



2015 Conference Minister's Report

Grace and Peace to you!

This last year has been busy and filled with great ministry in the Ohio Conference—from our 2015 General Synod in Cleveland where we welcomed thousands of fellow UCCers, to our summer camps at Pilgrim Hills, to the beginning of two new Young Ambassador programs with our partners in the Evangelical Protestant Church in Germany. This report will show how we've been developing deeper connections that form our covenantal foundation.

Growing Covenant and Collaboration

Conference leaders over this last year have deepened our covenant relationship with the wider United Church of Christ and beyond. These partnerships are tangible ways of living into our UCC commitments and provide greater resources to support our local churches. A few examples of these relationships include:

- **IKC Experiment.** An “Experiment” with the UCC Indiana-Kentucky and Ohio Conferences. The experiment in sharing me as conference minister has been going very well. We continue to explore ways to share resources and staff expertise across conference boundaries.
- **Regional Connections.** The conferences of the Great Lakes Region of the UCC will be meeting in a few weeks to discuss how we might leverage our covenantal relationships to provide greater resources and services to the local churches.
- **Conference Resources.** We will work with the Indiana-Kentucky, Central Pacific, Michigan, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Connecticut Conferences in the next few weeks to highlight and use the amazing skills and gifts of people across the entire denomination.
- **Ecumenical Ties.** We will foster even greater ecumenical relationships with the Ohio Council of Churches moving into the offices of the Ohio Conference in Columbus. This partnership will become much more effective and gives us rich opportunities to connect with other denominations across our Conference. I am currently serving as the Vice-President of the Council and have been involved with the re-formation of the group. The group will soon decide on a common mission focus for the Council. This will allow millions of Christians in the Ohio Conference to join together and serve our wider community.
- **Vatican Conversations.** Our ecumenical connections even extend to the Vatican as I will be meeting with representatives from the Vatican to discuss the Pope's emphasis on the environment.
- **German Partnership.** Our partnership with the Evangelical Protestant Church of Westphalia, Germany, has grown over the last year. We now have two Young Ambassador programs with the EKvW and have recently hosted our first group from Germany.
- **Benevolent Institutions.** We continue to work with our strong group of Benevolent Institutions who are all committed to being in partnership with us. Working with these partners has been one of the highlights of my time here. These groups are filled with skilled, committed and loving people. We are thankful for their ministry.
- **Denominational Leaders' Summit.** I will serve as one of four UCC representatives meeting in Georgia to discuss the future of the church in post-modern times. Many other denominational leaders will be attending, and we will foster more relationships through this event.
- **Ecumenical New Ministry Symposium.** I participate in this group which has representatives from all major mainline denominations and focuses on new church and ministry starts.

Financial Health and Renewal

I am thrilled to share with you the significant turn-around of the finances in our Conference. From 2014 to 2016 alone, we will see a change from a nearly \$400,000 deficit to a projected surplus of more than \$50,000. For the first time in many years, we will have a balanced budget for two primary reasons. First, we found the right partner to manage our camps.

United Camps, Conferences and Retreats (UCCR) has done an amazing job managing our camp properties. Their management has allowed us to move out of the business of running camp properties and to instead focus on developing outdoor ministry programs. Changes in our business practices has been the second major cause. From our Treasurer’s report we see some of those changes that resulted in a large savings:

Projected Savings since March 6, 2015	Net Change
Outdoor Ministry Reduction in Loss (from \$228,170 in 2014 to only \$19,000 in 2016)	\$209,000
Increased Our Churches Wider Mission Giving (OCWM)	\$31,300
Office Rent Savings	\$23,900
Insurance Savings	\$22,800
Financial Management Savings	\$10,000
Technology Repair/Maintenance Savings	\$9,500
Total Savings	\$306,500

Camp and Outdoor Ministry

We have focused on restructuring our Outdoor Ministry for more than two years. The changes have been significant, but the results have been very positive and we continue to improve our ministry and engage more people and churches. We have now held two years of summer camp at Pilgrim Hills with the help of our management company, UCCR, and a group of talented and committed volunteers. The Division of Outdoor Ministries is refocusing its efforts more directly on the programming not only in summer, but throughout the year.

We have sold some adjacent property at Templed Hills (the home and 2+ acres that used to be called the Manager’s House). These properties have no impact on any ministry that might occur at the site. A task force has been formed to look at the options and opportunities with other camp property. That information will be shared with the Conference Board for further consideration and decisions about camp properties.

Future of the Wider Church in the Ohio: Mission First

We will engage a major conversation about the shape of ministry in the wider church in the Ohio Conference in the coming year called “Mission First.” The form and structure we live with was designed about 50 years ago and has been the topic of discussion for years. I am hopeful because this new round of discussion involves a strong commitment to involve local church members and authorized ministers in envisioning what the wider church’s mission and ministry should be — then designing a structure that would live into that mission. There will be more details in the near future about this process. Please make a commitment to discern with us decisions about our future.

As Rev. Steve Sterner said, “the UCC is what seekers are seeking today.” This is so true. Our theology, mission and purpose fall in line with vast numbers of people around us. The challenge we face is that those seekers do not know about us. While we have had to focus on structural and organizational changes over the last couple of years, we must make a shift to articulating our mission and extending the UCC movement. We could spin our organizational wheels on internal work and conversations, but our opportunity for significant impact on our communities and our world is now. I look forward to this year, not only because of the conversations we will have, but the vision we could catch and the work we could do.

Blessings to you all,

Rev. R. Phillip Hart
Designated Conference Minister