

**Associations Interim Associate Minister for Congregational Vitality and Development
2018 Annual Report to the Eastern Ohio and Western Reserve Associations**

The last year and a half has been a time of dynamic change in our two associations as they have moved to what we are proposing will be the Living Water ONE (Ohio North East) Association. The Reverends Root and Plant moved to retirement, Reverend Bates to the Pennsylvania Northeast Conference and, key to that process, the Reverend Karjian was called to be our General Minister. It has been a joy to work with Rev. Karjian over the past eight months as she has set a new arc to the course of the change.

This has also been a time of change for many of our congregations. Thirty-nine, or 25%, of our churches were in some phase of pastoral transitions during that time: 19 Congregations called a new pastor; 10 are currently receiving profiles (including the Association itself); 4 are working to complete their congregational profiles; 5 are working with transitional issues prior to creating a profile; and Greater Cleveland Community Church ended their ministry with Alan Ramos' retirement.

Beyond the change that comes through pastoral change, all of our congregations are wrestling with how to navigate the change that is being thrust on them by the cultural shifts around us. According to an assessment done by our vitality Team towards the end of 2017, 21% of our churches are navigating this relatively well with 5% actually thriving, another 20% are seeing growth. Nineteen of these churches have been participating in the Vitality Team's Vitality Days program over the past two years with Michael Piazza's leadership.

This leaves more than half of our congregations that are in significant decline. Many of those are *Threshold Congregations*, congregations who are at a critical juncture in their life where strategic decisions and course corrections need to be made, before the Chinese proverb becomes true, "Unless there's a change, you are likely to arrive at where you are headed." With this understanding, the Association has sponsored Bob Richardson and my participation in the Legacy Project of the Center for Progressive Renewal. The greatest difficulty can be summed up in the "Frog Effect." Put a frog in hot water and they jump right out. Put them in cold and slowly heat it to boiling and you have frog soup. Many of our congregations, thought they know they are in decline, do not have enough sense of urgency to avoid their continued decline. The legacy project helps congregations to focus on a conscious choice to either make the major changes needed to stem the tide or chose to create a legacy that will allow for the core ministry of the congregation to continue after the worshiping life of the congregation has ended.

Having extended my initial 4-month interim with the Association to 6 months and then 16 months, I will be retiring December 31st. Please know that it has been an honor to serve as your Interim Associate. It has been a very meaningful time and a joy to get to know so many of you personally.

Respectfully Submitted

Rev. Dr. Gary A. Halstead

