

New Occasions Teach New Duties...

Hope for the Future – A Statement of Mission

The old hymn of the church reminds us that “new occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth.” These are times that call for new ways of being the Southern Conference, with new priorities and higher levels of covenantal relationships among our churches, members, associations, conference, staff and the board structures we share. These are times to trust and celebrate that God is at hand in the work we do together. Having considered the work of the “*Listen to Hear*” conference wide self study document and the work of the “*Committee of Twelve*,” we journey forward. Together, we bring forth a new sense of collaboration and put aside the conflict that has been so much a part of our conference life the past few years. During these times faithfulness is a higher goal than mere success. What moves, motivates, inspires and centers us is the Still Speaking God. God still has a fresh and vital word to say to us, even in these times when some would declare that God is silent or has spoken. It is imperative that we remember from where we have come, but also seek a new vision of God’s future for us. In this time of challenge and change, we will hold each other in prayer, trusting that the Holy Spirit’s guidance will sustain us and uphold us. If we do this, we can claim God’s certain promise, “I will never leave or forsake you.”

Certain prayerfully clear tenets of understanding should guide our work, over the next few years. While these following covenantal statements are not written on tablets of stone, they should be taken seriously as we seek to build a brighter and more faithful future for the Southern Conference. These statements are important to help guide our work and amplify our new sense of community.

- We affirm that Jesus is the sole head of the church.

To declare this point again moves us to understand the importance of being evangelists in our day. We will build churches. We will spread the gospel of Jesus Christ with enthusiasm and vitality. In our work we will seek to brand the Southern Conference as a church that embraces the understanding that “God is still speaking.” We will speak about our faith in the language of our time and speak with boldness and with new energy. We will inspire and teach our people how to evangelize unashamedly and eagerly testify to the hope of God within us.

- We encourage every person and church in the Southern Conference to strive to love each other, with all our many differences.

We often celebrate the diversity that is present in multiple ways in the Southern Conference. We tend to believe that diversity among us is our greatest strength, but sometimes act as if it is a liability. Finding ways to reach across lines of difference shall be our goal. We will do so, striving to empower acts of kindness, justice and peace among us rather than harbor and hide our fears, judgment and insecurities about one another. In doing this work, we believe we will be better

stewards, evangelists and more faithful to the mandates of our Savior. We will seek to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds. And we will love our neighbors as ourselves.

- We call ourselves to be in closer covenant and have higher and mutual accountability.

Closer covenant and higher expectations and mutual accountability are what bind us together and are central to our core. The bar should be raised. Our work is to lessen division among us. We shall seek to hold one another more accountable for the work we share. We will use words; take actions that spark love rather than anger or mistrust. We will have higher expectations of what membership in the Southern Conference and the United Church of Christ is; what “in good standing” means or what it means to be a “full covenantal partner.”

- We encourage all of our churches to be an active part of the Southern Conference and the United Church of Christ.

We know that several churches have made a decision to leave the United Church of Christ over the last few years. We regret their choice, but wish them well in their future endeavors. However, we see a brighter, clearer and faithful future ahead for us and we encourage every church that remains in covenant with the Southern Conference, to recommit and redouble their efforts at being an active part in the life of the United Church of Christ, the Southern Conference and their own local ecumenical community. Each church is encouraged to teach again (some for the first time in a generation or more) the history and polity of the United Church of Christ. Tell our own faith story and connect it to God’s story. We encourage pastors and lay leaders to teach as if the oldest member and the youngest child are hearing about the United Church of Christ for the first time. We encourage the teaching of the remarkable “firsts” that are the United Church of Christ and the Southern Conference, but also teaching the inconvenient truths and significant struggles we have endured. We trust that people will make healthy and positive decisions when they are provided with trustworthy, responsible and factual information. In broader and more real ways, Christian Education ministries in our local churches need to be vital work too. The stories of Jesus and the stories of the church are important to recall as stories connected. We believe that members of the Southern Conference will have great affinity for the work, mission and financial stability of the United Church of Christ, when the past and present are known, when the stories of Jesus are taught and when both are fairly interpreted.

- We covenant to do all that we can to move the Southern Conference to financial stability, immediately.

While we know that money does not drive us, we know that it is an important fuel to move us forward in our collective commitments and obligations. We are in this struggle together. Every local church should ask itself a basic question, that is, whether the financial commitment made to the Southern Conference and the United Church of Christ is at an acceptable level to fairly and faithfully support the work of the Southern Conference. Are the financial covenants we make currently at a level that will sustain the Southern Conference going forward? Is my local church doing its part, financially? With all the ways a local church is asked to make community-wide benevolent commitments these days, is the Southern Conference at a high memory level when mission decisions are made? (*Fact: \$125,000 additional OCWM income from our 225 churches would arrest the financial challenge the SOC has faced for over a decade.*) Each local church is

asked to understand that their giving toward Our Church's Wider Mission heightens the ability of the Southern Conference to be a healthy and a vigorous partner through the many important arenas in and beyond the Southern Conference. Working together is the key. To work to offer local congregational strategies to help local churches become more active partners with the Southern Conference is a goal. Doing so blesses all of us in the Southern Conference in greater ways, the wider church and the global community we mutually serve too.

- We declare our collective table to be fully inclusive in every way, shape and form, despite the discomfort that may present to any one of us. At this collective table, no one shall dominate the conversation, and we shall strive for all to have equal voice.

No longer shall the Southern Conference be sidetracked by conversations that restrict initiatives to be inclusive and a welcoming community. Being inclusive shall not be a hindrance to our ability to work together in ministry and mission or to being in community together. The conversation of race, gender and sexual orientation shall not be thwarted but seasoned by the mandate of the biblical golden rule. In the spirit of inclusive understanding, we will also include those who choose not to embrace all people for one reason or another, or who restrict any person because of their own heartfelt theological understanding. However, we want to use our energy and influence to work on those things that will bind us in community rather than those things that divide our Southern Conference community theologically. We therefore call ourselves to expand the vision of acceptance and thereby declare that it is time to get on with doing the challenging work that we know needs to be done in the Southern Conference despite our differences.

- We call ourselves to a new level of discipleship, working for justice, seeking peace. We know that God still speaks and still inspires us.

The United Church of Christ is a justice minded, peace seeking church. We believe that "another world is possible." We in the Southern Conference affirm that God is still speaking, still inspiring us to serve and be in mission. We intend to be a voice for good, positive and proactive, in the religious community so that, in covenant with one another, we lift high the biblical mandates and message of Jesus Christ. We believe striving for justice and peace is core work for us.

- We will seek to "go green" in whatever ways are possible.

It is important to us that we act now to do what we can as faith driven, motivated and inspired to be good stewards of creation. It is our Christian responsibility to help find ways to protect and nurture the environment. In this vein we are encouraged to make our churches as "green" as possible, and thereby encouraging our churches to use our resources to do what we can to make a difference. Also we encourage every church member to do what they can personally and at their own home to make environmental change priority faith work to be done. This too is theological work that is central to our identity and purpose, work to be accomplished.

- We will seek to be ecumenical.

We will work to help the larger faith community know of our desire to work for Christian unity. Where possible we will interact in interfaith dialogues and conversations. We know that we are stronger as a Southern Conference when we are an active part of the larger ecumenical community than isolated and cut off from wider and broader conversations. In every local community, including the structures of the Southern Conference, we will act with integrity and speak with candor about our unique faith perspectives and offer our resources, people and energy in God's world.

Every local church is encouraged to offer this paper to their own leadership circle, Bible study classes, church council/consistory, and members of each congregation, including clergy and lay groups in all places. Furthermore we encourage that this paper will be used in newsletters and through email lists. We are hopeful that this paper will stimulate a new and healthy conversation in the life of the Southern Conference, but more than that, spur a new commitment to the work of the Southern Conference and the United Church of Christ. We are hopeful that this paper will also help our churches and people look to the future with hope and guide our work in the continuing ministry and mission of the Southern Conference.

There is hope for the future. God is still speaking, still calling us together, and still calling us to faithfulness in covenant and mission.