

United in Ministry and Mission:
An Invitation to Create a New Conference
of the United Church of Christ

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*“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”
Isaiah 43:18-19a*

*“In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways;
Who will lead the pilgrim people, wandering in their separate ways?
God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagle’s soar;
We your people, ours the journey, now and ever, now and ever, now and evermore”
-In the Midst of New Dimensions, Julian Rush*

We believe it is time for a change. We believe that God’s Holy Spirit is inviting our congregations, our clergy and our denominational leaders to become active partners in the creation of forms of Christian community which are so new that, as yet, we can only glimpse them. We believe we are called to be midwives to a new spiritual movement which is already being born. At the same time, we believe that our more traditional, familiar call maintains its claim upon us. Thus, we are also called to partner with God in making sure that healthy, faithful, effective congregations of the United Church of Christ continue to discern God’s vision and transform our communities throughout southern New England.

This mix of familiar and new work calls for new means of organizing our people and resources. We believe the Holy Spirit is inviting us to embrace a new covenant among our three Conferences. Over the past year through the unanimous support of our Board of Directors, we have come together in a variety of ways to discern where the Spirit of God might be leading us. In an online survey, in local churches, in Association gatherings, in Conference Annual Meetings and at Super Saturdays as well as in myriad smaller conversations we have spent time conferring with one another about the possibilities for a new Conference of the United Church of Christ. As a “united and uniting” church we are convinced that we need each other to navigate the changes that we are all experiencing. If we are to encourage and transform the church we know, even as we help to birth a church for future

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generations, we believe we must transform our denominational structures as well . It is both an exciting and challenging time to be a part of the United Church of Christ here in Southern New England.

The centrality of the word and witness of Jesus Christ will not be changed in this proposal for a united ministry. We believe we find ourselves in the midst of a critical moment in the life of Christianity. Like our pilgrim forebears who crossed the ocean confident that more light would break forth from God’s Holy Word; like the four distinct traditions joining together in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ with a belief that unity in Christ transcended their differences; like the national setting which in 2013 streamlined its own structure to create a nimbler approach to mission and ministry, we believe that discipleship in a new era requires boldness and change. We believe the time for the creation of a new Conference has come.

We are mindful of the changes that are taking place in our congregations. These changes invite us to practice adaptive behaviors to the circumstances of our time. Some of our congregations are lively places of vitality. Some of our congregations feel as if they are “stuck in neutral”.

Other congregations are wondering about their survival and still other congregations have had to make the painful decision to no longer continue as a church. A good number of congregations are aging, declining in membership and no longer financially able to support the very mission field that lies at the heart of their calling. In the latest national statistical report of the UCC it is noted that in the last ten years we encountered a loss of 696 congregations and 318,897 members. Congregations are also becoming smaller in membership nationally. 41% of UCC congregations are 100 members or less. As local churches encounter this change, the support for the Wider Church declines and the pains of change are apparent. As many of us are familiar with this narrative, it is not a surprise.

We do not believe that the narrative of decline should define us. We are not a people who live without hope. We believe that the transformative message of the Gospel invites us into a deeper proclamation of that which unites us through the core values of the United Church of Christ:

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To proclaim that God is Still Speaking;
To provide an extravagant welcome to all of God's children and;
To be personally transformed by the inclusive Love of God in Christ to work
to change the world in which we live.

We bear testimony that an awakening is in progress. The Holy Spirit is active in and among our congregations. It can be seen through local churches that welcome into their midst the gay and transgendered, that invite with loving hearts the refugee and the citizen newly returned from prison. It can be seen through shared meals and knitted scarves and stitched bedrolls for street people. It can be seen through the engagement by a local congregation with cutting edge issues that adversely affect a suffering people in its community. It can be seen through reconciling meetings between the police and members of the African American community. It is seen every time a congregation undergoes a visioning process, designed to reinvigorate mission and respond to the call of Jesus to make an impact. It is seen through transformative experiences where the heart takes the lead in believing.

The awakening to which we bear testimony is not confined to our congregations. Faith leaders and writers such as Diana Butler Bass and our own General Minister and President John Dorhauer have documented the growth of new kinds of spiritual communities with deep Christian roots and remarkable resonance with UCC values and theology. Some of our own congregations are hosting and sheltering experimental faith communities which look very little like the church of our forebears, but through which the Holy Spirit is transforming lives.

We are a people who are bound together by covenant. We are aware that among some of our congregations the sense of connection with one another is not always recognized or affirmed. We are aware that along with the great and important history of those who have walked before us that we have placed our love of autonomy as a more important value than the ties that bind us together. At this moment in time we are convinced that both a reclamation of our understanding of covenant and the embrace of a new covenant is an act of faith that will allow us to increase our impact in Southern New England. We believe it to be the role of the Conference to help

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local congregations discern the ministries to which they are called and to provide a way to connect congregations to one another. The Conference setting is “uniquely positioned to be the center for congregational interdependence.” (*On Covenant*, a paper by Sue Phillips)

We believe that the creation of a new Conference will increase the impact of the United Church of Christ in Southern New England. We are aware that in our culture today the dominant Christian voice is equated with judgment, dogma and a restrictive view of the world. Our voice would be strengthened through this new covenant. It will enable us to become a stronger, bolder witness. We inhabit small states in close proximity with similar demographics and history. There is power and value in shared resources, knowledge and expertise.

We believe there are compelling reasons to move towards the creation of a new Conference.

Those reasons include:

- Building on what each conference does well (sharing assets) and creating new vistas yet untouched.
- Increasing congregations’ access to resources, programs and consultations.
- Creating a new, more nimble institutional platform better positioned to support new forms of ministry with and to new generations.
- Developing a more robust technological capacity to share our mission and develop connections among our congregations.
- Facilitating the building of relationships in a wider context. A new Conference would have greater influence in the wider community simply because of its numbers. It would strengthen the mission and ministry of the UCC in this part of the country and would serve as a model for other Conferences needing to take bold action to adapt themselves.
- Eliminating the artificial boundaries of state lines – and likely challenging other boundaries as we come to see them as unnecessary and limiting.
- Providing greater prophetic public voice; stronger collective support for churches; greater clarity about the direction and ministries of the

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national setting; strengthened outreach and mission, capacity to meet the challenges before us and support for new ways of being the Church in our time.

- Creating conversations and initiating new strategies for the sharing and implementation of “best practices”.
- Embracing this act of interdependence will prepare us to work with other like-minded Christian denominations and people of faith. We believe this alignment will help us establish the building of a progressive Christian movement. We also believe that interreligious work will be increasingly important in the future.
- Embracing the belief that as the body of Christ we can be a sign of the visible unity of the Church in our time.

We propose to enter into a new covenant together. The Board of Directors of the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island Conference recommends the creation of a new Conference. We recommend this be a two-step process.

The first vote in June of 2017 would be to embrace the intention to create a new Conference. If affirmed by each Conference, the three Boards of Directors would put into place the plan for the creation of the new Conference. The plan would include a single Board of Directors with diverse members coming from the three Conferences. This single Board would also act and as necessary conduct its work as the Board for the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island Conference. This proposal would allow for the maintenance of the historic and legal Conference entities to remain in place. A second vote would take place in June of 2018 which, if approved by the Conferences, would ratify creation of the new Conference.

This proposed change would allow the UCC in Southern New England to maintain three historic conferences while conferring flexibility and adaptability and establishing economies of scale.

We believe it is time for a change. We are ready to embrace a new covenant to further the mission and ministry of the United Church of Christ in Southern New England. May it be so.

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RESOLUTION

Be it resolved that the _____ Board of the _____ Conference of the UCC adopts the following statement of intent:

Grateful for the 2015-2016 time of discernment, we believe that God is calling our Conference to live into increased interdependence with the other two UCC Conferences of southern New England, that we make an impact by ministering and witnessing together, and that we live in a time when God is calling us to do a new thing.

As of today, we commit our Conference Board, staff and designated representatives to work with our counterparts from the other two UCC Conferences of southern New England to engage in a visioning process that includes (among other things) reasonable sharing of records and information, due diligence in sharing financial information as well as cultural and operational practices, encouragement of our members, churches and Associations to participate in each other's' programs and initiatives, and responding to each other's' inquiries – all focusing on the creation of a proposal that would be brought to a joint annual meeting of the three southern New England Conferences of the UCC in June 2018.

Our time of discernment has led us to imagine that this proposal will be to create a new Conference:

- i) with a single Board of Directors made up of diverse members coming from the three Conferences.
- ii) This single Board would also act, as necessary, as the Board of Directors for each of the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island Conferences.
- iii) The proposal would allow for the three historic and legal Conference entities of Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts to remain in place;
- iv) The proposal may also recommend a transition to a unified budget and a new staffing structure.
- v) The proposal recognizes that Conference boundaries – including changes in Conference boundaries – are determined by vote of synod and we anticipate that if this proposal is approved by the joint annual meeting of the RI, CT and MA Conferences in June 2018, we will appeal to synod in 2019 for recognition.
- vi) The proposal may also provide a common table for other faith communities, both historic and those coming into being, to share in common vision.

We also recognize that the planning process we now begin may lead us to respond to God's call and increase our interdependence through other means.

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On January 21, 2017 the CT, RI and MA Boards each unanimously passed the above resolution. When delegates from our three Conferences come together in June 2017, the three Annual Meetings will each be asked to pass a common resolution endorsing the above resolution.