

February 1, 2016

Dear Friends,

Having sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reflected on all the feedback we received, discerned the needs of our Conference, and heard your hope for bold leadership in this time of great shift taking place within the church, the Board of Directors and the Search Committee are excited to share with you our joint nomination of the Rev. Sue Artt as our Conference Minister.

For the last four years, we have been taking steps toward a bold and vibrant future. We have shifted how we approach Annual Meeting and we have engaged in a visioning process that resulted in a vision of radical connection. At the 2014 Annual Meeting in Grand Junction, Rev. Steve Sterner, who offered a keynote, commented that we aren't like other Conferences. There is an energy and an excitement that makes us stand out. We believe that Sue Artt is the kind of spiritual and administrative leader who can help us live into the future that God has begun to place before us in the Conference and in the Region.

She understands the urgency of the times in which we live and is unafraid to experiment, to support new and emerging ministries, and to forge new pathways for the future church. She empowers others and builds strong teams and team spirit. She actively seeks resources, isn't a Lone Ranger, and freely calls upon her national network of connections for ideas. She knows how to say "no" when requests don't align with the highest priorities. She understands the importance of vision and excels at translating ideals into real life strategies. She is also open-minded and flexible enough to shift course when needed.

We are a Conference that not only spans three states, but also very different cultural realities, from the mountain towns of Western Colorado, to rural communities in Eastern Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, to urban centers of Denver and Salt Lake City. Sue's sensitivity to and appreciation of these unique cultural settings of our churches and her authentic desire to help each one thrive in their local communities has already made us a stronger Conference, and we believe will continue to do so. In the last two years, she has demonstrated her commitment to the local church. She knows a healthy Conference comes from healthy churches. She pastors our pastors and our churches in transition with great care and grace.

In our conversations with the Rev. Dr. Gayle Engel, who has been our support person these last three months from the National Office of the UCC, we learned that conference ministry is becoming a less and less desirable position because of the complexity facing the current and future church. Sue has demonstrated an ability to thrive in the face of complexity. While many conferences continue to face cutbacks and shrinking OCWM dollars, Rocky Mountain Conference OCWM is higher than it has been in years.

In her first few weeks, faced with a very real threat to La Foret, Sue proved her capacity to grasp complex issues, solve problems, and execute solutions. She brings an executive's experience with a pastor's heart. Sue is not afraid to admit she's wrong and can redirect her energies. She has a high commitment to the UCC and is able to create a bridge between the wider church and the local church beautifully.

We know that Sue is not perfect. No one is. And while we know that many "like" her, this is not the reason we are compelled to call her as our Conference Minister. Sue is a person who possesses clarity of self and her own calling. She is Spirit-led and a woman of deep integrity. Most of all, she believes in the church and its ability to make a difference in the lives of people. She knows the church matters and believes it to be one of the great hopes for a more just and compassionate world.

BACKGROUND

Having laid out our reasons for our nomination of the Rev. Sue Artt, we also want to own that this was not a traditional process for calling a Conference Minister. With incredible support and guidance from Gayle Engel, we have spent a great deal of time reflecting on this process as we have sought to discern the best way forward. To say we have grown and learned through this time is an understatement.

In an effort to share what we have learned, we want to retrace the history as we understand it that has led us to this point.

As stated earlier, our Conference engaged in a visioning process from 2012-2014. In August of 2013, midway through that process, the Rev. Tom Rehling retired as our Conference Minister. Based on the momentum of transformation underway in the Conference, rather than starting over with a traditional interim ministry, the Board felt we needed someone who could help us carry this momentum forward in the completion of our visioning process, which would also help us clarify and know what kind of leader(s) we would need in our next Conference Minister(s). After celebrating Tom's retirement at the 2013 Annual Meeting, the Board of Directors conducted a search and extended a Call to Sue Artt in August of 2013, and included in that call the option of being a candidate for the future settled position. Mistakenly, the Board used the term Interim Minister, when in fact, what they were suggesting was an Acting Conference Minister.

Within the first two months of Sue's time with us, the Board (without any involvement or advocacy from Sue) corrected her title from Interim to Acting Conference Minister in order to clarify and affirm that she could be a candidate for Settled Conference Minister, and to align with terminology used within the United Church of Christ.

When the time came for the Settled Conference Minister search to begin, Sue considered becoming a candidate. The team chosen to be the Search Committee was directed by the Board, after consultations with national UCC folk, to consider Sue first as the sole candidate and to pursue other candidates only if Sue was not selected.

At the 2015 Annual Meeting at La Foret, several voices raised concerns regarding the change from Interim to Acting and the process of candidate evaluation for the Search Committee. Upon hearing these concerns, the Board held a special session during the Annual Meeting to hear these concerns, answer questions, and clarify their decision. After this session, the Board decided to reaffirm their decisions and the Search Committee proceeded to create a profile and prepared to interview Sue.

As the interview approached, Sue engaged in her own season of discernment and after deep reflection and dialogue with mentors, determined that for the best future health and vitality of the Rocky Mountain Conference, she could not go forward with her candidacy and withdrew her name.

Following that decision, the Board asked the Search Committee to put a hold on their work and we entered into a time of exploration and discernment with the Search Committee and with Gayle Engel.

During this time, we also asked for the Conference to share their thoughts and reflections. Many of you came forward. All affirmed the ministry that Sue has shared with us. Many shared their gratitude for the care and attention Sue has given to them and to their local church. Some voiced their concern that we had lost a uniquely qualified candidate for our Conference Minister due to poor process. Others shared their fear that this hard-earned positive movement forward would be stalled or even halted by this turn of events. Still others continued to point to the importance of interim ministry and its role in providing a wholehearted assessment of the organization, addressing systemic issues, and creating new organizational possibilities.

Out of this time of reflection, we recognized that while we had made our decision with the best of intentions and out of a deep love for the Conference, the choice to call an Acting Conference Minister had unforeseen consequences as well as blind spots. In choosing an Acting Conference Minister, we in no way meant to suggest that Interim Ministry isn't a necessary and important model in times of transition. We also own that we did not adequately communicate our reasons for our decisions as best as we could have.

With the help of Gayle Engel, we were able to identify three areas of focus we believe are essential for us to pursue together as a Conference to ensure our future health and well being:

- We need to deal squarely and skillfully with our history of problems and perceptions around Conference Minister Searches, as well any other history or systemic issues that continue to linger beneath the surface.
- We need to develop qualitative and quantitative strategies, methods, and approaches that can take our Vision Framework into a lived reality.
- We need to ensure that the central role and function of the Conference Ministerial staff is clearly and broadly understood.

In addition to identifying and committing to these three areas of focus, we considered several possible scenarios that included keeping our current Search Committee, forming a new Search Committee, or calling a Designated Conference Minister for a specific period of time, which is something a number of Conferences have done more recently. As we considered each of these scenarios, our top priority was to discern what would best enable the future health and vitality of our Conference. What kept emerging, both through our conversations as a Board and in the feedback we received from you, is that we already had the candidate we wanted in our midst.

Having seen Sue in action for the past two years and having witnessed the renewal within our Conference under her leadership, we unanimously agreed that Rev. Sue Artt was the right person in the life of our Conference at this time.

With full support from the National setting, we met with the Search Committee on December 7, 2015 and laid out our reasons for why we believed Sue was uniquely and extraordinarily qualified to serve as our Conference Minister. And, we asked the members of the Search Committee to join us in approaching Sue to see if she would be willing to reconsider. By the end of this joint meeting, having shared in honest dialogue about the search process up to that point, considered all the feedback given, and contemplated these three areas of focus, the Board and the Search Committee were of one accord, believing Rev. Sue Artt to be a uniquely qualified candidate.

And so, jointly as the Board of Directors and the Search Committee, we approached Sue and asked her if she would be willing to reconsider being a candidate for Conference Minister. As Sue was open to the possibility, the Board, the Search Committee, and Sue met on January 11, 2016. They again invited Gayle Engel to be present in the conversation, to dialogue together about what we had learned about ourselves, the three areas of focus that had emerged out the time since her withdrawal as a candidate, and the reasons we believe she is the right person for this position at this time. At the end of the meeting, the Board and Search Committee took a vote and unanimously agreed to extend the Rev. Sue Artt the nomination. Sue accepted our nomination.

We realize that pain lingers within the Conference regarding past decisions and processes that were not or did not seem to be fair and true to our Congregational ideals. As our recent letters to you indicate, we take responsibility for our decisions that have contributed to this sense of frustration and concern and, in the end, are grateful for what we have learned through this process. Thankfully, as the Rev. Phil Campbell, a pastor who served in the Rocky Mountain Conference for many years, shared with us, "A flawed process can still produce a good result." And so we rejoice, and, in fact, stand in awe, of the creative work of the Spirit that has been able to transform a demoralizing and disheartening turn of events into a catalyst for faithful collaboration that has now led to this moment in which believe, together with the Rev. Sue Artt, we have the capacity to be a powerful force in the co-creation of the Realm of God on Earth.

INVITATION

And so we now ask you to join us in that assessment and pray it will lead us to a wholehearted confirmation of the Rev. Sue Artt as our Settled Conference Minister at our Annual Conference Meeting on June 9-12 in Salt Lake City.

The Conference Bylaws allow for a special meeting to be called for the purpose of electing a Conference Minister, but with the process already under welcome scrutiny, and considering the importance of this decision, the Board of Directors and Search Committee agreed that the proper time for the vote would be the Annual Meeting, when more members are present.

The Board of Directors thanks you for your patience and support through this process, and they continue to welcome your feedback, questions, concerns, and prayers.

Faithfully,

Your Board of Directors and Search Committee

RMC Board of Directors:

Rebecca Kemper Poos, John Rostykus, Matt Huntington, Jan Hepp, Martha Jones, Gage Church, Erin Gilmore, Martha Sullivan, Nate Miller, Karen Winkel, Judy Baillie, Courtney Dobbins, Max Michalec

RMC Search Committee:

Beth Robey Hyde, Chris Gilmore, Gage Church, Laura Gurney, Heidi Hess, Ron Heil, Amanda Minter, Betty Barnes, Adrian Miller