A Word From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

What a year this has been, with challenges, opportunities and surprises around every corner!

Like many of you, we have had to adapt this past year, remaining nimble and responsive to the ever-shifting circumstances and needs around us. Like you, we felt exhausted this year. Like you, we hold grief and hope in tension as we reflect on the past year, live faithfully in the present and look ahead to the future.

And like you, we have reimagined what it means to live out our mission, charting new paths, creating new offerings from scratch, and letting other efforts rest on the back burner. For us, that meant launching new initiatives like our Intersection webinars and Timely Resources collection, reconfiguring longstanding offerings like church consulting and ACU Summit, and temporarily pausing gatherings like Equipping for Ministry.

Through all the twists and turns of the past year, one thing that hasn’t changed is our commitment to serve churches and Christian leaders, which we distilled into our new tagline, “Equipping Leaders, Helping Churches Thrive.” Practically, we provide tools to help you lead more skillfully and conversation partners to nurture your spiritual health. Aspirationally, we offer services that resource local congregations and the church at large to flourish. Ultimately, we pray that we promote God’s mission in the world and call for ministers and congregations to act out of hope! And while we honor Churches of Christ as our core constituency, we welcome opportunities to work with any churches and leaders who seek the types of resourcing we provide and who choose to utilize our services.

Through the pages of this Year in Review, I invite you to reflect with me on a few of the ways we have responded to your needs, reimagined our events, served adaptively and connected you with many of Abilene Christian University’s resources. I also invite you to join me in anticipating a few of the opportunities on our horizon. Thank you for taking the time to journey with me through these pages!

Blessings,
Dr. Carson E. Reed
Executive Director, Siburt Institute for Church Ministry
Vice President for Church Relations
Focus Groups

We began the year by intentionally listening to leaders in the trenches of ministry. Through several focus groups in May and June 2020, we simply asked these congregational leaders about the challenges they faced and where they needed help. From these churches in 11 U.S. states and representing membership sizes from under 110 to more than 600, we heard a need for help around pastoral care, emotional wellness, political division, theological reflection, resources for families and children, how to reopen churches and a host of other leadership challenges.

What we learned from these leaders set the tone for much of our work through the ensuing year as we created or reimagined programming and curated resources from ACU and beyond.

Timely Resources

In June we expanded our relatively new pandemic-centric collection of resources on our website to include anti-racism articles, podcasts, books, videos and more. Curated from a variety of creators within the Siburt Institute, ACU and beyond, this collection offers resources for timely matters that are critical to churches and their leaders.

Browse: siburtinstitute.org/timely

COVID-19 Impacts on Congregations

As the pandemic reshaped congregational life,

Dr. Suzie Macaluso put her sociological expertise to good work and conducted two surveys about the pandemic’s impact on churchgoers. The first, conducted in May with nearly 2,000 respondents, opened opportunities for her to unpack the data for congregational leaders during our Summer Seminar in July, an Intersection webinar in August and a blog series on Mosaic.

A follow-up survey in October examined how churches have navigated the pandemic and how members perceive those responses. Macaluso expanded her prior Mosaic series with two additional articles on key findings from this second survey. She teaches sociology courses at ACU, directs the Pruett Gerontology Center and is one of the architects and researchers of our Church Health Assessment.

Explore her findings: mosaicsite.org/covid19surveys

Reflection Roundup

Launched in January, our new “Reflection Roundup” blog series on Mosaic helps readers – including us! – to listen more broadly to a diverse chorus of voices and perspectives. Each week, Beth Ann Fisher gathers 10-plus news items, podcasts, liturgies and more that speak into such areas as spiritual vitality, leadership and congregational practices. Fisher is a Siburt Institute doctoral fellow and hospital chaplain in Abilene, and teaches as an adjunct at ACU.

Receive these and other Mosaic articles delivered to your inbox weekly: mosaicsite.org/follow

ACU Campus Collaborations

Our position within a university enables us to forge connections between the church and the academy, bringing the best of the university’s resources to the church. Here are just a few ways we’ve chosen to draw on the expertise of our university colleagues this year as we equip leaders to help churches thrive.

• One of our new Looking Team members, Dr. Mason Lee, directs the Graduate School of Theology’s contextual education program. In this role, he facilitates intentional two-way learning between seminary students’ ministerial practice and academic work. Lee brings to the Looking Team a love for the church and a relationship with a wide network of churches, ministers and soon-to-be ministers.

• We partnered with Dr. Myles Werntz and the new Baptist Studies Center at ACU to offer two webinars, “Church Cultures of Care and Abuse” and “Pastors and Politics.”

• Several Summit pathways were hosted in collaboration with ACU units such as the Carl Spain Center on Race Studies and Spiritual Action, and the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Science. We also collaborated with the Chapel and spiritual formation office to bring minister and bestselling author Jonathan “JP” Pokluda to campus to speak with our university students.

• During Intersection webinars, we learned from Dr. Houston Heflin, Dr. Vic McCracken and Dr. Amanda Pittman, who teach in ACU’s Department of Bible, Missions and Ministry. From the broader ACU community, we also talked with Dr. Richard Beck from psychology, Dr. Cole Bennett from language and literature, Dr. Jackie Halstead from the online marriage and family therapy program and Dr. Suzie Macaluso from sociology.

• The ACUTV studio became a popular place this year for numerous ACU units adapting their offerings to a digital format. We are grateful to Hutton Harris and his team for collaborating with us to record and stream a number of Summit and Summer Seminar sessions from the studio.

• As an Adobe Creative Campus, ACU recognizes the value of teaching digital literacy skills in higher education and provides access to Adobe Creative Cloud to all students, faculty and staff – and these Adobe resources came into play for our Summit guidebooks. Sparked by an idea from ACU provost Dr. Robert Rhodes, Amos Gutierrez designed and created the guidebooks with Adobe InDesign and edited more than 70 Summit 2020 videos with Adobe Premiere Pro. Gutierrez is Adobe ambassador and creative learning technologies coordinator for the ACU Brown Library.
Running through the seminar program

Hutton Harris in the ACUTV studio

The past year afforded opportunities for us to reinvent long-standing traditions and launch a new series to respond to the rapidly shifting needs of churches and Christian leaders.

Though we all know that web-based interactions have their limitations, we have seen new possibilities open up by transitioning our events into virtual spaces. Without the consideration of travel, for instance, they became more accessible to Christian leaders around the world.

We also got to engage with leading voices whom we would have been unable to bring to an in-person gathering — such as authors Jemar Tisby (The Color of Compromise), Dr. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer (A Church Called Tov), Dr. Jessica Goudeau (After the Last Border) and Dr. Andrew Root (The Pastor in a Secular Age).

**Summer Seminar 2020**

With the theme “Faithful and Flexible: Flourishing Congregations in Times of Transition,” this annual seminar shifted from our traditional in-person weekend gathering into a condensed online event with shorter sessions and live chat throughout.

To develop the program, we looked to past Summer Seminar participants and others serving in the trenches of ministry, asking specifically about what these leaders needed. Based on their feedback, we offered nine sessions on such topics as “Thriving as a Scattered Church,” “Conflict Transformation” and “When Politics Come to Church.”

The live chat feature enabled participants to engage with the presented content in realtime and to interact with fellow Christ-followers from over 100 cities in Australia, Canada, Ghana, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the U.S.

Find recordings: siburtinstitute.org/seminar2020

“Right when we needed it, the Siburt Institute delivered the Summer Seminar to a global audience managing the novel demands of the pandemic. Summer Seminar gave us a handle to grasp this most unusual year. The speakers fixed our attention in three critical areas. First, they defined the challenge of the scattered church. Rather than raising an alarm, they gave us reason to maintain hope. Second, they provided much needed data from serious surveys. The pandemic was a fertile environment for worst-case narratives and unfounded speculation. The data-driven discussions were refreshing. Finally, the seminar boldly addressed the issues of politics that contributed to stress in American churches. With fairness and goodwill, the speakers equipped us to think about the intersection of politics and spiritual community.”

— Dr. Chris Benjamin, preaching minister, West-Ark Church of Christ, Fort Smith, Arkansas

**STATISTICS**

- A total of 1,550 people registered for one or more of our web-based events this year.
- Registrants represent **28 countries** including Argentina, Australia, Bermuda, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Cyprus, Eswatini, Germany, Ghana, Honduras, India, Italy, Lebanon, Malawi, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States.
- We published **53 hours** (3,247 minutes) of video content.
Reimagining Events

Intersection: Where Theology and Practice Meet

In July we launched a new webinar series that allows us to be nimble and responsive to current events and church leaders’ needs. Drawing wisdom from special guests and inspiration from timely topics, hosts Randy Harris and Dr. Carson Reed create space for collegial learning, reflection and ministerial action. We have gotten to dialogue with participants from all over the world along with special guests from a variety of disciplines, such as therapist Chelsie Sargent, LPC-S, who talked with us about mental health for church leaders, and journalists Dr. Cheryl Mann Bacon and Bobby Ross Jr., who taught us about media literacy for ministers.

Find recordings: siburtinstitute.org/intersection

Lawrence Rodgers, pastor at Second Baptist Church of Detroit, Michigan, speaks at our inaugural Intersection in July 2020

“My experience with Intersection has been a blessing in many ways. It has been an outlet to think deeply about things that transcend discouraging circumstances. The topics of the conversations always seemed to catch my attention, but the discussion facilitated by Randy Harris and Carson Reed has kept me coming back. Intersection is a safe environment to think critically about what it means to be a Christian in the world today, and an encouragement to live out of my convictions.”

– Graham Cepica, senior business marketing major, class of 2021

“I believe that good listening can transform our world. The Siburt Institute’s Intersection series has both discussed and demonstrated what good listening can look like. Over the course of the past year they have hosted conversations about racism and politics, which require listening well to those with whom we might disagree, and also had conversations about different kinds of prayer, which involves listening deeply to God. These have not only discussed listening, but also demonstrated it by unfolding in a dialogue rather than a lecture. These conversations have been valuable resources throughout this past year, have helped me to personally feel less alone in the work of ministry, and have helped me to become a better listener along the way.”


Insights

When asked what they like best about Intersection webinars, participants shared themes like these: relevant, practical, scholarly yet approachable, encouraging, variety of speakers, candid, inclusive audience, can listen without driving to Abilene, and opportunity to connect with others.

Ministers’ Support Network (MSN)

Thanks to its already small, intimate format, MSN was the one gathering we didn’t have to reimagine this year! Under the leadership of Robert Oglesby Jr. and the staff couples, we held sabbatical retreats for six ministry couples in the fall and six in the spring.

“I came to the retreat with dark clouds overhead, but by the time I left, God’s light was clearly shining through and breaking up the darkness through each participant. Thank you for allowing us to leave with hope. It is the one thing I have expressed has been lacking for some time, and the blessing that we left with.”

– Anonymous by request
Summit

Christians throughout history have been called to live as peacemakers in a divided world, and with the guiding theme of “Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Bridging the Divides,” Summit 2020 felt both timely and timeless. First-century and 21st-century Christians alike have wrestled with tensions surrounding political life, racial inequalities, socioeconomic differences, church identity and family life. As it moved online, Summit tackled these ancient-yet-timely topics.

Moving Summit online allowed us to extend the learning beyond a three-day gathering in Abilene. This year it began in September and continued through November, kicking off with several theme sessions to set the stage and adding at least one new pathway (series of sessions oriented around a specific topic) each week.

This year we offered digital guidebooks to accompany each pathway. Designed as a practical tool for churches to use in small groups, Bible classes or other adult learning contexts, these dynamic PDFs include session videos, discussion questions and resources to deepen learning.

Moving online also allowed Summit to be a truly global event. For instance:

• The “Peacemaking Across the Muslim-Christian Divide” pathway included live, interactive sessions with speakers from such places as Lebanon, Morocco and California.

• Pre-recorded theme sessions included prayers and Scripture readings from people like Tsitsi Nherera (Eswatini), Marion Hinton (Michigan), Joshua Marcum and Edwin Valdiviezo (Ecuador) and Lynette Leach (Australia).

• Emerging from an established community of Hispanic ministers, the highly interactive “Hispanic Ministries” and “Comunidad Hispana” pathways brought together leaders from across Latin America for a full day in English and another in Spanish.

Find recordings: acusummit.org/recordings

“ACU’s virtual 2020 Summit came at just the right time. We now had multiple resources available for those looking to learn and grow, and the theme was perfect at a time when peace was a stretch for us. We provided links to the various classes over several weeks for our members to enjoy on their own schedule. Thank you, Summit, for creatively adapting to the times and shining a light on peace when we needed it.”
– Charles Smith, Bible class coordinator, Highland Church of Christ, Abilene, Texas

Amos Gutierrez and Dr. David Wray record Summit videos in ACU’s Chapel on the Hill

Claudia Panta Santos, ACU music performance major, reads Scripture during Summit

Ian Nickerson records his Summit theme session, “Old Dreams and New Visions”
Ministry Transitions

The pandemic halted numerous processes around the world, but it hasn’t seemed to slow down ministerial search and transition processes! In fact, we have noticed an uptick in the number of congregations we have been privileged to serve this year through our minister transition, interim preaching and consulting services.

Our Looking Team grew this year, enabling us to more effectively connect churches seeking ministers with ministers seeking churches to serve. New teammates include Dr. Wes Crawford, Dr. David Kneip and Dr. Mason Lee, who teach in ACU’s College of Biblical Studies.

In response to feedback from people using our online job board, MinistryLink, we integrated this service more fully into our website, making it easier to navigate.

Learn more: siburtinstitute.org/transition

Consulting

For our consulting team, church consulting looked different this past year. Some had fewer consulting opportunities due to travel limitations, while others experienced a dramatic increase in consulting remotely.

Some also added new types of consulting to their plates. Robert Oglesby Jr., for instance, began coaching youth ministers over Zoom, helping them improve their teaching skills. And Dr. Carson Reed has worked with several churches engaging in the difficult, intentional work of learning from the crises of the past year and reimagining congregational life.

Reach out: siburtinstitute.org/consulting

Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Already a digital offering since its inception in 2015, our peer-reviewed journal remained one of our most consistent resources this past year. Dr. Ron Bruner, editor of Discernment and executive director of Westview Boys’ Home in Oklahoma, led the editorial board through publishing new journal issues in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. To date, readers worldwide have downloaded over 10,000 Discernment articles, and one of this year’s most popular articles is Dr. Shannon Rains’ review of Bridging Theory and Practice in Children’s Ministry. Rains teaches ministry courses at Lubbock Christian University.

Find all articles: siburtinstitute.org/discernment

Ministers’ Salary Survey

Launched in January, this year’s survey added a question about COVID-19’s impact on minister compensation and the churches they serve. Since preaching ministers typically represent the largest group of survey respondents, we offered a more granular look this year at data distinct to preaching ministers, senior/lead ministers and solo ministers.

Download the report: siburtinstitute.org/salariesurvey

“Walking alongside’ is a term I hear a lot in ministry these days, but it’s a great term to describe how Carson and Wes have worked with us during our period of interim ministry. They have worked closely with us to understand our current congregational status and the mission to which we believe God is calling us. Their interim work for us has fit in perfectly with what we needed here during this time. They have helped strengthen the understanding of our mission by tailoring their messages to our specific needs. Furthermore, they have encouraged and challenged our members with all their preaching and interpersonal interactions. I value both their friendship and partnership in seeking to further God’s kingdom here in Indianapolis!”

– Paul Collins, elder, North Central Church of Christ, Indianapolis, Indiana

“Carson and Wes have provided us with a practical application of godly principles that have guided our members toward the church’s future role within our community. Our initial experience with Carson was launched through the use of a national survey that gave us a comprehensive overview of our strengths and weaknesses. The preacher search process has been clearly enhanced by the foundation of a comprehensive survey, followed by focus group analysis; all of which gave us clarity in defining the attributes of our next spiritual leader.”

– Don Barnett, shepherd/elder, Kerrville Church of Christ, Kerrville, Texas

Crawford preaching at North Central Church of Christ in Indianapolis, Indiana
LOOKING AHEAD WITH HOPE

- We will soon launch a new iteration of ElderLink, which the late Dr. Charles Siburt launched 21 years ago as a ministry to shepherds. This year we’ll expand this well-loved program to serve church leaders in a greater variety of roles.

- Dr. David Kneip joins our team as associate director, beginning in June 2021. In his role, he will host regional Equippping for Ministry gatherings, relaunch ElderLink, lead our operational staff and continue to partner with various Siburt Institute offerings such as Summit, the Looking Team and the Contemplative Ministers’ Initiative.

- We are thrilled to resume Contemplative Ministers’ Initiative (CMI) retreats in the fall and to welcome Dr. Houston Heflin as the initiative’s new director. Randy Harris, who initiated CMI in 2015, retired from teaching at ACU this past year but will remain heavily involved in CMI.

- Beth Ann Fisher also joins our team as our second doctoral fellow. She begins ACU’s Doctor of Ministry program this year and has already been doing outstanding work with the “Reflection Roundup” series on Mosaic.

- Summit will continue this fall with new imagination and a more intentional focus on fostering community and resourcing among congregational leaders.

Contact our team: siburtinstitute.org/contact
Abilene Christian University • ACU Box 29405, Abilene, Texas 79699-9405 • siburtinstitute@acu.edu • siburtinstitute.org • 325-674-3732