



RENEW

REFRESH

RESTORE

The Rev. Nayiri Karjian
Association General Minister

May 20, 2020

Dear Siblings in Christ,

In light of our recent deliberations and the May 13, 2020 letter from the Central Southeast Ohio Association, the executive team of the Living Water Association wishes to propose a way forward that we believe will invigorate the process of restructuring the Heartland Conference while living into the promise of deeper collaboration and unity.

We affirm our support of our fellow Associations and the Conference. We affirm our commitment to restructuring the Conference for the purpose of collaborative ministry. We are grateful for the work that has already been done, but recognize that more work lies ahead.

We share the Central Southeast Ohio Association's concern, expressed in their letter, about the current motivation for the restructuring of the Conference, which appears to be primarily driven by financial exigencies on the part of one Association. We share the concern that the current restructuring plan appears to "take apart" the Associations in order to build up the Conference. By dissolving or homogenizing the Associations, the vital ministry they do for, among, and on behalf of the churches that comprise them will be compromised and the United Church of Christ in the Heartland Conference will not be in a position to effectively respond to the needs of the church where it matters most: the local setting. We affirm the polity of the United Church of Christ that rejects ecclesiastical hierarchy, upholds the local church as the primary unit, and maintains settings to facilitate mutual ministry. Our work together is shared, which requires shared leadership and desired means and ends. Any pursuit of restructuring needs to organically build upon our source of strength rather than an artificial attempt to force a structural shift that may not meet the needs of our congregations.

We agree that trust among the various entities involved in this conversion has not been sufficiently nurtured by the process and that intentional work is required in this direction. Trust is built through honest and transparent deliberation with room for dissent, accountability and responsiveness, recognition of equal partnership among all the entities, and consistent and expansive communication. Relationship building through trust remains a necessary priority.

We also agree that the primary, overarching purpose for restructuring the Conference, although addressed in the vision team proposal 2018, has not been clearly articulated, shared or received, and the question, "*what does the Conference do?*" persists.

Recognizing the need for greater clarity about the motivation for this process, an organizational design that meets the needs of our churches, Associations, and the Conference, as well as an increase in trust through a streamlined and organic process by which we live into our collaboration, we propose the following:

- The executive committees of the Associations and the Conference board of directors form a nimble team composed of two members from and chosen by each entity to drive the process forward. The Transitional Conference Minister and Association Ministers would serve in an advisory capacity.
- The primary objective of this team is to review and rewrite, as necessary, the current restructuring proposal, taking into account the concerns of each of the Associations and the Conference as well as best practices for organizational design.
- This team would need to identify and address the proverbial elephants in the room, a solid and theologically grounded motivation for the restructuring that goes beyond financial urgency, and ensure that the design of the Conference structure takes into account the specific needs of the Associations, their mission fields, along with the ministries and missions their churches are called to in their specific geographical locations.
- This team could be facilitated by an elected moderator. The ideal candidate would be skilled in process design and facilitation and be able to lead, with a commitment to neutrality, a productive process.
- This team would report back their findings and recommendations to the wider executive team body within three months.

We believe that this is in keeping with the collaborative leadership structure already proposed for the Conference in which the executive committees of each of the Associations would comprise the Conference's board of directors.

We write this letter in prayerful commitment to intentionally respond to the letter sent by Central Southeast and ask that the next gathering of the Executive Teams be primarily devoted to a full discussion of both letters as a means of moving this process forward.

In faith,

Kelly Fuhrmann, Cheryl Lindsay, Rachel McDonald, Steven Savides, Nayiri Karjian
Living Water Association Ohio NorthEast Executive Team