

The Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ is moving toward a new structure, one that provides, ***“one nimble and responsive judicatory that is faithful in mission and responsible in stewardship.”*** The Board of Directors has approved for the consideration of Associations and other groups two foundational documents. The first is entitled ***“For Such a Time as This!”*** The second is an outline of a plan for a three-year transition process. It is called, ***“CONFERENCE STRUCTURE PROCESS.”***

Both documents are available in the Association Office and here (links). The plan, if enacted, would begin in 2018 and culminate in 2020.

CONFERENCE STRUCTURE PROCESS

AS AMENDED BY VISION TEAM 9/27/17

Some representatives on the working team for reforming the structure of the United Church of Christ in Ohio, West Virginia, and Northern Kentucky have been personally involved in the process since at least 2008. Some were involved in the last Conference-wide iteration in 2000. That is a long time to work at structure and reform.

Thankfully, the present attempts have gained the kind of momentum that the former iterations lacked. There is unanimity around tables of “Conference” and “Association” folk, all of whom recognize that it is irresponsible stewardship of local church funds to continue to operate with two middle judicatory bodies. Clinging to two judicatory bodies has deterred the ministry and mission to which we are called in every setting of the United Church of Christ in Ohio, West Virginia and Northern Kentucky.

Therefore, the attempts of the working group, which has met for several years, has come to clear consensus. The United Church of Christ in what had been known as “The Ohio Conference” needs to become ***“One nimble and responsive judicatory level that is faithful in mission and responsible in stewardship.”***

The work involved in moving the organization onward in its evolutionary process is daunting. The working group imagines a three-year process, out of which will come a new way of being the United Church of Christ in the congregations and judicatory of Ohio, West Virginia and Northern Kentucky.

Perhaps the first consideration could be naming the new entity. The working group understands that the term “Ohio Conference” is exclusionary. The term does not include the congregations of West Virginia or Northern Kentucky. A new, inclusive term must be imagined and utilized. Some have been suggested. They include: The Heartland Conference; Upper Appalachian Conference; Trinity Conference; Ohio Valley Conference; Mid-American Conference; and Mid-East Conference. Before moving to discussions of structural organization, shared ministries that are based in best practices, finances, outdoor ministries, initiatives or directions, the working group realizes that it must unify the vision to which the title refers. That suggests a process of selecting the single, inclusive judicatory name.

After the name is selected, hopefully in a process that creates some energy and imagination, the hard work of shaping ministry resource begins. The sub-committee of the working group that has been charged with designing process suggests that this planning phase take no more than two years. It involves an outline of a resource for best and standard practices. The content of this resource will take

shape as the Conference lives together into the new structure. This resource is constantly open to amendment, deletion and/or addition.

Also during this two-year planning phase, a team to imagine new means of stewardship and finance would work at developing models for inspiring, unifying, and constructing new formulae for OCWM collection and disbursement. This includes development of an aggregate budget, processes for designated funds of every setting, and equitable distribution of funds for ministry and mission. Outdoor Ministries and Camping will be a key component of these discussions and determinations, whether by this stewardship and finance sub-committee or another ad hoc body so charged.

Also within these initial two years, a team must consider form and structure, to include issues like staffing, both professional and support, location and number of Support Centers of the Conference, means of communication and technological possibilities. The forms here may be geographical, demographic, or by other forms of cultural identities. Included in these considerations would be Board structures, representational formulae, and determination of the need for Conference Executive or a collegial approach among Conference Support Center Leadership.

Progress in each of these areas will be reported to Associations at Gatherings of each of the Associations and shared, through Associations, with the local churches within them. Team representatives may be at these meetings to present, explain rationale and cover whatever details might be available. These reports may take place each of the two years of the initial phase, with the intent of maintaining absolute transparency throughout the process and to invite understanding and participation. Significant push back should be considered by the teams as they return to their work and reported back to the working group at the next possible opportunity, not necessarily at annual gatherings. So, three reports may come to annual Association Gatherings, one on best practices, one on stewardship and finance, and one on form and structure. Specially called Association meetings may be called to deal specifically with structure and process. The role of the working group in these meetings is to listen, hear, and, as far as possible, plan accordingly.

The entire first two-year initial phase is directed by the Conference Minister, with the assistance of the Association Ministers, and a guiding working group with whom the staff manages the progress. Team members should commit to the entire three-year implementation plan, as far as that is possible. Staff, too, should commit to the total process, if possible.

From this three-year initial phase should come: 1. A resource that outlines best and standard practices to be used by Conference Centers and local churches; 2. A formula for stewardship and finance that establishes a clear path for the aggregate funding and support of ministry and mission throughout the Conference; and 3. A determination on form and structure. Once these three are approved, by each Associations at regular or called gatherings, by the Conference Board of Directors, and by the Conference at an Annual Gathering, the second, implementation phase begins.

The second stage of implementation is initiated by act of former Associations and the Conference. Included in the Conference vote may be an amendment of Constitution and By-Laws that governed the former structure, if necessary. This depends, of course, on the wording of the current Constitution and By-Laws and the new structure that is being proposed. Consultation with General Counsel could precede this action.

The second phase of implementation commences with the form and structure plan. Based on the determinations of the team on structure and form, Conference Centers are established and Conference Staff is deployed in correspondence with those Centers within the third year. The Conference Minister continues to guide the process, even if the determination of the team is to move forward without a Conference Executive. Offices are established according to the plan. Professional and support staff is called and hired, according to the plan, if present configurations do not match the plan.

Budget and support for the Conference Support Centers is a result of the determinations of the team on Stewardship and Finance. The formation of Conference Support Centers and the implementation of aggregate formulae for stewardship and support are to be accomplished by the end of the third year of implementation. Additionally, Associations who have separate corporate status (501(c)3) would begin the process of dissolution and determination of reserve/discretionary/designated funds. Conference accounts that reflect these funds should be established by the end of year #3. All Constitution and By-Law changes that apply to the new structure are to be in place by the end of year #3.

Leadership at the end of year three reflects the plan that was developed in the initial planning stage. This includes both professional and support staff in each of the Conference Support Centers, whether personnel is new or continuing. The Conference Executive should remain in place until the end of year #3, regardless of whether the final plan calls for that position to continue. At the end of year #3, the Conference Executive, who has taken primary responsibility for the implementation of the new structure and form of the Conference, steps aside. If the plan calls for a Conference Executive, the person who had served in transition may be considered for the position.

Full implementation of the plan commences on the last day of the third year from commencement of the implementation plan, with the flexibility to alter parts of the form and structure if they prove either unworkable or disruptive to the service of the United Church of Christ in Ohio, West Virginia and Northern Kentucky.

Prelude: Process assumes endorsement in 2017 and startup early in 2018; process separated into a planning and an implementation phase with target completion by end of 2020; leadership provided by Conference Executive and Conference Staff with assistance from Association Ministers and a representative working group – all committed to a three-year effort; and, three sub-groups on best practices, finance and stewardship, and structure and form. Periodic reports go through Associations and their governing bodies. Associations work toward dissolution of legal standing. When agreement is reached, Conference Board and Annual Gathering of Conference give final approval. Appropriate legal counsel may be sought throughout the process.

Phase 1: Planning: Up to two years, culminating no later than year-end 2019: Managed by Conference Executive and the Conference Staff, guided and assisted by a representative working group of the Conference.

- A. Name: Select a non-exclusionary name for the United Church of Christ in Ohio, Northern Kentucky and West Virginia. This could be a Conference-wide effort that raises awareness and generates some enthusiasm.

- B. Best and Standard Practices Resource: Conference Team develops a resource for ministries, approaches, or programs of local churches, the judicatory, and the national setting of the United Church of Christ that can be standardized in form and practice to enhance and improve the consistency of ministry in Ohio, Northern Kentucky and West Virginia.
- C. Finance and Stewardship: Conference Team develops formulae for aggregate budget of the Conference, including collection and equitable distribution of OCWM funds (or the successor to OCWM). Outdoor Ministries/Camping is dealt with either by this Team or by another ad hoc working group of the Conference. Of special interest is the plan for designated and undesignated reserves of Associations and ministries.
- D. Structure and Form: Conference Team develops a plan for organization and structure of the Conference, inclusive of Conference Support Centers, staffing, both professional and support, location, and Center logistics. The Team will have to determine the need for a Conference Executive. This Team will also consider Board makeup, representational formulae, and clear lines of communication, transparency, and accountability.
- E. Reports and Votes: Associations, Conference Board of Directors and Conference Annual Gathering ratify each of the four steps. Conference Constitution and By-Laws will be amended as needed throughout the process.

Phase 2: Implementation: One year, culminating by year-end 2020: Managed by Conference Executive and the Conference Staff, guided and assisted by a representative working group of the Conference.

- A. Form and Structure Plan: Conference Support Centers are established, according to the determinations of the Phase 1 plan.
- B. Staffing:
 - Conference Executive** serves through 2020, ensuring full implementation of the plans that were developed in Phase 1 and embodied in Phase 2. The Conference Executive steps aside at the end of the year. If the Phase 1 and 2 determinations lead to continuation of the office of the Conference Executive, this person may be considered for the office.
 - Conference Staff** may continue to serve the needs of the Conference in Conference Support Centers, depending on the plans of Phases 1. If the determination has been made that it is best to proceed with a Conference Executive, any of the Conference Staff may be considered for the position.
- C. Legalities: Association Tax-Exempt corporate status dissolved and new Conference registered with Secretary of State/Secretaries of States, if necessary.
- D. Finance and Stewardship: Aggregate budget is created. Accounts established and financial reports created that reflect the Phase 1 plan of the Finance and Stewardship Team, including those designated funds that are required, undesignated reserves that are existing, and actual collection and disbursement of OCWM funding.

- E. Best and Standard Practices: The Conference implements the Practices Resource as a way for the Conference to do better, as a unified body, what it had been doing in different ways throughout the Conference.

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*.