

“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)

The Mission: “to provide better spiritual, educational, programmatic and financial support to our congregations.”

We are in the midst of the next re-formation of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is moving in innovative and re-visioned forms of Christian community. That is profoundly exciting for some, painful for others and confusing for most. New occasions that teach new duties require fresh expressions of faith, rituals, discipleship and leadership that can hold in artistic tension the traditions that have formed deeply ingrained identities and practices with the creative power of the Divine who is “making all things new.”

Change is the inevitable result. And that hinges on the capacity for spiritual renewal and adaptation to ministry challenges unique to the 21st century. Some of our congregations and their leaders have risen to those challenges and become lively places of transformation. Some are able to maintain their current ministry. Other congregations are wondering about their survival while many congregations have made the painful decision to close. All four Pennsylvania Conferences have declined by a third of the churches who were part of the 1957 UCC merger. More than half of all PA churches call part-time ministers. By 2030, one-fourth of our pastors will have retired from any form of active ministry.

As local churches contend with these changes, the support for the Wider Church has declined precipitously and the resources and assistance once heavily relied upon are no longer available. The ways we have conferenced together in the past must give way to these new realities. We need different models and modes of connecting that will enable us to partner with God and each other so that healthy, faithful, effective congregations, clergy, and lay leaders can discern and act on God’s mission and vision.

We are a people who are bound together by biblical covenants and guided by Jesus’ fundamental commandment to love one another. By that love we work together to serve God and our neighbors with compassion, to encourage and inspire one another with hope and to make bold and courageous choices.

We are aware that among some of our congregations the level of unity in our “United Church” and the depth of love commended by our Lord is at best loose. Our value and practice of autonomy is held above the ties that bind us and we mimic cultural and political divisions rather than gospel unity. We are convinced that a reclamation of our commitment to covenantal connections and embracing new relationships is an act of faith that will increase our capacity to encourage, inspire, support and care for one another in ministries of mutual accountability to realize Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one.”

If we are to encourage and transform the church we know, we must transform ourselves and the denominational structures and expectations we have of them and each other. We believe there are compelling reasons to move toward the creation of a unified Conference. This might allow us to:

- Promote spiritual revival and inclusivity in all its forms.

- Provide stronger collective support for local churches; strengthen outreach and mission so our passions can meet the world's deepest needs to reshape our communities with the love and care of Jesus Christ.
- Blend what each conference does well, building on our individual and corporate strengths.
- Create conversations and initiate new strategies for the sharing and implementation of best practices.
- Increase our "Large Tent" presence in the wider UCC community.
- 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 Pennsylvania.
- Respond with dynamic faithfulness to a fluid world with the timeless truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ and move forward into the future with confidence and vision.
- Embrace discipleship and live as the Body of Christ, in our witness to the interdependent unity of all Creation.

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