

**Visioning Task Force  
Pre-Conference Briefing  
April/May 2026**

At last year's Annual Conference session, the body affirmed entering a season of Visioning for the United Methodists of Upper New York. Soon after the 2025 session work began by securing a consultant to guide the process, and the formation of a task force to work on behalf of the Conference Leadership Team, and the Conference as a whole. The task force is comprised of the following members:

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Tara Barnes  
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The process began through a journey of deep listening. Through surveys, input from the Bishop's C3 tour, and focus groups this is some of what the team heard from the Conference:

1. A can-do attitude – clergy and laity who serve in multiple ways and show resilience.
2. Gathered connection – Annual Conference and other events that create a sense of community when people are together.
3. Training and resources when they reach the local church clearly.
4. Mission energy – disaster response, community service, and justice work that blesses the wider community. Special appreciation for UMCOR and disaster response ministries.

5. Diversity as a real gift – cultural, theological, generational diversity and cross-cultural appointments. Pride in public witness for justice (e.g., racial justice, inclusion of LGBTQ+ people).
6. Renewed hope and collaboration under current episcopal leadership – a sense that the tone has shifted toward openness and grace.
7. **Hurt and mistrust from previous leadership that has not fully healed.**  
Many named experiences of broken trust, lack of transparency, and moments where clergy and leaders—especially women, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC leaders—felt unseen, unsupported, or harmed. That pain is still present and shaping how people experience the Conference today.
8. **There is deep exhaustion—especially among clergy and those serving multiple churches.**  
Leaders spoke about feeling stretched thin, carrying heavy ministry demands, navigating declining congregations, and managing systems that often feel overwhelming or unclear. Many are asking not for more to do—but for support that is real and tangible.
9. Declining Churches, Building Burdens, and Financial Strain. Concerns for the viability of many small congregations were shared. Along with concerns of aging buildings with overwhelming maintenance costs and fear that the system is unsustainable and may collapse under its own weight.
10. **There is a strong desire for clearer communication, consistency, and follow-through.**  
Consistently, people said: “Help us understand what is happening, why it’s happening, and what it means for us.” There is a longing for communication that is simple, transparent, and matched by action—because too often in the past, things were announced but not sustained.

The Visioning Task force took these valuable insights from the deep listening process and worked together to identify the unique gift (or charism) of our Upper New York Conference. This charism/gift came into focus using stories and feedback from the listening process.

*Courageous Missional Connection: The Upper New York Conference possesses a Spirit-given capacity to (be) remain connected in Christ while courageously mobilizing leaders and congregations for mission among vulnerable people in our communities.*

This charism reflects the lived expression of the conference’s values. Our commitment to connection and unity enables leaders and congrega

tions to remain in relationship across differences. Our missional heart and commitment to justice propel the conference outward toward communities and people in need. And our culture of resilient faithfulness allows leaders and congregations to engage difficult challenges while continuing to pursue Christ-centered mission.

We then turned our attention to the world around us and engaged in deep listening with non-United Methodist communities within our conference area. In order to learn the concerns and struggles of our communities--called pain points, we asked a series of questions in one-to-one interviews:

- What are the best parts of your local community that should be cherished and preserved?
- What do you think are the challenges, problems, or pain points impacting most people in your area?
- What issues or challenges in your area do you worry about? What keeps you up at night?
- What do you think is the most important contribution that good people collaborating can make to your community?

From these interviews, two concerns became very evident—the need to support vulnerable populations and a deep desire to rebuild community connection and belonging. Holding in tension our discerned charism and these two pain points, we believe the United Methodists of Upper New York are invited by God to respond to this moment through... Continuing through the listening and the discernment charisms and opportunities, we believe the United Methodists of Upper New York are being invited by God to respond to this moment through:

Adaptive shifts: an adaptive shift is more than fixing a problem. Problem-solving is a technical change—hiring an expert to address the need. An adaptive shift involves shifting processes, culture and strategies to meet internal and external challenges and needs. In our move to adaptive shifts, we will continue prioritizing *relationships* over everything else, and we will lead the way in the shifts:

1. From institutional preservation to missional experimentation
  - a. Congregations often feel pressure to preserve existing structures and programs. Yet the changing cultural landscape requires a willingness to experiment with new forms of ministry. This shift involves encouraging innovation and learning, creating permission for experimentation, and supporting Fresh Expressions and new faith communities.
2. From Congregational Independence to connectional collaboration

- a. Although Connectionalism is a theological value within the United Methodist tradition, congregations often operate independently in practice. Moving forward, the conference will increasingly rely on cooperative parish models, regional ministry partnerships, and shared mission initiatives among congregations.
3. From clergy-centered leadership to shared leadership ecosystems
  - a. Clergy shortages and increasing ministry complexity require stronger partnerships between clergy and laity. This shift includes intentional lay leadership development, team-based ministry structures, and new pathways for emerging leaders.
4. From bureaucratic complexity to mission-focused systems
  - a. Administrative burdens and communication challenges were repeatedly named in the listening reports. Simplifying conference structures will allow leaders to focus more fully on mission rather than administration.
5. From Program-centered ministry to community-embedded presence
  - a. Congregations will increasingly need to move beyond internal programming toward deeper engagement with their communities. This includes developing relationships with community partners, creating gathering spaces that foster belonging, and addressing local social challenges collaboratively.

Adaptive initiatives: Here we name some of the actual goals—the real work—in making these adaptive shifts:

1. Collaborative Parish Development: In the past, in previous conferences, we used the language of cooperative parish. This is not that. Collaboration is an umbrella term that covers a variety of ways that congregations seek to work together to care for the vulnerable and rebuild community connections. It may be a jointly run food ministry, or a clothing center. It may be a shared community meal held in different locations. Each collaboration dreams of the way(s) God is calling them into ministry together.
2. Innovative Ministries and New Faith Communities: Along with dreaming new ways to be in collaboration with one another, another goal of our adaptive shift work is innovation in ministry within current congregations and the continued formation of new faith communities. There are examples of this already happening across our connection. The conference will continue this work and support such innovation and new community building across our conference.
3. Shared Leadership Models: Again and again, throughout our deep listening, we heard how leadership and structures have changed and are changing. A great

weariness was named by many. One goal in our adaptive shift work is to address this change, to offer supports and resources that meet the work of lay people and clergy where they are, and walk alongside them into the future God is calling them into.

4. **Community Mission Catalyst:** to live more intentionally into our gift, our charism of courageous missional connection, the conference will explore and develop resources that will support and motivate mission work. These catalysts could take the form of grants, or other types of resources to encourage and support mission.

Collaboration with Susquehanna: to live into these adaptive shifts and to work on these adaptive initiatives will require learning and resources. Throughout this strategic visioning process, we have worked alongside the vision team from the Susquehanna Conference. Though our gifts/charisms, shifts and goals are unique, there is some overlap in the type of ministries and the needed resources. The learning and resource work can be shared with our siblings from the Susquehanna Conference and we can learn from and support one another:

1. **Missional Learning Lab:** A shared learning network supporting experimentation with Fresh Expressions, cooperative parishes, and community-based ministries.
2. **Vulnerable Communities Partnership Initiative:** A joint initiative equipping congregations to address poverty, social isolation, and community fragmentation through shared training, grant programs, and collaborative ministry experiments.
3. **Leadership Development Initiative:** Create shared leadership development pathways with unified delivery methods that provide both foundational training and adaptive leadership development for emerging and current leaders.
4. **Sharing Financial, Staff, and Other Resources:** Explore collaborative opportunities across ministry teams and conferences for aligning financial and human resources, adjusting staffing structures and responsibilities, and creating equitable systems that serve the entire episcopal area—amplifying impact and ensuring faithful stewardship.

Here are concerns and needs that we, the Upper New York Conference, can address in the immediate future, visible, consistent action: (Greater detail can be found in the Pre-Conference Workbook pages 60-62)

1. **Rebuild Trust:** We will rebuild trust by practicing consistent leadership—clear communication, transparent decisions, and reliable follow through.
2. **Streamline Communication System:** We will simplify and clarify UNY communications so leaders can easily understand what is changing, when it is changing, and how it affects their ministries.

3. **Reduce the Administrative Burden:** We will streamline and clarify administrative processes so leaders spend less time on forms and compliance and more time on mission, pastoral care, and leadership.
4. **Clarify District Leadership Roles:** We will clarify district leadership and strengthen DS accessibility, so clergy and congregations know exactly where to turn for care, conflict support, and administrative guidance.
5. **Strengthen Connection & Support for Clergy and Congregational Leaders:** We will strengthen relational support by increasing direct contact and care for clergy and leaders—especially those serving multiple churches, trauma-affected communities, or cross-cultural appointments—to reduce isolation and foster connection.
6. **Implement Conference Initiatives Consistently:** We will follow through on initiatives with consistency and visibility, ensuring that what we announce is implemented. By matching communication with action, we will counter cynicism and strengthen trust across UNY
7. **Simplify Access to Resources:** We will make conference resources easier to locate, understand, and access—especially for smaller and volunteer-led churches—so that leaders can quickly find what they need and experience our support as visible, usable, and truly helpful.

#### Future Missional Impact

We will engage fully in the adaptive shifts and initiatives before us so that United Methodists of Upper New York become known not for institutional structure but for a visible, healing presence in the places of pain across our region. As we collaborate more deeply, share leadership between clergy and laity, and cultivate new forms of church alongside traditional congregations, UNY will increasingly be recognized as a connection of churches that:

- Proclaim and embody Christ's love, mercy, compassion, and justice.
- Rebuild belonging in fragmented communities.
- Support vulnerable neighbors.
- Cultivate new forms of Christian community.

In this future, the conference becomes a movement of vibrant and connected congregations participating in Christ's mission across New York

You might be wondering how is this different than what we have done in the past?

- Process: the vision team engaged in a 9-month process of learning, listening, discernment and work with consultants

- Transparency; Clear, concise communication as we address these adaptive shifts and initiatives. What is happening- Who is leading this work, who is responsible- what to expect, etc.
- Partnership: Ongoing collaboration that brings to bear the diverse voices of the Annual Conference
- Accountability: Regular updates regarding Conference initiatives and the related prototypes will be provided.

Some of the information is very similar or familiar to what we have discussed in the past. This is a good thing. It means that we were on the right track in the past but perhaps didn't have the right processes or the needed accountability for follow-through. With the passion and openness of our current episcopal leader, clear accountability and transparency in communication, we can stay-the-course on this work in the days, months and years to come.

At the coming session of Annual Conference, on Thursday evening after dinner, we invite you to be ready to:

- Have intentional conversation about the Missional Plan
- Offer yourselves as partners in doing this work
- Affirm the Missional Path Forward