

**Annual Report - July 2024**  
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**A Year of Growth and Gratitude: Reflections from the Associate Conference Minister**

As I look back on the past year, I am filled with deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve the Western District Conference (WDC). My journey has been enriched by the unwavering support of the WDC staff, commissions and the inspiring resilience of our congregations and credential ministers. Together, we have navigated challenges, celebrated successes, and embraced the diverse cultural tapestry that makes our conference vibrant and unique.

**Nurturing New Church Plants**

This year, we were blessed to support church plants, guided by the careful discernment of local leaders and the strategic vision of the WDC Church Planting Commission (CPC). One such endeavor was the collaboration to form a partnership between the WDC, the Hispanic Ministry of MEA, and SEMILLA (Seminario Anabautista Latinoamericano) to implement the IBA –Instituto Bíblico Anabautista program, at Arca de Salvacion Church Plant, Uspantán, Guatemala.

The collaborative efforts ensured these new faith communities are being equipped with the resources and mentorship necessary for a solid Anabaptist foundation. Through training sessions, we empowered church planters with tools for missional engagement and community building, embodying a shared commitment to spreading the gospel.

**Supporting Pastors and Congregations**

Our work with pastors has been particularly fulfilling. One-on-one mentoring sessions provided safe spaces for pastors to navigate personal and professional challenges, I organized pastors and leadership workshops, and facilitating Hispanic ministry and Bilingual pastors peer group. Our pastors peer group meetings have been rich with fellowship and learning. Others valuable peer groups that I support are: Transitional pastors, Pastor Review Advisors, and Chaplains. The support and encouragement they provide to one another are invaluable. I am grateful for their commitment to growing together as leaders.

Visiting congregations has been a joy and an honor, allowing us to listen, encourage, and connect them with essential resources. Facilitated mediation meetings, preaching, working with congregational leadership, search committees, and focus group to boost church revitalization tailored to address specific congregational needs. These interactions strengthened our relationships and deepened our collective understanding of each community's unique context.

**Listening and Learning**

This year, we facilitated listening sessions in four congregations in Texas. These gatherings were invaluable, offering a platform for members to express their hopes, concerns, and dreams. The feedback we are receiving will be instrumental in shaping our future planning, ensuring that our strategies align with the real needs of our communities. The Listening Process planning team, and volunteer's dedication to these sessions highlighted their commitment to truly hearing and understanding the voices of our congregations.

**Cultural Sensitivity and Hispanic Ministry**

Our focus on cultural sensitivity was particularly evident in the planning of the Hispanic ministry retreat, scheduled for September 2024. We pray for spiritual renewal, where leaders could reconnect with their calling and each other. WDC staff played an integral role in these retreats, offering logistical support and promotion. Crafting a proposal for a Transitional Ministry for the Hispanic congregation, we prioritized cultural respect and relevance. Working together with conference Minister Heidi Regier Kreider to support the transitional ministry for Casa Betania in Newton KS, give us the experience to ensuring that our approaches were not only thoughtful but also deeply respectful of the diverse cultural backgrounds within our conference.

### **Engaging in Broader Conversations**

Representing WDC as a delegate at the MC USA biennial assembly was a profound experience. It was an opportunity to bring the concerns and aspirations of our local congregations to the national stage. Participating in denominational gatherings allowed me to engage fully in the discussions shaping our locals' congregations. Similarly, attending "Hope for the Future 2024" provided a unique space to connect with other BIPOC church leaders, sharing experiences and exploring ways to support one another making this experience both impactful and enriching.

### **Building Bridges and Supporting Youth**

Building relationships with congregations in south Texas (former South Central MC churches) was another highlight of the year. As result New Life Christian Center is seeking membership in WDC during our annual assembly, and it has been a privilege to act as a bridge, facilitating discussions about shared vision and mission. Fostering these connections has been instrumental in making this process smooth and fruitful.

How to support youth ministry in Texas has also been a key focus. We explored various ways to engage youth ministry, identifying resources and training opportunities. The enthusiasm and commitment of Dwight Regier, Youth Ministry Network Team Leader, and the WDC's conference ministers give us hope that we can find ways to work collectively to nurturing the next generation of church leaders.

### **Institutional relationships**

I serve as Director of the Anabaptist Missional Leadership Academy (ALMA) a program of the Hispanic Mennonite Church/ MC USA. Leadership discernment committee (LDC) of MC USA. Everence National Chapter Grant Board member. AMBS advisor for Pastor's Week 2024 and AMBS's Practical Leadership Training program.

I attended the MC USA conference minister's virtual monthly meetings and annual MC USA/Canada retreat Nov. 9-12 in Banff. A presentation by Dr. Carl Adrian on mental health issues and how pastors deal with loneliness provided us with tools not only for self-differentiation but will also be useful to understand and help other leaders with whom we work in my role as ACM.

I joined MC USA church planting virtual meeting. This meeting is for denominational leaders of church planting for networking and sharing about the church planting work in the conferences.

### **The Importance of WDC Staff Support**

WDC commission and task forces supporting congregations to address their unique challenges and opportunities. The sense of community and collaboration fostered by the staff has been invaluable, reinforcing our shared commitment to God's mission and cultivating a welcoming, inclusive faith community.

I maintained weekly meetings to check in with CM Heidi Regier Kreider, reporting and consulting important matters related to the work of the Conference. Monthly meeting with WDC staff. And Associate Conference Ministers Kathy Neufeld Dunn for updating and task coordination.

In addition to these updates, I work closely with, Violeta Ajquejay Suastegui in her role as Ministry Assistant to support culturally sensitive congregations and pastors, providing resources and strengthening connections with the broader conference and denomination.

### **looking forward**

As I reflect on this year, I am struck by the growth and learning we have experienced together. The initiatives we've undertaken have not only addressed the immediate needs of our congregations but have also laid a foundation for future growth and inclusion. The support and cultural sensitivity demonstrated by the WDC staff have been key components, helping to navigate the complexities of ministry with grace and compassion.

Looking ahead, I am filled with hope and excitement. We will continue to build on the foundation we have laid, striving to create a diverse and welcoming community that reflects the love and justice of Christ. With gratitude for the past and faith in the future, I look forward to another year of serving alongside the incredible people of the Western District Conference.

With heartfelt thanks,

Sandra Montes-Martinez.