

Conference Minister Annual Report 2024

Beloved People of God,

As I approach my two-year anniversary with all of you, I am overjoyed. I am overjoyed by the many folks I have met. I am overjoyed to have reached out to all of our churches through pastors, workshops, meetings, visits, and consultations (with a handful not yet reaching back). I am overjoyed that during these past two years I have been invited to preach at 65 of our churches. I am overjoyed that I hear more and more from smaller church congregations who have grasped “Alive and Thrive, any size”, as they discern their path forward. I am overjoyed that our staff (in all of its newness) is a wonderful gift of the Spirit as we learn and grow and slowly develop our institutional memory.

I am also grieved. I am grieved that our beloved Anne Hodgman passed into the eternal arms. I am grieved as I recall the names of those who were massacred or wounded last October in Lewiston. I grieve for their families and friends and community. I grieve for all of us as we grapple with gun violence that is so much part of our national tapestry. I grieve when a church must end its ministry and struggle with the pain and challenge of what to do with their church building. (This year we have had 2 churches close). I grieve when I hear of folks who have passed into the eternal arms and I grieve with the family, friends, and church members in their loss. I am grieved that 42 of our 140 churches do not give to OCWM basic support, many because conference staff has not done a good job sharing what it is, especially the difference between dues and OCWM basic support. I am grieved that some churches have pulled out of OCWM because of dissatisfaction with conference ministry. I apologize on behalf of past ministry and pray for understanding and wisdom to help heal our covenant and my part in it.

And I am filled with hope. A goal I set for myself last year that continues is inviting you to partner with me to celebrate all God has done and has yet to do, to learn of me as a partner who is committed to walking alongside each of you and all of you as we look to God for a path forward: staff and committees; Board and teams; MESOM and Pilgrim Lodge; churches and pastors; chaplains; lay folk; members and friends. I am filled with hope that you are beginning to learn of me and that I care deeply and I am here for you as spiritual leader, pastoral presence, consultant, partner in the work of Christ. I am filled with hope as we discern new pastoral models for our smallest churches. I am filled with hope as MESOM is providing the academic bedrock for folks to rise from the pews to be authorized for ministry. I am filled with hope that Pilgrim Lodge is a beacon for folks beyond our conference, reaching out to diverse groups and being so blessed. I am filled with hope that the Spirit’s love and guidance is burning through our discouragement and doubt. I am filled with hope that so many are hearing and heeding the message that “we do not know what the future holds, and we know who holds our future.” I remember last year’s focus of Annual meeting being just that: knowing that God holds our future, as Jeremiah 29:11 tells us: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Yes, God is planning for our Maine Conference in all of its iterations, for a future filled with hope, as we call on God and pray for love and guidance.

In last year’s annual report, I outlined my goals for this year, some of which we have begun to consider, some which will take more than a year:

- Who are we in the Maine Conference? What has God called us to be and do?
- What are the ministry models that will best serve our churches, no matter what the size?
- What does membership mean in this time? How do we fully welcome those who are not “joiners”, and yet are faithful disciples?
- How can churches work together for sustainability? Share mission? Pastors? Buildings?

- What is our financial picture of the Conference over the next five, ten years? Will OCWM sustain us? What other avenues of support do we need to consider?

At this year's Annual Meeting, we will touch on each of these areas with a basic question: how are we in covenant with one another as we look to the future God holds for us? Covenant is the love language of God and the bedrock for how the many facets of a conference love and work together. We are the conference. The conference is made up of people and churches, ministry settings and associations, committees and teams, and conference staff. At our Annual Meeting we will wonder and have conversation around covenant among each and all of us. A big part of the conversation will include how we see ourselves as members of the conference, how we work together to value our commitment together, and how we together can sustain the conference financially.

The theme of this year's Annual meeting is "Linked by Love", for that is the language of covenant. Our focus scripture is from Colossian 3:12-15 *Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as God has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ^[a] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (NRSV)*

Please pray fervently and continually for every corner of our conference, every segment of our covenant together. Who is the conference? WE are the conference: from south to north, down east to west, mid coast to south central, and everywhere else. Let us adopt God's love language. Let us embrace the bedrock of the United Church of Christ: autonomy and covenant woven together in the tapestry of our faith journey into the future God has for us.

Marisa

Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola

Conference Minister