

State of the Conference Address

**Stephen C. Gray
Conference Minister**

**Indiana-Kentucky Conference
United Church of Christ**

June 5, 2009

As I have done the past three years, I have taken the liberty of having my State of the Conference address passed out to you so that you can follow along as I share it verbally.

If we had any doubt about it, all we have to do is look at the daily headlines. “Bubble Burst on Sub-prime Mortgages;” “Bankruptcy Likely for General Motors,” “Government Bails Out AIG,” “United States Triggers Global Recession,” “Unemployment Climbs,” and “Recession Means Working Long, Retiring Later.” The signs are all about us. The giant fall in the stock market in the 4th quarter of last year and the ongoing recession has fostered a level of anxiety and despair that manifests itself in every part of our society.

And what is true of our society at large is also true of numbers of our churches, the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, the national setting of the United Church of Christ and the whole religious landscape. This past spring our Board of Directors and church leadership across the country had the unpleasant task of looking at alarming decreases of up to 50% in invested funds and decreased giving from our members and member churches. Here, in Indiana, we have experienced record unemployment in Elkhart and other counties. And with so many of the workers in Indiana and Kentucky employed by Chrysler, General Motors, and Toyota, we are all collectively holding our breath while bankruptcy and re-structuring are unfolding. For the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, all of this has contributed to the continuing downsizing of our conference staff, the proposed reduction in our 2009 budget, and the unprecedented step of delaying the building of the 2010 budget until we

have input from the delegates to this Annual Meeting. And to top it all off, at the end of April, the Conference's OCWM income was \$58,000 behind income at the same time last year!

Anxiety and uncertainty are two constants with which we have been living for at least the last 9 months and, in all likelihood, will continue to dominate the religious community for many months yet to come. To one degree or another, anxiety and uncertainty are here with each one of us at this Annual Meeting. And so I would like to use this address to pose the question: As people of faith, how are we to respond to the anxiety and uncertainty that is affecting our individual churches as well as the Indiana-Kentucky Conference? How are we to respond?

But precisely because we are people of faith, we have this irrepressible tendency to always see the glass to be half full rather than half empty. Therefore, I would be remiss if I did not begin this address by lifting up some of our achievements in the last year and some special people who have provided leadership to this Conference.

- Joining our staff as the new Receptionist and Resource Center Support Staff was Ms. Lisa Bennett. This past April, the Board of Directors removed the word "Interim" from the title of Ms. Susie Larson who is now our regularly called part-time Director of Merom Conference Center.
- After a combined 17 years of service to the Indiana-Kentucky Conference as Associate Conference Ministers for the Northern Area and Southern Area, Rev. Carol Barth and Rev. Thom Webster are seeking new calls outside of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference. Carol and Thom asked that a celebration of their ministries not be held at this meeting. Nevertheless, I would ask Carol and Thom to stand so that we can show them our appreciation.
- Three of our churches dedicated new buildings and another congregation will be recognized at General Synod. In November, Trinity United Church of Christ in Gary, one of our new church starts, dedicated its brand new worship building. In February, Zion United Church of Christ (Post Road) in Indianapolis dedicated its new gymnasium. In May, Friedens United Church of

Christ in Indianapolis dedicated its new Family Life Center. And finally, we just received word that Grace Immanuel United Church of Christ in Louisville, Kentucky, because of their resettlement of refugees from Kosovo, Sudan, Liberia, Russia, Burma and Iraq, will be the recipient of the Heart of Mission Award at General Synod 27 this June.

- We continue in our effort to start 20 new churches by 2020. Unfortunately, our attempt to start a new church in Fishers, Indiana did not succeed and was ended in July 2008. Undeterred, the New Church Start Committee is recommending calling a bi-vocational church planter for a new UCC church in Warsaw, Indiana. After a long search we have a promising candidate for starting a new church in the Bluegrass area from Lexington to Louisville.
- Work on implementing the Vision Plan has been slow, but is in motion. The Search Committee for a Conference Minister to follow me at the conclusion of my third term in August, 2010 is well underway. A plan for the Association Visitors program has been developed and will be shared with clergy groups and Associations this fall, with implementation in the first part of 2010. The Communication Task Force is meeting and is in the process of assessing our current communication system and web site.
- Finally, our annual Work Camps are in full swing for the 8th year in a row. Each year, with funding from our churches and One Great Hour of Sharing, IKC volunteers repair homes affected by flooding or by wind damage for families who are not in a position to do so by themselves. This year five work camps will be held in Johnson County, Vigo County, Lake County and Harlan, Kentucky.

As many positive things as we have witnessed in the ministries of our local congregations and in the life of our Conference in the past year, we continue to feel the repercussions from the recession and last year's massive drop in the stock market. Anxiety and uncertainty continue in both our local churches, our Conference, and the wider United Church of Christ.

As people of faith, how are we called to respond?

I would like to suggest that there is one response that we can both count on - and that we need to do our best to avoid. In the book of Numbers we come across another religious community that is also experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. Not only do the Hebrew people have their own economic uncertainties, but in the wilderness in which they find themselves, they can find no permanent place in which to lay their heads. The response is predictable. In the 14th chapter of Numbers we read: “Then the whole Israelite community cried out in dismay; all night long they wept. One and all they made complaints against Moses and Aaron; ‘If only we had died in Egypt or in the wilderness!’ they said. ‘Far happier if we had! Why should the Lord bring us in this land, to die in battle and leave our wives and our dependents to become the spoils of war? To go back to Egypt would be better than this.’ And they began to talk of choosing someone to lead them back” (vs. 1-4)

In a time of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, religious people can sometimes act in ways that are at odds with the Golden Rule. As consultant Gil Rendle has said, “Anxious people don’t always behave well.” And so the Israelites, predictably, begin to long for the past. Things were bad then, but at least they were predictable! You didn’t have to put up with this anxiety! And, of course, they made complaints against Moses and Aaron. Leadership is supposed to “fix things.” But if it is not fixed to my expectation, blame the leaders! And finally, the Israelites began to talk about choosing new leadership who could make it like it was in the “good old days.” If we can just find the right leadership, everything will be ok! While we know that this is probably an illusion, for a while, at least, it makes us feel better.

The point is that the behavior of the Israelites is predictable! Anxious people do not always behave well! Now, I suspect that they will feel uncomfortable comparing themselves to Moses or Aaron, but I would like to ask the members of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference Board of Directors to stand. These are the people that God called and you affirmed to lead you. They are just as human as Moses and Aaron. But they are the ones who attend many meetings and devote many hours of time to the “building up” of this Conference on your behalf. You do not have to agree to everything they

propose – and I know that some of you don't – but let us show them appreciation for doing their level best to lead us in anxious and uncertain times!

Anxiety and uncertainty continue in both our local churches, our Conference and the wider United Church of Christ. As people of faith, how are we called to positively respond? In answering this question, I think it is very important for us to distinguish between those things over which we have little or no control and those things over we have some control.

One of the things over which we have little or no control is the economy and the effect that it is having on our local churches, the Conference, and the national setting of the United Church of Christ. One of our congregations in the northern part of Indianapolis reports that of nine other mostly large Protestant congregations that surround it, it is the only church not laying off at least one employee. While we have not surveyed our churches about this, I suspect that a good number of our IKC congregations are experiencing shortfalls this year in comparison to giving for the same time period last year.

Other factors that continue to affect all of our churches, but over which we have little or no control, are seven that I mentioned in last year's address. I would like to briefly repeat them because they affect our churches more than we can ever imagine.

Sustainability Levels. In 1930 it took an average weekly attendance of 30 to afford a full-time minister, church building and programs. In 2000 it took an average weekly attendance of 130 to do the same. In the past year we have seen an increase in the number of our churches whose budgets have fallen below \$100,000, which today is usually the minimum amount to maintain a full-time ministry.

Generational Changes. The make up of the people in the pews does not reflect the age distribution of the population. Some 70% of the people who regularly attend worship are people in the Builder and Silent generations – people today who are approximately 62 years old and older.

However, these two generations represent only 35% of the population. Baby boomers and younger generations represent 65% of the population, but only 30% of those who regularly attend worship.

Birth Rate. Birth rate is the number one reason for decline of mainline churches. In 1960 there were 34 births per 1,000 mainline church members. In 2002 there were only 11.7 births per 1,000 mainline church members. If you have wondered why your church's Sunday School, confirmation classes and youth groups have seemed smaller, this is primarily the reason.

Population Shifts. In 1960 approximately 50% of the population in the United States lived in rural areas and 20% lived in metropolitan areas. Today, people living in rural areas make up only 20% of the population and nearly 80% live in metropolitan areas. The result is that many congregations, especially here in the Midwest, are in places with a declining population. **Communication Transformation.** The change that has revolutionized the communication landscape was made possible by the invention of the personal computer and the introduction in the 1990's of e-mail and the world- wide-web. In the life of the church, the web-site has become the new "front door" of the church and "face book" and "twitter" have become primary communication tools of our members and some of our pastors. Churches that fail to invest in this technology will be less able to communicate with 20 and 30 "somethings" for whom this is now and will be the primary form of communication.

Philanthropic Giving. A seismic shift has occurred in the landscape of religious giving since the 1990's. As a share of overall charitable giving, giving to religion has fallen from over half of the charitable dollars given to less than one third today. Since 1989 the giving of every religious group has declined between 15% to as high as 45.7%!

Worship Attendance. While 65% of US citizens claim to be Christian, only 17.7% of the population participates in worship. There are 75 million US adults who do not participate in church at all.

In response to anxiety and uncertainty in our local churches, our Conference, and the wider United Church of Christ, there are certain things, however, over which we do have some control and which we can address in the coming year. And I would like to identify four areas in both our Conference and our local churches for us to concentrate in the coming year.

Of first priority in the Conference is **implementation of the Vision Plan**. We have begun to take the first steps to convert the Indiana-Kentucky Conference from a staff-driven to a network-driven structure. The *Association Visitors* plan has been drafted and, after further refinement, will be presented to clergy groups and at Association meetings this fall for further comment and critique. It is my hope that we can begin this new program of visitation and pastoral care by the first quarter of next year. The *Communication Task Force* is now underway in developing a sophisticated – yet user-friendly communication system and is beginning what we estimate to be in the range of about 36 months of work. Preliminary steps have been taken to investigate a conference-wide *capital campaign* that will bring greater financial stability to Merom Conference Center. The primary steps for *reconfiguring governance and committee structure* and implementing an *All-Conference Planning Event (APE)* will be undertaken in the coming year for introduction in 2011.

A second thing that we must again **bring into balance** is **our income and our expenditures** for both the Conference and Merom Conference Center. There are a number of conferences in the United Church of Christ that have not been blessed with the endowments and designated reserves that our Conference has accumulated over the years. The limit of spending in those conferences is only what their churches contribute in Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support. They do not have the luxury of deficit spending. Due to the drop in the stock market we could conceivably be only two years away from the same situation. We will do our best to increase OCWM this year, but we may well be dealing with economic forces in a number of our congregations that are beyond our control. As a result of the trend of decreasing OCWM, the Board of Directors has taken the unprecedented

step of seeking your input on the expenditure side of the 2010 budget to guide the Board of Directors in reducing our conference programs and governance to a level which we can adequately fund.

A third area of ministry to which we need to remain committed in the coming year is our goal of **starting 20 new churches** by the year 2020. However, one thing the New Church Start Committee has learned is that we cannot create new churches in a vacuum! We must have the blessing and willing cooperation of local churches and associations. In fact, the most successful model for new church starts today is for one or more local churches to proactively start a new church on their own – either without or with the help of the Conference and the national UCC! This is amply illustrated by Trinity United Church of Christ in Gary. It was Trinity UCC in Chicago, in cooperation with the Conference and national UCC, which provided the lion's share of the funding as well as sharing one of their own staff as the new pastor! As we learned this past year with our attempted new church in Fishers, there is risk in starting new churches. Some will grow, some will flourish, but some new churches will do neither. However, we are undeterred. Leadership has been identified for a new start in Warsaw, Indiana, and we continue to look for a new church planter for the Bluegrass area between Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky.

A fourth area over which each of our local churches and each of our pastors has some measure of control is either to continue or to **bring new vitality to the worship life** of their congregation. Transformation of local churches largely begins and ends with the quality of worship we offer to our present members and our members yet to be. In the last several years, numbers of our congregations have begun to offer or are experimenting with second services to try to reach those 75 million adults who do not participate in church life. Some of those second services will not succeed, but that must not stop us from using our creativity to find the music and a form of worship that will help connect us with people who do not know about the Good News of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

How are we called to positively respond to the anxiety and uncertainty facing our churches and our Conference? Implementation of the Vision Plan, bringing into balance our Conference

income and expenditures, starting new churches, and bringing new vitality to the worship life of our existing churches are all things over which we do have some control and which need our primary attention in the coming years.

But finally, in the face of anxiety and uncertainty, we need to constantly remind one another of **who we are and whose we are**. We are members of the United Church of Christ. It is this Jesus Christ which we proclaim is the Head of our Church. And it is through the life and witness of Jesus Christ that we proclaim that the two primary characteristics of our God are an undeniable need to love and to give. An undeniable need to love and to give. And having been created in God's image, we also proclaim that our vocation as Christians is to love and to give in no less generous a way than the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is this truth that is at the heart of one final story that claims to be centuries old and which comes from the very marrow of the Judaic tradition in which Jesus was raised and nurtured. It is a story about a father and his two sons.

In this story the father is an upright Jew who loves the Torah. And he has two sons. One of the sons is married and has been blessed with many children. The second son, however, has no children and has never been married but has been blessed by great wealth.

One afternoon the father calls for his two sons. When they arrive, he tells them that the illness that has plagued him for many years has culminated and he fears that he will die that night. Therefore, he wishes to give them their inheritance. That very morning, with his last bit of strength, he and his servant traveled to the middle of his property and drove a stake in his field dividing his property equally between his two sons. That night, the father dies.

That evening, both sons are wracked with grief and find it difficult to sleep. And one wakes up and says to himself, "Here I have no children and my needs are so small. And there is my brother with all those children and mouths to feed. I will get up in the middle of this night and go and move the stake so as to give my brother a greater share of my father's property.

Likewise, the other brother could not sleep and says to himself, “Here I am with so many children who will provide for me and for my wife until our death. And there is my brother with no one to take care of him. I will get up in the middle of this night and go and move the stake so as to give my brother a greater share of my father’s property that he might be taken care of in his old age.”

And so it was that both brothers groped blindly through the darkness where, upon approaching the stake, they recognized each other and embraced one another and wept with one another.

And so, as the story goes, it is on that very spot that they founded Jerusalem!

At this very moment, when the economy looks bleak and our prospects appear cloudy, we need to give witness that the God that we worship, the God of all history, is a God with an undeniable need to love and to give, who has the power to help each one of us go and do likewise. Finding its origins in the beginning of creation, we encounter a God who cannot help but give – a God that so loves this world and provides to this day for each of us so many good things. May we trust in this God to guide us through the year to come.

Wishing you grace, mercy, and peace this day. Amen.