



Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ

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Dear Siblings in Christ:

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September of 2019 was the 20th anniversary of my ordination and it set off a season of discernment. For the first time, I began to realize I was, likely, more than halfway through what might be my ordained ministry career. The last 11 years in this conference had been rewarding in work and life. The conference was on a good path. Lauren and I had fallen in love and married during the time I was here. We'd welcomed Leo into the world. Life was good.

And yet when I was in seminary, I'd never thought about doing regional work. I expected to spend my entire career in small, urban churches called to service and advocacy. That description fit the first church I was called to, and I loved it. At some point, I expected to serve a local church like that again but it was my ordination anniversary that started me wondering when and where.

Lauren and I had sometimes talked about maybe moving back east close to family someday but we were pretty settled in where we were. We'd bought a house. Lauren was coming close to a decade of work at Keystone UCC. Heck, I was the new co-president of the PTSA at Leo's school.

Then, that December, my sister found out she had lymphoma. Suddenly, our family back east seemed very far away, and life seemed shorter and more fragile than before. I started actively talking with colleagues about leaving conference ministry and finding a position closer to our family.

It was on Ash Wednesday of 2020 when I sent a note your way about preparing for the pandemic. We all did the best we could with what we had and, with God's help, we did some amazing things. We brought our loaves and our fishes and were blessed with abundance. In the middle of so much loss, grieving, and disruption we supported each other and our neighbors. The fragility of the world was exposed and in the spaces left behind, we found little certainty but unusual clarity. There was no waiting for someone else to do something. It was up to us and we did well. I'd never been prouder to be part of any group of people, ever.

By the next fall, my sister's treatments were going well (she's in remission now). Still, our larger family continued to feel further and further away, in some ways. There had been other family health and life challenges that happened during that year. There were deaths from COVID in our extended family. I had some health challenges, too. Considering the state of the world, we started to wonder if we'd ever get to see some of our family again.

During that same time, our family of three had become closer than we'd ever been. It was a pretty big day towards the beginning of the pandemic when I was home for a whole month for the first time in more than 15 years. I've loved the travel that's been part of this position but ended up loving being with my family even more. The longer the pandemic continued, the clearer this became. Sometime in the late fall of 2020, we decided to be open to what the Spirit might do. I put my profile together and started searching for a local church position.

This past Sunday, South Congregational Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, voted to call me as their next pastor. It's a designated, $\frac{3}{4}$ time position with a church that feeds about 700 families weekly through its food pantry. They are consolidating with another church in town, First Church of Christ (UCC), to form something new together. The challenges and the gifts of these churches and this place call out to me. The opportunity to be no more than a day's drive from our family is exciting and a relief. As with any significant change, there are some other feelings mixed in, too. Even though we'll be closer to family, we'll miss all those we've served with, played with, and grown with here. Moving to Pittsfield will be starting over in many ways. It's going to be exciting, and it's going to be hard.

We're at a complex moment in conference life. The turnover in local churches is unprecedented. Rich and challenging conversations are emerging about our budget, our commitment to being an anti-racist conference, restructuring, and how best to provide our camps with the support and accountability they need. There's always a lot going on in our conference, and, like any ministry, there has always been more to do than our capacity would allow. That's all part of discernment.

This conference is prepared for taking this work on. Over the last 14 years, I've seen more and more people claim this conference as their own. Instead of complaining about what wasn't being done, the people of this conference have pulled together and done some amazing things. People are doing more and more to self-organize around interests, support, and causes. Our collective response to the onset of the pandemic didn't come out of nowhere. We'd been working at developing and investing in the skills we used for years. The pandemic allowed us to practice all those things we'd learned and those same learnings will be helpful, now. In your staff, you have one of the best, smartest, and most skilled groups of people in the UCC. You have boards and committees ready to work, learn, listen, and try new things. The denomination has already started the process of coming alongside us and helping PNC through this time, too. This conference, your conference, is ready to be open to what the Spirit might do.

I'll start working for South Congregational Church in the 2nd half of September. In order to get Leo to school on September 1st, the last month I'll be working remotely. Between now and then, my most important tasks will be finishing what I can, handing over what can be handed over, and saying goodbye to all you wonderful, beautiful people. Soon, you'll hear from the board their plans for carrying the conference through this transitional time.

But, for now...

Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Take another deep breath. Let that one out slowly, too.

My wonderful, beautiful, Siblings in Christ, I look forward to seeing where the Spirit will lead us all.

With hope,



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