

SPECIAL MEETING TO DISCUSS THE PURPOSE OF THE NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION

Glen Ridge Congregational Church

October 16, 2008 – 7:15 p.m.

Following a light supper, the meeting opened at 7:15 p.m. Heather Cherrey, President of the Council, offered the opening prayer and then provided an overview of the meeting. She referred to how the discussion of the Association's purpose had started with a report by Sherry Taylor to the Association Council that had been repeated in her annual report for the year 2006. In response, the 2007 annual meeting of the Association voted to consider the purpose of the Association. The Council had discussed the subject considerably during the ensuing year, and several requests were made for input from members of the Association without response. Another motion was passed at the 2008 annual meeting that "the Association Council provide a plan to engage the Association in a general conversation on our purpose." This evening's meeting is the result of the expressed desire to have a conversation about the purpose of the Association.

Ellen Witko reported on the various discussions that had taken place at various Association Council meetings. The purpose as outlined in our constitution was reviewed, and the many concerns of people were touched upon: dwindling membership in our churches, reduced interest in things beyond the local church, some clergy not interested in the NJA, the CAC and the UCC, etc. She then outlined some of the new ways of doing things, with signs of new transitioning and new life. As inklings of things to come, she mentioned new initiatives on fund-raising, the revitalization of the Christian Education & Youth Commission, programs on website design, and the upcoming January meeting featuring Livingston Taylor. She concluded with one reflection recognizing the changing environment and our need to revise our approaches to familiar challenges: "Let's hold onto each other and pray."

The meeting was then opened to a general sharing of ideas, with suggestions, observations, questions, and general discussion among those assembled. Among the points raised were the following:

(Stephanie Weiner) It looks like we're middle management; people are interested in services.

(Joyce Phipps) It's good to learn from others' ideas. We need practical topics from which to pick up ideas. The Association should be a support system and idea factory.

(Linda Holzbaur) We need SMEs: Subject Matter Experts. Association has even broader role due to geographic dispersion of member churches. Subject matters should be topical.

(Jim Van Dyke) The Association is the skeletal system, the connecting link, bringing people together within appropriate boundaries.

(Bo Boccock) The Association's purpose is to help, equip, resource and support the ministers and members within the UCC in New Jersey. People are reluctant; we have to help, not criticize.

(Heather) Do churches publicize Association activities – pass on the word?

(Steve Cutaia) Association is important not for people at this meeting but people in the pews. We need to go in the direction of getting them to “buy in.”

(Bill Kelly, Chair of Union Cong’s outreach commission) Nice to hear what’s going on in the Association; connecting with people is important.

(Heather) Why did people come tonight?

(Joyce) The way we use language depersonalizes the Association. We need to make it more personal. People don’t need more structure. We need to find a way to make it more personal. Church members are generally more conservative than the pastor.

(Cindy Reynolds) Importance of the concept of covenant: we here in New Jersey don’t “get it.” People in the pew don’t get it: connection among churches. Concept is common in New England.

(Linda) “Covenant” is a foreign concept. Our churches understand being autonomous, but we don’t have the flip side of covenant. If ministers don’t have time to meet with each other, how can the rest of the people get the idea of covenant? People feel they can’t take the time to be together. If we can’t find connection socially, how can we get together to work together?

(Bill) What’s the draw for the average person?

(Heather) The problem starts with the clergy. How do we get the idea to trickle down to the laity?

(Sherry Taylor) Let the people do what excites them – e.g., the recent Yom Kippur event. It feels different – not doing the “right things.”

(Bill) Share experiences.

(Stephanie) You gotta know your folks.

(Linda) Same old structure – we have to try to reorganize. Some commissions should be permanent; some should be short-term. The Association should become a clearinghouse. We need a way to post things on the Association website. Having passion vs. filling a slot.

(Heather) You don’t have to sign up for three years; take risks; step out and do something new. The Council is too busy; there are practicalities of time availability. Are there others willing to take on things?

(Stephanie and Steve) Discover people’s interests and develop groups connected with skill bank.

(Linda) Declare a Year of Jubilee.

(Bo) How long have numbers been dropping?

(Bart Brown) At least since the late 1980's, probably earlier.

(Joyce) Since the 1990's. National mood; generations changing; alternative worship services; bonding of community. Suggested new name for Association: Community of New Jersey UCC Churches. We need to talk of ourselves as a community.

(Steve) Do things around needs; share resources.

(Bob Cassels) Step back; don't worry about turnout. The Council should look at what we have to do, not what others say. We should do what we want to do. That way, we start to build unity.

(Stephanie) We can't stop talking.

(Ken Barnes, interim at First Cong, Montclair) The problems are not unique to this Association. An organization starts to go down when everyone looks alike, thinks alike. Mentioned fellowship among Japanese congregations widely dispersed in California. How will we bond?

(Cindy) Offer support – e.g., for women who have been at home and now are facing full-time employment in the work force again.

(Mark Boyea) Connection, building community, shared purpose, common language. We do a poor job of sharing values. Denominational identity not strong. Without shared language we can't bond.

(Jim) Referred to Council's offer to visit local governing bodies to start the dialogue.

(Sherry) The individual churches don't need so much as they used to.

The meeting adjourned at 8:35 p.m. with thanks to those who had attended and a closing prayer by Sherry Taylor.

Respectfully submitted,

H. Bartlett Brown
Acting Secretary

OCTOBER 16, 2008 MEETING ATTENDEES

New Jersey Association Council Members:

Rev. Mark Boyea
Bart Brown
Rev. Heather Cherrey
Steve Cutaia
Rev. Ken Hess
Rev. Cindy Reynolds
Rev. Sherry Taylor
Jim VanDyke
Re. Ellen Witko

Other New Jersey Association attendees:

Rev. Ken Barnes
Rev. Bo Boccock
Rev. Bob Cassels
Sheila Cassels
Rev. Leah Fowler
Rev. Linda Holzbaur
Bill Kelly
Armand Khachaturian
Rev. Joy Mounts
Rev. Joyce Phipps
Rev. Ann Ralosky
Rev. Stephanie Weiner
Union Cong. member who left early and did not sign in
Several unidentified participants