

[MARY] Greetings, Missouri Mid-South!

First I want to begin with a word of thanks – my deep gratitude goes to the staff of the Missouri Mid-South Conference for their hard work this year, in rolling with the changes that naturally happen with a leadership transition in the workplace, and in their creativity and adaptability through the course of massive change in the wider culture as we have all lived through pandemic and cultural and political and economic upheavals, the likes of which have not happened in generations. You have a capable and solid Conference staff, and it is their work this year that has made smooth the transitions we have experienced. Damien, Kathie, Cindy, Julie, Nate, Bill, Beckie – thank you for all you are doing for the ministry of the Missouri Mid-South Conference.

I also want to thank our Conference Council, and especially the Executive Committee (Rev. Andrea Asselmeier, Elaine Tebbenkamp, Sonya Vann, and Mike Mueller) for their leadership and discernment this year, as we've listened and prayed and taken risks to move the Conference forward in ways that have not been tried in many years. I believe that they are helping to bring the Missouri Mid-South Conference into a new era of its ministry because they believe in what the Conference can be and must be in the 21st century.

I also want to thank the people who are making today's fall meeting possible – Rev. Katie Hotze-Wilton, our Tech Genius, Attorney Grant Weins, Parliamentarian Rob Calvin, Damien and Rev. Meredith Jackson for serving as Tech Stewards, Cora Willard our Bookkeeper who is resourcing our budget conversation today and her business partner Reneé Werner, Kathie and Sonya who are tallying the votes, and Andrea and Elaine who are moderating the meeting... and all of you who are here on the Zoom call, or watching on the Facebook live, all of you who have given time and financial support and feedback on drafts of the business that is before us today. All of you are making the work of the Conference happen, and using a beautiful Saturday morning to do so, and I want you to know that gift does not go unnoticed. Thank you. Thanks be to God for you.

When 2021 began, none of us knew that this year would unfold as it has. Our Outdoor Ministries Director at MoVal resigned for another position; our Conference Minister resigned to take on new adventures as well; we hired a Transitional Conference Minister, which is a new idea to many of us; a coronavirus

vaccine was made available sooner and faster than we had anticipated; the virus still impacted our churches and our communities and our families, and some of the more than 750,000 deaths that have happened nationwide have been significant people in our lives—friends, loved ones, coworkers, church members, teachers, neighbors, parents, children. When 2021 began, none of us knew what Covid would do to our supply chain, and our housing markets, and the value of our work, and the buying power of our dollar. When 2021 began, none of us knew that George Floyd’s killers would actually go to jail, or that Breonna Taylor’s killers would not. When 2021 began, none of us knew that the wave of unanticipated retirements and job market upheaval would become what we now call the Great Resignation, and none of us could imagine how it would impact our churches and our clergy. We have been through huge changes and huge challenges together.

[ANDREA] I am going through a change in my life, which impacts my ability to serve on Conference Council going forward. My job responsibilities are changing in my work life, and I will be stepping down as Conference Moderator after this meeting – but I will remain on Conference Council to fulfill the obligations of my term as a member, as planned. I’m grateful to Elaine Tebbenkamp for her willingness to step into this role sooner than she had anticipated—I know you’ll serve well, Elaine, with your own skills and your own style in this new era in the life of the Conference.

It has been an honor to work with and lead the Conference Council for the past year and a half. The Council is not some elusive, far-off group of people, but are members of local churches in each of our Associations. I would like to thank them for their thoughtful and diligent work. You have elected a group of spirit-led, dedicated, diverse leaders. I encourage you to support them, trust that each and every one of them holds firm the best interests of the Conference as a whole in all that they do, and when you do have questions or concerns, talk to them, not about them. And, if you or someone you know feel called to serve on the Council, please respond to the call for nominations when it comes in the eCourier next year.

[MARY] As I have come into this Conference new to this culture and these people, Andrea has been a rock, and a source of valuable knowledge and guidance, to help me step into the role as your Transitional Conference Minister. Thank you for that

Andrea; and Elaine, I look forward to working with you as we move into next year together.

Those of you who have heard me speak in Association meetings and in worship services know that the book of Ephesians has been my touchstone for ministry these past six months. The more I pore over the words of this letter, the more I reflect on what it says to the congregation in first-century Turkey and to the United Church of Christ in twenty-first century Missouri, the more the story of that church and the story of our Church speak to one another in my reading. They were a congregation finding a new way of being together, finding what it means to be faithful when their old ways weren't serving them but their new ways hadn't been fully discerned yet. And I think we have been in a similar place this year, maybe these last few years.

You know, Jesus came into a world where “an eye for an eye” was the ruling order of the day. Where there were clans and factions and tribes and groups who fought with one another because they'd always been fighting, who'd punished one another tit-for-tat for disagreements and hurts that went so far back nobody really understood their origins. He came into a world where the social order was the social order, and he said, “You know, you guys, it doesn't have to be this way. We can do something different. We can choose another way to be.”

We can choose another way to be. An eye for an eye doesn't work. And Jesus was the one who said it out loud. He told the truth. He told the truth—not to hurt anyone or one-up anyone or gain more followers and likes, but because he knew there was a better way. And when there is a better way, you follow that way. An eye for an eye doesn't work, there's a better way.

One of the stories about MMS that I have heard repeated – almost whispered, yet, because it's too new, and too grief-pricking, and too scary – is the story of David Beebe, beloved saint of this Conference, standing at the microphone at Conference Annual Gathering in 2019, telling us the story of ourselves, of this Conference. When the United Church of Christ was formed, the lines were drawn for us, and this Conference was created and cultures smashed together and it didn't feel authentic or life-giving or blessing to be put together this way. And, Rev. Beebe said, it's not your fault. It's not your fault.

But – AND – you have been punishing one another for it ever since.

And it doesn't have to be this way. We can choose another way to be. An eye for an eye doesn't work. There's a better way.

It was working on the 2022 budget before the October Conference Council meeting that really helped me to understand what is happening here. I was so frustrated, looking at this spreadsheet, because the names of things don't match what they actually are, what they actually do. I suspect this is part of the frustration that some of you express, when you speak about a lack of transparency, or a failure of communication. Our line item names don't always match what the line item actually IS. And I realized that our budget was describing a Conference that was— a staff that was, a program that was, a snapshot of how we were but that is not who we are or who we say we want to be.

It is as if we have inherited our grandparent's house and are living in it, but we have never replaced or even rearranged the furniture to suit our life today. We're living out of suitcases instead of putting our clothes in the drawers. We've left grandma's chair next to the window where she liked to watch the birds at the feeder, but we need to put a desk in that spot and be able to work from home, and the bird feeder fell down a long time ago and we've never gone out to pick it up and refill it... we're living around the memories in this home instead of making the home our own. That is no way for us to live. There's a better way.

We have to deal with the hurts of the past. But at the same time we also have to move forward and begin trying new ways to be with one another—so we don't keep making new hurts in the present.

Next year is a reset year: All the business that is before us today is a chance to draw a line in the sand and choose a new way to be. It's a reset, a refresh, a renewal – a professional audit, a new website, a new structure, a new commitment to outdoor ministry, a new shift into the Unifying Call and Core Ministries.

What we have been doing – taking last year’s budget, last year’s agenda, and tweaking it a bit – that approach won’t work. We can’t predict next year based on this last year, or the last two years, because too much has changed. In this way, Covid has created an opportunity for us: we can’t just do what we did last year. We need a reset year, where we learn how to be – where we ask, who is God calling us to be? We are not hanging on to the past, but moving into the future. We are nearly ¼ of the way through the 21st century, we cannot continue to be a church that is clinging to 20th or even 19th century ways of being. There is a better way.

Next year’s theme, next year’s guiding scripture, will be Psalm 126 – “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream... Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

We need a year of restoration, a year of reset. As we discern who we are called to be, and who God is calling to lead us into that, let us seize the opportunity to find new ways to be in ministry and in relationship with one another. Let us work together to find a better way. We have sowed our fair share of tears—let us find our way home with shouts of joy.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.