

Uniting for Cooperative Ministry in the Schoharie Region

A Proposal and Covenant

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Vision Team of clergy and members of the Schoharie Region United Methodist Churches invites your congregation to join with the eleven other churches of our region in a new venture called cooperative ministry.

Over the past three years, with the guidance of Pastor Anna Blinn Cole, our regional coordinator, our congregations have come together and worked effectively for mission, discipleship, and witness. We saw that we can do more together than we can do alone. We have made strong relationships across church lines and we have created a large of family of United Methodists in the Schoharie Region.

We propose to continue and expand our work together, and invite all the churches in our region to join us as we formally establish what is called, in the United Methodist Book of Discipline, a Cooperative Ministry. We hope you will read on to learn what it would mean for us to form such a ministry, as well as why we think it's a good idea. Then we would like you to discuss our ideas in your own church. Ask your pastor, Pastor Anna, or members of the Vision Team any questions you might have. Finally, we ask you decide as a congregation whether or not you would like to join us. We ask you to make a decision by Easter.

Included in this packet is our proposal, the covenant that we invite your church to consider adopting in order to join with us in cooperative ministry, the specific roles of clergy and laity as part of the cooperative ministry, and a summary of our vision team's process that led us to this point.

Sincerely, The Vision Team

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A PROPOSAL FOR COOPERATIVE MINISTRY

The Regional Vision Team, a team of clergy and lay from across our 12 Schoharie Region United Methodist Churches, invites all of our regional churches to consider an invitation to join in formal cooperative ministry.

Our proposal is to move our informal arrangement of working together into a formal Cooperative Ministry as outlined and defined by our Book of Discipline, ¶206. In this way, we as “local churches, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may enhance our witness to one another and to the world by showing forth the love of Jesus Christ through forms of mutual cooperation.”

Organizing ourselves into a formal Cooperative Ministry encourages us to be intentional about our partnership. When we are intentional, we name our commitment to one another as churches that are there for one another in good times and bad. We recognize that we share a similar mission field and that we can also share ideas and resources that increase each church’s effectiveness in living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By intentionally forming a Cooperative Ministry, we believe we can lighten the burden of doing ministry in isolation: our pastors have mutual support, our laity has a larger network, our problems are not ours alone, our joys are celebrated widely, and our opportunities to make disciples are multiplied.

Being a formal Cooperative Ministry also puts us in a position to reap several formal benefits outlined in the Book of Discipline, ¶206. Among these are Conference and District support and training for our work together, priority in the appointment process, and financial support when available and needed.

Within ¶206 there are several kinds of Cooperative Ministry outlined. After considering these variations, our Vision Teams feels the “Multiple Charge Parish” model is best suited to our region (¶206.3b.1): An “intentionally organized group of two or more pastoral charges in which each church continues to relate to its charge conference on the organizational level and also participates in a parish-wide council. The pastors are appointed or assigned to the charges and also to the parish, and a director or coordinator is appointed or assigned by the bishop.”

Bearing in mind the fear and distrust caused by the "soil testing" process in 2014-2015 and the subsequent church closings, we want to be clear what cooperative ministry does not mean:

- Cooperative ministry does **not** mean closing small, struggling churches.
- Cooperative ministry does **not** mean merging small congregations with other congregations.
- Perhaps most importantly, cooperative ministry does **not** mean that someone outside the Schoharie Region is imposing a structure on our of congregations. Also, as I'll explain below, your church will not be obligated to join cooperative, if this is your choice.

This proposal for cooperative ministry came from a group of your peers—clergy and lay—from across our Schoharie Region. We want to reclaim our voice and ability to direct our own future as churches.

We love working together. We believe that intentionally going forward as a cooperative ministry -- naming our commitment to one another as churches who are there for one another in good times and bad -- will ensure that we will have both the opportunity and the resources to continue our work into the future, building up the identity and strength of our local churches as we do.

We believe that by intentionally engaging in cooperative ministry we can lighten the burden of doing ministry in isolation: our pastors have mutual support, our laity has a larger network, our problems are not ours alone, our joys are celebrated widely, and our opportunities to make disciples of Jesus Christ are multiplied.

STEPS FOR PARTICIPATION

1. Review the following Covenant and Clergy and Laity roles.
2. Direct any questions to Pastor Anna Blinn Cole, your pastor, or another member of the Vision Team.
3. Be in prayer as a congregation about Covenanting with our Schoharie Region Cooperative Ministry.
4. Assess the interest in your church for joining the Cooperative Ministry. You may do this in an all-church meeting, around the Administrative Council table, over a potluck or in any other way your church deems appropriate to gauge your church's interest.
5. If your church has affirmed participation in the Cooperative Ministry, encourage as many from your church as desire to attend our Spring Quarterly Gathering and Joint Church Conference to officially adopt the Covenant and celebrate our partnership with other joining congregations on the afternoon of Sunday May 19, facilitated by our D.S. Everett Bassett.

COVENANT

Name and Mission

The Schoharie Region Cooperative Ministry is a Multiple Charge Cooperative Parish (as outlined in the Book of Discipline, ¶206.3b.1) in the Oneonta District of the United Methodist Church. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by empowering and resourcing our covenanted churches to do more together than they can alone.

Our goals are simple

- To share resources as ministry opportunities arise, including our staff and facilities.
- To seek out opportunities for our churches to come together in worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.
- To communicate effectively between our churches, laity and clergy through a newsletter, website and social media so that our local church's events, joys and concerns can be supported, celebrated and cared for as a larger community.
- To deepen our relationships with each other and Christ in order to continue building up the Kingdom of God.

Membership in the Cooperative

- Membership in the Schoharie Region Cooperative Ministry is open to all congregations in the following United Methodist Churches of the Oneonta District, Upper New York Conference: Barnerville, Central Bridge, Cobleskill, Delanson, Esperance/Sloansville, Grosvenors Corners, Gallupville, Huntersland, Middleburgh, Richmondville, Sharon Springs, and Warnerville.
- Covenant congregations shall be those congregations which accept this covenant through Church Conference action.
- Any UM congregation within the region may become a member of the Cooperative Ministry when it desires by showing a willingness to do its part in the work of the ministry, by accepting the Covenant and by electing representatives to the council.
- Any congregation may withdraw from the Cooperative Ministry at their annual Charge Conference with written notice provided to the Cooperative Council.

- All persons who are members of the Covenant Congregations also become members of the Cooperative Ministry.

Cooperative Ministry Council

- The Cooperative Ministry operates through the Cooperative Ministry Council. The Council shall be the vision setting and administrative body for the Cooperative Ministry.
- The Council shall be composed of one to two laypersons elected by each congregation, the pastor(s) of each charge, and any lay Cooperative Ministry staff.
- The Council shall set up a structure of meetings that makes sense to the body.
- The Council shall meet at least five times a year (usually bimonthly from September through June) and at the call of the Council Chairperson or the Cooperative Ministry coordinator. Meetings shall be hosted, on a rotating basis, by each of the participating congregations. The lay representatives shall be expected to give a report of these meetings to their local congregations.

Financial Impact

- Each congregation shall continue to operate autonomously in regard to its local and denominational obligations.
- Any financial needs of the Cooperative Ministry will be funded through special fundraisers or outside funding mechanisms, not through mandated local church contributions.
- The Cooperative Ministry shall prepare an annual budget.
- The Cooperative Ministry shall be authorized to present to member churches proposals for special financial needs.

Ministries

The Schoharie Region Cooperative Ministry will be focused on empowering and equipping its member congregation for mission and ministry in the Schoharie Region. Subgroups including but not limited to collaborative mission outreach, discipleship, children and youth ministries, and witness may be formed to help with this primary focus.

That said, participation in the cooperative ministry does not prevent or restrict individual congregations from exploring ministry paths they deem appropriate in their context. The cooperative may choose to do some things together, while at other times only a handful of member churches will chose to participate. At other times, individual churches will work independently or in pairs on particular ministries. The goal of this cooperative ministry is to resource and equip churches for ministry without getting in the way.

Connectionalism

Connectionalism is a word used by United Methodists when we consider the many and complex ways in which the faith, the people, and the work of the UMC are connected. One aspect of connectionalism that is particularly pertinent to our new Schoharie Regional Ministry is described in our Book of Discipline with these words:

Our connectionism is not merely a linking of one charge conference to another. It is rather a vital web of interactive relationships.

In the spirit of connectionalism, we, the Covenanting members of the Schoharie Regional Ministry, covenant not only with each other, but with the larger United Methodist Church, to support our mission and ministry. We respectfully request that our Superintendent, Cabinet, and Bishop will

- **continue to support our grass-roots efforts to work collaboratively.** Your support and your faith that the Holy Spirit is indeed doing a new thing in this place and has been essential to our work, and may it continue to be so.
- **see our good-faith efforts to organize ourselves for cooperative ministry** not as an excuse to consolidate or reduce our ministries, but as **an opportunity to build up and strengthen our local churches for a new chapter of vital and effective ministry.**
- **assign to our churches and support clergy who will be active partners in cooperative ministry and whose gifts are well-suited to leadership in the context of our Schoharie Region.** Such clergy are essential to the growth and sustenance of the “vital web of interactive relationships” that are and do the work of the church.

SCHOHARIE UNITED METHODIST COOPERATIVE MINISTRY

Role of clergy

1. The success of the Cooperative depends upon the involvement of clergy from local member congregations.
2. Clergy shall have primary responsibility to the church(es) to which they have been assigned.
3. Clergy shall have secondary responsibility to the Cooperative Ministry, with an appointment to the Schoharie Region a part of their larger appointment.
4. Primary responsibility for pastoral care shall remain with the parishioner's church of membership. However in special circumstances pastoral care may be provided by other members of the Cooperative Clergy.
5. One clergy serving full-time in the region will be appointed by the bishop as coordinator of the Cooperative Ministry. Coordination of the Cooperative Ministry should take no more than 10% of his or her time.
6. Clergy shall support the Cooperative in the following ways:¹
 - Be willing to share their special gifts with the Cooperative.
 - Attend regularly scheduled meetings of the Cooperative Council, cooperating in good faith.
 - Working with the lay representative from their church(es), clergy shall invite parishioners of member churches to participate in nurture, outreach and witness opportunities offered by their local church to other members of the Cooperative.
 - Clergy shall promote ministries and activities of the Cooperative Council to the local church by encouraging active participation in these ministries, supporting events and meetings. They will work with the lay representatives in this promotion.
 - Become familiar with parishioners of the Cooperative by participating in Cooperative ministries, attending events at various Cooperative member churches and by participating in pulpit exchanges.

¹ In limited situations where the pastor is unwilling or unable to participate in these ways, yet the church is still committed to the Cooperative Ministry, the laity will take a larger role fulfilling these responsibilities.

SCHOHARIE UNITED METHODIST COOPERATIVE MINISTRY

Role of laity and churches

1. The success of the Cooperative depends upon the involvement of lay people from local member congregations.
2. The Cooperative Council is made up of one-two lay members and the clergy from each member church. This body will meet at least 5 times a year. Lay members to the Cooperative Council shall attend (or send a representative) regularly scheduled meetings of the Cooperative Council.
3. Lay members of the Cooperative Council have a primary responsibility for communicating nurture, outreach and witness opportunities offered by their church(es) to which other Cooperative congregations are welcome to participate.
4. Lay members of the Cooperative Council have a primary responsibility for ensuring that nurture, outreach and witness opportunities communicated by other member churches of the Cooperative as well as Cooperative Council activities are communicated to the local congregation through newsletter, bulletin and oral announcements during weekly worship services.
5. Lay members of the Cooperative Council shall meet with the staff-parish relations committees and Administrative Council of the local churches to maintain an open dialogue about the Cooperative. This meeting should take place yearly.
6. Chairs of staff-parish relations committees of all member churches shall meet as a group with the Cooperative Coordinator at least once annually.

VISION TEAM PROCESS (SEPT-FEB 2018-2019)

Beginning in the fall of 2018, a group of clergy and lay from across the Schoharie Region's 12 churches began meeting together to reflect on the strengths of our shared ministry over the last several years and discern how and if we would like to continue working together in the future. Over the course of four months 39 people from 12 churches gathered for six different conversations.

These were our six conversations:

1. What crossroads do we find ourselves at now?
2. What is possible together that we cannot do alone?
3. What doubts or reservations do we have about the possibilities?
4. What gifts do we bring to these possibilities?
5. Which possibilities speak to our greatest challenges at this moment now?
6. How do we invite more people into the conversation?

In our first conversation, we identified the current realities that shape our current crossroads moment.

We determined that these were our shared current realities as a Region:

- Aging congregations
- Financially struggling
- Old buildings
- Declining attendance
- People stretched thin
- Changing culture that doesn't prioritize church
- Fear and lack of trust in Church
- Competing calendars
- 11 worship services between 8am-12pm on Sunday
- Anger about top-down decisions
- Pastoral transitions that we have little control over
- Regional Coordinator Position ending June 2019

We determined that these were our strengths as a Region:

- Willing to work together
- Determination
- Innovation
- Great pastors who work well together
- Hospitality

- Tradition
- Generous and passionate about mission
- Strong will to keep our church doors open
- Beautiful buildings
- Strong physical presence in our communities

Among the things we celebrated by our Schoharie Region were:

- Over 150 flood buckets sent to disaster relief in two years
- Over 600 Red Bird Mission Christmas Shoe Boxes in three years
- 28 Missionaries sent to Appalachia in summer of 2018
- Growing in Discipleship through Bible studies, VBSs, New Faith Communities, and shared Youth Ministry
- Great pastors!
- Opportunities to serve with our neighbors
- Fun and Fellowship Together with Progressive Dinners and Quarterly Gatherings
- Being a united witness for Christ by gaining positive media coverage for our joint mission efforts in His name.

In light of our current realities and strengths, we came up with some questions to guide our six conversations.

Guiding Questions

- What kind of community do we want to create?
- How do we continue to make disciples of Jesus?
- What are our gifts?
- How do we best use our gifts?
- How do we change the narrative?
- What can we do together that we cannot do alone?

Our “possibility” conversation built off the question “What can we do together that we cannot do alone?”. We allowed ourselves to dream without limitation. The list of possibilities we came up with was diverse, heart-felt and eclectic.

Many Possibilities!

- More non-traditional worship options: Encouraging and resourcing our churches, as they feel led, to reach new people in new ways.
- Networking church volunteers: Connecting volunteers in our churches with those who do similar jobs for collaboration and idea-sharing.

- Try worshipping outside Sunday morning: Encouraging our churches, as they feel led, to try new times for worship services that might reach new people.
- Flexibility in sacraments: Pastoral appointments in the region could be to the local church and also to the “Region” so that Local Pastors would have sacramental authority across the region to help when churches are in need.
- Combined Holiday Services: Share more special occasions together in worship.
- Strong Social Media Presence: Increase our regional and local church social media presence with a shared website and Facebook page, and resources for local churches who need help increasing their own social media presence.
- Database of skills within our churches: Begin compiling a list of skilled laity across our region as a resource for our churches when needs arise.
- Fundraising as a Region: Using our momentum as a cooperative body to raise funds for special needs, regional needs, or individual local churches.
- Sharing resources: People, equipment, and ministry materials!
- Working together to identify community needs: Since all our churches serve a similar demographic across the Schoharie Region, putting our heads together to identify needs.
- Regional Resource Library: Such a library could include curriculum, equipment, costumes, sound systems, and other things important to ministry that individual churches may not want to purchase.
- Sharing administrative burdens (i.e. Blended Ministry): Making our administration at the local church level more efficient by centralizing those administrative burdens.
- New collaborative and entrepreneurial ministry to reach new people at former Mineral Springs UMC building: Using this space as a cooperative venture to provide new ministry space for youth, art, community-building, New Faith Communities, and income-producing ventures to fund our church ministries (coffee shop, thrift store, etc).
- Local Schoharie Mission Project: Responding to local building repair needs in our own community by assembling work teams from a variety of our churches.

After dreaming about these possibilities, we weighed pros and cons, and refined the possibilities to match our most challenging current realities. Through conversations around gifts and reservations, we discerned that some of the possibilities would need to be either tabled or amended to meet the needs of our context.

Near the end of our six conversations we identified this consensus:

- Good things ARE happening in the Region.
- We have big dreams about what is possible in our Region.
- We want to continue Regional cooperation after the Regional Coordinating Pastor position ends.
- We want the Conference/District to recognize our needs as village & country churches.
- We are concerned about the health and strength of our local congregations.

At this point in the process, we formulated a plan that proposes to maintain and increase the momentum we have begun as a cooperating region while also equipping our clergy and laity to continue this cooperative work as a team without heavily relying on a half-time Regional Coordinator.

The Vision Team developed a proposal for cooperative ministry and presented it to over 160 people who came out to three Town Hall meetings held in three locations across the region in January and February of 2019. The Town Halls included a time for feedback. After gathering that feedback, the Vision Team updated the proposal for Cooperative Ministry and presents the final version to you in the following sections of this packet.

Respectfully Submitted by your Regional Vision Team.