

2024-2025 Annual Report of the Transitional Conference Minister
Submitted by Rev. Erin Gilmore
erin@rmcucc.org

As I complete my eighth year serving the Rocky Mountain Conference and my first in the role of Transitional Conference Minister here is what I continue to find: our churches matter. Our churches impact lives for the better. Our churches provide experiences of belonging, generosity, kindness, and courage and invite people into the profound mystery of God's love made known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps that seems an obvious statement, but in the face of all that is being dismantled, destroyed and discarded in this present time there is great power in coming together and choosing to **be** the church for such a time as this. I am witnessing a clarified and renewed purpose among many of our congregations as they seek to be micro counter-cultures in which the life-giving Love of God is an embodied and living reality.

I am also aware that many of our churches and leaders continue to feel isolated, stressed, and anxious about the future. Churches in transition know first hand the reality of a growing clergy shortage. Others are facing difficult decisions about their ability to continue to sustain the cost of buildings and grounds. Still others are experiencing increased conflict and frustration.

In the proposal for the transition period we said this time is about helping the conference reimagine and realign all that we do through the lens of supporting and equipping the local church in living out its most faithful expression of the gospel. Now more than ever I **am convinced that our local churches, in their familiar and emerging forms, are worthy of our deepest investment.** Their ministry is the treasure, as our RMC Treasurer Hunter Baker so wisely reminds us.

I have attempted in this report to give an overview of the steps we have taken towards that investment. There are three main areas of focus in the proposal: technical and systems work, sustaining and adapting work, and internal relational work

TECHNICAL AND SYSTEMS WORK

We know that the Conference is so much more than a Conference Minister or a Conference Office. A huge part of this transition period is about building systems and structures that help us live more fully into that reality so that the ministry of the Conference is not dependent on any one person or personality. It is also about ensuring those systems and structures are accountable and connected to our vision and purpose as a conference. How do we take this vision of truly being a force for good in the lives of our local churches and faith leaders and hardwire it into our structures and practices as a Conference?

To that end we have begun to assess the effectiveness of our current board structure and have come to the conclusion that there is a lack of clarity around role and responsibilities as well as how each position supports the larger mission. Ultimately we want to be able to align our board structure, our budget and our bylaws into a cohesive narrative that reflects the ministry and purpose of the Conference.

Looking ahead: As the transition begins its work visiting and listening to congregations, it will be inviting members and clergy of the conference to reflect on the potential framework for our ministry as a conference.

Financial Stability: In the last couple of years the conference has taken great strides towards greater financial transparency and accountability. Building on this work in the last year we have instituted:

- outside accountant that is reviewing our books quarterly
- Monthly meetings between Financial Associate, Treasurer and TCM
- The Finance committee meeting monthly
- Treasurer and members of finance established an extended timeline for budget input and creation

Looking ahead:

Generosity: one of the goals of the transition period, in addition to being realistic about spending, is to also be intentional about giving. This coming year we will be working on building a generosity team that can work towards greater communication, education, and invitation about why the ministry of the conference matters and how people and congregations can participate in their success.

Conference wide conversations about financial health, wellbeing, and spending. As we review our financial position and the Conference's ability to sustain ministry beyond the transitional period, there needs to be in place a policy or a guideline for the Board that helps them determine how long we will continue to spend down the unrestricted net assets. Is there a point at which the conference needs to consider part time Conference Minister, or working with other Conferences in our region, other denominations, and/or in creative partnerships for judicatory ministry.

SUSTAINING AND ADAPTING WORK

Committee on Ministry (COM): As was true for each Association when they each had their own COM, the work of the COM is one of the most essential ministries of the Conference. It is in many ways its heartbeat. With the change from two full time conference ministry staff to one, the wonderful reality of a continued stream of potential Members in Discernment, the huge learning curve for anyone serving on the COM, and a change in COM leadership, it became clear that the COM needed more support than I could provide given the rest of the demands on my time. I had also felt that as we continued to live into the new Conference COM we would benefit from someone bringing wisdom from other conferences and offer suggestions that would continue to strengthen its ministry. I approached the Board and the Personnel Committee with a proposal for a Bridge ACM for 10 hrs a week focused specifically on the COM. The Board approved the position and I hired Rev. Leslie Etheredge to fill this position for a 6 month contract.

Over the last few months the COM has been restructured to streamline and simplify its work and to lessen the number of people on the COM while also giving each person a more specific role and responsibility on the COM. The feedback from the COM members has been very positive, to the point that we have extended the Bridge position for another 6 months to ensure there is a strong foundation with this new restructure.

Clergy Coaching Program: One of the most important ministries of the Conference is supporting and nurturing leadership within the conference. After 8 years of Conference ministry it is extremely clear to me that the health of our congregations depends on the health and self-differentiation of its authorized ministers. The pilot coaching program sought to invest in the resilience and capacity of faith leaders through a program that helped them learn about a vital aspect of themselves as it related to their

ministry setting. Initial results from the 5 clergy who participated in the program was that it exceeded their expectations and greatly increased their joy and capacity to serve the church in this present time.

Looking ahead: It is our hope to offer a second year of the program to twice the number of clergy as the pilot year.

Alternative Paths to Ministry: Lisa Stenmark, the pastor of Wheatland UCC in WY has taken great interest in the alternative paths to ministry offered in the UCC, recognizing that there is a shortage of clergy and that we need to return to raising up leaders from within our congregations.

Slack: In the interest of helping the members and clergy of the conference connect with one another directly, to be able to offer resources and ask for needs, we have re-launched an RMC Conference Slack page.

Looking ahead: for this to become an integral part of our community we need to identify and equip a few people to be key contributors and drivers of this online community.

INTERNAL RELATIONS WORK

October Retreat with Quanita Roberson: For 3 days in October 22 people gathered together at the newly opened Lapp Lodge at La Foret where she facilitated several important conversations and ritual that held our grief, lament, and anger not only about our particular recent history in the conference but also the broader state of the world.

Ongoing care for Clergy and Congregations: Over the last year I have been in over 50 conversations with clergy, search committees, church councils, and MID's, seeking to continue to provide support, guidance and care to the churches and clergy of our Conference.

In addition to the work named above, in 2025-2026, we're looking forward to:

- Development of a new Congregational Care Team with the publishing of the new Manual on Church
- Engaging in conference wide reflection on our understanding and practice of Covenant
- Continued conversations about the future of Associations and the possibilities of what they might become in the future
- Transition Listening Teams, Transition Retreat, Writing of conference profile

Deep gratitude to the Board, all the Committees and Teams for their faithfulness and dedication to the ministry of the Conference.