

State of the Conference Report

The Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ

2016 Annual Gathering

Three years ago, I began a call to serve as your Designated Conference Minister. This is the second time I have served as your Conference Minister, the first being about 10 years ago when I served as the Interim Conference Minister. I am thankful for the opportunity to serve you once again and will take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on the “State Of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ.”

First, let me say that these three years have been full of challenges and wonderful opportunities. We have dealt with many issues “head on” and I have found the people of the Ohio Conference to be thoughtful, discerning and committed to our common ministry. A quick look at an incomplete list of things we have accomplished over these three years will give you a better idea about the type of work we have done.

In these three years we have:

- * Hosted the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland.
- * Worked hard, and have made our Outdoor Ministry Program a successful and sustainable program for the future.
- * Contracted with the United Camps, Conferences, and Retreats (UCCR) to manage our camp properties which has been very successful.
- * Formed a “Camp Property” committee and have studied our options and opportunities for the future of our camp properties.
- * Re-organized our staffing model for the Conference.
- * Reduced our office space, continuing our shared space with the Central Southeast Ohio Association, but also inviting the Ohio Council of Churches to join us in our new offices.
- * Conducted the first “experiment” in the UCC between two Conferences where we shared a Conference Minister with the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the UCC.
- * Created a collaborative position with the National UCC Setting where Rev. Nicole Havelka serves both settings of the UCC.
- * Redesigned our website and developed a robust communication program.
- * Dealt directly with a significant yearly deficit for the Conference, putting us in a position to create a balanced and sustainable budget for the future.
- * Started the process to have conversations among the Associations, Conference and the National UCC setting about the future of the Wider Church in the Ohio Conference.
- * Continued to develop our existing Young Ambassador Programs and started yet another program with our partners in the Evangelical Protestant Church in Westphalia, Germany.
- * Started a “Younger Pastors” program in the Conference to provide leadership and support opportunities for newer pastors in the UCC.
- * Started a new UCC learning community with the Methodist Theological School of Ohio.
- * Distributed thousands of dollars in seminary scholarships and grants, including \$60,000 in Literacy Grants across the Conference.
- * And much more...

There is, of course, always more work to do, but you can see we have taken on large issues successfully and created greater opportunities for our people and churches to promote the mission, work, and values of the UCC together.

The single biggest issue that continues to face the Ohio Conference is the conversation about how the wider church will be structured in our setting. I have written to you several times about this subject, and I still believe the path forward involves: (1) wide conversations, (2) talking to, and learning from other UCC Conferences, and (3) having each local church involved in the final decisions about our future. I will elaborate on each of these briefly.

Wide Conversations. You can measure a congregational community's health by examining who is involved, and who participates in the conversations and decision making for that community. As in every organization, leadership is important, but the single, greatest defining element of a congregational system is the breadth and depth of conversation among the entire community. These kinds of deep, communal conversations ensure that the powerful, the pushy, or the popular voices are not simply assumed to be the voices of the Divine. These kinds of inclusive conversations allow for the still small voice, the marginalized voice, and the creative voice to be heard and considered.

Talking to and Learning from other Conferences. Every conference in the United Church of Christ is, in one way or another, dealing with organizational and ecclesiastical change. Talking, listening and learning from these faithful partners in the UCC will help us learn and gain important insights. There is no way that we have all the helpful insight, all the wisdom, and all the knowledge within our own borders. It shows both humility and wisdom to listen to how our sisters and brothers across the UCC have been discerning their future. It demonstrates our belief that God is Still Speaking and keeps us from falling into that dangerous habit of hearing the Divine voice as a voice that always speaks our own regional dialect.

Local Church Involvement. About 50 years ago, when the Ohio Conference was formed, each Congregational Church voted to become part of the Conference and each Evangelical Reformed Church had the opportunity to vote to leave the Conference. Two groups, two approaches to creating our community but the common theme was that each local church had the opportunity to be directly involved in the structure of the wider church that would serve on their behalf. As we begin to talk about the most significant change in 50 years-not simply in how we organize ourselves, but in how we relate and live out a common future- should we not allow those kinds of decisions to be made by our local churches after we have had broad conversations and shared multiple insights and options? I find it difficult to philosophically or ecclesiastically find a reason why our local churches should not be directly involved in the conversations and decision about how they will relate to one another in the future.

Now, let me conclude this report with a light and easy topic: Money. We have to admit that the changes in the world have greatly impacted our community and are one of the reasons why we are undertaking the conversation of organizational change. But we demonstrate our maturity and awareness of reality, when we also admit that our finances are an important reason why we are having this conversation. Diminishing OCWM (Our Churches Wider Mission) dollars has occurred over the last 20 years, and it is likely that this trend will continue. Over the next year or two, the entire United Church of Christ will change the pattern of how we give and support the wider church ministries in the UCC. I expect to see recommendations and motions at the 2017

General Synod that will make significant changes to OCWM and how local churches will support the wider ministry of the United Church of Christ. Although I do not know how these changes will impact our church, I am certain the impact will be significant. One of the great opportunities that will come from this conversation is a chance to talk about how we use our sacred resources together. OCWM is a unique pool of money. It comes from the hard work and dedication of local churches who, more often than not, could easily find other ways to use the money. OCWM says something about our beliefs, but it also says something about our hopes.

The earliest expression of something like OCWM in the Church is described to us in the New Testament as the “Jerusalem offering.” This was money that was collected from all sorts of churches, in many different countries and given to the Jerusalem church to help them respond to the huge number of new believers flocking to Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul is talking to parts of the church who are able to give and says, “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: ‘The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.’”

We have before us an opportunity to ask ourselves not only how we organize ourselves, but how we support the wider mission and work of God as we in the United Church of Christ perceive it. This will, at least, be an interesting conversation.

Lastly, my friends, let me bring us back to the important thing. In the end the most important thing in all of this work is whether we are helping people connect with God, helping people connect with their neighbors, and helping people come to know and love themselves. While all these administrative and organizational conversations are important and will impact our work, we always need to come back to the most important things. Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. Let us be people obsessed with preaching and showing love, justice, kindness and hope. In the end, the true measure of our work will be measured by this.

The Grace of God be with you all.

Phil

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The Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ