



Central Southeast Ohio Association of the Heartland Conference
United Church of Christ

May 13, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Council of Central Southeast Ohio Association both affirms and supports that we are better together, that God is calling us to collaborate and share in ministries throughout the Conference. Our focus, both internally as the Association and externally as the wider church, is taking what is strong and building upon that. In doing so the Body of Christ is strengthened, renewed and lived out and into, and is made visible by our actions.

In the Fall of 2011 members of the Central Southeast Ohio Association entered into a time of discernment. Guiding this time was “a desire for greater connectivity among congregations and members, a need for the best possible use of resources, the obsolescence of hierarchical structures, the need for empowerment across the organization, and the personal and cultural changes that continue as the world’s connectivity grows.”¹ This was not driven by finances, though diminishing finances are both symptomatic of the need for change and were taken into account as changes are made. The Vision sought to address change in an adaptive way² that is both faithful and effective.

Over the first five years the Association discerned a new structure that was network driven rather than staff-dependent and staff-driven model (hub and spoke model). Together we acknowledged that as the Association transformed, new time, energy (and hopefully money) would become available.

As individual members and as an Association of the United Church of Christ, we continue to live out Jesus’ prayer for all believers, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.”³ Our oneness is grounded in the

¹ Strategic Plan, Central Southeast Association of the Ohio Conference United Church of Christ.

² “Adaptive” is used here in the same way it is used by Ron Heifetz, author of “Leadership Without easy Answers”. That is, “adaptive change” goes past “fixing problems within a system” to addressing the entire system itself.

³ John 17:20-21.

love of God for all people and our dedication to create a better world. In 2017 we began living into our Association's new structure.

In September 2018, the wider Conference of the then Ohio Conference voted to accept the Restructuring Proposal from the Vision Team. Beginning with line 24 of the document it is acknowledged that OCWM giving to the national setting has fallen from 37% in 1995 to 13% in 2017. It is further acknowledged that "it is not practical to continue with the same structure. Responsible stewardship calls us to reconsider the current structure..."

It is further stated, beginning with line 35, that the "Holy Spirit calls us to do ministry in new and relevant ways...to reimagine and to birth ministry models that reflect who we are, and what God is calling us to be and do—a connected, covenantal church living the mission of Jesus Christ..."

With all of the above very much in the forefront of our minds, the Council of Central Southeast Ohio Association again affirms and supports that we are better together, that God is calling us to collaborate and share in ministries throughout the Conference. Our focus, both internally as the Association and externally as the wider church, is taking what is strong and building upon that. Let our focus be on ministry and how, together, we are the Church. In doing so the Body of Christ is strengthened, renewed and lived out and into, and is made visible by our actions.

We do not support a restructure of the Conference in which finances are the driving factor and/or focus. We are not supportive of taking apart the Associations to build up the Conference. Our focus, in CSEOA, is not one of scarcity as a driving factor as it was not and is not the driving factor of the gospel. We are greatly concerned that the model, as proposed, is a top-heavy model, one in which local churches send monies to the Conference and pray they trickle back down to the local level/areas.

Based upon multiple conversations and meetings at the Conference level and Association level, trust does not appear to be evident among not only the Board but also among the Associations. We are saddened that the covenant among Associations is strained.

What is more evident is an anxious, panic-driven conversation primarily due to the financial issues within SONKA. The most recent evidence of this is the letter from SONKA to the Conference Board of Directors, dated February 10, 2020. It states in part, "For SONKA,

time is quickly passing. Our reserve fund will be depleted before the end of 2020. We need the conference centers to be developed. It is imperative that restructuring into three conference centers begin.”

CSEOA acknowledges this a difficult time for our brothers and sisters in SONKA. We also acknowledge that seeking financial assistance from the other Associations, without first looking within to address ways to be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us, is not a covenantal action and does not build trust and relationship.

CSEOA affirms our desire to remain in covenant in the Conference, build trust, collaborate and share out of a spirit of generosity, and build upon what is working well. We know, from our own experience and journey as an Association, that God desires this for all of us.

In order to continue being part of the conversation we request the following items be addressed by the Board of Directors. We ask that this information be clearly and effectively communicated, both orally and in writing, to each Association:

1. What is/are the primary, over-arching purpose(s) for restructuring the Conference
2. What are ways in which trust can be built and built upon throughout the Conference, between Associations, and Board of Directors

We respectfully request a reply by June 8, 2020 in order for our council to have ample time to receive, discern, and have conversation at our June Council meeting.

May we be found forever faithful and may God continue to bless each of us in the work and ministry to which we are called.

Together in Christ,

CSEOA Executive Committee Members