

FAQs for Keystone

January 2024

1. Where did the Keystone idea come from?

The four PA Conference Ministers began discussing the idea of shared ministry back in late 2021 as we considered the current trends within churches and conferences. We recognized that our churches are struggling in today's world, particularly regarding leadership, and we were seeking answers about how best to help. We didn't know whether a fully merged Conference was the model we would eventually choose, but we wanted to explore more.

We met with Rev. William Metzger of Renaissance Consulting (in Penn Northeast) and after discussing our ideas, he agreed to help us. We then applied for and were awarded a three-year grant from the Council of Conference Ministers. Each Conference Minister nominated 4-6 members of their own Conference who were in positions of leadership (e.g. Moderator) and the Keystone Working Group met for the first time in October 2022. We begin every meeting with scriptural reflection and weave theological and spiritual aspects into all our work.

2. Why create a merged Conference?

We believe that *Together We are Stronger*. We believe we can better accomplish conference work by sharing resources (both human and financial). We intend to build on our varied theological and cultural traditions to be inclusive with integrity and model the 'big tent' ideal of the early United Church of Christ.

Given the trajectories we are on regarding membership and church size, we do not believe four conferences in Pennsylvania are needed any longer. We considered several options with various potential staff and resource arrangements. However, given the realities of trends in church membership and with a desire to be faithfully proactive, the group moved quickly toward merger.

More details are available on our options evaluation and analysis. In summary, we started this process with our Mission being: "to provide better programmatic, spiritual, educational and financial support to our congregations". Then we identified seven options, ranging from staying as we are with no changes, to several options focused on our four Conferences sharing staff, digital sharing, to forming an Executive board and one staff, to creating two Conferences as a stepping stone to future unification, outsourcing Conference staff work to merging all four Conferences. We developed seven evaluation criteria, weighted those criteria in terms of importance to the mission and ranked each option against these weighted criteria. The outcome of this analysis overwhelmingly indicated that merging into one Keystone Conference would best achieve the Mission.

We are currently immersed in developing a "transition" and "end state" staffing model, financial analysis, governance model, legal analysis and the resolution submittal, review and approval

process within our four Conferences and General Synod. Guided by the Spirit, we are hopeful all this will lead us to a recommendation for all of you to prayerfully consider.

3. Why such a huge change all at once?

The Working Group took seriously the need to make changes while there was a will and a way forward. Making a change in the church is always difficult and creates anxiety. We believe by managing anxiety and being very intentional about the plans we can handle a large change that will inspire for years to come. We trust the Holy Spirit to make its will known to us through the process.

4. How would this be different from what we have now?

Several things would change if a Keystone Conference is created. There would be a new governance structure that includes the whole Commonwealth instead of four individual Conferences. Thus, the overall governance would be different in terms of a new Constitution and Bylaws and legal status. This would also hold true for staffing and leadership. The financial assets would be combined for ministry and programming across the Conference. Finally, our merger would create a substantial new footprint within the wider UCC.

5. What are the major benefits of such a merger?

The largest benefit would be the increase in human expertise and resources. Each Conference currently engages in a multitude of ministries. For those that have significant duplication the ministries would be streamlined in a new model. For those that stand alone (for example, a project on Rural Church Ministry) they would now become available for the wider population. We would be able to share resources to benefit our local clergy and churches. Our Annual Meetings would be large and exciting affairs.

6. Who decides?

You do. The delegates of Conference will have to decide for themselves whether they wish to move forward into a merger. That vote would happen at individual Conference meetings in November 2024.

7. What's involved with the decision?

In June 2024 all four Conferences will meet for a shared Summer/Annual Meeting at the Penn Stater Conference Center in State College. At that time, delegates will be presented with all the accumulated work of the Keystone Working Group (e.g., governance, staffing, finance, etc.) and a draft resolution that would need to be submitted for vote at General Synod in 2025 (only General Synod has the authority to change Conference boundaries). We will not vote on that resolution at the June meeting. Instead, all 4 conferences will meet on their own on November 9, 2024, to vote individually to accept or reject the resolution. If it passes, the resolution will then

move to the Governance Committee of the UCC Board of Directors for inclusion in the schedule of the 2025 Synod meeting in Kansas City.

8. What's the benefit of centralization vs. maintaining autonomy?

Centralization of the duties of a Conference helps streamline human resources, programs, fiscal sustainability, and mission for the benefit of all in the church. However, every local church remains autonomous!

9. Aren't our geographical distances a challenge?

Yes, they are. However, we have come through the Covid pandemic and learned a great deal about how to connect with others over wide distances. We fully expect to make wide use of technology such as Zoom as well as to advocate for those areas that do not have access to broadband yet! Local and regional gatherings will always be encouraged. We hope the excitement of a new endeavor will encourage people to lean into the process and express willingness to try new things.

10. What happens to the Associations?

According to the UCC Constitution: The boundaries of any new Association, or any adjustment of boundaries between Associations, shall be determined by the Associations concerned with the approval of the Conference or Conferences involved. The standing of an Association as a body of the United Church of Christ is determined by the Conference in which it is located. (UCC Constitution Article IX: Conferences and Associations, lines 283-286)

Therefore, The Keystone Conference Process has no authority to alter Association boundaries, leadership, or duties. The UCC Constitution prohibits such actions unless they are posed by and agreed to by an association directly or in partnership with another association. Now is the time to think about alternative models! For example, would four associations be interested and willing to have one Committee on Ministry? Or one Mission and Ministry team? We hope Associations will see this as an exciting time to try something new.

11. How can we be sure the voices of small and rural churches are heard?

Most churches in the Pennsylvania Conferences are small and either rural or small-town. We are deeply committed to making the process accessible to church members and leaders. You will need to show up at a town hall or an Association/Conference meeting and make yourself heard. We promise to listen.

12. How will we be sure minority voices will be heard?

From the start of Keystone discussions in 2022 the Working Group spoke of a rich and nuanced commitment to the wide diversity of individuals and congregations within the conferences. This diversity is one of our greatest blessings and we honor and respect it. To accomplish our desire to be a 'large tent' church we diligently welcome and affirm multiple minority voices, based on race, ethnicity, theological position, sexual and gender identities, geography, and more. This can be challenging work for our churches and requires constant affirmation and recommitment.

Everyone who would be affected by a merger must agree to bring their concerns and questions to the Conference Ministers or to the Keystone Working Group. Please attend a Town Hall or other meeting to share your excitement and your questions!

13. Would a merged Conference be Open and Affirming?

None of the current Pennsylvania Conferences are O&A. We know this designation is critical for many in the church. A merged Conference cannot be determined to be O&A from its creation. Like the local church, a Conference must agree to engage in the Open and Affirming process.

14. Given the UCC national focus on racial justice, won't a merger create a Conference that is overwhelmingly white?

Given the current population of Pennsylvania and the racial/ethnic diversity numbers in our churches, we are majority white. However, we also hope fervently that a wide inclusion of churches from across the Commonwealth will enable us to share rich theological, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and voices with and among all our churches. We commit to becoming a multiracial and multicultural expression of God's inclusive love.

15. What will happen to our Board and/or donor-restricted funds?

The Finance subcommittee will study the current structure of funding sources and will present a recommendation for how to move forward with combined finances. Questions around what will happen with various funds will be addressed by the subcommittee. Any and all financial structural changes must be approved at each Conference's annual meeting prior to merger.

16. Will there be an actual Conference Office somewhere?

The new Conference will likely require some minimal 'footprint' for storage of files and other materials. However, the location will depend on the staffing model as we determine the need for office/meeting space and the like. This will be under the Governance subcommittee's purview.

17. How will a Board be configured?

This question falls under the work of the Governance subcommittee, overseen by Conference Minister Bonnie Bates (PNE). There are several possible models. However, we are committed to making sure we have equal representation from the Commonwealth. As the Governance subcommittee continues its work, this question will be answered and shared.

18. What might staffing look like?

Creation of a staffing model is the work of all four Conference Ministers and a Staffing subcommittee overseen by Conference Minister Bonnie Bates. This group will present a draft model prior to the Summer 2024 meeting.

19. Will local churches have a staff member nearby (e.g. within 2 hours) who can offer pastoral care, preaching, or consultation with the pastor or church?

This is an important question and will be answered by the Staffing subcommittee. Since there are different models of staffing, we are considering them all while also keeping our commitment to connection with local churches.

20. Where does faith formation have a place in the new Keystone Conference?

The Keystone Working Group identified Faith Formation as a key function of the Conference and the new Conference will help to facilitate its development in all settings of the church. Faith formation is critical to the growth of a local church. Many local churches have asked the question, “Where does faith formation have a place currently in our local churches?” We are committed to helping the church affirm the role of pastor as teacher; the call to form disciples; and the congregational baptismal vow to love, support, and care for our children and new members.