

*Report of the General Presbyter
Rev. Shannan R. Vance-Ocampo
May 2022 - Annual Report*

As I sit and write this report, I am away at my first ever large-scale gathering in the time of this pandemic. I am at Montreat with the NEXT Church [gathering](#). They have reformatted the traditional conference to instead be a gathering in a retreat setting with the majority of the time outside. There are no workshops, instead there are focused cohorts for coaching on the conference theme of *Rest, Renewal and Resistance*. All meals, except for breakfast are outside and a big tent is up to sit under. Keynotes are shortened, worship is reformatted to be uplifting and challenging for the time we are in. Paying deep attention to the reality of systemic racism and the harm done to siblings of color, the work of the gathering is all framed in anti-racist practices and with the goal to interrupt the usual conference behaviors where you go, consume content, and come home. Instead for this one you go to be filled up, challenged, grow your faith, and then make actionable plans to bring resources home with you to your ministry context. We are staying fully masked indoors, and masks optional outdoors to prioritize wellness and health for everyone. These are shifts and changes in *how* we gather, *why* we gather, and *what we do* when we gather and then afterwards.

If you didn't get to go to NEXT this year, there is a post-conference package that is available to you with all of the resources, keynotes, worship, etc. from the conference. I highly recommend it and it can be found at [this link](#).

As we reflect at this May meeting of the Presbytery and as we gather for the first time in person in nearly two and a half years I want to lift up a few things for all of us:

This is hard. Come into the space with gentleness and care.

As we regather, it is deeply emotional and spiritual. We have missed each other and reunions are joyful and also filled with so many feelings. Some of us are no longer here because folks have taken new calls or moved away and we didn't get to really say goodbye the way we wanted to. Some who used to be with us didn't make it through this phase of the pandemic. Some of us are not yet comfortable being with others in person. Others are immocomprised and/or caring for someone who is. Even those of us who do show up in body and spirit at our Presbytery meeting are not the same. Mental health challenges have taken their toll on many of us or on our family members. We might be grieving. We may be worried. We may also be joyful and exuberant at seeing each other. Some of us might look different. Some might want a hug, others may not. *We are just not the same as we gather, and it is going to take us some time as a Presbytery to find our rhythm of togetherness again - let us have grace and gentleness with one another.* There are also a lot of new people among us who have joined us during the pandemic.

We are taking time at the beginning of this meeting for fellowship, come early to gather, and an extended time at lunch. We will be taking a special time in worship to lay hands on all of those who were ordained and installed virtually during the last two and a half years and that opportunity was not present in their services. We want to complete that cycle of worship and our liturgy and not let this important aspect go. *Ask people how they are - really ask and really listen.* Give people space if they need it. Walk gently, this is the holy ground of relationships and renewing.

Our journey of anti-racism.

We have been working hard with our consultants from [Crossroads Anti-Racism Training and Organizing](#) and there are many opportunities coming up this fall for you and your congregation to plug in, learn, and engage. This is our most important work as a Presbytery. Systemic racism in our culture and in our congregations has broken us as people of the Way of Jesus. It has infected and infiltrated every part of who we are. Our siblings of color in this Presbytery are exhausted, deflated, and afraid. The events of last weekend were a reminder that once again if you are not in a white-skinned body in this country you cannot do anything without being in danger. You cannot go to the grocery store, to church, to work, or out into your community without having to be hyper-vigilant every millisecond of every day and worried for your physical, emotional, and spiritual safety. If you are an adult person of color, you are doubly or more exhausted because you are also worrying about the children all the time. There is no rest. As white people we cannot fully imagine or understand what this is like. As the Church we need to repent of the sin of racism and that is going to take the rest of our lives and then some. Racism is a sin, it is unacceptable if we are committed to the Way of Jesus. We have to understand and acknowledge that we live in a society that is 100% broken and has been for a long time, but maybe we are just waking up to it now. We must differentiate as the Church, as people of Jesus. If we do not, then we should shut our doors, take down our signs and our websites and stop saying we are the Church. Differentiation will mean that we will need to be faithful, to the point of being willing to lose our lives and the life of our congregations. But we must do it. And we must fortify ourselves as people of the Way of Jesus for the seriousness that faithfulness and discipleship will require of us in this time. We have coasted for a very long time in the Church because we have made generational mistakes of connecting ourselves with and benefiting from Empire. This must stop so we can follow Jesus. I hope all of you will join us in this work, reflection, and discipleship formation with Crossroads.

Prayer

Finally, there is so much going on. So much we cannot control. So much that is out of control. Power is being exerted in ways that terrify many of us. The pandemic has taken its toll in many ways on each of us. The climate crisis is here. And yet, we are people of HOPE and TRUST in the living God who brings resurrection and life everywhere at

every time. I want to encourage everyone to set aside time for silence, meditation, and prayer every day. Find ways to connect to the Divine in ways that make sense for you and who you are. Find time for corporate and shared prayer with others. Connect with God, yourself and your communities of faith. Talk to others about your prayer life and your discipleship journey. Pray for the Church that we might regain faithfulness and steadfastness to the Way of Jesus. Pray for those who no one is praying for. Pray for the Creation and that we might fall back in love with it again. Pray for a renewal of faith. Pray.

I am looking forward to seeing you next week for our meeting. I am grateful as always to walk with you on the ever unfolding journey that the Spirit has invited us into.

Blessings and Peace,

Shannan