



## **State of the Michigan Conference**

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**May 16, 2008**

The e-mail shocked me into reality. Screaming from the computer screen, in all capital letters, was a four-letter word. L-A-S-T. Reminding this procrastinating Conference Minister the deadline was fast approaching for his *Kent's Korner* column, our editor was pleading: "I need your LAST article..."

Famous people have last words recorded for posterity. Singing artists make money off their last tours. Much to-do is made over NASCAR drivers during their last laps. Intellectually I knew, existentially it had yet to sink in, the day would come to pen my last editorial for our newspaper.

Now the day has come to deliver my last "State of the Michigan Conference" remarks. While I have not been counting down the days, it is clear that my time in this office is nearing completion. I need to provide you with an accounting of my stewardship of this sacred office. So please permit me to reflect on the last twelve years, trying to create a balance sheet of what has and has not been accomplished, and then offer a last word, or two, or maybe even three before moving on.

Let me begin by offering thanks and praise to God for the privilege of this call. Simply put, I have grown to love the churches and clergy of this Conference, along with the ministry and mission we do together. Early on people would ask: "Are you still having fun?" Not every moment has been filled with fun. But there have been times of laughter and delight. And no day has ever passed without that blessing of joy which came in serving God by serving you.

The work entrusted to Conference Ministers is the ministry of the episcopate, the ministry of oversight, as the late Bill Hulteen put it: the ministry of seeing the big picture. Conference Ministers are called (1) to embody the unity of the church, (2) to teach the faith of the church through the ages, (3) to lead the mission of the church in a particular geographic region, and (4) to provide administrative and pastoral oversight for churches and clergy. In the ecumenical world, these are the responsibilities entrusted to bishops, though, as John Thomas once observed, we in the UCC seem to have an allergy to that word.

Within the Michigan Conference our Board of Directors has identified administration of the search and call process as having the highest priority. Why? Because the securing of quality pastoral leadership, more than any other factor, carries the potential to impact significantly the health of our local congregations. During my tenure some 125 of our 160 churches (nearly 80%) have been involved in calling new pastoral leadership...some more than once.

Twelve years ago I discovered seminarians being cautioned not to go to Michigan because we were a troubled conference. By God's grace that reputation has been reversed. Unlike most other conferences, despite fewer and fewer ministerial profiles going into circulation, over the years we have experienced a significant increase in the number of pastors submitting their names here for prayerful consideration by our search committees...and presently that higher number has remained stable despite Michigan's economic condition.

Twelve years ago we were a Conference engaged in a decades old fight over our outdoor ministry program. In each of the three years prior to your calling me, we had experienced \$100,000 losses and we were but two years away from shutting it down completely for lack of funds. How well I remember the very first question from the floor prior to the ballot: "What are YOU going to do to save Camp Talahi?"

I remember answering that that was the wrong question. I replied that the right question is: "What mission do we hear God calling us to perform together? Discernment of mission always must be primary, for only

when we have clarity regarding that can we determine what property we need.”

A year later the vision regarding that mission became clear: to immerse persons in quality educational programming which is God-grounded, Christ-centered, and Spirit-sustained, to the end that disciples can be nurtured in the faith to change the world. The VISION Corporation was formed to carry out that mission, not only at Camp Talahi with children and youth, but in other settings, and with adults. New funding streams were created. Commitments were made by local churches to send campers and other learners. Clergy had time written into their calls to provide leadership.

As a consequence, programming increased in quantity and quality, facilities were improved at Camp Talahi, followed in time by our reaching the goal of offering VISION educational events on a monthly basis. Repeatedly the largest youth delegations in the country to the UCC National Youth Event came from Michigan. Three hundred UCC youth from the Great Lakes Conferences gathered at Olivet for a regional youth event. A hundred Michigan UCC youth gathered up north to explore the possibility of God calling them into ministry. International delegations of youth and youth workers were sent and hosted to explore how to fulfill more completely the baptismal vow to nurture God’s children in the faith. Work camps were sent to New Orleans and to the Back Bay Mission. Most importantly, lives were transformed as God’s presence was felt in the diversity of the wider Christian community.

Bows Lake, however, remained severely underutilized. Over time VISION Covenant annual gifts diminished. So this Conference mustered the courage to make the difficult strategic decision to sell that property with the promise of a true endowment being created. While yet to happen in these market conditions, the sale of that property and the creation of that endowment remain absolutely critical for the sake of the VISION’s God-given mission.

The first phone call I received on the first day I served as Conference Minister was from Leona Riebling, telling me she had bought a plane ticket for me to lead a delegation from the Detroit Metropolitan Association to negotiate a partnership with the Congregational Churches of Mexico. That new partnership joined our long term partnerships with the Pomerian Church of the Union in Germany (held in trust by our United Northern Association), as well as with the Visiyas Jurisdiction of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (entrusted to our Covenant Association).

While the hope-for partnership with the seminary in Zimbabwe never materialized, given insufficient funds and ever present danger for traveling, truly the Conference’s life has been enriched by the courage in the struggle for justice we have witnessed in the Philippines where church leaders are being martyred; by the perseverance of the church in Germany which has survived under fascism, socialism, and atheism; and by the energy of the Mexican church, which asked me very embarrassing questions about why the Michigan Conference had no plan to start new churches.

Twelve years later a Detroit area mission congregation of the Church of South India has joined our UCC family; the Potter’s House new church start in Traverse City is likely to charter as a full congregation by this fall; the Journey is our new church venture in Holland; a Macomb County new church start is just in its infancy; and an agreement has been reached with Trinity UCC in Chicago to create a new church in Benton Harbor. There is an entrepreneurial nature to new churches. Launching them is not without cost and not all mature into established churches. But there are now five new congregations being born into the Michigan Conference, where none had been before.

At the same time, I regret that we have lost some twenty-four churches during my tenure. The loss of the vast majority, unlike in other Conferences, has little to do with controversial prophetic pronouncements. The primary causes are threefold: (1) the congregation lost its sense of mission, failed to reach out to the community, and dwindled in members, funds, and spirit until it had to shut its doors; or (2) the congregation experienced extreme internal conflict, causing healthy leaders to leave; or (3) the congregation called a pastor who could not embrace the ethos of our denomination, and so intentionally led the congregation away.

I need also say that only a small part of the total membership decline of our Conference over the last

twelve years – some 13,000 members – can be attributed to the loss of those twenty-four churches. Overwhelmingly our losses come from the other 160 remaining churches that, even with the “God Is Still Speaking” campaign, we still have not been able to help find an effective means of evangelism they were willing to embrace.

Accompanying such a loss of membership, of course, come concerns regarding stewardship. Since 1996 per capita giving in support of our local churches has increased by \$330 per year. That’s 70%. By contrast, since 1996 per capita giving in support of the ministry and mission of the wider church has increased by less than \$5 per year, with most of that going into special offerings rather than basic support. To help both local churches and the Conference in our funding efforts, a strategic decision was made to spend accumulated assets to employ a Fund Development Officer for a period of at least five years. That person is on staff and in place now, ready for you to utilize his expertise. But it will not be a quick turnaround, human nature being what it is.

Twelve years ago, due to long-standing misunderstandings regarding use of the funds from the selling of Pilgrim Haven, due to a computer crash that left benevolences unpaid on a timely basis, and due to promises being made of grants beyond what the Conference reserves were generating, there was a significant loss of trust in the Conference finances.

Today I can report that, throughout my tenure, every attempt has been made to make the Conference financial dealings as transparent as possible; all expenditures have been made in a manner consistent with donor intent; all promised grants have been paid to local churches in a timely fashion; all benevolent gifts have been transmitted in full; all reports from our auditors have been clean; income has exceeded expenses in all but four years, and in all but two years when capital transactions are included; the St. Paul endowment fund has been added to support the VISION program; to help our seminarians with their education, the Immanuel Scholarship endowment fund has been added and now has grown to the million dollar level; the South Church restricted fund was both added and then distributed to Kent County Habitat, UCOM, and Pilgrim Manor, and now is funding the new church start in Holland; and our Church Development endowment fund has grown to \$2.6 million. The total assets of the Michigan Conference have grown from \$3 million to nearly \$7 million. Significant ministry is being underwritten by these restricted and endowed monies.

However, the amount of unrestricted funds we have in reserve has been diminished to \$125,000 for the VISION and \$10,000 for the Conference. What is the primary source of the Conference’s unrestricted funds? Your annual OCWM gifts.

As a consequence of level or lowered annual giving from our congregations to OCWM Basic Support, we have had no choice but to manage the budget by reducing staff, enriching job descriptions, and now the restructuring of “A New Way for A New Day.”

Administratively, “A New Way for A New Day” refocuses our attention on five mission areas consistent with our Mission Statement -- spiritual discernment, prophetic integrity, compassionate generosity, core infrastructure, and vital growth – and, consistent with the manner in which volunteers prefer to serve today, it replaces commissions and committees with project task groups.

Per your approval at last year’s annual meeting, before us this year is a new Spending Plan for Mission based on the mission areas, and bylaw amendments allowing for implementation of the restructure on January 1, 2009.

The Board of Directors has determined that a Transitional Conference Minister shall be employed to focus on implementation of the restructure through all the stages, so that it is functioning when the next Conference Minister is called. Plans have been put into place for securing staffing through the interim period, and part time persons will be hired for the short term until the next Interim Associate Conference Minister search is successful.

There will be no Nominating Committee report brought before you today. During the final half year prior to the new bylaws going into effect, we are asking that those serving now be permitted to continue through the end of this year. A Special Conference Meeting will be called to introduce the Transitional Conference Minister, elect leaders for the new structure, and be updated on progress made. What we need at this meeting is your help in creating a pool of names for a nominating task group to bring forward a slate for the new structure.

Transition times are sometimes messy. Curve balls come and must be caught. As the Board of Directors takes the lead, your prayerful support is much needed.

Also coming before you at this meeting is a proposed resolution on adoption equality. During my tenure, the Michigan Conference has taken prophetic actions to support affirmative action, to combat racism, to protect the waters of the Great Lakes, to stop the killing of Mourning Doves, to demand criminal justice, to oppose the introduction of discriminatory language into Michigan's constitution, to stand against the violence being perpetrated against our sisters and brothers in the Philippines, and to call for access to health care. I need to report that neither the Governor nor the leaders of the legislature have chosen to acknowledge or to respond to our health care resolution.

The Michigan Conference instituted anti-racism training utilizing the resources of the Disciples of Christ. In turn we have instituted boundary training for both denominations. 472 Michigan clergy and lay-leaders have been through boundary training in the last nine years, with the number of disciplinary reviews having dropped over my tenure from three-a-year to one-every-three years.

Following the burning in Benton Harbor, the Conference made a commitment to minister with that community...and you have done so with grants made, a Habitat House built, and a new church start in the center of the city.

You even are going to host General Synod, though I fear I have lost my room in the hotel.

I could, and have, and do go on and on and on about this beloved Conference. But now is the time, not only for this State of the Michigan Conference report, but also for my ministry here, to come to an end. If I may be permitted yet one more word...

Along with giving thanks to God, stating his theological convictions, posing directions for ethical and ecclesial problem solving, and sending greetings to particular individuals, St. Paul's letters typically include three more elements.

He gives those he has served a warning. My warning to you is this: be careful of the so-called renewal groups which have emerged in the mainline denominations. The Biblical Witness Fellowship consistently has proclaimed a false witness. The UCC Truths website is focused on destroying the reputation of denominational leaders. The Faithful and Welcoming movement is neither faithful to the gospel nor welcoming of all God's children. Read *Hard Ball on Sacred Ground* to learn the connection between such groups and those with great wealth who strive, for their own political reasons, to silence the social justice witness of the church. Read *Steeple-Jacking* to learn how wolves in sheep's clothing are moving into the UCC for the purpose of stealing our congregations.

Paul also gives an encouragement. My encouragement parallels Paul's to his beloved congregation in Philippi: *"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."*

Then Paul ends with a blessing. You already know the blessing I extend to you in Christ's name. You have heard it often. Receive it once more. My final last word to you. Peace and Joy!