

47th Annual Meeting Orientation
By Rev. Dr. Karen Smith Sellers, Conference Minister
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College of St. Benedict, St. Joseph, MN
Power Point Slide Presentation accompanies

“Grace and peace to you on behalf of the 138 local churches and over 30,000 members of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ! I am delighted to be with you this day and to bring you greetings from your partners in ministry from Ada to Zumbrota, International Falls to Eitzen, and Ortonville to Grand Marais.” Sunday after Sunday I say those words in a local church of the Minnesota Conference. How GOOD it is to proclaim them today – when folks from Ada to Zumbrota and International Falls to Eitzen are gathered in this place -- when we are **TOGETHER**, in order to be **RENEWED**. (slide.)

Half a dozen years ago, Rev. Dr. Clyde Steckel, then Interim Conference Minister, described the annual meeting in this way: “Our early nineteenth-century ancestors would have called it a camp meeting, [then] later in that century and into the twentieth, a revival meeting. Now we call it an **annual meeting**. It is for: (slide) a revival of our spirits in refreshing our common vision and mission; powerful preaching and inspiring singing; stirring keynote speakers; sharing mission and program resources; learning about neighboring congregations and more distant missions; and above all, sharing the reality of being connected in covenant with the wider church. This is a conversion experience we all need at least once a year.” (What is a Conference For, Anyway?, June 13, 2003, p. 4)

The Minnesota Conference **is** an expression of the church AND it is a corporation organized and existing under Chapter 317 of the Minnesota Statutes and defined in the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. Such entities must hold a regular meeting of voting members annually. So, we gather also to GOVERN ourselves. (slide) “Governance is often a dirty word,” ” says L.

Gregory Jones, Dean of Duke Divinity School. “It is either something explicitly disdained, or it is seen as an unfortunate necessity that **anyone in his or her right mind would avoid and evade**. All too often, governance becomes equated with bureaucracy. Yet we know that wise governance is crucial, and that preserving the health of institutions is vital to our well being as persons and as communities.” (The Practice of Christian Governance, p. 1) In our Annual Meeting we come together to discern what it means to strengthen this particular manifestation of the church and to be in mission and in service, bearing witness to God’s in-breaking realm.

To engage this task faithfully, it may help to begin with an assessment of **where we are**. One helpful way to think about this comes to us from Bob Terry, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a longtime faculty member at the Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota. Terry asks us to think about Meaning, Mission, Power, Structure, Resources, and Existence.

(slide)

Meaning	the significance term	for which
Mission	the direction term	toward which
Power	the energy term	by which
Structure	the form and process term	through which
Resources	the material term	with which
Existence	the limiting/possibility term	from which

Let’s take a few minutes to talk about each one of these.

For the Minnesota Conference, the **meaning** (or vision) may best be named in our commitment to “increase the love of God and neighbor.” (slide) We do this,

we believe, in order to fulfill the great commission as expressed in Acts 1: To “**be Christ’s witnesses** – in word and in deed – in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

From this we derive a **mission** – a sense of direction – a “toward which.” In 2007, we began to talk about this as follows: (slide) “Called by Christ and emboldened by the Spirit, we are witnesses to God’s transforming love ... by:

- Telling the story of whose we are
- Being Christ’s hands in the world
- Nurturing the gifts of all people and
- Living out our relational identity.

“Mission clarity,” says Terry, “is crucial to organizational effectiveness. To be energy giving, [mission] must be concise, clear, trusted as real, shared, and believed to be doable.” (p.70) Accordingly, the Minnesota Conference has named these core mission priorities (slide):

The Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ is committed to being a transformational regional body:

- Driven by mission rather than maintenance;
- Committed to spiritually-enlivened strategic initiatives rather than to survival; (slide)
- Focused on Christian formation and discipleship of children, youth and adults;
- Directed toward identifying and nurturing the gifts and leadership abilities of clergy and laity;
- Devoted to strengthening, building, and inviting congregations; and
- Dedicated to increasing prophetic witness.

These are our core missional priorities. We strive to align our work and choices with these. This fall we hope to do so more intentionally in strategic planning work with Rev. Steve Sterner, Executive Minister of Local Church Ministries.

(slide) Power comes to us from the Holy Spirit, who inspires and emboldens us. Power is also in our partnerships that increase and expand our capacity to fulfill these strategic priorities. And power is in the people – in every local church that is joined in covenant in the Minnesota Conference to work together on these goals, and in the approximately 200 persons involved in various ministries positions throughout the Conference. **(slide)** We have 138 mission centers spread across the 87,000 square miles of Minnesota and **(slide)** we are over 30,000 members.

(slide) Structure is the “through which;” it is how we organize ourselves. **(Ask folks to find the Governing Structure chart in their packets.)** The Annual Meeting and *ad interim* the Board of Directors are at the center and are called to govern **on behalf of the whole**. **Power** – the power of the people, of the Spirit – energizes and modifies this structure; the structure generates and allocates resources. **Each dimension informs and impacts the other**. Governance – on behalf of the whole – listens to and accounts for various interests – but eventually searches for what will best serve the mission.

For Terry, **resources** **(slide)** are a “material term” the “with which.” As a people of faith, informed by a theology of abundance and not limited by the myth of scarcity, we are mindful of many resources: prayer is a resource and our diverse perspectives are resources. Money is a resource as well.

Let us talk briefly about money – for Jesus was surely not ashamed to – referencing it in more than half of his parables.

If you send a dollar to the Minnesota Conference UCC through Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM), 34.75 cents is immediately sent on to the national church. That is our sharing ratio, and it has not changed for many years. To learn how those dollars are expended, turn to the brochure included in your packets. (Lift up OCWM brochure.) The remaining 65.25 cents remains in Minnesota to be expended in ways identified in the Conference OCWM brochure in your packet. (Lift up Conference OCWM brochure.) If the ways in which OCWM dollars are spent in Minnesota is a particular interest of yours, you may also refer to the detailed proposed 2010 budget on each table and participate in tomorrow's budget hearing.

(slide) You may be interested in knowing how the churches of the Minnesota Conference UCC participate in contributing to Our Church's Wider Mission. A graphic description of this is in your packets on the reverse side of the governing structure chart. There you will see that sixteen churches contribute half of all the OCWM received and fifteen churches do not contribute at all.

(slide) It is now well known that OCWM contributions have been declining steadily for some time. A few months ago I reported that, when corrected for inflation, OCWM giving both nationally and in Minnesota has declined **by 40% over the last twenty years**. I wrote in COMMAntary, (slide) "With one exception (the Hawaii Conference), every conference shows a decline in the number of churches, with the median decline being 13%. Similarly, with one exception (the Southeast Conference), every conference shows a loss of membership, with the median loss being 30%. The median change in OCWM giving is 103%, but when corrected for inflation during that twenty year period, OCWM contributions have declined by 40%. Minnesota's numbers are almost exactly at the median: We

have 87% of the churches and 69% of the members we had in 1988, and our OCWM giving (at 107%) when adjusted for inflation is 61% of what it was then.”

To address this change in the financial landscape, we have undertaken an intentional effort to increase individual giving through Friends of the Conference. (go back to previous slide) We have had two years of successfully achieving – indeed exceeding – our goal. And, with your help, we will do the same again this year – but, like all giving, Friends is being impacted by the financial collapse and recession. (slide) This chart shows what has happened to the Ashley Endowment during the last year and a half. In October 2007, it was valued at \$8.2 million and it is now valued at about \$5.5 million – almost \$3 million dollars less. (slide) This slide shows the way in which various elements contributed to the fiscal 2009 budget. This pie chart is likely to change dramatically in fiscal 2010 because the proposal is that we reduce substantially our reliance on the Ashley Endowment.

Finally, we talk about **existence** – the limiting and possibility term – the “from which.” Terry asserts, “History is replete with those who, to their great detriment, persisted in seeing the world through glasses framed with outmoded or false notions.” (p. 87) (Show Terry’s action wheel, and talk for a moment about this graphic)

In the introduction to his book I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church our keynoter Paul Nixon writes: Most of the denominational faith communities that first evangelized North America are now rapidly down-shifting toward oblivion and near extinction. Most mainline pastors are leading **churches that will not exist by the year 2100; many of these churches will be gone long before that.**” (p. 9, Introduction.) *In a moment, we’ll see just how true that statement might be for the Minnesota Conference.*

(slide) We are living in a time when the landscape of religion is changing so rapidly that most churches are struggling to keep pace. It was nearly twenty years ago that the Alban Institute's Loren Mead said, "We are at the front edges of the greatest transformation of the church that has occurred for 1600 years. It is by far the greatest change that the church has ever experienced in America; it may eventually make the transformation of the Reformation look like a ripple in the pond." And now, on top of the religious, demographic, and sociological shifts, our world is reeling from a financial crisis whose reach has not yet been discerned.

We come to this 47th Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ facing difficult decisions. It is imperative that we talk honestly about the situation in which we find ourselves. So, I share with you just a few "snapshots" of the changes that have taken place:

Slide: 1966 and 2006

Slide: churches lost and churches gained

Slide: number of churches that have grown numerically at all and those that have grown by an average of one member per year over forty years. Every other congregation – shows numeric decline. These are the facts that lead to Paul Nixon's prediction. And these are the conditions under which we are called by the still speaking God to make faithful mission, power, structure, and resource decisions.

It bears underscoring that this situation is not unique to the United Church of Christ, or to the Minnesota Conference. Not long ago, in an essay titled, "**Beyond Hanging On,**" (I LOVE that title) UCC General Minister and President John Thomas wrote: "There is a growing sense in the United Church of Christ that the viability of many of our Conferences is in peril, and that the capacity of all

of our Conferences to sustain their accustomed roles is in question. The United Church of Christ has been declining in membership at the rate of 1% per year since 1965, but institutionally we have not adapted to our smaller reality.”

(Slide) Not long ago, it was believed that no conference minister should serve without an associate; today one-third of the conferences have solo conference ministers, and the survival of several of these conferences is in doubt. In Minnesota, until the recent financial collapse, the Ashley Endowment permitted us to avoid or delay some of what other conferences have been addressing for several years.

For some of you, this is not new information. Many of you have heard me set forth these or other similar facts during these last three and a half years. As a result, some have concluded that I am negative and a pessimist. And more than one or two have questioned my faith. So, let me speak directly to this – under the conviction that “Silence is the lie when truth needs to be spoken.”

Search sacred scripture and I believe we will find the story of a community of faith and a God in honest, authentic relationship. Our heroes and heroines challenge God and wrestle with God, they cry out to God, and they “tell it like it is.” The narrative is one of questioning, “Why did you bring us out into the wilderness to die?” “Can these bones live?” “Why have you forsaken me?” Repeatedly, the narrative testifies against pretending and denying.

Turn to our own United Church of Christ tradition to underscore the conviction that: “We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind, to notions of our day and place – crude, partial and confined. No, let a new and better hope with our hearts be stirred. Our God has yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.” (slide) Our God really does not need us to do it the way we’ve “always” done it – especially since our “always” is never long enough

and frequently encompasses only a generation or two. Our God does not need us to keep on doing the same things again and again and expect different results. As the song says, “Our God is an **awesome** God.”

Accordingly, I believe that the faith challenge of our time is to **trust God enough to let go of our cherished memories of the way things have been** and to **open ourselves to the new things that God is doing**. A theme heard at the Pilgrim Point Camp Listening Sessions was, “Does the Conference have enough faith to keep the Camp going for another year?” But one participant, turned that question on its head and asked: “Do **we** have enough faith in the power of a resurrecting God to loosen our hold on the current form of the Camp and outdoor ministries – opening ourselves to new approaches and confident in a God who says, ‘Behold, I am doing a new thing,’ – trusting in a God with whom all things are possible?”

We are an Easter people, gathered in the season of Pentecost. We are not necessarily or always optimists, but we are people who **abound in hope**.

Bob Terry says, “Resources only become resources after mission is clarified.” (p. 86) As staff and Board and Conference we have committed ourselves not to program maintenance or survival but to the mission priorities and to spiritually enlivened initiatives:

- Thus, our fall 2007 workshop on “The UCC @ 50 – where are we going, who will we become?” and 2008’s “Recreating the Church for the Postmodern Age,” and this fall’s “Becoming an Intergenerational Church – Communicating across the Generations and Ministering to the Missing Generation.”

- Thus, our Vitality Initiative Project, and the powerful transformation that is beginning in eleven of our congregations that have committed to going deeper in faith and reaching out in new ways.
- Thus, this Annual Meeting focused on renewal and transformation.

Several weeks ago I spoke with my colleague, Rev. Judith Youngman – formerly our Interim Associate Conference Minister and now the Interim Conference Minister in Michigan. The Michigan Conference, like the Minnesota Conference, faces the prospect of suspending operations at their last remaining camp (they once had three) at the end of this camping season. Judith said, “I’m determined that this matter will not take over our Annual Meeting.”

I hope that won’t happen here, either.

And the best way for us to go forward, I believe, is if the context of all our conversations – whatever the issue – is under the theme that has drawn us here. First, a focus on **together** – on our understanding that we face **common** challenges – that we can disagree without being disagreeable, that in essentials we seek unity, in non-essentials we acknowledge, honor and rejoice in our diversity, and in all things we seek charity and second on **renewal** – on who the Still-speaking God is calling us to be.

We have a chance at this Annual Meeting to harness the passions that have been evoked in recent weeks, to engage those who have a renewed interest in the mission and ministries of the Conference, and to turn this time of seeming crisis into one of opportunity. This is a *kairos* moment; I hope together we will seize it.