

Frequently Asked Questions For a New Conference in Eastern PA

At the 2017 Spring Annual Meetings of the Penn Northeast and Pennsylvania Southeast Conferences of the United Church of Christ each voted to approve a resolution calling for the vision and development of a new Conference of the United Church of Christ in Eastern Pennsylvania. Since then, the JCVDT has been meeting monthly in response to this charge. The following FAQs respond to some of the questions that Conference leadership has heard regarding this initiative and the actions that will come before the Fall Annual Meetings in 2018.

What's new?

- We believe that the mission of God in Christ will be enhanced if we come together. The new is above all else a new covenant based on being in relationship and in partnership with each other, with sister congregations, with our conference, with our wider church....
- The new is still unfolding as we vision and move beyond the institutional requirements of being conference to educate and equip pastors and churches to build up the body of Christ to be vital in sharing the good news with our communities and connected to them in life-giving ministry and mission.

Are we doing this because the UCC is in decline?

- Yes. The trajectory of the decline of the Church will continue unless we become proactive in being church together. Both the PNE and PSE Conferences are steadily becoming smaller with declining church membership and churches closing. Without change we will be unable to sustain our conference staff and ministry. We believe God is doing something new and we want to be a part of Christ's resurrection work. By becoming a new conference we will create excitement within churches and in partnership with congregations to also make necessary changes that will strengthen our ministries move us into our communities and into alignment with God's purposes in the world.
- By becoming a new conference our hope is that in 50 years we will have trained the leaders we need for the emerging church, created a system of support for our churches in Eastern PA and that our churches will be deeply connected to their communities, spreading the gospel of love and compassion and justice in a way that is not judgmental of others but embracing others and working together in partnership for the common good.

Are we doing this because PNEC is running out of money?

- No. Although PNEC has fewer endowment assets and a smaller budget, we believe both conferences have resources, gifts, and skills that when combined will strengthen the new conference in our ministry together.
- Both conferences are experiencing declining resources, which forces us to think about how we are doing church and what needs to change so we can continue to be church.

What will happen to the current staffs if we create a new conference?

- A draft staff model has been created to help us move into a new conference structure but it is just a draft. As the Unified Conference Council creates the Constitution and By-Laws and as we live into a new conference, the draft staff model may evolve to serve the needs of a new conference.

- The current staff of both conferences will remain in place for at least one year following General Synod approval.
- A search process for ordained staff will be initiated once the new Conference governance structure and policies are in place.

Where will the conference office be located?

- If the new conference is approved, PNEC will put their conference office building on sale and PSEC will give notice to their landlords that they will be moving.
- A new site at this time has not been determined but it will most likely be located somewhere between Bethlehem and Trexlertown, the geographical center of the new conference.
- We are expecting to have a mobile staff and looking into the possibility of our staff to have the flexibility to work from home except when it is necessary to be at the conference office.

What will be the name of the new conference?

- The suggested new name is Eastern Pennsylvania i Conference (EPiC). The “i” stands for innovative, inclusive, incarnational, infinite, inspirational, intentional, inspirit.... For a more in depth explanation, please see the document on the new name.

Are any of the other UCC conferences doing anything like this?

- The Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota Conferences now have a single Conference Minister who reports to all three Conference Boards.
- The Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts Conferences have created the Together, As One Conference. This Conference is pending approval by the General Synod in 2019.

This seems to be moving so fast. Has the Joint Conference Vision and Development Team been listening to the churches, pastors and people in the pews?

- The JCVDT has been intentional about seeking feedback since the process began. We have made use of surveys, Annual Meetings, town hall gatherings, Association meetings, Area Mission Council meetings and Zoom meetings. We had a joint retreat with the PNE Board and PSE Consistory, and met with Conference staff, the Committee on Ministries, Association representatives and Area Mission Council Conveners to inform our work.

What will the conference delegations be voting on at the Fall 2018 Annual Meeting? Will we be able to make changes at that meeting?

- In late September 2018, the churches and authorized ministers of our two conferences will be provided with advanced materials, including all relevant documents and the wording of all votes. Both Annual Meetings need to pass identical votes in November 2018 in order for the process to move forward, so these documents will not be amendable at the Annual Meetings. However, suggestions for improvement will be welcome and utilized by the new Unified Conference Council.

What's the impact on my Association if both Conferences Fall Annual Meetings 2018 votes for this?

- We don't expect any impact. Having conferred with the General Counsel of the UCC, Heather Kimmel, this is what we understand. If the annual meetings of the two Conferences vote in November 2018 to create a new conference, then the two historic Conferences (PNEC and PSEC) will bring to Synod in June of 2019 a resolution to change our boundaries (and name). This resolution would take effect on 1/1/2020. If Synod votes to affirm that resolution, then when The resolution takes effect (1/1/2020) the standing of the Associations automatically migrates from the historic Conference to the newly created EPIC Conference.
- Associations will remain the same with the understanding that they may evolve in a new conference model: either a three association/regional model, one association model (the conference acting as an association) or another yet to be envisioned model. This conversation was begun with Association leadership from both Conferences and the JCVDT. The conversation will be continued at a joint spring meeting of the PNE and PSE Conferences in 2019.