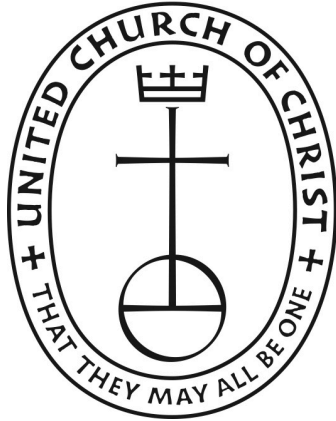


Creating Covenant Community

The Southern Conference: restructuring for greater vitality in ministry



I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? – Isaiah 43:19

I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. – Philippians 1:6

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered . . . the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. – 1 John 4:4

Introduction

After a word of encouragement, this document briefly outlines some of the current resources and challenges of the conference, proposes a way forward to greater vitality and responsiveness, and issues an appeal to all in the Southern Conference to engage in strengthening our Christian witness and ministry.

Our God encourages us

We begin – not with a history of our conference, or of its successes and its challenges – but with words of encouragement drawn from the scriptures above. First, we can know that the God who brought new life in Isaiah’s time is the same God still speaking new life for us, in the Southern Conference and among those we serve. Second, just as Paul trusted in God to complete the work begun in his life, we can trust that the God who began this work among us will bring it to fruitful completion. And finally, even when the challenges before us seem more than we can overcome, we can take strength from knowing that the One who is in us is greater than any obstacle in the world.

And so we begin this document the way we have begun our work: in prayer.

Gracious God, we believe it is your will to do a new thing among your people, in every generation. Give us now the wisdom, ways and means to do your good work: ministering to your hurting world. When we feel small, help us to remember your greatness, and that you bend toward us in love. Amen.

Current resources and challenges

Life is a gift from God, and yet, good health is not a given, for persons or communities. Maintaining good health takes effort, whether we are talking about the health of our souls, bodies, families, communities, or finances. Periodic check-ups help us to know our vital signs, and whether our efforts to maintain good health are working.

This year Southern Conference leadership has been doing just that, taking a close look at the vital signs of the conference and our environment for ministry.

The current conditions are these: We are in a still-fluctuating economy, going through a slow, jobless recovery from economic depression. Contributions to churches have fallen in many settings, along with stagnant or declining personal income. Pressures, frustrations and fears have risen: we find ourselves at odds with each other over differences in identities and beliefs, theologies and politics, seeking the comfort of familiarity and similarity.

Up against these conditions, it is no wonder our vital signs indicate a struggling conference, even against guidelines established ten years ago, when the Southern Conference adopted the following Vision and Mission:

- Our Vision: We are called to be a living expression of the Body of Christ, strengthening ties that bind God's people together in mission.
- Our Mission:
 - To proclaim the saving grace, compassion, justice, and peace of Jesus Christ for all people.
 - To pray, worship, and work in covenant with the congregations of our conference and with mission partners at home and throughout the world.
 - To empower and equip clergy and laity for transforming ministry in the Body of Christ (Romans 12:1-2).

If we look at our vital signs based on this Vision and Mission, we might ask:

- How strong are the ties binding us together in mission?
- How well are we proclaiming the saving grace, compassion, justice, and peace of Jesus Christ for all people?
- Are we praying, worshipping and working in covenant with each other and with our mission partners inside and outside the conference?
- How well are we empowering and equipping clergy and laity for transforming ministry in the Body of Christ?

In light of these questions, some of our vitals look strong, and some do not.

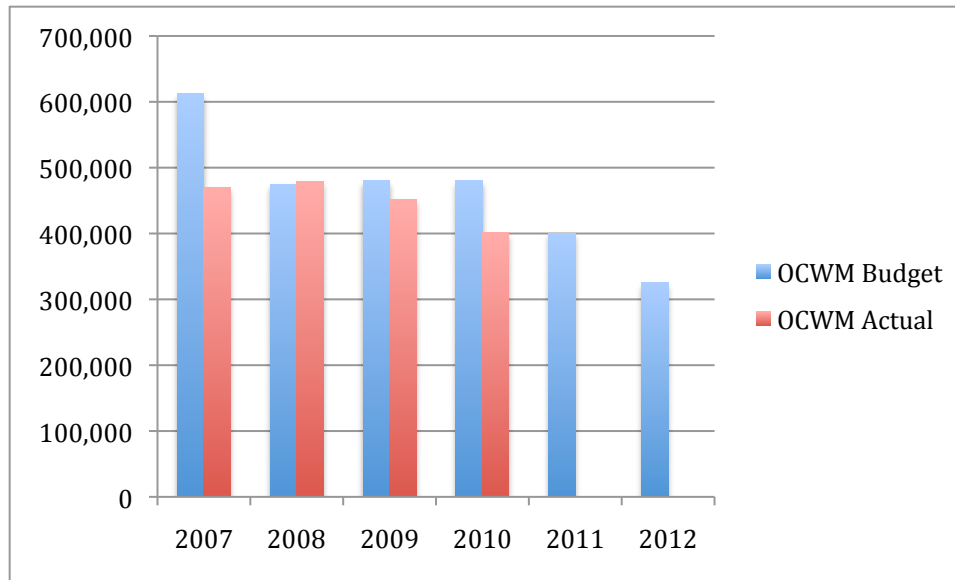
- The ties among us are fraying as we come to focus more on our differences than on our common mission.
- We proclaim the grace, compassion, justice and peace of Christ, and yet struggle to live into it, with each other inside the church and with persons and communities outside the church.
- We continue to pray, worship and work in covenant with each other, but the numbers of persons participating in annual meetings and other gatherings is not what it once was. Many congregations have left the conference over differences with the larger church, breaking covenant altogether. Others remain in the conference, but withhold or redirect funding as a sign of feeling disconnected.
- On the brighter side, one key sign of strong vitality is our education ministry, particularly the Pastoral Leadership Development program. Thirteen of 19 graduates have been ordained and are serving as ministers or chaplains, and the scope of the program is now expanding to empower lay leadership and ministries.

The impact of conference stresses shows up on our bottom line. It is true that as a conference we have over \$4 million in assets; but many of these are restricted (i.e., not available for general use) or not in liquid form (i.e., they might consist of land or buildings that are not easy to convert to cash).

The money that *is* available to us for accomplishing our mission comes from congregational giving to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) offerings, of which a portion supports association and conference ministries, and another portion is passed along to support denominational ministries.

OCWM giving has been in a decline. We are not alone in this; whether we look across UCC conferences or across mainline denominations, a common trend appears: giving toward judicatory budgets (i.e., bodies like the Southern Conference) has been heading down for years.

In our own Southern Conference, the trend looks like this:



In five years, our giving has dropped significantly. And yet, our structures and staffing levels have remained the same. Our current reality is not sustainable. That's the difficult news.

The good news is that the leadership of the Southern Conference is taking this difficult situation as an opportunity to refocus on the work that matters most now, and to transform ourselves into a conference empowered for ministry in 2012 and beyond.

Toward greater vitality and responsiveness

In the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011, the Southern Conference engaged the Center for Congregational Health to assist in gathering information about the priorities of Southern Conference congregations. Participation was widespread, across associations, including clergy and lay people, using face-to-face meetings and a survey instrument.

Southern Conference leadership has undertaken two key initiatives in the wake of this information-gathering, based on the priorities identified: the board is working with due deliberation and urgency to hire a designated conference minister, and has chartered a set of action teams to help the conference make needed changes. These action teams of volunteer lay people and clergy from across all three associations are being led by conference board members, and most have been working since the beginning of the summer.

The action groups are focused on mission and vision, restructuring, technology, membership, institutional relationships, property and finance, reclaiming unity, and recommending changes to the Southern Conference constitution and by-laws.

This document represents the work to date of the restructuring action group. It is being presented in draft form in multiple settings to invite input from lay people, clergy and leaders from across the conference. We have shared the draft with the chairs of our Committees on Church and Ministry, as well as with Association boards. **In a brief period of time, we have made what revisions we can, and are now seeking feedback from our annual Association meetings.** Feedback from these settings will be used to revise the plan again before it is submitted to the Southern Conference board and the Constitution and By-laws Action Group.

In the next sections of the document, we describe the inputs to our restructuring plan, offer a depiction of restructured roles and work processes, and present a comparison to our previous structure.

Inputs

Our primary input for this restructuring has come from the **direction given by our congregations** through the information-gathering process led by the Center for Congregational Health. In face-to-face meetings and survey responses, congregants identified these key priorities for Southern Conference roles and responsibilities:

- Assisting with clergy search and call processes
- Christian education for lay people* and youth training
- Liaison between congregations and wider church
- Clergy support

* Note: This item was the highest priority on the list of what congregations reported being willing to fund.

Secondarily we wanted to be sure our work was tied to our essential reasons for being as a conference, and so – while awaiting the input to come from the mission and vision action group – we evaluated the above-mentioned Vision and Mission in light of these four congregational priorities, and found a common focus on two themes: **congregational vitality** and the **health of our covenant relationships**. Accordingly, we derived the following working mission for the restructuring: We are working to *promote congregational vitality and the covenant we share*.

Finally, we also took input from UCC national, conference and association staff regarding existing work and relational needs.

It is our hope that this restructuring will open us to new ways in which we will all take on the responsibility for promoting congregational vitality, in our own congregations and in communication with each other, so that our covenant relationships deepen, creating support for thriving ministries. If – as our founding documents say – “the local congregation is the basic unit of the life and organization of the church,” then the vitality of local congregations *is* our future.

Restructured roles and processes

Through evaluation of the above inputs, we have identified these core processes as representing the work of the Conference and its constituent associations:

Promoting congregational vitality:

- Education program development/delivery
- Liaison/communication
- Clergy support
- Crisis/conflict resolution

Promoting the covenant we share:

- Pastoral search and call
- Discerning/supporting calls to ministry
- Managing finances/real property

A variety of roles, responsibilities and persons are involved in accomplishing this work, *most notably our congregations and the people in them. Every other role* ultimately supports and enables the people in our congregations to *be* the people of God doing the work and worship of God.

Supporting and enabling roles and positions include:

- Conference-based roles:
 - Conference minister – This role provides executive leadership for the conference’s ongoing ministries as well as the work of the action groups. The conference minister supports ministry initiatives within and across congregational, program district, association or conference levels, by: locating training, collaborators and other resources for laypersons and clergy; facilitating theological reflection with ministry partners; organizing and supporting clergy peer support groups; facilitating knowledge- and

- resource-sharing among ministry partners, through ecumenical relations, and through international partnerships.
- Administrative support – This full-time role provides administrative support to the conference and conference minister, by fielding and directing calls, assisting with scheduling of gatherings, data administration, and other administrative tasks.
 - Minister of Education – This part-time role organizes learning programs for clergy continuing education and peer learning groups, lay leadership development and youth education, either in combination with or by coordinating with executive director of Pastoral Leadership Development program.
 - Financial support – This role is not finalized; at this point the SOC conference board has contracted an external bookkeeper on an interim basis and is fulfilling strategic financial planning and decision making through the Treasurer and Stewardship, Finance and Budget committee.
 - Association-based roles:
 - Church and Ministry Associates – This part-time role (three persons holding part-time positions in geographically reasonable locations) provides staff support for search and call and to all members-in-discernment in the conference, as they prepare for authorized ministry. This role also provides staff support to the Associations' Committees on Church and Ministry.
 - Crisis/conflict resolution stewards – This role is filled by two stipended stewards per Association. Stewards are nominated by the Association, trained by external consultants (until an in-conference capacity can be developed), stipended by the conference, and assigned by the conference minister to assist particular congregation(s) with crises or conflicts.
 - Education stewards – One education steward will be nominated per program district to work with the Minister of Education in coordinating education events in that district. Although there is no stipend associated with this role, expenses will be reimbursed by the conference.

Comparison to previous structure

The chart below illustrates changes in the restructured Southern Conference.

CURRENT	PROPOSED
<p>6.75 OCWM-funded Staff</p> <p>Program/Professional Staff</p> <p>1 Conference Minister</p> <p>3 ¾ time Associate Conference Ministers geographically situated</p> <p>Administrative Staff</p> <p>1 Full-time administrative assistant</p> <p>1 ¾ time financial advisor (resigned)</p> <p>3 ½ time administrative assistants</p> <p>Stipendiary Role</p> <p>1 Program manager for conference outdoor ministry and communications</p>	<p>4.25 OCWM-funded Staff</p> <p>Program or Professional Staff</p> <p>1 Conference Minister</p> <p>3 ½ time Church and Ministry Associates</p> <p>1 ¼ Minister of Education</p> <p>Administrative Staff</p> <p>1 Administrative Support</p> <p>1 Financial support (½ time or less)</p> <p>Stipendiary Roles</p> <p>12 Crisis/conflict resolution stewards</p> <p>15 Education stewards</p> <p>1 Program manager for conference outdoor ministry and communications</p>
<p>Congregations: High variability in degrees of vitality as well as connectedness in covenant relationships (with each other, their Associations and the conference). Connected primarily through clergy and small numbers attending annual meetings.</p>	<p>Congregations: Greater degree of partnering with other local congregations on multiple learning and serving projects and missions through the year, thereby increasing vitality and connectedness.</p>
<p>Congregations facing pastoral transition call Associate Conference Minister for assistance with search process.</p>	<p>Congregations facing pastoral transition call conference office or regional Church and Ministry Associate for assistance with search process.</p>
<p>When a church is in crisis or conflict, its leadership calls upon the Associate Conference Minister, who spends many hours in meetings with clergy and lay leaders.</p>	<p>When a church is in crisis or conflict, its leadership contacts the conference office; a trained crisis/conflict resolution steward is assigned to meet with the congregation, and if more than six hours of assistance are needed, the congregation pays a small stipend to support the steward's ongoing work.</p>
<p>Pastors of local congregations typically function independently from one another with occasional help from their Association Minister.</p>	<p>Pastors of local congregations are a part of a peer network of sisters and brothers in ministry who share experiences and learning, lending support and inspiration to each other.</p>
<p>Pastors in need of advice calls their Association Minister first.</p>	<p>Pastors look first to their peer group for insight. If necessary, they can call the conference office for further assistance.</p>

<p>Associate Conference Ministers preach in local churches in their own regions, providing worship leadership and a “face” of the Conference.</p>	<p>Conference Minister or other national, conference, association or local resource preaches in local church, depending on current call, ministry and issues facing that church. He/she engages congregation in conversation afterwards, focused on leadership, justice, stewardship, evangelism, faith development, or whatever need is present.</p>
<p>Associate Conference Minister attends most meetings of Association governing bodies and Committees on Ministry.</p>	<p>Conference Minister and Administrative Support provide assistance with scheduling and resourcing gatherings of Association governing bodies. Church and Ministry Associates serve as staff resource to Committees on Church and Ministry, and attend other meetings when their presence will make a significant difference in the meeting.</p>
<p>While many local churches hold adult education programs, little attention is focused on adult faith formation in the Conference setting of the church; resources and learning opportunities are only occasionally leveraged across multiple congregations.</p>	<p>Minister of Education works with lay leaders to create communities of practice focused on topics of interest, such as stewardship, Christian education, justice issues, or youth work. These communities provide firsthand experience with adult faith formation in a group setting, equipping participants to offer similar opportunities in their local churches. Increasingly, technology-enabled distance learning supports congregational learning and empowerment.</p>
<p>After participation in a Conference program, individuals fill out an evaluation form indicating what was helpful and what might be helpful another time.</p>	<p>Staff learn to evaluate the impact of Conference programs not only via evaluation forms, but by tracking worship attendance, pledge data and mission activities of participating churches.</p>
<p>Pastors seek calls in the Southern Conference based on their individual initiative and interest.</p>	<p>The Conference Minister takes a leadership role encouraging highly capable pastors and seminary graduates to consider calls in the Southern Conference based on our unparalleled pastoral support systems. The Church and Ministry Associates make sure all members-in-discernment in the Southern Conference understand how the call process works, have a plan in place to prepare for authorized ministry, and have an Advisor in Discernment to mentor them.</p>

As described above, the goal of this restructuring is to realign conference resources and staff to enhance congregational vitality and covenant relationships, among congregations, clergy, associations and the Southern Conference.

Implementing these changes will take time, money, training and understanding. We may have to use a staged implementation, with persons rolling into new roles as they are hired and/or trained.

We are working to make sure all necessary work is identified and accomplished; you can help by providing feedback on this model and asking questions. We have identified some questions and answers in an Appendix below; we hope to hear from you what your specific thoughts are: likes, dislikes, questions, concerns ... let us hear from you!

An appeal to all

We are a part of the body of Christ, and we are a human creation, we who are called the Southern Conference. We are beloved of God, and yet finite and limited in both resources and means. Our struggle is nothing new to God, who submitted to the constraints of incarnation, for love of us, and who walks with us in all we do.

This God has placed a call upon our lives, here in the Southern Conference. It is revealed when we and those around us are leading fragmented lives under growing financial pressure. It is revealed in our differences, too often dividing us along variables of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, culture and commitment. It is revealed when we are surrounded by people who do not know our Scriptures or our traditions or our God's love – people who are our neighbors, our friends, our children.

Who will be on the front lines, sharing God's love with those who don't know it?
Who will be the connective tissue, reconciling our communities and churches?
Who will be the agents of healing and wholeness-making, if not us?

We can no longer rely solely on paid staff; the need is too great, and the resources too thin. We are the ones we have been waiting for, and the renewal and revitalization of the Southern Conference depends on all of us, working together to help each other become the church we've dreamed of, the church the world needs us to be.

The Southern Conference needs us, each of us, every person, every congregation; the Southern Conference *is* us. Won't you find your way to help build a stronger, more vital church? A true covenant community, each part helping and strengthening the other, in and through God's grace and love.

Appendix 1: Questions and (some) answers

There are plenty of challenges ahead, and plenty we haven't figured out yet. Here are some questions we've been thinking about ... what are yours?

Q. What are the next steps?

We have revised our initial draft restructuring based on input from the chairs of each Association's Committees on Ministry, and from Association boards. We are now seeking feedback from our Associations' Annual Gatherings. With this input, we will revise the restructuring plan and present it to the SOC Board at its November 5 meeting. Further revisions may be necessary.

When the plan is approved, it will be passed to the Constitution and By-Laws Revision action group, as well as the incoming designated conference minister, when that position is filled.

Q: What does the restructuring group need from conference stakeholders?

We are requesting further input through small group discussions at the Annual Gatherings, facilitated by board members of each Association, who will funnel input back to the restructuring action group.

In the medium-term, we hope everyone looking at this plan will help to make it stronger and something we can implement. Specifically:

1. What do you find of value in this plan?
2. How might you, and others from your local congregation, participate?
3. What might be added or modified to make the plan stronger?
4. What else would you like to know and what else do you want us to know about your response to the proposal?

Q: Current Associate Conference Minister positions run through December 2011. Who do we call for help in January 2012?

You will call the conference office at (336) 222-8771. The administrative support person will either answer your question, or direct your call: to the Conference Minister, Church and Ministry Associate, crisis/conflict resolution steward, education steward, or other appropriate resource.

Q: Is the Church and Ministry Associate just an Associate Conference Minister at half-time?

No. It's important to be clear what we are trying to accomplish. The ACM positions as previously constituted were overloaded in their job descriptions, making the jobs difficult to perform as written. Then, we asked even more of our ACMs; as mentioned above, they were spending up to 75-80% of their time dealing with conflicts, which was not in the job descriptions we saw.

This new role is focused on three essential tasks:

- **Search and call** for congregations seeking new pastors.
- **Supporting members in discernment** who are moving toward authorized ministry.
- **Providing staff support to Association Committees on Church and Ministry**, to facilitate the work of these committees.

Key enablers of this change include:

- **Treating the reality of congregational crises and conflicts as a development opportunity.** While congregations experiencing crises or conflicts can be helped by an external advisor, this role does not have to be fulfilled by a conference minister or associate conference minister. We can train crisis/conflict resolution stewards and have them available on an as-needed basis, with costs (of training and an hourly stipend) to be shared by the conference and the congregations utilizing these services. We'd recommend training more people every year, so that more and more of us can get good at managing the conflicts associated with growth and change.
- **Conference constituents (i.e., everyone) need to realize that staffing these roles represents a shared cost.** We all benefit from conference assistance during pastoral development and transitions; we all need to share in supporting the budget requirements for their remuneration.

Q: Geography has always been a problem; how are congregations to work together without time and money for travel?

We do need to think creatively about our geographic challenges. We can do more at the program district level, where travel is not as onerous. We can also organize around topics of interest that we share, rather than in geographic groupings. In these cases, we can find ways to "meet" virtually – either on telephone conference calls, or using WebEx or Skype video conferencing. The Technology Action

Group and the Pastoral Leadership Development program are both looking into options for setting up such options.

Q. What does the budget for these positions look like?

We estimate the following ...

X000 · Unbudgeted Personnel Expenses	
X1 Church and Ministry Associates (3 @ .5 FTE)	
Salary/benefits (\$30,000 X 3)	90,000.00
X2 Minister of Education (.25 FTE)	
Salary	12,500.00
X3 Conflict/crisis management stewards	
Stipendiary expenses (assumptions below)	4,500.00
Training for 12 stewards	2,500.00
X4 Education stewards	
expense reimbursement	1,200.00
	<hr/>
Total X000 · Administrative Expenses	110,700.00

... based on these assumptions:

- Travel expenses for all positions will be drawn from the conference minister’s travel fund for 2012.
- Utilization of crisis/conflict management stewards will begin when a congregation calls the conference office for assistance with a crisis or conflict. The congregation can anticipate:
 - Conference will bear the cost of (up to) the first six hours
 - If resolution takes more than six hours of assistance, congregation pays \$25/hr for steward to continue, as needed.
- Conference cost for crisis/conflict management is based on 30 crises/conflicts per year at \$150 each = \$4500.

We propose three sources of funds to offset these costs:

- Concluding an arrangement (such as the one in discussion with Catawba College) that takes Black Lake expenses off the SOC budget, saving \$33,086.

- Not spending all of the funds budgeted for the Designated Conference Minister. We have budgeted \$133,782 for DCM salary, housing allowance and benefits; the SOC Executive Committee has set the salary/housing/benefits package at \$80,000. This could save us \$53,782. Combined with the savings from Black Lake, this would return as much as \$86,868 to the 2012 budget.
- We would request funding assistance from the national UCC office to assist with the costs of implementing the crisis/conflict management stewards approach (\$7,000).
- If necessary, we could defer implementation of the Minister of Education position until 2013. This would be unfortunate, given that it is the top mandate from the CCH survey question regarding what SOC role congregations would be most willing to pay for.

Combining these savings, forms of assistance and deferments would enable us to achieve costs near what are already budgeted.

Please share with us your ideas, concerns and questions. We look forward to receiving direction from constituents as we take our next steps in revising this draft restructure plan.