

Vermont Conference, UCC 2013 Annual Reports

Vermont Conference UCC: ***Equipping congregations for Christ's mission and ministry today and tomorrow***

Annual Report of the Conference Minister
Rev. Dr. Lynn Bujnak

Dear VTCUCC:

As I write this annual report I find myself thinking back over the five and a half years of serving as your conference minister. One thing I believe we have done together is **to make the ministry and mission of the local church our main focus**. The conference is no longer a programmatic body doing ministry on behalf of individual congregations. Your conference staff and Board of Directors are committed to equipping our congregations with the tools they need to live in these in between times with faithfulness and to boldly live into a new future.

So, as you read through this Annual Report, please see all of the amazing work that is being done: assisting churches in their search for pastoral leaders, working with congregations on more streamlined organizational structures, workshops on visioning, spiritual renewal, new resources and initiatives in mission and justice, new ways of doing faith formation, training in stewardship practices tied to mission to energize congregations.

Again this year we have chosen to focus on a unified theme: **Rooted and Grounded in Love**. For as we live in the midst of transition and feel the push to be and do church differently, there is anxiety and strain. First and foremost, we are disciples of Jesus the Christ. In order to follow where He leads, we return to the very foundation of our faith – practices of prayer, meditation, being fed and feeding others in Christ's name. Our annual meeting is built around a time of retreat and renewal. If you have not already looked at or downloaded "A Feast of Possibilities for Exploring a Life Practicing the Presence of God" I urge you to do so.

We are also taking new and bold steps to implement our vision and desire for vital, relevant churches. Over the next three years the Vermont Conference will be putting our energy and resources into supporting vitality in our congregations and developing a conference wide culture of birthing new expressions of church for a new day. Two major partnerships have been formed to help us accomplish our goals.

Strategic Investment in Sacred Spaces is a partnership between the Vermont Conference UCC, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont and Partners for Sacred Places. Over the next two years five UCC and five Episcopal churches will engage in an intensive assessment and training process aimed at increasing the congregation's capacity to partner with the wider community by sharing space and fundraising . We expect the UCC churches participating to "pay it forward" by assisting other congregations to learn new skills.

Our other partnership is wider in scope and will last for three years. **Center for Progressive Renewal** will:

- provide specialized consultation, training and coaching to four churches per year for three years to get them to the "next level" of vitality
- provide us with one major event per year to help all our congregational leaders and pastors grow in the capacity to lead for vitality

- Work with us to create a “climate of new ministry multiplication” and share with us best practices for birthing new expressions of church
- Develop, lead and resource three Affinity Groups of leaders

Our other partnership is an ecumenical one with the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. Already we are inviting each other to conference/diocese wide events. We jointly sponsored “Recalculating the Way” for clergy and lay leaders and we are participating together in the Strategic Investment for Sacred Places.

This is a time of great creativity in the life of Christ’s Church. It is a time of experimentation, of partnerships, and of deep connections. I look forward to this year for all the possibilities and promise before us. I hope you do as well.

ANNUAL MEETING REPORT
 Rev. Pam Lucas
 Associate Conference Minister
 for Search and Call and Small Church Ministry

In the midst of a world that is changing so rapidly in every direction it is good to come apart and be reminded to ‘be still and know that God is God’, to be reminded of the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love. And it is good to come apart and do that together as brothers and sisters in faith.

The resignation or retirement of a pastor is a ‘change’ that invites a congregation to take time. To take time to be still and know that God is God. To remember that the church is the body of Christ and is called to be about the work of God in the world. To take time to remember what God has done in the life of your congregation in the past. To be still and reflect on what new thing God might be doing to shape you for the future. And it is good for a congregation to ‘be’ together to do that work – which is really a work of prayer and worship.

A number of our churches have been involved in that kind of ‘change’ in this past year. The Vermont Conference has said goodbye to some pastors while welcoming other pastors who are new to Vermont. I am grateful for the congregations and Search Committees who have taken this work of reflection seriously and faithfully.

There are a couple of other projects that have also been great fun to work on. The first is the completion of ‘Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Relationships, Healthy Churches – Boundary Awareness Training for Lay Leaders’. This is a daylong workshop that has been developed by lay members of Church and Ministry Committees who had been aware of the Boundary Awareness Training for Pastors and wanted lay folks to understand how boundary awareness among church members could be an essential tool in creating healthy Christian communities. This resource has been shared with other Conferences and may hold individual resources that can be helpful with churches in interim time as they consider the health of their own congregation.

Did you know that out of our 139 churches here in Vermont, 91 have less than 50 in worship attendance and many have 25 or less in attendance? Vermont is a Conference of small churches. And small does not mean ‘less than’. Small can thrive. Small can be flexible and adaptable. Small can build deep relationships. (Which is why ‘big’ churches create ‘small’ group ministries!) Small can do mighty things to meet a need in their community. (And, yes, I know that small churches can also be rigid and exclusive and insular.) But we have many small churches that are vital and healthy and faithful and faith-filled. These churches need and deserve leadership.

But do they need to do a search in the same way that a church of 100 or 200 need to do? They are small enough to have all-congregational conversations.

So Lynn Bujnak and I have gathered a group of seasoned interim pastors to design a Small Church Search and Call Process. It is called 'Leaning Forward into God's Future'. It features a series of Congregational Conversations for all members to come together and together do the work of reflection and dreaming forward. Each conversation is rooted in scripture, worship and prayer. The conversations are titled:

- #1 Meeting our Church Again for the First Time
How will we encounter Christ in One Another?
- #2 Be Not Afraid to Enter the Future
We are a community with a past, present and future.
- #3 Following Jesus Forward
With what shall we create our future?
- #4 Who is Our Neighbor?
Naming our mission/passion/outreach – present and future
- #5 Discerning our Purpose and Identity
Discovering five significant things that would be said about Who We Are.
- #6 Discerning Leadership Change

Potential Transitional Pastors to lead this 6 – 8 month process will be introduced to these materials this spring. And when a small church faces 'change' with the resignation or retirement of their pastor, one of these folk will be invited to go and sit with this small church as they become 'still and know that God is God' and are invited to 'Lean Forward into God's Future' together.

Annual Report
Associate Conference Minister for Stewardship,
Church Vitality, and Finance
Rev. Jim Thomas

2013 was quite a year both for the Conference and for me personally. In the life of the Conference, there was new energy and hope and commitment to be what God is calling us to be as the 21st century church. Congregations, who for too long had been in denial about the changes in our culture and within our churches, are finding ways to begin to move forward. The path to Vitality and Sustainability leads us to reconnect with our communities, seeking to resource the needs there and developing relationships with those who are not a part of our congregations. We know that while we once simply waited for the new people to come to church, now we have to go where they are, build relationships where they are, and the invitation to our communities of faith is not the first step anymore.

In April we brought Diana Butler Bass to Vermont – part of our intentional effort to hear voices on the front lines of change. Her message was both challenging and hopeful. A month earlier, Rev. Mike Piazza keynoted the Northeast Ecumenical Stewardship event, where we were challenged to focus on the mission and ministry of our churches instead of constant fundraising.

During the year, from General Synod in Long Beach to Annual Meeting to Convocation, I saw pastors, lay leaders, and congregations ready to move on – to stop looking over our shoulders at what we once were and instead focusing on the bright future ahead of us.

The best part of my work for the Conference is being with our Associations and Churches. In 2013 I visited more than two dozen churches, participating in worship and/or leading workshops on Stewardship, Governance, Capital Campaigns, Investments, Visioning, Strategic Planning, and more. I was also privileged to keynote two Association meetings.

In June I ended an 11 year pastorate at the First Congregational Church of Randolph, UCC. It was bittersweet – in order to fully live into the work I am called to as your Associate Conference Minister, it was no longer possible to also pastor a church. But I love being a local church pastor, and that congregation was a healthy and supportive place to do ministry.

On November 24th, I was honored and blessed to be ordained into the United Church of Christ and officially installed to my ACM call. Months later I still feel some of the glow from the love and affirmations heaped upon me. I am extraordinarily blessed, friends, and grateful that we walk this path together.

And you are blessed as well – our best days are ahead of us. We have seen the ebb tide, and now we need to be ready for the returning waters of vitality and covenant and purpose. There will no doubt be some rip tides along the way, seeking to pull us off course. But, in this thing, as in all things, a focus on our Redeemer will keep us true.

Board of Directors Annual Report
Respectfully submitted for the Board,
Rev. Amelia Pitton, Chair

This has been a year of action on the part of the Vermont Conference Board of Directors. Aware of the significant challenges that are facing the churches of the Conference, the primary focus of the Board of Directors has been working hard at discerning how we might help the churches and clergy of the conference meet the significant challenges they are facing. Our mission statement reminds us that it is our task to equip Vermont UCC churches so that they can do Christ's ministry and mission as they feel called. To that end, the Board of Directors is leading the Conference to take several bold steps by investing time and resources in our churches and their leaders.

The Board has contracted with two organizations to help us equip leaders and churches for ministry and mission. The first organization is the **Center for Progressive Renewal (CPR** – yes, the acronym is intentional!), a partner organization with the United Church of Christ. The mission of CPR is “focused primarily on leadership development to revitalize progressive Christianity – one leader at a time.” They have an impressive portfolio of leadership and church development resources which you can check out on their website – www.progressiverenewal.org.

The Board has worked out the terms of a multi-year contract with CPR that will:

- Begin by taking effective churches and giving them the tools to break growth barriers and “become all they can do and be”.

- Use technology to bring leaders with affinity interests together and spark new ideas to help churches learn and create best practices for ministry.
- Create a support system and animate by the Holy Spirit a cultural climate for new ministries and churches to be conceived and birthed.
- Inspire hope that the best days of the Vermont Conference are in the future. Some of today's churches will leave a legacy that will make tomorrow's churches stronger and able to continue the ministry of hope, love, and justice to the communities of Vermont.

We expect that over the course of three years that 80 congregations in the Conference will be assisted in this partnership with CPR. The Conference will be making a significant financial investment to make this happen.

The second organization that the Conference will be working with is **Partners for Sacred Places (PSP)**. This is a familiar organization for some churches in the Conference who have worked with PSP before. PSP is “a nonsectarian, non-profit organization... dedicated to the sound stewardship and active community use of sacred spaces across America. At the intersection of heritage, faith, and community, Partner's mission is to build a shared sense of responsibility for the future of sacred spaces.” You can check them out on their website at www.sacredplaces.org.

The scope of this project is smaller than that of the one with CPR, but has the added benefit of being an ecumenical program. We will be working in partnership with the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont to help 10 specific churches (5 UCC and 5 Episcopal) generate a comprehensive plan and support structure to engage a congregation's strengths, to revitalize its role in the community and increase its fundraising capability. There is a list of criteria that a church must meet in order to be considered for this program and churches who qualify have been invited to consider participating. This program is supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, but also requires an investment of funds from both the Conference and participating churches.

It is the Board of Directors' expectation that through these programs, the churches and leadership of the Vermont Conference will find new hope, new vision, and new energy for our ministries and mission.

In addition to these exciting plans, the Board has continued with its other duties of monitoring the finances of the Conference, keeping in touch with the Departments and Committees of the Conference and working closely with the Conference Staff.

A joy-filled highlight of the year was the ordination of our Associate Conference Minister for Stewardship, Church Vitality and Finance, the Rev. Jim Thomas. The Board was so pleased to celebrate this significant event with Jim!

A big Thank You goes out to the Staff of the Conference – Lynn Bujnak, Pam Lucas, Jim Thomas, Lynn Thomas and Sybil McShane. We on the Board very much appreciate your wisdom, your thoughtfulness and your prayerful discernment as we work together for the good of the churches of the Vermont Conference. May God bless us as we continue to discern how we can continue to be faithful in a fast changing world.

Department of Church and Ministry Report for 2013

David Durfee

Church and Ministry Department Chair

The new combined Conference Constitution and Bylaws went into effect January 1, 2009. The year 2013, therefore, completed the first five years under that document. It requires the committees of department to reexamine their purpose at least once every five years, and so it seemed appropriate for the Department to do the same. In mid-December the Chair, David Durfee, Vice Chair, Mark Milligan, and Staff Liaison, Pam Lucas, met and began such a review. It will be continued at the first 2014 meeting of the Council, but some initial thoughts follow.

The Department's purpose contained in the Constitution and Bylaws reads:

The Department of Church and Ministry shall oversee the pastoral care of churches and ministers (ordained and lay), uphold and foster standards of excellence in all levels and all kinds of ministry within the Conference, promote and nurture the covenantal relationship between and among local churches, Associations, and the Conference.

The Department had been doing little "overseeing" in the years just before 2009. There was no Steering Committee as called for under the old Constitution, the Department had not met, some Department Chairs had agreed to serve with the understanding that their role was that of a place holder, and few associations had felt it necessary to elect representatives to the Department. Opportunities for "overseeing" were limited. Of the most active committees in the Department, the work of one, Ministerial Standing and Standards, was confidential, of a second, Convocation, although included in the Departmental budget, collected its own money and controlled its expenses and program for pastors. A third, Church Growth, in many ways had one foot in Church and Ministry and the other in Stewardship.

Recognizing these conditions, and keeping the stated purpose of the Department, the Council set the following initial priorities which have guided its actions for the first five years. Briefly stated, they are:

Become a true Department by-

1. Getting full representation of all associations on the Council.
2. Learning and reacting to the Church and Ministry needs of associations and local churches.
3. Learning and reacting to the purpose and status of all Department committees.

Significant progress was made on priority 1) under the leadership of the first "new dispensation" chair, Dereen Vanderlinde-Abernathy. It has since then been a struggle to maintain the advances and to find acceptable meeting dates and times. By the close of 2013 there were six associations with representatives, four of whom could attend meetings.

Priority number 2) has led to much of the activity. Four full day workshops have been held for association leaders. The first was information on and understanding of ministerial standing and standards and a look at what associations should be doing about church standing. The second was an exploration of "Why Associations?" The third was on covenant. In 2013 there was a session for association leaders and potential trainers in Boundary Awareness Training for Church Lay Leaders. The Council will have to do more to help associations spread the training to local churches.

Under priority 3) the Department was streamlined by changing the status of four of its former standing committees. Women's Fellowship became an independent stand-alone body. Continuing Education became a staff undertaking. Healing Ministry was removed from the Conference with hopes that it might flourish in associations. The task of the former Ministerial Compensation Committee was assumed by the Department Council. When it was decided that the same committee could not be expected to responsible to nurture churches and to assess their faithfulness to the covenant, the Church Growth and Standing Committee called for in the Constitution was relieved of that "Standing" responsibility. It became Church Standing and Vitality. A new Church Standing and Standards Committee was created by Constitutional amendment. It held its first meeting in 2013.

Readers who have reached this point are encouraged to look for the separate reports of current committees of the Department mentioned above. They have done good work in 2013.

DEPARTMENT OF MISSION REPORT
Jeanne Zammataro, Chair

The state of the Department of Mission is strong and getting stronger, and the strength of the Department is in its committees. The committees all have incredible volunteers who have worked hard this past year as demonstrated by their reports. Additionally, all the department's committees have made ample use of E-Kit to make their work known in the Conference.

JUST PEACE ADVOCATES

The Just Peace Advocates are a small, dedicated group, and we would welcome new members! We meet two or three times a year, and in the past year we have carried out the following activities:

We organized and conducted the Peacemakers' Breakfast program at Annual Meeting, as we do each year. In 2013, presentations included several local church activities that promoted peace with justice, a trend we support and intend to highlight in 2014.

As part of our ongoing support of the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council (VLIAC), we organized and carried out the annual Vermont Low Income Advocacy Legislative Day, March 15, 2013. Members of several UCC churches attended this inspiring event at the State House, which included opening devotions in the House Chamber by the Rev. Mark Pitton, attendance at legislative committee meetings, and a lunch program with presentations to our group by key legislators, including Speaker of the House Shap Smith, who commended the United Church of Christ for its work for justice. Judi Joy, a member of our JPA group, serves as the Vermont Conference representative on VLIAC and we submit VLIAC updates to e-KIT periodically to keep churches informed.

In December 2012 we began a new project called "Peacemaker's Pulpit," which continued throughout 2013 and is still active. Once a month, a member of our group submits to e-KIT a short reflection on an issue related to peace. We want to expand this to include offerings from anyone interested in submitting one, and hope you will be in touch if this is something you would like to do.

We have contacted local church pastors and mission committees to discuss how we can support greater engagement in just peace activities. We attended Association meetings to introduce ourselves, the extensive

Just Peace resource notebook we've created, and the brief how-to document entitled, "Engaging in Just Peace Activities."

We submitted information to e-KIT regarding such events as the anniversary of the Newtown tragedy and the International Day of Peace. We are currently considering holding a Conference-wide Just Peace event sometime in 2014.

Respectfully submitted, Theresa Lever and Betty Edson, Co-Chairs

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE

After last year's successful **Mission 4/1 Earth**, our committee has spent most of its energy working to develop programs for this year's season of Easter and Pentecost. We'll be promoting three different ways for churches to express their faith commitment through care for creation: Mission 4/1 Earth, Not Ordinary Times, and becoming a Green Justice Congregation.

- The **Mission 4/1 Earth program** will be offered this year by New England UCC churches, spearheaded by the Connecticut conference. The program, running from April 1- June 15, will again offer resources and opportunities to help churches live out their faith through stewardship for creation: programs such as tree planting, advocacy letters, and earth-care projects, as well as worship and educational resources.
- **Not Ordinary Times**, developed by Eco-Justice Ministries, will run from Pentecost, June 15 to the beginning of Advent, Nov. 23. In contrast to the "ordinary time" of the season of Pentecost, this program will lift up the many ways these are not ordinary times, either in the church or in terms of global ecological disruption. To be faithful and relevant, the church must be intentional about addressing new and challenging questions of faith and ethics raised by our unique planetary situation. The program focuses on Core Faith Questions for theological and spiritual reflection and worship.
- **The Green Justice Congregations** program of the UCC offers a comprehensive series of steps congregations can take to becoming more environmentally responsible: from worship and education through energy audits, recycling programs and other concrete projects. The Vermont Conference in 2011 adopted a "Resolution on Becoming a Green Justice Conference," and we hope to promote this program as a way of supporting the Conference's commitment to this goal.

We also plan to offer several special workshop/retreats to support and inspire individuals and congregations in their goals of creation care. We will offer a workshop at the Annual Meeting on April 25-6, with a focus on nurturing the spiritual roots of our faithful stewardship of creation. And we hope to develop a retreat later on in the spring or early summer for those participating in the Not Ordinary Times program.

In Faith
Fred Taylor,
for the Department of Missions Environmental Committee

SUMMER LUNCH COMMITTEE

All goals for 2013 were met or exceeded. We went from 19 grants in 2012 to 17 grants in 2013. Information and links to the application were posted in E-Kit. Helpful hints and stories of different approaches to Summer Lunch were also published. The grant money was evenly split between the 17 churches. Mary Lou DeCosta

GUN VIOLENCE TASK FORCE

The Department of Mission appointed a Gun Violence Task Force in November 2013 to help the Vermont Conference implement the resolution on Gun Violence passed at the 2013 Annual Meeting and to provide local congregations and members with information on the issues of Gun Violence.

The resolution stated: "Be it resolved that the Vermont Conference, United Church of Christ calls upon individuals, congregations, and the Conference Office to: prayerfully consider actions which lessen the prevalence of gun violence in our communities and contact State and Federal legislators, Governors, and the President and ask those officials to support legislation which would:

- Ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines.
- Require a criminal background check for every gun sold in America.
- Make gun trafficking a federal crime, with real penalties for "straw purchasers" (those who arm criminals)."

In February of 2014, the Task Force sent a letter to all churches stating and explaining the Gun Violence Resolution and providing supporting documents and informational items.

The supporting documents included:

- Gospel citations to consider
- Questions for reflection and discussion
- Sample Letter (if a congregation or an individual wishes to write to a legislator on this issue)
- Bulletin Insert

These and other documents and information can be found at: http://www.vtcucc.org/Gun_Violence.html.

In the spring of 2014 the Vermont Conference plans to complete the actions called for in the resolution by sending a letter asking for support for the measures to reduce gun violence called for in the resolution to the President, the Governor, and US and Vermont legislators.

Task Force members:

Christopher Ashley, Norwich Congregational Church UCC, Norwich
Margaret Campbell, Bethany Church UCC, Randolph
Betty Edson, Bethany Church UCC, Randolph
Reverend Tracy Weatherhogg, Associate Minister, Grace Church

PRISON JUSTICE COMMITTEE

The prison justice committee serves as a resource to those around the conference who have questions surrounding the prison justice system in Vermont. By publishing inspiring articles in E-Kit, the Committee also continues to encourage UCC members in Vermont to volunteer in the Vermont prisons, at a Dismas House in Rutland, Burlington or Winooski, at Camp Agape or as a support member of a Circle of Support and Accountability. In the Springfield prison, UCC members lead worship, provide hospice and bereavement counseling, lead Bible study and give guitar and keyboard lessons. UCC members cook and eat with residents of Dismas Houses to achieve reconciliation with those re-entering society, and also serve on its boards. Circle of Support and Accountability members work extensively for one year with one specific individual as a way to help that individual turn his life around. Going forward, PJC will join St. Paul's Cathedral's efforts to improve Vermont's re-entry system.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeanne Zammataro

GLOBAL MINISTRIES COMMITTEE

This year the Global Ministries Committee sponsored the Rev. Lauren McGrail, a UCC missionary serving the Palestinian YWCA and the Church of Scotland in Palestine, on an itineration in Vermont. Lauren visited a number of churches in Vermont. The committee also surveyed the conference's churches and found that many of them are involved in a variety of global ministries. The committee, with the support of the Conference's

Board of Directors, is working on a proposal for the Conference to become a Global Ministries Conference. The committee will present a resolution to the 2015 Conference Annual Meeting to that effect. The committee was chaired this year by the Rev. Deborah Adams.

DISASTER RELIEF COMMITTEE

The Rev. Deborah Adams also served as the interim Disaster Relief Coordinator this past year. The Rev. Sandy Daly has agreed to serve as the Disaster Relief Coordinator going forward. The committee's goal is to help congregations to be prepared in the event of a disaster, so they can serve their communities instead of needing to be served by their communities. The committee will be moving a tool truck given to the Conference by the national UCC disaster relief to Randolph and will adopt policies and procedures for its use.

In addition to the work of its committees, the Department of Mission voted to continue its financial support of the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council and also voted to financially support Vermont Interfaith Action. The Department is also pursuing the possibility of encouraging Vermont congregations to enter into migrant ministry with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's migrant minister in Vermont. Finally, the Department will begin considering how it can help Vermont congregations respond to the heroin crisis in our midst.
