

PENN CENTRAL CONFERENCE



Empowering churches to proclaim the reconciling love of Christ.

A Message from PCC

November 10, 2021

Dear Members and Friends of Penn Central Conference,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. And God, who searches our hearts, knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God's purpose. (Romans 8:26-28; amended for inclusive language)

Don't know how to pray? The Spirit does. Every time we cry out with "O God help" or "I'm so confused" or "What is going on here?", the Spirit interprets these expressions as prayer—and prays for us. All we need to do is groan. But it doesn't stop there. In those things where we need help, where we're confused, where we don't know which way is up, God is working for good.

I don't know about you, but sometimes it's hard for me to fully grasp Paul's words. The entirety of chapter 8 is dedicated to convincing us that we live in God's spiritual realm, and not to be taken in by the temporal realities of the day. In other words, God's got our backs in any circumstance, whether we see it, know it, believe it—or not.

When I first came across this scripture that God works in all things for good, it came as a shock. I was very young in my Christian walk, still believing that if bad things happen surely God has a hand in the bad. It took me a long time to work out my theology where I realized that God doesn't send painful or difficult circumstances and experiences. God is with us intimately in all those circumstances and experiences—working for good to unfold. I also came to realize that the timing of good to happen sometimes, oftentimes, is way longer than I think it should be.

Lately I have been thinking about this scripture in relation to the state of the church right now: declining memberships and attendance, decreased coffers, more and more churches barely affording a parttime pas-

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Outdoor Ministries

In partnership with Lutheran Camping Corporation

ADVENT DAY APART

December 4 @The Wittel Farm (9 a.m. - 2 p.m.)

Enter into the Advent spirit by participating in a day of Bible study, worship, and prayerful reflection. For more information & to register, go to: <https://www.lutherancamping.org/event/advent-day-apart-2021/>

Learn more here: <https://pccucc.org/outdoor-ministry/>

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.

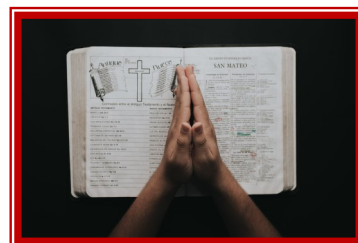
This week, we pray for each other as we continue to live into God's calling...

St. Matthew's UCC, Carlisle

Salem Stone UCC, Carlisle

Trinity UCC, Cashtown

Trinity UCC, Centre Hall



Message from the Conference cont'

tor where they have previously afforded a full-time pastor. In my role as Associate Conference Minister for Congregational Transitions, I spend a lot of time thinking about such things. And of course, I could blame the pandemic....

But....I am reminded that we have been talking about the new realities of church and where God is leading us since the early 2000's. The signs of decline began even before then. These phenomena began as early as the 1980's across denominations, and church development and vitality folk have been grappling and analyzing all along the way. There are some who suggest that the bubble that began in the 1950's was just that: a bubble. Some wonder if we are poised to return to the early model of church in the first century with small gatherings as the norm.

At my last pastorate, our church needed to face head-on declining attendance on Sunday morning and a coffer that barely covered my salary and benefits. And then we were introduced to the concept of church being church every day of the week, not just Sundays. And becoming a mission church that is relevant to the greater community brought folks to us those other days of the week—including their time, talent, and treasure, although not on Sunday morning. And we joined with the United Methodist church across the street that was floundering to bring two communities into one which was a Godly boost as well.

As your ACM for Congregational Transitions, I am joyfully tasked with working closely with our churches to wonder how God is working for good, despite membership and attendance decline, despite there being more small churches than we could have imagined just 50 years ago. And I believe as we groan and sigh, the Spirit prays. And I have faith that even as we wonder "how long, O Lord", God is already working for good.

This coming Sunday I have been invited to the York Association Annual Meeting to talk on churches joining together for ministry or mission. I am happy to share with other Associations as well. Beginning in March, I will be offering workshops in each of the Associations regarding the health and vitality of small churches—and celebrating these churches as God's new vision of the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven.

I invite you to join me in the work that God has for us as a "new church" emerges and unfolds. As we join together, let's dare to believe that even though we may not know what our future holds for the next 5 to 10 years, we indeed know who holds our future.

I believe that as we come together, we can wait in joyful hope, as Paul says earlier in chapter 8:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing

Wider Church

with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

May we hope as we wait—together—with faith in our ever-present and intimate God,

Marisa

Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola

Associate Conference Minister

Penn Central Conference

Address Change!

Please begin mailing any correspondence to our new PO Box:

Penn Central Conference

PO Box 6625

Harrisburg, PA 17112

Our physical address starting the week of November 15 (Do not mail letters to this address!)

St. Thomas UCC

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Harrisburg, PA 17112

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