

MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER & PRESIDENT – Ordination Vows
Nancy S. Taylor
Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, May 16, 2002

Dear Clergy, Association leaders, Church and Ministry Committees, In Care persons,
Seminary faculty and staff:

At the Clergy Colloquy on Confidentiality held in early May, I was asked to initiate a Conference-wide conversation about one of the ordination vows in the UCC Book of Worship. Ordinands vow they will “keep silent all confidences” shared with them. This vow contradicts the new Massachusetts law that makes clergy mandated reporters of child abuse. Equally important, the vow no longer represents the ethical convictions of many clergy. Again and again, we are hearing from clergy and laity who agree there are limits to confidentiality, especially if a child is being harmed. We seem to be reaching a consensus that there is a distinction between a confidence and a secret and that clergy are not in the business of keeping secrets that permit children to be abused with impunity. We are hearing growing unease that the ordination vow is out of synch, both with state law and with our deepest held values.

The Area Ministers and I herein offer this suggestion for your consideration. Ordaining bodies (Associations) could replace the wording currently in the Book of Worship with the wording in the Ordained Minister’s Code. In that code, clergy are called upon to “honor” all confidences. Therefore, we suggest the question could read: “Will you honor all confidences shared with you?” rather than, “Will you keep silent all confidences shared with you?”

This is a matter that each Association must answer for itself. We are asking you – clergy, Committees on the Ministry, Association leaders, ANTS faculty – to initiate this conversation in your various settings. Consensus or ideas could then be referred to your Association leaders. We offer this as a possible interim solution...until such time as a larger conversation can be convened throughout the United Church of Christ.

We give thanks for all the pastors and laity who minister with integrity, good will and open hearts in these demanding days.

Faithfully,

Nancy S. Taylor, Minister and President

Dale Hempen, Associate Conference Minister in the Southeast Area

Tom Clough, Associate Conference Minister in the Metropolitan Boston Association

Peter Wells, Associate Conference Minister in the Western Area

Harry Flad, Interim Associate Conference Minister in the Central Area

Marilyn Rossier, Interim Associate Conference Minister in the Northeast Area