

**Annual Report of the Associate Conference Minister to the Western Association**  
**Rev. Kathy Lawes**  
**April 25, 2020**

Dear colleagues and partners in ministry in the Western Association:

Grace and peace, dear ones. In this time of pandemic, I realize how very dear each one of you is to me.

Please receive my expressions of gratitude for you all – for our pastors and moderators and lay leaders; for our “kitchen ladies” and ushers and Sunday School teachers; and, for our congregations and all those who share their love of Jesus and their faithfulness to God in word and deed, in action and prayer. You are God’s people here in the Western Association, and it is your commitment to our shared faith and your love for one another that strengthen our collective witness to the Risen Christ.

I write in the midst of the coronavirus shutdown. Our churches are hurting. Giving is down in many congregations. Pastors had to figure out how to observe Holy Week online and lead Easter celebrations while practicing social distancing. Our ministers are hurting that they can’t be at the hospital bedside or preside at Holy Communion face-to-face with parishioners or be in person with grieving families. Our members and adherents are missing worshiping together and are saddened and disappointed at the cancellation of so many church, school, and community events. Funerals, baptisms, and weddings have been postponed, and the isolation and missed expectations compound the suffering. In our new “normal” – though can living in a time of pandemic even be considered “normal”? – we are doing our best to retain and strengthen relationships with one another. This is good. This is healthy. Acknowledging to ourselves, our congregants, our colleagues and our families that we are *not fine* is healthy, too. Recognizing in our hearts and aloud that we are frustrated or lonely or fearful is not only healthy – it lets others know they are not alone. Providing comfort and care and virtual presence for one another is as vital and life-affirming as providing food and masks to those in need in these dark times.

In our Association, we have experienced transitions over the past 12 months. We bid farewell to our colleague, Tom Norwalk, at his retirement; we gained the leadership of Kim Wood briefly until she was assigned to the Fox Valley Associations. We celebrated 30 years of Connie Owens’ administrative ministry with special recognition of this milestone at the Conference Annual Celebration. We bid farewell to John Noonan, former Western Association Minister and pastor emeritus of St. Paul, Pekin. We marked the closure of Fondulac Congregational Church in East Peoria and received with sadness the withdrawal of the Congregational Church of Lacon from the United Church of Christ. The Association Council engaged in reflection, tackled revisions of the Constitution and by-laws, wrestled with quorums, and figured out how we can vote on Association business when we can’t meet in person. Our outgoing moderator, Jon Prain, devoted significant time, energy, and passion in leading the Council and now, as he becomes the Vice President of the Illinois Conference (his two-year term starts in June) we trust his leadership and his ongoing commitment to strengthening our churches’ ministries and supporting our pastors. We will welcome Jeff Newcomb as our incoming moderator, grateful for his leadership with the Planning Committee, and prepared now to move us forward as an Association. We welcome our incoming vice moderator, Santana Poor.

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Gratitude is due in generous portions to those who carried the work of the Association's committee. Thanks to Laurie Hill for taking minutes for the Association Council meetings, and to Bob Tallitsch for ensuring accurate minuting of the Committee on Ministry meetings. Nancy Dexter did yeoman's work in spearheading the work of the Nominating Committee. The Association Council members carried out their responsibilities faithfully. Mary Newcomb and Tim White co-chaired the Committee on Ministry, and the COM worked with grace and diligence. A special thanks is extended to those who served as representatives of the Western Association to Conference-wide committees: Dan Dexter on the Personnel Committee; Laurie Hill and Dianne Sherman on the Conference Annual Celebration planning committee; Dick Cridlebaugh and Connie Leader on the Outdoor Ministries committee; Dan Dexter on the Special Assistance Committee; Ken Webster on the Justice and Witness Committee; Judy Kennedy on the LEEAP (Local Evangelism, Envisioning, and Planting) committee; Judie Foust and Bob Sherman on the Stewardship Team; and our delegates to Synod 2019 in Milwaukee: Dick Cridlebaugh, Chandler Drahn, Laurie Hill, Judy Kennedy, Mary Newcomb, Elizabeth Prain (youth), Jon Prain, and Melissa Pletkovich.

At the almost 31-year point in her work with the Association, Connie Owens – who shared that she had initially accepted the job as a 3-month temporary position – remains energetic, responsive, thorough, and positive. Her real tasks aren't always easily summed up in her title of Administrative Assistant, but "Association's Communication Hub, Keeper of Records, Filer of Reports, Gentle Reminder-er of Deadlines, Maintainer of Institutional Memory, and Helpful Person at the Other End of the Phone Line" doesn't really fit on a business card. Thank you, Connie.

I give you my thanks for the responsibilities you've entrusted to me; for the confidences shared and the hopes expressed; for your prayers for 17-year-old David and me; for your graciousness and hospitality; for your humor and faith; and, for allowing me to serve with you. Please, stay safe and healthy in this shutdown, and together we will pray to God for the well-being of God's entire creation.

In Christ's service,

*Rev. Kathy Lawes*

Associate Conference Minister Serving the Western and Prairie Associations  
Illinois Conference United Church of Christ