

**ROCKY MOUNTAIN CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**2004 ASSESSMENT
FINAL REPORT
PART I
(SECTIONS I THROUGH V)**

April 27, 2004

**Submitted by
CONNECTION PARTNERS, INC.**

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This assessment was conducted to identify the issues, perspectives, and programs that are most important to the people in the Rocky Mountain Conference United Church of Christ (RMC UCC). The RMC Transition Task Force (TTF) and Board of Directors will use the assessment results to inform options for shaping the future of the Conference. The assessment was designed to be credible and meaningful, but without the scope required for scientific rigor.

Five hundred and fifty questionnaires were sent from the RMC during January, 2004; 475 questionnaires to 75 parish clergy, and one each to 75 specialized clergy. A cover letter requested clergy each to complete and return one of the questionnaires, and asked parish clergy to distribute the remaining 400 questionnaires to lay members in proportion to twice the number of delegates to the Annual Meeting, and to vary distribution across viewpoint, age, gender, and length of membership. Instructions to participants on the questionnaire assured that both confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained by the consultants conducting the assessment.

Responses to the questionnaire from laity were grouped and compared to responses from all clergy (parish clergy and specialized clergy). No other comparisons (e.g., by length of membership) were made.

During March, 2004, four focus groups were conducted (in Colorado Springs, Greeley, and Grand Junction, Colorado; and in Holladay, Utah) as part of the assessment.

A total of 164 people participated in the assessment: 87 lay members (53% of participants) and 77 clergy (47% of participants; 42 parish clergy and 35 specialized clergy). Twenty-five people provided input both by answering the questionnaire and by participating in a focus group, 116 people answered only the questionnaire, and 23 participated in only a focus group. The profile of people participating in the assessment (i.e., church size, Association, as well as laity age, gender, and length of membership) appears to be similar to the profile of the RMC UCC membership.

The 25.6% questionnaire response rate is lower than hoped for, and the 164 clergy and laity assessment participation accounts for less than 1% of the RMC UCC membership. This means that we cannot assume that the assessment results represent the opinions of each of the other 19,124 people in the RMC. However, we believe that the input provided by the 164 assessment participants articulates a broad range of perspectives in the RMC, and that the assessment results achieve the goal of identifying issues, perspectives and programs most important to people in the Conference.

Key overall conclusions include:

- Laity and clergy are proud of and experience joy from the theology and values of the RMC UCC — including both the open and affirming policies, and stands on peace and

justice issues, — the people and sense of community within the RMC UCC, the Conference events and programs, and support from the Conference.

- Clergy and congregations feel supported by the Conference when then RMC provides opportunities for members to come together in prayer, in service, and to learn, and when the Conference keeps members informed about activities beyond their local church.
- Members look to and expect the Conference to meet a wide variety of needs. The gap between members' beliefs about what the Conference should provide and the reality of what Conference can provide is stimulating resentment, dissatisfaction, and dismay within the Conference.
- The Conference could better leverage the resources that are available within the Conference.
- Over the tenures of different Conference Ministers, the Conference has been inconsistently responsive to requests for assistance, and services and provided by Conference have been inconsistently effective.
- The operating definition of the Rocky Mountain Conference as churches and people across three states is not meeting members' needs for a unifying, spiritual identity
- For clergy in particular, pastors cannot count on receiving spiritual guidance and support when they most need it, and they are reluctant to request help with small problems.
- For laity in particular, communication is a source of frustration.
- The current Conference structure does not meet the needs of the Conference.

For a complete presentation of Overall Conclusions and Recommendations, see Part I. Section III of this Final Report.

II. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Conclusions: What's Working?

Laities and clergy are proud of and experience joy from the theology and values of the RMC UCC — including both the open and affirming policies, and stands on peace and justice issues, — the people and sense of community within the RMC UCC, the Conference events and programs, and support from the Conference.

Clergy and laity appreciate and want Conference to retain:

- The UCC Theology and Values
 - Inclusiveness
 - Witness to peace and justice
 - Spirituality emphasizing a loving God
- Gatherings that bring people together in spiritual community, including:
 - Conference events and programs
 - Association events and meetings
 - Visits from Conference staff
 - La Foret
 - Spiritual retreats
 - Classes and workshops
 - Youth programs
- Presence of the Conference staff, including:
 - Participating in Worship Services
 - Helping to resolve problems
 - Offering ideas to stimulate thinking
- Communication that helps people feel connected to the Conference beyond their local church, including:
 - The RMC Newsletter
 - Reflections
 - Reports from Association and Conference committee meetings

Clergy in particular appreciate and want Conference to retain:

- Classes and workshops, including:
 - Stewardship
 - Boundary training
 - Church growth
 - Alive! Series
- Service on boards and committees
- Clergy clusters

- Installations and Ordinations

Laity in particular value:

- Communication, including knowing about others' programs and service

Overall, clergy and congregations feel supported by the Conference when then RMC provides opportunities for members to come together in prayer, in service, and to learn, and when the Conference keeps members informed about activities beyond their local church.

Overall Conclusions: What Could Be Improved?

The current financial resources of the Conference and the current number of Conference staff prevent the Conference from funding programs and materials, as well as providing services and supports to the extent desired by clergy and laity. However, members look to and expect the Conference to meet a wide variety of needs. The gap between members' beliefs about what the Conference should provide and the reality of what Conference can provide is evoking frustration, resentment, dissatisfaction, and dismay within the Conference.

The Conference could better leverage the resources that are available within the Conference:

- Programs are not produced in a widely accessible format
- Locally developed programs and resource materials that exist within the Conference are not widely known or shared
- The gifts and expertise of members are not identified, widely known, or utilized within the Conference

Over the tenures of different Conference Ministers, the Conference has been inconsistently responsive to requests for assistance, and services and provided by Conference have been inconsistently effective.

- Processes to support search and replacement of ministers have been helpful to many but not helpful to all churches requesting such assistance.
- Some are grateful for help that defused and prevented conflicts, but others say help came too late, didn't come, or didn't have the expertise to deal effectively with the conflict.
- Conference staff visits are too infrequent to build trust, close connection, and relationships with congregations.

The Conference has not achieved a comfortable and loving balance between members' desires for unity and diversity.

The operating definition of the Rocky Mountain Conference as churches and people across three states is not meeting members' needs for a unifying, spiritual identity.

Clergy and laity want leadership that is ministerial as well as administrative in order to create a Conference that is more nurturing and spiritual.

Clergy and laity recognize that leadership to support the Conference can come from individual churches, Association boards and committees, as well as from Conference boards and committees.

Clergy and congregations want more Conference-wide accountability, including:

- Information about distribution of money donated
- Clear differentiation between Association responsibilities and responsibilities of the Conference
- Reports back from those serving on committees
- Established Conference and Association goals and reporting of progress towards achieving the goals
- Upholding of covenants by churches, Association committees and boards, Conference committees and boards, including dealing with behavior that is not aligned with Conference values and ethics

Members want the Conference to focus on creating connection, spiritual renewal, and providing leadership to the Conference that includes a voice to the larger community beyond the UCC Conference.

Both clergy and laity focus more on what they perceive the Conference to not be doing than on what the Conference is doing. This may be due to the Conference not communicating short- and long-term Conference goals and accomplishments in a way that establishes the value of the Conference for every pastor and every member in the RMC.

For clergy in particular, pastors cannot count on receiving spiritual guidance and support when they most need it, and they are reluctant to request help with small problems.

For laity in particular, communication is a source of frustration. They perceive that:

- Information is not easily communicated or shared between churches
- There is no system for laity to provide input to Conference
- Input is not sought by Conference from congregations
- Information passed through clergy does not reach laity
- The Conference does not communicate enough information about what the Conference needs and expects from churches and congregations

There is limited input from, and programs involving, youth, who potentially are future RMC UCC leaders and members.

The current Conference structure does not meet the needs of the Conference:

- The Conference Minister needs more support to successfully fulfill the multiple administrative, caretaking, and governance responsibilities required by the RMC UCC By-Laws
- The Conference responsibilities and resources are not aligned
- Responsibility for selection of clergy and follow up support of clergy are not aligned

Recommendations

“The churches in the Rocky Mountain Conference, United Church of Christ covenant together as a united body under this Statement of Purpose:

The purpose of the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ by covenant of its members is to serve God in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ by:

- ❖ *Providing leadership to our local churches associations, and organizations as we seek to do ministry in the world,*
- ❖ *Caring for, nurturing, and empowering our clergy, local churches, associations, and Conference for ministry,*
- ❖ *Helping to identify, develop and use resources which are needed for ministry,*
- ❖ *Promoting the work of the wider church through denominational and ecumenical relationships and activities.*

The Rocky Mountain Conference also covenants with the whole United Church of Christ, joining in its mission and service to the world and its action for social justice and peace...”*

*[Source: 2000 Profile of the Conference Priorities Survey]

Within the context of the RMC UCC covenants, we offer the following recommendations:

- ❖ *Providing leadership to our local churches associations, and organizations as we seek to do ministry in the world*

Leadership

- Create unity by articulating a spiritual vision or purpose of the Conference and work with each church to tie their mission to the RMC UCC spiritual vision
- Create on-going discussions within the Conference to identify responsibilities and behaviors that express the honoring of the covenants by churches, Associations, and the Conference with one another
- Clarify and differentiate the responsibilities of churches, Association boards and committees, and Conference boards and committees to support each other
- Establish Conference and Association goals and report progress towards achieving the goals to the Conference
- Identify Conference goals and match the goals to available resources (people, programs, and money)
- Align authority for selection and approval of pastors with responsibility for follow-up pastor support
- Develop role and responsibility descriptions for people serving on boards and committees that include the practice of regular reporting back to congregations of updates about committee and board activities

Leadership Structure

- Support the Conference and the Conference Minister by expanding the Conference leadership across the Conference
 - o Hire a minimum of two part-time Associate Conference Ministers or, ideally, as many as two full-time Associate Conference Ministers with needed expertise (to be decided) and able to provide spiritual support pastors and program support (e.g., Youth Programs, Christian Ed programs, etc.)
 - o Locate one Associate Conference Minister in the west, either in Salt Lake City or Grand Junction; locate the other in proximity to the Colorado Front Range
 - Support the Conference and the Conference Minister with additional support staff to build and coordinate communication
 - o Create volunteer internships for electronically skilled youth to work, under adult supervision, on Conference website in exchange for work samples and letters of recommendation
 - o Create minimum wage internships for theology student office support for Associate Conference Ministers
 - o Ask for volunteer office support from within congregations near regional Conference offices
 - Develop skilled teams with expertise to assist churches as needed with conflict resolution, crisis intervention, fund raising, and financial planning
 - Use the focus group generated Criteria for Great Leadership (see Part II. Section VII.) to identify attitudes, behaviors, and experience desired in Conference leadership at all levels
 - o Develop behavioral role descriptions from the criteria to select, hire, and develop clergy and leadership throughout the Conference
- ❖ *Caring for, nurturing, and empowering our clergy, local churches, associations, and Conference for ministry*

Spiritual Renewal

- Work with Associations to create a network of pastors within each Association who provide on-going spiritual support and guidance to pastors
 - Teach empathetic, compassionate listening skills throughout the Conference in order to lovingly hear each other's truths when people disagree, as God listens to us
 - Communicate and model a theological foundation for mission and ministry
- ❖ *Helping to identify, develop and use resources which are needed for ministry*

Connection

- Continue Conference-wide events that gather members in prayer, service, and to learn
- Work with Associations to create events for spiritual and educational gatherings within Associations or regions of the Conference
- Create opportunities at Annual Meeting or other major gatherings for a facilitated discussion among youth for the creation of youth-oriented worship services, and other services and programs that meet the needs of RMC UCC youth
- Call clergy, churches, Associations, and the Conference into accountability for upholding covenant relationships and responsibilities to one another

Communication

- Follow-up and solicit feedback after conflict resolution or crisis intervention, or after providing other major services in order to continually improve and to know what works
- Develop a multi-method (e.g., paper, electronic, video taped announcements, individuals making announcements, telephone tree) communication system to convey information from National and from Conference to each congregation
 - o Continue the newsletters and inserts that keep members informed about activities beyond their local church
- Create the role of lay Conference representative or “champion” in each church to:
 - o Report to churches on Conference board and committee activities and accomplishments
 - o Ask for what is needed by the conference
 - o Solicit feedback to the Conference about news and needs of the churches
- Develop and publicize a resource catalog listing topics, descriptions, and contact information. Topics could include:
 - o Programs to be shared (e.g., Youth worship, Evangelism programs, Educational programs, etc.)
 - o Music
 - o Gifts, skills, and expertise (e.g., financial skills, legal knowledge and skills, psychological counseling, conflict resolution skills) within the Conference available to the Conference
- Video tape programs for distribution across the Conference
- Use satellite and web conferencing technologies to communicate in real time with leadership across the Conference

III. SUMMARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Who and how many people participated in the assessment?

(For more information, see Section V. Assessment Participation: Detailed Findings and Conclusions.)

Questionnaires. One hundred forty-one people completed questionnaires from the 550 questionnaires sent out, representing a response rate of 25.6%. The questionnaire response rate is lower than the hoped for 40% to 50%. Of the 150 that went to parish clergy and clergy in other settings, 72 were completed and submitted (48%). Of the 400 that were sent to parish clergy for distribution to laity, 69 (17%) were returned.

Focus Groups. Forty-eight people participated in the focus groups. Of these, 25 had also returned completed questionnaires.

Overall Assessment: A total of 164 individuals participated in the assessment, 25 answering both the questionnaire and participating in a focus group. Laity participated in the assessment slightly more than did clergy (53% vs 47%). While three more clergy answered the questionnaire than laity (51% vs 49%), more lay members (N = 27) participated in the focus groups than clergy (N = 21).

Assessment participants were more likely to be members of smaller churches (under 250) than larger churches (52% vs 45%). Of laity, the majority were 50 years of age and older (67% vs 31%), female (60% vs 28%), and longer term members of 5 years or more (68% vs 23%).

Participation by clergy and laity across Associations was in proportion to Association size, with the greatest number of participants belonging to Metropolitan Denver (37%), Northeastern (20%), and Southeastern (13%) Associations. Wyoming (8%) and Utah (9%) Associations had the least participation in the assessment.

Conclusions: Based on feedback from the RMC, we believe that the profile of people participating in the assessment appears similar to the profile of people in the RMC.

It is important to the RMC Transition Task Force that the assessment be credible but without the design, sampling distribution, scope, and cost that would be required for scientific rigor. The overall 25.6% response rate is lower than hoped for and, overall, accounts for less than 1% of the RMC UCC membership. This means that we cannot assume that the assessment results represent the opinions of each of the other 19,124 people in the RMC. However, we believe that the input provided by the 164 participants articulates a broad range of perspectives in the RMC, and that the assessment results achieve the goal of identifying issues, perspectives and programs most important to people in the Conference.

Summary Findings and Conclusions from Questionnaires

(For more information, see Final Report Part II. Section VI. Questionnaire: Detailed Findings and Conclusions.)

What makes members proud and/or joyful in being a part of the Rocky Mountain Conference United Church of Christ?

Similarities and Differences Between Laity and Clergy:

THEMES*	
LAITY (N = 69)	CLERGY (N = 72)
A. Our Theology and Values (46%) - Open, Affirming, Welcoming of Diversity (28%) - Spirituality (22%) - Peace and Social Justice (14%)	A. Our Theology and Values (43%) - Peace and Social Justice (28%) - Open, Affirming, Welcoming of Diversity (22%) - Spirituality (15%)
B. The People/Community (39%)	B. Conference Events and Programs (26%) - Camping and La Foret (18%) - Programs, Education, and Outreach (15%)
C. Conference Events and Programs (19%)	C. The People/Community (22%)
D. Support From the Conference (16%)	D. Support From the Conference (15%)
E. Don't Know/No Response (10%)	

**Percentages add to more than 100% because people submitted multiple responses.*

There are four areas that evoke pride and joy for both laity and clergy participating in the assessment: Theology and Values, The People/Community, Conference Events and Programs, and Support from the Conference.

Both laity (46%) and clergy (43%) say that their greatest pride and joy comes from the theology and values of the RMC UCC. By this they mean the policy of being open, affirming and welcoming of diversity; spirituality, and the stand on peace and social justice issues. Taking a position on peace and social justice issues is more important to clergy (28%) than to laity (14%), while laity emphasizes the policy of being open and affirming (28%) more than clergy (22%). Laity also says their joy comes from their spirituality (22%) more than clergy (15%), but both are proud and joyful when their spiritual beliefs are aligned with and manifested by their actions.

For laity, their second greatest source of joy comes from the people and the community of RMC UCC (39%). Comments suggest that laity enjoy being part of and connected to a larger community with shared goals and beliefs. For clergy, Conference events and programs are their second greatest source of pride and joy (26%), slightly more than the people and community (22%). However, both groups place value on human connection, and both clergy and laity speak highly of enriching experiences of camping at La Foret as well as pride in Conference programs such as Mission Partners and global partners in Venezuela. A likely component of the differences in their reported sources of joy is that both laity and clergy seek connection and community with their peers, and laity are more likely to meet that need within their church while clergy have more of an opportunity to do so at Conference-wide events.

Both groups equally appreciate the support from the Conference (laity 16%, clergy 15%), but the support is not their greatest source of pride and joy in being part of the RMC UCC.

Conclusions: While there are differences in degree, both laity and clergy are proud of and receive joy from the same things – the RMC UCC’s:

- Theology and values, including both open and affirming policies, and stands on peace and justice issues
- People and community
- Events and programs
- Support from the Conference.

Both laity and clergy are thankful that they are in community with people with similar values, and that the RMC UCC enables them to connect with others with whom they can work, grow, and share ideas. Both are proud and joyful when programs and actions are in alignment with RMC UCC spiritual beliefs.

When people feel proud and joyful, they mean that in these four areas the RMC UCC is meeting needs for spirituality, meaning, making a contribution, human connection, learning and support.

When members hear or see the words, "Rocky Mountain Conference," how do they define the Rocky Mountain Conference? What or who do they think of as the Rocky Mountain Conference?

Similarities and Differences Between Laity and Clergy:

THEMES*	
LAITY (N = 69)	CLERGY (N = 72)
A. Geography and/or Churches (74%) - Specific Designations (15%)	A. Geography, Churches, and Associations (68%)
B. People (52%) - Laity and Clergy (29%) - Conference Staff (20%)	B. People (51%) - Conference Staff (32%) - Laity and Clergy (31%)
C. Connection to Larger Church Community (22%)	C. Theology and Values (19%)
D. Services and Support (20%) - Support (12%) - Coordination (10%)	D. Cohesive / Fragmented (15%)
E. Theology and Values (12%)	E. Programs (14%)
F. Programs (10%)	F. Services and Support (14%)
	G. Connection to Larger Church Community (13%)

*Percentages add to more than 100% because people submitted multiple responses.

Both laity and clergy define the Rocky Mountain Conference in multiple ways, with laity responses grouping into six main themes, and clergy responses into seven.

Both laity and clergy most frequently identify the RMC as the states and churches (74% and 68% respectively), with clergy also including Associations in their definitions. Fifteen percent of laity have special ways of defining the RMC. For example, they think of the RMC as all of the churches in Utah, as churches on the East side of the Rockies, as mostly rural congregations, or as Denver.

Next, both laity and clergy define the RMC as people (52% and 51% respectively). Thinking of the Rocky Mountain Conference primarily in terms of physical entities and people is not surprising given the definition provided by the RMC in its materials:

“What is the Rocky Mountain Conference UCC? It is the ecclesiastical organization of the 84 congregations, six associations, and 19,288 members of our denomination in Utah, Wyoming and Colorado.” [Source: 30th Annual Meeting Rocky Mountain Conference United Church of Christ, Annual Meeting Guidelines and Information.]

When describing the RMC as people, however, clergy tend to think inclusively of both Conference staff (32%) and laity and clergy (31%), whereas laity less frequently mention Conference staff (20%). This difference probably is due to clergy having more frequent interactions with Conference staff than does laity.

Twenty-two percent of laity (compared to 13% of clergy) define the Conference as a linkage to the larger church community, and as a provider of services and support (20%) before thinking of the RMC as its theology and values (12%). Nineteen percent of clergy, on the other hand, define the RMC in terms of theology and values, emphasizing the progressive, liberal, social justice orientation of the denomination.

Clergy (15%), unlike laity, express their view of the RMC as a mix of cohesion and fragmentation, with comments describing distress over what they see as a struggle between solidarity and individualism.

Both laity (20%) and clergy (14%) mention that the RMC is to them the services and support provided by the RMC, as well as a variety of Conference programs (clergy 14%, laity 10%). Both convey the special place in their hearts for La Foret.

Conclusions: That the majority of both laity and clergy think of the Rocky Mountain Conference as churches, the states in which they are located, and the clergy, laity, and Conference staff, is in line with the RMC's definition of itself as physical structures and people.

Beyond thinking of the RMC as physical structures and people, both laity and clergy mention a variety of characteristics and functions they associate with the RMC. However, there is no clear identity or image of what the RMC is about in terms of its higher purpose or intention, a definition in which people might take pride and by which they might be inspired, and to which others might be drawn.

Imagine, for example, the following hypothetical definition offered here to evoke reaction: *The Rocky Mountain Conference United Church of Christ is a community of compassionate people united through Christ in beliefs and actions.*

When clergy think of the RMC UCC, some are frustrated over unresolved tension between unity and diversity in the Conference. We suspect this issue triggers dismay because the RMC UCC's values regarding issues of peace and justice and policies of inclusiveness are a source of joy and pride for clergy (see Part II. Section VI. Question 5, "What makes members proud and/or joyful in being a part of the Rocky Mountain Conference United Church Of Christ?") However, both clergy and laity respond positively to what the Conference means to them when they think of La Foret.

If members could have anything from the Rocky Mountain Conference, without limitation of time or cost, what would they ask for?

Similarities and Differences Between Laity and Clergy:

THEMES*	
LAITY (N = 69)	CLERGY (N = 72)
A. Closer Connections (42%) - With Conference Staff (33%) - With Each Other, National, Other Churches (12%)	A. Resources/Support (57%) - Financial and Other Resources (25%) - Other Programs (24%) - Pastor To Pastors (11%) - Recruiting, Selection, and Finding Positions (11%)
B. Resources/Support (38%) - Support (28%) - Financial and Other Resources (15%)	B. Closer Connection (33%) - With Conference Staff (18%) - With Each Other, National, Other Churches (15%)
C. Leadership (26%) - Within the Conference and Out in the Greater Community (22%)	C. Structure or Positions (26%)
D. Communication (25%) - Sharing Information (13%) - Suggested Strategies (13%)	D. Leadership (24%)
E. On-Going Development (17%)	E. On-Going Development (15%)
F. Invigorating Local Churches (15%)	F. Communication (14%)
G. Spiritual Renewal (10%)	G. Invigorating Local Churches (11%)

*Percentages add to more than 100% because people submitted multiple responses.

If members could have anything, without limitation, from the Rocky Mountain Conference, 42% of laity and 33% of clergy would ask for Conference to assist in creating closer connections, both with Conference staff as well as with their peers, with people from other UCC churches, the national organization, and even with other congregations outside of the UCC denomination (Clergy 15%, Laity 12%).

Closer connection with Conference staff for laity means Conference staff having a regular, visible presence in the local church. Laity express a stronger desire for Conference staff presence than do clergy (laity 33% vs clergy 18%) but this may be because clergy have more contact with Conference staff than do laity.

While 33% of clergy also ask for closer connections, resources and support are at the top of the clergy Wish List (Clergy 57%, Laity 38%). Twenty-five percent of clergy wish for financial and other resources. Desired financial support includes greater contributions to OCWM, funding to lower camping costs for La Foret, and financial assistance for mission work and education programs. In addition to financial resources, clergy want skilled support to help them deal with emotional problems, conflicts, and misconduct, as well as prevent crises.

If there were no limitations, clergy (24%) also wish for a variety of program resources, including organized retreats and programs for gathering and learning, such as La Foret and Christian Educational programs; staff for programming in such areas as mission, stewardship, and evangelism; and staff support for Association church and ministry committees. Eleven percent would also ask for more assistance from the Conference with clergy recruiting and selection. In addition to these tangible resources, clergy (11%) express a need for spiritual support in the form of a pastor for pastors.

Laity, like clergy, also wish for resources and support (38%) in the form of assistance to deal with church conflicts, and help with clergy replacement searches. Laity too wish for financial and other resources (15%) including funds for building and remodeling, camperships to make La Foret events more affordable, aid for smaller churches, and money for program resource materials.

The third and fourth wishes most frequently mentioned respectively by laity (26%) and by clergy (24%) are for leadership from the RMC UCC. Both clergy and laity want Conference leadership to articulate a unifying vision of RMC UCC identity and ideology, both inside the UCC and publicly in order to differentiate the UCC from others in the faith community. Both want the UCC to be more visible in the region, to take clear stands and be an advocate for peace and social justice.

Clergy wish for leadership that both has a pastoral heart and deals with boundary violations, dysfunctional behavior, and other hard Conference issues. In addition, clergy want a stable leadership with good administrative skills and processes that work. Laity wish for the RMC to focus more on fewer programs and Mission Partners in order to bring people together in their efforts and to create greater impact.

Clergy (26%) but not laity, ask for structural changes that they believe will enhance the operations of the Conference. Some wish for greater clarity between the roles of the Conference and the Associations, and for greater partnership between the Conference and Associations. Several suggest ways to distribute the office or Conference staff throughout the geographic region to better meet the different needs of churches outside of Colorado, and for easier contact between Conference staff, churches and ministers in Associations located away from Denver. Some wish for more events in locations other than in Denver in order to make participation easier for churches with long travel distances. Wishes also include the addition of Associate Conference Ministers (e.g., for Youth Education, for Clergy and Congregations) and other staff positions (e.g., Coordinator of Conference Justice and Peace Task Force).

Laity's fourth most frequent wish is for more communication from the Conference (laity 25%, clergy 14%). Laity wish for sharing of information (13%) about missions of the church (e.g., OCWM), ministries of local churches, about National, as well as communication about expectations of local churches by the Conference. Both clergy and laity offer suggestions for specific communication strategies within the Conference (e.g., web-based communication, web accessible information about worship and resources for Christian Education, adding information to monthly packet sent out to churches from the Conference, an on-line list serve, regular reporting to all churches of what's happening in other churches and in the Conference), as well as to the broader community (e.g., TV and other advertising campaigns, PR programs).

Wishes for on-going development are expressed by both clergy (15%) and laity (17%). Laity mention wanting more programs, outdoor ministries, and other opportunities for youth.

Fifteen percent of laity and 11% of clergy wish for Conference to help to invigorate churches by increasing participation and membership, and laity include getting people to give financially. Clergy also wish for an emphasis on church renewal through open Christ-centeredness, evangelism and healing work. In a related theme, laity (10%) wish for spiritual renewal by prioritizing spirituality through spiritual education and retreats, and by creatively gaining youth involvement.

Conclusions: When asked what they would request from the Conference, both laity and clergy respond with long lists, indicating that they have many unmet needs. People feel depleted because they are trying to do much with too little, and they want help from the Conference. They want the Conference leadership to infuse the Conference with the vitality it needs to manifest its higher purpose.

Members yearn to be in community. They want leadership that draws people together by: articulating a clear identity, focusing priorities for greatest impact, providing more local presence of the Conference throughout the region, and creating more opportunities for connection with their peers.

Both laity and clergy wish for more gatherings and events throughout the region that bring people together. In addition, laity want to know about activities occurring at all levels of the RMC, including committee projects, missions and ministries, and both clergy and laity want communication systems that provide easy access to Conference information, worship, educational and other resources.

Members desire the support and resources that will enable them to create programs and promote activities that reflect their shared values, both within the Conference and out in the larger community. They ask for missions and outreach ministries that will invigorate their local churches and spiritual lives. Laity and clergy ask for nurturing, committed leadership that will deal with hard problems honestly and compassionately. In addition to leadership help to prevent crises, clergy ask for pastoral guidance and spiritual support so they can be empathetic and fully present for the people in their congregations.

Members want leadership to differentiate the RMC UCC and draw new members by giving voice to the RMC UCC's liberal perspective, including the Conference stance on peace and social justice, to the greater community.

Was there a time when members wished that the Rocky Mountain Conference had been there for them?

Similarities and Differences Between Laity and Clergy:

THEMES*	
LAITY (N = 69)	CLERGY (N = 72)
A. Needed Help in Times of Crisis (45%)	A. No Response, Can't Think Of Any, Not Sure (26%)
B. Conference Has Been There (22%)	B. Conference Has Been There (25%)
C. I Don't Know/ No (20%)	C. Needed Help In Times Of Crisis (22%)
D. Caring and Inclusion (13%)	D. Caring and Inclusion (15%)
	E. Help with Placement or Search (12%)
	F. Conference Minister (11%)

**Percentages add to more than 100% because people submitted multiple responses.*

The majority of clergy (26%) either did not respond to this question, or said that they could not think of a time they had wished the Conference had been there for them. Fewer than 10% of laity left this question unanswered, and 20% indicated that they cannot think of a time when they had wished the Conference had been there for them.

Twenty-five percent of clergy and 22% of laity (23.4% of all questionnaire respondents) state unequivocally that the Conference has been there when needed.

On the other hand, 45% of laity (22% of clergy) give examples of times they were disappointed by the Conference's lack of support. Comments suggest that the biggest frustrations involved lack of help during times of transition (e.g., pastor searches), when needing to defuse or resolve severe conflicts, and during financial crises.

Laity tell of situations mostly involving others (e.g., resignation or retirement of ministers, conflicts between minister and leadership, loss of members during Gay Blessing). Clergy (22%) tell of similarly feeling let down by Conference during times of conflicts and crises within their church, but their examples also include many poignant personal stories—times of despair (for example over family deaths, long-term hospitalizations, tragedies occurring to those close to them, and when coming out as gay),—when they felt no one from the Conference was there for them.

Another time when people wish the Conference had been present was when clergy (15%) and laity (13%) needed caring and inclusion. Comments suggest that clergy long for Conference staff to call just to check in about how things are going, as well as someone to call to bounce ideas off of over little problems. Laity describe times when they wished for Conference Ministers who are honest and caring when communicating to congregations, deeply understanding of each church's needs, and who act in ways that are truly inclusive of all members, young and old.

Clergy also mention times when they wished they had received help with placement or job searches (12%), and a few describe being hurt or displeased by actions taken by the past Conference Minister (11%).

Conclusions: Approximately 23% of the 141 clergy and laity who answered the questionnaire say that the Conference provided support when it was needed. However, almost twice as many laity (45%) and almost the same percentage of clergy (22%) describe times of great need when they remember the Conference as not having helped their church. Prevalent examples include when clergy left, when conflicts flared, or when financial crises arose.

Clergy describe not only times they wished the Conference had been there to prevent or help with crises in their church, but also to provide assistance during times of personal pain and anguish. Their stories of times of personal sorrows as well as when needing help with searches and placements convey deep disappointment when seeking caring connection where they thought it would be, and not finding it.

Descriptions of times when people wished the Conference had been there for them mirror responses expressed elsewhere in the assessment (see Part II. Section VI. Question 7: “If members could have anything from the Rocky Mountain Conference, without limitation of time or cost, what would they ask for?”). Here too we hear unmet needs of laity and clergy for connection to others and for resources and support to cope with events that appear to be particularly stressful within the Conference: when clergy leave and when conflicts erupt.

Clergy need to feel connected to the Rocky Mountain Conference, to know there is someone who cares, someone with whom they can be in touch when needing guidance in small matters as well as with large problems. They need an empathetic person to whom they can turn so they then can be empathetic to their congregations.

For the Conference to be a viable entity, both clergy and laity need to trust that the Conference will support them – at a minimum with caring and empathy, with ideas, with respectful conversation – in times of need. When laity and clergy remember times when they wished that the Rocky Mountain Conference had been there for them, the painful feelings that came up at the time (e.g., despair, disappointment, mistrust, resentment) are triggered and come alive in the present.

In order to overcome the negative perceptions and heal emotional damage created in the past, the RMC will need to rebuild trust throughout the Conference by making compassion a priority and by providing leadership to align actions with beliefs.

What Events, Programs, Or Groups Help Members Feel Connected To The Rocky Mountain Conference Beyond Their Local Church?

Similarities and Differences Between Laity and Clergy

THEMES*	
LAITY (N = 69)	CLERGY (N = 72)
A. Conference Events (61%) - Annual Meeting (45%) - Camps (38%)	A. Conference Events (65%) - Annual Meetings and Other Events (36%) - Camps (26%)
B. Association Events/Meetings (22%)	B. Classes and Workshops (36%)
C. Communication (19%)	C. Service (29%)
D. Don't Know/Nothing/No Response (19%)	D. Association Events And Meetings (28%)
E. Service (17%)	E. Clergy Clusters (22%)
F. Contact with Conference Staff (13%)	F. Communication (21%)
G. Classes and Workshops (13%)	G. Ordinations and Installations (17%)
H. Fellowship and Celebrations (10%)	H. Contact with Conference Staff (15%)

**Percentages add to more than 100% because people submitted multiple responses.*

Both laity and clergy report that their strongest connection to the Conference comes through participating in Conference-wide events (laity 61%, clergy, 65%), including the Annual Meeting (laity 45%) and camps (laity 38%, clergy 26%).

Many laity comments express satisfaction with Annual Meetings both because of their interactions with others there, and because Annual Meeting is where they learn about National events. However, some also comment that not many of the benefits get back to their congregations. For clergy, Conference events include not only Annual Meetings but also events such as Conference-wide mission trips, youth programs, and issues-focused events (36%). Both laity and clergy speak with joy of their connections and memories associated primarily with La Foret, although laity also mention their connection to Conference through MADD and through National youth camps.

Among laity, the next most frequently mentioned connection to the Conference is through general Association meetings (laity 22%, clergy 28%). Although clergy feel more connected to Conference through classes and workshops (laity 13%, clergy 36%), and through service (see below) than through Association meetings, clergy responses indicate that they gain connection to Conference through a greater variety of Association events than do laity, including clergy clusters, ecclesiastical councils, and ordinations.

The second strongest connection to Conference for clergy (laity 13%, clergy 36%) is through classes and workshops. Both groups mentioned the Alive series of workshops, however clergy also identify other workshops, including those on church growth, the Fish Philosophy seminar, stewardship and boundary training.

Service helps both clergy and laity feel more connected to Conference, but more for clergy (29%) than for laity (17%). For clergy, service appears to include not only their own work on Boards and committees but also the existence of programs—such as, Global Partners, programs providing housing for low income family, and restorative justice actions going on in the Conference. Laity mention feeling more connection to Conference both through their own service as well as from the service of others, such as their local minister.

Other vehicles for helping both laity and clergy feel connected with the Conference beyond their local church include Communication and Contact with Conference Staff. Communication responses (laity 19% and clergy 21%) mention primarily different inserts and publications such as in “Reflections,” the RMC Newsletter, and reporting back by representatives to the Conference. Clergy also mention calls, emails, and a packet from the Conference. Contact with Conference Staff (laity 13%, clergy 15%) consists for laity primarily of visits to churches. For clergy, contact includes more personal contacts and assistance from Conference staff. Clergy (22%) also value clergy clusters as a source of connection with the greater Conference.

Clergy (17%) enjoy greater connection by attending celebratory events such as ordinations and installations, and a few lay participants (10%) mention that they too experience greater connection by attending not only installations but also events at other UCC churches.

Nineteen percent of laity either did not answer this question, said that they did not know, or that there was nothing they could think of that helped them to feel more connected to the Conference beyond their local church.

Conclusions: Overwhelmingly, what helps members feel connected to the Rocky Mountain Conference beyond their local church is almost any event, program or group meeting because these are where people come together with others in the Conference. The few responses that did not involve opportunities for face-to-face interactions dealt with reading about what others are doing or feeling connected to Conference through the programs and service of others.

In this assessment, members of the RMC have said they feel joyful in being part of the Conference because they value, after the Theology and Values, the people/community, and the Conference events and programs. They have also indicated that if they could have anything from the Conference, without limitations of time or cost, they would ask for closer connections (laity 42%, clergy 33%). What helps people feel more connected to the Conference beyond their local church is their joyful experience of being in community – serving, praying, learning, and playing with people holding similar values.

Summary Findings and Conclusions from Focus Groups

(For more information, see Final Report Part II. Section VII. Focus Groups: Detailed Findings and Conclusions.)

What can we do as a Conference together to enhance and invigorate church life?

On the questionnaire, clergy and laity were asked what they would ask for from the Conference if they could have anything without limitation of time or cost. In the focus groups, clergy and laity are asked here to focus on what specifically would enhance and invigorate their church life. Additionally, the context is shifted from one of no limitations (as asked on the questionnaire), to one of enhancing and invigorating church life "...as a Conference together."

Responses generated to this question group into almost all of the same themes as what clergy and laity say on the questionnaire that they would ask for if they could have anything without limitation of time or cost.

Participants in all four of the focus groups agreed that their church lives would be enhanced and invigorated by

- **Connection**
- **Communication**
- **Leadership**
- **Spirituality**

Three of the focus groups include:

- **Support**

Two of the focus groups include:

- **Programs**

Laity and clergy seek a greater sense of community, including both social interactions and the cross-pollination of ideas and learning from each other. The majority of comments categorized under Connection as well as under Communication, Leadership, and Spirituality ask for ways to exchange ideas among member churches, and even from outside the Conference, about how others lead, how others enhance spiritual development, and to mutually benefit from program development of others.

As heard in questionnaire responses, laity and clergy believe that one way to enhance their church life is to develop strong communication loops. In focus groups, people say they want to know what is going on in the greater Conference, and honest communication about Conference finances and other resources. They want to maintain on-going dialogue between the local churches and the Conference, and to know what each needs from the other.

Focus group comments about Leadership convey a clear and strong desire for Conference leadership to articulate and live what the Conference UCC is about. Comments such as, "identify

what the Conference stands for,” “...move from a local perspective to a ‘corporate’ perspective and process,” “have the Conference be the voice of the liberal church and share the message with local churches so they don’t have to create their own message from scratch,” “we need to get together; we need to overcome being Lone Rangers and develop shared ownership.” “be the voice of the liberal church,” and “remind members about what is important about membership” ask for a clear identity that draws people together.

Additionally, comments such as “clear planning and direction,” “honor covenants by implementing and aligning practice with theory,” and – (under Spirituality) – “be a counselor to the flock of pastors...have a pastor or chaplain for each Association,” and “get Conference staff that is ministerial as well as administrative” convey that clergy and laity believe their church lives would be enhanced by a Conference leadership and structure that are aligned and reflect the RMC UCC spiritual values.

Unlike questionnaire responses, focus group participants asked minimally for financial resources, emphasizing instead making people and programs more widely available. Doing more with less can be gleaned from comments such as: “provide crisis help from the Conference whereby churches go to other churches to help,” Opportunities for clergy to grow and to gain a sense of collegiality, for example coming together to hear great speakers,” “...teach about useful resources for growth such as Percept...so local churches can target their efforts,” “train people in each Association to run workshops...” “...share a variety of worship ideas...” and “...video tape workshops as a way to get education to more people; create and offer workshops that are easy to travel to for an evening...”

Conclusions: Clergy and laity need community, connection, and cohesion for their church lives to be enhanced and invigorated. They want leadership to articulate a clear, unifying identity reflecting shared spiritual values of the Conference. They desire opportunities for personal interactions; and communication processes and systems that enable them to be connected to each other and to give input into what is going on in the larger Conference.

Given the realities of the current Conference resources, how would clergy and laity prioritize the top two needs of those identified by questionnaire respondents?

In response to the questionnaire, clergy and laity said what they would ask for from the Conference if they could have anything without limitations of time or cost. We grouped their responses into seven themes. The themes, shown below, represent unmet needs of laity and clergy.

Focus group participants discussed the identified needs and were then asked to decide their top two priorities based on current realities of the Conference's available resources. Results averaged across focus groups reveal that needs for closer connection, spiritual renewal, and leadership are the most important issues for Conference to address.

Prioritized Clergy and Laity Needs:	Rankings Averaged Across Focus Groups (Highest To Lowest)*
1. Closer Connection	2.1
2. Spiritual Renewal	2.3
3. Leadership	2.7
4. Invigorating Local Churches	3.7
5. Communications	4.4
6. Resources/Support	5.1
7. On-going Education and Development	6.5

*Possible rankings could range from 1 = highest (i.e., if all four groups had ranked the need as a 1) to 7 = lowest (i.e., if all four groups had ranked the need as a 7).

Conclusions: In response to multiple questions on this assessment, laity and clergy strongly express that they want the Conference to provide them with opportunities for closer connection and changes in leadership. Laity and clergy desire for spiritual renewal is expressed more gently in multiple ways.

Members love the theology and values of the Conference, and feel joyful from the spirituality as well as the open and affirming policies and stands on peace and social justice. However, the Conference identity appears to be divorced from spirituality. Physical entities (i.e., geography and churches) are much more likely to come to members' minds before theology and values, including spirituality, when members think of the Rocky Mountain Conference.

Across the assessment, participants express that they want the Conference to be a spiritual entity rather than an organizational entity. They want leadership to articulate an inspiring vision and identity. They ask for spiritual retreats and resources for spiritual programs, youth ministers to help draw and engage younger members, for pastors who serve as spiritual guides and support

for ministers, and for leadership to hold themselves and clergy accountable for alignment between their spiritual beliefs and their actions.

Laity and clergy want a nurturing, spiritual Conference that fosters connections with one another.

If the RMC UCC develops a GREAT leader or leadership team, how will members recognize when the RMC UCC has this leadership?

Because approximately 25% of both laity and clergy said, in responses to the questionnaire, that they would ask for leadership if they could have anything from the Conference without limitation of time or cost, focus group participants were asked a series of three questions about leadership. The purpose of this set of questions is to clarify what the churches and members envision for Conference leadership:

- What observable changes in the Conference participants expect to occur if the Conference has “great” leadership
- What participants think the ideal Conference leadership structure is
- What leadership at different levels of the Conference could support the Conference in order to enable the Conference to better meet church and member needs.

The purpose of this first question is to identify what observable changes in the Conference participants expect to occur if the Conference has “great” leadership.

Participants believe that the recognizable impact of “great” leadership is that clergy and churches throughout the Conference will be healthy and flourish. Churches will grow and members will contribute financially and actively engage. Spiritual mentoring of ministers and laity will be the norm, as will caring and open communication. More clergy from outside the Conference will be drawn to the RMC.

In addition, focus group participants describe great Conference leadership as having many characteristics, including: a passionate spirituality, demonstrating compassion, empowering others, and having high integrity and ethics. Leadership skills include: establishes measurable goals and is accountable for meeting them, communicates a vision and motivates people to attain it, good listening skills, and conflict management skills. Experience includes: leadership experience in the local church, and connections to National in order to serve the RMC.

Conclusions: Clergy and laity have high hopes for what their envisioned leadership can accomplish. People in the Conference will need a clear understanding of what realistic short- and long-term impact can be expected from any leadership changes. It will be important to set achievable goals, focus activities, and define what observable, measurable changes are anticipated as a result of targeted efforts, and by when.

The list of identified leadership characteristics, skills, and experience can be refined and used to develop and to select leaders who will meet the needs of the Conference.

What would an ideal leader or leadership team look like for RMC?

The purpose of this question is to clarify what participants think the ideal Conference leadership structure is:

Laitly and clergy participating in the focus groups believe that ideal leadership for the Conference consists of a spiritually-based, non-hierarchical, cohesive, diverse team reflecting the demographic makeup of the Conference. The team is comprised of people from across the geographic area who possess a variety of skills and gifts needed for identifying and addressing different problems and issues. Some serve on the leadership team in more limited ways when needed (e.g., attorneys, finance experts).

Each member of the team is committed to the good of the Conference and leads by example. The team members are accessible and responsive, empower others, and look for positive examples of how other churches have successfully addressed issues similar to those in the Conference.

Conclusions: The ideal Conference leadership proposed by focus group participants recognizes that a team is likely to be needed to provide the range of skills and expertise required to address the issues and needs of the Conference.

What contribution to leadership needs to come from individual churches (laity and clergy)? From Associations (boards and committees)? From the Conference (boards, committees, staff)?

The purpose of this question is to identify what leadership at different levels of the Conference could support the Conference in order to enable the Conference to better meet church and member needs.

Most focus group participants expressed surprise at this question and revealed that they were not used to thinking about what leadership individual churches and Associations could provide in order to support the Conference. Instead, they had habitually looked to the Conference as the problem solver and provider.

All focus groups see opportunities for leadership coming from individual churches (laity and clergy) and Association boards and committees separate from leadership from the Conference. Their suggestions include:

Individual Churches: Participants recognize that laity and clergy from individual churches can give financial support, volunteer talent and time for boards, committees and programs, share ideas, take responsibility for dispersing information received from other levels from within the Conference as well as creating two-way communication, including time for report backs from committee meetings. In addition, people can share with the Conference what has been successful in their individual church, and offer prayers, support, caring and commitment to Conference leadership.

Associations: Participants suggest that Associations can become more visibly involved. Association members can travel to churches, create youth gatherings, recruit and encourage active participation on committees and boards, share information and foster interchurch communication, develop clergy to become Conference leaders, provide financial and spiritual support for “special efforts,” and offer more care and nurturing of clergy and churches.

Conference: Participants want the Conference to articulate a spiritual vision of the UCC, set goals and priorities, have a presence, offer ideas and initiatives, communicate information from National to local churches, and to know what gifts are available as resources.

Conclusions: Laity and clergy recognize many opportunities for leadership that are both spread throughout the Conference and that are mutually supportive rather than top down. This type of leadership structure promotes ownership of shared goals, spreads responsibility for achieving the goals throughout the Conference, and calls upon the Conference to articulate a spiritual vision and prioritize the goals so all members are clear about what is expected of them. In this way, each level of the Conference supports every level of the Conference, all working as part of the same team.

What would help members or their church to feel more included in Conference actions and decisions?

Clergy and laity were asked on the questionnaire to describe what helps them to feel connected to the Conference beyond their local church, as well as what makes them proud and/or joyful to be a part of the RMC UCC. Here they are asked specifically what would help them to feel more engaged in Conference actions and decisions.

Clergy and laity participating in the focus group would feel more included in Conference actions and decisions by a two-way communication feedback loop process from the Conference to local churches and from local churches back to the Conference. Members want a communication process that allows churches to be heard, that allows clergy and laity to know what is going on in the Conference, including how funds are spent—particularly OCWM money—and what committees and boards are doing. This input mirrors responses to the related questions on the questionnaire.

Focus group participants suggest a number of different strategies as part of the Conference communication process, including: solicit and take input and feedback from the local church to Conference boards; conduct surveys or membership polls; have members on boards and committees report back to individual churches; and recruit and establish the role of a lay person as a Conference champion within local churches. These suggestions and the many others given point to ways to fully engage members in the Conference decisions and actions.

Three of the four focus groups say that greater participation in Conference activities is important. They recommend that an effort needs to be made to include not only more active participation but also to invite different people rather than the same people over and over. In addition, they believe it is important to train and to clarify expectations for delegates and those participating on Conference committees to report back to churches and Associations.

Participants in two of the focus groups, Grand Junction and Colorado Springs, say that upholding covenants and holding clergy and laity accountable to each other is essential if they are to feel more included in Conference actions and decisions.

For Colorado Springs participants, it is important that Conference reflect the spiritual framework or values of the RMC UCC in order to enhance their feeling connected to the decisions and actions of the Conference.

Conclusions: Feeling included in the Conference actions and decisions is the foundation for “ownership,”—that is, willingness by clergy and laity to abide by and support Conference leadership decisions and actions. Questionnaire and focus group responses convey that clergy and laity want to be more included in informing the decisions to be made. They want to be heard, and they want to be kept informed.

IV. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background: Why Was An RMC UCC Assessment Conducted?

Based on awareness of the transitional state in the life of the Rocky Mountain Conference (RMC) UCC, and with input from the UCC national staff, the Board of Directors decided that taking a "business as usual" approach to finding a new Conference Minister was not appropriate in light of the Conference's long-term financial situation, and concerns that had been raised.

A Transition Task Force (TTF) formed that included six Association representatives to the Board, a youth representative, the Moderator of the Conference Board of Directors, and a member of the Conference Personnel Committee. The TTF, with the assistance of Acting Conference Minister Tom Rehling, sought help to identify the issues urgently needing to be addressed in order to bring healing and direction to the Conference.

The TTF members were concerned because they had seen and/or heard among members:

- Lack of clarity about who we are and why the Conference exists
- Lack of alignment among churches, Associations, and the RMC
- Lack of vitality including a drop in participation and financial support
- Pockets of dissatisfaction

On behalf of the Conference, the TTF wanted to understand the current needs of the UCC churches within the six Associations of the RMC. Because the TTF felt it was essential that the information gathering process be a credible, reliable assessment of a broad range of perspectives across the six Associations, several proposals were invited for submission and review in late 2003.

The TTF's review of proposals resulted in the selection of Connection Partners, Inc. (CPI), a company formed in January 1999, to provide mediation, facilitation, and consulting services to secular and religious organizations. Arlene Brownell and Tom Bache-Wiig, principals of CPI, have combined experience of over 25 years of designing and conducting needs assessments ranging from small organizations to worldwide assessments, and expertise in gathering information via questionnaires, telephone interviews, focus groups, and in facilitating groups in order to reach consensus. In addition to their work with other denominations, Arlene and Tom had a successful history of working in partnership with clergy and lay leaders to identify and resolve issues in two RMC UCC churches.

In December, 2003, the TTF and CPI met to design a process to gather information regarding the issues, perspectives, and programs that are most important to the people in the Conference. In general, and without repeating the 2000 Conference Priorities Survey, the purpose of the assessment is to identify:

- What services and support clergy and congregations want from the RMC:
 - The current needs of the UCC churches within the six Associations of the RMC and how well the RMC is meeting those needs

- What the RMC does that works and doesn't work to support clergy and congregations
- What clergy and congregations wish the RMC would do that's not being done
- What the RMC is doing that churches and members appreciate and want to retain
- Potential problems, hot spots, areas of discontent
- What organizational or staff structure would best serve the clergy and congregations within the six Associations

Methodology: How Was The Assessment Conducted?

Criteria for Credibility:

For an assessment to be credible, the TTF needed to hear both from across the RMC's broad geographic area, and from the diversity of view points and perspectives that make up the UCC. In order to meet these needs, the upcoming assessment was publicized in advance, and two methods were used for gathering information and feedback:

- Questionnaire
- Focus Groups

Communication About the Assessment:

An announcement of the upcoming assessment was published in the RMC Reflections and included in the January Bulletin. The announcement is shown in Appendix A.

Assessment Questionnaire Design and Sampling Strategy:

Connection Partners, Inc. designed the assessment questionnaire based on the TTF input about what information and feedback was needed in order to bring direction to the Conference. The 2004 assessment survey questionnaire was distributed following a sample selection formula similar to the 2000 Conference Priorities Survey, which was, "Each clergy person with standing, each congregation equal to the number of delegates to the Annual Meeting." The 2004 questionnaire distribution strategy was that questionnaires go to each clergy person with standing, and to each congregation equal to *twice* the number of delegates to the Annual Meeting.

A cover letter with instructions to parish clergy requesting distribution of the assessment questionnaire, and a total of 550 assessment questionnaires were printed and sent out during the week of January 19, 2004, from the RMC as follows:

- 400 questionnaires to parish clergy for distribution to lay members (selected by parish clergy) across churches in proportion to the number of delegates to the to the annual meeting,
- 75 questionnaires to parish clergy
- 75 questionnaires to specialized clergy

Parish clergy were requested in the cover letter to keep one copy of the questionnaire to complete and return, and to distribute the others to laity in a way that would balance participants similar to RMC UCC membership as follows:

- Under and over 50 years of age
- Male and female
- Newer and longer term members

We do not know how many questionnaires were actually distributed.

The overall goal of the assessment was to hear the different perspectives of both clergy and laity, from both small (under 250 members) and large churches, and from all six Associations in relative proportion to the number of members within each Association.

The cover letter to parish clergy and the assessment questionnaire are shown in Appendix B.

Questionnaire Confidentiality:

In order to maintain confidentiality of responses, respondents were instructed to not write their names on the questionnaire. All questionnaires, whether received via US Postal Service or by electronic mail were assigned an identity code with the key known only to Connection Partners, Inc. In addition, all responses are grouped, and no individual responses are tied back to any person participating in the assessment process. Any completed survey questionnaires turned over to the RMC at a future date, will first have all demographic and any other identifying information removed.

Questionnaire Anomalies:

We received three questionnaires on which participants indicated that responses were contributed from more than one person. Each of these questionnaires was counted as a single completed questionnaire (i.e., as if returned by one participant), and all information was included in the data analysis.

Two completed questionnaires mailed in the same envelope, postmarked March 4 and received March 7, and another completed questionnaire postmarked March 9, were not included in the assessment because they were received several weeks after the February 9 deadline, and well into the data analysis processing of the assessment.

Focus Group Design and Process:

A focus group process was designed to give people an opportunity to provide input in person as well as on the questionnaire. Connection Partners, Inc. designed the focus group questions to confirm or challenge information gained through the questionnaire responses as well as to clarify and deepen our understanding by asking different questions than were asked on the questionnaire.

The focus group process was designed to enable people to discuss the various issues and answer questions in both small group and full group processes, to last three hours, and to include a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 20 participants.

One of the goals of the focus group process was to allow group participants to reflect on their own and hear others' knowledge and experience before moving on to answer the core focus group questions. In order to accomplish this, focus group members were asked to process one or more pre-questions. For example, before answering the first focus group question, "What can we do as a conference to enhance and invigorate our church life?" participants were asked to consider and discuss two other questions: "What is most inspiring and spiritual to you about your church life?" and "What is important to you personally about being here today and contributing to your church and the greater church community?"

By asking participants to search their own experience and hear others experiences we sought to enrich and inform their responses to the focus group questions. Each of the focus group questions was prefaced by a similar process of asking participants to connect with their own experience and that of others.

Four focus groups were conducted in order to draw people from all regions of the Conference. TTF members coordinated the scheduling of the focus groups, and the gathering of participants with the overall objective of including a cross section of UCC members and perspectives. In addition, in order to hear from more laity than clergy, Connection Partners, Inc. (CPI) recommended that TTF members strive to include a maximum of 25% clergy. In addition, in order to hear from as broad a range of members as possible, CPI recommended that the coordination team strive to include no more than 33% of people in each focus group who had completed and returned surveys. Tables 1 through 4c show the demographic composition of the questionnaire and focus group participants.

The four focus groups were scheduled and conducted during March, 2004 in locations shown below.

- Colorado Springs, including Southeastern Colorado, Pueblo and South Denver
- Greeley, including Northern Colorado, Denver and Eastern Wyoming
- Holladay, Utah, including Utah and Western Wyoming
- Grand Junction, including Western Colorado

At the beginning of each focus group, participants wrote answers to the same four demographic questions as on the assessment questionnaire. In addition, in order to know how many people were participating in both the questionnaire and the focus group parts of the assessment, focus group participants were asked whether or not they had returned a completed questionnaire earlier in the assessment process. No names were asked for as part of this information.

How Were The Open-Ended Questionnaire Responses, And Focus Group Responses Analyzed?

Questionnaire Content Analysis: Laity and Clergy Groupings

Responses from laity were grouped and analyzed separately from clergy responses. In order to stay within the allotted assessment budget, responses from Parish Clergy and Clergy in Other Settings were treated as one group and analyzed together, and no other comparisons in findings (e.g., by length of membership) were made.

Clergy responses and laity responses were independently analyzed by researchers (clergy by Tom Bache-Wiig and laity by Arlene Brownell). Researchers then randomly sampled each other's sorts to determine degree of consistency (inter-rater reliability) between researchers. The few differences between them were discussed and an agreed upon classification was reached. and then compared for similarities and differences, and for labeling of themes.

Questionnaire Content Analysis: Grouping into Themes and Subthemes

Responses from both groups (i.e., laity and clergy) were sorted by content and similar responses grouped into main themes and, where appropriate, into subthemes. A main theme (e.g., 5A. Our Theology and Values) was identified first. If warranted, subthemes (e.g., Open, Affirming, Welcoming of Diversity; Spirituality) were created and are shown beneath the main theme. In this case, the main theme serves as an umbrella category.

To be considered a “theme” or “subtheme,” Connection Partners, Inc. set criteria of seven or more people providing similar responses, or approximately 10% of lay respondents and 10% of clergy. Responses are grouped by themes and presented in the Summary Findings Section in order from most frequently mentioned to less frequently mentioned.

Questionnaire Content Analysis: Coding, Counting, and Numbers

Many people wrote long responses and several offered multiple answers to a single question. Each answer was coded and counted, although not necessarily quoted, based on our experience and belief that people who need to be heard tend to say as much as they can when given the opportunity.

The numbers shown in parentheses following the main theme [e.g., 5A. Our Theology and Values (N = 32)] represents the *total* number of people answering the question with that theme. Where subthemes appear underneath a main theme [e.g., Open, Affirming, Welcoming of Diversity; (N = 19); Spirituality (N = 15)], we counted each person as an individual respondent for the main theme. The number shown in parentheses following the subthemes reflects the subset of the total whose response fit the subtheme. Therefore, people are counted only once in the main theme, but may be counted in more than one subtheme.

Questionnaire Content Analysis: Quotes

Representative responses are quoted to convey the flavor, depth and diversity of each theme. Placement into a specific theme is subjective, and placement is intended to be meaningful, not scientifically precise.

- Joys, Sorrows, Suggestions, Wishes: Many participants responded to one or more questions on the questionnaire with information not directly addressing the question. Typically, the responses could be characterized as either “Joys,” “Sorrows,” “Suggestions” or “Wishes.” Because people took time to communicate something that we assume is important to them and that they wanted heard, we grouped and included them at the ends of the specific question for which the responses were offered. However, they are presented for reference only. We did not include them in counts or in analyses because each comment is unique and was not held to our criteria of a minimum of 7 similar responses.

Focus Group Analysis:

Each focus group was presented with the same questions and all responses were recorded on easel sheets as part of the focus group process. Recorded responses were transcribed and grouped into themes following a content analysis process similar to the questionnaire content analysis process (see Questionnaire Content Analysis: Grouping into Themes and Subthemes above).

To keep the assessment scope within limits, no attempt was made to distinguish laity from clergy in the focus groups.

Detailed Focus Group Findings and Conclusions are presented in Section VII. Following each item in the Detailed Focus Group Findings is a code reflecting the location of the focus group (CS = Colorado Springs, G = Greeley, GJ = Grand Junction, and SLC = Salt Lake City).

Where responses from different focus groups are similar, they are combined and all location codes are presented. Similar responses coming from the most focus groups are listed first, followed by the next most frequently mentioned responses, with those made in only one focus group listed last.

V. ASSESSMENT PARTICIPATION: DETAILED FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Who and how many people participated in the assessment?

Questionnaires: 141 people completed questionnaires from the 550 questionnaires sent out, representing a response rate of 25.6%. The response rate is lower than the hoped for 40% to 50%. Of the 150 that went to parish clergy and clergy in other settings, 72 were returned (48%). Of the 400 that were sent to parish clergy for distribution to laity, 69 (17%) were returned.

Focus Groups: As shown in Tables 1 – 3, 48 people participated in the focus groups. Of these, 25 had also returned completed questionnaires.

Overall Assessment Participation: As shown in Table 1, a total of 164 people participated in the assessment – less than 1% of the total 19,288 members – as follows: 87 lay members (53% of participants), 42 parish clergy, and 35 clergy retired or in other service (77 clergy total, 47% of participants). Twenty-five people provided input both by answering the questionnaire and by participating in a focus group, 116 people answered only the questionnaire, and 23 participated in only a focus group.

Assessment participants describe themselves and their RMC UCC memberships as follows:

1. Role:

Role:	Questionnaire	Focus Groups		Assessment
	A. Total Questionnaire Participants	B. Total Focus Group Participants	C. Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	A + (B – C) Individuals Participating in Assessment
Lay Person	69 (49%)	27	9	87 (53%)
Parish Clergy	38 (27%)	18	14	42 (26%)
Other Clergy (Retired, Clergy in other settings)	34 (24%)	3	2	35 (21%)
Total*:	141 (100%)	48	25	164 (100%)

***Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%**

2. Church Size:

Church Size:	Questionnaire	Focus Groups		Assessment
	A. Total Questionnaire Participants	B. Total Focus Group Participants	C. Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	A + (B – C) Individuals Participating in Assessment
Under 250 members	74 (52%)	23	11	86 (52%)
Over 250 members	63 (45%)	24	13	74 (45%)
No Congregation	2 (1%)	0	0	2 (1%)
No Response	2 (1%)	1	1	2 (1%)
Total Participants*	141 (99%)	48	25	164 (99%)

*Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%

3. Association:

Association:	Questionnaire	Focus Groups		Assessment
	A. Total Questionnaire Participants	B. Total Focus Group Participants	C. Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	A + (B – C) Individuals Participating in Assessment
Wyoming	13 (9%)	2	2	13 (8%)
Western	11 (8%)	13	4	20 (12%)
Utah	13 (9%)	5	4	14 (9%)
Southeastern	20 (14%)	10	8	22 (13%)
Northeastern	24 (17%)	11	3	32 (20%)
Metropolitan Denver	58 (41%)	7	4	61 (37%)
No Response	2 (1%)	0	0	2 (1%)
Total*	141 (99%)	48	25	164 (100%)

*Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%

4a. Age of Lay Participants:

Age:	Questionnaire	Focus Groups		Assessment
	A. Total Questionnaire Participants	B. Total Focus Group Participants	C. Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	A + (B – C) Individuals Participating in Assessment
Under 50 years of age	23 (33%)	8	4	27 (31%)
50 years of age or older	44 (64%)	19	5	58 (67%)
No Response	2 (3%)	0	0	2 (2%)
Total*	69 (100%)	27	9	87 (100%)

*Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%

4b. Gender of Lay Participants:

Gender:	Questionnaire	Focus Groups		Assessment
	A. Total Questionnaire Participants	B. Total Focus Group Participants	C. Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	A + (B – C) Individuals Participating in Assessment
Male	17 (25%)	8	1	24 (28%)
Female	41 (59%)	18	7	52 (60%)
No Response	11 (16%)	1	1	11 (13%)
Total*	69 (100%)	27	9	87 (101%)*

*Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%

4c. Length of Membership:

Length of Membership:	Questionnaire:	Focus Groups		Assessment
	Total Questionnaire Participants	Total Focus Group Participants	Focus Group and Questionnaire Participants	Individuals Participating in Assessment
Less than 5 years	13 (19%)	9	2	20 (23%)
5 years or more	49 (71%)	16	6	59 (68%)
No Response	7 (10%)	2	1	8 (9%)
Total*	69 (100%)		9	87 (100%)

***Due to rounding errors, percentages do not always sum to 100%**

Summary Findings and Conclusions

Who and how many people participated in the assessment?

Laity participated in the assessment slightly more than did clergy (53% vs 47%). While three more clergy answered the questionnaire than laity (51% vs 49%), more lay members (27) participated in the focus groups than clergy (21).

Participants were more likely to be members of smaller churches (under 250) than larger churches (52% vs 45%). Of laity, the majority were 50 years of age and older (67% vs 31%), female (60% vs 28%), and longer term members of 5 years or more (68% vs 23%).

Participation by clergy and laity across Associations was in proportion to Association size, with the greatest number of participants belonging to Metropolitan Denver (37%), Northeastern (20%), and Southeastern (13%) Associations. Wyoming (8%) and Utah (9%) Associations had the least participation in the assessment.

Conclusions: Based on feedback from the RMC, we believe that the profile of people participating in the assessment appears similar to the profile of people in the RMC.

It is important to the RMC Transition Task Force that the assessment be credible but without the design, sampling distribution, scope, and cost that would be required for scientific rigor. The overall 25.6% response rate is lower than hoped for and, overall, accounts for less than 1% of the RMC UCC membership. This means that we cannot assume that the assessment results represent the opinions of each of the other 19,124 people in the RMC. However, we believe that the input provided by the 164 participants articulates a broad range of perspectives in the RMC,

and that the assessment results achieve the goal of identifying issues, perspectives and programs most important to people in the Conference.