

Three Dimensions of Local Church Life

February 12, 2021

Dear Metro Denver Association UCC Local Church and Ministers Committee,

In response to your [October 22, 2020, letter](#) outlining the next steps in the Congregation-In-Discernment process, we provide the following response and requested documentation.

Our response is organized by the three dimensions of local church life outlined in your letter: Organization, Identity, and Public Witness. Please let us know if you have any questions. We look forward to conversation with you.

In Partnership,

The Juniper Formation Staff & Leadership Team

Minister Javon Bracy
Rev. Morgan Caruthers Fletcher
Katelin Champion
Spencer LaJoye
Jeanette Rojas
Rev. Dr. Jenny Witcher
Rev. Dr. Jason Whitehead
Keisha Wiggan

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Organization

We are organized according to our [Bylaws](#), which were revised and adopted by a vote of our members on February 10, 2021. You may read more about each of the following areas in our Bylaws:

- We make decisions using a **consensus model as a discernment process** to co-create strategic direction, engage in mutual growth, and make informed decisions. (Article XI: Decision Making, pp. 16-17)
- Our **membership** is modeled after the way of Christ, whose followers were active disciples and participants in ministry. Therefore, voting members include people who have been actively involved in the ministries of Juniper Formation over the past year. Currently our voting membership includes: Leadership Team, Staff, Special Advisors, and ministry participants in the Spirit-Led Accompaniment Circle (SLAC) and the Spiritual Well Ministry Team. (Article V: Membership, p. 6-7)
- Each Juniper Formation ministry has **expectations for participation**, which are contextual to its ministry. **Reception of new members** occurs within each ministry setting, and each ministry has a process and ritual by which we receive participants, which includes communion and also is reflective of the specific ministry and its context. We have moved to virtual gatherings during COVID-19, which has not had any negative impact on attendance, and has provided opportunities for non-local participation. (Article V: Membership, p. 6-7)

Our [staff position descriptions](#) and [organizing strategy](#) further illustrate our adaptive, team-based ministry model. You will also see this flatter organizational structure and culture reflected in our Bylaws as it relates to how power functions and decisions are made.

Our church is organized as an inclusive and intentionally diverse community of Christian faith. So far, we have completed the following additional steps towards systemically reflecting these values and identities of our church:

1. [Abuse Prevention Policy](#) (i.e.: Safe Church Policy) and [Disclosure Form](#).

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2. Certification as an Open and Affirming designated church by the Open and Affirming Coalition United Church of Christ ([certification welcome email](#)).
3. We are in ongoing conversations about inclusion, and will continue to explore additional UCC designations.

Our two lay delegates to the Metro Denver Association and Rocky Mountain Conference who maintain voice without vote during our Congregation-In-Discernment process are:

1. Rev. Morgan Caruthers Fletcher, Leadership Team Chair (Moderator), morgan@juniperformation.org, 720-692-7476
2. Jeanette Rojas, Leadership Team Vice Chair, jeanette.e.rojas@gmail.com, 970-297-8032

Identity

Over the past 12 months we've engaged in "worship, furtherance of Christian fellowship, and ongoing Christian witness" through the following events, gatherings, small group ministries, and advocacy actions. We've also indicated below ministry areas that we plan to engage and expand in 2021 and beyond.

It is important to clarify that worship occurs throughout our congregation's ministries, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Matthew 18:20)." It is also in our gatherings that we engage in Christian fellowship. We additionally engage in Christian fellowship through one-to-one and small group relational discernment, in which we seek to engage the abiding Holy Spirit within one another.

In April 2021, we are launching monthly Juniper Formation-wide Gathering (For more info: <https://www.juniperformation.org/gathering/>), which is a form of worship, but is not named "worship," as this language can be difficult for some of our people based on their previous experiences within the Church. We gather every two weeks (twice monthly) on Zoom, for two different purposes:

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Gathering for Communion & Prayer

2nd Monday of the month, 6:30 – 7:30 p.m. Mountain Time, [Zoom link & Registration Page](#)

Gathering for Scripture & Reflection

4th Wednesday of the month, 6:30 – 7:30 p.m. Mountain Time, [Zoom link & Registration Page](#)

Over the past year, our Christian witness included immediate action responses to the COVID-19 pandemic around homelessness and eviction prevention, and the 2020 election cycle.

- Articulated a vision and plan for our future. While living into this plan, we've grown our capacity from 1 to 5 staff members in 2020! Most of these are project-based part-time staff. With increased financial support, in 2021, we can increase their time and capacities working with congregations, developing resources for the wider Church, supporting the development of new ministries, and building a strong administrative foundation for Juniper Formation.
- Discerned to incorporate Juniper Formation as a local church of the United Church of Christ. We are building a community of Christian faith to live our mission of prophetically reimagining the Church through Spirit-led, justice-centered, relational, and worshipful congregational accompaniment, incubation of new ministries, and one-to-one and small group discernment and coaching.
- Begun building a congregation that centers the margins of the Church—we celebrate and affirm our diversities in ethnicities, genders, sexualities, abilities, ages, and Christian traditions.
- Co-created and released "Speak Boldly," a progressive sacred music album by singer songwriter Jenny LaJoye, and shared lead sheets and worship music videos so that you can play and sing this music in your spiritual and worship life. We'd love to share more music and liturgical resources with the wider Church in 2021, and will be developing new music monthly as part of the Gathering experiences.
- Led our first year-long Spirit-Led Accompaniment Circle (SLAC) small group ministry for individuals discerning their call to lay and ordained ministry. We hope to expand these discernment and ministry formation opportunities in 2021.

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- Continued to prophetically accompany congregations through rebirth. In 2020, we worked with Park Hill UCC to co-create a Spirit-led relational culture and congregational fabric. As a result, they have discerned to rebirth their traditional church as both fully virtual and in-person ministry long-term, expanding their relationships to include members within and beyond Colorado. Completed a first stage congregational accompaniment process with a Presbyterian church January-March 2021, and look forward to continued partnership with them and working with additional churches in 2021.
- Launched a new ministry called the Spiritual Well to integrate spiritual and mental health and wellness within congregations and their communities. In 2021, we're looking to begin working with congregations to co-create new cultures of spiritual and mental health.
- Organized congregations for immediate pandemic response action to advocate for the safety and health of those experiencing homelessness, and fundraising to prevent evictions through the Congregational Housing Campaign.
- Collaborated with the Interfaith Immigration Network in developing the new "Vecinos" ("neighbors" in Spanish) program to educate, challenge, train, and inspire people of faith and congregations to become allies of our undocumented immigrant neighbors.
- Engaged in anti-racism efforts and advocacy in our church, criminal justice system, and with other congregations. Anti-racism is an ongoing part of co-creating a multi-ethnic congregation and our wider ministry with other congregations, which we hope to expand in 2021. We are currently working in partnership with three other UCC congregations to co-create an anti-racism effort that includes reparations.
- Shared a progressive theological framework on issue-based initiatives like women's reproductive rights and electoral ballot choices in battleground states where conservative theologies dominate during the 2020 election. In 2021, we have advocated for two bills that extend the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse in partnership with the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CCASA).
- Built an "office shed" and started developing a backyard house church space, including a community greenhouse and sacred space to grow plants for ritual and physical food for diverse local communities and spiritual traditions. We look forward to gathering people in this space when it is safe to do so in 2021.

One of our primary **goals for 2021**, is increasing capacity. We have people ready, and are working to raise funding to expand our staffing and ministries, which will help us grow our congregation through increasing opportunities for ministry formation and

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engagement. Capacity building means continuing to become an active church of movement leaders and people in ministry (lay and ordained) who engage relational discernment and ministry formation, co-create prophetic and progressive ministries within current congregations, birth new ministries and churches, and through this active embodiment of church build a multiethnic Juniper Formation congregation.

An important aspect of our ministry is that we are Spirit-led, which means we do not have a decisive and detailed multi-year strategic plan. We do engage in Spirit-led strategic planning, with fewer defined boundaries over longer periods of time and an openness to allow the Holy Spirit to interject and redirect our energy to where it is needed.

Please see our responses below to the UCC Church Profile areas you highlighted in your letter. We have also attempted to complete the [UCC Church Profile](#) to the best of our ability. As you reference in your letter, the form was not created for new church starts, nor for non-traditional churches. We've crossed out sections that were not relevant to our church to make it easier to read through.

Mission: Prophetically reimagining the Church

Vision: A vibrant and relevant Christian Church

Values:

1. Christ-Centered: Jesus' words and acts as foundational for prophetic ministry
2. Spirit-Led: Sharing the creative, vulnerable, and courageous responsibility and accountability to listen to the movement of the Holy Spirit
3. Liberated Imagination: The freedom to imagine shared liberation and to disrupt the cornerstones of oppression
4. Relationship: Accompanying one another in discernment, formation, and prophetic action
5. Radical Love & Justice: Radical love and justice for the diversity of God's creation, especially the marginalized and oppressed
6. Co-Creation: Gathering in community to co-create by working *with* (not for) others.

[2020 Annual Budget](#)

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Giving to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) & annual UCC Special Offerings:

Under the advice of the Rocky Mountain Conference Minister Rev. Sue Artt, as a new church start, we will begin by contributing 1% of our annual operating budget in 2021, and work ourselves up towards the RMC standard 4% over the coming years.

UCC Congregational Designation Status: Juniper Formation is a certified Open and Affirming (ONA) church by the Open and Affirming Coalition UCC. We will be exploring additional designations together.

UCC Knowledge and Formation: Juniper Formation was formed within and by the UCC from our inception. When we recently engaged our leadership team and staff in conversation about their experiences and understandings of our UCC identity and formation, one of the ways they described being welcomed into the UCC history, polity, theology, etc. was through the ecumenical cornerstone of the UCC history and motto of "So that they all may be one."

While our leaders come from a diversity of denominational backgrounds, including participation, leadership, and education within institutions affiliated with multiple denominations, joined together we understand ourselves as part of the United Church of Christ. In addition to "United Church of Christ," we use the term "ecumenical" in our public witness to describe Juniper Formation to signal to others outside of the UCC that they are invited and included. This is particularly important for congregations outside of the UCC who often wonder if we as a UCC church are willing to work with them as ministry partners and for congregational accompaniment. More importantly to us, the term "ecumenical" mirrors who the UCC is in terms of our history, denominational formation, and the makeup of membership within local UCC churches which diversely represent an ecumenical gathering of Christians who believe that "We all may be One." One of the ways we are similar to so many UCC local churches is the care and attention we give to our congregants who come from diverse backgrounds and identities, including denominational. Like other UCC congregations, we consider the specific cultural aspects of worship, ministry, and church life that speak to our congregation because of our diversity and intentionally work to include opportunities for all to belong in the body of Christ.

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There are many ways that we identify as part of the United Church of Christ, here are a few foundational aspects:

1. Covenantal relationships with one another within our church, ministries, communities, ministry partners, and wider Church. As we've shared, relationships and relational discernment are central to our church and ministries;
2. Local authority and autonomy of local churches, which allows Juniper Formation to even exist as a non-traditional new church start, to experiment, and respond to the still speaking Holy Spirit instead of being constrained and restrained by one ecclesiology; and
3. Juniper Formation's governance is anchored in congregational engagement and polity through our team-based organizing strategy and discipleship-based church structure of shared leadership amongst people in ministry (lay and ordained).

One of the more formalized ways we have collectively experienced UCC practices and covenant together was the the Call, installation, and covenant process for our Minister of Prophetic Formation and the covenantal process with our sponsoring congregation Sixth Avenue UCC, the Metro Denver Association UCC, and the Rocky Mountain Conference UCC. During this process, our discernment process of transitioning from a ministry to a local church of the UCC, and the RMC request for proposal process related to the future of the Christ Congregational Church property we've collectively engaged with and learned about the UCC history and polity in action.

In highlighting the ways covenant is so key to UCC practices, we also seek to be relational within our UCC region. This includes not just attending UCC events, but our inviting UCC congregations to join us in ministry, which has included: congregational accompaniment (consultation), COVID-19 urgent response actions to support those experiencing homelessness, the Congregational Housing Stability Campaign, and soon through the Spiritual Well ministry.

We have previously provided a [list of ways our Minister of Prophetic Formation and Juniper Formation has been engaged in UCC events, programs, and gatherings](#), which is quite extensive at the local, associational, conference, and national levels of the UCC. While this may appear to be individual engagement, some of these experiences were shared, and the rest were regularly discussed and shared with the Juniper Formation Leadership Team and Staff.

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This year members of our Spiritual Well Ministry Team will be participating in the RMC continuing education offerings through the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center on Healthy Congregations and Conflict Transformation Skills for Congregations. Our members have also participated in various national UCC offerings, particularly webinars.

Juniper Formation familiarizes our members with UCC identity, history, theology, and polity through ongoing integration and embodiment of UCC values and practices in our theology, and how we live out our church life and ministries. The Leadership Team and Staff have read and discussed the UCC Constitution and Bylaws and some history together during our discernment process. During these conversations some points of history were raised, particularly as it related to working to come together from a diversity of denominational backgrounds into Juniper Formation as a local church of the UCC and key moments in UCC history.

One of the particular areas of interest and ongoing discussion with the Juniper Formation Leadership Team, Staff, and members is the authorization of lay ministers from the newly revised UCC Manual on Ministry. This particular aspect of the UCC aligns directly with Juniper Formation's focus on ministry formation for all members of the church as the priesthood of all believers. We've also closely aligned with the UCC's history and theology of Open and Affirming, and more broadly the UCC's progressive theology and values around diversity and inclusion.

We will continue to engage our congregation in educational and formational opportunities about and within the UCC.

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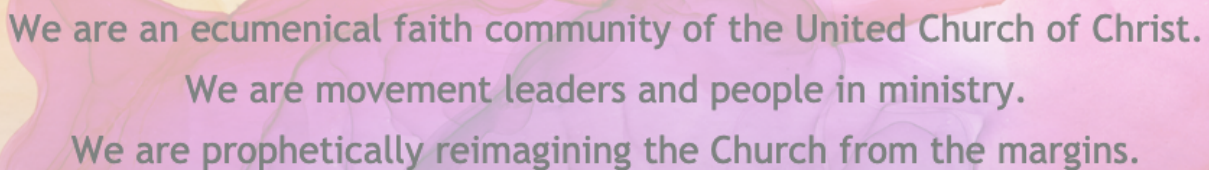
Public Witness

Juniper Formation consistently identifies itself as a Congregation-In-Discernment or a “new church start” (language accessible to external audiences) within the United Church of Christ through our website, social media presence, and newsletter. While “United Church of Christ” is not part of our name, it is part of our descriptor and how we talk about ourselves as a local church internally, externally, and while working with our ministry partners.

Some of the ways we communicate about our UCC identity include:

Our website: We have updated our website to reflect our new status as a new church start in the UCC in three major ways:

Our homepage includes the following at the top of the page:



We are an ecumenical faith community of the United Church of Christ.
We are movement leaders and people in ministry.
We are prophetically reimagining the Church from the margins.

Our “about” page now includes the below header section:

Who We Are

Juniper Formation is an ecumenical faith community of the United Church of Christ (UCC). We are movement leaders and people in ministry who are prophetically reimagining the Church from the margins.

Our mission is prophetically reimagining the Church by incubating new ministries, centering the margins of the Church, and accompanying one another through prophetic discernment and ministry formation.

Juniper Formation is invested in shared liberation and disrupting the cornerstones of oppression; and committed to radical love and justice for the diversity of God's creation, especially the marginalized and oppressed.

Our church is womxn-led, multiethnic, and antiracist, affirming of undocumented neighbors, celebrating of different abilities, and Open & Affirming of LGBTQ+ individuals and families in the life, leadership, and sacraments of our church. We are centering the margins of the Church.

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And every web page on our website includes the following footer:

Juniper Formation is a faith community of the United Church of Christ for movement leaders and people in ministry who are prophetically reimagining the Church from the margins.



Social Media: We maintain a social media presence on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Youtube](#). All of these social media channels reflect our UCC identity. For those channels that use hashtags (instagram and LinkedIn), we use #UCC and #UnitedChurchofChrist on most posts.

Newsletter and Inspirations Multimedia Blog: In one of our latest blog-newsletters over Advent our Leadership Team Chair shared a video message about Juniper Formation becoming a local church of the United Church of Christ. We will continue to articulate and share our UCC identity within our newsletter and Inspirations multimedia blog posts.

Who is Included and Invited? Yes, Juniper Formation is a church for movement leaders and people in ministry who are prophetically reimagining the Church from the margins. The question raised in the LCM letter “Are you a church ‘**open to the public**’ or only for ‘movement leaders’ and ‘people in ministry?’” raises a concern about presumed exclusivity. We believe this is actually an ecclesiological question, as we believe that the Church is made up of disciples, following the model of Christ and the early Church. We use the modern language of “movement leaders” and “people in ministry” to identify active and engaged disciples of Christ.

We intentionally chose the language of “people in ministry” instead of “ministers,” because most church folk we have spoken with understand “ministers” as exclusively meaning ordained clergy, and do not see themselves as ministers or church leaders unless it involves administrative or facility-based tasks. These church goers have also shared their experience of barriers to being in ministry (lay or authorized) within their respective congregations and by their clergy who are not invested in forming ministry leaders, but rather retaining a supremacist structure that privileges ordained ministers and limits the ministerial roles of lay leaders.

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Juniper Formation's mission is focused on ministry formation for all people, and especially drawing from the margins of the church. By margins, we mean those people who have historically and presently are often excluded from or undervalued in ministerial leadership including the intersection of identities of women, gender queer, LGBTQ+, people of color, people with disabilities and those who are differently abled, those with cognitive capacities and differences, people with varied documentation status, and those called to diverse forms of ministry within and beyond the local church setting.

We strongly identify with the UCC's belief in the "priesthood of all believers." Our invitation to the "public" is simply to follow Christ. However, we all know from experience that following Christ is not an easy path, which is why we believe there is a need for churches to seriously invest in and prioritize the formation of disciples as people in ministry and movement leaders, not just pew warmers. This also requires those in ordained ministry within Juniper Formation to work co-creatively as colleagues with lay ministers, which is why we maintain a team-based organizing strategy.

People will know we are a church by:

1. Our relationships
2. Our experiences in ministry together.
3. Our evangelism: our witness, who we are and how we are together, our relationships, and our ministries.
4. Because we identify as and communicate that we are a church.

People will know how to get involved in Juniper Formation through: relationships and referrals, reaching out to us and our reaching out to them for one-to-one relational discernment conversations, visiting our "[Get Involved](#)" webpage and social media, and through our invitations to both public and small group ministry opportunities.

We are a church focused on engaging one another and God in ministry. These ministries are Spirit-led, asset-based (gifts and talents), adaptive, emergent, responsive, relational, contextual, and always forming. Our ministries will always be evolving based on the movement of the Holy Spirit, our relationships, and the community contexts within which we live and co-create. These community contexts emerge from the people involved in Juniper Formation's ministries. With ongoing emerging ministries, we have ongoing emerging community contexts.