

Rocky Mountain Conference Transitional Period Proposal 2024-2027

Rationale

The Rocky Mountain Conference (RMC) of the UCC is at a critical juncture in our life together. Like all settings of the church we are living in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. At every turn, from the climate, to politics, to economy, to healthcare, to education, to community, to our own local churches, the systems we have long relied on are undergoing seismic shifts. In the midst of this changing landscape we have all read the headlines of church decline. We are not immune from those headlines.

Here's the sobering reality: Our statistics tell us that in the 50 years the RMC has existed, we have gone from 103 to 69 churches and from 20,934 to 8,722 members. In the last 10 years Our Church's Wider Mission (the primary source of revenue for Conferences and the National Setting that comes from local churches) has dropped from \$382,000 to \$290,000. Even having significantly reduced our budget for the 2024-2025 year, we still have a deficit budget of over \$100,000. If we were to continue on this trend without any change, we will spend down our unrestricted net assets in about 10 years. The Rocky Mountain Conference, as it currently operates, is not on a sustainable trajectory.

There is another story to tell: Alongside the statistics of decline, there are also stories of faithful reimagination taking place in every corner of the Conference. In the face of this changing religious and spiritual landscape, as well as a global pandemic, national division, climate crisis, racial reckoning, and economic insecurity to name just a few, congregations are finding themselves with a renewed and clarified purpose to be about the love and justice of Jesus. They are building community partnerships, some are opening their buildings to mission aligned organizations, and others are selling their buildings in order to live more fully into who they are. They are forming brave and beloved communities onsite and online. They are asking what the needs are in their local communities and discerning how their gifts can meet those needs. Indeed as you begin to pay attention to the stories in between the statistics it is clear that the Holy Spirit is moving in the life of the local church. There is a growing willingness to take risks for the sake of the gospel. Congregations are actively participating in expanding love's presence in the world.

The clarion call: In his book *Gone for Good*, Mark Elsdon predicts that 100,000 church buildings are going to be sold in the next 5 years. To be sure, this doesn't necessarily mean that 100,000 **churches** are going to close; there is a difference between a church building and a local church. At our best, local churches are communities of people whose presence calls forth the values of Jesus within and among their local contexts. We believe something vital will be lost if these communities cease to exist.

And so it is our conviction that this moment calls us as a Conference to put our best effort towards helping our local churches make faithful, creative, and bold decisions as they discern how to embody the love and justice of Jesus with or without a building. This transition period is focused on realigning all that we do as a Conference through the lens of how it will support the local church in living out its most faithful expression of the gospel. We of course cannot know if this will lead to a sustainable future for the Conference. What we do know is that our future is intricately connected to the capacity of our local churches to respond and adapt and get curious about how the Holy Spirit wants to use them in the sacred work of loving the world.

The following proposal seeks to outline a path for the Conference to become financially stable, missionally aligned, and relationally strong so that we can continue to be an impactful covenantal partner in our collective work of creating a just world for all.

Proposal

The RMC Board of Directors proposes that the Rocky Mountain Conference enter into an intentional and spacious 3-year period to do the work that we believe is necessary for us to transition to a more impactful, trustworthy, and viable setting of the church in this particular moment in history.

We propose the temporary contracting of consultants and skilled experts to help lead the Conference through particular areas in need of transformation. We imagine three overarching areas of focus to help us faithfully show up to our work in this season: sustaining and adaptive work, internal and relationship work, technical and systems work. These all work together in an ecosystem of healthy ministry and overlap at several points.

1. Sustaining and Adapting Work:

- a. While we have long had a staffing structure that included a full-time Conference Minister (CM) and full-time Associate Conference Minister (ACM), and more recently a structure that included a second full-time ACM, we have been subsidizing this staffing structure with conference funds that have come from the sale of buildings and properties. To be sure, these decisions were made with great faith and with the best of intentions for the future of the RMC. And yet given our financial reality, our challenge is to find ways to carry out the essential ministries of the Conference when we are not able to afford more staff. And in fact, even if we could afford more staff, we sense that there are more sustainable, empowering, impactful, and creative ways to carry out the work of the Conference.
- b. During this period we want to identify and begin to experiment with new models for carrying out essential ministries of the Conference that directly and positively impact the local church while also staying within a balanced budget. As examples:
 - i. Many of our churches can only afford part-time clergy and find it difficult to recruit leadership. Meanwhile, we have a lot of part-time clergy spread out across the Conference with pastoral, counseling, leadership, and/or administrative gifts to offer. Perhaps we can help both churches and clergy by contracting these clergy to also carry out particular tasks of the Conference beyond their local congregation.
 - ii. Equip and train teams of both clergy and laity to provide conflict mediation and/or support to churches and leaders in crisis.
 - iii. Search and Call: an option is to contract someone with experience and expertise in the field of Search and Call to review our current Search and Call process, bring examples of other Conference models, and help implement a team-led approach that could positively impact local churches during times of transition.
- c. We also want to research new funding sources and cultivate stronger partnerships with related entities like the Pension Boards, Cornerstone, and others whose mission is also to revitalize and empower local faith communities.
- d. Believing that impact drives income, it is essential for us to consider how we can leverage our resources (human, financial, relational) in ways that have a positive impact

on those we are called to serve, namely the local church, its leaders, and authorized ministers in the RMC.

- e. We will identify, recruit and call needed staff to continue to implement what emerges from this transition period.

2. Internal and Relational Work:

- a. We need to grieve, heal and learn from our history, both recent and past, so that we can move forward into the future that God is calling us to imagine. The last 18 months have been a particularly tumultuous and painful time and there are also old wounds and resentments that have never been examined. Some relationships are broken. Trust has been eroded. Believing that a good beginning comes out of a good ending, there is relational work that we need to do together to be able to function in a healthy, transparent, and generous way with one another, and to be able to welcome new leadership with excitement and willingness to support their work among us.
- b. We will develop a long-term and on-going plan for dismantling systemic racism and unexamined hierarchies across and among Conference membership and in each ministry setting so that we can build structures that are equitable and just and reflect the beloved community of God.

3. Technical and Systems Work:

- a. Over the last 10 years we have said that we, as the RMC, exist to inspire, challenge, and empower faith and justice communities across the West. It is an ambitious statement that suggests our focus lies beyond the borders of Utah, Wyoming and Colorado and could include many different kinds of communities beyond the local church. It also misses a “so that.” What feels a bit more accurate is to say the RMC exists to inspire, challenge and empower local congregations and leaders as they seek to live the love and justice of Jesus. This transition period is about getting really clear about our purpose and implementing this purpose. How do we take this vision of truly being a force for good in the lives of our local churches and faith leaders and hardwire it into our structures and practices as a Conference?
- b. We will need to critically assess the effectiveness of our current board and committee structures, policies, and priorities through the lens of how they do or do not support the local church in living out its most faithful expression of the gospel. We then need to discern what changes are necessary in our current structure, policies, and priorities to positively impact local churches and faith leaders.
- c. We need to build into our structure a culture of developing and equipping RMC Board members and other Conference leaders
- d. We will retain outside financial oversight to help ensure continued financial transparency.
- e. We will examine current named initiatives of the Conference, including the Tributary Grant, and discern which initiatives that the Conference desires to carry forward. We will also discern ways to bless and release those that are not effective or are not our work for this season.
- f. Alongside the conversation about structure we need to have candid conversations about our financial standing and work together to foster a culture of generosity that is faithful to God’s abundance. Present and educate the Conference membership regarding best practices, new trends, and emerging resources for financial sustainability.

- g. As we review our financial position and the Conference's ability to sustain ministry beyond the transitional period, we recognize that we may reach a point where we may need to consider working with other Conferences in our region, other denominations, and/or in creative partnerships for judicatory ministry.

Transitional Conference Minister

In addition, we propose the appointment of Rev. Erin Gilmore to serve as a Transitional Conference Minister (TCM) through the duration of this Transitional Period. Given the high turnover in our Conference ministry staff, her long standing relationships with the leaders and churches of our Conference, her institutional knowledge, and her pastoral skill and expertise in facilitation and organizational systems, she can provide much needed stability in the ongoing ministry of the Conference as well as wise and seasoned leadership to guide this season of transition. **Rev. Gilmore and the RMC Board have mutually agreed that she will not be eligible to apply or be appointed to serve as part of a settled Conference Ministry team following this period.**

The role of the TCM is crucial to the success of the transition. In addition to ensuring basic functions of the Conference are carried out (e.g., congregational search and call, support for the Committee on Ministry, guiding those conducting Fitness Reviews, overseeing staff and administration, and providing pastoral support), the TCM will help identify areas for innovation and adaptation and work with the board and contracted consultants to assist with practical integration of the key areas of transition, outlined above.

By the end of this transition period our goals include:

1. To be a Conference that knows its purpose: every Authorized Minister, Association Leader, Local Church moderator, and Conference Leader could answer, without pause, why the Conference exists.
2. A renewed confidence in the Conference, measured by increased financial giving and participation that grows out of the direct experience of the Conference making a difference in the local church and the lives of leaders.
3. Learning from our recent and past history and developing a new covenant of behavior and values guiding our relationships across the Conference.
4. Introducing a framework for understanding and enacting racial justice in our local contexts and across the ministries of the Conference with a commitment to continue to engage in ongoing work together so that we become a more equitable and just Conference.
5. Identifying at least 2 new funding sources for the work of the Conference.
6. Identifying, presenting, and ratifying a board and committee structure aligned with our mission to strengthen and empower local churches.
7. Developing a more robust and equitable process for identifying and equipping lay and clergy leaders across the conference.
8. Developing a viable staffing structure that will carry forward the work of the transition period into the next chapter of the RMC mission and ministry.
9. Creating job descriptions and profiles written and circulated in accordance with needs identified by the Conference.
10. Calling new ministerial leadership identified by a search committee from a national search, ideally voted in at the Annual Meeting in 2027.

11. Creating a culture of financial transparency and literacy regarding Conference finances and presenting a balanced budget by the 2027-2028 fiscal year.

Proposed Budget to support Transitional Period

Below is our best estimate of a budget for each year.

Operating Budget

- 2024-2027- Full-time Transitional Conference Minister
 - Spiritual and visionary leadership during transition
 - Pastoral support to Authorized Ministers
 - Provide search and call support to churches in transition
 - Staff and administrative oversight
 - Support for Conference Committee on Ministry
 - Integration of 3 key areas of transition (outlined above)
 - Helping identify areas of ministry for innovation and adaptation
 - Staff fitness reviews
 - Connection with National Setting, Ecumenical Partners, and other UCC Conferences

- In the case of a search process that goes beyond the Annual Meeting of 2027, the Board will have authority to extend TCM call agreement in 6 month increments until settled Conference Minister/s are called, or until TCM accepts a new call.

Designate a Transition Fund for the Transition Period

In 2020, the RMC Board designated \$450,000 into an Anti-Racism Platform Fund to be used over 3 years. The 3-year term for this fund has now expired. There is \$306,000 currently remaining in this fund on our balance sheet.

The RMC Board proposes the following redistribution:

\$56,000 to remain in an Anti-Racism Platform Fund for continued racial justice work beyond the transition.

\$50,000 to be used towards organizational evaluation of systemic racism in our Conference and the development of a framework for enacting racial justice at all levels of our Conference, from the Board, to committees, to our local contexts.

\$200,000 to be redesignated to a Transition Period Fund to be used to pay for consultants, experts, experimental models of ministry, and preparation for a national search, as follows (totalling \$183,000 over three years), and allowing for some flexibility in case we have expenses beyond what we can anticipate today.

2024-2025:

Grief Work & Relationship Repair	20,000
Mission & Structure Consulting with Board	10,000
External Financial Oversight	10,000
OCWM Consultant	5,000
Beginning Experimentation	<u>10,000</u>

	\$55,000
2025-2026:	
Mission & Structure Consulting with Board	6,000
Grief work/Relationship Repair	7,000
Continuing Experiments with New Models of Ministry	30,000
OCWM Consultant	5,000
External Financial Oversight	10,000
National Search Committee Prep	<u>10,000</u>
	\$68,000
2026-2027:	
Experimenting with New Models of Ministry	30,000
External Financial Oversight (in operating budget if needed)	10,000
National Search	<u>20,000</u>
	\$60,000
Anticipated total expenses (2024-2027) from Transition Fund:	\$183,000

In Summary

As stated above, much of the work that we will engage in overlaps and intersects with one another. For example, justice work is inherently relational. Financial health is deeply connected to mission and purpose. Each of the areas that we focus on will also strengthen and reinforce the other areas.

While we have outlined here a broad view of how we envision the funds being used over the next 3 years, one of the first goals we have as a Board in working with the outside ministry consultant will be to outline the progression and integration of our work and how we will move through each of these key areas in more detail. The Board will continue to update the Conference on the timeline as it evolves through our work together.

Several years ago we identified the roots of the word Conference, “con” meaning “with,” and “ferre” meaning “to bear, to carry.” One could say that to “confer” or to be a “conference” is to carry together or to go together. That is the call of this transition, to go together towards a future God imagines for us. This will require a willingness to look honestly at ourselves, our structures and our cultures, to participate in difficult conversations with those whose perspectives are different from our own, to extend grace to one another and to ourselves, and to risk failure for the possibility of discovery. This is a time to relinquish power *over* and to join in power *with*, letting go of the illusion that any one person has all of the answers in finding our way forward. This is an “all hands on deck” effort so that we might continue to be a faithful expression of the Gospel as the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ.