



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### TEAMWORK IS WIN-WIN!

A few months ago I attended a meeting hosted by Christ UCC in Bethlehem, and attended by their consistory and a handful of folk from two other Bethlehem-area UCC churches. They had invited the Rev. Jane Hess, Senior Minister of Faith UCC in Hazleton, to come and speak to them about her experience in helping four struggling churches, about ten years ago, to come together to form a new congregation.

I was very impressed with what she shared. Not only was the charter membership of the new congregation larger than the combined number of members of the four churches at the time of their merger, but Faith UCC has grown by a couple of hundred members *since* that time. They now have over a thousand people on their rolls, and they average over 300 people in attendance at three worship services each week.

But what really impressed me were the burgeoning and robust youth and children's programs they have—lots of young people involved in lots of activities (the two go together, naturally!). Now here's a church with a future!

And another thing impressed me. Jane said that their weekly offering receipts now pay all the bills! She said this with a bit of wonder in her voice, as if she herself could not believe what she was saying. Now that's the type of "believing" we'd all like to have a little more of!

Okay, there was another thing that impressed me. You are no doubt aware of some of the "social" problems that Hazleton has been struggling with over the past few years. Well, Faith UCC—and their pastor in particular—are very much involved in speaking a *WORD* of truth and compassion to these contentious matters. This UCC congregation is known all over the city as a progressive church that preaches inclusion and actively supports people from all backgrounds. They may not be the most popular church in some quarters, but they certainly are making a mark for the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

*And all of this is because four churches took the risk of leaving their past in the past, so that they could become a new congregation.*

More recently, three congregations in Easton have united and begun making plans to start anew with fresh enthusiasm and an exciting vision for ministry in that part of Northampton County. Meanwhile, several UCC congregations in Bethlehem have been meeting for a number of months now to discuss possibilities for sharing ministry in various ways, from engaging in "leveraged purchasing" (to cut costs for such things as fuel and service contracts) to sharing a youth ministry program. And I still have hope that this sort of thing will become more concretely realized in Allentown.

For some time now our rural churches have found it advantageous to share pastors, and this idea is being "road-tested" in some of our union churches as well. These joint Lutheran-Reformed congregations, which have shared the same building for generations, have asked for judicatory assistance in helping them to establish shared ministry settings where they can begin to share virtually everything else. And as time goes by and things work out well, some of these shared ministry settings are choosing to "go federated"—meaning they literally become one congregation: with one constitution, one pastor, one budget, one leadership body, one of just about everything—except that they relate equally to *two* denominations!

It is exciting to see congregations beginning to realize that there is strength in numbers, and that working together as a team is a win-win situation for everyone. I have been privileged to help midwife some of these shared ministry situations both within our Conference family and between our churches and Lutheran churches, and I have come to realize this is definitely "cutting-edge" stuff that many of our congregations in the *near* future will want to consider very seriously.

When this happens, we may *lose* in terms of the absolute number of churches in PNEC, but we'll *gain* in terms of the overall number of church *members* in PNEC—because a moderate-to-large, thriving, inclusive, healthy, mission-minded church is much more likely to attract new members than several little ones that are all gasping for financial support.

-Toby Holleman, Associate Conference Minister

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