

South Central Mennonite Conference
Network Director Report, 2020-21

As a part of the new structure for SCMC leadership, in September 2020 a new assignment was given to Howard and Cathy Wagler as Network Directors, to direct the communications between SCMC and the conference congregations. This position filled the need for a Conference Minister position. There were already Regional Conference Ministers in place who each were responsible for contacting a group of churches as assigned at an earlier time. Because that system of communication was working well, we continued with those pastors using a new title, Regional Ministry Coaches (RMC). As you can see below, those persons are very valuable to the churches and pastors that they reach out to. This is especially true in light of the current year of Covid.

There were several churches that were left without a specific RMC, and the Network Directors have filled that role for these churches. Each week, we have chosen to communicate by phone or email with a variety of church leaders across the conference. In addition, as much as possible, we are visiting churches on Sunday mornings to meet people and learn to know more about their unique ministries and community needs. This has been both encouraging and educational for us as Network Directors as we continue to move forward. We are also given the responsibility of communicating with MC USA leadership whenever there are meetings, or information to be passed on to the local leaders, as well as other information to resource congregations for following their missional call.

Occasionally, Howard has been available to fill the pulpit for several SCMC congregations. That has been rewarding, as we have appreciated being on site with congregations to worship with them.

Congregations currently being contacted by Howard and Cathy Wagler, Network Directors:

Argentine MC, Kansas City, Sandeep Thomas, Pastor

Herold MC, Bessie, OK, Don Janzen, Deacon

Metro MC, Oklahoma City (Mustang, OK), Norman Berry, Pastor

Mt Pisgah MC, Leonard, MO (Macon, MO), Roger Otto, church chair, Tim Wortzel, pastor

New Hope Fellowship, Perryton TX, Robert Humphrey, Pastor

Following are individual reports from each of the Regional Ministry Coaches.

Clarence Rempel, RMC

We praise God for the founding and flourishing of the new Amani Community Church in Wichita, Kansas, with eleven South Central Mennonite Conference churches participating in prayer, presence and financial support. Amani also received gifts of a 16-passenger van, Swahili Bibles, projector and screen, choir outfits, and mutual aid support for immigrant families. Pastor Masemo Wakibogo and the Amani Ministry Team have guided the congregation through the complications of COVID. The Paradizo Choir has recorded a number of energetic worship songs to YouTube under Amani Community Church. A recent Marriage Blessing service saw over 150 in attendance. SCMC is committed to networking church planting partnerships.

Pastoral searches have been a significant part of my work with Journey Mennonite Church, Whitestone Mennonite Church, and Hesston Mennonite Church. The pastoral pool of available candidates is small at the present time resulting in longer search times. Zachary Batson was installed as Campus Pastor at Yoder@McPherson on February 28, 2021.

Pastors and church leaders navigated the COVID-19 shut down with amazing agility and creativity. New ways of being church together are emerging with many questions remaining about what the post-pandemic church might look like.

Congregations engaged in the Discovery 20.21 Process with different degrees of intensity depending on what seemed appropriate and necessary for their involvement.

Howard Keim, RMC

I serve five rural congregations, all west of Wichita, including Crystal Springs (Harper), Pleasant Valley (Harper), Kingman, Greensburg and Light of Life (Farmington, NM). Due to covid and other factors, my face to face visits have been few in the past year. I visit by phone with each pastor at least monthly and we meet as a group of pastors two or three times per year.

The past year has been challenging for these congregations in several ways. The most obvious disrupter of congregational life has been the pandemic. The direct effects have varied among the congregations, but all have adjusted their meeting patterns and Sunday services. Pastors have needed to develop new ways to think about how to get information to people, how to extend care and how to help people engage in worship in a virtual format. I have been encouraged by the resilience of these congregations and the creative leadership of pastors. They have learned new ways to extend pastoral care, new ways to worship and gather people, new ways to serve their communities, and even new technology skills. Perhaps we could find ways to track our interactions and service in the community rather than using church attendance as our primary measure.

Unfortunately, responses to health guidelines during the pandemic took on a partisan political tone, with pastors and church leaders feeling the political tension as well as the pastoral care responsibility. An additional strain was added with the racial incidents and unrest taking place across the country, and it had its effects on the general sense of unrest and insecurity. Another issue still at play is the extreme political partisanship most obviously seen in a contested presidential election. All these things combine to raise questions about what it means to be Christian in a secular society and how best to be faithful as congregations when Christians seem so divided in the nation.

I have always seen the value of longer-term pastorates, but this year was especially instructive in that regard. As one pastor explained it, "The longer I am here, the more I can earn the trust of the community and the more people come to me for help." Another stated that "There are so many great opportunities that I didn't see in my earlier years." I am hoping to find more intentional ways of helping the shorter-term pastors learn from the longer-term pastors in the future.

James Wenger, RMC

All of us faced challenges because of the Covid 19 Epidemic. The self supported pastors engaged in church planting situations had major obstacles to overcome. For example, Omot and Hanna Aganya

from Eden Life Church both lost their jobs and had great difficulty getting any unemployment insurance. Eventually, they both found work, but had to start with lower wages than they had gotten before. In spite of that, Eden Life Church flourished with increasing numbers of Congolese refugees joining the church. Another self supporting pastor, Jerry Acosta, was able to keep his job and they recently have gained several new families.

Most of the churches that I work with continued to have services much of the time through Covid 19, each with their own guidelines and common practices regarding covid precautions. Covid cases affected some of my congregations very severely with high numbers of infections and even fatalities. Several of the churches mentioned that new people came to their services during this time. The larger churches were able to live stream a service while they were closed but many of the smaller and newer churches weren't able to do that as well.

Tim Sweigart, RMC

The churches from the UCIM district of SCMC are being served by Tim Sweigart, who has been newly appointed to this position. He has made one trip to S Texas to visit these churches and listen to their needs, gathering information from the pastors and church leaders to better serve them in the future. There are currently 11 congregations in this southern group of churches.