

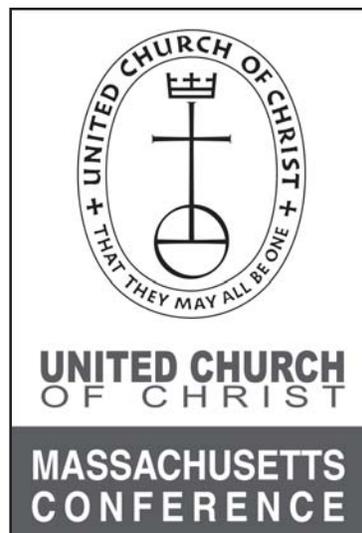
A Still More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12:31

Transforming our use of Massachusetts Conference Resources for Vitality and Covenant

**Presented by the Board of Directors
Massachusetts Conference,
United Church of Christ**

September 2007 Revision



Dear Annual Meeting Delegate,

In June, we gathered as a Conference (in Connecticut of all places!) for a robust and rewarding “Part One” of our Annual Meeting. Our major focus was a draft of this document from the Conference Board of Directors. I want to thank all the delegates and guests for your enthusiastic participation in those discussions and for the thoughtful written feedback you generated at your tables, along with the additional feedback you provided through the website and your letters.

As soon as the Annual Meeting and General Synod concluded, the Board began to gather your feedback so that it could be taken into consideration in drafting the final revision of the paper, which you now see before you. Included is a new “Frequently Asked Questions” section.

This paper will come before the Massachusetts Conference for a vote at “Part Two” of our Conference Annual Meeting on September 29, 2007 in Worcester. Prior to the Meeting, the Board and Executive Staff members are hosting five informational hearings across the Conference to discuss the proposal and respond to questions. (For more information, visit www.macucc.org/news/stillexcellent.htm)

In closing, I want to thank you all for your input through the 32 sessions of the listening process, the web site feedback, your letters and the annual meeting conversations. I look forward to seeing you in Worcester.

Faithfully Yours,
Jim Antal
Minister and President
Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ

A Still More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12:31

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A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 12:31

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Presented by the Board of Directors, September, 2007

“...And I will show you a still more excellent way.” 1 Corinthians 12:31

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for their work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Ephesians 4:12-13

Executive Summary

Our experience and our constraints lead us to change. The Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ has a Vision for Renewal and Growth and a concise mission statement: to nurture local church vitality and the covenant among our churches. We have done creative and fruitful work in the areas of leadership development; evangelism, mission and justice; youth and young adult ministries; 21st century communications, stewardship, and UCC identity. We are currently implementing an innovative and highly successful Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program. But the Conference has fewer churches and members than in the past, and financial contributions from our churches are no longer adequate to sustain past levels of staff and programs. This proposal affirms both the Vision for Renewal and Growth¹ and the mission statement of the Conference. From what we have learned in living into our Vision, and from what we have heard in our recent Listening Project, we must now realign our resources — people and money — to support our Vision and mission in the most effective way.

The Conference will seek new ways to foster connection and communication among our churches. Our staff will identify the gifts that clergy, lay leaders and churches can offer one another. Here we can build upon our experience with our Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program, Stewardship Associates, Vitality Coaches and Mission and Justice Coaches. The Conference will concentrate on three core functions: adult faith formation; leadership development; and prophetic witness. In each function, we expect new patterns of support among churches and church leaders to emerge with encouragement from Conference staff. One-time workshops, such as those offered at Conference Annual Meetings, will meet some needs; ongoing relationships, such as those nurtured in the pastoral excellence process, are more appropriate to address other needs.

Churches and church leaders will need encouragement and training in moving into a new model of connection and communication. Conference staff will work to make this happen.

This document is neither an evaluation of recent Conference work nor a comprehensive program plan for the future. Rather, it is a statement of intention to further focus our shared ministries, and to carry out these ministries together in new ways. It proposes, not an endpoint, but the next stage on a shared journey of transformation. Your Board of Directors invites you to participate in this journey.

¹ The text of the Vision for Renewal and Growth may be found at <http://www.macucc.org/about-us/vision.htm>

The changes proposed in this document are a significant beginning, but work remains to be done. We will review our commission and committee structure, re-examine our financial and real estate resources, and consider new ways of fostering collaboration among Associations within the Conference and with neighboring Conferences. And we will apply regular, rigorous evaluation of our work together.

This plan, we think, offers great hope for our churches as we seek to be faithful and prophetic, here and now.

Introduction

More than halfway through the first decade of the new century, the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ has an opportunity to realize its Vision for Renewal and Growth in new and exciting ways. The Conference Board of Directors has spent several years discerning and distilling the ways that we can best serve the Still Speaking God and live out vital, covenantal relationships between and among our churches and with our neighbors throughout the Commonwealth and the world. This journey has involved much prayer, struggle, courage, thought and plain hard work. It is our hope that our members and all readers of this document will appreciate the love and hope with which it is presented, and both prayerfully and carefully consider its recommendations for our communal life as people of God.

Background

In 2000, the Annual Meeting of the Conference affirmed the Vision for Renewal and Growth, culminating a broad-based, 18-month strategic planning process. The Vision called for “passionate, mission-oriented renewal” to revitalize our churches, start new congregations, and reach out to those who have yet to hear the Good News. To these ends, the Vision committed the Conference to experiment with new ministries in the areas of leadership development; evangelism, mission and justice; youth and young adult ministries; and 21st century communications.

Early in 2005, the Board of Directors distilled key elements of the Vision into a concise mission statement for the Conference: *to nurture local church vitality and the covenant among our churches.*

During the period from 2004-2007, it became clear to the Board that the basic organizational structure of the Conference needed to be realigned to better support the Vision and mission. The staff structure has been essentially unchanged since the 1960's, while our churches and our world have changed profoundly. The Board undertook a process of exploration and education which included Bible study, reading the works of noted management and church consultants, prayer, and discussion. We held several retreats facilitated by Gil Rendle, the Alban Institute consultant who assisted the Conference with the strategic planning process in 1998-9 which culminated in the Vision for Renewal and Growth. In addition, we sought input from current Conference staff, and initiated a Conference-wide Listening Process in 2007.

In this proposal, the Board reaffirms both the Vision for Renewal and Growth and our mission to foster congregational vitality and covenant. Although the key elements of the Vision will be reframed in the coming pages, we review them here and affirm their value in guiding our work since 2000 and into the future.

1. Leadership development continues to be a priority as expressed in the feedback from the Listening Process.
2. Evangelism, Mission and Justice work is perceived as fundamental to church vitality, and a fertile area for increased interaction and collaboration among local churches.
3. Ministries targeted at youth and young adults remain important. We believe the most effective environment for these ministries is the local church. The Listening Process holds up faith formation work with all adults (including young adults) as a crucial engine of church vitality, and perhaps the most important means to the end of engaging youth.
4. 21st Century Communications are now woven into our lives as churches and Conference. Ongoing work will be necessary to maintain and grow these communication networks, but the fundamental transition as outlined in the Vision has been accomplished.

Our experience since 2000 has been fruitful. As a Conference, we now have a clear picture of the marks of congregational vitality. We know what our churches acting together can do to foster the “passionate, mission-oriented renewal” of each local church. This document proposes that the Conference continue to live into its mission by allocating our shared resources in new ways. Specifically, we propose that most of our resources be redirected to enable a wide range of individuals - both clergy and lay - to minister to one another and assist one another to be the church in this place, in this time.

Our Shared Resources

The resources we share as a Conference include the moneys contributed by our churches in the form of Our Church’s Wider Mission Basic Support and Fellowship Dues; grants and gifts for specific purposes (such as the Lilly Endowment grant for Sustaining Pastoral Excellence); our endowments; real property such as land and buildings; staff; and the faith, skills and gifts of all our members and clergy.

It is our task as a Conference to align these resources as closely as possible with the work we seek to accomplish together.

The reality of decreasing financial resources has been a compelling motivator for the Board to take on the challenging work reflected in this document. In recent years, funds contributed by our churches have declined slowly but steadily. From a high of \$2,292,800 in 2000, Basic Support contributions dropped by a total of 13%, to \$2,005,000 in 2006. The rate of increase in Dues and Basic Support retention taken together has, since 1990, lagged behind the rate of inflation by about eight percent, despite three increases in the proportion of Basic Support retained in the Massachusetts Conference (and corresponding reductions in support for the National UCC.)

The reasons for these decreases are many, but the most significant may simply be that we are a smaller denomination than we once were. Twenty percent of our churches have grown in the past five years, and we have successfully nurtured several thriving new church starts. However, the long-term trends remain challenging. In 1990 we were a denomination of 455 churches and 116,900 members; we are now 403 churches and 84,300 members. Per capita contributions for our common ministries have changed little, but there are fewer of us sharing the costs of these ministries.

Another reason for the decrease in support for the wider church has been the increase in local church expenses over the past decade. In general the rate of increase in pledging to our churches has been

dwarfed by the rate of increases in the costs to operate those churches.

The demographic and financial facts thus urge change from two perspectives. Most obviously, we must find creative ways to “do more with less” because we have a smaller budget. More fundamentally, we need to work in new ways, because the ways we have been ministering together in recent decades have not led consistently to growth.

There is good news to be noted, however. Conference research has shown that, in those congregations where clergy are well-supported and well-connected with the wider church, and where members are deepening their faith and reaching out in mission and witness, giving is increasing dramatically beyond historic levels. We believe that the proposals outlined in this document offer much hope for numerical and financial growth in the coming years.

The following pages focus primarily on financial and staff resources. However, as will be described, the Board is engaged in ongoing work regarding real property and our volunteer structure, and will have further recommendations regarding those resources in the future.

New Ways to Work Together

The Listening Process identifies one of the key roles of the Conference setting as fostering connection and communication among our churches. As a smaller Conference with a smaller staff than we have had in the past, we have an opportunity to grow in our capacity for faithful ministry to one another. The Board proposes that the role of Conference staff be substantively re-envisioned. Rather than being primarily providers of services, Conference staff will become expert at identifying the gifts that clergy, lay leaders and churches can offer to one another, nurturing these gifts, and providing connectivity, training and support as churches and leaders learn to resource and assist one another. We envision the Conference as a web of crisscrossing relationships in which expertise, inspiration, witness and nurture pass freely in all directions. It will be the job of the staff to facilitate this flow.

The Conference has experience of this model through the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program funded by the Lilly Endowment. Skilled and seasoned clergy leaders have been recruited, trained, guided, and very modestly paid to lead Communities of Practice for other clergy. These groups meet monthly to share information and insight, learn new practices and approaches to ministry, and offer one another spiritual discernment and prayerful support. Likewise, we have long experience with Stewardship Associates, recruited and empowered to consult with local churches, and Vitality Coaches and Mission and Justice Coaches, trained for similar work. We propose that the best of such practices be identified and expanded, so that the vast creativity and gifts of our 84,300 members and clergy can be identified, widely shared, and celebrated.

What We Do Together

The recent Listening Process indicates a need for some refinement and reframing of the Vision goals affirmed in 2000. The fundamental question is “What can the Conference do that no other entity - local church, Association, or National setting - can do as well?”

We know that congregations thrive when their members are deepening their faith; when there is an excellent match between pastor and congregation; when pastors are skilled, well-equipped and sup-

ported; when lay leaders are similarly empowered; and when a vision of personal and societal transformation resides at the heart of their life together.

For these reasons, we discern that the core functions of the Conference are adult faith formation, leadership development, and prophetic witness.

I. Adult Faith Formation

The formation of Christian faith takes place, first and foremost, in local congregations. However, the Listening Process sent a clear message that our churches seek the help of the wider church in learning to foster deep, joyous and committed discipleship among adults.

Adult faith formation is the engine of evangelism. When adults, including young adults, are actively engaged in a culture of lifelong learning and sharing about their faith, their enthusiasm draws others to their church. We propose that the Conference gather congregational leaders to share best practices and encourage the development of new approaches for adult faith formation in local church settings. By intentionally living out their baptismal vows with a powerful sense of ministry and mission, participants will learn skills and practices which will enable them to serve as mentors and guides for others who likewise seek a deeper, more vital and active faith.

Adult faith formation is also the engine of Christian education and youth engagement. Children learn from the adults who nurture them. Children are most likely to grow up loving God when they see supportive adults living out their faith with joyful enthusiasm. Youth are drawn to, or remain engaged by, a Christian community when they see and hear adults of all ages and other young people authentically sharing and openly living out their love of Christ by transforming their community and deepening their commitment to peace and justice.

We propose further that the Conference assist local church pastors to play a more active role in the faith development of adults in their congregations. UCC clergy are ordained to be “Pastors and Teachers.” By living into their role as Teacher, these pastors can help to build a congregational culture of lifelong growth and learning, to inspire evangelical passion, and to cultivate all whose gifts are suited for Christian education and youth ministry.

II. Leadership Development

Leadership development is the engine of faithful and vital churches. The Conference has long sought to train and equip clergy and lay leaders by offering workshops, colloquies, retreats, supervision for new church start pastors, and a resource center. The Conference can further enhance leadership development in five critical ways.

First, we propose to build into the DNA of the Conference the learnings of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program. These learnings include:

- a) pastors seeking to excel in ministry need to come together in community with one another;
- b) by engaging various spiritual practices New Clergy Groups and Clergy Communities of Practice have deepened their own prayer life and learned valuable approaches for adult faith formation in their congregations;

- c) clergy who participate in these groups are increasingly comfortable sharing stories of their own faith;
- d) these groups are discovering that the sacraments are at the core of vital ministry;
- e) clergy are most effective when they are equipped, thanked, affirmed, prayed for, have friends, share gifts and are open to grow.

Second, we propose to apply these learnings in support of lay leadership development.

Third, we must continue to support and educate our Committees on Ministry as they carry out their essential leadership development responsibility of authorizing individuals for ministry.

Fourth, we propose to continue to enhance our culture of pastoral excellence and to make the MACUCC a magnet conference for excellent UCC clergy nationwide. We propose that the Conference Minister and President identify and lead an ongoing process to this end.

Finally, we propose to identify ways to enhance the pastoral settlement process - that is, the process by which churches are assisted to find new pastors - to assure the best match between clergy and congregation.

III. Prophetic Witness

Prophetic witness is the engine of a transformed world and is essential in the life of a transforming congregation. Prophetic activity calls to account the status quo by elevating our vision to see new possibilities of creating the beloved community and the congregations that are part of it. Prophetic engagement generates hope amidst people who have either settled for “what is” or given up on “what might be.”

By simply sharing with our friends and neighbors the core messages of the United Church of Christ, we discover our prophetic voice. Among those core messages are Jesus’ inclusive love, God’s revelation as ongoing (“God is still speaking”) and faithfulness as a covenantal journey within community.

In contrast to these core messages, we live in a culture where the loudest public voices professing Christianity do so in ideologically narrow terms. Throughout the Commonwealth are tens of thousands of seekers and ecclesial refugees who can’t imagine that a church like the UCC exists. In this cultural context, sharing our distinctive faith is a prophetic enterprise.

The Minister and President has a particular role to play as a key prophetic voice for the Conference. This voice may at times be directed toward our churches, the UCC as a whole, the Commonwealth, or the wider society.

However, our world needs many prophets, and every Associate Conference Minister as well as each of our clergy and lay members, has a prophetic voice to share! The Conference provides a setting for communication, shared learning and action, and can help catalyze, integrate and empower prophetic witness throughout our churches.

The “How” of our shared work: Technical and Adaptive Change

It is clear that these three core functions overlap. Faith formation involves the development of a prophetic voice, justice advocates need to become able leaders, and leaders lead best when their work is rooted in a growing faith. Further, we believe that similar events and contexts can nurture growth in each area.

We propose that the Conference use two principal vehicles to foster development in each of these areas: 1) one-time workshops and colloquies (such as those offered at the Conference’s Annual Meeting or at day or evening meetings throughout the year) and 2) ongoing Communities of Practice for lay and clergy leaders.

Management consultants Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky make a distinction between “technical” and “adaptive” change (*Managing Yourself: A Survival Guide for Leaders*, Harvard Business Review, June 2002). A technical solution doesn’t require much change in the way people behave – for example, most strep infections are easily cured with an antibiotic. A successful solution to heart disease, on the other hand, involves adaptive change: the patient must alter exercise, eating and stress management habits. While technical change is neither particularly difficult nor painful, adaptive change requires persistence, practice and ongoing support.

One-time workshops are excellently suited to offering technical solutions. At times, our members need instruction in how to run an effective Stewardship campaign, how to use a new Church School curriculum, or how to improve their church’s website. We propose that the Conference continue to offer periodic opportunities for the learning of new technical solutions so that these skills may be multiplied throughout our churches.

If, however, our members struggle with deeper issues regarding faith and money, or whether to redesign worship for fuller inclusion of children in the service, or how to fully welcome and integrate new people once they have found us on the Web, one-time training events are insufficient. We believe that adaptive change can best be nurtured through ongoing relationships in which participants learn together, support one another and hold one another accountable. Clergy Communities of Practice (described above) have proved to be potent, ongoing vehicles for such change.

We propose that the Community of Practice model become a primary vehicle for the nurture of vitality and covenant throughout the Conference. Small groups of clergy and/or lay members, gathered around issues of shared interest and common challenges, led by well-equipped peer leaders, will provide a context for learning, nurture, support, and adaptive change. Participants will, in turn, learn the skills and insights required to conduct similar small-group ministries in their local churches, should they feel called to do so.

As a Conference, we have already made significant progress in this direction. Fifty-one individuals have been trained to facilitate communities of practice for new and experienced clergy. 191 pastors were active participants in communities of practice as of June, 2007, and 80 more have committed to join such groups beginning in the fall. Staff are in the process of making phone calls to all parish-based clergy and interns to personally invite participation. Preliminary work to organize similar groups for Christian Educators has also begun.

It is our assumption that the potential for leaders within the Conference to minister to one another is virtually boundless. The role of Conference staff may initially involve initiating and leading some workshops and/or Communities of Practice, but they will be expected to move quickly in the direction of identifying and equipping others to serve as workshop leaders and small group facilitators. Thus, our understanding of the core function of leadership development includes the nurture of leaders who can share their expertise with the wider church. Through this approach of developing an ever-expanding cadre of supportive leaders, our churches can work through the adaptive changes necessary to vital, covenantal congregational life.

The Role of Associate Conference Ministers

The primary function of all staff is to be agents of transformation, equipping the saints of the Conference for ministry and helping them connect with one another, to nurture both church vitality and covenant. This contrasts with an earlier paradigm in which Conference staff were seen primarily as performing direct ministry themselves. The idea of staff training leaders is, of course, not new - but we propose a significant shift in emphasis in the coming years.

All Associate Conference Ministers will:

- focus on nurturing vitality and covenant, particularly via equipping and supporting leaders for adult faith formation, leadership development and prophetic witness.
- help identify gifts, recruit, train and support adjunct persons for Conference-wide ministry - clergy and lay, young people and retirees, volunteers and stipendiary adjunct staff.
- be called and managed centrally. Associations will have some participation in the process of calling staff members, but priority will be placed on ensuring that the overall Conference staff is balanced in terms of complementary gifts, skills and perspectives.
- hold job descriptions which are understood to be fluid and may change over time
- have objective, regular, outcome-based review and evaluation of their work.

Associate Conference Ministers who are geographically situated

Geography, and relationships based on geography, are currently very important to our churches and members. Since we foresee that regional offices will gradually be closed over time as leases expire, and their support and administrative work gradually consolidated in the Framingham office, it may be in many churches' interest over the longer term to evolve toward a model in which congregations relate to and support one another based less on geography and more on shared callings, challenges or concerns. Any abrupt or externally-imposed "centralization", however, would be counterproductive. Therefore the proposed model is as follows:

- Three full-time and two half-time ACMs will function primarily regionally and live dispersed throughout the Conference. They will preach in their areas and serve as the initial contact person for those in their region. For example, they will be the "first responders" for churches in crisis, listening and providing an initial diagnosis. However, consistent with recent practice, they will refer the congregation and/or clergy to appropriate resources for adaptive change, ongoing conflict transformation or longer-term crisis resolution.

- It will be their primary responsibility to identify leaders and potential leaders within their areas of geographic focus, link these individuals with appropriate resources including workshops and communities of practice, and facilitate lateral relationships within and beyond their regions. They will foster shared approaches to a wide range of church concerns: youth, stewardship, mission, adult education, and others. They will attend fewer meetings, adopting a limited and ‘as needed’ approach to attendance at Association Committee on Ministry and Executive Committee meetings.
- Regionally-dispersed ACMs will play a significant role in assisting churches in the Search and Call process. Times of pastoral transition are potentially transformative in the life of a congregation, as members engage deeply with one another and the Holy Spirit to discern their mission and purpose as they seek new leadership. These times represent fertile ground for faith formation and leadership development, and set the direction for the congregation’s prophetic witness. ACMs will prioritize work with congregations ready to take full advantage of this strategic moment in their life together.
- The primary role of Associate Conference Ministers with regard to authorization for ministry will be to facilitate and catalyze the work of those Associations and committees responsible for authorization. While Authorization remains a crucial leadership development function of the Conference, our polity locates responsibility squarely within the Association and its Committee on Ministry or equivalent. ACMs will provide coaching, mentoring and training to members of Committees on Ministry, and encourage cooperation and sharing of expertise among those Committees. Over time, they will bear less burden for the ministerial authorization function. (See “Associations”, below, for related comments.)
- They may also have Conference-wide responsibility for discovering and equipping leaders in particular areas of expertise, such as evangelism, or justice work.

Associate Conference Ministers whose primary responsibilities are Conference-wide

- The position of ACM for Stewardship will be redefined as Director of Development and will remain full-time. Responsibilities will include development work for the Conference; recruitment, training and deployment of stewardship consultants to local churches; assisting selected local churches with capital campaigns; and occasional preaching in local churches. Several possibilities for funding this position beyond 2008 are being explored, including expecting the position to be self-funding and/or sharing staff time with neighboring conferences.
- The position of ACM for Leadership Development will continue at full-time, 50% funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment through 2012. Responsibilities will include Conference-wide oversight of leadership development efforts, including the promulgation and replication of the best learnings from the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program throughout the staff. Sharing of this expertise will play a crucial role in the transformation of the work of all geographically-based ACMs.
- The 80%-time position of ACM for Policy and Finance will remain as operational support to the

Minister and President, with substantial allocation of time given to developing and equipping Board leadership.

- A half-time ACM for Evangelism and Vitality will lead Conference-wide work in the areas of evangelism, church turnarounds and new church starts.

Future Steps Along the Way

Should the 208th Annual Meeting approve this proposal in September, we will begin promptly to live into it. The staffing pattern will change to reflect it; the budget will support it; and our ways of working together will incorporate its spirit and its content. But this report is not the last step along the way. We will continue to examine our commission and committee structure and our property stewardship; we will encourage our Associations to incorporate the spirit and content of this report; we will look for ways to collaborate with other New England UCC conferences; and we will conduct regular and rigorous evaluation of our evolving structure.

Continued Examination

Currently, Conference bylaws calls for seven program commissions and two committees, in addition to the Board of Directors and its committees, to conduct important work for the Conference in the areas of evangelism and renewal; leadership development; educational ministries; mission and justice; ecumenical partnerships; stewardship and mission interpretation; communications; annual meeting planning; and nominating. As in many local churches, it has become difficult in recent years to find sufficient long-term volunteers to sustain this structure. Whether the present structure, composition and selection of commissions and committees best serve The Conference's mission should be reviewed. Working with the commissions and committees, the Board hopes to find ways to let them become more nimble and more passionate, resembling the Communities of Practice discussed previously in this report. Determining what work is to be done by staff and what work is to be done by volunteers will be part of this review. Based on this research, the Board of Directors expects to come to the 2008 Annual Meeting with recommended revisions to the Conference bylaws.

All Conference-owned real estate should serve the mission of the Conference. Scudder House on the Framingham property, unusable for many years, was recently developed into a home for women in recovery from substance abuse. Whether Warner Farm in Cummington is sufficiently serving the mission is currently under review; and a similar review of the Ashland portion of the Framingham campus may soon be recommended.

Associations

Associations are the building blocks of the wider church. They have long provided support and encouragement for groups of churches and their members, and they provide invaluable service in the authorization for ministry. We encourage each Association in the Conference to study this report and to determine whether there may be new ways for Associations to work together as they fulfill their mission. Associations might find ways to coordinate Committees on the Ministry that would reflect more consistency and be less staff-intensive, thus better-equipping all of the volunteers involved in the ministerial authorization process.

Regional Collaboration

One UCC conference can learn from the experience and expertise of other UCC conferences. Our Communities of Practice described previously in this report may be usefully adopted by one or more neighboring conferences. We may be able learn about youth programming and camping from another conference. As staffing patterns change, cross-conference support and training may become more useful than ever.

Evaluation

Local church vitality and covenant among churches and the conferences are movements of the Holy Spirit and cannot be directly measured. But as faithful stewards, the Conference Board of Directors and staff need to become skilled at measuring ways to advance church vitality and covenant. In regular and rigorous reviews, we will seek to introduce outcome-based assessment into all aspects of Conference work and to use the assessment data to guide future program strategies.

Conclusion

We who serve you as your Board of Directors realize that this proposal is neither complete nor perfect. Should the 208th Annual Meeting affirm it for implementation in the fall of 2007, we will need to continue to experiment, evaluate, and listen to our members, and, most important, to the Still Speaking God. However, we believe the plan outlined here offers great hope for our congregations and our Commonwealth, as the Christians who belong to the United Church of Christ build closer relationships, multiply their gifts, and shine their faithful and prophetic light in our churches and communities. We ask your support for this way forward into the future.

F.A.Q.

...or...

We *thought* you might ask...

1. If adult faith formation is the primary task of the local church, why is it identified as a core function of the Conference?

Great question. Adult faith formation was identified through the Listening Process as a central need of the local church in the spiritual development of clergy and local church lay leaders. While we firmly believe in and endorse the enhancement and growth of spiritual lives as a central focus of the local church, we also acknowledged the need (and the mandate by Conference stakeholders like yourselves) for assistance in spiritual formation directed at ordained and lay leadership. This, in turn, is meant to help strengthen those ordained and lay ministers in their pursuit of fulfilling their call to “grow their congregations in Christ.”

2. “Prophetic Witness” does not seem to appear as a central focus of the Listening Process results. Can you explain how it came to be identified as a core function of the Conference?

It is true that this did not emerge as central to the concerns of those participating from local churches in the Listening Process in January. Where it did emerge as a critical role of the Conference was through the input of Conference staff, various Commission volunteers, and the Conference Minister and President (with the affirmation of the Board). Furthermore, significant feedback came to us after the initial run of this Proposal in June regarding its *lack* of sufficient attention to the Prophetic Witness role. Both perspectives – that the proposal contains too much emphasis on prophetic witness, and too little - were taken into account by the Board as we prepared a final revision of this document.

3. There seem to be so many things missing from the Board’s proposal that we are currently doing as a Conference. What happened to them? Why will we not be pursuing them going forward?

A Still More Excellent Way is primarily meant to convey the *alterations* of approach to Conference ministry – and is not presented to you as a comprehensive document recommending an entire overhaul of the Conference “way of doing business.” The things that are continuing to work well, both in terms of effective ministry and efficient use of funds, will “continue to continue.” We have no intention to change what does not need to be changed.

4. What about youth and young adult faith formation and development?

Another good question – and one that has come up frequently since the proposal was released. We believe that youth education and faith formation are central functions of the local church, much like spiritual formation. What we feel we are charged with, as facilitators of the Conference’s call by God and based on the resources available to us, is the development and training of ordained and lay leadership in the area of youth and young adult ministry. Directly facilitating youth ministry is not central to our focus in the same way that promoting and facilitating the spiritual growth of local church members is not. We feel it would be presumptive to *teach* local church youth – but it will be critical to *train* local church leadership for the purposes of enhanced youth and young adult formation at the local level.

5. With the face-to-face role of the Associate Conference Ministers diminished, how will local churches continue to be drawn into covenant with the Conference?

It was never the intention of the Proposal that the ACM contact role will diminish. What will

decrease is their role with certain administrative committees at the Association level; in addition, the nature and emphasis of their contact will change. ACMs will continue to regularly preach at local churches, and these times will then be enhanced by various types of in-person conversation and/or leadership training following the worship services. They will continue to work closely with Search Committees and churches in transition, though the role of the Interim Minister in that regard may in some cases be strengthened and enhanced. Their role will *increase* in facilitating resourcing between local congregations and implementing leadership training for certain specific areas of ministry, in tandem with the *Communities of Practice*. These efforts will, over time, increase the capacity of church leaders to minister to one another in some circumstances, rather than relying as heavily on Conference staff as in the past. Finally, ACMs will continue to be accessible for immediate engagement with churches and pastors finding themselves in states of crisis or conflict. Ongoing interaction in those situations will be assessed on an individual basis.

6. Are there other reasons besides finances that promote the changes of Conference ministry style and focus that you propose?

Yes, there are. It has been suggested that the changes we are proposing reflect a macro-version of a similar metamorphosis from a “pastor-driven” church model to a “program-driven” church. Said differently, the central focus of ministry – and consequently, the source of it – shifts from the pastor (i.e., Assoc. Conf. minister) to lay leadership (i.e., clergy expertise, Communities of Practice and inter-church relationships) being trained and equipped by the “pastors” for more broadly-based ministry. This is what we have discerned as God’s next step for us as a Conference..

7. What if I am unconvinced of the value of Communities of Practice, and thus do not participate in one? Does this mean I will not have access to Conference resources?

No. You will still have access to geographically-assigned ACMs as their job description has suggested; you will still have assistance in times of crisis and conflict; you will still enjoy the occasional preaching and training visit from an ACM; you will still be invited to participate in one-time conference training sessions in Framingham (and other locations); and you will still be considered a vital part of your Association and your Conference. What you will *lack* is the opportunity to not only benefit from the expertise and gifting of others – but to let others benefit from *yours*. After all, being in *covenant* is not merely what we can gain from that relationship, but what we bring to it. You may have overt or latent gifts and areas of knowledge that others can – perhaps *need* to – profit from.

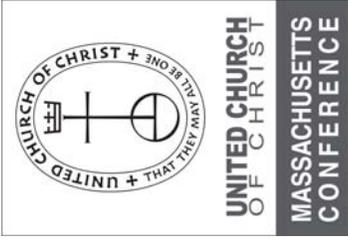
8. So is this it? Is this what we will look like as a Conference for the next full chapter of its life, however long that will be?

Not at all. As we say in *A Still More Excellent Way* in several places throughout the document (e.g., pp. 5, 12, 13), “...we will apply regular, rigorous evaluation of our work together.” What we basically mean by this is that, as a Board of Directors in concert with Conference staff, we will be assessing the effectiveness of this proposal and its components as it is implemented throughout 2008. What proves to work well we will communicate broadly to you, the stakeholders of the Conference. What may end up proving to be stagnant or relatively ineffective we will reassess and rethink as we move forward. Your input will be regularly taken into consideration and given weight – in fact, it will be *critical* for us to properly evaluate this proposal’s worth. If adjustments are needed at the end of its first year of implementation, they will be made as efficiently as possible. As is stated on page 4, this proposal is “...not an endpoint, but the next stage on a shared journey of transformation.” And we mean that.

Appendix

STATISTICS, 2005	PROJECTED STATISTICS , 2008
Churches: 411	Churches: 403
Members: 90,226	Members (projected): 82,600
Total Personnel Budget (in '08 dollars): \$1,738,300	Total Personnel Budget (in '08 dollars): \$1,470,900
Major Staff Changes 2005 – 2008 (fractions represent part-time staff)	
8.8 Associate Conference Ministers 6.9 Administrative Assistants to ACMs 1 Associate for Administration 1 Youth/CE director	7.3 Associate Conference Ministers 4.6 Administrative Assistants to ACMs No Associate for Administration Multiple stipendiary youth/CE resource people totalling one-half position.
THE FORMER VS. THE PROPOSED	
FORMER WAY (2005)	PROPOSED NEW DIRECTION (2008)
Associate Conference Minister Key Roles: Pastor and administrator	Associate Conference Minister Key Role: Agent of transformation for individuals and congregations
Local Church Pastors typically function independently from one another with occasional help from their Area Minister.	Each Local Church Pastor is part of a network of sisters and brothers in ministry who share experiences, support and challenge one another.
A pastor in need of advice calls her or his Area Minister first.	A pastor draws upon the wisdom of his or her peers in a community of practice, and, when necessary, calls the appropriate staff person.
Area Ministers preach in local churches in their own regions, providing worship leadership and a “face” of the Conference.	Most appropriate Associate Conference Minister preaches in local church , depending on current call, ministry and issues facing that church. He/she engages church leadership in a group conversation afterwards, focused on leadership, justice, or faith development needs of those present.
Area Minister attends most meetings of Association governing bodies.	Associate Conference Minister attends meetings of Association governing bodies when his/her presence will make a significant difference in the meeting.

Conference staff offer a youth event at Annual Meeting. Due to the timing of Annual Meeting, few youth are able to attend.	Conference staff assist the formation of groups of youth educators , provide training and resources, and assist them to build a network for planning shared events based on the interests and passions of their young people.
When a church is in conflict , the Area Minister spends many hours in meetings with clergy and lay leaders.	When a church is in conflict , an Associate Conference Minister meets with those involved, listens, assesses their needs, and makes a referral to the most appropriate resource person or group for ongoing conflict transformation work.
Stewardship Committee members are invited to attend a workshop at Annual Meeting led by a Conference staff person.	Stewardship Committee members are invited to a workshop at Annual Meeting led by an experienced Stewardship leader from another church. They are then invited to join a community of practice for deeper conversation about faith and money, and further development of their leadership skills.
While many local churches hold adult education programs, little attention is focused on adult faith formation in the Conference setting of the church.	Lay leaders are invited to participate in communities of practice focused on topics of interest to them, such as stewardship, Christian education, justice issues, or youth work. These communities will provide firsthand experience with adult faith formation in a group setting, equipping participants to offer similar opportunities in their local churches.
After participation in a Conference program, individuals fill out an evaluation form indicating what was helpful and what might be helpful another time.	Staff learn to evaluate the impact of Conference programs not only via evaluation forms, but by tracking worship attendance, pledge data and mission activities of participating churches.
Pastors seek calls in Massachusetts based on their individual initiative and interest.	The Minister and President takes a leadership role encouraging highly capable pastors and seminary graduates to consider calls in Massachusetts based on our unparalleled pastoral support systems.



**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**

**MASSACHUSETTS
CONFERENCE**

**Massachusetts Conference
United Church of Christ
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*Nurturing local church vitality and
the covenant among our churches.*