

The Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ

Evaluation of the Ashley Minister of Faith Formation for Children and Youth

Successes and Challenges after Three Years

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2010

Introduction

In 2006, the Ashley Task Force recommended hiring a full time Conference staff person to work in the area of children and youth programming as part of a larger effort to make the Minnesota Conference a “premier site for Christian education, spiritual development, and youth ministry.” Because this was an endeavor into new territory, the Task Force recommended that the Conference conduct a thorough review of the new position and associated programs and policies during the third year of its implementation. Per this recommendation, this evaluation report will provide an in-depth, retrospective evaluation of the position of the Ashley Minister of Faith Formation for Children and Youth. The report concludes with a summary of accomplishments and challenges – as identified by key stakeholders – and a suggested framework for making decisions about the future of the Ashley Minister position.

History and Original Design

Prior to the advent of the Ashley Minister position, the conference employed a part-time Conference Youth Ministry Coordinator who supported the implementation of youth programming in the Minnesota Conference. In 2005, the Conference Youth Ministry Coordinator wrote a letter to the Personnel Committee of the Board of Directors suggesting that the position be upgraded to a full-time staff position and that the duties of the position be expanded to include leadership development activities for leaders of local youth programs in addition to planning programming on a Conference level. He wrote, “While the Coordinator has the blessed opportunity to enjoy relationships with many of our conference youth, the primary responsibility (as I see it) should be for developing the Local Church Youth Ministers and Leaders” (Garth Schumacher, August 2005, in a letter to the Minnesota Conference Personnel Committee).

A year later, the Ashley Task Force recommended hiring a full-time Conference staff person, not as a Conference Youth Ministry Coordinator, but as the Minister of Faith Formation for Children and Youth.

While the position description refrained from naming definitive job responsibilities, it did offer the following as possible responsibilities:

- “Visit or make contact with each church of the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ for purposes of achieving a needs assessment, strengthening relationships, and developing a plan for more effective ministry to children and youth in each context;
- Work with clergy clusters to enhance support of Christian education, youth ministry, and spiritual development of young people;
- Implement a comprehensive Conference Youth Ministry Program; (currently this includes two Conference Youth Events annually, participation in General Synod bi-annually, and participation in a Regional Youth Event quadrennially);
- Foster the growth and excellence of Christian educators and youth leaders/ministers serving congregations of the Minnesota Conference UCC in various ways, such as
 - Working with the Conference Christian Education Ministry Team, the Conference Youth Ministry Team, the Conference Spiritual Development Team, and the Conference Outdoor Ministry Team as needed in fulfillment of the purposes of the position;
 - Being a resource to local churches calling for resources, ideas, and contacts; Offering leadership training for youth leaders and youth and assist in vocational

- discernment of youth; and Participating in MAYHEM (Minnesota Area Youth Helpers, Educators, and Ministers);
- Coordinate and facilitate communication among local churches, the Conference, the West Central Region, and the national setting of the United Church of Christ;
- Provide for the development of a blog or website attractive to youth; and
- If necessary, oversee Ashley Endowment grants and scholarships” (Taken directly from the Ashley Minister position description, 2006)

Notably, a large portion (and the most clearly defined portion) of the job description revolves around supporting and strengthening local children and youth ministries, particularly through local Christian educators and youth leaders/ministers. The position description also explicitly acknowledged that “effective ministry with young people may well involve work with their parents and other adults in their lives.” Thus, the question was never whether or not adults are a key ingredient in the development of a successful ministry with young people, but rather how to balance direct ministry to young people with ministry to the adults in congregations who minister to young people. The current Ashley Minister has also wrestled with this question, and we suggest that this question remain at the forefront of the conversation about the Ashley Minister’s role in the Minnesota Conference.

The Present Task

We turn then to the present with the following questions.

1. How has Wade Zick, the current Ashley Minister of Faith Formation for Children and Youth, understood and shaped the position?
2. What are the current responsibilities and activities of the Ashley Minister?
3. How have the actions taken by the Ashley Minister affected the Minnesota Conference, particularly the Faith Formation Team, the Conference Outdoor Ministry Team, the Conference Youth Events, and ministries to children and youth in local congregations?

In the report that follows, we summarize what we have learned from interviewing 28 key stakeholders, individuals who share an interest in the faith formation of children and youth. Among our interviewees were 3 youth, 5 current or former board members, 3 members of the original search committee for the Ashley Minister position, 5 members of the Faith Formation Team, 5 participants from the Taize trip, 2 members of the Outdoor Ministries Team, 2 members of the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee, 2 representatives from the national church setting, 12 local leaders of children and youth ministries, and 7 conference staff members. We also attended several hours of the recent joint retreat for the Faith Formation Team and Outdoor Ministries Team. Finally, we reviewed program documents including the Ashley Minister’s records of visits made to congregations, each congregation’s participation in relevant conference events, and evaluations from Conference Youth Events and the Youth Ministry Leader Retreat and Training.

In Section 1, we will provide a narrative of the Ashley Minister position, as it was developed and as it is currently practiced, including the vision and principles which motivated and guided the decisions made. To do this, we rely primarily but not exclusively on information from Wade Zick, the current Ashley Minister. In Section 2, we will summarize the positive impact of the Ashley Minister on the conference, as described by interview respondents. In Section 3, we will examine the remaining challenges, concerns, and questions that interviewees expressed about this position and its ministry, including confusion that exists around the role and responsibilities of the Ashley Minister. Finally, we provide a summary of our findings (and potential implications) and suggest a framework for examining the future of the Ashley Minister position.

Section 1. The First Three Years

Overall Vision

The Ashley Minister has a distinct vision for how and where the Ashley funds and the Ashley Minister's time and energy should be directed. He believed that having received a gift of such magnitude in the Ashley Fund, it was incumbent on him to do something equally grandiose to set a tone of innovation, to focus on (as the Conference staff often describes it) "mission over maintenance." His vision is further motivated by the belief that high-quality ministry to children and youth requires spiritually healthy adult leaders. Because of this belief, he committed to making the spiritual health of local adult leaders his number one priority. Secondly, he believes that the best way to create a healthy conference ministry to children and youth is to build upon the strengths of existing local ministries so that healthy, high-quality programs can become support systems and examples for developing healthy high-quality programs in other congregations.

He sees his own role not as a pastor to children and youth in the Conference, but as a pastor to the leaders of children and youth ministries in local settings. In this sense, he aimed to move the position away from direct service to youth, and instead provide service to those who directly serve children and youth in local settings. He then serves as a consultant/mentor/coach figure to these other adult leaders.

Resourcing, Networking, Supporting, and Strengthening Local Leaders

While some have questioned the wisdom of spending such a large sum on a one-time trip, the Ashley Minister believed that a trip to Taize for local ministry leaders was just the sort of big event needed to kick off the new era of children and youth ministry in Minnesota. The trip would serve both to build deep relationships with and among local ministry leaders and to provide those same leaders with a life-changing, spiritually-renewing experience that would rejuvenate their ministries. It was also, as he described it, a noticeable way to demonstrate the conference's commitment to children and youth ministry.

Notably, gaining new skills for implementing children and youth ministry was not one of the primary goals of the trip. This decision reflects the Ashley Minister's belief that one of the best ways to serve children and youth is to make sure that those individuals who are providing direct ministry to children and youth are themselves spiritually healthy.

Yet no one-time trip, no matter how delightful, can provide sufficient spiritual nourishment to keep leaders healthy for the long road ahead. Thus, the trip and subsequent retreats aimed to teach these leaders sustainable spiritual practices and to build collegial relationships between them, the kind of relationships that can provide long-term nourishment and support.

Beyond the Taize trip, the Ashley Minister continued to make the spiritual well-being of adult leaders a priority and began to offer training opportunities to strengthen the skills and professionalism of adult leaders. This included providing access to courses at United Theological Seminary: an anti-racism training in the fall of 2008 and Our Whole Lives training in the fall of 2009. Additional trainings have also been made available to a small group of adult leaders. These trainings have included a Great Lakes Association of United Church Educators training for children ministry leaders in Chicago in the fall of 2008 and a training on the Faith Practices curriculum in Nashville in the fall of 2009.

During the past three years, the Ashley Minister has visited the majority of congregations in the Minnesota Conference. According to his records, he has had significant contact (defined as going to lunch with a leader, presenting materials at the church, or providing desired resources) with 93 congregations. Because of his belief that the best use of resources is to strengthen leaders who already show strength, the Ashley Minister has not committed to visiting every congregation. Instead, he has prioritized congregations with active ministries to children and youth. Thus, the Ashley Minister has had significant contact with over 90% of congregations that have participated in at least one conference event for youth or children/youth ministry leaders but with only a third of the congregations that have not participated in any conference events for children and/or youth ministry.

While building individual relationships with adult leaders is a priority, facilitating relationships between adult leaders is also critical. The Ashley Minister recognizes that he cannot be the sole resource and source of support for adult leaders. He wants these leaders to rely on one another for support as well. To meet this goal, he has convened several lunch groups and informal gatherings of adult leaders in addition to the more formal retreats and trainings.

Finally, each summer, the Ashley Minister visits most sessions of camp as an ambassador of the Conference Staff, to make campers and staff alike aware of the presence and care of the Conference.

Managing and Facilitating the Use of Ashley Funds

Another early action by the Ashley Minister was to dismantle the Conference Christian Education Ministry Team and the Conference Youth Ministry Team, and to instead create the Faith Formation Team for Children and Youth. This decision came, in part, out of a recognition (by the Ashley Minister and also by some members of the existing teams) that new wine was not going to fit in old wine skins. The two teams were shaken by the arrival of the Ashley Funds and found themselves vying for top funding in what they perceived as a zero-sum game. As Ashley funds quickly redefined and expanded the realm of possibilities, these two separate ministries needed to not only completely re-imagine themselves, but also become inextricably linked to one another. To make this partnership more complete, the two Teams were dissolved and recreated as the Faith Formation Team for Children and Youth.

An additional benefit of the creation of the Faith Formation Team was that the Ashley Minister now has a team with which to jointly make funding recommendations. This particular role of the Faith Formation Team has been both a blessing and a curse. It has been a blessing in that it has created, at times, a sense of endless possibility. It has been a curse in that, in difficult economic times when money runs short, the Team has felt stifled or even useless. This dynamic will be discussed in greater depth in Section 3.

A further method for supporting local congregations is seen in the 2010 initiative to provide grants to congregations that are taking youth on mission trips. Using funds from the Ashley Endowment, the Faith Formation Team will grant congregations up to \$100 per trip participant. Congregations who receive the funds agree to publicize the receipt of the grant in their bulletin and allow for a 25 to 30 minute presentation from Conference staff to trip participants. Moreover, upon completion of the mission trip, grant recipients are required to submit a 2 to 3 minute video summary of the trip. These videos will be shared with the rest of the Conference at the Annual Meeting. Through these mechanisms, the Ashley Minister hopes that congregations will strengthen their relationship to the Conference.

Advocacy

Though harder to observe, another role of the Ashley Minister is to act as an advocate on behalf of children and youth in the Conference. One concrete example of this is the campaign that the Ashley Minister led to ensure that every congregation has a reserved slot to bring a youth or young adult delegate from the congregation to the Annual Meeting. By advocating for this policy, the Ashley Minister not only created new opportunities for the full participation of young people in Conference decision-making, but also forced Conference structures to consider and formally recognize the importance of young people in the life of the Conference.

Programming

The Ashley Minister has continued to be involved in conference programming, both for youth and for local ministers/leaders. Under his guidance, the Conference Youth Event Planning Team moved the Fall Conference Youth Event to Pilgrim Point Camp, a change that both helped the bottom-line of the camp and also increased the safety of participating youth who were otherwise housed by volunteers who had not been screened or trained in any way. The Ashley Minister has not, however, taken the lead role in organizing and leading these events. Instead, he has facilitated the planning of these events and offered support to improve the quality of these events (by providing Ashley funds for a higher-quality keynoter, etc). He has had a lead role, however, in determining the themes and content of these events.

Because he believes that local congregations are the core of children and youth ministries, he has also been pushing for CYEs to be viewed as events for local churches to attend rather than as an event for individuals. He argues that the meaningful faith experiences of individuals are not sustainable without a structure in the local congregation to support the continuation of that spiritual journey.

The Ashley Minister has also encouraged local congregational leaders to take primary responsibility for a series of “road trip” events for middle school youth. In 2008-2009, these events included concerts, workshops, and worship. In 2009-2010, they were/are service projects. A local congregation is asked to host each event, including the planning of a local service project, and receives support and facilitation from the Ashley Minister.

The Ashley Minister also led the effort to rent a bus to take youth from the Minnesota Conference to General Synod and was part of a small group of youth ministry leaders from around the country who advocated for having service events at General Synod. The idea was so appreciated by the national leadership that it was adopted by the General Synod Planning Committee. The Ashley Minister has also been involved in other national-level networks and Ashley funds have been used to support national-level research and youth events that Minnesota youth attended.

Summary and Implications:

- The Ashley Minister’s vision for this position places top priority on ministries to children and youth in local congregations and aims to raise the quality of these ministries by supporting and strengthening the ministry skills of local ministers/leaders. All other tasks are deemed secondary.
- The major responsibilities of the Ashley Minister, as he understand them, center around resourcing/networking local leaders, facilitating the use of Ashley funds, advocacy, and programming.

Section 2. Positive Impact

In the course of our interviews, we asked stakeholders **“How have the actions of the Ashley Minister affected or influenced you?”** We also asked a similar question about the impact of the Ashley Minister on local ministries and on the conference as a whole. All responses were positive or neutral. Some local leaders reported being unaffected by the Ashley Minister on a personal level but did see larger effects on a conference level. This section summarizes the responses to those questions.

- Four respondents referenced the Ashley Funds and how those funds either made something possible that would not have been otherwise – like the Taize trip and the bus that carried youth to General Synod – or how those funds signified that local youth ministry efforts were valued by the conference.
- Respondents also reported being affected or influenced by new perspectives, ideas, information, and resources that were provided by the Ashley Minister. These new ideas were seen as helpful for refocusing attention, provoking new ways of thinking, opening the conversation for new possibilities, and raising the standards of ministry. Salient examples include providing basic information to new ministers/leaders, brainstorming new program ideas, and bringing in speakers who discussed the role of the family in faith formation.
- A third cluster of responses focused on the energy that the Ashley Minister has brought to children and youth ministries. This energy has served to provide spiritual rejuvenation to weary youth workers (particularly those on the Taize trip), to make large tasks seem more manageable, and to inspire people to believe that better things are possible. One respondent said, “He is forever pushing me to remember my purpose... what ministry is about for me... He’s great at seeing the big picture and things as a whole.” Another said, “He’s made us feel really good about ourselves, that we have this gift from the Ashley family and we are doing something with it. That goes a very long way in how we feel about ourselves.” Respondents report that this energy and focus has also helped to focus the Conference, and the board of directors in particular, on children and youth.
- Lastly, stakeholders report that the actions of the Ashley Minister have served to connect people in the Conference to one another. Several people stated that without the Ashley Minister, they would feel isolated in their ministry, unable to find support from anyone who truly understood their goals and struggles. One respondent noted that leaders have always had interest in getting together, but “we need someone who will help gather the people.”

To obtain more detailed information about the resourcing role of the Ashley Minister, we asked, **“What resources are available through the Ashley Minister that would be unavailable or less available without him?”** As a follow-up, we asked, “When might you call the Ashley Minister? What sort of questions would you ask him?” Below is a summary of responses.

- Respondents reported that they highly appreciate that the Ashley Minister exposes them to new curriculums, and noted that although they might hear about a curriculum elsewhere, it is the Ashley Minister who invites them to attend a training on the curriculum. As one respondent described, “You see this flyer come by your desk [about a new curriculum], but Wade has had the national staff come so we could hear firsthand about those resources. It’s a gift to be able to see and touch [the curriculum] without having to seek it out.” Others,

particularly lay or volunteer leaders, mentioned that although they are aware of the Resource Center for Churches, they did not often take the initiative to use that resource before the Ashley Minister encouraged it.

- Similar sentiments were expressed for other types of resources like workshops, seminars, and training events. Resources have always been available for those who sought them, via classes at United Theological Seminary and independent training organizations like Vibrant Faith, but again lay and volunteer leaders complained that they did not have the energy to seek out these training opportunities or didn't know that they were lacking a skill until told about it. The Ashley Minister has had a significant impact simply by proactively and personally inviting leaders to participate in trainings, both in formal and informal settings.
- When local adult leaders call the Ashley Minister, it is usually to ask for advice or programming ideas, or to get information about events happening in the conference.

Finally, to learn more about the successes of the Ashley Minister position, we asked, “**What parts of the Ashley Minister position simply MUST be retained?**” and “What characteristics are necessary in a successful Ashley Minister?” Although this second question could have elicited both positive and negative feedback, we include it here because the answers we heard were most often those characteristics that had already been used to describe the current Ashley Minister.

- The roles that stakeholders see as most critical are those that have been mentioned already: building networks, coordinating the Conference Youth Events, and providing resources and training events to promote best practices.
- An additional role that stakeholders report as essential is that of advocate for children and youth. One leader described how important it is “just knowing that there's somebody in the conference focused on this, who isn't going to table children and youth issues for any amount of time, because it's all they do.”

The characteristics that interview respondents most often reported as necessary in a successful Ashley minister were:

- Energy, interest, passion, and a sense of call and commitment to children and youth ministry
- An outgoing personality, the ability to be hospitable and welcoming to a diversity of people
- Creativity and openness to new ideas, and the ability to envision an alternative reality, outside the usual conventions
- Strong listening skills to discern the needs of others.
- A firm grounding in and understanding of the traditions and theology of the United Church of Christ
- Strong and diverse communication skills, keeping up with technological advances

Summary and Implications:

- All individuals interviewed reported that the Ashley Minister had either a positive or neutral impact on their ministries. He is most often credited with providing access to funding, new resources and trainings, energy/spiritual rejuvenation, and a support system or network of colleagues.
- Those interviewed felt it is essential that the Ashley Minister continue to serve as a facilitator

of both resources for leaders and programming for youth, while also acting as an advocate for children and youth in the Conference structure.

Section 3. Sources of Confusion and Conflict

In any new position, challenges will inevitably arise. A one-page position description cannot possibly capture the breadth and depth of a full-time position; the interests and talents of the individual who holds the position will often drive the focus and priorities of the ministry; and the structure and context in which the position functions will both expand and limit its possibilities. While acknowledging the usual growing pains of a new position, we aim here to identify and describe challenges which persist and may require more than the passing of time for their resolution.

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities

The primary challenge for the Ashley Minister position identified in this evaluation is the confusion among stakeholders as to the exact role the Ashley Minister is expected to fulfill. When frustrations with the activities of the Ashley Minister were identified, they almost always stemmed from a disagreement between what the interviewee understood the responsibilities of the position to be and what the current Ashley Minister understands his responsibilities to be. To determine what stakeholders were expecting from the Ashley Minister, we asked, “What, in your best estimation, is the role of the Ashley Minister?” Based on these answers, we identified the following questions about the role and responsibilities of the Ashley Minister.

What portion of the Ashley Minister position is spent distributing the money in the Ashley Fund?

Some respondents believe that determining the distribution of Ashley funds is the primary responsibility of the Ashley Minister, while others see this as a necessary, but not central, part of the position. A few expressed concern that money had taken too central of a role in the position and that this was particularly problematic in a time of economic recession.

What kind of relationship should the Ashley Minister build with conference youth? Should he be “the face of youth ministry”?

Some respondents expressed a vehement desire that the Ashley Minister not become the “pied piper” of Conference youth. Others seemed confident that the Ashley Minister was the furthest thing from a “pied piper,” as he is focused on strengthening and supporting adult leaders and only indirectly serving youth. In contrast, others expressed disappointment that the Ashley Minister was not relating well to youth and seemed, in fact, to be abandoning the youth and only spending time with adults. There was also significant confusion about whether the Ashley Minister was expected to operate “up in front” or “behind the scenes” at Conference Youth Events.

To what extent is the Ashley Minister responsible for planning and leading conference events for children and youth?

A significant number of respondents described the planning of conference events for children and youth as the primary responsibility of the Ashley Minister. Some lamented the fact that congregations and local leaders were being asked to take so much responsibility for conference events when a conference staff person could commit the time to provide that leadership and planning. One stakeholder explained how she would like to divide the labor for conference events, “We provide the space and other churches provide the kids and you [the Ashley Minister] plan the day and get us involved.”

Others seemed convinced, whether they agreed or not with the decision, that conference events were no longer a high priority and would be given fewer resources and less of the Ashley Minister's energy. "[The Ashley Minister] sees youth ministry as something that happens in local churches and he wants to resource those churches to keep that ministry in the best shape possible," one respondent explained, "but I also think that there is a place for young people coming together, especially for young people coming from churches that don't have a lot of young people there."

What is the Ashley Minister's role on the Faith Formation Team? The Outdoor Ministries Team? The Conference Youth Event Planning Team? The Youth Task Force?

There was significant confusion about the role of the Ashley Minister in all of these contexts. Most but not all stakeholders knew that the Ashley Minister did not lead these teams, and all knew that the Ashley Minister convened the meetings and had a significant role in their content. One respondent explained the need for this leadership role by saying, "He's the one who is going around, visiting all the churches, and can kind of see what is happening in a wide variety of churches. He has the kind of insight that no committee could have." Although many found this balance of leadership to be both helpful and appropriate, others felt the Ashley Minister dominated or controlled more than was appropriate to his position.

Still others expressed disappointment that the teams weren't being more fully utilized and expected the Ashley Minister to lead the team(s) and its members to be more productive and effective. There was particular concern that the Faith Formation Team was not being utilized to do anything other than make budget recommendations. One respondent explained that "there were meetings that were canceled, right after the stock market started to tank... I think that we could have more input and have some visioning meetings, think of creative ways to do ministry even without the money." The role of the Outdoor Ministries Team is still sufficiently unclear that no one was able to explain the role of the Ashley Minister within that team.

Suggested Changes

Stakeholders were asked, "**If you could change the role of the AM, what would you want to be different?**" Respondents made the following suggestions:

The Ashley Minister should continue to find new ways to communicate with his constituency.

For some, this meant making the most of the latest technologies like texting and using social networking websites. For others, this meant getting back to the basics, like the telephone, especially for rural congregations who have not adopted or don't appreciate newer technologies. One respondent suggested giving the Ashley Minister a column in COMMAntary.

The Ashley Minister should reach out to congregations that are less involved in the conference.

According to several respondents, these congregations may be interested in connecting to others and receiving resources, but not know or be able to articulate what they need. They may not have the time or energy to take the initiative to connect, but would benefit from support if offered it more directly. This was sometimes said in reference to small churches and other times in reference to rural churches. According to one stakeholder, "I don't think that that position currently understand the dynamics for those [outstate rural] churches and I think the frustration level is high with that."

The Ashley Minister could be doing more for children's ministries.

While many acknowledged that the Ashley Minister never claimed to have expertise in this area, several respondents nonetheless believed more could be done. According to an interviewee, "Sometimes

people say, 'but what about these Christian Ed things and what about these younger people?' And I think there could be more energy there. That is a place where the Faith Formation Team could help him with ideas and resources if that isn't his primary strength." Another respondent suggested that Christian educators might benefit from gatherings akin to clergy clusters but focused on Christian education. Several interviewees stated that what works with youth ministers – relational ministry – may not work with Christian Educators.

The Ashley Minister should focus more on young people and less on the adults who work with them.

Some respondents questioned whether the focus the Ashley Minister has placed on adult leaders of children and youth ministries is appropriate or whether more attention should be paid to directly serving youth. "The Ashley money was left for the youth of the church," said one concerned respondent, "and I think we are kind of stretching it a bit saying 'We need healthy adults, so let's spend the money on the adults.'"

Clarifying Organizational Structure

To gain a deeper understanding of how the Ashley Minister position relates to the wider conference structure, we asked interviewees, "**How does the Ashley Minister relate to the other conference staff?**" This question was not posed as a potential concern or a challenge of the position, and was not generally taken to be a concern, but was repeatedly seen as a point of uncertainty worth discussing. The uncertainty centered around the status of the position: Should the Ashley Minister be understood as an Associate Conference Minister or as a Program Minister?

As it is currently implemented, the Ashley Minister's role is defined as a Program Minister because he is focused on a particular "program" of the Conference: the faith formation of children and youth. This title is usually used for someone whose primary responsibility is to implement conference programming, and while programming is a responsibility of the position, it is not the central or primary responsibility of the position as the current Ashley Minister has defined it. Understandably, respondents who believed that providing programming for children and youth was the primary responsibility of the Ashley Minister were least likely to be uncomfortable with the title of Program Minister.

Unlike the other Program Minister in the Conference, the Ashley Minister operates within the same physical space as the rest of the Conference Staff and serves as a full participant in the activities and initiatives of the Conference. Moreover, he is the primary face of the Conference to a large portion of the stakeholders interviewed. He makes a significant number of visits to congregations each year which often include preaching, teaching, or simply bringing a greeting on behalf of the Conference.

An additional concern, voiced by numerous stakeholders, was that some of his work as a full member of the Conference Staff is not explicitly focused on children and youth. Given that the Ashley funds were intended to be used exclusively for ministries benefitting children and youth, how exacting should the Ashley Minister be in guarding his time and reserving his resources?

Finally, we asked stakeholders, "**How does the Ashley Minister relate to the Outdoor Ministry Team and the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee and Director?**" Many respondents expressed confusion over the purpose of the Outdoor Ministry Team and Wade's role on that team. Nearly everyone we talked to acknowledged a significant tension in the relationship between the Ashley Minister and the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee and Director, and also expressed concern that the problem would not be easily resolved.

These relationships are important because Outdoor Ministries (whether at Pilgrim Point Camp or not) often involve children and youth in faith formation activities, and the Ashley Minister is supposed to oversee ministries of faith formation for children and youth. Yet the relationship is complicated because Outdoor Ministries are not exclusively focused on children and youth. Thus, the extent to which the Ashley Minister should be guiding or providing input on these ministries is a matter of much debate. Because this issue loomed so large in so many interviews, we do want to address it here in some depth. However, we want to acknowledge that our sample was not designed to address this question. The individuals we identified to be interviewed were chosen because of their role as stakeholders in the Ashley Minister Position (not as stakeholders in the camp) and the context of the interviews was always focused on the Ashley Minister position. We do our best here to tell you what we heard, but do not want to overstate our findings or overstep the bounds of what we were asked to do.

According to our respondents, the tension with Pilgrim Point Camp and its leadership seems to be based on a philosophical difference in approaches to ministry which comes to a head most clearly on the issues of staffing and communication. The common perception is that most camp counselors and directors are not involved in children and youth ministry in a congregation. Those who are local church leaders are not, according to our interviewees, welcome to join the camping staff. The Ashley Minister objects to staffing the camp with such individuals for two reasons:

- 1) The Ashley Minister believes that all conference youth ministry events should ultimately serve to strengthen local church ministries, and therefore would prefer that local church leaders were involved in the camp experience alongside the children and youth from their church so that the experience could be shared and reflected upon by both youth and adults upon return to their local setting.
- 2) The Ashley Minister believes that high quality ministry to children and youth can only happen when leaders are both spiritual healthy and sufficiently skilled to keep young people safe – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Since most members of the camp staff are not participating in local church ministries, they are also not participating in trainings and retreats designed to prepare adults to appropriately minister to children and youth. Therefore, he concludes that these adults are less qualified to lead in the ministry of camp.

The concern about staffing was echoed by at least one of the respondents who explained that the staffing was a big reason that fewer youth were attending camp from her congregation. She said that parents “are sending their kids to a place where they have no idea who the leader is, they have no idea who the volunteers are, they have no idea what the programming is going to be and they don’t just trust that things are going to be okay, especially around some of the safety issues.”

The issue of communication strategies is also tightly linked to the Ashley Minister’s philosophy of firmly locating children and youth ministry at the congregational level. According to our interviewees, the camp currently keeps a list of campers from previous seasons and communicates with campers individually to invite them to attend another session of camp. The Ashley Minister would prefer for all communications to go through local congregations so that camp attendance is considered an act of the local congregation and might even be coordinated so that youth and/or adults from the congregation attend together as a cohesive unit. In addition, the camp and the other conference events have separate mailing lists so that these events are never presented as an integrated whole.

A third source of tension between the Ashley Minister’s programs/energies and the program/energies of the camp is the allocation of Ashley Funds. Both groups can make requests or recommendations to the Board of Directors for how the money might be spent and the groups experience this as a zero-sum competition where one’s gain is the other’s loss.

Programmatic content also feels disjointed because the Ashley Minister has no input into the theme or curriculum of camp and therefore cannot integrate the lessons and themes of other conference events into camp or vice versa.

According to our respondents, these issues continue to fester unaddressed because the two ministries operate independently. Some effort has been made to bring the two groups together by making the Ashley Minister the staff liaison to the Outdoor Ministries Team and just recently by having the Faith Formation Team and Outdoor Ministries Team meet jointly. Yet nearly everyone we heard from was pessimistic that these efforts would resolve the issue.

The lack of clarity about the role of the Ashley Minister as the staff liaison to the Outdoor Ministries Team is also an issue, but one that respondents were more optimistic about resolving. The Ashley Minister's presence and input on that Team are not only welcomed but desired by our respondents. However, members of the Outdoor Ministries Team were unclear about how much support and staff resources they could expect from the Ashley Minister, given his other responsibilities and the fact that not all their work is directed at children and youth.

Summary and Implications:

- There remains significant confusion as to what exactly the Ashley Minister's role is, particularly in terms of direct youth leadership and the planning of youth events but also in terms of the distribution of Ashley funds and relation to other conference bodies. Clarifying expectations will serve not only the Ashley Minister, but also the Conference as a whole.
- To improve the position, respondents suggest that the Ashley Minister communicate more intentionally with more churches, particularly with Christian Educators and leaders in congregations that have been less involved in conference events. Some would prefer that the Ashley Minister devote more attention to direct ministry to children and youth.
- There is discussion as to whether or not the Ashley Minister's current title of Program Minister matches his role and responsibilities in the conference, and whether all his responsibilities are appropriate given that his position is entirely funded by Ashley dollars. The title he carries will inevitably have consequences for his ministry.
- The relationship between Pilgrim Point Camp and the Ashley Minister is one of notable tension and disconnect. Pilgrim Point Camp's independent approach to programming, staffing, and communications make it difficult for the camp to be integrated into the children and youth ministries of the conference as a whole.

Section 4. Considerations for the Future

The primary purpose of this evaluation was to describe the activities and responsibilities of the Ashley Minister position as currently practiced and the impact that the Ashley Minister has had on the Minnesota Conference. We have described here how the Ashley Minister took a flexible job description and made some necessary decisions about the focus of his work. We outlined the Ashley Minister's vision and priorities for this position, and outlined how that vision has resulted in the ministry you see now. To review, his stated priorities are:

- Valuing local contexts as the core of all ministries (even at the conference, regional, and

- national level),
- Focusing his energies on adult leaders of children and youth rather than on children and youth directly,
- Devoting significant time to relationship-building and networking
- Devoting energy to the spiritual health and well-being of adult leaders, even when not specifically focused on their relationship to the children and youth they serve
- Prioritizing support for active, healthy congregational ministries rather than trying to reach every congregation.

While the Ashley Minister has made his priorities clear, it would be helpful to know more about his intermediate and long-term goals and how he expects these priorities to help the Conference reach those goals. We recommend that the Ashley Minister outline these longer-term goals more clearly for his own planning and also so that the Board of Directors can monitor his progress.

Secondary findings from this evaluation are:

- 1) Not everyone in the Conference knows what the Ashley Minister is tasked with doing, and even among those who do, not everyone understands or agrees with the priorities and methods chosen by the Ashley Minister to fulfill that purpose.
- 2) Certain organizational barriers limit the effectiveness of the Ashley Minister, particularly the relationship of the Ashley Minister to the Outdoor Ministries Team and the Pilgrim Point Camp leadership.

To address these secondary issues, we recommend that the Board and Conference leadership establish goals for children and youth ministry and a theory of change it believes will bring these goals to fruition. In the Appendix, we provide a summary of responses we heard from asking a handful of stakeholders this question: “What would it mean for the Minnesota Conference to be a premier site for children and youth ministry?” Responses to this question may provide a starting point for discerning long-term goals. The Board may also want to use the upcoming “Needs Assessment” (to be conducted by the conference staff under the direction of Tabitha Knerr) as a vehicle for polling a wider population of stakeholders about what they believe they need from the Conference in order to build healthy ministries of faith formation for children and youth.

Once goals and priorities are agreed upon, we recommend that these goals and priorities are communicated clearly around the Conference so that, as much as possible, all parties understand what can and cannot be expected from the Ashley Minister. Even if not everyone will agree with the goals and priorities chosen, clear expectations will help to avoid unnecessary frustration. Moreover, the Ashley Minister will be more effective if she/he has the stated support of the Board for her/his goals and actions.

At the same time, we recommend that the structures within the Conference (particularly the relations among the Ashley Minister, the Outdoor Ministries Team, and the Pilgrim Point Camp leadership) be reexamined and possibly reorganized to create more cohesive, integrated movement toward shared goals. Systems theory may serve as a resource and source of ideas in this process.

Finally, we recommend an ongoing process of evaluation that admits the fallibility of human plans and anticipates making additional adjustments as new information arises. We suggest, and already have plans to assist in, the creation of a logic model which includes a series of intermediate steps that will move the Conference toward its goals for the ministry of Faith Formation for children and youth. The

model will also include measurable outputs and outcomes that will serve as indicators of progress made and/or alert the staff and the Board to unforeseen difficulties, which can then be addressed.

Attachment A. Summary of Responses to the question, “**What would it mean for MN to be a premier site for children and youth ministry and what would it take to get there?**”

Having resources (both written resources and human expertise) that other conferences seek out.

Being a model of best practice – in programming, structures, and systems

Hosting in-service trainings for other conferences or sending the Ashley Minister out, or having a website with resources, webinars

Being able to afford to contribute to national level initiatives, whether events or other initiatives

Providing youth with leadership development opportunities and training, helping congregations think through what it means to offer hospitality to their youth (awareness raising and consciousness raising), intergenerational ministries, providing youth with opportunities to do mission work and social justice work, making youth feel safe.

A strong network of ministers/leaders in the Conference who collaborate with one another