



Together, As One



Creating a New Conference of the United Church of Christ

Frequently Asked Questions

In January 2017, the Boards of Directors of the Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut Conferences of the United Church of Christ each voted unanimously to approve a resolution calling for the creation of a new Conference of the United Church of Christ in Southern New England. The following FAQs respond to some of the questions that Conference leadership has heard regarding this resolution.

1. Why are we moving in this direction?

Simply put, we believe that God is calling us to greater collaboration, interdependence, and unity. As a united and uniting church, we are convinced that we need each other to navigate the changes we are all experiencing—globally, nationally, locally, and within our congregations. With the Prophet Isaiah, we hear God saying, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). With the Apostle Paul, we believe that “just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). With our forebears who created the United Church of Christ, and with Jesus himself, we continue to pray “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). By moving forward *Together, As One*, we are following the impulse of connection that is part of our DNA as Christians, and we are living out our faith in new ways for a new time.

2. How did we decide to move in this direction?

Our three Conferences have been engaged in a process of discernment and increasing connection for many years. This has included collaboration among Conference staff, sharing of resources (such as Fitness Reviews, Boundary Training, and Racial Justice Training), and creation of joint programs for learning and mission (such as Super Saturday, joint General Synod caucuses, and the RIMACT youth delegations to General Synod and National Youth Event). As

we have collaborated, we have discovered the strength and joy that come from pooling our resources and joining with our siblings in Christ to accomplish more together than we can ever do alone.

We have also engaged in an intentional process of discernment. Following several years of increasing collaboration, in November 2014, the three Conference Boards of Directors held a joint meeting, followed by a joint Conference staff meeting in January 2015. In September 2015, the three Boards of Directors voted to enter into a year-long Season of Discernment, which included opportunities for in-person feedback at Association and Conference meetings, Super Saturday, and other events, as well as an online survey. The three Boards and the planning team carefully considered all the input we received as we discerned our way forward, leading to the unanimous votes by the three Boards in January 2017 to move forward in creating a new Conference together.

You can learn more about all that this process has entailed by reviewing the timeline at www.macucc.org/timeline.

3. Are we just creating a new Conference with the same structure, but on a larger scale?

No. 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 recognize that the world has changed in the 60 years since Conference boundaries were established at the creation of the United Church of Christ in 1957, and we believe that new ways of organizing ourselves to do ministry together will best serve our local churches as they serve the world in Christ’s name.

4. Isn’t this really about money and membership?

No. At its root, this initiative is about our ongoing effort to be the church God is calling us to be, the church the world needs for this time. It is also true that there are financial and numerical realities facing our Conferences, as there are for many of our local churches. We are seeking to respond to those realities in a proactive fashion based in faith and vision, rather than waiting until we reach a point of crisis and then making changes out of desperation.

5. How will this amplify our impact in Southern New England and beyond?

By modeling interdependence and collaboration, we will set an example of new ways to live and serve in faith that may inspire and enliven our local churches and their members. We will

also practice the kind of relationship-building that will strengthen us for partnership and collaboration with like-minded people of other faiths and of no faith. By speaking out together, we will have a louder and stronger voice as we work together to make our region, our nation, and our world a more just and loving place, a place that more closely resembles God’s realm.

6. What will this mean for my local church?

We anticipate that coming together for a future of shared ministry will mean that local churches across Southern New England have greater access to the resources that have traditionally been divided along state lines. Each Conference brings particular areas of expertise from which we all can learn—for example, Rhode Island has a great tradition of local and global mission partnerships, Massachusetts has done extensive work around creation care and climate justice, and Connecticut has developed pioneering curricula and programs to advance racial justice. By coming together across the boundaries that have divided us, we will be better able to match expertise with need, creating a stronger network of disciples working together for the good of the world.

7. What will this mean for my pastor?

In the same ways that we believe this initiative will benefit local churches, it will also offer greater access to resources for pastors. Clergy will be connected to a wider network of expertise, advice, reflection, and support, as well as resources for professional development and problem-solving for their ministries.

8. What will this mean for my Association?

Associations will not be changed by this initiative. If Associations wish to build on this spirit of interdependence and join together in collaboration with one another, they are and will remain free to do so. But their structure will continue to be determined by Association Boards, Committees, and members, according to their own bylaws.

9. Where will the new Conference offices be located, and what will the staffing configuration be?

We don’t know yet. We are taking this process one step at a time. First, we focused on discerning the direction in which God is calling us to move, making sure we are clear about the “why.” Having clarity there will help us as we work out the details of “what” and “how.” We

have precedent for this approach in the founding of the United Church of Christ, which happened in a similar fashion, with a vote to unite followed by a period of working out the details. As we live into this new thing that God is doing, we will build together a structure that best serves our congregations and our communities.

We know that for clergy and congregations, it is very important to know who to call when resources are needed. Although we cannot yet describe the details of our new organizational structure, we are committed to maintaining and deepening the resources available to local churches, and we will be proactive about communication to make sure everyone knows how to access those wider church connections.

10. How will we handle legal, financial, and governance issues that may arise as we come together?

Conference staff and Board members have begun a process of due diligence by sharing information and identifying details that will need to be addressed as we create a new structure together. This process will continue and deepen in the coming months. We also anticipate engaging the services of a consultant with expertise in these areas to help us navigate the transition and create a structure that will best serve our ministries moving forward.

At present, we envision establishing a single Board of Directors, made up of diverse members coming from each of the Conferences, which would govern the three historic and legal Conference entities of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. We are in consultation with Heather Kimmel, General Counsel to the United Church of Christ, as we work through the logistics of this change, and she sees no legal obstacles to our current direction.

11. Where do we go from here?

The next step is for the delegates to the Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut Conference Annual Meetings (to be held jointly in Hartford on June 16-17, 2017) to vote to ratify the votes of their Boards of Directors to move ahead in the process of creating a new Conference of the United Church of Christ in Southern New England. If this vote is successful, the Conference Boards and staff will continue working out the details of the proposal, which will be presented for a vote at the 2018 Annual Meetings. The new Conference structure would then be presented for approval at the 2019 UCC General Synod.