

I must admit to you – I am not a big fan of meetings. Three years ago as I prepared to meet with the new vision team I admit I was skeptical about the possibilities for a new conference, as I sat around yet another oblong table. However, as I've shared with many of you already, I was amazed at the cohesion, the excitement, the spirituality that I discovered around that table as we talked about the possibilities for God actually doing a new thing in our midst. I have witnessed groups of people coming together across conference lines willing to lay aside their way of doing things in order to be open to the unfrozen moment – to embrace the hope within the chaos that always comes with change. I have heard again and again – people from Central PA conference say – here is OUR chance to do something new. I have heard again and again the word mission – hands-on mission and I have seen how it perks up the ears and begins conversation across existing conference lines.

I'll admit – that hope comes out of necessity as we recognize across our denomination a need – a fantastic need to be church in a completely different way. Here – we sensed – was our chance. The Susquehanna and Upper New York conferences have a rare opportunity to live with God in the midst of that chaos - because that's where God is most creative and free.

But that's not the only place I see hope. In the last month or two – I have dealt with my own grief as I recognize the split is more than losing a conference – it's losing the opportunity to see faces of people that have helped me to see God in new ways. 12 years ago I wandered around here with one of those stickers on my name tag that said I was new. You have given me a great gift in those years that I have come to recognize and embrace. The hope for me is that this gift isn't going away – we carry it with us into the new annual conferences.

You take the gift of courage that it has taken to make difficult choices – choices that put God's plan above our own wants and needs. You have experienced the act of selfless giving – of relinquishing the comfortable in order to see God at work in a new way. You need that kind of courage in our new conferences. You take the closeness of a small gathering like this and with it the understanding that God

speaks loud and clear through the most unexpected people – because you've had no choice but to get to know them. We need that sort of 'down to earthiness' in a new conference. You take the noisy geese of Sky Lake awakening you to a day that you experienced God's calling to something unthinkable, unknowable... but somehow possible. We need that quiet listening in a new conference.

Beyond the hope that I have seen through the new faces in new places around new oblong tables, I also carry with me the gift of all that I have learned here, among all of you. That gift will never diminish – it will only grow and spread and teach and bring light and life to our new paths as God walks with us along the way.