

# District Executive Minister's Report

Russ Matteson

This has been a hard year. It has been an unusual year to say the least. It has been disruptive of norms and routines, and has challenged us to find new ways of connecting, serving, meeting, and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the communities that surround the churches of the Pacific Southwest District.

## A word of thanks to our pastors

I want to open with a word of thanks and blessing to the pastors who are serving the churches of PSWD. They have each responded to the pandemic situation with creativity and grace. They have learned new skills, tried new approaches, extended themselves to meet needs. None of them entered the year, or ministry in general, expecting or training to do ministry in this kind of setting. Our pastors thrive on being together with people on Sunday mornings, during weeknight studies and events, in presence at sacred moments in people's lives -- and that kind of physically gathered connection is one of the biggest losses for the Christian community during this year. So to our pastors, thank you for your continuing ministry among us, and continued blessings as you seek to help lead your congregation along the path of Jesus through these challenging times.

## Thoughts on my work

As the District Executive Minister this year has been about figuring out what is needed at this time to support and encourage our congregations, determining what needs to have priority at this time and what should be let go, and an incredible amount of time on the phone, working in email, in Zoom meetings, and in more webinars than I can count. At the district office we have tried to walk the balance of adding helpful and supportive information for churches without adding to the burden of already quickly overfilling plates of local pastors and leaders.

An example of this would be around the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) loans that churches were eligible for as part of the federal government's financial response to the pandemic. There were a host of questions around eligibility, requirements that might be placed on churches, appropriateness of participation, documentation needed to apply, how to participate in relationship to decision making

processes of congregations and more. I worked to gain the basic information, keep congregations informed about what might be possible, and then provide support as needed to those who were interested in moving forward with an application. Several congregations, and eventually the District, participated in this program.

I have become used to traveling to our churches, meeting with pastors and members, being present in church buildings and enjoying the variety of worship styles that our congregations engage in as they praise God. One of the significant savings in our district budget has been in the DEM travel budget. Trips to the COB Church Planting Conference, Annual Conference, and physical visits to our churches have fallen away this year. For most of this year Sunday morning has found me joining worship with a church on Zoom or watching the service on YouTube or Facebook Live. The day and time will come when the travel portion of my work resumes in some fashion, but a question I am holding prayerfully is how best to do that in a manner that is faithful to and fruitful for the kingdom of God here in PSWD.

One of the active conversations at the Policy and Executive Board meetings is to be thinking and praying about what we need at this moment, and in the post-pandemic moments, from the District Executive Minister, the District Office, and the District staff. We will be relocating the district office in the spring of 2021 (when the sale of Pomona Fellowship's building is completed) and are talking about what we really need and the purpose of that office space. If you have thoughts around these things, I would welcome a phone call and a chance to talk about it.

## Pastoral / Congregational Transitions

*Bakersfield* - Pastor Alan McLearn-Montz resigned this summer and completed his service at the end of August. The congregation is using several members in a preaching rotation while they begin to work on next steps for leadership.

*Papago Buttes* (Scottsdale, AZ) - Pastor Don Shankster announced that he will retire in April 2021. The congregation has formed a search committee and is working on their profile as they begin the search for new pastoral leadership.

*Pomona Fellowship* - Plans proceed with the sale of their property to a developer. The sale should be completed in Spring 2021. Pomona Fellowship is looking for a new space to purchase or rent in a different part of Pomona where they will worship and serve, as well as partner with several community organizations as they become a vital partner in this neighborhood.

### **Ministry & Improvement Fund**

The Policy Board spent the Spring into early Summer working on the details related to the funds District Conference 2019 set aside for the Ministry & Improvement Fund. There was really good conversation with a working team for each of the four areas that wrote the guidelines and established the areas of support within each fund. The movement from development to the application took longer than anticipated, but it is now available on the District website ([www.pswdcob.org/grants](http://www.pswdcob.org/grants)) and churches and pastors can make application to use the funds. Work for the Policy Board in early 2021 will include reviewing responses from pastors regarding areas that leadership training and development is needed, and then working to create or connect to trainings and resources that will help our congregations develop and grow in ministry together.

### **Church Planting**

The three existing groups continued to work during this last year. It is challenging to try to grow a church when you cannot gather people together or invite them to come in the ways we have always used. And with these groups all in ministry with populations that tend to be at greater risk with the virus, extra precautions are in order for the safety of the pastors and participants. They have been faithful in their work, but the reality is this year has been about surviving as communities and growing the church has been delayed until next year. Hold the pastors in this work in your prayers.

In *Los Banos at Centro Agape en Acción* meetings have moved to Facebook Live since March. The work on remodeling the new facility has slowed as getting engineered plans to submit to the city for approval took longer than anticipated. Contractors are in place to do the work and hopefully will be in full swing by early November and the space will be ready to use when COVID restrictions are lifted and in person gatherings can resume. Rigo and Margie Berumen are the pastors.

*Iglesia Cristiana Elohim in Las Vegas* has

moved to a new rental facility, subletting from another Spanish language church in a space in an office park. The location is a better space both in location and in square footage, and the agreement provides protections for their meeting times. They have resumed worship while also sharing the services over Zoom and Facebook Live. Luz Roman is the pastor.

The *Waterford project* has taken the name *Nueva Vision la Hermosa (Beautiful New Vision)*. They were building a core group and starting to make connections in the community, and that work has continued without easily being able to gather in person. Much work at cleaning up the church facility, both inside and out, has taken place. They are ready to welcome people when the moment is right. Florecita Merlos is the pastor.

*A new work is also beginning in Pasadena*, as the congregation there is partnering with the District to begin a Spanish speaking community as a part of the Pasadena congregation. Pasadena pastor Elizabeth Rowan made a connection with a young ministry couple from Columbia who are students at Fuller Seminary and have an interest in starting a ministry there. Juan Pablo Plaza and Adriana Rios have now been licensed in the Church of the Brethren and have begun to reach out via social media to begin a faith community. They have been joined by another Fuller graduate from Chile, Fernanda Navarrete (also licensed by the district), in this work.

We are in need of rebuilding our Church Planting Task Group that will work with the District and these new expressions of the church (and others that God may send our way). If you have names to suggest, please reach out to me with information so that we can gather a support and encouragement team to work alongside our church planters.

### **Brethren Disaster Ministry (BDM) grants**

In May BDM determined that the pandemic was a disaster that needed response, not the kind they are used to doing with cleanup and rebuilding, but certainly the opportunity was there for the church to meet immediate and pressing human need brought on by the pandemic. In response they offered grants to help local churches reach out into the needs of members of their congregations and communities to offer help in the name of Jesus.

The District shared this information with our churches, and in particular worked to help the Spanish language congregations make application to access these funds. Eight PSWD congregations have

received grants of \$5000 that has been put to work locally to help with food, rent, utilities, funeral expenses, and more. A few congregations are now applying for a second round of funding to continue to reach their communities. Those participating have included Centro Agape en Accion, Circle of Peace, Iglesia Cristiana Elohim, Iglesia Cristo Genesis, Iglesia Cristo Sion, La Verne, Nueva Visión la Hermosa, and Principe de Paz.

### Parting thoughts

I think that we will remember 2020 as the year of getting through. And sometimes the “getting through” is more than enough for that moment. I am grateful for the daily reminders that even though the times are challenging, God has been with God’s people through challenging times before, and God will continue to be with us in this moment, and in the moments ahead.

I do believe that God has an exciting journey in store for the Church of the Brethren here in Arizona, California, and Nevada. What does it mean for us as we are blessed with more congregations and ministers who speak Spanish as their first language? How do we as a district live more fully into the Revelation 7:9 vision of a church where all cultures, languages, and peoples are gathered together around Christ? How will all of our congregations live and share the good news of Jesus with our neighbors, connecting to God’s work for the healing of our churches, communities, and world? I look forward to journeying with you in the years ahead.

Pace e bene, Paz y bien, Peace and all good.

*Russ Matteson*

District Executive Minister

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## Deceased Ministers

Michael Fletcher - 11/18/1954 – 8/13/2020

Gene F. Hipskind - 12/22/1941 – 7/11/2020

Gene Palsgrove - 8/10/1923 – 11/25/2019

Karl A. Pohlhaus - 1/18/1939 – 4/10/2020

William B. Wash - 8/6/1925 – 1/22/2020

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## Recognition of Ministers’ Ordination Anniversaries

### 65 Years

Carl C. Beckwith  
Donald E. Fancher

### 60 Years

Willard D. Ressler

### 50 Years

John E. Price  
Clark Youngblood

### 40 Years

Robert E. Morris

### 35 Years

Susan I. Boyer

### 25 Years

Nada B. Sellers

### 20 Years

Barb Ober

### 10 Years

Doris Dunham  
Roland Johnson  
Jeremy Schaub

### 5 Years

Dawna Welch

Representing 445 years  
of service.

**TRIM Supervisor Report.** . . . . . Russ Matteson  
See also Ministry Commission report on page 20.

The PSWD currently has one licensed minister who is a participant in the TRIM program of the Brethren Academy. Jody Romero is nearing the completion of his ministry, bible, and theology coursework. The District also uses the courses available in TRIM to provide training to other licensed and commissioned ministers who are needing to complete courses to learn more about the Church of the Brethren history, theology, polity, and practices. And some of our ministers take TRIM courses for professional growth as areas of interest to them are offered.

*Russ Matteson, TRIM Coordinator*

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**Youth Advisor Report.** . . . . . Rafael Aranda

My name is Rafael Aranda and I was born and raised in Orange County, CA. I have been congregating with Príncipe De Paz Church in the city of Santa Ana for about 6-7 years now, and I am the Youth Leader there as well. I started as District Youth Advisor for PSWD in January of this year. Shortly after, I started working with the Youth Cabinet on some ideas for the year like events and gatherings to bring everyone together and have a great time. After possibly a month of planning and putting things together the Covid-19 pandemic hit our country. We currently are on somewhat of a pause until further notice with public and social gatherings. That does not mean we have stopped doing God's work.

The Youth Cabinet and I have been putting together Live Zoom classes for all district youth to get involved. They happen every 2nd and 4th Saturday of the month. These classes run for about an hour and a half, and currently we have had about 18-25 participants from within our district joining in. We will continue these classes moving forward as a tool to keep youth engaged with each other and in the word of God.

The youth cabinet and I will continue to push forward and brainstorm new and fresh ideas until we are able to finally see face to face. Overall this has been an encouraging journey, and I can't wait to see what Gods plans are for us in the near future.

*Rafael Aranda, District Youth Advisor*

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**MTC: Ministry Training Coordinator: SeBAH, EFSM, EPMC Report.** . . . . . Gilbert Romero  
See also Ministry Commission report on page 20.

In my role as MTC (Ministry Training Coordinator) for the district I find that through the many challenges, our current team makes everything work! I have a wonderful job centered on putting people that have been called to ministry in the Church of the Brethren, into the training programs EFSM: Education for Shared Ministry, EPMC: Educación para Ministerio Compartido, and SeBAH: Seminario Biblico Anabautista Hispano. Then I follow-up with calls and emails encouraging the licensed ministers as they move through the training, and keep them connected to resources.

I praise God for three new discerners from Cristo Genesis who have been licensed and are ready to start the EPMC program. Pastor Luz of the Las Vegas "Iglesia Cristiana Elohim" church plant is doing well in EPMC, about to start unit three this fall. Pastors Rigo & Margie Berumen of the Los Banos "Centro Agape en Acción" fellowship are doing well in EPMC, about to start unit three this fall. Pastor Florecita Merlos of the Waterford "Nueva Visión La Hermosa" church plant has finished SeBAH, and is starting her 20 experience write-ups. "Príncipe de Paz" Pastor Becky Zapata has finished her SeBAH and been approved for Ordination. Pastor Richard Zapata is working on his last SeBAH class and his 20 experience write-ups. "Iglesia de Cristo Sion" pastor David Flores has completed EPMC and been approved for Ordination. Pastor Rita Flores is on her last EPMC unit.

Thank you for letting me work with these students during these trying times. Be blessed.

*Gilbert Romero, MTC*