

To the people of the Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ:

Dear Friends,

In 2016, the Penn Northeast Conference began a search process for a Designated Conference Minister. At the time, our Conference Board had been in the process of discernment of the formation of a new Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. In consultation with staff from the national setting of the United Church of Christ, we decided to search for a designated term conference minister. This person would serve with a specific task: to help assist us through the discernment process of the possibility of forming a new conference. .

The Conference Board called Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates to serve as our Designated Conference Minister. She has a wealth of experience. Prior to coming to PNEC, she served as Associate Association Minister for Congregational Vitality and Development for the Eastern Ohio/Western Reserve Associations of the Ohio Conference, United Church of Christ. Prior to this she served as local church pastor in the New York Conference. Her first career focus was in organizational management and human resource development in non-profit companies.

Bonnie was an excellent leader and resource for us through the discernment process with Pennsylvania Southeast. She had led a similar process of restructuring which brought experience to us. She helped us in discerning a vision, mission, and purpose for our new Conference. She was thoughtful and resourceful in helping us through the discernment steps to explore the structures and ministry of a new Conference. She was open, attended meetings throughout our conference, met with many churches, and was always communicating openly and honestly throughout the process.

In the fall of 2018, when the PSEC conference voted “no” to continuing the process, our conversations with the PSEC stopped. The PSEC Consistory has voted to continue these conversations. Our Conference Board has asked for some time, and we may resume our conversations in the fall of 2019. We are engaged in many excited and wonderful ministries together, and these will continue! We are good friends with the folks in PSEC, and we will continue to discern where God is leading us together.

Since Bonnie was called for three years for the specific purpose of helping us through a unification discernment process, and because that process has taken a turn, the Conference Board has begun the visioning our more independent future. As the Conference Board has discerned next steps, we have asked Bonnie to help us develop a vision for our conference as we move into the next years. Additionally, the Conference Board has voted to present her to the Conference at our 2019 fall conference meeting to be our called Conference Minister.

Bonnie is a gifted leader who has helped us, the conference board and the conference congregations, develop vision and mission statements and core values for our conference. She has worked faithfully in developing relationships and connecting congregations for working together. Bonnie has led worship and preached in many churches throughout our conference because she believes every person and every congregation matters. She has helped us through our grief in letting go of our previous beloved Conference Minister. She has been a resource and encouraged us through the changes in authorization for ministry in the new Manual on Ministry. Additionally, she has assisted us in moving into a leaner and more flexible governance and ministry model of leadership and decision-making.

In the last 18 months since Bonnie has been with us, she has been guiding us to grow into a faithful and vital church through coaching with local congregations, a congregational vitality program for faith communities, and supporting disaster response and ecumenical ministries in the conference. Bonnie continues to encourage connections among communities so that we can work together to bring the good news of God's love throughout the Penn Northeast Conference.

Through the next nine months, Bonnie will be holding zoom meetings which will be announced in our e-newsletter "This Week in PNEC." These are meeting over the computer where you click a link to a video chat. Bonnie will be answering questions, and she wants to hear from you about your hopes and dreams for our conference.

She will also hold two in person meetings at coffee shops (one in the Lehigh Valley and one in the northern region of our conference) to have meet and greets with people in our conference.

Our Conference Board also wants to hear from you. We value your thoughts, input, prayers, and discernment for our conference. At our May 4th spring conference meeting, Bonnie will be engaging us in conversation, and we would like to have small groups that receive your input toward the vision of our conference. The Conference Board will receive your input from the spring conference meeting, and we will evaluate your responses at a Board retreat following the meeting. Bonnie will also be listening for your input at her zoom meetings and meet and greets.

Then, we will share all that we have learned at our November 2nd fall conference meeting. Bonnie will share a vision for the Conference based on your responses and input from the Conference Board. She will be presented to the fall meeting to be our next called Conference Minister of the Penn Northeast Conference. Together, through prayer and by God's grace, we will continue to be the Body of Christ, build relationships, and work together so that all may know the love and grace of our amazing God.

Peace be with you,

Joanne Marchetto

Moderator, Conference Board