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SOC 2009 President's Report
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I recall watching the presidential elections this year and hearing the announcers remind us viewers that at a particular time, the outgoing president would address the American public in his farewell speech. My thoughts were, oh well. What is there left for him to say? He is old news. And in Isaiah's prophetic and stirring words, "old things have passed away, behold I make all things new..." Change is coming; change is here. This was probably the first and only time I felt a special kinship to former President Bush, no disrespect intended. But, for real? What can I possibly say now that will have any affect on my constituency when they are already looking forward to the new? Probably not much, so I will not say much. It is my hope that these few words will rekindle the love and commitment to the Southern Conference that many of us professed to have had, well - whenever.

From the fall of 2006 through the fall of 2007, I participated in a "Courage to Lead" seasonal retreat series, developed by Parker Palmer. Each session was designed to help participants find ways of being wholly her or him self, in any given season. We were encouraged to wrestle, truthfully and honestly, with where we are on life's journey, acknowledging that we cannot lead others until we know who we are, thereby obtaining the courage to lead. The titles of our particular sessions were: Discovering the Seeds of True Self (Fall 2006); Embracing the Paradox of Dormancy and Deep Growth (Winter 2007); Renewal in the Midst of Muck and Mire (Spring 2007); Living an Abundant Life (Summer 2007); Reaping the Harvest (Fall 2007).

I note these sessions, recognizing that you will not get the full benefit of the retreat from merely naming them. However, I bring to your attention my final reflections as President of our beloved Conference, using these titles as analogies for my words. When I joined the Board of Directors as Vice-President in June 2005, I believe our Conference was struggling through two seasons: Fall and Winter. We were a body of people challenged by our identity as the United Church of Christ, and living in a constant paradox of dormancy and deep growth. In many ways, we have grown as a Conference. We know who we are (though some might still harbor uncertainties and doubts as to our true identity). We have begun to embody our identity in ways which continue to challenge us, uniting and unifying us as the church, on one hand, while instilling feelings of alienation and ostracism, on the other. I submit to you that this stage of knowing yet not knowing is completely natural. As we learned during our sessions, the seasons of our lives (of our life as the Southern Conference) are not measured by months or calendar years. Each of us must give ourselves the time needed to progress through each season. Our Conference must do likewise. As the struggle is a constant one, the paradox of dormancy (seemingly doing nothing and getting no where) while experiencing deep growth which we embody during the season of winter is a most encouraging one. Like a tree whose leaves turn brown and fall away from it, whose branches and limbs appear barren and forlorn, the tree who seems to sway and bend almost to the ground, a miracle is taking place in the deep recesses of its roots. No one can see what is happening. The lumberjack has already marked it off as lumber for houses in the spring. Only, what was perceived as dead and no longer viable in winter is not what *is* by the spring.

So, too, our beloved Southern Conference! We are not stagnant. Deep growth is happening in our roots. Our love for this Conference has been the miracle that has sparked and cultivated this new growth. In the midst of our struggles and challenges, we have embraced new churches into our

midst. Some of the churches who once discerned a need to come out from among us, have been led by the Spirit to reunite with us in the struggle. Churches who were withholding OCWM have found meaningful ways to once again contribute to the ministry of the Southern Conference, either directly through OCWM, Friends of the Conference, special offering designations, to name a few. Voices that at one time were perceived as unwelcome at the table have been included in major ways in Conference life and ministry. Students continue to enroll and graduate from the Pastoral Leadership Development Program; many of them have been called to serve churches as pastors, Christian Education Leaders, or in other ministerial capacities. The Board of Directors has appointed a new Task Force to delve into ways we are in ministry as a Conference and, with the help of the members of the Conference, recommend a plan for our life together over the next five years. This Task Force is to consider structure, finances, ministry, leadership, vision, and mission.

We are not dormant, and yet, perhaps we are, as we continue the struggle of self-identity and the work of discerning our life together as the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ. This paradox of dormancy and deep growth is a good place to be. Growth is happening in our roots, and as we struggle through the muck and the mire, at times we might get stuck in it. But know this, we will live. The prophet Ezekiel has left these words for us; they are our harbinger of hope. Hear them and may the Spirit of God speak to each of us individually and collectively, and may we discern God's good and perfect will for our lives. *"...He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." Ezekiel 37:3-6 (NRSV)*

We are on our way to summer, "Living an Abundant Life." Scarcity will not be named among us. When we come full circle, we will reap an abundant harvest, a Conference flowing with promise, with milk and honey. I will not be your President when we get there, yet I will get there with you. And we will shout "hallelujah" together as we dance and praise the God who still speaks, who says to us, "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your good..." And who also says, "I will never leave nor forsake you. I have called you by name, Southern Conference, you are mine." Let us march into victory as we become the Conference God has purposed for us to be.

Thank you, all of you, for this opportunity to serve as your President. To the Board of Directors, I have especially enjoyed working with you. May you continue to struggle and wrestle with the challenges we face as the Southern Conference, knowing with God's help, "we shall live!" Your labor is not in vain.

Blessings and peace,