

Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference Report of the Moderator

A year ago, I was looking forward to one more year to serve as the Conference Vice-Moderator in partnership with our then Moderator, Tracy Heilman. About eleven months ago, Tracy and Marc Stewart contacted me to let me know that Tracy had accepted a call to ministry in another conference and she would not be completing her term as moderator. The hope was that I would step into the position of Moderator at the conclusion of the Board of Director's October meeting, which I did. I was totally planning on using this year to learn the moderator ropes a bit more deeply without actually walking them. But since 2020 has not turned out as any of us have expected, why would Conference leadership be exempt. It's been a year of on-the-job-training. I am forever grateful for the understanding and patience of our Board.

Since so much of the Conference's leadership has been wrapped up in specific, time-sensitive items such as Camp Mimanagish and settling in after the dissolution of the partnership with the Disciples of Christ, the Board realized that we are in a place of looking forward to set some new visions for ministry in the Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference. As we began to engage this reality, the plans for this year's Conference Annual Meeting started to take shape to be a wonderful opportunity to begin to gather information to take us into a period of discernment. CAM was originally slated to be held in Red Lodge. Those plans had to change due to health and safety concerns related to COVID19. I am so grateful for the vision and work of Board members Jennifer Yocum and Pam Peterson in bringing the format of this year's CAM. I'm excited to see what will come out of our time together in September.

We have come to realize that our by-laws could use some tweaking. Understanding that by-laws, by nature, are living documents that shift with changing times and needs of the organization, this is not a critique of previous Conference leadership. We simply need to bring the by-laws into alignment with what is happening and strengthen some aspects of process and accountability. The hope is to present some amendments during future conference meetings.

Following through on the Conference vote to divest from Camp Mimanagish, the Board has hired a realtor to list the improvements and represent us through marketing, showing and negotiating a sale. We interviewed two potential realtors and contracted with Mary Lair of ML Properties in Big Timber. Mary has communicated with the Forest Service so she can be aware of their needs and requirements. She also has access to world-wide marketing as well as local. Although there has been some serious interest in the property, we have no offers on the table at this time.

We have continued our interaction with the Wholiness Project, an exploratory effort of three conferences: Pacific Northwest, Central Pacific, and Montana Northern Wyoming. The intent is to seek out what it is that we might do better together, both in existing ministries and programs and new. Our last meeting was in late January/early February, just prior to the COVID19 outbreaks across the country. Three main opportunities have surfaced through our work together: a tri-conference Annual Meeting to be held in Boise in 2021; a Virtual Climate Summit to address the church's response to climate change; and establishing and deepening relationships across conference boundaries.

We have been blessed to have the guidance of coach Claire Bamberg. Claire has been working with our Board through the summer to facilitate communication and help us come together as a more effective working team, laying the groundwork to receive the information that will come from CAM and be able to take it to the next step of establishing a vision and understanding of ministry in the Conference.

2020 is simply turning out to be nothing that any of us could have expected. I am grateful for Marc Stewart's presence and leadership during the harried early days of the COVID19 shutdown. As a local church pastor, I so appreciate his diligence in providing access to information that seemed to be changing daily and offering a variety of ways to stay connected. Administrative staff, Jennifer Penfield and Patty Martinsen were also right there offering their expertise and support. I am also grateful for the Board of Director's flexibility when it came to scheduling and re-scheduling meetings so we could be sensitive to one another's COVID related burdens and fatigue.

It is an honor to serve as your Moderator. I ask for your prayers and support for the entire conference as we move into a still-uncertain future. The certainty that I hold on to is that we are not in any of this alone. God is with us!

Rev. Lynne Spencer-Smith
Moderator