

“STATE OF THE REGION”

American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin, October 2, 2021 Annual Meeting
“Church Together” | Romans 12:3-5

Rev. Dr. John Jones, Interim Regional Executive Minister | john.jones@abcofwi.org

It has been a true honor to serve as Interim Regional Executive Minister this year. I am grateful for this opportunity to try and serve this association of congregations for this season. Serving in the role of IREM has only deepened my appreciation for all the faithful pastors and leaders in our congregations, all those willing to engage in the common mission of the region. The challenges faced by churches over the past two years have been remarkable. The creativity and determination of our churches in responding to those challenges has been inspiring.

2021 has been another difficult year. It began with the introduction of vaccines and the corresponding hope for a return to some semblance of normalcy. Our various churches had several different timelines. But most were steadily moving toward in-person worship and expanded ministry opportunities. That movement has been stymied by the Delta variant of the Coronavirus. One step forward and two steps back. That difficulty has been wearing, especially on leadership in our congregations.

That situation highlights the need within and between churches for personal connection and cooperation, not only for common mission, but even and especially for mutual support. That connection and cooperation has been happening, even in the face of all the challenges of the pandemic. The work of the Commissions and Committees of the region has continued, in service of our common mission, through the faithful and diligent attention of our leaders. Note the Program Committee, whose thoughtful and discerning reflections led to the selection of our “Church Together” theme. Their hard work and commitment to this association made the Annual Gathering possible. We have maintained the personal connections that can sustain good work even in challenging times.

The same could be said for our pastors. Many pastors and ministers have taken advantage of the monthly online check-ins for mutual support and encouragement. Though attendance at any particular session has typically been small, the diversity of participants over the course of these many months has been substantial. And the effort to provide a place for mutual support and encouragement for ministers has been appreciated by all participants.

Building and nurturing relationships is long and difficult work. Doing so during a pandemic is incredibly challenging, but it remains essential for engagement in the broad sense of the mission of *being* church. We build relationships in congregations. We build relationships between congregations as well. This difficult but important work helps us embody the value in our mission statement that “affirms our diversity of culture, gender, and theological perspectives as gifts for ministry.” I have seen and felt those gifts for ministry this year. In challenging circumstances, we continue to do the difficult work of building and nurturing relationships that serve as Christ’s witness in the world.

NEW INITIATIVES

Our recent initiatives have remained active and viable despite the challenges of the ongoing pandemic. The **New Wineskins** grant program can be the seedbed for new ministries. The **Circuit Ministry** serves as a resource to congregations in transition who desire that assistance. The **Co-Consultation on Race & Culture** remains a valued space where pastors can support and encourage one another as they navigate the cross-racial and multi-cultural efforts for justice, mutual understanding, and Kingdom-actions. We are working together creatively and collectively to support one another.

CAMPING

The camping ministry returned to activity this summer, though in an abbreviated format. See Rev. Carolyn Dugan's report below. Camping is a beloved ministry for ABC/WI constituency. Camp Tamarack will be entering a period of intentional promotion among ABC/WI churches (see report below) and of discernment for the future of that tremendous asset.

EDUCATION

At the end of 2020, the financial relationship between Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kansas and ABC/WI ended, effectively ending the seminary site that has been housed in the region office since 2005. CENTRAL Wisconsin was an important part of region ministry and an important presence for theological education in the area. The imprint of the site upon the region can be seen in the number of ministers and pastors who received their education through the site as well as through the offerings of the site to the wider community. Nevertheless, the end of the site requires a rethinking of the educational ministry of the region.

STAFFING

2021 saw more stability in staffing for the region with a new permanent part-time Office Administrator (Maretta McMullen) and the return (part-time) of Rev. Carolyn Dugan as Associate Regional Minister-Camping. The evolving nature of region ministry and the immanent transition to a new settled Regional Executive Minister will require continued attention and consideration of appropriate staffing for the region office.

GOVERNANCE

We are entering our third year under the new by-laws adopted during the 2019 Annual Gathering. The Board of Managers is active, diverse, and engaged in the ongoing work of the region, suggesting that this reconfiguration has been both welcome and effective. However, the difficulties faced by the Nominating Committee in recruiting new Board members the past two years suggests that the region will need to give continued attention to developing leadership to participate in this important work of visioning and oversight.

REPORTS

This year we had one congregation make the difficult decision to close after 173 years in ministry. **Darien Community** closed at the end of July.

We have new pastorates that began since our last gathering. **Rev. Tim Schaefer** began his ministry at **Madison, First** in November 2020. **Honey Creek, Community** called **Debbie Giese**, a student at Central Seminary, as pastor in May. And **La Crosse, First** took the bold and creative step of installing a pastoral team in September: **Rev. Dr. Timm Ashley, Rev. Maxine Ashley, Rev. Don Iliff, and Rev. Mark Stahlhut.**

CONCLUSION

I will quote Marie's last state of the region report when she encouraged us to "(r)emember, value, envision, and implement joint ministries and mission." This is what it means to be Baptist – to be associational in our mission work, however broadly or narrowly that work is understood. That is **being** church. We **choose** to engage in mission **together**. This is one of the reasons our Program Committee chose the theme of "Church Together" for this year's Annual Gathering. We are better together. We need each other probably more than we realize. And a conscious effort to live out that life together is what builds the capacity to respond to God's call well into the future.

2021 has been another challenging year. But our churches and leaders have been drawing on faith to respond to those challenges. The uncertainty can be daunting, but it is a reminder that we walk by faith and not by sight. May we all continue to follow the example of our savior who spoke with a prophetic

voice, ministered with a healing hand, and loved with a big, beautiful heart. May we follow in his footsteps toward the marginalized and despised. May we walk a path neither simple nor easy but true. May we be his feet and hands, his body – the body of Christ – in this world.

REGION NOTES:

Congregations and Pastors: *Completed:* Don Iliff—La Crosse, First (Interim); Carolyn Dugan—Fond du Lac, Memorial (Interim). *Beginning:* Tim Schaefer—Madison, First; Debbie Giese—Honey Creek, Community; Don Ilif, Timm Ashley, Maxine Ashley, & Mark Stahlhut (team pastorate)—La Crosse, First.

Closed Churches: Darien, Community, Robert Sullivan, Pastor

Pastorate Milestone Celebrations: Lawrence Kirby (Racine, St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church) — 40th; Louis Sibley (Milwaukee, Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church) — 35th; Karen Gygaz-Rodriguez (Green Lake, Federated Church) — 25th; Juan Contreras (Kenosha, Iglesia Bautista El Calvario) — 20th; John Nehs (Green Bay, Bridge Point) — 15th; Juan Arcila (Waukesha, Hispanic Congregation of First Waukesha) — 15th; Eugene Cowan (Milwaukee, Jeremiah Missionary Baptist Church) — 10th; Walter Lanier (Milwaukee, Progressive Baptist Church) — 10th; Betsy Perkins (Delavan, First)—5th; Marcus Allen (Madison, Mount Zion Baptist Church) — 5th

In Memoriam (ABC/WI Clergy): Karen Bailey (Milwaukee, Songs of Life); Jaime Davila (Milwaukee, Iglesia Bautista - retired)

Rev. Dr. John A. Jones IV, Interim Regional Executive Minister | john.jones@abcofwi.org

CAMPING

Rev. Carolyn Dugan, Associate Regional Minister – Camping | carolyn.dugan@abcofwi.org

Rev. Kim Drost, Assistant Minister – Camping: Facilities and Guest Services | kim.drost@abcofwi.org

This year the theme was based on Romans 8:39. After a year of virtual camp and physically distancing, the reminder was that nothing can separate us from God's love. God's love surpasses a virus and pandemic.

We slowly and carefully opened things up on the property for the year. We implemented a COVID protocol that includes wearing masks when indoors, reducing the capacity of buildings, changing some of our meal procedures and monitoring temperatures. For all of our decisions we consulted with the Waupaca County of Health and Waupaca High School nurses. With all of this in place, we only had one camper we needed to send home and as far as we know the issue was not COVID related.

It was a small, but successful camping season and we are grateful to all the volunteers that helped make it happen. As part of the programming we added a few "new" offerings this year including a Canoe/Kayak Camp, Reunion Camp and a Fishing Fun Day. We are trying to offer events that give people a chance to gather in fellowship and maybe try something new.

We continue to have opportunities for those that maybe can't commit to a full camp, but could come up for a day or two to help paint cabins or support our Spring In and Fall Out of camp work days to keep the space maintained and ready for our next arrivals.

In the coming year, we will be encouraging our churches and affiliated partners to explore the camp space for any needs they may have such and small group retreats, youth groups, and more. We understand that needs change over time, but one thing that doesn't change is how spending time in creation gives the soul rest and restoration.

Thank you to the Board and the Region for the continued support of Camp Tamarack as we look to the future.

Grace and Peace – Rev. Carolyn Dugan



*Neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God that is
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:39*