

Energy and Excitement in the Wisconsin Conference

Presentation by Franz Rigert

Slide 1 – Sailing Boat on calm water

Good afternoon Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ!

Since we've gathered on the beautiful shores of Green Lake I thought I'd begin with a slide of a sailboat gliding effortlessly on smooth waters. Just think, we could be out there today! It's an image that comes to mind when I think of Jesus setting sail with the disciples, intending to "crossover" the Sea of Galilee (perhaps a metaphor for taking the Gospel to a gentile people on the other side). . . a light breeze, but placid waters and an easy launch . . . much like we might imagine back in the glory days of the UCC – when we were prominently positioned and sailing along with a gentle breeze at our backs! How we long for those tranquil waters!

But truth be told . . . in the early merger days of the United Church of Christ – even as we pushed off shore in 1957 – clouds appeared in the skies and choppy waters set in!

Slide 2 – Sailing Boat with more wind and waves

We tend to reminisce nostalgically about the UCC sailing on smooth seas through the decades of the 60's & 70's. While the sailing was terrific, it wasn't altogether tranquil! Culture was shifting. Vietnam was roaring. And navigating the wind & waves of the Church took a little nautical skill and a lot of calling upon Jesus. It wasn't particularly calm, nor would we have wanted it to be . . . without wind a boat can't sail . . . and without waves the ride isn't all that adventurous.

Slide 3 – Boat on Stormy Sea

But a full blown storm? Tossing us to and fro? Rocking this Church Boat so that we have to batten down the hatches . . . and fear for our future . . . and scream for Jesus in the stern, pleading for some calmer waters: SOS – Save our Sunday Schools! . . . Only to have Jesus ask us, *"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"* Do you not realize, by

now, life on the spiritual seas will always fluctuate between the swales that threaten our status quo and the stillness that calms our souls in the midst of change.

Slide 4 – Empty Rowboat

The only way to guarantee a storm free ride (with no rough seas and no bouncing around) is to vacate the boat! And many have. The “Dones” and “Nones” have left the lake! Some of us have pondered it. But what would it look like, against a rather sketchy weather forecast, for us to continue to commit ourselves covenantally to this voyage of faith, this sailing odyssey (this calling which is less about a destination to heaven and more about a journey of justice here on earth)?

Slide 5 – Boat full of people (Canada emblem on boat)

No – we’re not all moving to Canada! But we’re all in this boat together . . . all hands on deck as they say . . . utilizing the unique gifts of each to equip the Church for the ministry of Jesus Christ in this time and place.

Life on the High Seas for the Wisconsin Conference is actually pretty steady sailing these days despite the inevitable winds & waves of Churchy waters.

Did you know . . . with 218 congregations and over 40,000 people. . . the Wisconsin Conference is among the strongest and healthiest conferences! Over the past few years we have shown amazing resilience . . . and an incredible, faithful response to **Our Churches Wider Mission.**

Slide 6 – 10 year OCWM

Here’s a graph which shows OCWM giving trends – 10 years ago basic OCWM was 2.1 million dollars; in 2017 it was just over 1.6 million (down a half million dollars over a decade). But notice the stabilizing . . . while many conferences and the national setting use projections of a 5% annual decline – our cumulative decline over three years (2015, 2016 and 2017) was under 2% . . . a net drop of only \$25,000! . . . and we are tracking pretty well in the first half of 2018! That is terrific news! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

What's more incredible . . . our congregations contributed more than \$350,000 toward our 4 special offerings . . . AND . . . 111 of our churches (over half) went 5 for 5 last year! Friends . . . we're sailing along together!!

Slide 7 – Boat sailing along in moderate wind and waves

So, why should we care so much about this **vessel** called the **Wisconsin Conference UCC** in an era when many claim to “spiritual but not so religious” . . . and when “institutional loyalty” is facing serious headwinds??

First, because together we share many common values that - when connected to the wider flotilla called the United Church of Christ - can have an exponential impact on this world . . . our commitment to wide welcome and warm hospitality . . . our belief in a continued testimony (that God is still speaking and yet to reveal further truths . . . and that others out there have some truth to share with us). These are values that are shared all across the high seas of our society (often by people outside the Church) especially our core commitment to the inclusion and equality of all people (and our unwavering willingness to speak prophetically when our convictions demand it . . . and to sail courageously against the prevailing winds of complacency and resistance).

After the most recent school shooting took place in Santa Fe, Texas . . . I was drawn to an interview of the UCC pastor in Newtown, Connecticut (this is the place where the horrific Sandy Hook shootings occurred back in Dec. 2012) Rev. Matt Crebin says, we don't so much have a 2nd amendment problem in the US (indeed most of my best friends are hunters and responsible gun owners) We have a have a 2nd commandment problem (our idolatry around guns and our distorted sense of “freedom” is the problem) . . . we in UCC have some core values (such violence is unacceptable) . . . and we need to boldly proclaim them!

The Second reason to care deeply about our Wider Mission & Ministry is that here in this vessel we share many provisions necessary for congregational life, but only together are we able to resource each other (after all – we're in the same boat!). I sometimes refer to those provisions as the trilogy of “deliverables:” personnel, program and precious places . . . these provisions enhance & help sustain your local ministry!

So thank you for partnering with the Wider Church . . . together we do ministry better!
Similarly . . . our congregations are increasingly collaborating in your local communities

Slide 8 – Medical Equipment

These pictures are from the Medical Equipment “loaner” ministry at St. Stephens UCC in Merrill . . . can you imagine (after breaking an ankle) some kind, cost conscious member of the medical staff whispers in your ear, “Just head down street to the local UCC where you can borrow crutches for as long as you need them” . . . a healing ministry in action!

Slide 9 – Clothing Closet

Up in little Cecil, St. Johns UCC – one of our many tiny but mighty congregations - has an incredible clothing ministry called Cecil Community Closet . . . *for I was naked and you clothed me:*

- other churches proudly hang rainbow banners (*a stranger and you welcomed me*)
- several provide care for elders with memory loss (*frail and you tended to me*)
- and still others pray in cell block (*imprisoned and you visited me*)
- SO MANY of our congregations serve community meals (*hungry and you fed me*).

Our Catalyst Team (which supports Church vitality) continues to help congregations navigate these new waters and make necessary “shifts” for effective 21st century ministry. **Here is their commitment to you:** When your mission ideas become passions, and when they meet some critical needs of local community life, this is a partnership worth investing in! . . . the Catalyst Team receives applications twice a year for grant requests up to \$5,000 to help launch new initiatives! Check out our website for details!

Now of course – in addition to these “serving” ministries of compassion – we are called (like never before) to tackle the tougher work of Justice.

Slide 10 – Justice March

These pictures are from the **ACT Now to End Racism** Rally in Washington DC held on the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Our calling? **To ACT – Awaken, Confront, Transform!** Throughout our Conference, congregations

are engaging in “conversations on race” and delving into the topic of “white” privilege. I encourage you to find a way to explore this conversation in your local setting.

During our annual meeting we are so very blessed to have the Rev. Traci Blackmon, national UCC executive for Justice and Local Church Ministries, whose profound gift of preaching will remind us of our calling: **to do Justice, love kindness and walk humbly.**

In August I will join 3 colleagues from our Conference (and several from Pennsylvania) for a colloquy in Berlin with our German partners. The theme is anchored in Martin Luther King’s quote, *“The arc of the moral Universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”* On both sides of the Atlantic we are yet confronting racism, xenophobia and jingoism (blind allegiances that dismisses critical thinking and ignores our higher spiritual authority)

Over the past 4 months our Conference staff engaged in some conversations about racism, which ultimately led us to talk about white privilege . . . I am well aware this topic can make people uncomfortable and defensive. But until white folks reckon with our own “story” we will not get to the root of this sin.

A few years back I heard Alice Hunt (former President of Chicago Theological) give a presentation on “privilege” by approaching the topic in a very non-threatening way she talked about the built-in biases our society has for right handed people (I had never contemplated the challenges of being left handed – though I was aware that lefties often prefer to sit on end so they don’t bump elbow with righties). Consider the disadvantages . . . all of these concepts designed around right handed dominance: scissors, handshakes, tape measures (for lefties the numbers are upside down), guitars, school desks, measuring glass (left handed people view the metric side).

I confess (after a bit of an awakening) to have come through many months of soul searching about my own privilege. And I acknowledge to you that many of the advantages I have in life (as a white, middle aged, straight, well parented & educated, English speaking, gainfully employed male) --- did not come merely because I worked hard. But for many years, I leaned toward this myth. In my “relatively” smooth sailing, I have known “privilege” as a prevailing wind at my back . . . and such awareness now compels me to advocate for those who invariably experience life against the wind.

Slide 11 – Brown Deer Church

On May 20th we celebrated the final worship service at our Brown Deer UCC. This **tiny yet mighty** church lifted up the LGBTQ community with fearless conviction. For years, through the leadership of Jan Doleschal and more recently Greg Young, they have been heralds for justice out in front of the rest of the Church – advocating for the marginalized and taking action against the injustices of our time.

The legacy of Brown Deer UCC will live on, through the ministry of New Life Church (which has worshipped there Sunday afternoons for past 2 years). Pastor Jarton Davis is a bi-vocational preacher, barber by trade, and trusted friend. Because we are committed to the establishment of an African American congregation in Brown Deer (a community that has now transitioned to 40% people of color) and because they have been unable to secure a loan through bank, our Board of Directors has resoundingly agreed to finance this sale over the next decade with no interest and with great hope (NOT for a UCC acquisition) but for a long-term multi-cultural relationship!

Slide 12 – Hocak UCC

We are grateful for a resolution brought forth from the Ho Chunk UCC (our only Native American congregation up near Black River Falls). This resolution asks us to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery (used historically to justify settler claims and to invalidate aboriginal possession of the land). Way back in the 1800's this church was a "mission" congregation of one of our predecessor denominations – the Reformed Church. As a mission Church, their "deed" was held by the denomination (first Reformed, then E & R then eventually UCC) . . . until just a few years ago, when our conference "deeded" back the land as a sign of our commitment to honor this Native place and people.

Friends, there are no shortages of justice concerns these days, and the many movements we have witnessed indicate a **churning in the waters AND some storms on the horizon. Indeed the Spirit our "Just God" is coming with a windstorm of "righteous intolerance" rejecting all forms of bigotry, inequality, poverty, abuse of power, and actions that relegate any human being as less than.** This is a headwind we need to sail straight into, and this a time to call upon Jesus for both calm and courage.

Several working justice groups (clustered together in the exhibit hall downstairs) reflect our commitment to this work . . . Sometimes we worry that our local congregations are too fragile to wrestle with these challenging issues . . . I'm all for sensitivity, and strategic approaches . . . but I'm also aware that Jesus refused to be silent on issues of moral conscience, and we know down deep where the Gospel stands on justice.

If we refuse to speak truth to power, then we too become complicit in "systemically sustaining" all the "ism's" of our time. It's time for us to band together with willing partners on the high seas to right some wrongs. Are you with me?!?

That's tough work for local churches that already face the headwinds of budget constraints and building concerns . . .

Slide 13 – Montage of local churches

No we aren't as prominently positioned on the city square or as bustling in the rolling countryside as we once were . . . in many ways we have become a bit of a remnant people. Imagine that . . . the "leftover" people of God. Sounds a bit Biblical!

But the **Spirit still calls**, and the **Church still responds** . . . these days often with some nautical recalculations (led by the GPS – Guiding Present Spirit) that often inspires us to chart a slightly different course . . .

Here are some trends we continue to track:

- More shared ministries (nearly 50 churches sharing a pastor)
- Clarifying of the "scope" of ministry (less and less fulltime) – bi-vocational
- Ecumenical partnerships (share ministries with ELCA or Presbyterian)
- Increased openness to ideas (necessity as mother of invention) permission assuming
- Niche ministries of passion (fuel that fires of faith & renewing energy of people)
- Drawing terrific ministerial talent from other Conferences (15 in past few years)

Lately I have been thinking about the primary mission of our Conference Staff as equipping and resourcing pastors and congregations to sail new waters. It's NOW my pleasure to introduce the team of people who support you with resources, guidance, coaching & cheerleading --and we're ROWING really well together!

Slide 14 – College Rowing Crew (rowing in sync)

Introduction of the conference Staff

- Sue Taylor – Admin Associate & Search and Call Coordinator
- Nola Risse-Connolly – Program & Communication Specialist (Happy Birthday!)
- Deb Simon – Director of Communications & Technology
- Tracy Hauge – Assistant Director of Finance
- Vicki Graff – Director of Finance (25 years! . . . present her a gift)
- Lisa Hart – ACM (associate conference minister) for Faith Formation and Executive Associate to the Conference Minister
- Tisha Brown – (working on her DMIN this weekend) – ACM for Leadership Development
- Jane Anderson – (field ACM in the Northeast and Southeast)
- Rob MacDougall – (field ACM in Northwest) . . . a number of other assignment's
- Joanne Thomson – (field ACM in Southwest) . . . also administers our COP program

At our Southwest Association Meeting Joanne announced her retirement, effective after General Synod next summer. I want to reassure how much we value our staff presence in the “field” and to let you know that this fall we will complete an ACM position portfolio and launch a wide search over the winter months. Our intention is to transition smoothly next summer.

Let's hear it for our staff!

Slide 15 – Recall or Re-call slide (with the pie chart of my work responsibilities)

So when a colleague learned that I was up for a term renewal as your Conference Minister . . . he said, *“Now is this a recall election or re-call election!”* . . . to which I answered . . . *“I don't recall! But I know I still feel called by God to do this work!”* Conference Leadership is a little like serving as captain on the high seas . . . it can make you sea sick or it can be an exhilarating experience. For me it's the latter and a labor of love!

The chart illustrates in general where I put my time and effort . . . I'm grateful for the chance to continue serving God . . . by serving as you as Conference Minister.

You can see . . . there is lots of energy in our midst! I want to end with 4 slides of exciting new ventures on the horizon . . .

Slide 16 – Damascus Project

In addition to our excellent Lay Academy . . . we are launching a pilot initiative this fall called the “Damascus Project.” It’s a joint effort with the Minnesota Conference to foster leadership development and a training track for those who desire ministerial authorization (but are not in a position to attend seminary). Tisha Brown and Vicki Wunsch (MN) are staff leaders and have connected with some exceptional people – Sandy Graham (prof. at Alverno College) and Pam Shellberg from Bangor Theological Institute). I’m telling you right now . . . there are a lot of eyes on this exciting initiative!

Slide 17 UCC/UCCI

At a time when many Conferences have sold off their camps, we have doubled down on our commitment to Outdoor Ministries . . . now with Presbyterian partners at Pilgrim Center & Camp Awesum partners at Moon Beach (and with major building improvements through the Campital Campaign) --- our camps are “rockin’ the boat” with excitement!

Executive Director (and beloved colleague) Glenn Svetnicka has assembled terrific management teams . . . and we continue to explore ways the Conference and UCCI can work more collaboratively. We now have a dedicated office for them at Trost Center. We continue to co-sponsor and plan Youth Faith Formation events. And we are in discussions about venturing into shared marketing and development efforts.

Speaking of . . .

Slide 18 Legacy Campaign

Several months ago our Board created a Financial Futures Team tasked with discerning the most effective ways to strengthen the financial position of our congregations and our Conference. Out of that came an idea to launch a **Legacy Campaign** as a way of resourcing local churches in promoting planned giving and pursuing estate gifts and bequests. Bret Bicoy (Executive Director of the Door County Foundation) is leading our

planning and we anticipate this will be a multi-year opportunity for your local churches, with a well-structured program offered by the Conference for you. Stay tuned!

Slide 19 – General Synod

Finally – General Synod 2019 in Milwaukee! A year from now our conference will be making last minute preparations to host some 2,500 delegates, guests and visitors. Here are three important pieces of information:

- We'll need 250-300 volunteers (hospitality) . . . watch for online sign ups this fall
- We project we'll need \$40,000 for local arrangements (we've already surpassed \$21K!)
- Special event on Sun. June 23 (afternoon worship & Milwaukee street festival)

Slide 20 – GS Leaders

We are so very fortunate to have a stellar leadership team of Co-Chair couples: . . . introduce: Bonnie Andrews & Tim Perkins (Bethel Bethany) and Debbie & Tom Payden (Frist Cong. UCC South Milwaukee) . . . all are in transition to retirement!

Debbie is going to share an update on Committee leadership (team comes forward)

Thanks to you all! This is a once in a lifetime chance to welcome the entire UCC!

Slide 21 – Sail On!

Friends . . . I leave you with words of encouragement . . . let's keep the faith . . . let's continue the voyage . . . let's love people AND do justice AND share Jesus AND care for neighbor AND praise God!

Let's Sail On Together!