

“That They May All Be One”

An Invitation to Conference Unity

11 The gifts (Jesus) gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”

Ephesians 4:11-13a (NRSV)

We are on the cusp of the next re-formation of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is moving in innovative and re-visioned forms of Christian community. New occasions that teach new duties require fresh expressions of faith formation, discipleship and leadership that are able to hold in artistic tension the traditions that have shaped our past with the creative power of the Divine who is “making all things new.”

These changes hinge on a capacity for adaptation; in the church’s case, to the ministry challenges unique to the 21st century. Some of our congregations and their leaders have risen to those challenges and become lively places of transformation. Some are only able to maintain their current ministry. Other congregations are wondering about their survival while many congregations have made the painful decision to close. The Pennsylvania Southeast Conference (PSEC) was 229 congregations strong at the birth of the United Church of Christ. Since 2000, forty-six churches have merged, ended their ministries or withdrawn their UCC affiliation. More than half of our now 163 congregations have moved to part-time leadership. The Pennsylvania Northeast Conference (PNEC) was 196 congregations strong at the birth of the United Church of Christ. Since 2000, thirty churches have merged, ended their ministries or withdrawn their UCC affiliation. More than sixty percent of PNEC’s 134 churches have part-time leadership.

As local churches and Associations encounter these changes, the support for the Wider Church has declined perceptibly. The ways we have Conferenced together in the past must give way to these new realities and ways of working together that will enable us to partner with God so that healthy, faithful, effective congregations and clergy can discern and act on God’s vision for transformed lives and communities.

Over the past year, with the unanimous support of both the PSEC Consistory and the PNEC Board as well as nearly unanimous consent of both Conference bodies, we have explored where God might be leading us. The Joint Conference Vision and Mission Development Team, a representative group of both Conferences, have surveyed local churches, Associations, Ministeriums and Annual Conference Meetings. They have hosted small group conversations and online video meetings. They have spent time conferring with both Conference staffs and one another to discern the vision, mission and values for a new Conference.

We are a people who are bound together by covenant and guided by Jesus’ fundamental commandment to love one another. By that love we work together to serve God and our neighbors with compassion, to encourage and inspire one another with hope and to make bold and courageous choices.

We are aware that among some of our congregations the level of unity in our “United Church” and the depth of love commended by our Lord is at best loose. We have placed our value of autonomy above the ties that bind us and fallen into the divisions that mimic global, not gospel, forces. We are convinced that a reclamation of our commitment to covenantal connections and embracing new relationships is an

act of faith that will increase our capacity to encourage, inspire, support and care for one another in ministries of mutual accountability to realize the dream “that they may all be one.”

If we are to encourage and transform the church we know, we must transform our denominational structures as well. We believe there are compelling reasons to move toward the creation of a unified Conference in eastern Pennsylvania. This would allow us to:

- Provide stronger collective support for local churches; strengthen outreach and mission so our passions can meet the world’s deepest needs to reshape our communities with the love and care of Jesus Christ.
- Blend what each conference does well, building on our individual and corporate strengths.
- Create conversations and initiate new strategies for the sharing and implementation of “best practices”.
- Build relationships in a wider context to increase diversity and inclusivity.
- Have greater influence in the wider community simply because of expanded numbers.
- Serve as a model for our congregations needing to take bold action to adapt themselves and strengthen the mission and ministry of the UCC in this part of Pennsylvania.
- Be more responsive in a fluid world with the timeless truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ and move forward into the future with confidence and vision.
- Embrace our understanding of discipleship and act like the Body of Christ, humanity’s best witness to the interdependent unity of all living things.

It is time to embrace a new covenant to further the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in our part of Pennsylvania. We believe it is time for a change.