

CSEOA presentation on Vision Plan

I'm grateful for the invitation to represent the Ohio Conference Vision Team this morning. There is awesome work being done, and most of it is still in the rough draft stage, so you will not hear a lot of detail today.

We've had the good help of these persons from CSEOA: Jay Yutzey who serves on a sub committee dealing with issues of financing and stewardship, Patricia Battle, Terry Williams, and Joyce Oyler. Thanks for lending them to us and for their steady thoughtful work on re-shaping our significant ministries. There are representatives from each Association on this team.

There is a document available in the United Church of Christ called Manual on Church. It is a companion to the Manual on Ministry which is a guidebook for the important work of our Committees on Ministry. But the Manual on Church has never been finished. The most recent draft is dated January 2005. I take that to mean we have yet to learn how to be the church in this rapidly dramatically shifting time.

In fact that's one of the significant remarks early in the Manual: "The church faces NEEDS that BEG for transformative CHANGE."

That is an accurate commentary on the whole UCC, for right now virtually every conference is reconsidering what to do about strengthening the life of congregations, what to do about finances, staffing, and the best uses of its resources.

There is another statement in the Manual which could well be adopted as THE mission statement for all settings of the UCC: "The church is accountable for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the whole people of God." The problem as I see it, however, is that we don't think so well in terms of accountability: we'd rather be stubborn about autonomy. But that's a sermon for another time.

The Manual does attempt to nail it down with this clear and forthright statement: "Each body is accountable to all the others."

So the Vision Team is working to figure out how best to address the fact that every setting of the church – congregations, associations, conference and national settings -is losing ground, and the loss is accelerating.

The goal of the Vision Team is printed on the handout you have. It is to imagine what it would be like if there were one setting of the church, rather than 6. And how would that one setting do all that the church is called to be?

The handout you have shows the most current effort of the Vision team to articulate, to state, its purpose or goal, and to name a vision for the new organization and to clarify its mission. These statements were created as recently as 12 days ago.

The work that is going on embraces everything the team heard in 15 listening sessions and online surveys and email correspondence and various notations from association councils and the board of directors. That doesn't mean every viewpoint was honored but each comment was heard studied, discussed, and considered.

Here is what is going on right now:

A writing committee is preparing a first draft proposal to put into narrative form the most recent concepts the vision team is considering. That draft will be sent to all Associations soon. Each Association is encouraged by the Vision Team to hold a special meeting sometime this spring or very early summer, for the sole purpose of discussing this first draft. It is not a voting session. It is intended to be a time for Associations to comment on concerns, agreements, disagreements and additional ideas. What the team learns will be worked into a second draft.

The second draft will be distributed to every congregation and association by the end of the summer.

At the annual gathering of the Conference at the end of September, we will seek a consensus about the proposal and the general outline it will present. If there is a positive consensus, the Vision Team will go to work immediately to work out the fine details of how that proposal can be accomplished.

In the meantime, there are three sub committees continuing their research and forming ideas. One of them is thinking about the administrative and ministry structure. So far they are thinking in terms of transforming the existing associations which are each separately incorporated into 3 or 4 support centers connected to one another in new ways. There would be staff in each support center supported by and accountable to a Leadership Board which replaces the Board of Directors of the Conference.

That staff will be freed of many duplicated administrative responsibilities so they can concentrate more fully on the important job of preparing and authorizing ministries and ministers; in other words, to be pastors to the pastors and congregations. There would be a head of staff to coordinate all that work and help prevent overlap, who would be a theological prophetic voice for and to the church, oversee funding and fund raising, and help the Leadership Board carry out its responsibilities for faith formation, German partnerships, relationships with ecumenical bodies, CUE, CHHSM partners, promotion of special offerings, work to influence policies and values of the national setting of the UCC, and be the key representative to the national setting.

Another group is working on best practices. To illustrate what they are doing, they accepted a challenge a week ago, to call together all the committees on ministry and ask them what really works well in their areas, and to see if there are ways to share those practices and avoid duplication of energy and effort.

The third working group is figuring out how to pay the bills, manage the income, support the support centers financially, and improve our stewardship. This is probably the group which is

most exposed to hard reactions from the churches, for Jesus got it right when he observed, where our treasures are that's where our hearts are.

Nothing has been nailed down yet, but a whole lot of work has been done and is being reshaped by input from you and many others. So I hope you will be patient in the absence of details, and prayerful in your support for the team that is working out a proposal for how that ONE expression of the UCC faith community in this Ohio, W.Va, N Ky area of the whole United Church of Christ can be nimble, responsive and responsible for the work God in Jesus Christ has gathered us to do as we nurture spirit, awaken gifts, love neighbor and serve communities.

Thank you.