

State of the Conference Address

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These last two years have been very different than the previous seven that I have served as your Conference Minister. As I did last year, I have taken the step of having my State of the Conference address passed out to you so that you can follow along as I share it verbally.

As we prepare to encounter our 44th year as a conference of churches and as our denomination celebrates its 50th year as the United Church of Christ, the state of the Conference can be symbolized in two events which took place this last month. At first, each might appear to be inauspicious, but I think both serve as a metaphor for our life together as a Conference over the past year.

The first event was a decision by me and my staff colleagues, Carol Barth and Thom Webster, to remove from our monthly staff agenda an item entitled, "Response to General Synod 25 Same Gender Marriage Amendment." It is an item that has required much of our staff's time and our emotional and spiritual energy over the past 23 months. And we anticipate some level of response to continue. Two of the amendments advocating traditional marriage, that originated in two of our associations and were debated here last year, will appear on the agenda of General Synod 26, which meets in Hartford in just two weeks. In response to whatever action is taken by General Synod 26, I have no doubt we will witness reactions both positive and negative in a number of our churches over the next few months. However, the decision of your staff is that it is time to move on. While "Seeking A Faithful Response" will thoughtfully explore the issues raised by the marriage amendment this coming fall, it is time to look forward to the new challenges and even more pressing needs that call for our attention. None the less, I do want to take a few moments this afternoon to reflect on what we have observed and learned from this issue over the past 23 months.

The second seemingly inauspicious event that took place was a gift of a book with the curious title Our Iceberg Is Melting and the sub-title Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions. If ever there was a metaphor for the visioning process in which the Indiana-Kentucky Conference is about to engage it is contained in this short little volume. The book tells the story of a colony of penguins with a very particular problem. The iceberg on which they have lived for generations and generations is beginning to melt. They either have to adapt or die. Written by John Kotter of Harvard Business School, the book outlines the steps the penguin colony took to adapt to their circumstances and go on to thrive. As a Conference, we, too, are in a similar situation. While a melting iceberg is not our particular problem, you heard from Dick Hamm this afternoon the challenges facing not just our Conference, but the middle judicatories of all denominations across the United States. However, just as was the case for the penguin colony, there is no assurance that we will be able to adapt. Change is something that all systems need and all systems resist. Therefore, I would like to take some time for us to think through the challenges before us in the next 18 months.

But before reflecting on what has happened in the past 23 months and what we will be facing in the coming 18 months, I think it is important to remember that there have been many joys during the past year. I would be remiss if I did not share a few of them with you.

- Our commitment as a Church Planting Conference to start 20 new churches by 2020 moved forward this year with the calling of Reverends Todd and Nicole Yonkman who will be the church planting team for our new church in Fishers, Indiana. Todd and Nicole, whom you will meet at the Banquet tonight, will begin their new ministry on July 1st. In addition, because of a generous planned gift, we will be able to purchase later this year a 5 ½ acre parcel of land, which will be the site for the new church.
- Another two of our new churches either has or is in the process of acquiring their first permanent church building. Since its founding in 1990, Union Community Church in Valparaiso, Indiana, never had owned its own church building. This past January, through a loan from our denomination and financial support originating from the Conference, Union Community acquired a former Greek

Orthodox Church located right in the middle of the community they serve! Our most recent new church, Trinity United Church of Christ in Gary, Indiana, broke ground this past month for a new church building to be constructed through a lease to purchase arrangement by Local Church Ministries. Trinity hopes to be in its new church by the end of this year!

- The strategic plan that we passed two years ago continues to be implemented with the promise of providing evangelism coaches and mediation teams for use by our churches in the coming year. Beginning in 2008, the Conference will annually sponsor gatherings to think through and feel through difficult issues in Christian faith and practice.
- In July, the Indiana-Kentucky Young Ambassadors will fly to Germany to visit for three weeks their counterparts who are members of our partner church, the Evangelical Church of Westphalia. Last year, the German Young Ambassadors spent three weeks here in our conference. This is the fourth generation of young people to participate in this very unique program of Christian formation.
- After more than a year of work, the second editions of both the Treasurer's Handbook and the Mission Handbook and Yellow Pages have been completed and are for sale here at this Annual Meeting.
- Finally, numbers of our associations and local churches have engaged in special gatherings to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the United Church of Christ. Over 150 members of the Evansville Tri-State Association gathered this past November for a memorable day and service of celebration.

However, competing with all of this productive ministry in the past year has been the continuing response to the General Synod 25 passage two years ago of the resolution, "In Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All," which called on marriage to be legalized for same gender couples. While the response in this second year has been far less hostile and angry than it was in the first year, what your staff witnessed was continuing dis-ease in numbers of our churches. At this time last year, 8 churches had withdrawn from the denomination either because of the marriage resolution or because the General Synod action was the culmination of many other actions with which they had disagreed. During the past 12 months, I regret to report that an additional 6 churches have withdrawn for many of the same reasons. At least one other church will vote on whether to withdraw following General Synod 26.

A number of other churches have continued to struggle with the issue throughout the past year. In some of these cases, leadership has discovered that members of the congregation are not of one mind on the issue of either homosexuality or same gender marriage, or other issues for that matter. Rather than risk splitting their congregation, they decided not to vote on the issue and are learning to live with their differences.

Finally, we witnessed in the last year a precipitous decline in the giving of our churches to Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support. OCWM receipts in 2006 were \$141,000 less than they were in 2005. And giving to OCWM in 2005 was \$78,000 less than in 2004! Between 2005 and 2006, this was a drop from \$1,061,221 to \$920,108. Approximately one half of this amount can be attributed to the congregations that have withdrawn. Another 20 of our congregations gave nothing to OCWM, some of whom tied their decision directly to the action of General Synod 25. Another group of churches directed their OCWM giving to be used by the "Conference only." The net result was a decrease in income that continues to have the Board of Directors deeply concerned.

As the staff has tried to understand and respond to these continuing reactions to General Synod 25, we have learned the importance of having **clergy and lay leaders keep their congregation informed about actions of the General Synod and the National United Church of Christ**. A pattern in many of the congregations that decided to withdraw was a lack of knowledge of actions and decisions of the wider United Church of Christ. Whether this was by intent or just through lack of communication, the result was the same. As Gil Rendle has said, "Surprised people don't often behave well."

A second lesson that your staff is more than familiar with is that **the polity of the United Church of Christ is difficult for some of our lay members to understand, to live with and to interpret**. Those who come to our churches from a more hierarchical church experience or who are looking for unambiguous moral teaching are often perplexed and frustrated by the concept of a General Synod that "speaks not for the churches, but to them." We have to take particular pains to educate our new members about the unique kind of freedom that is provided in each setting of our denomination. Our members often feel ill equipped to

explain to their neighbors that an action of the General Synod that makes the headlines is not church law to which each individual church needs to adhere.

Finally, one of my personal observations is that **UCC members who describe themselves as traditional or orthodox or conservative often do not feel part of our denominational family**. Sometimes we pastors or staff in the national setting of the UCC bear responsibility for that reaction. It is not in a total void that we have seen the rise of the Biblical Witness Fellowship, the Evangelical Association and Faithful & Welcoming, all claiming to be renewal groups in the United Church of Christ.

At the same time that we have been dealing with the negative response from General Synod 25, my two staff colleagues, Carol and Thom, have been trying to convince me that a far more fundamental change was taking place in the life and structure of the Conference. It had been my impression and that of the Board of Directors that we had addressed, with the passage of our strategic plan two years ago, all of the warning signs of institutional decline. These included decreasing numbers of churches, decreasing numbers of members, an increasing number of whom were older, and continual decline in our funding through Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support. But as good as our strategic plan was and is, it made the assumption that the present vision of the Conference – its role, structure and staffing – was sufficient to implement the plan. What has become increasingly evident in the past year is that the present vision of the Conference was designed to serve a constituency that lived a decade or two ago, but exists less and less today. If we were to not only implement the strategic plan, but provide leadership to the Conference with full effectiveness, it became clear that we would need to do so with a different vision of the Conference, a different understanding of the role the Conference is to play in relation to its churches and a different priority for the ministry of its staff.

For those who had eyes to see, the signs were all about us. The present vision of the Conference is a centralized model in which Indianapolis is at the hub of the wheel, both geographically and psychologically. However, the mission field for most of our churches is increasingly right outside of their front door. A centralized Conference is increasingly an answer for which there is not a question.

And what about all of those Conference and Association committees? The committee structure was created by a GI generation that believed in doing things together as a group and who actually enjoyed – or at least tolerated - all those church meetings! As hard as our Nominating Committee works today, just take a look at the number of vacancies in their report. And each year, the average age of our Conference volunteers rises.

The present vision of the Conference is one in which deployed staff are to provide pastoral care to their churches, pastors and their families. However, even when we had three Associate Conference Ministers, we were not able to provide the level of care and contact that was hoped for. Because Conference committees were staff dependent, many hours of time ended up in administrative support of the structure of the Conference.

Finally, what became painfully obvious in the last year was that our hopes to return to the OCWM support that we enjoyed in the 1990's, which was necessary to support the present vision of ministry in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, were not realistic. Simply observe that between 1996 and 2006 the total membership of our churches had declined from 48,611 to 34,983. Of that current membership, the average age continues to increase. Putting those two factors together, we should not be surprised that an increasing number of our churches are experiencing difficulty supporting their own local expenses, leading to decreased or depressed support for wider mission support.

In a word, "Our Iceberg Is Melting!" The vision of what a conference is to do and to be, which served us so well for so many years, is in need of "re-visioning." It is toward that end that the Board of Directors has secured the services of consultant Rev. "Dick" Hamm of the Columbia Partnership. Dick knows the United Church of Christ and the Indiana-Kentucky Conference well, having served as General Minister and President of the Disciples of Christ and as a local Disciples pastor here in Indiana. He is well positioned to serve us having just written a book entitled, Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Postmodern Age.

As we have prepared to engage in this visioning process, there are two things I am very aware of. The first is that **we are not alone**. We are witnessing change across the American religious landscape. Three of the six Great Lake conferences and a dozen other UCC conferences are also involved in a visioning process,

driven by the very same realities that we face. Even in self proclaimed Evangelical churches financial stresses are being experienced.

Secondly, I am aware and want to make you aware that what we have experienced over the past 23 months and what will result in the next 18 months **has had its effect on our exempt and support staff.** We are blessed by the hard work, skill, and just devotion to the people and churches of the Conference that is evident every day. When you see one of our staff people, express your gratitude for their service in this challenging time!

As you learned this afternoon, the plan for responding to our “melting iceberg” is for a group of about 130 people, consisting of lay and clergy leaders from all across the Conference, to meet for a retreat on July 13 and 14. The information gathered at the retreat will be reviewed by a Blue Ribbon Visioning Committee, which will have the responsibility of formulating a future vision for the Conference to be recommended to the Board of Directors by February of 2008. The names of the members of that Blue Ribbon Committee have been passed out to you. With the approval of the Board of Directors, the vision will be shared with our churches and will be considered at the 2008 Annual Meeting. If approved by the Annual Meeting, the new vision will be implemented beginning in 2009.

I would like to close with a wonderful story told by Professor Donald English who taught at the Reformed Seminary of England. It is the story of a little Quaker meeting house in London that was surrounded on three sides by the Williamson Department store. As the story goes, the Quaker meeting received a letter from the Board of Directors of the Williamson Department Store that went as follows: “Dear Sirs: We wish you to know that the business of the Williamson Department Store has been expanding and that we require more space. We wish you to know that we intend to expand and your meeting house stands in our way. Therefore, we are willing to buy your Quaker meeting house for any amount you might name so that we might demolish your meeting house and expand.” The next day Williamson Department Store received a letter from the Quaker Meeting House that read like this: “Dear Sirs: We recognize that Williamson Department Store needs to expand. We also recognize that Williamson Department Store would like to purchase our meeting house. However, we have been on this spot longer than you have been on yours and that we have no intention of moving. And we wish you to know that we would be willing to buy Williamson Department Store for whatever price you might name.” And it was signed: Cadberry. Now Cadberry is the greatest maker of chocolates in England. And the senior Cadberry just happened to be a member of that little Quaker meeting house. Who do you think won this little confrontation? Now, asks English, what is the point of this little story? The point is that it’s not how big you are that is important, it’s whose name is on the bottom of the letter. And for those of us who are members of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the United Church of Christ, the name on the bottom of our letter is the God revealed in Jesus Christ!

As we move to a new chapter in the life of this Conference, I will be a constant and joyful reminder that the United Church of Christ has a vision of the God revealed in Jesus Christ and a vision of the Christian community that is our gift to the Church Universal. It is a belief in a God who has never stopped speaking or acting to bridge all that divides us and bind us together, irrespective of race or gender, class or religion, language or sexual orientation, into one global human family. It is a God who is slow to anger, but whose grace and love and generosity are always more than we are prepared to receive. It is a Church marked by its commitment to the unity of Christ’s Church and by its radical hospitality to the stranger. It is a Church that prizes diversity of thought and freedom of belief captured in the motto: in essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity. It is a Church that embraces the world and seeks justice for all its inhabitants.

By the world’s standards, it is not a big Church. But neither was that little Quaker meeting house. In all that we think and do in this year to come, may the Christ that we know and proclaim be our guide and may we be empowered to be God’s presence in this world.

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