

State of the Conference Address
Reverend Shari Prestemon, Conference Minister
Annual Meeting 2017

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Very early in my tenure here in the Minnesota Conference, nearly 4 years ago, I heard something that I still think about often. Michael Piazza, who was at that time with the Center for Progressive Renewal, was doing a presentation to our Board of Directors that November of 2013. He said, “Your job is to be midwives of hope.” What he meant was that our job as a Conference, our task as the Church wherever we may be, is to facilitate the birth of new life and fresh possibility in the world. It is to cast into the world the Good News of a future with hope.

Midwives of hope. That seems like a remarkably appropriate vision for ourselves in these days we are living in, doesn't it? And an enormously challenging one. Even in our own churches the prevailing narrative these days is often not one of hope but of gloom and doom. We have our own litany of anxiety... about declining memberships, squeezed and scarce resources, the diminishing role of the Church in our society in general. And for some of you, that

narrative is steeped in hard reality. Some of you harbor profound worry that the church you have loved so much, perhaps where generations of your family have worshipped, may not survive another decade. At local, Conference, and national settings of the UCC, we wrestle with the intense challenges and change that confront today's Church, and all of us run an insane pace just trying to keep up. We have a hard time being 'midwives of hope' when so much grief about our own trend lines and change consumes us. What's more, these days, for many, there is also a narrative of genuine despair about the state of the world we are living in, a world increasingly characterized by hateful/angry rhetoric, polarized debate, and what some days feels like a deeply disturbing assault on many of the values we as individuals and we as Church hold dear.

This 29th chapter of Jeremiah that we've based our Annual Meeting theme on was directed at a people who probably experienced similar feelings in their time. This was a letter written to the Babylonian exiles. Jeremiah acknowledges the difficulty of their present situation and even says they should settle in because their captivity will be long. And yet Jeremiah urges them to be a

people of hope, to trust in the future that God has promised them.

In my time with you this afternoon, I want to give you a glimpse of where I see God's enduring promises at work in our life together in the Minnesota Conference, the things that give me hope for an exciting future ahead.

First, I want to tell you about some important work the staff and Board of Directors has done over the last few months to identify fresh purpose for our Conference over the next three years. Back in 2012, the Board of Directors adopted a newly articulated core purpose, core values, and a set of 4 strategic priorities, or bold inspirational goals, that would shape and drive the work of the Conference moving forward. Over the last year, the staff spent considerable time and creative energy thinking about how God is calling us anew to live out those priorities in this present moment. We agreed that the ministries we imagined would tend to the needs of the Church as we understand them today and also make room for the church we discern is emerging before us. Lastly, we wanted our work to produce real and measurable outcomes.

In dialogue with the Board of Directors, the staff created 8 strategic objectives that will guide our work over the next three

years, and the Board approved our vision in November of last year. This afternoon I want to share this work with you & invite you to offer your feedback, your interest, and your questions with me and other staff as this work evolves over these next months and years. Rest assured, we will continue to share in ministry with you in ways we always have: preparation and care of authorized ministers, care and resourcing of local congregations, supporting search and call processes in your churches, our ministries at Pilgrim Point Camp and all the other ways we routinely share in ministry together. But these strategic objectives represent new initiatives that we believe will enrich our ministry overall and strengthen the entire Body of Christ in the Minnesota Conference. So here they are:

Strategic Objectives

CREATE & SUSTAIN HEALTHY, VITAL CONGREGATIONS (strategic priority)

1) Identify/support two or more post-modern, “3.0” communities of faith by the end of 2019

- What’s a 3.0 church? Our GMP John Dorhauer uses this metaphor a lot, including in his book Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World. It’s a shift from the model of church nearly all of us in this room know. Typically, a 3.0 church has no building of its own and no full-time pastor. It might take place in a coffee shop or in someone’s living room, or revolve

entirely around mission or community engagement, or any number of other somewhat informal settings. A 3.0 community of faith looks less like an institution than it does a dynamic movement.

- Why have we chosen this as a strategic objective? This doesn't mean that we're going to abandon the model of church all of us here know and love. Far from it. But we want and need to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in fresh ways, attuned to the ways She 'shows up' in unexpected places. This provides a way to reach those who may be longing for a spiritual or religious dimension in their lives but are unlikely to step through the doors of one of our churches. It challenges us to seek new ways of sharing our enduring Christian message with those who won't be attracted by a traditional church setting.

2) Engage at least 3 congregations in each of 2018 & 2019 in an intentional revitalization/renewal program

- We've had a little experience with this over last two years when 9 congregations have participated in New Beginnings. We've seen the value of helping congregations devote intensive time to deliberate discernment about their futures. We know we want to make this commitment to congregations who are at a sort of "fork-in-the-road moment" in their life span and give them tools to identify how God is calling them now.

INCREASE CAPACITY FOR COMPASSIONATE SERVICE & PROPHETIC WITNESS (Strategic Priority)

Strategic Objective

3) Engage at least 10% of our congregations in use of the UCC's "White Privilege" curriculum, 2017-2019

- This signals our continuing commitment to our 2014 resolution asking the Conference to strengthen our resolve to dismantle racism
- "White Privilege" curriculum produced by the national UCC in 2016.
- For a predominantly white Conference such as ours, we recognize that our commitment to racial justice must begin with an honest look at ourselves and how we participate in and benefit from structures of racism.

EQUIP CLERGY & LAITY TO LEAD (Strategic Priority 3)

Strategic Objective

4) By year-end 2018, launch a lay leadership development program that grows our capacity across the Conference for strong lay leadership, provides for multiple paths to authorized ministry, and invigorates/equips the Church for the future

- This one is a big one..and a very important one!
- Did you know that fully 50% of our own congregations in the MNC can only afford a part-time pastor? Are you aware that increasing numbers of people who feel called to ministry can't entertain the traditional seminary education path? A combination of these and other factors is creating a mounting concern about the future leadership capacity of our Church, not just in the MN Conference but across the UCC, and we want to be proactive about addressing it.
- Includes a Young Adult Service Community component
- Rev. Vicki Wunsch hired as Director of Leadership Development in March and work has begun.

5) Beginning in 2017, identify/develop resources to support and train those in governance leadership roles in congregations

- From time to time we hear from those of you who have been elected to serve as Moderators, Presidents, and Treasurers in your congregations that you wish you had a better idea of what is expected of you. This objective is in response to that desire.

FAITH FORMATION ACROSS THE GENERATIONS (strategic priority)
Strategic Objectives

- 6) During 2017-2018 engage up to 5 congregational leadership teams in a 12-month coaching & mentoring process.**
- 7) During 2018, launch a 6-month leadership formation initiative for up to 25 faith formation leaders**

These next two initiatives reflect the enthusiastic commitment of our new Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation, Kevin Brown, to help congregations go deeper in their faith formation ministries. In the course of this work, congregations will fully embrace lifelong spiritual formation as a central task of their faith communities, and faith formation leaders will benefit from intensive peer support and spiritual renewal.

And finally, the last of the strategic objectives:

- 8) By the end of 2018 recruit and support a network of content creators from across the UCC of theologically progressive faith formation resources and launch an accessible distribution platform for these resources.**

This objective arose from comments we received from pastors and from some discussion in Board of Directors meetings. These comments identified the challenge of finding theologically progressive faith formation resources for use in our congregations. Utilizing our amazing Ashley Endowment asset to support this work, our intent is to provide something that will respond to this need and benefit the whole of the Church. We have the capacity to be a leader in the United Church of Christ on a whole host of faith formation issues, and we intend to lead. Stay tuned!

So there you have it. Eight strategic objectives we will implement over the next three years. These represent bold, fresh, purposeful vision for our Conference. I believe there is something there for everybody in our Conference, some work that speaks to you and your congregation's interests and needs, opportunities that are compelling and will invite your full engagement. As your Conference Minister, I'm convinced that just as God has a plan for us of possibility and promise, it's our responsibility to have a plan for ourselves that allows God's purposes to emerge before us. This work is an important part of that plan; I look forward to diving into this amazing work with you as these ministries unfold.

This strategic work really is one place where I see God's enduring promises 'showing up' in our life together in the Minnesota Conference. But now I want to step away from strategic plans and have a bit of a heart-to-heart with you....

I want you to know that when I look for that future with hope that God has promised us, I often see it in you. Your ministries, your perseverance, your leadership, and your witness.....are signs for me of God's abundant and undaunted hope.

I saw hope when Conference staff gathered with nearly 50 pastors over the course of 5 "ministry conversations" we hosted across the Conference and saw in those pastors such faithfulness and determination and heartfelt discernment. I see great hope when you describe with such excitement what your congregation is doing in your community to build new relationships and engage in mission in whole new ways. I see it when some of you head to the streets and to the Capitol to advocate for justice and equity in our communities and state. And I recognize it in the kind of prayerful, thoughtful conversations you are having in all sorts of settings of

your churches about how your faith intersects with your world and where you're feeling challenged to heed God's call in your life.

- Thank you for all you do and for all you are, day in and day out. You are hope personified.

We need to be midwives of hope for each other as often and in as many ways as we can, because these are extremely challenging times we are living in. The divide between rural and urban America has never been more stark (and I hear echoes of that truth from some of you when you talk to me about how you experience that same divide in our own Conference). The polarization of opinion and values is vast and we seem unable to broker any meaningful kind of exchange between contrasting ideas.

Roger Cohen wrote an OpEd piece in the New York Times recently titled "Americans, Let's Talk" that described our current political climate and national temperament this way: "There is no viable vocabulary. There is no shared reality... The end point of hardening fracture and mutual incomprehension is violence," he continued, "like the fatal stabbing of 2 men by a white supremacist on a Portland commuter train." And he concluded: "America needs the conversations it's not having."

Friends, we need these conversations in our churches, too. In the first weeks and months following the election, I had a number of conversations with pastors who were struggling with how to best minister to congregations who were not of one mind, where people in the pews and the pastors in the pulpit represented the diversity of politics and thought in our nation as a whole. I was inspired by the authentic way these pastors were really asking themselves what it might look like to minister to their people in this fractured context. And I have prayed about and wondered in all these months since what the role of our Church, of your congregations and this Minnesota Conference, is in this particular moment in our nation and world.

And here's my conclusion: our kind of church -- the United Church of Christ -- is made for just such a time as this.

- Remember the motivation out of which our denomination was born? Two denominations, the Congregational Christian church and the Evangelical & Reformed church, coming together to become the United Church of Christ in 1957. And what scripture passage did these faithful engineers of ecumenism choose as the anchor and brand for this new

United Church of Christ? “That all may be one”, a phrase from the prayer Jesus fervently prayed on behalf of his disciples toward the end of his life, according to the Gospel of John. And here’s the thing: this enterprise they hatched in 1957 was meant to be a continuing commitment for our denomination; we were to be a church “united and uniting”. So you see, this ministry of bridging divides and bringing a unifying spirit to all we do is in the very fiber of our being; we were literally created to do this work. And there’s never been a better or more important time than now to exercise that essential part of who we are. We were made for such a time as this.

- We talk a lot in the UCC about extravagant welcome. You know how it goes: ‘no matter who you are or where you on life’s journey, you are welcome here!’ That radical hospitality is what drives us to be the open and affirming, multi-racial, multi-cultural, accessible to all, immigrant welcoming, Creation-caring kind of church we strive and hope to be. And I love that about us! I know many of you do too. But here’s where I want to caution us a bit, because sometimes that zeal

for justice and extravagant welcome can get a little dogmatic and cause us to appear a little overly righteous. We should claim our values, rooted in our faith, with passion and commitment, no question. But we must practice humility and grace as well, for the sake of those conversations Roger Cohen says we need so much to have, in our nation and (I would add) in our churches and communities.

In most of our congregations, there is diversity of thought and opinion. And even if you think most people are essentially of one mind in your congregation, that's of course not true as soon as you step outside your church doors. It is a delicate dance, I admit, to be our authentic selves and hold fast to our deeply held values while also making room for the voices of those who see things so differently. But we need to ask ourselves whether our trademark hospitality extends to those with whom we disagree. I truly believe that this is a challenge that we as churches must be willing to take on, that creating space for respectful, open conversation is something we as church must be able to model....particularly because it's very hard to find anywhere else where it IS

happening. And I am certain that we in the United Church of Christ --- a united and uniting church -- have been made for this challenge, in this time.

Friends, this is a moment summoning the very best in us, calling us to full discernment about how it is God is calling us to be Christ's Church today. And I see evidence everywhere I look in our Conference that we are up to the challenge.

Embrace this moment, Minnesota Conference. Be the Church God has crafted us to be. Be a church driven by the stuff of our DNA: a hunger for unity, a commitment to a full and generous hospitality, an extravagant love for all God's people.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Prayer – O God, we pray for the courage to embrace your promises and trust in a future with hope. We pray for the imagination to step out of our woe-is-us, scarcity-bound narratives and see with fresh eyes the possibilities for new life you put before us. Empower us to be the Church you have created and called us to be in just such a

moment as this. May we, indeed, be “widwives of hope”. We pray it in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.