



WISCONSIN  
CONFERENCE  
UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST

## Moving Forward

*By Rev. Michael Obenauer, Interim Conference Minister*

I was privileged recently to help celebrate the ordination of the Rev. Justin Grommoll at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in River Falls. Every time I participate in an ordination, I repeat the ordination vows which I took when I was ordained. It is somewhat like being present at a baptism, where love and community are celebrated, and faith in the future is affirmed. As we together laid our hands on Justin, I experienced again the power of the founding motto of the United Church of Christ, “that they may all be one.” I left this gathering with great hope for the future . . . with new, vital leadership added to already vibrant leadership, with the community of faith affirmed and strengthened, with a vision for the future burning brightly, leading us forward.



Rev. Michael Obenauer

I was reminded of another recent experience with being in the larger United Church of Christ as I drove home from River Falls on the first above-freezing afternoon. I gathered in another, quite different, setting of the Church, the Council of Conference Ministers/Collegium Retreat. There was also a great picture of vision and community in the United Church of Christ in this community of leadership as well. In this leadership group, we affirmed the core values of extravagant welcome, continuing testament, and changed lives which speak to the spirit of this way of being the Church.

Early on in our time together, Conference Ministers and Collegium officers engaged interpersonal experiences of relationship and community building, led by experienced retreat leaders who indicated to us the power of interpersonal connections in discerning and building vision for the future. We learned that large institutions which successfully move through change in times of uncertainty first of all build networks of strong and deep interpersonal relationships. The themes which were described in our work were:

- Quality and authentic relationships
- Building a stable and flexible future
- Communicating with partners in ways that facilitates openness and connection
- Remaining spiritually grounded to live in the ambiguities of an open and flexible culture.

A consensus emerged out of this gathering which I believe was helpful and hopeful for our journey together into the future as the United Church of Christ. This consensus named four Bold Inspirational Goals (BIGS) which are the guiding inspiration and missional imperative as we live into our next chapter together. The BIGS are:

1. The UCC is a bold, widely-known and respected public voice of Christianity in service of God's ever-unfolding mission.
2. There is a welcoming UCC community of faith that is accessible to all--no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey.
3. Every UCC member is well equipped to be growing in faith, theologically conversant, and active in the global mission of the church.
4. The UCC has a wealth of prepared, excellent leaders who reflect the diversity of God's beloved community.

With the help of retreat leadership, we were able to enthusiastically approach the next step of our journey as a wider community of faith together knowing experimentation will be an essential quality for vitality in the United Church of Christ in the future. What this means is that all circles of our beloved church should encourage and accept the experimentation with new ideas, new ways of being church, and new ways of doing church. It is this very experimentation that will foster a culture where the next entry point to our life together will be discerned and the new fabric of our community will be lived out.

What this will require of us is to give permission for new ideas to be generated in discernment, for those new ideas to be encouraged and even funded as they are tried, and new lessons learned about how to be the United Church of Christ together will make us deeper and stronger. If it is in our roots as a church to be a Pilgrim People, then let us be on the journey together, knowing that God is indeed in the future waiting for us to catch up.

These are exciting times to be the United Church of Christ together. Each of us has a role to play as our beloved community of faith acts its way into the next phase of its life together. Faith requires us to live and move and act together, to act on our discernment, to move on our faith, and to live out our way of being the Christ's Church. Sitting on our hands and doing nothing is not an option. The Church has left the building!

Thanks be to God!

With Great Hope,

Michael Obenauer  
Interim Conference Minister