

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INTERIM ASSOCIATION MINISTER TO THE  
EASTERN OHIO ASSOCIATION  
October, 2011

I have now been serving as your Interim Association Minister for 18 months. My how time flies when you're having fun! In this past year I've had the opportunity to get to know more about our churches and pastors. I've become more accustomed to and comfortable doing ministry within the ethos of this association. And I've come to deeply appreciate the people and the ministries of this setting of the church. We've had some fun together, we've faced some challenges together, we have grown together, and through it all our common faith has sustained us.

One reflection of my time among you these past 12 months is in the statistics. Since last October, I have participated in 125 association events or meetings, met with folks or participated in Sunday worship in local churches 37 times; shared in services of celebration in local churches (like installations, ordinations, anniversaries) on 10 occasions, had 32 opportunities to meet with individuals (pastors and lay people) to provide pastoral care, support and/or guidance, met with 14 clergy of other denominations who were exploring the possibility of ministry in the UCC, and met with staff (EOA and WRA) 12 times. Besides that I related to the wider church on the conference level 10 times, on the denominational level 3 times, and represented the Ohio Conference on the Midwest Ministry Development Center Board in two trips to Chicago.

This has been a year of many transitions in the life of the association. We have had seven authorized ministers retire: Jim and Elaine Painting from St. Paul's, East Canton; Dick Beck from Grace, Uniontown; Jay Schmidt from Emmanuel, Akron; Jacquie McMillen from St. Peter's, Apple Creek; and Earl Roberts from Suffield UCC. In just a few weeks Ed Morrison will be retiring from Zion, Ragersville. While these folks are officially retired, they are still active in ministry in the association in a variety of ways. Well done, and thank you, faithful servants.

Currently in EOA we have 16 congregations that are in a time of pastoral transition, with two more that will say farewell to their pastors before the end of the year. We have installed pastors in three churches this year: Bert Ambrose at Emmanuel, Valley City; Joyce Schroer at Paradise, Louisville; and Jim Case at Stow Community Church. One other new call has begun and that is at First Congregational, Hudson where Jeanette Broderson started in September as the Associate Minister. We look forward to her installation in the months ahead. We had the joy of sharing in the ordination of three persons this year. Lauren Lorinz was called to serve a church in the Massachusetts Conference and was ordained at her home church, Trinity, Wadsworth in April. Dan Yetter, who has been serving as an Associate at Trinity, Canton was ordained there in November, 2010. And Adam Marquette was ordained in March at The Bath UCC where he has been serving as an Associate.

Sadly, we mourned the loss of Ryan Mathews who died October 12 following an automobile accident in St. Louis where he lived. Ryan was a Member in Discernment of

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the Eastern Ohio Association and had been approved for ordination pending a call. He was actively engaged in the search process at the time of his death and excited about the possibilities of serving in ministry. Ryan was a member of First Grace UCC in Akron, a member of the Office of General Ministries of the UCC and served as the secretary of the UCC Disabilities Ministries Board of Directors. Ryan's death is a great loss for the whole church.

The EOA/WRA Support Center staff experienced a major transition this past year when we said farewell to James Ferguson, who resigned the end of May as Support Staff for Communications and Administrative Support. James had been with us for over 4 years. In mid June, Cheryl McGraw began working in that position in the Support Center office. We are delighted to have Cheryl as part of our staff team and are grateful for the gifts she brings to her work here.

It's impossible to list everything that has happened in the life of the EOA over the last 12 months. However, I do want to highlight several things that I think point to some health and vitality in this association.

- We have had two Church Vitality Road Shows in EOA, led by Jim Oates, with another scheduled for November. Eight churches have been impacted by this opportunity to be renewed and revitalized. I am aware that Jim has also worked with several other congregations in coaching and guiding them into new and faithful ways to be the church in these days.

- Earlier in 2011 there were several opportunities for pastors and lay leaders to gather for intentional conversations about the future of this association. Some very helpful insights and thoughts were shared about how we move into being association in new and vital ways.

- The Akron Urban Ministries partner churches, along with support from the Urban Ministries Working Group of the EOA, have continued to live out Jesus' mandate to love our neighbors in creative and faithful ways in some very challenged neighborhoods. The Church in the World Department has begun to have conversations about how we might use a similar model of partnering for mission in Canton.

- I want to lift up the work of the EOA Property Committee which has worked hard to enable the association to get out of the "landlord" business. Working in partnership with New Vision UCC that committee made a recommendation to the Association Council that the association and congregation share ownership of the property on Market Avenue, thus sharing expenses and turning over regular upkeep to the congregation. This was accomplished in August. The Property Committee also worked out a land contract with the Mountain of Hope Faith Church which has been renting the building of the former St. Peter's UCC in Clinton. Special thanks goes to attorney John Kropf who did all of the legal work for us around those two projects.

- Church and Ministry Department working groups have provided three opportunities this past year for Periodic Support Consultations and three Boundary Awareness Seminars, supporting all authorized ministers in engaging in best practices in ministry.

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I believe there are two major challenges that lie before us in the year ahead. One is financial. The YTD statements for the end of September are not encouraging. We recognize that we are all affected by a struggling global economy. And we also recognize that the model and tradition of funding ministry for the wider church through OCWM is an old model and not as effective as it once was. All levels of the church are wrestling with how we fund ministry, but until we have it all figured out, OCWM is what we have. All of the ministry I have referred to in this report is, in one way or another, enabled by dollars to Our Church's Wider Mission. OCWM isn't about supporting administration or overhead, it's about supporting ministry. And we depend upon the pastors and lay leaders in our congregations to be faithful interpreters about the ministry that happens because of your gifts to OCWM. I share a word of thanks with those congregations and individuals who have so generously supported Our Church' Wider Mission in the past. Our Church's Wider Mission does change lives!

The second challenge before us is discerning what God is calling this association to be and do in the years ahead. How do we move into, not only a new staffing pattern and a changing way of relating to the Western Reserve Association, but how do we begin living out a new vision of being "the church" in this day and place? Friends, I don't have any easy answers to those questions, nor do I have an inside track on where we're going. Of this I am sure: we must be carefully listening to what the Still Speaking God has to say to us, being open to where God's spirit is leading us, and listening to and talking with one another. In other words by being in community with each other and in communion with God. I would encourage all of us to find creative ways to engage one another in conversation and prayer in the months ahead, seeking God's guidance as we move forward.

As I bring this report to a close, I want to share a word of deep and sincere appreciation to the staff team of the Eastern Ohio Association. These folks are committed to the church of Jesus Christ, they are gifted and bring a sense of integrity and joy to their work and ministries on behalf of all of us. And, perhaps most importantly, they bring a good sense of humor to their work among us! To Rich Plant, Associate Association Minister, whose love for this association and the whole church runs deep, whose collegiality I greatly value, and whose understanding of this work and this association have been of inestimable help and support to me, many thanks. To Machel Miller, Support Center Office Administrator and Cheryl McGraw, Communications Director and Administrative Support, who keep all of us functioning and do it with grace and skill (and that's for both EOA and WRA!) thank you, thank you. To Margaret Mills who covers a lot of ground as our part-time point person for educational ministries, for youth and young adult ministries, and for stewardship ministries, thank you for all that you do for the congregations of the Eastern Ohio Association. And to Carolyn Willis, who keeps track of all the money as our bookkeeper, and makes sure the bills get paid and those OCWM dollars get sent to the places where the ministry happens, many thanks.

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Finally, to all of you who are the Eastern Ohio Association, the congregations, the authorized ministers and lay leaders, to all who have served in leadership capacities this past year on a council or board or committee or working group or planning team, thank you for being the church. It has been my joy to be in ministry with you and among you, and I give thanks to God for the privilege and blessing having served as your Interim Association Minister. To God be the glory.

Grace and peace,  
Carol Barth