

STATE OF THE REGION
American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin – October 8, 2022 Annual Meeting
“Making a Way in the Wilderness” Isaiah 43:19

It is an honor and blessing to serve as your new Executive Minister. My family and I moved to Wisconsin from Seattle in February, and I began on March 1st. I have described my journey so far as a road race. I was dropped in the middle of the race and hit the ground running. I have a general sense of direction (in Seattle, Puget Sound is to the west. Here, Lake Michigan is to the east). I have an idea of what is coming ahead but I can't fully imagine it and don't always see the turns and bumps that may come my way. However, so far, I have enjoyed the route, and the pace is manageable. I have visited 26 churches for a worship service, and a few other pastors I have met for coffee or lunch. I also had the privilege of attending the AB Women's Gathering and other events throughout my first six months. I know things will slow down a bit around the holidays, but I hope to keep up the pace, and by this time next year, I hope to have visited every single one of our churches.

I began as your Executive Minister almost two years to the date of the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we come out on the other side, we are all emerging in different ways and in different spaces. Digital access has become vital for our disabled, immunocompromised and elderly members. It has made participating in faith community possible for a number of folks who could not before the pandemic. It has also made participation more convenient for people with busy schedules. Still, others prefer the in-person connection of worshipping together, including singing, and having fellowship with one another. It's a challenging time to emerge from the pandemic. We still are learning how to do "hybrid ministry" and what that fully means and looks like, when we have people online and in-person—how do we engage, encourage, educate and equip us all for ministry, together, across spaces AND time?

We're not through it yet. Our theme of "Making a Way in the Wilderness" is true for all of us as it was for the exiled Israelites returning home during the time of the prophet Isaiah. God is "about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" For our ancestors in the faith, they thought they would go back to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple that was destroyed, and things would go back to how they were. However, when they returned home, things were not the same. Over the years, with different waves of exiles returning home, they carried with them different understandings of what temple worship ought to look like or who they were in a post-kingdom Israel.

In a similar way, we are emerging from the pandemic at different paces, with possibly different ideas of who we are as the American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin. It isn't easy navigating the past and remembering how things were done when you are coming in brand new. There have been some difficult transitions. We have had staff retire and others move on. The Wisconsin AB Womens' group voted to close. Because of this closure, and our lack of participation from AM Men, we will need to revisit our bylaws in the next year as those positions have often gone unfilled. We will have to think of how to lead our region together in new ways.

Yet even there, seeds have been planted. There are young women from across cultures in our churches interested in starting a new women's group. There are young people in our churches ready to engage in ministry. There are possibilities of new ministries and even new churches being planted. In the midst of all the uncertainty as we come out of Covid, what I do know is this: God IS doing a new thing. It's springing forth. Can you perceive it?

Here are some of the new ways we are moving into the new:

Resourcing our churches: John Jones, in his newly revised role as Associate Minister for Education, is helping to develop trainings for our lay leaders. Our first training is a Financial Workshop for Church Treasurers and Finance Committees coming up at the end of October. We are also planning a training for Church Leadership Boards, and one for Pastoral Relations Committees on Best Practices.

Equipping and supporting our pastors: We are providing through our denomination and other sources several new training and continuing education opportunities for our pastors to continue learning, especially in this digital time. Lay Ministry is a top priority, to help equip our lay leaders for ministry and our small churches with leadership. In addition, we are providing two clergy retreats at Camp Tamarack: one pre-holiday in November, one post-holiday in January. Clergy retreats are an opportunity for rest, renewal, learning, and fellowship together. Ministry is often a lonely vocation, and we want to care for our pastors and leaders, so they have the endurance of spirit and encouragement and wisdom to care and lead our congregations.

Camping and Outdoor Ministry: Carolyn Dugan is working on plans for renovations and restorations at Camp Tamarack. I see Camp Tamarack as a vital resource for all of us, and I encourage you, if you've never been, to visit this beautiful place. We are looking to upgrade and restore our buildings and cultivate our connections to each other through the care and use of our wonderful camp.

Next Generation Ministries: This is my heart and passion. As a teen, I was invited and encouraged into leadership. I participated in worship leadership, church decision-making, and representing the church. My call to ministry was inspired and developed in my home church and through my faith formation at camp. However, we are seeing across the country, in every denomination and region, a generation gap. We have very few young people heading into ministry. Far too often churches have been focused inward on survival and dismissing younger people until they are of age—which by then, it's too late. My goal is to help us develop the skills and resources to encourage young people in church membership, leadership, and ministry. They are not the future of the church; they are the church now. And sometimes, the most difficult thing for us to do is the most necessary: to let go of how we have done things. To let others lead and make decisions. To help when asked, but not to assume it is needed.

Our 2023 Annual Gathering will be held October 13-15 at Green Lake, with the focus on Next Generation Ministries. I ask that you plan accordingly for one or both nights (the majority of events will be on Saturday) and also consider having your church sponsor a scholarship for youth and young adults from your church to attend. This is a reminder as churches approach the time to make budgets for the coming year to budget accordingly to send delegates, especially youth and young adults, to next year's event.

On a final note of how God is making all things new, as God leads us out of the wilderness: we are in historic times. Our region is the first region to call back-to-back women executive ministers. In December, May May Latt will be the first woman from Burma ordained in our region and there are not many women from Burma ordained in the world. We have four historically Euro-American churches being led by pastors of color, and two are women. God IS doing something new! Can you not perceive it?

With you on the journey of faith,
Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell
Executive Minister

REGION NOTES:

Staff Transitions:

Rev. Jim Carlson, Ph.D., retired as the Hispanic Liaison after six years on March 31st, 2022.

Rev. Kim Drost resigned from Camp Tamarack as Assistant Minister of Camping: Facilities and Guest Services on April 30th, 2022 and became the interim minister at First Baptist Church of Ixonia on May 1st.

Maretta McMullen resigned as Office Administrator for the Regional Office on September 22nd, 2022.

Sean Cornell returned as our Office Administrator for the Regional Office on September 26th, 2022.

Congregations and Pastors: *Completed:* Russ Antos—Ixonia, First Baptist. Debbie Giese—Honey Creek, Community. Eugene Cowan—Milwaukee, Jeremiah Missionary. *Beginning:* Gwendolyn Young—West Allis, First Baptist.

Pastorate Milestone Celebrations:

5th: Chakravarthy Zadda (Waukesha—First Baptist), Laku Htoo La (Milwaukee—Peniel Karen)

10th: Ronald Nunuk (Greenfield—Carson Chin), Kenneth Cutler (Milwaukee—Greater Mt. Zion), Martin Childs (Milwaukee-Pilgrim Rest)

15th: Johnny White (Milwaukee—Greater Galilee), Steven Carlson (West Allis—Tabernacle)

20th: John R Walton, Jr. (Milwaukee—Calvary Baptist), Holly Anderle (Racine—First Baptist)

In Memoriam (ABC/WI Clergy): Doug Farrell (retired, Honey Creek—Community), Alastair W. Brown (retired, Fond du Lac, Memorial)