

# PENN CENTRAL CONFERENCE



Empowering churches to proclaim the reconciling love of Christ.



## A Message from PCC

**February 23, 2022**

**Dear Friends and Members of Penn Central Conference,**

The word liminal comes from the Latin word 'limen', meaning threshold – any point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, a season of waiting, and not knowing. (liminalspace.org)

Author and Franciscan friar Richard Rohr describes this space as: "where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible... This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy."

Friends, I've been thinking a lot about the liminality of our time, particularly in the church. In the midst of the pandemic we have indeed been in a "liminal space", grieving what was and wondering what will be next, not knowing what our future holds; wishing we can just go back to "normal"—what was and has been that gave us a sense of comfort and familiarity.

And I must wonder: is it just in the past two years that we have been in this time of unknowing, transition, wishing for what was, fearing for what will be? Or has the pandemic crystallized an experience of the church that has been long coming?

For the past 40 years, with an intensity during the last 20 years, the church has been drifting into a liminality that we have only been vaguely aware. Church membership and attendance have decreased, as 75% of churches in the United States have less than 200 members. Small churches are increasingly becoming the

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## Prayers for Penn Central Conference

### Ephesians 6:18 (NLT)

*Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.*

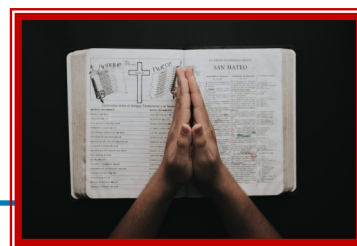
This week, we pray for each other as we continue to live into God's calling...

**Salem (Rohrerstown) UCC, Lancaster**

**New Hope UCC, Landisburg**

**Grace UCC, Lebanon**

**Hill UCC, Lebanon**



norm, with the need for pastors who are willing to serve less than full time and laity who are willing to take on more salient leadership roles. In general, folks in the U.S. have been decreasingly confident in their institutions across the board, including the institution of organized religion. More people than ever describe themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious.” (The statistics for UCC churches are readily available for viewing on the document 2021 UCC Statistical Profile, recently published by the Center for Analytics, Research, Development and Data)

I would like to gently suggest that the pandemic, as horribly devastating as it has been for all of us, is not the cause of decline of church attendance in the Penn Central Conference, or any other conference in the UCC. The pandemic perhaps has intensified our awareness of what already is happening to the point of no longer being able to ignore.

So, upon what is our faith in the future based? A future we cannot yet see? There are so many scriptures that give me comfort as I contemplate our time and space of liminality. Consider what Christ says in the 21st chapter of Revelation: “Behold I make all things new.” And we can have faith in our future, as in the 11th chapter of Hebrews we read: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” One of my favorite scriptures that has carried me through every transition in my life is found in Romans chapter 8: “God works for good in all things.”

My purpose here is not to throw scriptural platitudes around, although I pray that one of these verses brings comfort. I would like to invite you to consider deeply one more scripture that describes liminality of our times so poignantly. I’m thinking about the experience of Mary Magdalene with Jesus in the tomb (John 20:11-18). At first she thinks he is the gardener, but when he calls her name, she runs to hug him, and he stops her. “Mary don’t hold onto me.” Wow. What a shock. Mary, you can’t have me as you had me in mortal life. But...you will have me. You just don’t know how yet. Go and tell your brothers and sisters that I am coming to them. The liminality of Mary and Jesus in that space of light and dark, what was and what will be, grieving the past and being absolutely terrified for the future—speaks to me about the liminal period we are in: light and dark, grieving and longing for what was, being terrified of what we do not yet know—and so wishing we could go back to the way things were and hold on to Jesus so he keeps things the way they were. But perhaps Jesus is

speaking to us just as he spoke to Mary: “Don’t hold onto me.” You will have me, but in a new and different way.

The incredible new way that Jesus spoke was his coming to the disciples afresh and anew in Pentecost power, so they began the church of Jesus Christ in the 1st century; a church that grew and spread. Can we believe that Jesus will come to us, is coming to us, afresh and anew with Pentecost power—to rebirth the church of Jesus Christ for the 21st century that will grow and spread? How? We may ask. Perhaps that’s where our faith in an unknown future, God’s future, lies.

In my work with churches in the Conference, I have been asked if the church, particularly churches in the UCC, will eventually dwindle to a nominal influence. My heart and spirit are deeply moved by this question. My friends, I will say here what I say to those dear folks, what I believe deep within my heart: God isn’t done with us. The Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well in the United Church of Christ. Let us heed Jesus’ words not to hold onto what was, but to venture from that liminal space with hope-filled confidence, expecting a newness we perhaps cannot imagine. God indeed makes all things new and brings good out of the worst of circumstances. On God we can rest our faith, our hope, our trust, embracing what Jeremiah said to the devastated exiles millennia ago: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

**I am with you in prayer, for deep and blessed assurance,**

**Marisa**

Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola  
Associate Conference Minister  
Penn Central Conference

**Save the Dates:**

**PCC's 60th Annual Meeting**

Opening Plenary: 6:30PM, June 6, 2022  
Workshops: 6:30PM, June 7-9, 2022  
Business & Worship: 9:30AM, June 11, 2022

**HC Spirit Week**

Mt. Luther Camp  
August 6—12, 2022