

Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ

Ministerial Staff Report prepared for the Conference Annual Gathering 2024

Rev. Ellis Arnold, Designated Associate Conference Minister

Friends, it has been a tremendous year in the life of the Southern California Nevada Conference. I am thankful for the skilled, dedicated, and faithful folks in this Conference who have time and time again revealed that Church is an action, a way of being in community, and a practice of noticing what is Sacred in our midst. I will refrain from a sneak-a-preach moment disguised as an annual meeting report, but I do want to highlight some of the transformative work within the Conference during this past year.

Formation and Launch of the Covenanting Committee on Ministry (CCOM)

One of the most notable events this year has been the launch of the Covenanting Committee on Ministry (CCOM)¹. **All** Associations of the SCNC Conference have now covenanted with one another to collaboratively provide support, oversight, and accountability for Ministers and Local Churches!

The CCOM is comprised of four specialized and trained teams, each comprised of lay and clergy members from diverse backgrounds, life experiences, geographies. To learn more about each of the Teams or to be in contact with the Teams or staff who support them, visit:

www.scncucc.org/ministries/ccom

Alongside the launch of the CCOM, came the opportunity to engage in communal discernment, determine common best practices for Committee on Ministry work, align policies to UCC recommendations as recorded in the Manual on Ministry, shift to focus on relationship development, increase volunteer trainings, and shift to easier to use technologies to aid this work. A few of the major developments to celebrate:

- **Accessible, Written Ministerial Authorization Policies and Resources.** To increase transparency and help reduce bias, as well as to increase the ease of access for lay leaders, clergy, and those in discernment, all policies related to Ministerial Authorization are now accessible on the SCNC-UCC website. Check out www.scncucc.org/paths to learn about the variety of paths folk may take in their

¹ For those unfamiliar with the term “Committee on Ministry”, it may be helpful to know that in the UCC, there is a specific committee structure that is entrusted with the processes in the denomination that nurture the formation of ministers, provide ongoing vocational support for ministers, and provide accountability for ministers’ ethics and behavior. That same committee structure is also entrusted with the processes that nurture UCC identity within churches exploring affiliation with the UCC, provide ongoing support for UCC Local Churches, and provide accountability for a Local Church’s ethics and behavior. Throughout the denomination there are a variety of ways that Committees on Ministry work is accomplished, and with recent changes, SCNC has joined other settings said to have “unified” this work within their Conference.

journey towards becoming a UCC minister. Click on the various paths to learn more about the specific steps.

- **Training for Local Church Discernment Committees.** To help candidates begin their discernment process well, SCNC now offers training for every Local Church Discernment Committees. These training sessions are just the beginning of helping Local Churches become equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to accompany and nurture individuals discerning a call ministry. Contact the ACM or support staff for a training if your congregation has someone beginning their discernment journey and be sure to visit the Conference site for more information on the Member in Discernment Process www.scncucc.org/paths/mid or Privilege of Call Process www.scncucc.org/paths/poc.
- **Standing Requirements Improved to Include Continuing Education.** A continuing education requirement of 15 hours per year has been implemented for all UCC Ministers with Active Standing as a step towards encouraging and ensuring that our clergy are able to meet the evolving needs as professionals in ministry settings. More information is on the conference website. (Note: UCC clergy with Standing have either Active Standing or Exempt Standing. Ministers with Exempt Standing are *exempt* from continuing education requirement).
- **Easy to Use Information Reviews.** CCOM and administrative support staff (thank you to Virginia and Vicki!) made possible an easy-to-submit, electronic system for information reviews. These are vital for maintaining connection and this user-friendly platform simplifies the process, making less time-consuming to complete. Expect Annual Information Reviews in your email inbox each January. They will be due each February. These are required for clergy who want to retain Standing.

Discernment with Associations

This year, we continued efforts to engage in meaningful discernment with the Associations regarding their ministry and future direction. Through a series of consultations and dialogues, we have:

- **Hosted conversations** that allowed associations to reflect on their unique identities, strengths, and areas for growth.
- **Encouraged all settings to collaborate and share resources**, fostering a spirit of unity and mutual support with one another.
- **Supported Associations who are preparing for their future** by redoing bylaws and determining how to best serve and connect their congregations and communities.
- **Supported the Eastern Association through its decision to end its ministry.** On May 18, 2024, the Eastern Association voted to conclude its ministry and to transfer the roles and responsibilities to the SCNC Conference. This is an available option for Associations in the UCC and a faithful option for Associations who want the freedom to connect with one another to engage in ministry together without the extra responsibilities Association institutional management.

Consultation with Churches Considering Structural and/or Organizational Changes

The ministerial staff have been actively involved in consulting with and coaching Local Church leaders who are contemplating organizational changes. We have had the joy of

- **Providing guidance and support.** We offer advice and practical support to churches considering mergers, closures, or other significant structural changes.
- **Coaching congregations on healthy governance and policy practices.** During the changing landscape of religious life, many churches are considering changes to their governance structures. It is a great opportunity to make sure documents and practices are faithful, relevant, and clear, as well as meet legal requirements.
- **Facilitating congregational discernment sessions.** Our ministerial team (often in partnership with CCOM) has worked closely with Local Church leaders to create opportunities for them to be in discernment with one another. In these hosted conversations, Local Church leaders benefit from a neutral host who can help them determine next steps in their life together that align with their mission and vision.
- **Encouraging healthy transitions.** We assist churches in navigating the complexities of organizational change, encouraging that transitions between pastors and between seasons of institutional life are handled with care and compassion for all involved.

I can go on and on, but I will simply pause here to say that the past year has been one of growth, adaptation, and strengthened commitment to our mission. The formation of the Covenanting Committee on Ministry, the fruitful discernment with our associations, and the ongoing vital work with churches are reflective of increasing health in the Conference and deepening care and concern for one another.

As we look forward to the coming year, I am grateful that SCNC remains committed to fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and collaborative community for all our Local Churches and their members. I look forward to seeing what good trouble the Spirit stirs up and how we all respond to Her invitation to continue to seek new ways to live out our faith and serve our communities with love and justice.

Faithfully,

Rev. Ellis Arnold
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