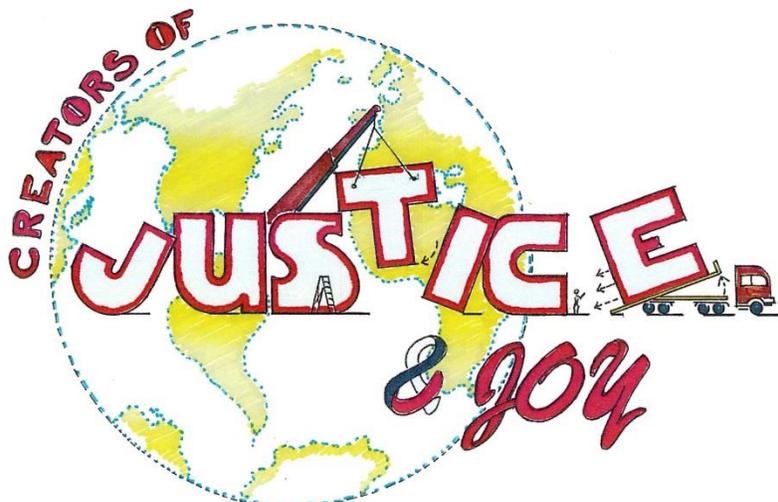


Vermont Conference UCC Annual Reports 2014-2015



Mission Statement: Equipping congregations for Christ's ministry and mission today and tomorrow.

Conference Minister
Reverend Dr. Lynn Bujnak

As I write this report it is a few days after Easter. My heart and mind are filled with images of new life, new possibilities and the certain knowledge that death is not, cannot and will not be the final word. This knowledge is nestling in my soul, spreading its wings and calling me to be at once less afraid and bolder.

As I contemplate the life, work and witness of the Vermont Conference, I see many things having to do with the relationship between death and resurrection. Like the rest of Christ's Church we are experiencing the challenges of change, loss and new beginnings. Here are some of the **challenges** we have and are experiencing:

- Staffing Transitions: We said goodbye to both Lynn Thomas and Sybil McShane in 2014. While we miss their presence and contributions we are also pleased to have two new members of the staff: Mark Pitton and Kim Edgar.
- A decrease in funding of the VTCUCC (see financial report and proposed budget)
- An increasing number of our small congregations running out of members and money to sustain even basic ongoing ministry
- The inability despite our best efforts to attract new attenders to our existing congregations

While these things are certainly challenges they also provide us with **opportunities** to grow in new and creative ways. Here are some of those new and renewed opportunities:

- **Equipping for Vitality**
 - We are making the expertise and coaching from the **Center for Progressive Renewal** available to many of our congregations and pastors. We have experienced two **Vitality Events** featuring the Rev. Michael Piazza that have been very well attended and enthusiastically received
 - We have four congregations working with a CPR coach as they move towards the “**Next Level**” of vitality and eight congregations who are working as “**affiliation networks**” around issues of vitality that they hold as common goals.
 - This year we will add **four** new “Next Level” congregations and **eight** new “Ministry Affiliation Network churches.
 - Our partnership with **Partners for Sacred Spaces** is enabling five of our churches to learn about making new partners for new dollars as well as work on goals they have identified through their work with Partners. These congregations will then be passing along their learning and insights to more of our congregations.
- **New Partnerships**
 - We continue to work with the **Episcopal Diocese of Vermont** on joint education and vitality events for leaders. We are also exploring ways in which we can partner on issues of social justice and our common Christian witness
 - We are beginning **conversations with our UCC neighboring conferences** to see what things we might better do together rather than separately. Look for more information on this as the year progresses.
- **Responding to the Needs of our Congregations**
 - We are continuing to seek ways to better serve the **needs of our congregations around times of pastoral transition**. Again, more will be said on this as we learn what works when “one size” of resourcing for transition “does not fit all.”
 - Staff is planning a **gathering for members of our smallest churches** as we think together about new ways to provide leadership and ways to celebrate and assist congregations whose ministry will continue, perhaps in new ways and places where the ministry of the congregation may be coming to an end.
 - **Jim Thomas** continues to offer his time, expertise and resources for stewardship, organizational structures that work and all manner of church vitality.

Your Conference Staff and Board of Directors have been and will continue to be focused on ways to fulfill our mission statement. To that end, we have engaged in work that supports the ministry of our Local Churches as they are today but always with an eye to what we are being called to as we live into God’s future.

Standing with you in resurrection hope,
Lynn

Associate Conference Minister
For Search and Call and Small Church Ministry
Reverend Pam Lucas

Years ago I came upon a study from the Gesell Institute of Child Behavior that theorized that human development moves through cycles of disequilibrium and equilibrium. Learning to walk or ride a bike or speak and be understood are times of disequilibrium - falling down or not being understood are times of frustration and self-discovery that lead to a time of equilibrium - the living into the gifts that this new learning has brought. Of course, another time of disequilibrium is always around the corner. Because equilibrium lulls us into complacency. Disequilibrium is what wakes us up and reminds us that we are not yet finished human beings.

This same theory resounds in all of life. It is certainly true at this time in the life of the Church with a capital 'C' as the Nones (those with no religious identity) increase in number and churchgoers decrease in number. This time of disequilibrium is forcing local churches to ask hard questions about sustainability and viability. Disequilibrium means change. And change invites frustration and self-discovery.

In the history of God's people from the earliest days recorded in Scripture until now this ebb and flow can be seen.

In the Vermont Conference with our 139 churches, in all of last year, only 3 churches called new pastors. Two others are circulating their profiles and two others have search committees working on creating their local church profiles. That's the equilibrium.

Now for the disequilibrium. Many of our churches are small churches in small communities. But the changing place of the church in society has not escaped Vermont. Here too, a growing percentage of seniors, fewer attendees, fewer dollars, and aging buildings are affecting our congregations.

Nine churches have interim pastors at this time. BUT twenty churches are looking for Interim pastors because their pastors have either retired or resigned. And another five pastors will be leaving over the summer. And a few of our churches are up against the wall having struggled too long to survive, hoping against hope that something would stop the downward spiral - and it hasn't. So the hardest of all questions looms. How can we say goodbye to our church?

In Secrets in the Dark, Frederik Buechner wrote, 'Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away - the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dry leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place.' To imagine that place where together - Jesus and we - ask new and different questions about how to be church in the present and future moments.

So I believe that God is in the disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is the place where God gets our attention. Disequilibrium is the place where we must repent of the ways we have

lapsed into assumptions that all will be as it was. Disequilibrium is the place where our eyes and ears and hearts have to cease looking inward where it's all about us - and again look up and out where God and God's world needs what we can share.

On April 12, in a sermon preached by Rev. Doug Moore, interim pastor at North and South Congregational Churches in St. Johnsbury, he said, "In the tension between our desire to cling to this moment and Christ's insistence that we let go, believe, and trust, our faith is strengthened and new life emerges - a new church is born."

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

As I sit to write this report, I am a bit surprised to realize I have been on the Conference Staff for more than 11 years. My position has morphed several times in those years, from Conference Administrator to Minister for Conference Administration to Conference Business Manager to my current called position. Through it all, my focus has been to establish and enhance covenant with our associations and churches. Moreover, I seek to provide practical and useful tools to equip our covenantal partners for mission and ministry. I quite literally measure where my efforts are focused by asking whether such efforts will help to bring about our stated mission of:

Equipping congregations for Christ's mission and ministry today and tomorrow

Some of my time is, of course, spent on the mundane but necessary bits that make the Conference function, including finances, investments, financial reports, and the like. But my joy comes from interaction with churches and associations, bringing resources and tools to help them enhance their personal and congregational discipleship. Here are some of the ways I sought to do this:

- In 2014 I preached and shared worship in 29 different churches, bringing messages on stewardship, church vitality, the future of church, and more. I usually tried to combine worship with a workshop which expanded on the theme heard during my message.
- I led workshops for churches and associations on a diverse list of topics including stewardship, narrative budgets, investments and endowments, governance, planned giving, financial systems management, capital campaigns, church vitality, and more.
- I led leadership retreats for lay leaders and pastors, working on visioning, strategic planning, and moving from dreaming to engaging.

- With a planning team, I helped bring about the Craft Church event in October 2014, which followed the ecumenical Recalculating the Way event in March that we presented with The Episcopal Church in Vermont.
- I keynoted three Association meetings, preached at ecumenical events in Randolph, moderated an income disparity event, and worked with the Stewardship Department to bring the Bluegrass Gospel Project to Chandler Center for the Arts, our first successful fundraiser in some time.

Speaking of the Stewardship Department, I am grateful both personally and professionally for the leadership of Rev. Lucia Jackson and Rev. Kathy Clark, who have revitalized the Department and have sought to be connectional with our churches, developing and presenting workshops on a variety of topics. Indeed, the Stewardship Department Council have all been involved in this effort.

The work of the Finance Committee, among the most difficult and least appreciated committees of the Conference, has been exemplary as well. Led by Rev. Dick White, they have done careful and thoughtful work to ensure mission and ministries continue amid constricting resources. And the Investment Committee, along with our portfolio specialists at TD Wealth Management, do a model job of being good stewards of our endowment.

And lastly, I wish to thank you, dear readers, for living into our shared covenant; for knowing when to ask for help, for hearing the sometimes hard-to-hear truths, and for your intentional efforts not just to hang on, but to enhance your presence in your communities and your personal and corporate discipleship.

We have much work to do, and we are navigating in uncharted waters. How much better that we go together, trusting in our God to guide, equip, and sustain us. Let's get to it!

Board of Directors

The mission statement of the Vermont Conference reminds us that it is our task to equip Vermont UCC churches so that they can work to do Christ's ministry and mission as they feel called. To that end, the primary focus of the Board of Directors in 2015 has been to continue to discern how we might help the churches and clergy of the conference meet the significant challenges they are facing.

One way we have done that is to look at our own staffing as we try to meet those needs. With both Lynn Thomas and Sybil McShane leaving their jobs in the Conference Office last summer, a small committee sat down and determined the best way to reallocate the tasks that needed to be done. As a result, two new positions were designed. Kim Edgar was hired as our new Conference Ministries Coordinator. Her main responsibility is Search and Call and Annual Meeting liaison. Rev. Mark Pitton was hired as the new Office Manager and

Communications Director. His main responsibility is managing the office as well as our e-communications and website. We are grateful for the excellent work that Lynn and Sybil did for the Conference. And we are enjoying the new energy that Kim and Mark bring to the Conference Office.

Last year, the Board contracted with two organizations to help us equip leaders and churches in the Vermont Conference, the Center for Progressive Renewal (CPR) and Partners for Sacred Places (PSP).

CPR is a partner organization with the United Church of Christ whose mission is “focused primarily on leadership development to revitalize progressive Christianity - one leader at a time.” CPR is currently working with 4 “Next Level” churches to help them find ways to get to the next level in their ministry, One Ministry Affiliation Group has also been established. Two Church Vitality Workshops have also been offered through CPR - Craft Church and Recalculating the Way 2. We are currently working to identify the next group of Next Level Churches. We are also just beginning the New Church Expressions committee, which is examining how we might plant new churches in the Vermont Conference.

Partners for Sacred Places (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, PSP is currently working with five UCC churches and four Episcopal churches in Vermont to help the churches generate a comprehensive plan and support structure to engage their strengths, to revitalize their role in the community and increase their fundraising capability.

In addition to these programs, 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. As part of our financial responsibilities, we are going to be looking at how we might increase giving to OCWM. Two on-going topics of exploration are what the possibilities for outdoor ministries in the Conference and looking at what it would mean for the Conference to divest itself from fossil fuels

As I complete my term as Chair of the Board of Directors, I want to say a heartfelt thank you to the Staff of the Conference - Lynn Bujnak, Pam Lucas, Jim Thomas, Mark Pitton, and Kim Edgar. 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. And thank you to the members of the Board, you have been a joy to lead! May God bless us as we continue to discern how we can continue to be faithful in a fast changing world.

Respectfully submitted for the Board,
Rev. Amelia Pitton, Chair

DEPARTMENT OF MISSION

The state of the Department of Mission is strong and getting stronger, and the strength of the Department is in its volunteers. These incredible volunteers worked hard this past year as demonstrated by their reports. Also, the department makes ample use of E-Kit to make its work known in the Conference.

JUST PEACE ADVOCATES

Since 2001, a small group of folks has met from time to time to discuss ways of raising consciousness within the Vermont Conference regarding issues of peace and justice. We have sponsored displays, workshops and peace-related resolutions at Annual Meeting. As we have done for several years, in 2014 we organized these annual events: Peacemakers Breakfast at Annual Meeting on April 26, the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council's Legislative Day on April 4 and Legislative Dinner on October 14. We have encouraged financial support for the Vermont Low Income Advocate, feeling strongly that this is a unique and important ministry of the Vermont Conference. Through the Advocate, low-income Vermonters have a voice in the Legislature, which is crucial when the State budget is tight and tried-and-true programs are under threat of reduction. We have been impressed to see the present Advocate, Karen Lafayette, in action. For the past two years we've also submitted monthly contributions to the Peacemakers Pulpit in E-KIT.

Citing the excellent work the Conference staff is doing to communicate and encourage involvement in justice and peace issues, the Just Peace Advocates decided to formally disband in the fall of 2014. Group members Betty Edson and Theresa Lever have agreed to continue organizing the Peacemakers Breakfast, all of the VLIAC activities, and the Peacemakers Pulpit. If anyone would like to be involved in helping with these programs, please be in touch with Betty Edson (bedson30@gmail.com) or Theresa Lever (thelevers@comcast.net).

As our denomination's statement of faith says, "Courage - to you all - in the struggle for justice and peace."

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE

Last year the Environmental Committee focused on developing retreats and workshops for pastors and congregations to develop resources for strengthening their environmental ministries. We offered two programs in the spring and summer of 2014:

At Annual Meeting, we offered a workshop in keeping with the spiritual theme of "Going Deeper." The 1 ½ hour long session focused on the importance of gratitude as a starting point and foundation for environmental stewardship. After beginning with silent meditation and poetry, participants were asked to describe a place that feels to them like holy ground - where they felt a deep connection to the sacred. A lively discussion followed, about how these experiences, and the gratitude they inspired, were important for both a deepening of faith, and a strengthening of commitment to care for creation. After a time of Bible study of Psalm 8, the session concluded with a discussion of "Spiritual Approaches in an Era of Climate Change."

On June 19, our committee offered a retreat at Bethany Church in Randolph, attended by 15 people from all corners of the state. This retreat was focused on developing resources for the “Not Ordinary Times” program of the Eco-Justice Ministries: including worship, with focus on environmental liturgies, discussion of resources, and showing of excerpts of three films that inspired a rich discussion. (The Journey of the Universe, Cosmos, and The Wisdom to Survive.) The response of the group was enthusiastic, and several participants suggested we make these retreats regular seasonal events. In the fall and winter, busy lives and other demands on our time prevented us from developing more retreat programs, but we plan to do so in 2015.

In March, Fred Taylor was invited to be the Mission Day speaker at First Congregational Church in Fair Haven. His sermon focused on how environmental and climate justice are integrally related to the other missions of the church. The service was well-received, and Fred is eager to bring this environmental message to other churches in the conference. Please feel free to contact him at rtaylor@antioch.edu or 802-387-2681.

Plans for the coming year:

1. We’ll offer another workshop at Annual Meeting, on the theme of “Environmental Justice,” and hope to also offer retreats in the summer and fall.
2. This year, we’ll be promoting the “New Awakening” project of the New England Environmental Ministries group: www.climatewitness.org. This project, beginning on the Feast of St. Francis, (Oct. 4) and concluding with the end of Epiphany (Feb. 7), urges congregations to enter into a “Season of Prophetic Climate Witness through Preaching, Prayer and Practice,” as faith communities mobilize in preparation for the Paris Climate Summit in December. Through retreats and online resources, we’ll be encouraging congregations to integrate this important aspect of mission into the life of their community.

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

SUMMER LUNCH COMMITTEE

In 2014, the Department of Mission dispersed Summer Lunch Grants to 16 congregations in Vermont for a total of \$3400. Sadly, Summer Lunch programs continue to be a vital link for families surviving at or below the poverty line. For families that receive free or reduced price breakfast and lunch every day during the school year, the summer can be a scary prospect. Suddenly you need to come up with a lot more money for groceries with the children home for all meals. That's where Summer Lunch programs come in to fill the gap. From full day summer camps, sites with a hot lunch available, home delivery of hot meals, to home delivery of groceries, Vermont churches do it all. From a small church helping 9 children last summer to a large church that helped 280 - every little bit helps. Watch your E-Kit for the application. Churches that received grants in 2014 are as follows:

Christ's Church, Saxton's River
Williston Federated, Williston
United Church of Craftsbury, Craftsbury Common
Centre Congregational, Brattleboro
Dummerston Congregational, E. Dummerston
First Congregational Church UCC, Springfield

Federated Church of East Arlington, East Arlington
Sharon Congregational UCC, Sharon
Essex, Jericho, Underhill Ecumenical Ministry, Essex
United Church of Dorset and East Rupert, Dorset
Malletts Bay Congregational UCC, Colchester
United Church of Northfield, Northfield
Windham Congregational, Londonderry
Congregational Church of Middlebury, Middlebury
United Church of Bellows Falls, Bellows Falls
Danville

PRISON JUSTICE COMMITTEE

The prison justice committee serves as a resource to those around the conference who have questions surrounding the correctional 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, and lead Bible study. 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 or her life around.

Committee members also participate in forums throughout the state. This year the chair participated in a forum at St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Brattleboro. St. Michael's has joined the Sunday afternoon UCC worship rotation at the Springfield prison. St. Michael's is also considering taking leadership to bring transitional housing to Brattleboro for those being released from prison.

The Committee also engages in advocacy. This legislative session the committee chair wrote to the chairs of the senate and house appropriation committees seeking the restoration of funding to the Community High School of Vermont that provides high school and vocational education to men and women subject to whatever form of Department of Corrections supervision. The letter cited a Rand Corporation study that demonstrates that education for such individuals significantly reduces recidivism, and argued that cutting CHSVT's budget is penny wise and pound foolish.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeanne Zammataro
Chair, Prison Justice Committee

GLOBAL MINISTRIES COMMITTEE

Global Ministries Committee, GMC, focus areas for 2014-2015
GMC shared in displays and presentations at the VTC UCC Annual Meetings (2014-2015) regarding UCC worldwide mission and ministry services.

GMC continued to encourage individual churches, when they inquired, to develop and deepen their own unique mission projects as well as to learn about and support Global

Ministries programs worldwide. It is important for churches to remember that Global Ministries is a covenantal relationship of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to carry out mission and ministry projects in over 70 countries in six regions of the world where partners invite Global Ministries participation. The philosophy and practice of Global Ministries is to “walk in accompaniment” with local partners as a presence to meet critical needs in health care, education, justice, uplift of women, child sponsorship, poverty reduction, environmental programming, micro-credit financing, and other approaches particularly with a particular emphasis on capacity building and development. Churches are encouraged to become sustaining partners in financing UCC mission and ministries through Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) and One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS).

For the GMC, Dee and Bob Keller planned and implemented the January, 10-20, 2015 itineration in Vermont of Alison Stendahl, UCC missionary in Turkey (1980-2014). Alison preached at Centre Congregational Church Brattleboro, and Bethany Congregational Church, Randolph. She led afternoon, dinner, or evening presentations and discussions with an excellent Power Point that showed the history of civilizations and missions in the Middle East with analysis of the current situation there. These were presented in Centre Congregational and First Congregational Churches in Brattleboro; Second Congregational Church in Bennington, United Church of Dorset & E. Rupert; First Congregational Church in Burlington, and Bethany Congregational Church in Montpelier. She met with small groups associated with Dummerston, Windham, and Bethany Randolph Congregational Churches. She also met with Mission and Service Committees of Centre and First Congregational Churches, Brattleboro. GMC thanks those who hosted meetings, meals, or overnights for Alison during those icy, snowy days: Dee and Bob Keller, Carol Corwin, Rev. Mary Lee-Clark, Skip Dickinson, Betty Edson, Theresa Lever, Lucy Samara, Rev. Susanna Griefen, David and Ginny Crittenden, and others.

Focusing on the Karen Armstrong quote, “Compassion is not an option. It’s the key to our survival.”, we continued to encourage the study and affirmation by churches of the Charter for Compassion which was endorsed by the VTC UCC Annual Meeting in June, 2010. In particular, we note with excitement the hundreds of communities in the USA and around the world including the Australian Parliament and the country of Botswana as nations in the Compassionate Communities International, CCI. We also note the emerging Compassionate Partners Network which includes eleven types of partners: Arts; Business; Compassionate Communities; Education; Environment; Healthcare; Peace and Non-Violence; Religion, Spirituality, and Interfaith (3 locations in Vermont, including South Congregational Church in St. Johnsbury); Restorative Justice; Science and Research; and Social Services. (See: www.charterforcompassion.org)

Respectfully submitted, Dee and Bob Keller, Interim Co-Chairs, Global Ministries Committee

Respectfully submitted,
Jeanne Zammataro
Chair, Department of Mission

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY

With Pam Lucas' leave of absence in the time of year when most of the 'work' of this department would be done, and with the other Conference Staff working with the new initiatives around Church Vitality with the Center for Progressive Renewal and Partners for Sacred Places this Department did not meet. However, the work of Ministerial Standing and Standards, a committee within the Department, was faithfully carried out. The Church Growth and Vitality Committee was responsible for helping plan the Recalculating the Way II on March 14th and the Convocation Committee is busy planning this year's gathering of our clergy on September 21-23.

FAITH FORMATION TASK FORCE (Department of Christian Education)

In 1960, the Vermont Conference had 189 churches, 27,360 reported members and church school enrollment of 14,022. In 2013, the Vermont Conference had 139 churches, 13,085 reported members and church school enrollment of 2,877.

The United Church of Christ has a stated vision for its future:

- The UCC is a bold public voice of Christianity in service of God's ever-unfolding mission
- There is a welcoming UCC community of faith that is accessible to all - no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey
- Every UCC person is well-equipped to *be growing in faith, be theologically conversant, and be active in the global mission of the church*
- The UCC has a wealth of prepared, excellent leaders that reflect the diversity of God's beloved community

At Annual Meeting 2014 questions were posed:

- How might the Vermont Conference contribute to this vision in the area of faith formation, biblical literacy and the making of disciples in our local churches?
- What is the State of 'Christian Education' in our churches today?
- What does it take to have an effective faith-forming congregation - and how might we equip our congregations to become faith-formers?

The plan was to form a Faith Formation Task Force to engage:

- In a discovery of exactly what is happening in our local churches in the area of faith formation for all ages;
- Our churches in a conversation about what is discovered;
- A vision of what the Vermont Conference might provide to enable and equip our churches and members of all ages to 'be growing in faith, theologically conversant and active in the global mission of the church'.

With Pam Lucas' leave of absence in the time of year when most of the 'work' would be done, and with the other Conference Staff working with the new initiatives around Church

Vitality with the Center for Progressive Renewal and Partners for Sacred Places, the Task Force never got off the ground.

But this work remains a priority. Listen for the ways in which your congregation can be part of the visioning the ways we might become a Conference where every UCC person is *well-equipped to be growing in faith, be theologically conversant, and be active in the global mission of the church.*