

**Listening Session**  
**West Bethel Congregational Church**  
**February 8, 2020**

**Welcome and introductions:**

With a start time of 10am, Board members shared the purpose of the meeting, and the agenda.

Introductions from around the room, most folks in attendance were from Western Maine churches.

**Prayer:**

Board Member Steve Wight opened the meeting with prayer.

**Update on Conference News:**

Conference Minister Deborah Blood shared important conference news. Associate Conference Minister, Darren Morgan, has submitted his resignation to the Conference. Floor was open to comments and questions. Listening session participants lifted up recognition and appreciation of the ministry and work that Darren has done for the Conference, and for individual churches. Many stated he has been a blessing and will miss him and his gifts.

Deborah shared information that there will be a bridge/interim pastor and that this is a good opportunity to look at how we can shape the staff to best serve needs, and whether the Conference looks to full or part time ACM(s). Deborah stated that she will be working on providing the best coverage for the full Conference, including visiting as many Associations and churches as she can during this time of transition.

Deborah opened the floor for general questions, and clarifications. Deborah spoke to the hard work put in on our budget and keeping it balanced. Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) giving is less than it has been and the Conference needs to keep working with what we already have and what resources are available. Question was asked where our budget monies come from. Deborah shared that our primary sources of funding are from church fellowship dues and investments, and that 20% of the OCWM giving goes to National (General Synod in Cleveland). Deborah clarified that Pilgrim Lodge (PL) has its own income and budget

When asked, Conference treasurer Bob Sandman offered that the Conference is about a million-dollar operation.

Question came up around staff openings, and at this time, Deborah clarified that only Darren's position is open, all the other staff needs are filled. Deborah will hire search and call consultants to help churches with certain searches. Search and call consultants can be either ordained or lay folk.

### **Peers Report:**

Board member Sara Bartlett gave a review of the Peers report, including the history and recommendations given to the Board and to the Conference Minister. Copies of the report were given to listening session participants.

In response, listening session participants asked if the Conference is going to do away with "Moving Forward Together" (MFT). Several board members spoke to the reality of what we can do with resources we actually have, as opposed to what we dreamed might work. Board members clarified that MFT is not being "thrown out" as a guiding document; it is being tweaked as the reality of actual resources are being discovered.

A participant brought up the following concern: the Peers report mentioned that communication is a challenge for the CM and Board, and recommended changes - yet, this challenge continues months later. It was acknowledged that the Board and CM continue to improve on communication with the greater Conference.

Deborah also addressed some of the internal work done through MFT, such as moving the Conference office along with other work to re-size the organization to fit our resources.

It was asked if ZOOM is something that the Conference offers for churches and Associations, Deborah responded that yes, ZOOM is a resource available as needed.

### **Board Goals:**

Board Member Susan Reisert shared a document developed at the Board retreat on January 25, 2020, which lists Board goals:

- Supporting new search and calls and how to make sure we are doing what helps churches.
- Improving staffing support and job description.
- A team of board members evaluating the Conference Minister.
- Improve listening sessions and hearing from folks.
- Continue to chart a path forward.
- Support new and existing ministries.
- Revise human resources.
- Build up communications between churches.
- Build up resources for churches.
- Supporting Pilgrim Lodge in their goals and milestones.

Listening session participants suggested that the Board needs to set dates and measurements for how well the Board is doing in meeting goals. Susan mentioned that the Board is working on this, as it remains an active discussion.

Concern was shared that membership might be expecting the goals to be met by annual meeting. If the Board can meet goals and Conference members see we are good to our word, it can be a good way to build trust, especially as that has been an issue.

### **Conference Minister Goals:**

Deborah brought up some ideas for her goals, including search and call, stating her goals would be set this coming week when she meets with the Board.

Deborah stated priorities and best patterns for Conference staff should be done by end of 2020.

Deborah also mentioned the importance of ministry with purpose. Deborah stated that she is glad to go wherever she is needed. She also stated the Conference will start doing evaluations on whether search committees and pastors got what was needed during the search and call process.

Deborah acknowledged the closing of the physical resource center was a challenge for some people. In order to meet needs for access to different resources, the Conference will have a virtual center. Deborah asked for input on what would be helpful and what would people like to access online. The Conference staff will try to have access to virtual resources completed by annual meeting 2020.

A comment was made that when people respond to an online question or request from the Conference, they should receive a “thank you” or at least an acknowledgement that the Conference saw the response. Deborah stated that people will receive responses on the feedback they have offered.

Deborah stated there would be at least one learning day for churches to get together. This will most likely happen in the fall of 2020.

Deborah let folks know that Convocation will be held in May, and the importance of the Maine School of Ministry (MESOM). She suggested that churches participate in MESOM Sunday, offered as an alternative to Seminary Sunday.

Folks attending the session mentioned that communication with CM remains an issue and lack of communication has led to lack of trust.

Deborah mentioned that email and electronic communications are the best ways to find out what is happening at the Conference level. Concern was given that not all Conference members have access to the internet or use email. Folks are willing to pay for stamps in order for physical paper letters to be sent out. People feel that if the Conference Board and Minister can build trust back up, it would make such a difference as people are looking for hope that the Conference is still alive.

Deborah shared her perspective that these are scary times. We as a Conference need to look to ways we can connect together, like the Alcyon Center. It was also mentioned that Pilgrim Lodge is another place where folks can gather. Deborah

lifted up that in this new way of being church, we need to find where God is, and look to the natural world to organize our faith. Additionally, we do have resources and need to start having conversations with each other.

Session members stated churches should also increase communications back to the Board and Conference staff. It would be helpful and uplifting for churches to share good news on what is happening throughout the Conference.

Deborah shared that Associations need to be strengthened and supported so they can be a greater resource for churches.

Folks shared a perspective that the Conference needs to go back to Congregational roots, where power lies not on “the top” of the structure but back with the people in the churches.

Congregations need more opportunities to gather together. Folks want opportunities to volunteer within the Conference and don't know how.

Deborah says that it matters that people show up and see what can happen, and that too can build trust.

People mentioned that churches are changing.

Pilgrim Lodge is THE connection for the Maine Conference.

At the end of the listening session, people expressed appreciation that the meeting was better organized than the last listening session. Holding organized meetings also helps to build trust in the Board. Pastor of First Parish in Gorham, Christine Dyke, asked folks to share the “plus and deltas” of this listening session.

### **Plus and Delta:**

Positives:

- Positive experience
- Located in Bethel (acknowledge western Maine is part of the Conference!)
- Board's goal sheet/handout
- Sharing the Board's goals
- Sharing the CM's goals
- Agenda was clear
- 2-hour time frame was good
- Having it in a circle is good
- Folks felt heard and that they could share what was on their minds
- Board Members being active listeners
- People contributing
- Gracious hosts
- Touching the spirit again

- People being open
- Absence of criticism

For next time.....

- Give folks a minute to get settled (i.e. starting on time caught some folks off guard)
- Eat more snacks
- Will only one more listening session be enough? Will all the state be captured?
- Need bio break at some point.

**Prayer:**

Bob Sandman gave the Benediction.