

2018 Conference Minister Report

On August 1st of this year I complete my fourth year as Conference Minister. It continues to be an eye-opening experience to the possibilities and the challenges of being church in the 21st Century.

Every local church leader is all too familiar with the changing religious landscape that has reduced the number of people in our pews. Creative leaders are finding new ways of sharing the gospel in a post Christian, postmodern, post denominational world. The decline of church membership and financial support continues to have a very real effect on the ministry we share. We see that at the Conference level in reduced OCWM contributions and in the Search and Call process where the salary and/or benefits of pastors and church staff are trimmed, reduced or eliminated entirely. Churches that cannot pay a competitive wage are struggling to attract capable and qualified ministry candidates of which there are fewer. We are also seeing an increase in the number of part-time pastoral positions that are difficult to fill as most pastors are searching for fulltime ministry.

I don't have clear sense about how much of this decline is culturally driven and outside our control and how much is driven by the weaknesses inherent to our system. I regularly ask what my role, and the role of the Conference Staff, is in responding to these challenges. Am I to maintain the system and adapt to the decline? Address the decline to some effect (slow, stop, reverse)? The 20/20 Vision Plan was not conceived for this specific purpose BUT it was designed to have an effect. Or help create a new system that will be a more faithful/effective expression of Christian discipleship (which is one of the possibilities of Conference merger)? These are some of the questions being addressed by the Conference Consistory and the Joint Conference Vision Team.

The work of the Consistory continues to be guided by the 2020 Vision Plan which moved to focus on five elements of that plan:

1. Help 5 cities or towns be affected by the presence of a UCC congregation as measured by the quality of life standards (i.e. education, housing/homelessness, crime reduction, employment opportunities, health/wellness) of those communities.
2. Develop an expectation of pastoral excellence among the Authorized Pastors of the conference, by providing a clergy coach to each pastor for the first year at the beginning of a new ministry. Every pastor in the conference will be in an accountability and support group with three other clergy.
3. Preparing for the birth of six new vital spiritual communities through recruitment of excellent entrepreneurial leaders to lead the effort.
4. Creating a Member In Discernment Academy to standardize the training of potential clergy in the essential practices of ministry excellence in the Penn SE Conference.
5. Connect local congregations to training, inspirational experiences, networking opportunities and congregational coaches with the goal of increasing active participation in 80 of our churches by 10%;

The Joint Conference Vision Development Team under the leadership of Rev. Barbara Pence has worked diligently since the PSEC 2017 Annual Spring Meeting when delegates authorized representatives of our Conference to work with PNEC brothers and sisters to create a plan for a new Conference for consideration by both Conferences. They have met regularly to discern and define potential mission, vision, values, ministry focus, staff configuration, Association alignment, and office location all of which

are still in process. The Team has been driven by a deep desire to be faithful to the gospel while creating a model of Conference ministry that meets the ever-evolving needs of local churches so that the decisions we make now serve the church well in both the near and distant future.

In addition to working in our region, I am member of the United Church of Christ National Board. We are in the middle of the Three Great Loves campaign. The Office of General Minister and President with the support of General Synod also initiated a four-million-dollar campaign to extend the reach of those three great loves through improvements to our technological capacity and the development of leadership skills.

The charitable arm of the UCC Pension Board, the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance (UCBMA), is taking steps to address the needs of current and retired clergy and lay church workers through a twenty-million-dollar campaign called “Generations of Service: Faith and Financing Action.” It will fund three key areas: Strengthen direct assistance programs (\$10 million); sustain the Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI) and Credo programs (\$7.5 million); improve the financial wellness of UCC authorized ministers (\$2.5 million).

New UCC Giving Protocols were established in a resolution of the last General Synod. The protocols give offices of the National Church the flexibility to fund the ministries of the United Church of Christ by direct appeal to individuals and congregations. While Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) remains a significant vehicle for supporting the ministries of the National Church, it will be only one of several means by which the UCC accomplishes its mission.

The PSEC Budget and Finance Team has been apprised of these developments and is working to educate others — specifically the Conference Consistory as it discerns and decides how we might participate in each capital campaign and what (if any) changes we must anticipate because of the new Giving Protocols.

The goals of the Board are directed, in part, by the leadership of our General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer. Together we are shaping the immediate future of our UCC in the following ways:

- a. Re-establish the primacy of the local church and the mutuality of relationships amongst the expressions of the church.
- b. Actively engage the principle expressions of the church—Local Church, Conference, National Setting, and Affiliated Ministries in strategic development toward the UCC 10-year strategic priorities: inclusive excellence, resource development towards “A Just World For All”, innovation, incubation, and development of a robust technology infrastructure that resources the broad and vast ministries of the UCC.
- c. Direct the establishment of a robust marketing and philanthropy program that a) evaluates the United Church of Christ as an organization “thought leader” in the marketplace of the religious ideology and establish a brand identity consistent with our Mission, Identity, and Core Values, and b) engages in a way that inspires volunteer, collegial and financial partnerships.
- d. Operationalize the alignment of the National Setting consistent with the newly established strategic priorities for the UCC. Inclusive excellence, resource development towards “A Just World For All”, innovation incubation, and development of a robust technology infrastructure.

There is no way I could have accomplished the meaningful work of the last four years without the friendship and collegial support of a very long list of people. There are more names to share than this space will allow but I must thank Conference Moderator Rev. Barbara Pence. She has not only been a leader to our Conference though the Conference re-visioning process, she has been a source of personal and pastoral support to me. Our staff continues to team tackle and crowd source the pressing needs of communities, congregations, and clergy. Sue Creswell has helped me continue that learning with a joy and an optimism that is absolutely contagious and life changing. Rev. Sharon Morris continues to lead through the decline of congregations which collides with the search and call process. She manages the unmanageable with effective, successful, and faithful diligence. Brea Rarick sews together knowledge of the United Church of Christ, computer skills, and detail tracking that has streamlined our resourcing of pastors and Committees on Ministry. Tammy Wisniewski and Donna Daloisio track every dollar coming into and going out of our Conference as if they were overseeing their own personal financial wellness. They carry the weight of our financial struggles and successes and they do it really well. Finally, Rev. Cean James has infused our Conference with energy, vitality, determination, and a faithfulness to increase the reach of the Gospel that breathes life and light into every corner where Cean is present. If you have not yet experienced one of his Congregational Development workshops you're, depriving yourself and your congregation of an incredible resource.

I have tended to my own wellness in on-going work with a spiritual director. I participated in a UCC wide conversation about re-imagining theological formation. I applied for and received a \$5K grant to attend a personal growth retreat in Nashville, TN. "Onsite" is a nationally recognized provider of therapeutic and personal growth workshops. They received a large grant to provide combat veterans scholarships for participation in their 6½-day program which includes experiential group processes and action for change. I attended this event and learned a great deal about trauma and how that effects our creative capacity.

We look to an uncertain future with the very certain presence of God. As we passed through the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, it was (and is) clear that we are in a period of new formation. I pray every day that the convicted and courageous audacity of those inspired reformers be present among us. The Christian faith is taking shape in new forms that look very much unlike the church we have known. The possibilities are endless and exciting. I do not know where they will lead but I do know that God and the Holy Spirit are in the leading. I cannot tell you how pleased, proud, humbled and blessed I am to be part of it as it takes shape in the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference.

Rev. William P. Worley,
Conference Minister