

## **“That They May All Be One”**

An Invitation to Conference Unity

*11 The gifts (Jesus) gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”*

Ephesians 4:11-13a (NRSV)

We are on the cusp of a new re-formation of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is moving in new and re-visioned forms of Christian community. New occasions that teach new duties require new expressions of faith formation, discipleship and leadership that are able to hold in artistic tension the traditions that have shaped our past with the creative power of the Divine who is “making all things new.”

All change hinges on a capacity for adaptation to the ministry challenges unique the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of our congregations and their leaders have risen to those challenges and become lively places of transformation. Some are only able to maintain their current ministry. Other congregations are wondering about their survival while several congregations have made the painful decision to close. PSEC was 240 congregations strong at the birth of the United Church of Christ. Since 2000, forty-three churches have merged, end their ministries or withdrawn their UCC affiliation. More than half of our congregations have moved to part-time leadership. In PNEC...

As local churches encounter these changes, the support for the Wider Church has declined perceptibly. The ways we have conferenced together in the past must give way to the new realities and ways of working together that will enable us to partner with God so that healthy, faithful, effective congregations and clergy can discern and act on God’s vision for transformed lives and communities.

Over the past year, with the unanimous support of both PSEC Consistory and PNEC Board as well as near unanimous consent of both Conference bodies, we have explored where God might be leading us. The Joint Conference Vision and Mission Team, a representative group of both Conferences, have surveyed local churches, Associations, Ministeriums and Annual Conference Meetings. They have hosted small group conversations and online video meetings. They have spent time conferring with both Conference staffs and one another to get clear about the vision, mission and values for a new Conference.

We are a people who are bound together by covenant. We are aware that among some of our congregations the level of unity in our “United Church” is at best loose. We have placed our value of autonomy above the ties that bind us in the Body of Christ. We are convinced that a reclamation of our commitment to covenantal connections and the embrace of new relationships is an act of faith that will increase our capacity to realize the dream “that they may all be one.”

If we are to encourage and transform the church we know, we must transform our denominational structures as well. We believe there are compelling reasons to move towards the creation of a unified Conference in eastern Pennsylvania. This would allow to:

- Facilitate the building of relationships in a wider context. A new Conference would have greater influence in the wider community simply because of its numbers.
- Serve as a model for our congregations needing to take bold action to adapt themselves and strengthen the mission and ministry of the UCC in this part of the country.
- Providing stronger collective support for local churches; strengthened outreach and mission.

- Blend what each conference does well.
- Create conversations and initiating new strategies for the sharing and implementation of “best practices”.
- Embrace the belief that as the body of Christ we can be a sign of the visible unity of the Church in our time.

We believe it is time for a change. It is time to embrace a new covenant to further the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in our part of Pennsylvania.