The Keystone Connection

A Message to the Conference

August 18, 2026

Members and Friends of Keystone Conference,

This summer, I've taken up the task of rediscovering Psalm 23 through reading unfamiliar translations and allowing the words to breathe new life into my spirit. I have been reflecting on how faith actually feels in the body. Not the polished version we sometimes present on Sunday mornings, but the lived experience of trust, fear, courage, and surprise. Walter Brueggemann's work has been a steady companion in this series, reminding us that faith is not static. It moves, shifts, stretches, and breaks open. It follows a pattern we recognize in our own lives: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

Psalm 23 is not simply a comforting poem. It is a map of that movement.

Recently, I found myself living that map in an unexpected place: on the back of a horse. My daughter suggested we go horseback riding while we were away. I had never done it before. I did not grow up around horses. I did not know how to sit, how to hold the reins, or how to trust an animal so much larger than me. Everything in me tightened. My shoulders, my breath, my sense of control. It was a moment of disorientation, small but real.

But then we started moving.

The horse found its rhythm, and slowly, I found mine. The trail opened into a meadow. Sunlight filtered through the trees. My daughter's laughter drifted back toward me. Something in my chest loosened. The fear did not vanish, but it softened. The unfamiliar became a place of unexpected peace. I felt held by the horse, by the moment, and by God.

It was a quiet, surprising experience of new orientation. Not a return to comfort, but a deeper, wiser kind of trust.

Psalm 23 names that movement with honesty. It begins in the groundedness of green pastures and still waters. It moves through the valley of deep shadow. Then, in one of the most daring lines of Scripture, it declares: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

The Hebrew word for enemies here is tsarar. It means more than hostile people. It means anything that constricts, tightens, or presses in. Anything that makes life feel smaller. Anything that narrows our breath, our courage, or our hope.

Brueggemann teaches that God's faithfulness is not found in the absence of these pressures, but in God's bold willingness to show up in the midst of them. God does not wait for the enemies to disappear. God does not wait for the valley to brighten. God does not wait for our fear to resolve. God prepares a table in the presence of what constricts us.

This is the heart of new orientation. It is not the restoration of what was, but the discovery of grace in places we never expected.

Just like that horseback ride, where fear gave way to wonder and unfamiliarity opened into peace, Psalm 23 invites us to trust that God is already ahead of us, preparing abundance in the very places that feel tight.

Perhaps that is the invitation of this series: to notice where life feels constricted, to name our tsarar honestly, and then to look for the Shepherd's presence right there, in the pressured places, the narrow places, the unfamiliar places, the places where we feel least steady.

These are the places where God is already spreading a table, already anointing us with dignity, and already letting our cups overflow.

May this journey through Psalm 23 open us to the God who leads us through every terrain: the meadows, the valleys, the tight places, and the wide, surprising spaces where grace finds us again.

Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege
Coordinator Faith Formation Youth
Keystone Conference UCC

2027 Clergy Compensation Guidelines have been updated. Learn more by visiting https://keystoneucc.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/

The only change of note from 2026 in the guidelines is at the bottom of page two where the 2027 Cost of Living Adjustment is listed. For clergy in existing calls, the recommendation is an increase to salary and related benefits of 3-3.5%.

Early next year, we anticipate revisiting the guidelines. Clergy and lay leaders will be surveyed to find out if this model is working and how the Conference Compensation Guidelines can best serve as a helpful resource for both churches and clergy.