

**IOWA CONFERENCE BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING**  
**June 11, 2010**

Members Present: Darmour-Paul, Nelson, Whiteman, Noer, Ebensberger, Brooks,  
Howie, Boege, Fisher, Love, Lof, Vass, Wohlhuter, Altenbaumer,  
Douglas

Absent (with prior notice): Mears, Sargent, Guffey-Lewis

Absent (without prior notice): None

Also Present: CM Pleva, ACM Stoik, Byron Henn

The Board of Directors met at the Carmen Center of Mayflower Community in Grinnell. The Chair, Laura Lof, called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

CM Pleva gave the opening prayer.

**Approval of Minutes**

**BOD 2010-18.** Vass/Nelson to approve the minutes of the meeting of April 10, 2010 as presented. Approved unanimously.

**Audit Report**

CM Pleva presented the audit report for the year ending December 31, 2009. He noted that it is a corrected report. The original audit report treated the Carstensen bequest as unrestricted, but that has been changed to properly reflect the restrictions imposed by Inge Carstensen's will. Treasurer Hanon noted that the audit indicates that there are no reportable conditions.

**BOD 2010-19.** Hanon/Fisher to accept the corrected audit report. Approved unanimously.

**Report of the Nominating Committee**

The report of the Nominating Committee was presented to the Board. CM Pleva announced the following corrections:

1. One member of the Mayflower Homes, Inc. Board of Directors is selected by the Iowa Conference Board of Directors and not by the Annual Meeting. Rev. Christopher Burtnett of Schleswig is the person nominated for the Board-selected position.
2. Janet Secor, of Fort Dodge, should be added to the Nominating Committee report as the Iowa Conference nominee to the Board of Directors of Our Sacred Space, Inc.

**BOD 2010-20.** Whiteman/Darmour-Paul to approve the report of the Nominating Committee with the changes identified above and to recommend to the Annual Meeting that the persons so nominated be elected. Approved unanimously.

**BOD 2010-21.** Noer/Whiteman to select Rev. Christopher Burnett as a member of the Board of Directors of Mayflower Homes, Inc. Approved unanimously.

### **UCC/UEK Representative**

The Iowa Conference has been invited to name and sponsor a representative to the UCC/UEK (*Die Union Evangelischer Kirchen in der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*) Forum.

**BOD 2010-22.** Vass/Whiteman to approve Iowa Conference participation in this program, to authorize sponsorship of an Iowa Conference representative to the UEK National Forum and to authorize the Conference Minister to choose that representative. Approved unanimously.

### **Agenda of the Annual Meeting**

The Board reviewed the agenda for the Plenary/Business Session of the Annual Meeting. CM Pleva noted the following proposed changes: Delete the reports of Mayflower Homes, Inc. and Our Sacred Space, Inc. from the 1:00 – 3:00 time block on Friday and add the report of Iowa Religious Media Services, Inc. to the same time block.

**BOD 2010-23.** Darmour-Paul/Nelson to recommend to the Annual Meeting that it adopt the agenda with the changes discussed. Approved unanimously.

### **Endowment Policy Review**

CM Pleva informed the Board that he had some concerns about the recently adopted Endowment Policy and requested that the Board submit the Policy to a review by the Investment Policy Task Force.

**BOD 2010-24.** Altenbaumer/Vass to direct the Investment Policy Task Force to review the Endowment Policy. Approved unanimously.

### **Appointment of Treasurer**

**BOD 2010-25.** Howie/Boege to appoint Larry Hanon as treasurer for the next year. Approved unanimously.

### **Special Projects Fund**

**BOD 2010-26.** Vass/Whiteman to authorize the Conference Minister to use \$1,000 from the Special Projects fund for payment of Iowa Conference share of costs associated with

the Conference Minister's participation in Wider Church Ministries trip to China in March, 2011. Approved unanimously.

### **Information Items**

CM Pleva reported on the following items:

1. Sale of the North Sioux City building owned by Open Door UCC
2. Dates for the 2010-11 meetings
  - a. August 27-28
  - b. October 23
  - c. January 22
  - d. April 2
  - e. Annual meeting 2011
3. Accounting issues
4. Conference Minister's report (a copy of the report is attached to these minutes)
5. Personnel matters
6. Letters of thanks received from Iowa Religious Media Services, Justice and Witness Ministries and Faith United Church of Christ in Muscatine.
7. Planning for celebration of 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Iowa Conference.
8. Financial reports for the period ending May 31, 2010.

### **Departing Board Members**

The Chair announced that Dick Douglas, Merlyn Boege and Tim Darmour-Paul are ending their service as members of the Board of Directors. She thanked them for their service and stated that she was proud to call them friends.

### **Next Meeting**

The Chair announced that the next meeting of the Board of Directors will be held on August 27-28, 2010. The time and place of the meeting will be announced.

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 12:00.

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Mary Stonebraker, Secretary

Iowa Conference, UCC  
Annual Meeting  
12 June 2010

### Conference Minister's Report

This past Sunday the Old Testament lection was the story of Elijah and the widow of Zerephath – the story of the little bit of flour and oil that didn't run out. I suspect some of you heard sermons on this text this past Sunday.

I was the guest preacher at the conference's only "extraterritorial" congregation on Sunday (Now that Open Door UCC is moving into Sioux City proper, we have only one congregation outside the boundaries of the state of Iowa – St. Paul UCC in Kahoka, MO). I used that Elijah story as the basis of a sermon in which I tried to make the point that whatever God has given us – whether much or little – is enough to do whatever God is calling us to do.

The hard part, of course, is knowing what it is that God really wants us to do. It's one thing to identify a long list of good admirable things that could be done – it's quite another to discern the one or two or three things to which I, or we, are specifically called. So far as we can tell, God didn't call the widow to feed the whole town of Zerephath (though it's likely others in town were hungry) – God called the widow to feed Elijah.

Doing good is precisely at the heart of our calling as people of God, but expanding the circle of our work may not actually increase the good that we do – it may only stretch us so thin that we accomplish nothing.

For some of us, this is counter-intuitive. It's even more challenging in a time of declining resources – not only are we unable to do all the good we might like to do, we aren't even able to do much of the good we used to do!

Allow me to illustrate, and in so doing I need to warn you to brace yourself. The picture I'm about to paint isn't a pretty one.

Twenty years ago – in 1990 (which to me, at least, doesn't seem very long ago), there were 206 congregations in the Iowa Conference. Today there are 179. That's a 13% decline. That's more of a decline than any of us would have wished, but it's not precipitous. It gets worse, however – much worse. In 1990 those 206 congregations reported an aggregate membership of 47,500. This past year the remaining churches reported membership of 33,500 – a decline of about 12,000 members, or 30%. That's getting to be serious. Here's where it gets stunning. A mere 20 years ago our churches reported church school enrollment of 12,600. This past year church school enrollment was reported to be barely over 5500. That's a decrease of over 7000 – a 56% fall off. That's frightening – at least to me.

Do you know what's happened to OCWM in those 20 years? Do you suppose it more closely mirrors the decline in number of churches, or in church school enrollment? At first glance the

numbers don't seem too terrible – OCWM income in 1990 was reported to be \$1,130,000 – last year it was \$867,000. But unlike attendance figures, which are absolute, and not subject to depreciation, the dollars we spend today aren't worth as much as those we spent in 1990. In 2010 dollars, OCWM in 1990 was the equivalent of \$1,800,000. That means that in these intervening 20 years OCWM receipts have declined by well over 50%.

Would it be reasonable for anyone to assume that the conference should be able to do pretty much the same as it was able to do 20 years ago on half as much money? Of course it isn't, but in fact, many of us (myself included), still labor under the illusion (and perhaps guilt) that we should just work harder and continue to fulfill all those 20 year old expectations.

We don't, of course, have the resources to do what we did 20 years ago. What we DO have are sufficient resources to do whatever it is that God is calling us to do today. God knows our situation better than we do ourselves, and all God expects is that we heed God's call and fulfill our calling – not the calling of our predecessors, but our call.

Whether we care to acknowledge it or not, our brand of religious expression is in significant decline. It's been declining for a long time, but we've often had sufficient excess from years ago that we were able to avoid facing those facts. We can no longer do so. It breaks my heart to say this, but we are seriously diminished from what we were a mere 20 years ago, and our current decline shows absolutely no signs of an end. Given this reality we can either bemoan our fate, or we can take calculated, intentional, clear-eyed and faith-filled steps to move in a positive direction. It is my intention – so long as you keep me as your conference minister – to face hard facts openly, but to move forward in faith and in proportion to the resources at our disposal.

Doing this is hard work. It is discouraging to work in a context of pervasive decline and diminishment. We need to pray for each other. We also need to bring our best creativity to our common work. We need to understand that the things that worked in the past may no longer be relevant – we need the freedom and courage to try new things, recognizing that sometimes those new things won't work and the fruits of our best efforts will as often (or maybe even more often) be failure as they will be success.

By time you read this report you will have seen our financial reports for the year 2009. You've seen how significantly OCWM declined this past year. To be honest, it's hard for me not to take that personally. I know better, but it's still hard.

On the other hand, you've also seen that the conference has just been the recipient of \$1.7 million dollar bequest. This bequest was totally unexpected. We can't speak with certainty about the motivations of the donor – Inge Carstensen – except that she obviously believed the conference would use her gift well. By God's grace we will do exactly that and in so doing honor the trust Ms. Carstensen has placed in us.

This probably sounds like a lot of money, and of course it is. Be clear however, this gift establishes a permanently restricted endowment fund. We cannot and will not use the principal – only the income it provides (and in today's economic environment that's not a huge amount of money). This is still a remarkable gift. Our current budget allows almost nothing for creative and special programming opportunities. That's precisely what will be done with the money this bequest generates. The income it provides will be used for various and sundry special projects – you'll hear more in the months ahead. Suffice it to say, there is no cause for you to go home and

report that the conference is flush with cash and therefore you can let up on your OCWM support. Your generous OCWM support is needed more now than ever. Let's be very clear about that.

In another way, Inge Carstensen's gift should be a teachable moment for all of us. Do we really care enough about the ministry of our church in all its various settings to generously support it with our giving? To be blunt, is your local church in your will (do you even HAVE a will?), and have you similarly remembered other organizations whose ministry is important to you? I'm pleased to report that my local church and the Iowa Conference are both in my will. Not for \$1.7 million dollars, admittedly (my entire estate isn't worth anything close to that amount), but I take some pleasure in knowing that upon my death, I will leave a word of witness about those ministries I found important. I hope you will do the same.

The conference's greatest asset, course, isn't money – it's our people. It's all of you – pastors and lay people who out of love for Jesus and his church bring wisdom and expertise and passion to our service of each other and the entire world. The staff of the conference functions as an extension of the ministry we all share in common. We work with you and on your behalf, but ultimately our work is no different from nor is it more important than yours.

This takes us full circle to Elijah and the widow. The staff and I work on your behalf, but there are real and practical limits to the time we can give and the territory we can cover. We love you – that is the honest truth – but we can't do everything you might wish we could. We are doing our best to share whatever wisdom and competence and faithfulness we have to offer, but at the end of the day there is invariably a list of things undone that we had intended and hoped to accomplish. In the face of that frank acknowledgement of limitation, it is still my sincere request that you call us when you have a need. We may not be able to come to you, or to personally meet your need, but we will do our best to help you find the assistance and resources appropriate to your need. We are here to help. Please be in touch. Just like the widow was only called to feed Elijah, there are limits to our capacity to personally help, but we will do our best to respond helpfully.

A few other comments:

- Thank you from the bottom of my heart for the provision of the sabbatical time I just completed. I am well aware how rare and valuable such an experience is. Many of you will never have the occasion to have such an experience – I am fully aware of that fact. The privilege of this experience has caused me to savor it all the more. Your generosity (and that of the Louisville Institute who helped fund my sabbatical program), is truly remarkable. Thank you.
- One of the reasons I was so free to let go of my conference work and truly put it out of mind was the confidence I had in the one who would sit in my chair for those three months. Thank you, Ron. I am truly grateful.
- I am without words to adequately describe the depth of my respect and appreciation for the colleagues with whom I share this ministry. Be sure that you thank the members of the conference staff for their work on your behalf.
- I am fortunate to be married to a remarkable woman who is patient and flexible far beyond what I have any reason to deserve. During sabbatical she never (well, hardly ever) laid guilt on me for relaxing at home while she went off to work each day. Next month I've got the crazy situation of flying to Cleveland on a Thursday, then to Chicago on Saturday

for a family wedding, then back to Cleveland for a different meeting before finally coming back to Des Moines. That means, of course, that Ruby will need to drive to Chicago and back alone for the wedding. That's not her favorite thing to do. She helps me serve you as well as I do, and I am grateful, and you should be, too.

Thank you for allowing me to serve you as your Conference Minister. This coming July 1, it will be exactly 20 years since I took my first uncertain steps into this "beautiful, heady, exasperating mix" that we call the United Church of Christ. When I stepped into the pulpit (robeless, because I'd never worn a robe in my previous 12 years of pastoral ministry in the denomination from which I'd come) that first Sunday – July 1, 1990 – as the interim pastor of Salem UCC in Verona, Wisconsin, I had no idea what I was getting into and certainly no idea what the future might hold. The idea that a mere 20 years later I'd be completing my 5<sup>th</sup> year as a conference minister would have been a truly laughable thought. But here we are – together. Maybe that's a key to the life to which we are called – togetherness.

By God's grace, let us continue together as we study, worship, pray, argue, debate and care for each other and for God's good – and sometimes broken – world.

God bless you!

Rich Pleva  
Iowa Conference Minister