


## 2008-2009 Annual Reports

### Conference Minister's Report

Rev. Lynn Bujnak

*The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society.*

*(UCC Constitution and Bylaws)*

Perhaps I should have begun my report with Rogers and Hammerstein instead of  the Constitution and Bylaws! *Getting to know you, getting to know all about you!* This is certainly what I have been attempting to do for the past ten months. I am becoming more familiar with the **geography** of Vermont:



The **churches** of the Vermont Conference UCC:



And the **people** of our conference:



I have been amazed by the ways I see our VTCUCC pastors, people and congregations "witnessing to the gospel in church and society." Whether through alive and vital worship, alternative worship offerings for seekers or those not able to attend on Sunday, feeding hungry children through the Summer Lunch Program and food shelves, working for justice by studying and making a public witness to protest the use of torture, rebuilding homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, making concrete *no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you're welcome here* and in ways too numerous to name your witness is shining brightly!

Our conference witness has been strong as well. We continue to provide resources and consultation to the roughly one third of our churches searching for new pastoral leadership. The Departments of our conference are providing key leadership in the areas of: mission, stewardship, church and ministry and Christian education. Our three committees that relate to the credentialing, nurture and support of clergy are finding ways to be more actively engaged with more clergy. Further, these committees are planning training events for mentors for: persons in discernment about a call to ministry, new pastors and licensed pastors.

What do I see as I look to our future? I see us strengthening our focus on equipping and nurturing leaders, both clergy and lay. I see a renewed commitment to actively involving our youth and young adults in ministry at the conference level and beyond. I see us continuing to commit time, resources and energy to issues of justice and sustainability while widening our understanding to include more parts of the world.

To be honest, I also see us struggling with deep challenges: finances, the ability of our churches to sustain full-time ministry, the need for more and better trained licensed pastors, making our connections a priority when it is so much easier to go it alone. We are now the Church in radically different times than those most of us grew up knowing and it is an act of courage to let go of the familiar, even risk failure and try new directions. So, perhaps most of all, we need to be deeply committed to prayer for and with one another and prayerfully seeking God's desire and direction for our common life and ministry.

Thank you for your warm welcome! I am both deeply thrilled and more than a bit awed to have the privilege of serving with you as your conference minister. May God continue to bless, challenge and guide us in our witness and life together.

Lynn

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### **Associate Conference Minister's Report**

Rev. Pamela Lucas

What a delight it has been to welcome Lynn Bujnak to the life and work of the Vermont Conference United Church of Christ. We are resting once again in something that feels "settled".

This past year has seen the goings and comings of pastors. And the largest number of first time pastors we've seen in a long time. There are EIGHT! They are gifted, talented, and we are blessed to have them in our midst. And we are fortunate to have been invited by the Massachusetts Conference to enlarge their Lilly Foundation Grant learnings. One of those learnings is how to avoid the 50% burnout rate of first time pastors. The answer has been three year covenanted communities of first time pastors and a trained facilitator. One such group in Vermont is almost a year old and the second group begins shortly.

In these challenging economic and changing demographic times, some of our churches are facing unwillingly into the reality that they may need to reduce pastoral time. These are painful conversations, but sometimes new and exciting possibilities are emerging.

Youth groups are coming together to join in youth planned worship. Pastors are being shared by two or more congregations. Congregations are worshiping together in alternating sanctuaries. Winter worship in non-sanctuary space to save heat has invited an intimacy and creativity that has been warmly received. Mission trips and book and bible studies opened up to other churches and the community. Monday School instead of Sunday School. Collaboration...Cooperation...

What has been most healthy is that the challenges have sent people back to the beginning – a spiritual awakening of sorts.

Why are we here?  
To whom do we belong?  
What are we supposed to be doing?

Churches celebrating what they have rather than mourning what they don't have.  
Churches discovering and building on their still strong strengths rather than wasting time complaining about where they see weakness.

It has taken prayer – discernment – re-focusing on the essentials – letting go of the unnecessary – reclaiming an identity as the people of God – and claiming what that means in the places where we are planted.

I love the promises scattered through the first seven chapters of 2 Chronicles – which boil down (or sugar down, after all this is Vermont!) to something like this:

Our God says to us: Take heart! Don't be anxious or discouraged. I am with you. I will not walk off and leave you in the lurch. I will give you uncluttered and focused hearts so that you may live by my direction and counsel as you brighten this corner of God's Kingdom where you live. I will be at your side until all you have been called to do is completed." Amen and Amen.

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### **Treasurer's Report**

David K. Damkot

The financial newscasters tell us it has been a difficult year in the financial markets and the economy is in some difficulty. My own finances suggest they are right. It has been no different for the VT Conference, our churches, and our congregants. Nevertheless, it is good news that Conference income has held quite steady; indeed, donations from churches are up slightly. Thank you. Further, the belt tightening over the last few years and the careful control of costs by all involved has been solid.

Thank you to the churches who have responded to Vermont Conference needs and support with regular Basic Support to Our Church's Wider Mission and regular payments to per capita billing. You sent to the Vermont Conference \$499,382 for Our Church's Wider Mission, \$145,434 towards per capita, and \$13,708 to Vermont Gifts. Vermont Gifts income was projected to grow faster by the Finance Committee, but it has been difficult. Perhaps such gifts from individuals and groups will increase.

The invested funds have been hit hard by the drop in financial markets. The investment committee has reviewed the investments results for 2008 and the fees charged by our money managers, TD Wealth Management, and concluded to continue using their service. Compared to other managers they provide substantial support to the VT Conference for the fees charged. Their investment results are in line with those of other similar funds handled by other managers. It is unfortunate our unrestricted funds have dropped to \$935,692.

The financial books are being kept in good order according to my lay audit every six weeks or so. I have found the recordkeeping on deposits and bills-paid is sound and consistent. Initials on bills show cross-checks are in place and more than one person is looking at and handling invoices and bills.

Elsewhere in this annual report you may read about our finances from the Stewardship Department, the Investment Committee, and the Finance Committee. The Board of Directors will recommend revisions to the 2009 budget and the 2010 projections for your vote.

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### **Board of Director's Report**

Rona Kinsley, Chair

In August, we said good-bye to Interim Conference Minister, Rev. Carole Carlson, who had so ably guided us through the time between Rev. Susan Henderson's resignation, as Interim Conference Minister, and the arrival of Rev. Dr. Lynn Bujnak, whom we joyfully called to be our new Conference Minister at last year's Annual Meeting. Both Carole and Lynn have blessed us with their ministries, over the past year, and we are grateful that Carole remains among us as an active member of the Vermont Conference. Lynn has hit the deck running, and, among her many other activities, she has begun the process of helping the Board to define its mission and purpose, set priorities, and dream dreams for the future.

We are also very grateful for the ministries of Associate Conference Minister/Director of VAST, Rev. Pam Lucas, Business Manager/Stewardship Associate, Jim Thomas, and Administrative Assistant/Placement Secretary, Lynn Thomas, who have continued to do more than seems humanly possible in their respective roles. In January, we added Sybil McShane to the Conference office, as the Associate in Communications Technology, with responsibility for E-KIT and the Resource Center. Sybil comes to us after retiring as Vermont State Librarian, and has quickly become a valued member of the staff.

This has been a year of major change in the structure of the Board of Directors. Following the approval of the new Constitution and Bylaws, at last year's Annual Meeting, we made the switch from a twenty-five member Board to a twelve member Board, with a mostly new cast of characters. The Nominating Committee worked with the Associations to present a slate of Board nominees, one from each Association area that balanced lay and clergy, male and female, old hands and newcomers. Along with the Conference Officers: Moderator, Stan Amadon, Vice-Moderator, Susie Webster-Toleno, Treasurer, David Damkot; and the Past Chair, Rona Kinsley (continuing to serve as Chair through the Annual Meeting); the Board now includes Malcolm Chase, from the Addison Association area, Rev. Debbie Ingram, from the Champlain Association area, Rev. Wayne Olson, from the Grafton-Orange Association area, Rev. Doug Carter, from the Northeast Association area, David Durfee, from the Southwest Association area, Rev. Amy Pitton, from the Washington Association area, Rev. Laurie

Krooss, from the Windham-Union Association area, and Amanda Swoyer, from the Windsor-Orange Association area. The primary commitment of each of the eight members from Association areas is as a Board member who maintains communication with the Associations, rather than as an Association representative.

Board members are also asked to serve on the Council of each of the four Departments, maintaining mutual communication and accountability between Departments and Board. We are grateful for the dedication of Malcolm Chase, serving with the Department of Church and Ministry, Rev. Wayne Olson, serving with the Department of Christian Education, Rev. Laurie Krooss, serving with the Department of Mission, and Rev. Doug Carter, serving with the Department of Stewardship. Thanks to their efforts, and the efforts of the Department Chairs, we are already experiencing a greater sense of connection between the Board and the Departments.

As you will see from the Financial Reports, the Vermont Conference has continued to live within its budget, although this has become an increasingly difficult challenge with the dramatic downturn in the economy. At our March meeting, Treasurer David Damkot presented the Finance Committee's report that, with losses to the Unrestricted Fund due to the crisis in the markets, we would not be able to end this year with a balanced budget. The Finance Committee recommended that we change the division of OCWM funds, currently 45% to the National setting and 55% to the Conference, to 40% to National and 60% to the Conference. This would move Vermont from being third highest among the Conferences in the percentage it sends to National, to fourth highest. The Board agreed to recommend this division to the Annual Meeting, both for the revised 2009 budget and the recommended 2010 budget.

In July, we made the difficult decision to sell the Atkinson Retreat Center (ARC). The ARC Board worked valiantly to make the Retreat a going concern, but it continued to lose money and to be a drain on shrinking Conference resources. Conference staff crafted a moving Closing Worship, held at the ARC on August 31, where many spoke of what the Retreat had meant to them in years past. The proceeds from the sale, now completed, will be added to the Atkinson Investment Account, with the Vermont Conference receiving a third of the income from that account.

Other activities of the Board, over the past year, have included approving "Requirements and Procedures for Resolutions Adopted by and in the Name of the Vermont Conference, United Church of Christ," which clarifies the procedure for bringing resolutions to the Annual Meeting, approving motions recommended by the Conference Ministerial Standing and Standards Committee with regard to "Guidelines for a Conference Minister Fitness Review," and beginning of process of reviewing and making recommendations for the use of the Sheldon Trust income, designated for retired Vermont Conference clergy in need.

It has been an interesting and exciting time to chair the Board, but I'm ready to pass the gavel and retire to being the "Past Chair" guru. I would like to end by expressing my gratitude for the hard work done by the "old" Board and Executive Committee to help bring about what we hope will be a more active and responsive governance structure for the Vermont Conference, and to the "new" Board, who have been working hard to live into the new structure and to bring a sense of excitement and possibility to doing things in a new way.

## **Make a Difference Grant Committee**

Jack Bixby, Chair

A Committee of the Board of Directors, the Make a Difference Grant Committee considers and approves small grants from Make a Difference Fund income to local churches for a wide variety of ministries. This past year, two grants were made, one to the United Church of Chelsea and one to Grace Church, Rutland. Another request is in the approval process. While funds are limited, churches are encouraged to make requests for projects that will “make a difference” in their communities.

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## **Church Growth and Evangelism**

Rev. Constance Moser, Chair



Under the steady leadership of Connie Moser, our focus this year was largely on helping ourselves and the member churches of the Vermont Conference to figure out what “Church Growth” really means.

In a time when the size of our congregations is often stagnant and sometimes shrinking, it’s easy to fixate on how to fill the pews, the collection plate, and the various committee assignments necessary for any church to function as an instrument of God’s presence in the world. Yet this definition of ‘church growth’ often seems to create frustration, misdirected effort, and even a sense of despair – among present worshippers and newcomers alike. Such despair welcomes neither the Holy Spirit nor the stranger.

So we began our work this year by inviting churches throughout Vermont to be in touch with us and tell us stories about growth in their congregations, however they chose to define it. We encouraged churches to tell us about growth in spiritual vitality as much as, if not more than, increases in the size of their Sunday worshipping crowd.

Response to this request was modest, but it did give us an idea for how to proceed with our work. As we mulled over our own definitions of church growth, we decided to hone in on examples of the Spirit at work in congregations, and to offer a workshop at Annual Meeting that will tell a handful of stories of this Spirit already at work, and will invite other stories from participants. We’re calling this workshop “Learning Where the Spoons Are.”

We hope, at this workshop and beyond, to begin a conversation about surprising events that are happening in churches around Vermont, and describing ways that other churches can grow these ideas in the context of their own congregational life. Simply put, we sense that when worship communities find new ways of welcoming people into their midst, the Holy Spirit has already begun working to nourish growth and is freed to work even further. When the stranger learns where the spoons are in the church kitchen, the Holy Spirit sets the table for a feast that can lead... who knows where?

We humbly suggest that “Spoon buttons” will be THE memento from this year’s Annual Meeting.

## **Ministerial Standing and Standards**

Rev. Martha B. Peck, Chair

The MSSC has the responsibility of oversight for clergy, licensed and commissioned ministers in six of the eight Associations in the Vermont Conference. Our twelve member committee gathers monthly in Randolph for a daylong meeting. In 2008-2009 we established three working subcommittees to handle our workload more effectively.

The Discernment Subcommittee oversees Members in Discernment (formerly In-Care students), from initial contact with their local churches, through seminary and up to approval for ordination. We are working according to a new model of closer contact with students throughout the process.

The Transitions Subcommittee keeps track of requests for clergy transfers in and out of the Vermont Conference, assists clergy seeking Leave of Absence status and conducts the annual Information Review required of all Vermont UCC ministers.

The Licensure Subcommittee receives and reviews requests from churches seeking annual authorization for licensed ministers.

Much of the legwork is done in subcommittee, with the whole MSSC coming together to vote on changes of status or authorization. The system seems to be helping us to achieve more in the limited time we have to do our work.

On the agenda for the next six months is 1) another round of Boundary Awareness training for all Vermont Conference ministers and 2) a training event for potential mentors, discernment partners and license advisors. (Each will have a slightly different role.)

The MSSC stands ready to investigate allegations of pastoral misconduct, but we are thankful that such instances are rare. Increasingly, our work is geared towards prevention, as we seek to support those already serving in our Conference and as we try to identify and nurture candidates for ministry who are well-prepared academically and who are psychologically and spiritually fit for ministry.

We appreciate the support given our committee from Lynn Thomas in the Conference office (keeping track of reams of paper!), the institutional memory and organizational brilliance of Pam Lucas, and the sensitivity and deep knowledge of ministry issues brought to us by Lynn Bujnak. As I step down in June, at the end of a long term of service on the MSSC, I am grateful for the friendship, good humor, wisdom and faithfulness of each member of the committee: Cordie Merritt, Jeremy Schrauf, Susan Tarolli, Nancy McHugh, Cindy Cyr, Rufus Cushman, Peter Plagge, Jay Sprout, Jerry Handspicker, Barbara Purinton, and Mike O'Daniel. It has been an honor to serve with all of them.

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## **Committee on the Healing Ministry**

Rev. Bob Boutwell, Chair

The Committee on the Healing Ministry is active in promoting the Healing Ministry among the churches of the Conference. We held a healing retreat/workshop on January 26, 2008 at Bethany Church in Randolph to help churches address the needs of persons affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and TBI and to offer healing for other hurtful memories. We take our Healing Prayer display

to various Health Fairs to promote prayer as a complement to other healing and medical procedures. Our committee members are skilled at various aspects of healing ministry. Mrs. Jean Britt is a Parish Nurse and encourages churches to develop a Parish Nurse Program. Rev. Sue Church is a Hospice chaplain and has received special training for the healing of grief and loss. Ms Linda Corey is a resource person in Mental Health. Rev. Bob Boutwell offers healing of hurtful memories. Rev. Jan Chilek has special training in healing touch and is skilled in healing relationships. Ms Karen Glade, RN is a resource person in community health care. We can help local churches to offer services of anointing with oil, laying on hands, and healing prayers. We provide many resources on the healing ministry at the Vermont Conference Resource Center and have a link to Healing Ministry on the Conference website. We promote the "Healthy Connections" program of the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. We provide oil and sample prayers for pastors at their installations and ordinations. We invited the Rev. Nigel Mumford to be the guest leader for an ecumenical Healing Retreat at Grace Congregational UCC in Rutland on January 24, 2009. Please contact us if we can be of assistance to your church, or provide training for your church's healing ministry.

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### **Department of Mission Report**

Rev. Bill Neil, Chair

Our Conference by-laws ask the Department of Mission to take actions which arise "out of a creative tension between ... the hopes and needs of the world and ... the capacities, talents, and passions of the churches and others to act." The hopes and needs of the world far exceed our capacities to act! We seek to match what capacities, talents, and passion that we do have with those hopes and needs about which we can take some positive action. During the 08 – 09 year our several Committees and Task Forces have continued their efforts on many fronts.

Justice-Poverty-and-Peace assisted in bringing Dr. Nuha Khoury of Bethlehem, Palestine to a day of workshops and presentations in Brattleboro on November 1, 2008. Our annual support of the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council (VLIAC) continued. Karen Lafayette works as an advocate for all Vermonters on a host of state-wide issues that benefit our low income citizens. Our Summer Lunch program continues with grants to local churches and community organizations which provide nutritional meals for low income children.

Our Prison Justice Committee is working to recruit and train volunteer visitors and worship leaders at correctional facilities. They also advocate for criminal justice issues. With others they support the ministry of Camp AGAPE which provides a Christian camping experience for children whose parent is or has been incarcerated.

Among its many projects, the Uprooting Racism Task Force has produced a powerful DVD which shares the voices of Vermonters who have experienced racism.

Our Global Ministries team also played a key role in the November 1 event at Brattleboro. The issue of Palestine/Israel is of great concern. A new focus is on "A Common Word Between Us and You." This initiative seeks to encourage Christian/Muslim dialogue.

Another passion for some members of our Department is a concern for Health Care For All. Access to and coverage for health care is an ongoing area which calls for action.

Local churches and their members are the primary force for mission. It is the privilege of the Department to assist these efforts and to provide effective opportunities for our combined resources to be of use. We thank you for your support.

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### **Prison Justice Committee**

Betty Edson, Chair

This has been another year of growing and learning for our committee, which has, as members, Mary Lou DeCosta, Skip Dickinson, Esther Farnsworth, Will Hunter, Alice McDonald, Alan Perkins, Jeanne Zammataro, and myself.

Having done two volunteer-awareness days in the recent past (one in Springfield and one in St. Johnsbury), we look forward to doing a third, which will take place on April 30, in Windsor. These events have resulted in several people becoming involved in volunteer work, across the corrections spectrum, and we trust that that will also be the case in Windsor.

Thanks to work by Jeanne Zammataro and Will Hunter, ecumenical worship services, by mainstream denominations, are now happening at the Springfield facility.

Thanks to work by Alan Perkins, our website is up and running and user-friendly. This site can be reached by going to the Department of Mission page on the Conference website, and clicking on "Prison Justice Website." The site includes any upcoming events, good articles on the subject, and links to other pertinent websites.

At Annual Meeting, we look forward to receiving items that will be used to fill backpacks that are given out to folks living at Dismas Houses (half-way houses for people recently released from incarceration) and to fill other backpacks that are given to children at Camp Agape (the ecumenical camp for children who have experienced the incarceration of a parent), which will take place this August.

We have representation on the Citizens Advisory Committee to the Commissioner of Corrections, which helps us to be aware of what is going on, state-wide.

We subscribe to two issue-related periodicals, which are available at the Conference Office. One is Prison Legal News and the other CURE.

I have a sermon on prison justice that I am happy to offer at your church. Thus far I have shared it with congregations in Strafford, Sharon, Hyde Park, Fairhaven and Randolph.

Our advocacy is in its infancy! However, we did send a letter to our congressional delegation, in support of Senator Webb's proposed legislation that would review and revise the present correctional system, which puts in prison a higher percentage of citizens (more than 1 in 100) than any other country in the world, and largely for non-violent crimes.

Dismas Houses, the wonderful half-way homes for people just out of prison, are operating in Rutland, Burlington and Winooski, and there is work underway for another one in the White River area. At

least one of our members is involved in that effort, and another is working on the very beginning process of helping people in the Bennington area consider such an undertaking.

We do have, of course, a presence at Annual Meeting, in the display area and at the Peace breakfast.

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### **Justice and Witness Ministries Report**

Beverly Anderson

As the Vermont Conference UCC representative to Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM) I have attended two Justice and Witness Ministries National Meetings this year as well as one Regional (New England) Justice and Witness Ministries Meeting.

**The Fall Meeting of JWM** was held in New Orleans where Justice and Witness has staff members serving the Gulf Coast Justice Team. We had a tour of New Orleans that confirmed for us that, due to the breached levy system and Hurricane Katrina damage, normalcy in the city is still a long way off. The land in certain areas is toxic. Homes still have not been reconstructed. Children are not able to play outside. Families are unable to return to their property, consequently their property is being taken away from them. There is still much work to be done. We received reports from members of the Gulf Coast Justice Team: Barbara Baylor, Minister for Health Care Justice; Sala Nolan, Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights; Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness all reported on their work on the Gulf Coast as it relates to their portfolio.

The business of that meeting included presentations followed by long and difficult discussion regarding the restructure of the national setting. Justice and Witness Ministries voted to affirm the Proposal of the Governance Follow-up Team. We also voted to request consideration of the following modification to the proposal: To add one additional person each from COREM. To increase in size from 85-88 to 90-93.

**The Spring Meeting of JWM** was held in Cleveland. It was a difficult meeting beginning with the news that Rev. Linda Jaramillo, Executive Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries would not be with us as she was with her mother in the final days of her earthly life. Linda is an important voice for Justice and an excellent leader. Her presence was missed.

The focus of the Spring Meeting for JWM was discussing and voting on the proposal to move forward with the planned restructure of the national setting. The discussion was difficult. The Board was divided. The Justice and Witness Ministries voted against moving forward with the proposal. This vote was not seen as a victory for anyone. There were those who felt it was best outcome at this time and those who were extremely disappointed and frustrated. The future is uncertain.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Beverly R. M. Anderson  
VTCUCC Justice and Witness Representative

## **Report of the Disaster Response Coordinator**

Jennifer Geary

It is with mixed emotions that I write this my last report as Disaster Response Coordinator. I submitted my letter of resignation in January of 2009 stating I would continue until someone was appointed to the position or July 1 which ever came first. During 2007-2008, Judy Moore put in many hours as the Co-Coordinator. She and her husband Doug have moved to New Orleans to continue the work they have been doing there.

I believe this ministry holds great potential for the Vermont Conference. Churches that do the work of preparing their entire congregation for a possible disaster inevitably improve communication in all areas of the life of their church. They also connect with the community around them in new and positive ways. When a Conference takes seriously the preparation work necessary to be ready to respond to a disaster, it is prepared for anything that might happen within its borders or to quickly and appropriately respond to any event around the world whether the vandalism of a local church, contamination of parishioners wells or a typhoon in the Pacific.

The importance of this ministry has not been realized in Vermont. There has never been any money budgeted for this ministry and there is no oversight for it within the conference structure. Much needed database software has not been purchased or created.

A two-pronged approach was necessary in establishing this ministry: 1. to organize the Churches, Associations and Conference. 2. to organize the many disaster response organizations in the state so that the Churches, Associations and Conference have a statewide framework within which to work.

My primary work over the last two years has been to create a network of non-profit disaster response agencies. As President of Vermont Voluntary Agencies Active in Disaster VTVOAD, I have worked closely with Vermont Emergency Management (VEMA) to establish lines of communication during and after in-state disasters. We created a statewide Long Term Recovery Committee (LTRC) that is ready to go. We connected this committee to Vermont 211. Now at the time of a disaster VEMA puts out press releases directing victims to contact Vermont 211. The operators have an intake form to collect information. This information is forwarded to the LTRC who assesses the needs utilizing trained caseworkers. Once the needs are known the responsibility for response is divided up among the VTVOAD partners. The LTRC is made up of three VTVOAD agencies, a rep from VT Dept of Human Services and a rep. from the Community Action Organizations. The VTCUCC had a seat on the LTRC until my resignation. Southern Baptist Disaster Relief now fills that seat.

In 2007, the UCC supplied a \$1000 grant for flood recovery. This grant plus the work of many local volunteers helped a family raise their property above flood stage and rebuild their home.

In 2008, Judy Moore updated the VTCUCC Disaster Response Plan and presented it to the Board of Directors for action. She also created a booklet to help churches begin to establish a Disaster Response Ministry within their congregation. This is available on the VTCUCC Website. Judy and I have spoken with individual congregations and Associations on the importance of establishing a plan before disasters happen.

Two areas in need of immediate focus by the VTCUCC are 1. to have a disaster response resource database. 2. to create awareness of and respond to Technology Caused Disaster. This is the most prevalent type of disaster in Vermont. Sick buildings, brown fields, asbestos, well contamination, etc. affect many of our parishioners. The UCC is the only religious based organization responding to this type of disaster and providing for long term recovery.

I pray the Vermont Conference will take seriously this important ministry by promptly filling this vacant position, establishing a line item in the budget and providing for clear lines of communication.

## **Department of Christian Education**

Leslie Desrosiers, Chair

The Department of Christian Education has been working on setting new priorities.

The Department of Christian Education shall encourage and support the ministry of Jesus Christ within the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ for its churches and their members in the following ways.

### **THE DEPARTMENT OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION'S PRIORITIES**

#### 1. Strengthening the Resource Center of the Vermont Conference

We believe that a strong, updated and vibrant Resource Center will be better able to provide the resources that our churches need to engage in vital ministry. To this end, we will be creating a Resource Center Subcommittee to work with appropriate staff and other departments / entities within the conference. We will create a process to empower all aspects of our Conference [staff, departments, committees, task forces and churches] to utilize this valuable resource within our midst.

The Department of Christian Education will work hard to maintain current and vital resources for our own particular areas of concern: various curriculums, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Junior and Senior High youth group activities, teacher training, outdoor ministry, adult education and any other aspect that rightly falls within our scope of operation.

#### 2. Maintaining our Covenantal Partnerships

We believe that maintaining our covenantal relationships within our particular sphere of influence is within the best interests of the Vermont Conference. Our covenants expand the resources and scope of our many ministries and allow our members to both feed and be fed by our wider partners of Christ's ministries. We propose to continue our covenantal relationships with:

- NEACE: New England Association of Christian Educators
- VAUCE: Vermont Association of United Church Educators
- UCC Resource Center: Our National UCC Resource Center
- Outdoor Ministry Association
- PIE: Partners in Education
- Troy/New England Annual Conference of the UMC: Our Covenant Hills Partners
- Episcopal Diocese of Vermont: Our Camp Agape Partners

#### 3. Providing Quality and Pertinent Christian Education Programs and Activities

We believe that providing programmatic and educational opportunities for our member churches and their members will ensure that our churches have the resources they need to carry out the educational ministry of the Vermont Conference. As many of you know, the Department of Christian Education of the Vermont Conference has been in the midst of a painful time of transition for the last few years. We are just beginning to regroup and reestablish some of the priorities and programs needed to ensure that our vital ministries are

carried out. We hope to provide the following resources on a regular basis. They include but are not limited to:

- Resource Center Open House
- Communities of Practice Program
- Curriculum Workshops
- Teacher Training Gatherings
- Safe Church Educational Workshops
- Vacation Bible School Curriculum and Training
- VAST: Vermont Academy of Spiritual Training
- Biblical Literacy and Faith Formation
- Children, Youth and Adult Spiritual Formation and Bible Study

#### 4. Providing Quality and Pertinent Youth Group Programs and Activities

We believe that providing programmatic and educational opportunities and activities for our member churches, their youth leaders and their youth will strengthen the Vermont Conference and yield a healthier and more vibrant church in the future. Again, after a temporary hiatus, we are again preparing to offer to Vermont Conference churches youth group resources and activities that will empower our folks and create a sense of belonging to the many youth that call one of the many Vermont Conference Churches home. We are working to provide the following programmatic and educational activities:

- Twice a year statewide gatherings of our youth [Spring/Fall- North/South]
- A youth presence at the Vermont Annual Meeting
- A Vermont youth presence at the New England Youth Event
- A Vermont youth presence at General Synod
- Youth Group Leader Workshops and Resourcing Events
- Vermont Youth Leadership Retreats

#### 5. Strengthening Our Commitment to Outdoor Ministry & Our Ties with Covenant Hills

We believe that a vibrant outdoor ministry program within the Vermont Conference will only strengthen the church and lead our youth to commit to a life-time of Christian discipleship and for some a track to ordained ministry and service to the United Church of Christ. In addition, a strong outdoor ministry program instills Christian values and allows our youth to have confidence in a progressive theology of social justice and abundant welcome. Over the last few years, the percentage of UCC outdoor ministry participants at Covenant Hills has consistently declined, mainly due to a lack of education and promotion within the conference and among its churches. This needs to change.

We also strongly encourage the Vermont Conference and its Board of Directors to re-covenant with the New England Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church [the new overseers of Covenant Hills – no longer the Troy Conference] in our partnership with Covenant Hills.

At the Vermont Conference's Board of Director's direction and with the Vermont Conference's Department of Christian Education's agreement, we have seen the shift of funding for Covenant Hills to begin to be taken out of the general budget of the Vermont Conference instead of out of the Outdoor Ministries Fund. However, believing that outdoor ministry is a priority of the entire Vermont Conference, we believe that the slow change of funding from

the Outdoor Ministry Fund to the general budget should be shared by all and not just the Department of Christian Education. The funds should naturally come out of our budget, but this year we have been asked by the Vermont Conference's Board of Directors to use funds already slated for other Department of Christian Education priorities to compensate for the change. Knowing the financial difficulties of the Conference, we have readily agreed to shift funds to cover the added expenses associated with our covenant with Covenant Hills. However in the future, we would like to either have our budget increased to cover the increasing commitment to our Covenant Hills covenant or to see it shared by the entire conference.

Another priority of the Department of Christian Education concerning the strengthening of our Outdoor Ministry will be re-covenanting with the New England Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, the new overseers / owners of Covenant Hills. The covenant should at the very least be with the Board of Directors and hopefully with the entire Vermont Conference at Annual Meeting.

We will continue to strengthen our commitment to Outdoor Ministry and our ties with Covenant Hills by:

- Creating an Outdoor Ministry Subcommittee [under Dept. of C.E.]
- Increasing our participation on the Covenant Hills Site Committee
- Encouraging increased participating in the Covenant Hills Open House
- Better publicizing Covenant Hills in the Vermont Conference  
[Annual Meeting, Association Meetings, Workshops, Mailings, etc]

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### **Department of Stewardship**

Rufus Cushman, Chair

#### New Occasions Teach New Duties

With the new structure being voted at last years annual meeting, the make-up of the Department of Stewardship has changed. Their responsibility to deal with both the income and expense of the Conference has not.

We have met twice since January and determined that our need to educate about the needs of OCWM at all levels continues to be a high priority. We also anticipate promoting more one day workshops on the "How To's" of doing Annual Stewardship, Planned Giving, and being a church treasurer.

The Investment and Finance Committees will submit thier own annual reports. The Properties Committee aided in the preparations for the sale of the Atkinson property in Newbury.

Jim Thomas, our Conference Business manager, has continued his giving of his valuable Time and Talents, and providing valuable insights into a number of the issues that the Department of Stewardship deals with--and we thank him.

As followers of Jesus Christ, 2/3 of whose Parables relate to money issues, we need to become more comfortable with the role that money plays in a life lived as a Christian.

## **Finance Committee Report**

John Holme, Chair

As we enter May, the economic crisis continues, as does the crisis in the finances of the Vermont Conference. As of April 30, Our Church's Wider Mission giving was down 14% from last year, while Per Capita contributions are up significantly over last year. The Unrestricted Fund fell to \$871,298.41 as of March 31, compared to \$1,305,411 as of December 31, 2007.

The Finance Committee met four times beginning in January. It proposed revisions of the 2009 budget to bring it into balance and proposed a balanced budget for 2010. The Board of Directors approved the new 2009 budget on March 7 and the 2010 budget on April 10. It seems that we are playing catch up as we go through the year. If ever there was a time to dig deeply and give generously to support the Vermont Conference, the time is now. Many people are forecasting an improvement in economic conditions early next year, so now is the time to increase giving to help us weather the storm.

The most significant change in the revised 2009 and the 2010 budgets is a reduction in the amount committed from the Conference to the National Church from 45% to 40%. Compensation of Staff, line 8000, is unchanged in the 2009 budget from the amount adopted at the 2008 Annual Meeting, but the increase for 2010 is only \$7,977 to \$338,564. After setting aside \$4,000 for an anticipated increase in medical insurance that leaves \$3,977 for salary increases. Conference Minister Lynn Bujank has promised to allocate those increases among the lowest paid staff members.

The Vermont Conference has been extremely generous with OCWM giving to the National. There is a strong consensus of support for the work of the National Church and a belief that our generosity sets an example for generosity among our member churches and our church members in Vermont. Only Massachusetts gives a larger percentage to the National than we do. If the delegates approve this reduction to 40%, we will be tied as the third most generous Conference.

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## **VT Conference Investment Committee**

David Andrews, Chair

Not surprisingly, the Conference's equity investments declined in value during 2008. Fortunately, we were not heavily invested in large bank stocks, and did not own Lehman Brothers. Nevertheless, our Unrestricted Account lost 39.5% of its value during 2008, and the two other accounts invested in equities fared similarly.

The impact on the income available to support the Conference is cushioned somewhat by the trailing three-year basis on which our "draw" is calculated. Depending on when (and whether) a recovery occurs, the negative impact on the budget may increase in each of the next two years. We believe that our investment managers at TD BankNorth are prudent in their approach to investing our funds, practicing diversification and maintaining an appropriate balance between stocks and bonds. The Investment Committee is also reviewing our formal investment policy, and hopes to present a proposed revision to the Board of Directors by the end of this year.

## **Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society**

The purpose of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society (VECBS) is to promote unity in Vermont's Christian churches, especially among its nine member denominations. The leaders of these denominations, or their representatives, are members of the VECBS Board of Trustees. The Board meetings provide an opportunity for the leaders to meet and have fellowship, to worship together, and to find ways to cooperate and work together.

The Council has three standing committees. One of these committees is Peace, Justice, and the Integrity of Creation. In 2008, this committee studied the issue of racism and wrote *A Statement on Racism: Brothers and Sisters Together* (at [www.vecbs.org](http://www.vecbs.org)). They then began an in depth study of water, both from a Christian perspective with its significance to the Christian faith, and from an ecological and justice point of view as an essential element for life to survive.

The Council's Faith & Order Committee members are completing their study of the World Council of Churches' paper, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. They plan to submit their comments about this paper, first to VECBS Trustees and members, then to WCC in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Prayer & Worship Committee organized and led the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service that was held at the Dormition of the Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church in Burlington in January. Greek Orthodox theologian, The Rev. Thomas Fitzgerald, was the homilist.

In 2008, the Bible Society part of VECBS distributed a total of \$6,376 worth of free Bibles through its Greenleaf Fund to Vermont ministries including to churches, prison ministry, soldiers, youth groups, high school students, refugees, and more.

The Council serves as a communication link in the faith community. An email newsletter is sent monthly to all who want to receive it (to subscribe, email [info@vecbs.org](mailto:info@vecbs.org) or call 802-434-7307).

The Council helps to get the word out to faith communities throughout the state about events, services, issues of concern and more.