

2020 Vision

A Three-Year Action Plan for the Michigan Conference UCC

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;’ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” Luke 10:27-28*

Our Vision

The Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ seeks to follow the call of our still speaking God as we live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus. As we follow this call, the Conference, Associations, and local congregations of the United Church of Christ in Michigan seek to initiate new mission in varied forms, and strengthen and enhance current mission.

This 2020 Vision will position the churches of the Michigan Conference to receive the best resources available and to find meaningful ways to participate in revitalizing mission and ministry by aiming together for:

- spiritual growth as individuals and as congregations
- congregational vitality marked by the energy of joy, enthusiasm, and inclusivity of all.
- leadership in congregations that is open, collaborative, empathetic, involved in our communities, and non-anxious in the face of change.
- prophetic witness that engages contemporary issues from a theological perspective that nurtures greater unity, ecumenism, interfaith partnering, and Open and Affirming spirit.
- financial resources for mission coupled with a strong strategy of investment in youth, in technology, in people, in communication, in leadership, in shared resources, and in mission.
- denominational branding that emphasizes participation in a movement rather than shoring up an institution.

Our Challenge

Our culture is moving through seismic changes in the ways that we relate to one another, our communities, our social and civic institutions, and our churches. The churches of the Michigan Conference experience this new reality in many ways: younger people are not going to church regularly; buildings are aging and in need of costly repairs; long-established modes of communication and organization are being supplanted, and; denominational structures are shrinking. Many congregations within the Michigan Conference have been in decline for a number of years; some will close in the next 5 to 10 years. Over the next few years if we do nothing we can easily expect the number of congregations to decline by 3% each year (the average rate of decline in denominational regions today).

We ignore this changing landscape at our peril. But with a strategy in place we can create an alternative: a bold, prophetic presence for the United Church of Christ in Michigan.

We must act immediately, clearly, and consistently to ensure this future. We must cultivate the leaders, build the infrastructure, and proclaim the Good News message of hope that will create a just and generous future for our congregations, our conference, and our communities.

Our Promise

We might be tempted to see the current changes in church life as ominous signs for many of our congregations. But that perspective misses the larger picture of hope emerging within our Conference. The Church is not dying; we are changing. That change brings new possibilities for experiencing God in our world and courageously embodying the Good News of Jesus that brings us all new life.

Many of our churches are closing; that means we have the opportunity to start new ones. Many of our churches are re-examining their ministry; that means we can initiate new strategies. Many of our clergy are retiring; that means we can explore new forms of leadership. Many of our communities are struggling with issues such as income and racial inequality, environmental destruction, crime, and illiteracy; that means our congregations can commit to ministries dedicated to community transformation. The best is yet to come for the churches of the Michigan Conference of the UCC!

Our Progress Thus Far

This 2020 Vision evolves from Michigan Conference planning and visioning efforts that span a decade. In recent years we have made significant progress in focus areas distilled from a 2011 planning process:

- We have fostered spiritual renewal through helping form clergy groups across the state.
- We have promoted congregational revitalization through providing access to *MissionInsite*, offering vitality speakers at Annual Meetings, and holding conference workshops on vitality.
- We have supported clergy through boundary training and coaching groups.
- We have sought to strengthen our prophetic voice through a survey of congregations and through five resolutions surrounding justice issues at annual meetings since 2013.
- We have supported stewardship through training and sending out OCWM Ambassadors and conducting trainings for church treasurers.
- We have increased our social media presence and produced “Faith for Thought” videos.
- Finally, in the interest of being more nimble, we have revised our Conference Bylaws.

In 2015 the Conference Board of Directors initiated a new period of envisioning that culminated at the Conference 2015 Annual Meeting. This Annual Meeting included conversations to gather thoughts, ideas and dreams from local church delegates.

Strategic Priorities

Our 2020 Vision expands and reimagines the Conference’s past work and incorporates the dreams and desires of local church members for their home settings. The Michigan Conference will continue focusing on priority areas drawn from the 2011 planning:

- Renew spiritually our core congregational members and clergy
- Revitalize congregations
- Support clergy
- Foster expanded missions and public/prophetic action

- Maximize financial assets
- Encourage new members for the United Church of Christ

Plan for Action

The people of the Michigan Conference are ready to take the next steps in ensuring a bright future for the Conference. To do this, we will invest in the following actions:

Renew spiritually our core congregational members and clergy

The Michigan Conference believes that a vital spiritual life among our congregations and leaders generates growth in many aspects of the church. We commit to supporting spiritual development within the Conference through the following:

Action Steps

- Stimulating rich worship through promoting opportunities to reflect on meaningful worship, grow skills, develop spiritual practices, and re-imagine aspects of worship.
- Seeking to connect teachers, youth advisors, and others interested in faith formation for mutual support and learning, and to encourage sharing ideas and best practices.
- Supporting efforts of local congregations to provide high-quality learning and mission opportunities for children and youth.
- Encouraging Safe Sanctuary policies and training in local congregations.
- Encouraging the formation and training of Pastoral Relations Committees in local congregations.
- Assessing and strengthening children and youth programming that is supported with Conference resources, including Michigan United Church of Christ Youth (MUCCY)

Revitalize congregations

The Michigan Conference envisions revitalization among our congregations, as well as new ministry initiatives in our midst. We will continue our current investment in revitalization through the following:

Action Steps

- Directing resources toward additional New Church starts.
- Holding one Vitality Day or Festival of Faith each year.
- Inviting and promoting revitalization speakers at Annual Meeting.
- Training and deploying Guides to work with congregations in reVision, Living Legacy, Search and Call, and Open and Affirming processes.
- Offering New Beginnings, coaching and reVision for congregations in each Quad.
- Engaging with Quad IV churches concerning the denomination's Living Legacy resource

Support Authorized Ministers

The Michigan Conference, along with our Associations and Church and Ministry Committees, recognizes the critical importance of supporting its authorized ministers. We will foster networks of collegial support through the following:

Action Steps

- Establishing Communities of Practice and encourage professional coaching.
- Re-establishing an annual clergy retreat.
- Investing in and supporting 20/30 Clergy Group.
- Continuing support for the development of Ecumenical Lay Leadership “academy”.
- Continuing ecumenical efforts of boundary training.
- Establishing racial justice training.

Foster expanded missions and public/prophetic action

The Michigan Conference and its congregations possess a lively tradition of working to create a more just world. We will continue and expand this witness through the following:

Action Steps

- Expanding interfaith understandings and alliances at the local and Conference levels.
- Encouraging congregations and Associations to develop resolutions that call us to wrestle with social justice issues in ways that prompt fresh thinking and action.
- Continuing to support social justice work on the congregational level through grants.
- Networking churches with similar interests and missions to encourage shared vision, shared resources, and shared efforts.
- Exploring possibilities for shared action and resources with other judicatories.
- Developing partnerships with national organizations for media training and resourcing for conference and local church leaders

Maximize financial assets

The Michigan Conference seeks to skillfully and faithfully steward its resources. We can work toward maximizing our financial assets through the following:

Action Steps

- Continuing and growing the OCWM Ambassador program.
- Seeking to maintain OCWM giving at 2015 levels.
- Finalizing the sale of Camp Talahi to the Camp Talahi Nature and Retreat Center.
- Reviewing at Board level all property assets of the Michigan Conference.
- Increasing assertiveness in outreach to Michigan churches that want to join the UCC.
- Exploring crowd-funding of special projects.
- Developing planned giving opportunities for the Conference and local churches.

Encourage New Members for the United Church of Christ

The Michigan Conference aims to effectively proclaim itself as a movement marked by justice, extravagant welcome, unity of purpose, diversity of beliefs and practices, courage, boldness, and service in community. We will strengthen our ability to do so through the following:

Action Steps

- Establishing a comprehensive communication plan for the Conference that leverages the resources created by the national UCC setting including the Still Speaking 2.0 campaign.

- Promoting opportunities for congregational leaders to learn about media relations, writing and presenting talking points, and developing key promotional tools for local congregations.
- Strengthening and promoting social networking, e-newsletter, and other electronic communications.

Key Roles

The success and impact of this 2020 Vision relies upon the covenantal relationships among the Michigan Conference, Associations, and local congregations. We must hold one another in mutual trust and honor while working together and walking together through challenging, transformative times. As we move toward our vision of hope and revitalization we know that responsibility for its fruition rests upon all the expressions of the United Church of Christ in Michigan. But we also know that this 2020 Vision requires the designation of some key roles:

Board of Directors will engage in dialogue with Mission Area Teams, Associations, and local churches to cultivate ownership of Vision and to develop partners in its implementation.

Budget and Finance Committee will aid and monitor Conference staff in coordinating expenditures and creating an annual budget that will meet the Vision needs.

Conference Staff will interpret the process from which this Vision evolves and work with Associations, congregations, and clergy to participate in its successful implementation.

Mission Area Teams will work diligently toward the action steps outlined in this Vision

Board of Directors, Mission Area Teams, Associations, Conference staff, congregations, and congregational leaders of the Michigan Conference will incorporate transparent processes and consistent, continuously improving mutual communication that strengthens our covenantal relationships in ministry and mission.

Success Metrics

- Renew spiritually our core congregational members and clergy
- Encourage MIUCC pastors and leaders to seek continuing education experiences and resources that deepen their theological understandings and challenge their biases (i.e. encourage congregations to participate in the national Conversations on Race).
- Attract participation from at least 10% of local congregations in Conference/Association-related children and youth programming on an annual basis by 2019.
- Revitalize congregations
- Directly contact at least 15% of local congregations annually re: availability of resources and guides appropriate for each phase of a congregational life cycle.
- Encourage 20% of churches to undertake a focused renewal process
- Support authorized ministers
- Encourage pastors to receive professional coaching relationship or peer cohort group so that at least 40% participate.
- Establish at least three Communities of Practice with trained facilitators by end of 2017.
- Foster expanded missions and public/prophetic action
- Develop partnerships with 2 national organizations who could provide resources and training opportunities for our clergy and lay leadership to be trained in using the media to reclaim our visible prophetic voice.

- Increase “likes” of Prophetic integrity Facebook page by 10-20% on an annual basis beginning in 2016.
- Increase frequency of posts on Facebook pages and Twitter to at least one/week by end of 2016.
- Maximize financial assets
- Complete sale of Camp Talahi by mid-2017.
- Grow OCWM by 3% over previous year beginning in 2017.
- Encourage new members for the United Church of Christ
- Increase number of unique visitors to website by 5%/year beginning in 2017.
- Increase engagement across Conference social media platforms by 5%/year beginning in 2017.
- Help establish an upward trend of participation (as measured by the congregation) in 10% of local congregations beginning in 2017.

Conclusion

Many of us have been leaders in the Church for years – long enough to give thanks for the powerful ways that the Church has shaped the world we live in and long enough to recognize that we need to work differently in the future. Our current religious structures served us well for a time; now we need new ways – additional ways – of living together in congregations and as people of faith to act on behalf of creating a radically inclusive and justice-minded world.

Pastor Mark Trotter once said, *“All of us need a purpose that is large enough to include God and long enough to include eternity. We need a purpose that makes life worth living and gives meaning to our dying. We need a purpose that calls forth our true stature and elicits the hidden fire within us. We are called to a life with imagination and courage because we have a purpose that endures past sunset.”* The Michigan Conference of the UCC is called to support the very congregations and leaders who give shape to the kind of religious and human experience that we would wish for generations to come. All of us want to give our time, talent and resources to something that matters – something that gives purpose to our living and endures past sunset. Together, we will ensure that the testimony of the Michigan Conference UCC is one of relentless hope and unfailing honesty. We are not ignoring the realities of a rapidly changing religious context in our communities. Instead, we are embracing the call to be pioneers of a new age of faith, embracing new practices and challenging ourselves to deeper spiritual authenticity. The days ahead of us will not always be easy, but the calling we accept rests in the story of Good News as shown to us by Jesus and that inspires us all.

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