

# Vision for the Indiana-Kentucky Conference United Church of Christ

*“reformed and constantly reforming”*

2008-2015

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## The Vision Plan

1 The Indiana-Kentucky Conference has come to a point in its history when it must do its work in a  
2 new way. This is not simply driven by finances, though diminishing finances are both symptomatic of the  
3 need for change and must be taken into account as changes are made. *This Vision is primarily driven by the*  
4 *need to address the cultural change we have all been experiencing in recent decades.* The Vision seeks to  
5 address this cultural change in an adaptive way<sup>1</sup> that is both faithful and effective.

6 This Vision is inspired by Ephesians 4, which describes a church that is less an institution and more  
7 of an organism. That is, it is a church in which all the believers are considered to be members of the Body of  
8 Christ and each is considered a minister. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “The gifts he gave were that some would  
9 be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of  
10 the ministry, for building up the body of Christ....”

11 These words suggest that *every* member of the body has responsibility for doing the ministry. It also  
12 suggests that leadership has responsibility for *equipping* the members for this ministry. Thus, this is a vision  
13 of a conference in which the work is dispersed through a *network* rather than done from a *hub*; a conference  
14 in which people (both clergy and laity) are *equipped, empowered, enabled, appreciated and held*  
15 *accountable.*

16 The committee (which was appointed to be broadly representative of the Conference membership)  
17 has taken seriously the considerable comment and input received from the Conference Retreat July 13-14,  
18 2007 (at which 118 were present), the Conference Board meeting in September, and other comments and  
19 conversations. We have sought also to be open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. It is our prayer that this  
20 Vision will be received with the same openness to the guidance of the Spirit and will be amended, if needed,  
21 and affirmed by the Conference Board and the Annual Meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> “Adaptive” is used here in the same way it is used by Ron Heifetz, author of “Leadership Without easy Answers”. That is, “adaptive change” goes past “fixing problems within a system” to addressing the entire system itself.

## **The Conference's current mission statement**

22 *Inspired and sustained by God's grace, the Indiana-Kentucky Conference exists as a living and growing*  
23 *body, supporting and challenging one another with the passion of Jesus Christ to share the word and*  
24 *work of God's Love with ever more people in ever more churches.*

## **The Proposed Conference Vision**

25 *Congregations covenanting together to be vibrant, faithful and effective witnesses to Christ in their locale*  
26 *and the world by connecting to one another, to the United Church of Christ and the wider faith*  
27 *community.*

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## **A Brief Description as of December 2007**

28 The Indiana-Kentucky Conference is composed of 155 congregations (including 20 in Kentucky, 2 in  
29 Illinois and 133 in Indiana) with 33,000 members. Approximately one-half (or 80) of the congregations were  
30 family size (less than 75 in worship on average); 32% (or 50) were "pastor-centered" size (75-150 in worship on  
31 average); 17% (or 27) were "program-centered size" (150-300), and none were corporate size (more than 300 in  
32 worship). There are concentrations of congregations in Indy, Louisville, Evansville, and a tier in Northern  
33 Indiana. Just three congregations are predominantly African American. Approximately one-fourth of the clergy  
34 are women.

35 The Conference has an office in the Interchurch Center of Indianapolis and presently employs three full-  
36 time ministerial staff: Steve Gray (Conference Minister for nine years), Carol Barth (Associate Conference  
37 Minister for 8 years), and Thom Webster (Associate Conference Minister for 7 years). Carol and Thom are  
38 currently deployed in northern and southern Indiana. There are three full-time and one half-time support staff in  
39 Indianapolis.

40 There are currently nine associations which work primarily through committees on ministry: Eastern,  
41 Evansville Tri-State, Kentuckiana, Lincolnland, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Wabash Valley, Western. All  
42 congregations are within four hours of the Indianapolis office.

43 The Conference has a board of 15 members, plus 5 officers and five ex-officio members. The Merom  
44 Conference Center has a separate board. There are a large number of standing committees responsible for  
45 various programs and other functions in the life of the Conference.

46 The Merom Conference Center was a college of the Christian Churches until it closed in the 1920's. It  
47 was used as a "rural institute by the University of Chicago" and then "purchased" by the Conference for a dollar  
48 in the 1960's for use as a conference center. It is about 2 hours from Indianapolis (south of Terre Haute). The  
49 Center operates year round and is available for use by outside groups and families when camps and conferences  
50 are not operating. It is a remote and beautiful location and has been an important center of Conference life,  
51 relationships, and leadership development. The Conference subsidizes the operation of the conference center,  
52 which has a 5/8's time director who also serves as a 3/8's time youth and young adult director, and a support  
53 staff person.

## **Current Challenges**

54 The Indiana-Kentucky Conference originated in 1963, six years after the formation of the United Church  
55 of Christ through a merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the Congregational Christian Churches  
56 (with slightly more E & R congregations).

57 The Evangelical and Reformed Church had synods, while the Congregational Christian Churches had  
58 associations and conferences. As part of the merger agreements, features of both groups were incorporated, so  
59 that both a national synod and conferences and associations were adopted for the newly formed United Church  
60 of Christ. Thus, for the formerly E & R congregations, the development of associations has been new, since they  
61 did not have these before the creation of the United Church of Christ. The development of the national synod  
62 was an innovation for the formerly Congregational Christian congregations. Also, the geography of middle

63 judicatories changed for most everyone in the development of the new relationships. These represented profound  
64 structural changes for both groups.

65 Some of the emotional and philosophical implications of the merger are at least as profound as the  
66 structural and geographical changes. For example, those from the merging traditions brought different  
67 understandings of how the nature of the faith is discussed and understood. In the Evangelical & Reformed  
68 Church before the 1957 merger into the UCC, when a national synod made decisions and statements, these were  
69 regarded as definitive and binding for congregational life. However, in the Congregational Christian churches  
70 before the 1957 merger into the UCC, such statements made by national conventions were regarded as *important*  
71 for consideration by congregations but basically *advisory* in nature (rather than binding). These understandings  
72 are still assumed to be accurate by many who experienced the 1957 merger. Thus, when the General Synod of  
73 2005 made strong statements about which there was disagreement, some of those who grew up in the E & R  
74 tradition and ethos tended to take those statements as theologically and ecclesially definitive, while many of  
75 those who grew up in the Congregational Christian tradition gave such statements less weight. For some, then,  
76 there seemed to be more at stake in the General Synod 2005 decisions than the polity of the United Church of  
77 Christ actually suggests. A result was much consternation and conflict and the loss and/or estrangement of a  
78 number of IKC congregations.

79 In addition to the structural and geographical changes resulting from the 1957 merger, and the deeper  
80 emotional and philosophical implications, the merger that brought about the United Church of Christ came  
81 during one of the most profound periods of change ever in the surrounding American culture. This cultural  
82 change was reflected in the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Viet Nam war movement, the feminist movement,  
83 the rise of mass communication, the global market place and so many other forces that birthed what has been  
84 called the post-modern era. Such rapid, disorienting change (some good, some not so good, some yet-to-be-  
85 understood, all profound) results in deep collective anxiety and stress for all, whether they are in the church or  
86 not.

87 This represents a huge amount of change in these 50 years since the UCC was formed. Changes in  
88 structure (such as these mentioned in the above paragraph) carry profound implications for the ethos and day to  
89 day practice of merged partner churches. In addition to the shiny new church that resulted, such change also  
90 engenders some misunderstanding, anxiety, and resistance. This is mostly a reflection of human nature and the  
91 human condition, rather than unfaithfulness. Taken together, it means that though it has been fifty years since the  
92 merger, the merger is still a work in progress. But we also affirm that in spite of the difficulties always implicit  
93 in a merger and the difficulties engendered by the rapid social change in the United States during these past 50  
94 years, the creation of the United Church of Christ is a gift of God and a work worth continuing! In fact, we  
95 believe the United Church of Christ is a church for “such a time as this!”

96 Most younger and newer members of the church will have little awareness of this history and will think  
97 of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the UCC as an entity that has “just always been.” They have been drawn  
98 to the church by its many strengths: it feels like spiritual “home” to them and they are deeply appreciative of the  
99 heritage it represents, often without knowing much about the dynamics that have shaped it and continue to shape  
100 it. Yet, it is important to be aware of this history and how it continues to affect our church in its continuing  
101 development.

102 This church, like all churches of Jesus Christ, is called to be “reformed and constantly reforming”. The  
103 strategic plan developed in 2001-2005, was the most recent effort to reform appropriately in the face of the  
104 changed context in which the Conference does its ministry.

### The Core Issue

105 The Strategic Plan approved in 2005 recognizes many of the important shifts needed including these it  
106 names: “energize and utilize the spiritual gifts and talents of lay members in our churches; focus on transforming  
107 our current congregations through programs of spiritual direction, evangelism and church growth; start new  
108 congregations; empower associations to become settings of energy and excitement for ministry; work in  
109 covenant with other settings of the United Church of Christ.”

110 However, the strategic plan did *not* address the underlying model by which the Conference operates.  
111 This current operating model is, as is true of most church structures created in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century era, a **staff-**  
112 **dependent and staff-driven model**. The strategic plan actually *reaffirms* the current model by identifying the  
113 following as a *key aspect*: “Reconfigure the Conference staff and professional staff to provide increased contact

114 with churches and pastors while dedicating new time for pro-active ministries of transformation with  
115 congregations.” Thus, while the plan recognizes the need for “increased contact with churches and pastors” and  
116 for “pro-active ministries of transformation with congregations”, it places primary responsibility for this on the  
117 staff. One wonders where such “new time” will come from since the Conference staff is already “run ragged”  
118 trying to fulfill their current responsibilities!

119 Conference leadership has now come to see that the current staff-dependent model has lost its  
120 effectiveness, as evidenced by reduced giving, difficulty in recruiting volunteers for some jobs, some low trust  
121 levels, and a lack of measurable or perceived common direction. So, attention has been given to the development  
122 of a new model, which is what is envisioned in this document. This new model is a **network model**, which we  
123 believe is in keeping with what the Holy Spirit is seeking to do among us.

### **The Needed Transition**

124 The transition to a network-driven conference will require some time, intentionality and skill on the part  
125 of the staff and the volunteer leadership (including the Conference Board). Such a decentralized model will  
126 require more “*networking between congregations*” rather than “*networking between congregations and the*  
127 *Conference office*” only or primarily. It will require investment of time and money in networking tools,  
128 including an advanced website and other Internet capacities (e.g. “webinar” capability). It will also mean using  
129 volunteer time for mission and nurture themselves, rather than for governance primarily. Governance is  
130 important, but a huge proportion of volunteer time is used in boards and committees rather than in the primary  
131 work of the conference. Thus the “primary work” has typically been left to the conference staff (a hallmark of  
132 modern, WWII generation institutions, that does not work well in this post-modern era). The Vision hopes for  
133 the continued availability of three full-time staff ministers, but with revised job descriptions that will support the  
134 networking model of the Conference.

135 Tasks/roles that must be fulfilled by the Conference (but not entirely by the Conference staff) include:  
136 ✓ representing to congregations and to the world the unity and wholeness of the United Church of Christ  
137 and of the whole church of Jesus Christ;  
138 ✓ representing the rich heritage and identity of the United Church of Christ;  
139 ✓ providing leadership and encouragement in the priority areas of the church’s mission including  
140 congregational vitality and new congregation establishment;  
141 ✓ tending to the health and growth of the United Church’s witness in Indiana and Kentucky;  
142 ✓ facilitating search and call processes (which involves maintaining connection with the denominational  
143 processes as well as working with congregations);  
144 ✓ leadership development;  
145 ✓ providing mentoring, care and counsel to ministers, lay leaders and congregations;  
146 ✓ conflict resolution;  
147 ✓ oversight of the property and program of Merom Conference Center;  
148 ✓ programming for children, youth, and adults (men and women);  
149 ✓ oversight of ministerial licensing, ordination and standing processes, and continuing education;  
150 ✓ ministerial ethics;  
151 ✓ providing representation to denominational bodies as well as ecumenical bodies;  
152 ✓ and tending the close relationship of the Conference with the Christian Church (Disciple of Christ) and  
153 other ecumenical partners.

154 ***Building blocks of the new system will need to be implemented into the fabric of the conference over time to***  
155 ***give it a whole new character. Changes that are needed to develop a network-driven conference include:***

156 (1) Development of “Association Visitors”:

157 This is fundamental to the development of a system that is based on relationship between congregations  
158 and individuals (rather than relationships merely between staff and congregations/individuals). These  
159 Association Visitors are not “staff” in the normal sense of the word, but are lay and clergy leaders chosen to  
160 serve for a limited term because of their spiritual, emotional and ecclesial maturity and who serve as  
161 “connectors” within the body. Their authority is more informal than formal (that is, they have no “constitutional  
162 powers” but become effective as they develop trust and express care and concern for those of the body).

163 Implementation is envisioned as follows (the following is also printed in the plans for July, 2008): An  
164 “Association Visitors Development Task Force” (composed of clergy and lay representatives from each of the  
165 associations sufficient to provide demographic balance) will meet with the Conference Staff to develop a  
166 Conference-wide program.

167 These “Association Visitors” may consist of pairings of one lay person with one clergy person, with laity  
168 “Association Visitors” visiting congregations on one or two Sunday mornings a month, and clergy “Association  
169 Visitors” attending clergy circles and visiting councils/consistories once a year. They will seek to: be available  
170 for celebration of significant days and events in congregations; be available for advice and counsel; express  
171 appreciation on behalf of the whole Conference and wider church for their witness and various contributions;  
172 network congregations with each other according to their needs and strengths; and communicate to, from and  
173 between congregations about local, cluster, association, conference and wider church events.

174 As envisioned by the Visioning Team, Association Visitors will be people who have: been transformed  
175 by the Gospel; have demonstrated love for and participation in the life of the United Church of Christ beyond the  
176 congregation; modeled a lifestyle of integrity; exhibited appropriate relational skills; practiced the spiritual  
177 disciplines including stewardship; subscribed to an Association Visitors code of ethics (to be developed to  
178 parallel the current ministerial code of ethics); indicated willingness and ability to participate in continuing  
179 education designed for the Association Visitors.

180 The Association Visitors will be proposed by the associations and confirmed by both association officers  
181 and the Conference Board of Directors, will covenant with the Conference and will be confirmed and  
182 consecrated at Conference Annual Meeting. Association Visitors will serve a two year term initially and can be  
183 re-appointed. Their foundational ministry will be one of spiritual and pastoral care and encouragement.

184 Regular training of the Association Visitors will be provided by and through the Conference Minister,  
185 who will also be the primary point of accountability in addition to the whole group of Visitors holding each other  
186 accountable. Visitors will be volunteers but will be reimbursed for expenses.

#### 187 (2) Development of “Volunteer Specialists”:

188 These are persons who by virtue of their experience, trustworthiness, and trainability can provide some  
189 basic conference services with excellence including, for example, orientation of congregational search  
190 committees to the search and call process, Partners in Education Consultants, and mediation teams. In addition,  
191 we need to develop a protocol for connecting with local church leadership at the time a pastor announces his or  
192 her resignation. For example, a team of persons including a conference staff person, a member of the Committee  
193 on Ministry, a mediation volunteer and a Partner in Education representative could meet with the congregational  
194 leaders to provide support.

195 These “volunteer specialists” are accountable to, and will regularly communicate with, the conference  
196 minister who is ultimately responsible for the quality of such services offered.

#### 197 (3) Development of a sophisticated-yet-user-friendly communication system that will under gird the network:

198 Another key to an effective network is the free flow of information that does not depend upon individual  
199 staff members. Because of the volume of work and information with which staff must deal, when the conference  
200 looks primarily to them for communication staff members become unintentional “bottlenecks.” The  
201 communication system must be broader, easily accessible, and mostly unencumbered by “experts” and “gate  
202 keepers.” More can be read about this proposal in April, 2008 of the strategic plans.

#### 203 (4) Streamlining of governance structures and committees so as to free up time and energy of volunteers for 204 doing the actual ministry of the conference:

205 The current conference structure is mostly a product of the modern era, when people related to God  
206 through the institution. Generally, for people born after 1945, an institution has value primarily as it helps people  
207 relate directly to God and to one another, rather than “through the institution itself.” Thus, in this post-modern  
208 era, there is a desire for less time spent in governance meetings (including boards and committees) and more  
209 time spent in direct mission work and nurture of individuals and congregations in faith and effectiveness.

- 210 (5) A capital campaign:  
211 It has been a very long time since a capital campaign has been undertaken in the conference. This would  
212 provide for the needs of Merom, assuring the continuation of programs for children and youth (including camp  
213 and conference) while, at the same time, freeing conference operational budget dollars to be invested in ministry  
214 with individuals and congregations through staff and volunteers. References to a “feasibility study” for this  
215 campaign can be found in the strategic plans in April, June and September of 2008.
- 216 (6) Reconfigure Conference ministerial and support staff to most effectively support the network:  
217 The current system requires the staff to attend too many meetings and thus fosters dependency upon staff  
218 rather than the staff being equippers and enablers. The purpose here is not to *reduce* staff, but to put staff in the  
219 position of supporting the network.
- 220 (7) Development of an Annual Planning Event (A.P.E.):  
221 The purposes of an A.P.E. are to lessen the time spent in committee work and thus free up the time and  
222 energy of staff and volunteers for actual engagement in mission and nurture, to provide for coordination and  
223 accountability, and to insure a comprehensive conference-wide program of education, nurture and mission  
224 (without limiting or regulating the freedom of associations to develop their own programs). More information  
225 can be found in the strategic plans in April, 2009 (#2).
- 226 (8) Continued development of a broad congregational transformation initiative:  
227 Like all mainline communions, the United Church of Christ has a disproportionate number of its  
228 congregations that are better suited for 1957 than for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A transformation initiative will provide  
229 information and spiritual and emotional support for congregations that are willing to address the change needed  
230 to make them more effective in the current context.

### **A Word about Change**

- 231 The seven year plan seeks to transition the Conference from a typical “hub” model (a “staff-centered and  
232 “staff-dependent” model) to a “network” model. As this is implemented, some of the current committees of the  
233 Conference will be altered, replaced, or eliminated. Because there are many committed and faithful people  
234 serving on these committees, these changes in committee structure and life will need to be done with sensitivity  
235 and care. Many of these individuals will be drawn into the new model that is unfolding over the next few years.  
236 But a few people may initially feel displaced and so it is important to move forward with respect and care for  
237 everyone. This change of model should not be understood as a way of cutting anyone out of leadership and  
238 service – quite the contrary, it will ultimately engage many more persons in the ministry of the Conference  
239 (though not necessarily in committee work). Nonetheless, until the new model is fully up and operating, it may  
240 *feel* to some that they are being pushed out. So let us proceed with care, but let us proceed.
- 241 Only the first two years of the seven-year plan appear here. The unfolding of the later years will depend a  
242 great deal upon what is accomplished in the first two years and upon regular evaluation of progress and of the  
243 plan itself. The overall Plan and our progress will be reviewed every 180 days by a “Continuing Review Team”  
244 in order to make adjustments as needed and to celebrate that which has been accomplished since the last review.  
245 Changes and celebrations should be shared with the Conference in a public way and, as possible, in a context of  
246 worship (at Annual Conference Meeting, for example).
- 247 The primary factor in the rate of forward movement is the Conference’s *capacity* in terms of time,  
248 energy, and money. As the Conference transforms, new time, energy (and hopefully money) will become  
249 available and a greater rate of movement will be achievable. Thus, what might seem to be impossible initially  
250 will become quite do-able as the Conference steadily transforms over the next five years.