



UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST

God is still speaking,

NORTHERN PLAINS CONFERENCE
WORK PLAN 2018

Introduction

The mainline/old-line church in this country has been in decline for the past 60 years. This general decline is taking place in every denomination at every level.

The problems we face are big; which immediately leads us to ask what is the big answer? We have big problems, so we need big answers. But Wendell Berry the prophet and poet would remind us that attempts to impose big answers are what got us in this mess in the first place.

Change will happen neighborhood by neighborhood where people come together and decide that they will live differently going forward. We must make common cause with the places we live and then start doing what needs to be done.

All of this will require patience, and patience in an emergency is a very difficult thing. Before we can ask others to change, we must first change ourselves. We must first change our principles, and if enough of us change our principles we may one day be able to change policy. If this change were easy, we would have done it already. We have been going down the wrong road for a long time, and we have been telling ourselves things that are not true for a long time.

In North Dakota, we reside on the leading edge of this change. This means that we have a chance to learn some of the things that everyone will eventually need to know. Our actions over the next 10 years could have a big impact on the vitality of the Christian Church going forward.

The Outline of a Possible Plan

1] We must love one another with a love that leads to action.

Knowing the right words can be a dangerous thing, because at some point we begin to believe that saying the right words will be enough. The Apostle James warns, “faith without works is dead.” He is right. If our faith is not leading us to acts of healing and justice, then we need to reexamine our faith.

How?

Over the next several years, we must identify the ways we have failed to offer love to those in our communities – our Native American brothers and sisters, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, the poor, and various generations among us.

We must determine a way to reconcile relationships with those we have not loved.

We must allow those we have not loved to show us how we can best welcome and include them in our lives and ministries.

We must organize churches that will unabashedly welcome everyone in the community, no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey.

2] We must become missionaries. Our focus must move from mostly inward to mostly outward.

A hundred and fifty years ago, we Christians largely believed that our mission was to share the good news of the Gospel with the rest of world. Slowly, over time, our focus has turned inward, and our focus now is largely about our own interests and needs.

How?

We must become those who go out and gather up the people at the margins and invite them into the fold where they can be healed.

We must use our creativity and energy to determine ways we can offer assistance in our individual communities so that they can move toward becoming healthy, prosperous and just communities.

We must venture out beyond our communities and our comfort zones to offer assistance and work together with local people to establish relationships and understanding in places where the people we meet are likely to be quite different from us.

3] We must start talking to one another in meaningful ways

We are a divided nation. We no longer talk to one another. Instead we sit at home and watch TV. Half of us watch Fox News and the other half watches MSNBC. And it really doesn't matter which, because in either case we are told that the other side cannot be trusted. Divide and conquer is one of the tried and true methods for keeping people in line.

If we would just listen to one another, we would find out that we want many of the same things. We should decide to start working together on those things about which we agree.

How?

One possible ministry would be to begin conversations across the "aisle".

Our Conference and churches could be the forces that unites if we would open our doors for community forums and debates with a goal of involving our communities in solving problems together.

By providing opportunities such as camps, work groups, youth events, adult events, multi-generational events, etc. – we encourage friendships which will build understanding, tolerance, and love.

4] We must work to unite the faith community in ND

Our greatest strength is our openness. It is widely known throughout the state that if no other church in town will bury your loved one, you can always go to the local UCC church. The UCC fancies itself “a united and a uniting church”. Our relationship with the Christian Church Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Canada are examples of this openness. We must take the initiative to unite the faith community in North Dakota. And I am not talking about just Christian. We must also reach out to our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist brothers and sisters.

5) We must support and train the pastors and laity of our churches

The Northern Plains Conference has long valued an educated, well-trained clergy. We should also encourage education among the members of our congregations.

How?

It is imperative that the Conference provide training and educational opportunities for clergy and laity alike.

We must hold each other accountable by conducting periodic reviews of clergy and lay leaders, as well as the churches they are serving.

6) We must offer opportunities for all members and friends of the Northern Plains Conference to be involved in maintaining the framework and function of the Conference by practicing good stewardship and supporting our mission and ministry.

It is impossible to staff, organize and maintain an organization without funding, and it is unrealistic to expect that people will be involved in something unless they have a stake in its growth.

How?

For the Conference to be what we want it to be, we will all be required to offer time, talent and treasure to that end.

The Conference Minister, committees and staff will work together to develop the talents, time and treasures of the people of our conference.

Conclusion

If the faith community does not rescue the people, then they will not be rescued in our time.

Good courageous people are doing wonderful works of liberation all around the world. But in too many cases the Church of Jesus the Christ sits on the sidelines. We are the missing piece because we are the people with a job description of transforming the world, and we have a presence in just about every community around the world.

And if we seriously wrestle with the challenges before us, we will learn what works and where we need to make adjustments for 2019.

The theme for this year's Annual Meeting is "Love That Leads to Action". We will lift up the UCC Three Great Loves: Love of Neighbor; Love of Children; Love of Creation. In the coming year we hope every congregation will do something that shows love in each of these three areas.

At the Annual Meeting we will offer workshops in all three areas that will provide practical ideas, success stories and a time to collect ideas from the

workshop participants. Following the Annual Meeting, we will publish a list of ideas in each of the areas.

In the coming year, we will explore ways in which we can become more effective as congregations. Sunday visits by the Conference Minister to congregations will deliver the message of this work plan. We also hope to be invited to talk more about the various strategies outlined in this plan.