



Public Conversations Project

Case Summary: Union UCC Church

Context/Challenge:

New minister inherits legacy of conflict over whether church will become an “open and affirming” congregation. Large exodus of “opposed” members the last time the issue was considered a few years before. Many felt the previous minister was trying to force a positive decision. The deacons are pressing the new minister to move forward.

Response of the new minister:

Spend a year in preparation, inviting people to a combination of PCP-style meetings, discussion and education.

People: Minister, Deacons and Members, who participated enthusiastically. Many meetings were standing room only.

Process:

Preparation and Conversation:

- PCP trains Deacons and minister in inquiry and dialogue
- Minister and PCP Associate co-facilitate series of Open Forums. The first focuses on inviting congregants’ questions and posting them in a prominent place as their “Community of Questions”. Later meetings invite them to talk with each other about sub-sets of questions.
- Minister and PCP Associate co-preach about constructive communication and Christian faith
- Minister offers a series of Bible studies on relevant passages.
- Conversations continue for a year

Immediate Effects:

1. People speak freely and listen deeply to one another, voicing their most vexing concerns
2. Enhanced understanding, respect and experience of good will
3. Most of those who had left began to return
4. When the vote was taken, it was almost unanimous. No one who “lost” left the church. Many said, “I’m staying because I felt heard.”

Longer-term Effects:

1. Membership. All who had left have returned. And, at a time when the membership of most mainline churches is declining, it is booming at Union.
2. A new culture of how to manage disagreements and differences.

