

Synod Report

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So much goes on at Synod that I find it hard to boil it all down. But my major impressions were related to our shared worship, the ways we manage ourselves (bylaw changes and prudential resolutions) and the ways we choose to witness around us (Resolutions of Witness.)

First of all, I absolutely love festival worship. I love worship that engages me auditorially and kinesthetically, and particularly visually. I try to create that kind of worship in my own church, but my ability to do so is limited, both by my budget and by the fact that I am creating worship every week. Festival worship, developed over a long period of time, and strung throughout the five days, is particularly moving to me. Threads, like Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan's "There is a River," some of the graphics on the screens and of course the fountain that ran as a reminder of our baptism, tied everything together. I loved the dance that was added, Amy Sens' "We'll All Stand Together," and of course Mark Miller's music from John Dornhauer's installation, which reminded us that we are the church, on a national level, even when we are not together at Synod. The Catawba Singers were a particular highlight, and their impromptu concert by the escalators on Saturday evening was, for me, virtually another worship service. The highlight for me, however, was Monday evening's service, at the end of the plenary, based on Naaman. The moving dance, the sermon and finally, the litany that urged us and Naaman to get in the water reminded me deeply of our commitment, via covenant, to the work that we decide to do together, and urging us to get in the water of our commitment to witness in our work.

Then, of course there is doing the work of the church. I usually see both sides of the work of the church. First I see the work we are deciding to do now, in the prudential resolutions, bylaw changes, and resolutions of witness. In those we are speaking out, changing the way we govern ourselves, and deciding what our focus will be in the next few years. Having attended 4 of the last 6 synods, I am clearly beginning to see the connections between what happens at Synods and what happens at the next few Synods, and what happens between Synods. When we vote at Synod we identify not only what we think, but we focus the work of the church for the next couple of years. For example, at General Synod 29, the Synod affirmed the resolution "Calling for the United Church of Christ to Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery which Authorized the Genocide of Native Peoples and the Theft of Native Lands." At the last Synod, 30, in Cleveland, Bible Study and Educational materials were brought forwards for churches, and that Synod and this Synod included worship moments and educational opportunities, including workshops and presentations that implemented, at least in part, that resolution, including lifting up the Standing Rock Youth Water Protectors. So I expected, as I began my work as a delegate, that the same thing would be true, that what we decided at this Synod would affect who the UCC are, what kind of materials they prepare, and what we as a church do for the next two years at least.

The Work of running the church – Bylaw Changes and Resolutions of Witness.

Some of the work we do involves how we govern ourselves. This was a big year for this. We changed the structure of our church at the highest level, adjusted our expectations of how we will fund a national church, and talked about new ways for ministers to be identified, authorized, and supervised. Some of the work we did related to that included:

- Traci Blackmon was elected to lead the UCC's justice ministry. She's been the acting minister of Justice and Witness for a while, and she has been an impressive voice for justice within the UCC.
- A Resolution on Patterns of Giving, almost unanimously approved, that will move the denomination past the existing pattern of giving, allowing more modern fundraising techniques on the national level, no longer limiting them to funding via OCWM.
- A related resolution proposing a new framework for covenantal giving.
- A Resolution providing enhanced support for churches and institutions founded as a result of the work of the American Missionary Association and the Afro Christian Churches. This will provide additional support for small historic churches in the UCC's rich black church strains. This resolution also calls on all of the UCC, in all settings to continue the denomination's historic anti-racism focus.

- A set of changes to the UCC Constitution and Bylaws that reshape the leadership of the church. Now the single general minister and president leads, with Associate general ministers, called by General Synod, and with their work determined by the General Minister and President. While the number of associate general ministers is not detailed by these changes, it is generally understood that Ben Guess will not be replaced, and that Dornhauer, Moos and Blackmon will assist in the leadership of local church ministries.
- A resolution encouraging relationships between UCC settings and community development federal credit unions.
- A resolution to establish procedures for cultural diversity training for Authorized Ministers.
- A resolutions supporting the Authorized Ministries of under-represented Clergy in local Congregations. This calls local congregations to consider their bias when evaluating potential clergy and to consider ministers who are women, people of color, LGBTQ, and disabled when filling pastoral slots. This also asks that economic justice issues of clergy from underrepresented groups be addressed by local churches.
- Referred to the board of directors, a resolution on adoption of a revised Manual of Ministry. This has been the work of the church for a number of Synods, and is coming to fruition now. All of us need to attend to what is coming here – how ministers will be identified, supported, supervised, and authorized.

We also speak to the world, to power, to our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world, to our governments, and to those who are oppressed, to let them know that we do stand with them. Some of the work we did related to that included:

- Overwhelmingly (96%) voted on a resolution to become an Immigrant Welcoming Church. It will call on us to develop study materials on immigration issues, and to serve immigrant populations in our areas.
- Approved a resolution to guarantee Palestinian children (under 18) basic due process and to prohibit torture or ill treatment of detained minors in the occupied territories. This will require our General Minister and President to communicate our concerns internationally, and to hold the US Government to account for foreign aid that supports human rights abuses associated with these children. While a significant majority (79%) concurred, there was dissention.
- A resolution to end the US embargo of Cuba.
- A resolution declaring that “The Earth is the Lord’s” which addresses climate change and urges UCC members and settings to speak out to the “powers that be” to support moves to limit climate change and degradation of the earth’s environment.
- A resolution that urges the recognition and study of gun violence as a public health emergency. This was powerfully discussed by the youth of Synod, some of whom experience this violence in their daily lives.
- A resolution urging UCC settings and members to become aware of and welcoming of adults who have experienced the trauma of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, as children. These people are all around us, and may not receive comfort because their experiences set up walls, and will train churches and clergy to understand and support such people.
- A resolution calling on the UCC to support a living wage, and to provide such a wage, at a \$15 minimum, to their employees. This resolution calls on us to change our employment practices, and should be reviewed by local churches.
- A resolution calling on the General Synod and the churches and congregants to commit themselves to disability justice.
- A resolution to enforce the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ boycott of Wendy’s restaurants. Wendy’s has refused for the last 10 years to join the Fair Food program, which seeks to improve working conditions in Florida tomato fields. 14 other fast food restaurant chains participate in the program, which ensures that slavery and sexual harassment is not happening in these situations, and also establishes a grievance procedure and a penny a pound pay raise for tomato pickers.
- A resolution encouraging participation with the Boy Scouts of America through inclusive Scouting programs.
- A resolution calling on the UCC to oppose corporal punishment of children in institutions. This resolution, which also included homes in the original version, was significantly changed prior to approval.

Our youth at synod came forward and were given voice to present their concerns in the synod. They responded with their concerns on the resolution on Palestinian Children, and on gun violence.

In addition, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ includes a variety of points of view, as our members come from so many different points of view. This was clear in the exhibit hall where groups like the Faithful and Welcoming churches shared their point of view. In the plenary sessions there were a couple of situations where the requirement for a supermajority for a resolution of witness resulted in resolutions failing to pass. In my experience, when this happens it is almost always a strong strain of the UCC expressing concern, and I think that was true here. These issues may come through again, but they included:

- A resolution calling to support medical aid in dying failed by only a dozen votes. While there was heartfelt and important witness in favor of it, there was also clearly a significant segment of the floor opposed to this resolution.
- A resolution calling for the universal unlocking of adult adoptees birth records failed, as there were a significant number of opposing people, particularly concerning birth mothers who may wish to retain privacy.

We worshipped, we worked. We learned, and we shopped in between. We rubbed elbows with colleagues we don't see very often. We had some fun, and we mourned some losses. It was a very rich Synod.