

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

*Because this is a discernment process it is a work in progress. The following FAQs may evolve over time as we listen and learn more from what we hear. So we have put a date and draft version number in the upper right corner for you to know what version of the FAQs you are reviewing.*

### **1) Why are we considering this?**

We live in a time of great change in the world and in our churches. As a united and uniting church, we are convinced that we need each other to navigate the changes we are all experiencing. While staying true to the deep roots of our faith, we are inviting God's Spirit to guide and inspire us in creating a new thing -- new patterns and structures that will enable us to make the extravagant love of God known in dynamic and innovative ways, both in Southern New England and beyond. We wonder with you if our witness and impact might be strengthened by bringing our three conferences together for shared ministry.

### **2) Is “this” already a “done deal?”**

No. As the resolution points out, our three conferences have benefitted from considerable cooperation over the past many years, and we are continuing to find new ways to cooperate. By passing a common resolution, our three Boards are asking for the stakeholders of our three conferences to engage in discerning the benefits of additional shared ministry.

### **3) What does “this” mean for my local church?**

Your access to all the resources, program opportunities and advice will increase. This will be true no matter what scenario unfolds going forward, and has already begun thanks to several new initiatives. (E.g. joint Super Saturday gatherings, shared strategic partnership for Racial Justice training, and caucuses during General Synod) You will still have clear points of contact at the conference setting in this new structure.

### **4) What does “this” mean for my local pastor?**

Your pastor will have access to more resources and program opportunities for your local church and for her or his professional development. If s/he participates in a Community of Practice, or serves on an Association committee, no change is anticipated.

### **5) What does “this” mean for my regional Associate Conference Minister?**

The staffing structure and roles of each the three conferences have shifted over the past 10 years. Before this resolution was proposed, we were already in conversation about sharing staff. Regardless of whether the conversation about merger or federation moves forward, the possibility of sharing staff will certainly be explored.

### **6) Will we still have a Conference Minister?**

Yes. Even if our discernment leads to full merger, there would be a Conference(s) Minister that would serve as a leader for all three conferences. Currently we have three Conference Ministers, each spending 1/3 of their time serving in the national setting. We believe that a new staffing structure would lead to an increase of resources for our local church settings.

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**7) Isn't the "real" reason this is being discussed diminished resources?**

The real reason is that the Boards of Directors of RI/MA/CT feel God is calling us to something new, and we believe that the ministries of all three conferences will be strengthened by greater interdependence. There is no emergency that is forcing us into this decision, although we do recognize that mainline denominational stewardship and resources have been in decline. This is a Kairos moment that presents an opportunity to continue to have a strong progressive Christian voice in New England.

**8) What are the implications of the possible creation of a new Southern New England Conference for the wider UCC?**

The southern New England conferences have long taken a leadership role within the United Church of Christ. This may be a useful model for other regions. Our Conference Ministers and our new General Minister and President have been in dialogue about the implications and possibilities that a potential merger would create.

**9) How could this possible merger or federation amplify grass roots organizing and mission and justice work and witness?**

Our hope is that as the conferences model the breaking down of barriers we will model working together for our local churches. The model of the Pastoral Excellence Programs could extend to connect churches focusing on mission, justice, and witness. The work that each conference has done in terms of mission, justice, and witness is already influencing the conferences beyond their borders. Connecticut Conference has led racial justice trainings for both Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Massachusetts Conference's leadership on climate change extends to all of New England. This will lead to greater resource sharing in our areas of expertise.

**10) How could this possible merger or federation amplify ecumenical cooperation?**

This act of interdependence will prepare us to work with other like-minded Christian denominations and people of faith. We believe that ecumenical work will be increasingly important in the future and that our congregational structure in general and this proposal in particular will enhance our ability to form partnerships over former divides.

**11) Does General Synod have to approve whatever we do?**

Yes. General Synod recognizes conference borders. This proposal, if approved by all three conferences, will be submitted to General Synod to be ratified.

**So. New England UCC –  
Engaging a Season of Discernment For A Future Of Shared Ministry**  
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**12) Will “this” reduce our delegate count at Synod?**

No. The delegation to General Synod is based on local church membership through the following formula: In compliance with the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, the total number of Conference Delegates in any biennium shall not be fewer than 675, and there shall not be fewer than three delegates allocated to any Conference, regardless of membership. The distribution of Conference Delegates to the Thirty-first General Synod is based on Conference membership, as listed in the 2015 United Church of Christ Yearbook.

**13) What will our governance structure be?**

This period of discernment will shape the future of the conference(s). Your feedback will help inform our future governance and staffing structure.

**14) How do we retain the legacy of each of our conferences should we move into something new?**

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” The centrality of the word and witness of Jesus Christ will not be changed in this move, but now is a critical moment in the life of Christianity – we believe that God is calling us to do a new thing. Like the pilgrims who crossed the ocean sure that more light would break forth from God’s Holy Word, or four distinct traditions joining together in 1957 believing that a commitment to Christ’s call to unity was more important than theological differences. We are convinced that bridging our geographic and theological differences will only enhance our witness to God’s redemptive work in the world.

**We thank you for helping to lead this process:**

Barbara Libby, RI Conference Interim Conference Minister

George Peters, RI Conference Board Chair

Kent Siladi, CT Conference Conference Minister

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