

Iowa Conference, UCC  
Report of the Conference Minister  
2011 Annual Meeting

“Leadership matters.”

Church traditions like ours are inclined to embrace romantic notions about community life. We often believe that an egalitarian approach to leadership can be counted on to surface visions and plans and strategies that will ensure ongoing vitality and relevance for the whole.

More often than not this attitude leads to missional drift and slow but steady decline. I’ve lately been preaching a sermon in which I offer a (somewhat simplified) account of the history of congregationalism that goes like this:

In the United Church of Christ, we are the inheritors of a tradition that is not inclined as a matter of first impulse or instinct, to value and coalesce around strong leaders. The dominant strain of those several traditions which came together in 1957 to form the United Church of Christ was the Congregational tradition – that religious tradition born of the Puritans and Pilgrims. This was a tradition formed in deep-seated wariness about civil and ecclesial authority run amuck. Make no mistake – 150 years after the Pilgrims first set foot in what came to be known as New England – when the founding fathers of our nation formed a system of government predicated on the exercise of checks and balances among three distinct branches of government – our congregational ancestors were contributors to the attitude of caution about the dangers of unaccountable leadership. They knew firsthand the dangers of autonomous and irresponsible authority and from a perspective of suspicion and wariness they contributed to a system designed to keep leaders accountable and to protect the whole from the potential abuse of those with power.

There is no doubt our ancestors exercised profound wisdom in so doing. But now – another 250 years after our own nation’s revolution – this church tradition of which we are a part is inclined to a truncated and naïve approach to leadership. We are so suspicious of leadership and so disinclined to trust each other that we find it difficult – nigh to impossible – to speak with one voice or to act with coherent purpose in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have no doubt that unaccountable authority is a malicious thing and that human systems can only sustain healthy and humane function as they hold their leaders to high levels of accountability. I know the reality of sin! But that is a far cry from affirming the notion that leaders are inherently suspect and inevitably inclined to self-serving function and the abuse of the whole in order to facilitate the illegitimate advantage of the few (those in leadership and their cronies).

It seems to me that one of the pervasive themes of the Biblical record is that of leadership – of good, poor and mediocre models of leadership. When Jesus announced that “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant....” and that he himself had come “not

to be served but to serve....” he was announcing a radical theory of leadership. The leader he describes is not shy, but is nonetheless humble. This leader doesn’t dither, but neither does she impose. This leader listens carefully and respectfully, but is not given to equivocation.

We seem to believe that leaders are inevitably people who advance their own agendas by virtue of manipulation and contrivance and subterfuge. We imagine leaders as people who exercise raw power at the expense of the marginalized. We’d never want to be such a person (thank goodness!). But we throw the baby out with the bathwater. When we buy into a caricature of leadership we avoid the excesses of the caricature (a good thing), but we deprive ourselves of the advantages of the real thing. I believe our entire church suffers for our ambivalent attitude toward leadership.

Consequently, it has been my intention and goal as your conference minister (and as a leader, I hope) to rehabilitate the notion of leadership in our context. Not for my own sake – but for the welfare of our churches and our people.

In the KJV of the Bible, there is a famous line “where there is no vision the people perish.” The word for vision is translated prophecy in most contemporary versions. It’s talking about clarity of direction – God’s Word, if you will. Over time “vision” in any organization without effective leadership gets cloudy and amorphous. Inevitably it takes individuals to push the community to clarify their essential *raison d’être*. That’s what leadership is – the prodding and pushing and shrewd stubbornness necessary to cajole and entice any community to critically examine its preferred status quo and instead risk moving in directions that hold promise of better aligning with the ways of God.

Groups can’t typically exercise this function – this is something that individuals do – people we come to call leaders. They don’t impose vision on the whole – rather they empower the whole to discern that to which God is calling. But without individuals to shepherd the process it rarely produces anything of lasting effect.

Here in the Iowa Conference we need more such leaders, and I and the conference staff are engaged in the hard work of figuring out how we can be most effectively utilized in empowering other individuals – folk like you! – to embrace the challenges and rewards of leadership. It is this mission upon which we are focused and it for this purpose that we invite and request your support – ultimately, we believe that when you give to OCWM you are resourcing a ministry designed to build leadership capacity – you are supporting the formation of healthy congregations. Thank you for your generous support.

## The Year in Review

Structurally, the Iowa Conference is in good shape today. Our bills are paid, our commitments to the national setting of the church are being met, we have a competent and faithful staff in place, and our work is carried on in a financially lean and efficient manner. It would be easy and tempting to sit on our laurels. The fact is the present moment of stability will certainly be fleeting. The long-term decline in OCWM is slowly accelerating, even while costs continue to rise. Only a very few of our congregations are growing – most are aging and shrinking – some at an alarming rate. Prospects for sustained increases in OCWM from churches are completely unrealistic – we must face this fact squarely. Our

strategy for building ongoing support for this ministry of leadership building is therefore multi-pronged:

- We continually work to improve the clarity and effectiveness of the way we tell our ministry story. Local congregations continue to provide the overwhelming majority of our support and will continue to do so for a long time.
- We provide stewardship and fundraising resources (the two are not the same thing but both are needed).
- We work to identify individuals who understand and share a passion for this vision of ministry. We unabashedly invite them to share in our financial support. I hope YOU will consider becoming a financial supporter of the Iowa Conference.
- The long term work of building a cadre of clergy who are strong and effective leaders will inevitably be advantageous for the financial health of local churches. We hope those churches will share that financial growth with the wider church.

The efforts of the staff during the past year have been focused on several areas of work:

- Support of the search and call process. We try to help churches call the very best clergy available.
- Support of the process of authorization for ministry. We try to form men and women for pastoral leadership in ways appropriate to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Support and growth opportunities for the existing cadre of clergy, particularly through covenant/growth groups.
- Support for those whose local church ministry is work with youth and young adults. These persons, after all, are working with those who for good or for ill will be our next generation of leaders.
- Strengthening our relationships with partners in our own church and across denominational lines. It seems likely to me that the progressive church of the future will not be organized like today's denominations. We can best prepare for that unknown future by building strong and substantive relationship with potential partners in other places.

As your conference minister I serve on your behalf in a variety ways you might not realize:

- I serve on the Board of the Mayflower Community here in Iowa.
- I serve on the Board of Trustees of Eden Seminary in St. Louis.
- I am just now ending a term of service on the Board of Directors of UCC Wider Church Ministries.
- I have just ended a long stint of service on the task forces which have studied governance in the national setting of the church, the most recent of which (affectionately titled UGov) is bringing recommendations for unified governance to the General Synod next month.
- I am standing for election to the Executive Council of the church and will begin that service after General Synod.
- I participate in groups comprised of judicatory executives from several denominations here in Iowa.

- I participate in the activities of the West Central Region of UCC Conferences and the Council of Conference Ministers (CCM) of the 38 UCC conferences .

As some of you already know, I recently faced the need to restructure my own portfolio of responsibilities. Earlier this spring I found myself nearing emotional exhaustion. The Board of Directors reviewed my performance earlier this year and warmly praised my work on your behalf, but suggested that my workload was unsustainable and that the price of my wide range of responsibilities was insufficient attention to those activities of reading, thinking, listening and planning that are essential to the long-term effectiveness of an organizational leader. My staff made the same observations in more pointed (and uncomfortable!) ways. They were right, though I was loath to admit it. As a consequence I am in the process of greatly reducing the amount of ACM-like work that I do. I will no longer serve as primary staff to the Central Association.

This means that each of the ACM's find themselves with new work on their respective plates. They were already working at full capacity, so each of them are now making important and difficult choices about that to which they currently attend which must be delegated to others or just left undone. The staff and I will spend time later this summer and fall with an organizational consultant who will help us continue this process of alignment – the process of maximizing the application of staff skill and expertise to the stated mission and goals of the organization.

There are other changes which are only in a thinking/exploration phase, but among them is the possibility of a more centralized approach to some of the functions of the six Association based Committees on Ministry.

A few additional observations: I am a strong believer in the efficacy of group learning. I believe that a collective has the potential, when well led, to be smarter than the sum of the individuals in the group. This can be a double-edged sword, however. It is also true that without effective and focused leadership a group can be DUMBER than the sum of the intelligences of the individual members (see the training video, "Abilene Paradox"). The network of clergy covenant groups that I've called SAG has not developed as I had hoped it would. One limiting factor has been my preference for staff leadership in these groups. I'm ready to try a different model and you can expect to see the gradual rollout of new and revised SAG groups (probably with a different name) with a variety of leadership models. Stay tuned.

It was my privilege to travel to China this spring with a group of other UCC Conference Ministers. You probably didn't even know I was gone, but the experience was remarkable. We saw the profound societal impact made over a long period of time by highly committed and self-sacrificing missionaries from our own tradition. At the time of their work, however, evidence of their impact was scarce to invisible. I find encouragement from this history. I hope you will, too.

Finally – leadership is not so much knowing the answers as it is exercising the courage and toughness to hold a system in its own conflict and discomfort long enough that the temptation to embrace easy answers finally slips away and we break through a threshold into genuinely new and adaptive thinking. I am most assuredly not smart enough to know the "silver bullet" answers to all the challenges we face in the Iowa Conference. I do believe

I have the toughness (maybe it's just stubbornness) to invite us to face our challenges long enough for the new to begin to emerge. This is hard work. I don't always like doing it. Sometimes I wish God would let me do something else. But God seems to have called us together. Please pray for me and for my staff as we serve you. We promise to do the same for you.

God bless you.

Rich Pleva  
Iowa Conference Minister

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Are you willing to enter into financial partnership with the staff and volunteers of the Iowa Conference?

Your financial gifts whether one-time or periodic are greatly appreciated.

You will soon be able to contribute electronically via our newly revised website. You can also use the old-fashioned method, and write a check.

Bequests and other planned gifts are another way to support the important work of the Iowa Conference. Please contact the conference office for additional information on making a planned gift for this ministry.

Thank you!

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