

## Moving Forward Together & Beyond

This past spring our two congregations (Zion UCC and St. Paul's UCC) voted in a straw poll on whether the leadership of our congregations should continue working on the moving forward together process. The results of that straw poll were unanimous by all who voted from both congregations that we believe "God is leading our two congregations to continue to explore the vision of forming one church together." Thank you to all who came to the congregational meeting to share in the discussion and vote.

The vision of this new church is a 1+1=3 joining together, where we are able to reach more people and engage in more and better ministry together than we can apart, where the sum of our combined ministry is greater than our separate parts. The vision is not merely St. Paul's and Zion together, but a church that grows beyond just our current membership, meeting more of our spiritual needs, involving a higher percent of our members than what we are currently doing, and engages even more people in our community in sharing in the ministry of our church.

We are using the book, *Better Together* as our guide, which gives us a process of creating not a 1+1=2 church, but rather a 1+1=3. *Better Together* provides lessons learned from both successful and failed mergers, with guidance to create a healthy new church that leads to growth, as well as cautions of what to avoid that has led other churches to a 1+1=1 (or less) church.

There are over 30 steps in this process. Some steps are ongoing, such as the first and most important step of prayer. Please continue to keep our congregations and this process in your prayers. Another that is ongoing is providing updates, such as this article.

Over the summer, the MFT Committee (our combined task force for leading this process) has continued to meet and work on this process. The primary things in which we have been engaged over the summer are: (1) working on the wording of the new constitution and bylaws (which will eventually require a congregational vote); (2) self-evaluation of factors that led our congregations to have only about 20% of our members being active, and how we can have a greater portion of our membership more active in the new church; (3) a solid plan and strategy by which we will be growing, welcoming new members, and keeping those new members more engaged in the new church; and (4) giving our members time to think and pray about what this new church being greater than the sum of our parts could be called.

We have already accomplished some key aspects in this process, which is essential for laying a solid foundation for the remaining parts. The following is a top ten list of what our list of accomplished tasks includes so far:

1. **Prayer**

We have been praying together, and continue to pray together, and invite your continued prayers, as well.

2. **Biblical Study**

We have been sharing in combined Bible studies over the past couple of years. The most significant one being the study of the Book of Acts, which will resume in September, and is open to all of our members and visitors, which teaches us about how the first disciples of Christ made decisions about forming the first Christian church. We have also been sharing in Sunday school and youth group, and we will have a combined confirmation class this fall.

3. **Mission Outreach**

We have been sharing in mission outreach together, including our stay-near-home mission trip last fall, Soup 'n' Such and Clothing Closet, Plarn Mats for the homeless, care packages to college students, One Great Hour of Sharing, Blue Marsh project, prayer vigil for Ukraine, and more.

Together, we were able to invite more people to our building through our combined Wine & Strawberry Festival, than what either of us were able to do with any recent activity that we have done on our own, and in future years hope to transform that into an activity that leads people into greater relationship with our church.

4. **Vision**

We both share in a vision of reaching more people in the name of Christ and leading them into a living, growing, loving relationship with God through the church, as disciples of Christ.

5. **Process**

We have studied the book *Better Together* to better learn what to do and what not to do to create a strong, healthy, growing new church, and have chosen the “Folding In” process described in that book as our guide.

6. **Philosophy of Ministry**

We have studied and have agreed upon the Missional Approach ministry philosophy for growth, based on the book *Reclaiming the Great Commission*. This is the workshop that has been taught every January at St. Paul’s UCC for leadership.

7. **Pastors**

We have affirmed that the new church will be served by our current two pastors as they are serving now.

8. **Finances**

We have had a meeting to disclose and discuss finances with one another, and we have had a meeting with the Financial Operations Manager of the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference (PSEC), Tammie Wisniewski, CPA, CGMA, to discuss and plan for the financial process of coming together.

9. **Legal**

We have met with, interviewed, and agreed upon utilizing James Smith of the Smith Bukowski law firm as our lawyer for the legal parts of this process, and have begun planning for some of the legal work. James Smith was also recommended by the PSEC.

10. **Conference Minister**

We have met with the Conference Minister of the PSEC, and have been providing updates to the Conference Minister, Associate Conference Ministers, and the Committee On Ministry of the Covenant Association (which is the ethical oversight committee for the UCC churches and pastors in Berks County, which grants standing of churches and pastors), for input and to ensure that our path and process is one that is affirmed by the wider UCC church. Additionally, the “Folding In” process from the book *Better Together* is the process and resource book that the Conference Ministers believed would be the best approach for our situation and goals.

For worship, most of our combined ministries, and the Wine and Strawberry Festival, you may have noticed we have been simply saying, “United Church of Christ in Robesonia.” We are intentionally doing this for a number of reasons: (1) we noticed that when the phrase “St. Paul’s & Zion UCC” or “Zion & St. Paul’s UCC” is used, we use “us & them” language, rather than “we” language and we are less united and more divided; (2) when using “Zion & St. Paul’s UCC” or “St. Paul’s & Zion UCC” we were trying to alternate which comes first, which is challenging, and when it does not alternate, for some it communicated one group of people over the other, rather than all people equally; (3) “United Church of Christ” is neutral and a part of both of our identities and will be a part of the name of the new church; (4) since we do not know how the vote to form a new church will go, or how the naming process will go, or what the time line will eventually end up being, by just putting “United Church of Christ in Robesonia” on our Wine & Strawberry Festival signs, we can use those same signs year after year without necessarily needing to buy new ones; and (5) we anticipate the naming process will be the most emotional part of this process, and we want to give transitional space of letting go of our individual identities to make room for birthing the new thing God is doing through us in our midst, more fully allowing the Holy Spirit to create through us something that is even greater than the sum of our separate parts.

As we have been learning, it is quick and easy to create a 1+1=1 combined church. That is not our goal; that is not our vision. We hope that all within our congregations will catch the vision of birthing a 1+1=3 church. Our thanks to all who are putting in a tremendous amount of time and energy into all the work that it takes to form a solid firm foundation and ministry growth strategy for such a church, and the faith and faithfulness this takes to trust in God without knowing the end result of all that faithful labor. Thank you for all your prayers over this process, over our leadership and pastors, and over our congregations. Please continue to lift up all in prayer.

The Moving Forward Committee is being co-chaired by Cory Putt from Zion UCC and Kirk Aulenbach from St. Paul’s UCC. Both pastors are members of the committee (Pastor Mary Etta Mest and Pastor Ben Motz). We have equal representation from both congregations on the committee. Those members include: John Eiceman, Jon Henning, George McLain, Steve Miller, Wanda Moore, Sheri Rowe, Ray Trone, and Elsa Wertz.