Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ

Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry Assessment

Final Report

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Executive Summary

A team from the Minnesota Conference UCC community conducted a 12-month assessment of the conference's Outdoor and Faith Formation ministries. Through a comprehensive listening, survey and research process involving over 300 constituents, the team identified strategic recommendations and six Ministry Priorities for the conference to consider in an effort to bolster the current ministry's reach and impact.

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1. Introduction

In December 2023, the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ (MN UCC) initiated a comprehensive assessment of its Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry programs.

Recent data indicates that while only 3 in 10 adults attend religious services regularly, 78% of young people identify as at least slightly spiritual, and 68% identify as at least slightly religious. Additionally, 28% of young people report becoming more religious or spiritual in recent years[1]. These trends suggest both challenges and opportunities for faith-based organizations to reimagine how they serve their communities and support spiritual development.

The last formal assessments of these ministries were conducted in 2011 and 2019. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing cultural polarization, and changing patterns of religious engagement, the Conference recognized the need for a fresh examination of these programs. This assessment was guided by two fundamental questions:

1. How well are the current Outdoor and Faith Formation conference ministries serving the MN UCC community?
2. What else can they be, or might they become?

1.1 Purpose and Scope

The assessment sought to understand:

- The effectiveness of the conference's Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministries at the individual and congregational levels
- The strengths and impact of existing programs
- Barriers to engagement with these ministries
- Opportunities for growth and adaptation

1.2 Goals of the assessment

The assessment had three primary objectives:

1. Environmental Scan: To understand the current landscape of Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry
2. Education: To help community members understand current programs and their impact, and to provide the Board context for understanding current and future programming

[1] *The State of Religion & Young People: Exploring the Sacred*, Springtide Research Institute, 2023

3. Ideation: To engage the community in imagining new possibilities for these ministries

This report presents the findings from a year-long assessment process and offers programmatic and strategic recommendations for the future direction of these ministries. The insights and recommendations are grounded in extensive data collection, community input, research on current trends in church participation, and analysis of both current needs and future opportunities.

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2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct this assessment from December 2023 to January 2025. The assessment was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through multiple channels to ensure broad representation and insights from the MN UCC community.

2.1 Assessment Design and Planning

The assessment was structured in five key phases:

- Development Stage (December 2023-March 2024): Creation of assessment tools, questions, and assessment team formation
- Implementation Stage (March-July 2024): Data collection through multiple methods
- Analysis Stage (June-August 2024): Data compilation and analysis
- Dreaming and Planning Stage (August-November 2024): Synthesis and recommendations development
- Presentation Stage (October 2024-March 2025): Report creation and dissemination to team members and Board

2.2 Data Collection Methods

Three formal data collection methods were used: Surveys, Listening Sessions, and Interviews. The tools are included in Appendix 2 of this report and were developed by the assessment leadership in collaboration with the assessment team, board members, and outside consultants. Below we describe each tool and how it was employed.

Surveys

- Online and in-person surveys distributed through multiple channels including:
    - Conference newsletter
    - Annual meeting
    - Direct email to faith formation leaders

- Outdoor Ministry newsletter
- Ministers' Facebook group
- MN Conference Facebook page
- Church websites
- In-person at local congregations

Listening Sessions

- 15 focus groups (18 participating congregations) conducted between April-June 2024
- Mix of online and in-person sessions
- Groups structured to gather input from diverse constituencies including:
  - Balance of greater Minnesota and Twin Cities area congregations
  - Both larger and smaller congregations
  - LGBTQIA+ community members
  - Congregational leaders (clergy and lay staff)
  - Members in Discernment
  - Lay people

Individual Interviews

- 8 interviews conducted between May-July 2024
- Mix of phone and in-person interviews

Informally, dozens of individual and small group conversations took place between members of the assessment team, church leaders, and laypeople. The Assessment Team also engaged in focus groups, discussion, and guided brainstorming during the Planning and Dreaming Phase of the assessment process.

2.3 Assessment Team Structure

The assessment was led by Keren Gudeman, independent consultant, with support from Rev. Kevin Brown and Rev. Sheri Nelson.

The assessment team of eight additional members was selected for their diversity of geography, ages, and backgrounds, as well as their willingness to volunteer their time and skills to the process. They included: Dustin Moretz, Amanda Hunter, Jill Sanders, Leah Springer, Cole Marshall, Nik Peterson, Cindy Lemke, Liam Magistad.

Learn more about each of these team members and their roles in the assessment process in Appendix 1.

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3. Cross-Program Findings

The assessment revealed several themes that span both Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry programs

3.1 Communication Gaps

- Communication challenges identified across both ministry areas
- While some congregations, congregants and leaders feel closely connected and in tune with conference leadership, others do not
- Communication within congregations and to/from congregations and the conference varies widely, with a general dissatisfaction with the regularity and clarity
- A general sense of missed opportunities was pervasive, with communication named as the barrier

3.2 Desire for a Culture of Lifelong Spiritual Formation

- Traditional program-based approaches may not adequately meet contemporary spiritual needs
- Disconnect between conference-level programming and local congregation engagement
- Many congregations primarily view faith formation as a programmatic ministry for children and youth
- Opportunities for spiritual formation often viewed as separate from regular church life
- Deep engagement in some Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry programming is appreciated, with a desire for more intergenerational participation

3.3. Need for Re-Building Relationships & Trust

- There are geographic disparities in program access and engagement
- Some congregations feel disconnected from conference-level initiatives
- Many lack confidence in Conference offerings due to ongoing cancellation of events due to low registrations
- Trust needs strengthening between conference staff and local congregations

3.4 Leadership Development and Support

- Clergy need additional support in understanding and implementing ministries
- Local congregations seeking resources for leadership development
- Volunteer recruitment and retention challenges
- Need for better tools and communications to help tell the story of what it means for the Minnesota UCC to support spiritual growth across the lifespan

3.5 Resource Allocation and Effectiveness

- Limited resources spread across multiple initiatives
- Need for better metrics or tools to evaluate ministry impact
- Some programs may not be sustainable in current form

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4. Program-by-Program Analysis

4.1 Outdoor Ministry

Current State

- Offers retreats, summer camps, and special events at multiple locations across the state and online (e.g. Creation Justice Zoom gatherings)
- Part-time staff provides conference-level offerings across the state
- Some congregations offer their own ministry, most do not
- Support for the Creation Justice Team and other environmental groups in the conference.

Strengths

- Provides opportunities that individual congregations may not be able to organize themselves
- Creates unique points of connection between multiple congregations
- Offers space for spiritual growth outside regular congregational settings, aligning with the 26% of adults who report that spending time in nature connects them spiritually with themselves and/or others[2]

Challenges

- Resource constraints for comprehensive program development
- Geographic Access:
    - Services perceived as concentrated in central Minnesota, and location accessibility is a concern
    - Desire for consistent locations
- Relationship Building and Communication:
    - Need for stronger connections between Conference staff and local congregations
    - Importance of face-to-face connections identified as critical priority
    - Many respondents indicated limited awareness of available programs

[2] Spirituality Among Americans Report, PEW Research Center, December 7, 2023

4.2 Faith Formation Ministry

The assessment revealed a need to reimagine faith formation as central to congregational life and leadership, rather than as a separate program area.

Current State

- Offers retreats and events at multiple locations across the state
- Leadership viewed as a resource and mentor for many
- Programming includes both youth and adult offerings

Strengths

- There are many existing frameworks for spiritual development and leadership (e.g. OWL, FourThursday, camps, retreats)
- Strong commitment by leadership to lifelong spiritual formation
- Communication from conference to congregational leaders

Challenges

- Need for better tools to assess spiritual growth and impact, to help tell the story of what the conference provides for congregations and individuals
- Communication and coordination between local congregations
- Explicit support for part-time staff and lay leaders in local congregations

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5. Strategic Recommendations

5.1 Strategic Framework

The Conference's Ashley Endowment provides abundant resources to fund relevant and sustainable faith formation and outdoor ministries for children, youth, and families. Ashley funds also make possible the Conference's work to support and equip leaders of all ages. The Pilgrim Point Legacy Fund provides significant funding for adult-focused outdoor ministry programs. These funds together can help foster a spirit of experimentation and innovation in both of these areas of ministry.

Grounded in the assumption of ongoing access to these resources, the Assessment Team analyzed the assessment data and identified Ministry Priorities. The Ministry Priorities are strategic recommendations that provide goals and tactics for the Board to consider as they decide on the future of each Ministry.

While the focus of our assessment was on the ministries, because of the comprehensive reach of the assessment — over 300 constituents, across 20 congregations — the team discovered priorities that transcend individual ministry areas and can be considered suggestions for the conference more broadly.

5.2 Ministry Priorities

Priority #1: Communication as a Critical Investment

- Allocate resources to evaluating/auditing current communication practices across the conference and local congregations
- Develop a strategic communications plan that addresses the communication barriers identified through this assessment process: lack of/regular access to information, quality/relevance of communications, regularity of communication

Priority #2: Cultivate a Culture of Lifelong Spiritual Formation

- Integrate spiritual formation more deeply into all aspects of church life
- Emphasize equipping local congregations as primary centers for faith development
- Focus on nurturing spiritually mature adults who can lead others
- Recognize that outdoor ministry can serve as a unique catalyst for spiritual growth

Priority #3: Build Relationships & Trust

- Prioritize face-to-face connections between Conference staff and local congregations
- Develop regional, multi-congregational gatherings and collaborations
- Create more opportunities for peer learning and resource sharing
- Invest in rebuilding relationships post-COVID and after Pilgrim Point closure

Priority #4: Equip Clergy to Lead Community Spiritual Formation

- Support clergy in reimagining worship through a formational lens
- Develop innovative grant opportunities for local congregations
- Create tools for spiritual gifts assessment and leadership development
- Build capacity for qualitative program assessment

Priority #5: Innovate & Assess Resource Allocation and Effectiveness

- Focus resources on supporting local congregations as primary ministry centers
- Develop qualitative assessment tools beyond numerical measurements
- Create database to track individual interests, passions, and gifts

Priority #6: Sustain Accessible Ministry with Youth & Young Adults

- Maintain and/or build upon successful past efforts between the conference and local congregations
- Allocate resources to support relationship-building priorities

5.3 Short-term Initiatives (0-12 months)

The assessment team wanted to provide the Board a suggested timeline of goals and key steps, to help implement the recommendations in section 5.2.

1. **Decide on a new staffing and/or ministry structure by addressing the following questions.**
    - Outdoor MInistry Questions to consider:
        i. Fully fund Outdoor Ministry/Director position and expand ministry and grant funding?
        ii. Status quo (part-time Outdoor Ministry)?
        iii. Enhanced status quo (part-time Outdoor Ministry staff, but allocate more funding for local and regional collaboration and grants to local congregations)?
        iv. No conference Outdoor Ministry — outdoor ministry instead is integrated into other ministries? Provide funding to congregations?
    - Faith Formation Ministry Questions:
        i. Ashley funds currently support multiple Conference staff roles with an understanding that each of these positions helps to support healthy congregational ecosystems necessary for ministry with children and youth to thrive? Should this practice continue or expand?
        ii. Does the Conference return to an ACM role fully dedicated to the work of faith formation?

2. **Address critical communication gaps**
    - Allocate resources to evaluating/auditing current communication practices across the conference and local congregations
    - Develop a strategic communications plan that addresses the communication barriers identified through this assessment process: lack of/regular access to information, quality/relevance of communications, regularity of communication between the conference and congregations

3. **Strengthen relationships between Conference and local congregations**
    - Create job descriptions for each ministry with outreach and connection across the state as a priority

- Create strategic plans for each ministry that supports relationship-building in year 1 of any newly created structure
- Allocate resources to staff/ministries to provide the time and space to build connection and to communicate changes in a ministry

5.4. Medium- and Long-Term Initiatives (1-5 years)

- Develop regional ministry hubs
- Build sustainable funding structures
- Create assessment and evaluative frameworks
- Full implementation of ministry model selected by the Board

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6. Programmatic Recommendations

6.1 Programmatic Framework & Assumptions

In the Dreaming Phase of the assessment process, the team researched, read, discussed, reflected, brainstormed and coalesced the assessment results with outside sources. During this phase, the team was asked to imagine new programs and opportunities for the ministries, grounded in the data, Ministry Priorities, and the conference's strategic plan. Below are some of the ideas that emerged, organized by the priority they address.

For all of the programs outlined below, following is a list of potential partners to support the development of materials, relationship-building, and experiences:

Wild Church Network, The Ministry Lab, The Damascus Project, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, Springtide Research Institute, Center for Youth Ministry Training, Outdoor Ministries Association UCC, Association of United Church Educators, Network of Wider Church Youth Ministries

6.2 Priority-by-Priority Program Ideas

Priority #1: Communication as a Critical Investment

The assessment team did not have specific programmatic recommendations for this priority, as we see this as an operational opportunity that is addressed in Section 5.2,

Priority #2: Cultivate a Culture of Lifelong Spiritual Formation

Faith Formation Opportunities:

- **Host 4-5 regional conversations** about the centrality of spiritual formation to the life of the local congregation; in addition, ACM for Faith Formation will dedicate significant time connecting with congregational leaders to deepen connections and foster greater understanding of the centrality of spiritual formation within the life of local congregations.
- **Offer online and in-person development opportunities to equip local leaders to support individual and community formation** in all aspects of a congregation's ministry (worship, service, justice, business, education, social, etc.) in collaboration with partner organizations.
- Work with partner organizations and local congregations to **develop resources and host spaces to equip, encourage, and empower parents** for their roles as the primary nurturers of the spiritual lives of children and youth.
- **Reestablish the Conference's Faith Formation Team** as a hub for creative collaboration in guiding the Conference's faith formation ministry. The priority for the team will be to create a Conference-wide initiative that offers a framework for congregations to integrate the work of formation for all ages within all aspects of their ministry (like the Faith Forming Five initiative launched in 2010).

Outdoor Ministry Opportunities:

- **Host regional conversations** to help local congregations embrace outdoor ministry, environment justice, and earth-based spiritual practices as central to their worship life and community connection.
- **Establish Outdoor Ministry Team** (Earth spirituality/justice team?) as a hub for the Conference's eco-spirituality, creation justice, and other outdoor ministry endeavors.
- Work with partner organizations to **resource and support parents to weave earth-based spiritual practices and creation justice** within their day-to-day family activities.

Priority #3: Build Relationships & Trust

Faith Formation Opportunities:

- **Consider restructuring and expanding the Conference's current 4th Thursday gatherings** for faith formation leaders.
- **Offer more in-person retreat experiences and gatherings** specifically for congregational faith formation and youth ministry leaders.
- **Invite local congregations to identify potential regional collaboratives** for faith formation events and gatherings; dedicate funding and Conference staff time to resource and support these programs.
- **Explore Conference grant funding to create a sustainable, multi-congregational collaborative for faith formation/youth ministry**; grant could be used to help congregations offset staffing costs for this ministry.
- **Encourage greater participation by local leaders in Animating Antiracism in Faith Formation training cohorts**, the program created with funding from the Ashley

Endowment and in collaboration with Crossroads and the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministries.

Outdoor Ministry Opportunities

- **Conference outdoor ministry staff dedicates time for in-person connection** with local congregations and leaders.
- **Identify opportunities for multi-congregational collaboration** for shared worship experiences, retreats, training, and environmental advocacy in collaboration with local leaders.
- **Provide consistent and relevant retreat and wilderness opportunities for local congregations and individuals** to explore the deep interconnectedness with the natural world through earth-based spiritual practices.

Priority #4: Equip Clergy to Lead Community Spiritual Formation

Faith Formation Opportunities:

- **Develop and host training opportunities for clergy leaders** with an emphasis on framing pastoral ministry through a formational lens in collaboration with partners.
- **Provide funding and encouragement for clergy to participate in conferences and other development opportunities** focused on the work of faith/spiritual formation (e.g., ConNext Summit, APCE annual gathering, programs of Yale Youth Ministry Institute, Springtide Research Institute trainings/gatherings, and others).
- **Develop formational and practice-based liturgical resources**.
- **Offer specific trainings and retreats** that provide opportunities for clergy to experience and practice worship that supports individual and community spiritual formation.

Outdoor Ministry Opportunities:

- **Host trainings and retreats with partner organizations** for clergy to experience and learn about Wild Church and the invitation to center worship and congregational life on our deep interconnectedness with all of creation.
- **Provide grants for clergy to participate in continuing education, training, and development opportunities** focused on earth-based spirituality, environmental justice, and other outdoor ministry focused learning.
- **Develop a cohort of Conference congregations and leaders** to learn about and host Wild Church experiences within their local or regional contexts.

Priority #5: Innovate & Assess Resource Allocation and Effectiveness

Faith Formation Opportunities

- **Expand grant programs for local congregations** to experiment with creative and innovative faith formation opportunities within their local or regional context.
- **Consider offering individual grants for local leaders** to engage in training and development opportunities to equip them for a more effective ministry.

- **Engage faith formation team and partner organizations to develop assessment tools** and attend to the ongoing evaluation of faith formation programs.

Outdoor Ministry Opportunities

- **Launch grant program for local congregations** to experiment with creative and innovative outdoor ministry opportunities within their community.
- **Engage outdoor ministry team and partner organizations to develop assessment tools** and attend to the ongoing evaluation of outdoor ministry programs

Priority #6: Sustain Accessible Ministry with Youth & Young Adults

Faith Formation Opportunities

- **Continue to offer high-quality and accessible immersion experiences** and service-learning trips for youth and young adults.
- **Evaluate the current model of Conference Youth Events** and experiment with new ways to host in-person youth retreats and gatherings.
- **Evaluate current cohort model for young adult leadership development** and make necessary structural changes to maintain relevance and sustainability of programming.
- **Strengthen and expand opportunities for congregations and people of all ages to engage with the Our Whole Lives** comprehensive, life-span sexuality education program.

Outdoor Ministry Opportunities

- Partner with the Conference faith formation ministry to **create ongoing leadership development opportunities for young adults** to explore their spirituality and gifts
- Develop retreats and Wild Church experiences specifically designed for youth and young adults.
- **Develop resources and methods for local congregations** to support environmental education and spiritual exploration for children, youth and families.
- **Explore options for creating environmental education hubs** (similar to the Blue Theology program) in places within the Minnesota Conference to provide service-learning and environment immersion experiences.

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7. Conclusion

The 2024 Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry assessment reveals immediate needs, challenges to engagement with the current ministries, and long-term opportunities. The Minnesota Conference UCC holds a unique position with resources that enable novel approaches beneficial to both the conference and the wider church.

Report prepared by Keren Gudeman 2.24.25

Evidence points to a necessary shift from program-centric to relationship-centered ministry. Communication challenges, trust-building needs, and evolving patterns of religious engagement demand strategic adaptation. The geographic disparities in program access and varying levels of congregational engagement require particular attention.

The emerging priorities identified through this assessment provide direction:

- Support local congregations as primary centers of faith formation
- Strengthen relationships across all expressions of the Conference
- Implement sustainable staffing and funding models that allow for relationship-building as a core tenet of each ministry
- Experiment with innovative approaches to ministry delivery and ongoing evaluation

Our recommendations offer a pathway to implementation, with careful consideration of both the Ashley Endowment and Pilgrim Point Legacy Fund parameters. The recently received $125,000 gift from the estate of Donna Wolff dedicated to Outdoor Ministry (and the anticipated second gift from the estate estimated at $100,000-$125,000) provides an opportunity for a 4-5 year pilot program to establish new systems and demonstrate impact.

Success depends on sustained commitment to both structural and spiritual elements of these ministries. The Conference Board's decisions about funding models and staff structure will shape how effectively the Minnesota Conference UCC can support both conference-wide efforts and local congregation resourcing.

The path forward requires courage in decision-making and creativity in implementation. By following these recommendations while remaining faithful to our emerging priorities, the Minnesota Conference UCC can strengthen its leadership role in faith formation and outdoor ministry while better serving our evolving community needs.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Assessment Team biographies

Project Leads

Keren Gudeman
- Assessment Consultant and Project Coordinator
- Led strategic planning and implementation of the assessment process
- Background in qualitative research and organizational assessment

Rev. Kevin Brown
- Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation, Minnesota Conference UCC
- Guided assessment design and methodology
- Expertise in congregational development and faith formation programming

Rev. Sheri Nelson
- Outdoor Ministry Director, Minnesota Conference UCC
- Provided leadership in outdoor ministry assessment and program evaluation
- Extensive experience in youth ministry and outdoor programming

Assessment Team Members

Amanda Hunter - Children, Youth, and Small Group Coordinator, Peace UCC, Duluth
- Contributed to data analysis, listening session facilitation and dreaming phase
- Experience in youth ministry and congregational leadership

Dustin Moretz - Macalester Plymouth United Church, St. Paul; member in discernment
- Contributed to interview design, qualitative data collection and dreaming phase
- Background in organizational development and program evaluation

Cindy Lemke - licensed minister in West Central Minnesota
- Supported survey design and implementation, listening sessions and dreaming phase
- Experience in faith formation and adult education

Nik Peterson - Hazel Park UCC, St. Paul; college student
- Assisted with communications, listening sessions and evaluation of instruments
- Background in program assessment and strategic planning

Liam Magistad - Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries, St. Anthony Park UCC, St. Paul; member of the Conference's Young Adult Leadership Cohort
- Supported instrument design and organization

- Expertise in data management and analysis

Jill Sanders - Pastor, First Congregational UCC, Alexandria

- Contributed to listening sessions design and facilitation, communications, and dreaming phase
- Experience in congregational ministry and adult education

Cole Marshall - First Congregational UCC, Anoka; member of the Conference's Young Adult Leadership Cohort; seminary student

- Supported interview instrument development and data collection
- Background in youth ministry and program development

Leah Springer - Morningside Hills UCC, Edina; retired faith formation leader

- Assisted with communications and report development, listening sessions and dreaming phase
- Experience in organizational communication and ministry programming

8.2. Assessment tools and instruments

Interviews

Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Assessment
Interview Guidelines

Interviewer Name: _____ Date: _____

Interviewee Name: _____ Location: _____

Congregation Name: _____

Interview Guidelines

Setting up the interview

- You'll receive an email from the Assessment Team leaders (Sheri, Keren or Kevin) with contact information on an interviewee, including their email and phone number. Reach out to schedule the session time, allowing for 45 minutes.
- Once you've confirmed the date and time, please create a Zoom calendar (or reach out to us to help set that up).
- One week in advance, email to confirm the date, time and location. Be sure to include the Zoom link.

On the Interview Day

- Prepare the space, whether in-person or virtual, 10 minutes in advance. Check your mic, video and recording button.
- Please have paper and pen on hand for taking notes.

After the Interview

- Please take a photo of your notes. Then, email the photo to Sheri (sherin@uccmn.org) and upload to the shared drive folder.
- Let us know if anything particularly sensitive came up that they may not want to share.
- Upload the audio file to the shared drive, and label it: "interview.interviewee last name.date"

Note-taking Guidelines

In case the recording doesn't work, please take notes that include any/all of the following:

- Phrases, words that catch your ear
- Repeated phrases or words or themes

- Questions

****Anything the person wants to share, is what we want to hear****

Interview Script (Lead Moderator)

Introduction

Introduce yourself and thank them for their time and willingness to share their stories.
First, I want explain what this interview is for:
The purpose of the interview is to help the conference gather more insight into an assessment of our Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministries. As you already know, we are assessing those this year, so we can better serve our community. The interview allows us to collect more in-depth responses than what the survey and listening sessions can provide. I'll be asking a few different questions today, and I invite you to speak openly and honestly.

Second, a few logistics:

- I have a page to share with you that asks if you want follow up after the interview. Please feel free to fill this out afterward, if you desire.
- I'll be hitting record now, since you've communicated your permission.
- I'll be keeping time, and this interview will be about 30 minutes long.
- I may be taking some notes, as a backup.
- Your information won't get shared publicly, and that the assessment team will be using their answers and stories to aggregate themes and stories for the purposes of reflecting on current and future UCC offerings.
- After the interview, I'll ask for your consent to share.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?
Okay, great. Now let's dive in!

Questions

What is your role in the congregation (clergy, lay leadership, member)?

How do you hear about conference resources, events, and/or happenings?

What, if any, Faith Formation or Outdoor Ministry programming offered by the conference have you been involved in?

*Clergy/Lay Leaders- What resources offered by the conference have you shared and/or used with your congregation?

*Members- What resources have you seen offered by the conference that have been used/shared with your local congregation?

What are some reasons you may not be participating in Outdoor Ministry and/or Faith Formation resources/events?

What are the kinds of resources and/or events could the conference offer to you and your congregation to better equip your local ministry? What are your ideas?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for your time today. Your answers will be compiled with other interviews, listening sessions and our survey to help us assess and improve our conference resources.

Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ

Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Assessment

Interview Recording Consent Form

Thank you for participating in the MN Conference Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Assessment Interview. We will be recording your session to allow our Assessment Team to add your comments to our research. Your identity will not be shared with anyone outside of the Assessment Team, and your comments will be added to our database with other interviews.

Please read the statement below and sign where indicated.

I understand that my interview is being recorded and will not be shared beyond the assessment team. I grant the MN Conference UCC Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Assessment Team permission to use this recording for information gathering purposes, without the use of my personal identity.

If a participant is a minor, a parent/guardian must give permission.

Signature_____

Print Name_____

Date_____

Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Assessment Listening Session Guidelines

Moderator name: _____ Date: _____

Assistant Moderator name: _____ Location: _____

Congregation Name: _____

Listening Session Guidelines the Moderator and Assistant Moderator

Roles

Lead Moderator
Sets up the group/date
Guides the discussions
Skillful in group discussions
Uses pre-determined questions
Establishes permissive environment
Helps set up the space

Assistant Moderator
Helps set up the space
Gets the refreshments
Sets up recording equipment
Ensures recording is working
Takes notes
Does not participate
Keep track of time

General Guidelines

- Arrive 20-30 minutes early to set up the space & snacks
- Be inclusive, welcoming and warm
- Bring Brave Space handouts to share
- Speak loudly enough for all to hear
- Be mindful of time
- Make sure everyone has space and time to share
- Make sure participants know they can reach out afterward with follow up questions or thoughts

Note-taking Guidelines

In case the devices don't work/capture all voices, please take notes that include any/all of the following:
Note if the pastor or lay leader is involved in this listening session
Phrases, words that catch your ear
Repeated phrases or words or themes
Questions

After the session: Please take a photo of your notes. Then, email it directly to Sheri (sherin@uccmn.org) and also upload it to the shared drive folder.

Listening Session Script (Lead Moderator)

Introduction

Hello, everyone. I am_____, and I'm a member of the MN Conference Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry Assessment Team. I'll be leading today's Listening Session.

My colleague, _____, will assist with taking notes and recording this session, but will not be participating in the conversation.

These Listening Sessions help us gather information to learn how the conference may better serve the needs of individuals and congregations from an Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation perspective.

We expect today's Listening Session to take 45 minutes to an hour. I'll be asking a series of questions and facilitating conversation. We invite you to speak openly, honestly, and respectfully.

Before we begin, we wanted to let you know that we hope to record the conversation, with your permission. Your names will not be shared. All recordings will be deleted when this part of our work is done and will not be shared outside of the Assessment Team. So, I am going to look at each of you and ask for a nod or shake that you are comfortable with being recorded. If, for some reason you aren't comfortable, you may shake your head and no explanation is needed.

We appreciate your honesty and sincerity. Are there any questions for me before we get started?

Questions

First, we'll begin by going around and saying our first names and what brought you here today.

Outdoor Ministry

Our first set of questions pertains to the MN Conference Outdoor Ministry.

1. When you hear the term "Outdoor Ministry", what comes to mind?
2. What are some of the events and resources that you have heard Outdoor Ministry offers that you have used or participated in?
    a. What are some takeaways from those events or resources?
3. What do you think Outdoor Ministry is doing well?
4. What prevents you and your congregation from participating or engaging with the available resources?

Faith Formation

The next set of questions pertains to the MN Conference Faith Formation.

1. When you hear the term Faith Formation, what comes to mind?
2. How have you as individuals and/or congregation engaged with events and resources from Faith Formation?

3. What is Faith Formation doing well to support you and/or your congregation?
4. What prevents you or your congregation from participating or engaging with the available resources?

Congregation

Our final set of questions pertains to your congregation.

1. What groups in your congregation are focused on faith formation or prophetic witness?
2. What are the challenges or barriers these groups have in their work?
3. What are ways you feel the Conference can support your congregation more broadly?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for your time today. Your answers will be compiled with other Listening Sessions and will be used to assess and improve our conference resources.

We will also be conducting individual interviews, and I'd love to know who would be interested in being interviewed? Feel free to raise your hand now, and I'll come to you at the end to gather your contact information.

If you have further thoughts you wish to share, you may forward that to Kevin Brown (ACM), Sheri Nelson (Director of OM), or Keren Gudeman (Assessment Consultant) by email, which we can provide you at the the conclusion of this meeting.

Thank you and be well.

Survey for Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry

Welcome

Thank you for helping the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ by providing your feedback. This year we are evaluating some of our ministries so we can continually improve on what we offer and how we offer it. Your voice matters!

The questions below ask for input on your experiences with both the Conference's Outdoor Ministry and Faith Formation Ministry as they currently exist. We are also interested in your ideas about the future of each of these ministries.

ALL RESPONSES ARE ANONYMOUS.

Please note: Once you complete the survey, you will be asked if you'd like to be entered into a drawing to win one of the following:

- **discounts on registration for 2024 events**
- **collections of faith formation books**
- **some MN UCC swag.**

If you choose to participate, you will click on a link that takes you to a different browser window to enter your email address. Your email will not be connected to your survey answers.

If you need help with the survey or have any questions, please reach out to faithformation@uccmn.org.

PLEASE TAKE THIS SURVEY ONLY ONCE.

1. Which of the following best describes your age group?

- ◯ Youth (age 12-18)
- ◯ Young Adult (age 19-29)
- ◯ Adult (age 30-50)
- ◯ Adult (ages 50-65
- ◯ Adult (age 65+)
- ◯ Prefer not to answer

2. Gender

- ◯ nonbinary
- ◯ female
- ◯ male
- ◯ prefer not to answer
- ◯ Other (please specify)

3. Are you currently serving in a leadership role in the Minnesota Conference UCC? If so, select the category that best describes this role.

- ◯ board of directors
- ◯ committee or work group
- ◯ prophetic witness team
- ◯ Other (please specify)

  _____

- ◯ None of the above

* 4. What is your current role in your local congregation?

- ☐ Lay leader - Faith Formation/Youth Ministry
- ☐ Lay Leader - Other
- ☐ Minister
- ☐ Staff - Faith Formation/Youth Ministry
- ☐ Staff - Other
- ☐ Member
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Other (please specify)

  _____

Survey for Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry

Leadership and Staff Questions

* 1. Please rate your familiarity with the following:

	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Somewhat familiar	A bit familiar	Not familiar at all	N/A
the conference's **outdoor ministry**	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
outdoor ministry opportunities in your local congregation	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
outdoor ministry leadership development opportunities	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
the conference's **faith formation ministry**	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
faith formation ministry in your local congregation	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
faith formation leadership development opportunities	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Outdoor Ministry Questions for Leaders

* 2. How well do you think the conference...?

	Not well	Somewhat well	Well	Very well	N/A or Don't know enough
supports **outdoor ministries** throughout the conference	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
your local congregation's **outdoor ministry**	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
support the development of outdoor leaders through **outdoor ministries**	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
generally supports congregational leaders through **outdoor ministries**	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

3. How does the Conference support local congregations and leaders through **Outdoor Ministry**?

4. What could the Conference do better in the area of **Outdoor Ministry** to support you and your congregation?

Faith Formation Ministry Questions for Leaders

* 5. How well do you think the conference...?

	Not well	Somewhat well	Well	Very well	N/A or Don't know enough
supports **faith formation ministries** throughout the conference	○	○	○	○	○
your local congregation's **faith formation ministry**	○	○	○	○	○
support the development of outdoor leaders through **faith formation ministries**	○	○	○	○	○
generally supports congregational leaders (staff and volunteer) through **faith formation ministries**	○	○	○	○	○

6. What does the Conference do well in the area of **Faith Formation**?

7. What could the Conference do better in the area of **Faith Formation** to support you and your congregation?

Survey for Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry

Outdoor Ministry Feedback

* 1. Which of the following phrases describe or connect to your understanding of **Outdoor Ministry**? (check all that apply)

- [ ] encountering nature
- [ ] creation care
- [ ] rural immersion
- [ ] adult retreats
- [ ] contemplative practice
- [ ] wilderness experience
- [ ] environmental education
- [ ] leadership development
- [ ] finding solitude
- [ ] intergenerational relationships
- [ ] respite and renewal
- [ ] youth camps and retreats
- [ ] community connection
- [ ] creation justice advocacy
- [ ] sustainable living
- [ ] Connecting my faith with the environment
- [ ] Other (what other words come to mind)
- [ ] None of the above

* 2. In what ways have you engaged with the Conference's **Outdoor Ministry?**

- [ ] Women's Retreat/Women's Wilderness Retreat
- [ ] Men's Retreat
- [ ] Young Adult Retreat
- [ ] Youth Camp/Conference Youth Event
- [ ] Creation Justice Webinar
- [ ] Great Lakes Creation Care Collaborative
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] Congregational Retreat/Camp
- [ ] Outdoor Ministry Newsletter
- [ ] Conference-sponsored Youth Immersion Trip
- [ ] UCC National or Regional Youth Event
- [ ] Not applicable (N/A)

* 3. How do you receive information about the Conference's **Outdoor Ministry** opportunities? Please check all that apply.

- [ ] Conference newsletter
- [ ] Interactions with conference leaders
- [ ] Direct email from the conference
- [ ] My church's newsletter
- [ ] Conference gathering
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] Interactions with my congregation's leaders
- [ ] On a calendar or bulletin board in my church
- [ ] Social media
- [ ] N/A

* 4. Which of the following have prevented you from participating in the Conference's **Outdoor Ministry** (check all that apply). Feel free to select "other" and add a comment below.

- [ ] Programs not a fit or not appealing
- [ ] Timing of offerings
- [ ] Lack of connection to my congregation
- [ ] Lack of clear connection to the mission of UCC
- [ ] I didn't understand what was being offered
- [ ] Not a fit with the people involved/didn't see myself reflected in the ministry
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] None of the above

* 5. What do you appreciate about the Conference's **Outdoor Ministry** (check all that apply). Please feel free to select "other" and comment below.

- [ ] Programs are unique
- [ ] I learn something new
- [ ] Offers connection to my local congregation or other congregations
- [ ] I like the people
- [ ] Offers connection to God, spirit, or something bigger
- [ ] Helps me explore my spirituality
- [ ] Provides opportunities to grow a more just and peaceful world
- [ ] Helps me serve my community
- [ ] Offers an opportunity to lead or develop leadership skills
- [ ] Gives me concrete ways to take action
- [ ] Other (please specify)

- [ ] None of the above

6. What do you value most about the Conference's outdoor ministry? *Feel free to skip ahead if you don't have enough experience or knowledge to answer this question.*

Survey for Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry

Faith Formation Ministry Feedback

* 1. Which of the following phrases describe or connect to your understanding of **Faith Formation**?

- [ ] spiritual practices
- [ ] life-long
- [ ] intergenerational relationships
- [ ] service learning
- [ ] all-ages worshipping together
- [ ] leadership development
- [ ] deep listening
- [ ] comprehensive sexuality education
- [ ] at-home practices
- [ ] working for justice
- [ ] meaningful rituals
- [ ] sharing faith/doubt stories
- [ ] community of belonging
- [ ] confirmation
- [ ] caring connections
- [ ] exploring theology
- [ ] developing personal beliefs and values
- [ ] Other (what other words come to mind)
- [ ] None of the above

* 2. In what ways have you engaged with the Conference's **Faith Formation Ministry**?

- [ ] Courage & Renewal Retreat
- [ ] 4th Thursday
- [ ] Conference Youth Event
- [ ] Conference-sponsored Youth Immersion Trip
- [ ] Ashley Microgrant
- [ ] Faith Formation Leader Retreat
- [ ] Boundary Training for Children/Youth Ministry Leaders
- [ ] Ministry Lab @ United
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] At-home Family Toolkit
- [ ] UCC Regional or National Youth Event
- [ ] Reset for Renewal Webinar
- [ ] Consultation/Support from ACM for Faith Formation
- [ ] Our Whole Lives Training
- [ ] Through newsletter content
- [ ] Young adult retreat
- [ ] Not applicable (N/A)

* 3. How have you, or do you, learn about **Faith Formation Ministry** opportunities? Please check all that apply.

- [ ] Conference newsletter
- [ ] Interactions with conference leaders
- [ ] My church's newsletter
- [ ] Interactions with my congregation's leaders
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] On a calendar or bulletin board in my church
- [ ] Social media
- [ ] N/A

* 4. What has prevented you from participating in the Conference's **Faith Formation Ministry** (check all that apply). Feel free to select "other" and add a comment below.

- [ ] Programs not a fit or not appealing
- [ ] Timing of offerings
- [ ] Lack of connection to my congregation
- [ ] Lack of clear connection to the mission of UCC
- [ ] I didn't understand what was being offered
- [ ] Not a fit with the people involved/didn't see myself reflected in the ministry
- [ ] Other (please specify)
- [ ] None of the above

* 5. What do you appreciate about the Conference's **Faith Formation Ministry** (check all that apply). Please feel free to select "other" and comment below.

- [ ] Programs are unique
- [ ] I learn something new
- [ ] Offers connection to my local congregation or other congregations
- [ ] I like the people
- [ ] Offers connection to God, spirit, or something bigger
- [ ] Helps me explore my spirituality
- [ ] Provides opportunities to grow a more just and peaceful world
- [ ] Helps me serve my community
- [ ] Offers an opportunity to lead or develop leadership skills
- [ ] Gives me concrete ways to take action
- [ ] Other (please specify)

- [ ] None of the above

6. What do you value most about the Conference's **Faith Formation Ministry**? *Feel free to skip ahead if you don't have enough experience or knowledge to answer this question.*

Survey for Faith Formation and Outdoor Ministry

Possibilities for the Future

* 1. Which of the following **Outdoor Ministry** potential offerings are you most excited about?

	Very excited	Somewhat excited	Less excited
Camps	◯	◯	◯
Creation care worship/liturgy planning	◯	◯	◯
Leadership development	◯	◯	◯
Immersion trips	◯	◯	◯
Environmental training opportunities	◯	◯	◯
Adult retreat programs	◯	◯	◯
Cross-congregation projects or programs	◯	◯	◯
Service projects	◯	◯	◯
Wilderness experiences	◯	◯	◯
Environmental justice advocacy and action	◯	◯	◯
Grant programs to support **outdoor minsitry** in local congregations	◯	◯	◯

2. What other **Outdoor Ministry** opportunities could the Conference offer to support you, your family, or your local congregation?

* 3. How likely are you to engage with **Outdoor Ministry** in the future?

- ◯ Likely
- ◯ Somewhat likely
- ◯ Somewhat unlikely
- ◯ Unlikely

* 4. Which of the following **Faith Formation Ministry** potential offerings are you most excited about?

	Very excited	Somewhat excited	Less excited
Gatherings for faith formation leaders	◯	◯	◯
Online opportunities to connect/equip parents	◯	◯	◯
Development opportunities for faith formation leaders	◯	◯	◯
Youth immersion or service-learning trips	◯	◯	◯
Anti-racism training programs	◯	◯	◯
Cross-congregation projects or programs	◯	◯	◯
Spiritual pilgrimage opportunities	◯	◯	◯
Local service projects	◯	◯	◯
Expanded grant programs for local congregations	◯	◯	◯
Justice advocacy	◯	◯	◯

5. What other **Faith Formation** opportunities could the Conference offer to support you, your family, or your local congregation?

* 6. How likely are you to engage with **Faith Formation Ministry** in the future?

- ◯ Likely
- ◯ Somewhat likely
- ◯ Somewhat unlikely
- ◯ Unlikely

7. What have we missed or forgotten to ask you? What else would you like us to know?

8. What is the name of your local congregation?

9. In what town or city is your congregation located?