

For Such a Time as This!

In the book of Esther, Esther is put in a precarious place to advocate to her husband the king on behalf of the Jewish people. Advocating in this way will be dangerous for Esther—herself a Jewish woman—possibly bringing death at the hand of her king who does not yet know of her lineage.

In her hesitation and discernment, her uncle Mordecai suggests to her that this may be exactly why God has placed her in this position—so that she might advocate for her people. He says, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity *for just such a time as this.*” (Esther 4.14c, emphasis added)

Anyone who has spent some time in and around the Ohio Conference knows our judicatory structure is unlike anywhere else in the United Church of Christ. When this structure was developed, it was both a compromise between the previous organizational units of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church, providing us a way forward together for that time. In creating two layers of middle judicatory it was believed that the local church would receive care and support from the associations and that the associations would in turn give care and support to a holistic conference of churches in the greater Ohio area.

At its formation, there were 600+ churches in the newly minted Ohio Conference. These early days were marked by a plethora of churches all contributing financial resources for the sake of the work of UCC churches in portions of West Virginia, Kentucky, and all of Ohio. While we continue to fund this structure designed for 600+ churches, we currently have around 350 churches within the Ohio Conference.

At a time when churches number nearly half of our previous total, and with available resources of those churches being stretched ever thinner, it is not practical to continue in the way we have. It is not good stewardship of the resources of the local church to continue with a structure that simply was not made *for just such a time as this.*

For just such a time as this, we are called to reimagine and reconstruct an organizational model of the church that faithfully fills the vision that God has placed on our hearts: a connected, covenantal church living the mission of Jesus Christ throughout our communities, states, and local region.

A committed group of folks from around the conference have been meeting over the past year and a half on behalf of the association and conference in order to dream of a structure for just such a time as this. Words being thrown out to describe this new structure include, nimble, responsive, faithful, decentralized, local church focused, and covenantal. We are trying to listen to what our still-speaking God is saying to the churches at this time and in our many places of ministry. We have listened and continue to listen to stories of both joy and pain from around the conference as we discern where God is leading us around opportunities with our Outdoor Ministries programming, our association and conference staff, and a whole host of other decisions facing our conference.

Can we hear Mordecai's words again, spoken today as if spoken directly to us, that perhaps God has brought us all here for just such a time as this? Are we to trust in the movement of the Holy Spirit as we reconfigure the ministry of the United Church of Christ in our region and for our time? Can we be brave like Esther and confront the situation ahead with a firm reliance on God to see us through, even if we cannot see the end of the long journey before us?

We are persuaded that God is calling us to make a clear decision—a decision like the one Esther was faced with in her time and in her place. We are called, as Esther was, to abandon complete safety for the hope of a more glorious future, counting as loss the possible risks that confront us personally and focusing instead on the possible progress that waits for all of our people.

As a faithful witness united in Christ, the people of our conference must be prepared to follow the model of Esther, taking a fearless spiritual inventory of what things matter most to us all. The core values we share in Christ together—compassion, grace, inclusivity, learning, growth, peacemaking, joyful living, and true diversity—these things must be given our full attention even as we allow other things to pass from our hands.

Just as Esther gave up her complete security of position in speaking truth for her people, we must be prepared to give up our security of position in many ways to see the truth of God's new creation born. Can we join together to disrupt old patterns and exchange many of our traditional methods for bold new experiments and ideas? Are we willing to be stretched in our faith, as Esther was, to believe more fully in our God who has promised to never leave us or forsake us and whose divine intent for us is always that we should know more goodness tomorrow than we've experienced today?

As our forebears before us, we must have the strength to accept with joy the new life that God is giving us, structuring ourselves in community differently than ever before. Our lives now, in this moment, will form the basis of a heritage of faith that one day will be looked upon by the faithful generations that follow us—our children and their children's children. Let us pray that one day, as our descendants in the faith look back on our work and labor here, they will have laid out for them the pattern of a people who today courageously step forward in faith and promise, are unafraid to claim the faith of Jesus as their own, and who boldly choose to declare a new way of being church together *for just such a time as this*.