The Keystone Connection

A Message to the Conference

October 13, 2026

Members and Friends of Keystone Conference,

"A tent requires tension!"

That memorable observation from the Rev. Dr. Philip Vinod Peacock captured something essential about the recent gathering of United Church of Christ leaders in Cleveland. A Tent of Our Own Making was the third and largest gathering convened by UCC General Minister and President, the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson. I joined over seventy people from across the denomination to wrestle with a question: **How do we live faithfully in covenant when we disagree deeply with one another?** I find this question reverberates across the Keystone Conference as well.

As one of our Keystone pastors, Rev. Ken Evitts of St. John's Center UCC in East Earl, and other participants reflected afterward, the image offered a powerful reminder: unity does not require the absence of disagreement. Living together in covenant may require us to remain in relationship precisely when our differences threaten to pull us apart. Rev. Jes Kast of Faith UCC in State College, reflected, "Love is not a catchy slogan, but love is hard work that seeks to listen for the image of God in another."

The UCC has long celebrated its broad theological tent. But what happens when our differences extend beyond theology to questions of identity, experience, conviction, and our hopes for the church? How do we remain in covenant when we do not see the world—or even the church—in the same way? "We're busy trying to figure out what to do with diversity, but it's already here," Thompson reminded us. The challenge is not whether diversity exists, but how we choose to live with it.

For Kast, the gathering offered a glimpse of what covenant might look like in practice. She described the work as "spiritually mature and demanding," requiring humility alongside confidence. Reflecting on Jesus' prayer "that they may be one" (John 17:21), she saw the possibility of a "prophetic witness of unity in a divided world."

But such unity cannot be superficial. Participants raised difficult questions about whose voices are heard, whether the national church adequately reflects the diversity of its congregations, what resources churches need, and what the future holds for pastoral ministry. Not everyone left equally confident that the denomination would live fully into its commitments. Nor were all the questions answered.

Likely that was a point of the gathering: Covenant is not the reward we receive after reaching agreement. It

is the commitment that allows us to keep talking, listening, and working together when agreement remains elusive.

What might this mean for our own congregations and for the Keystone Conference?

Rev. Joseph Hedden, Dean of Keystone Academy and pastor of Emmanuel Hill's Reformed UCC in Export, challenged us to consider whether we will follow the wider culture into ever-deeper division, treating those who disagree with us as enemies, or choose another way.

Hedden was also affected by Dr. Peacock's keynote image of the Exodus tabernacle, a sacred tent belonging to a people on the move. Our calling is not simply to invite others into the spaces where we already feel comfortable. Rather, as Hedden reflected, "we are called to move outward into our neighborhoods, to stand alongside people who are hurting and support our neighbors not because we agree, but because we love."

That is a demanding vision of covenant. It asks us to listen before reacting, to resist assuming the worst of one another, and to discover common purpose even across profound differences. The work of covenant will never be easy. It requires patience, humility, courage, and a willingness to be changed by our encounters with one another. It also requires something increasingly rare in our polarized world, the determination to remain in relationship.

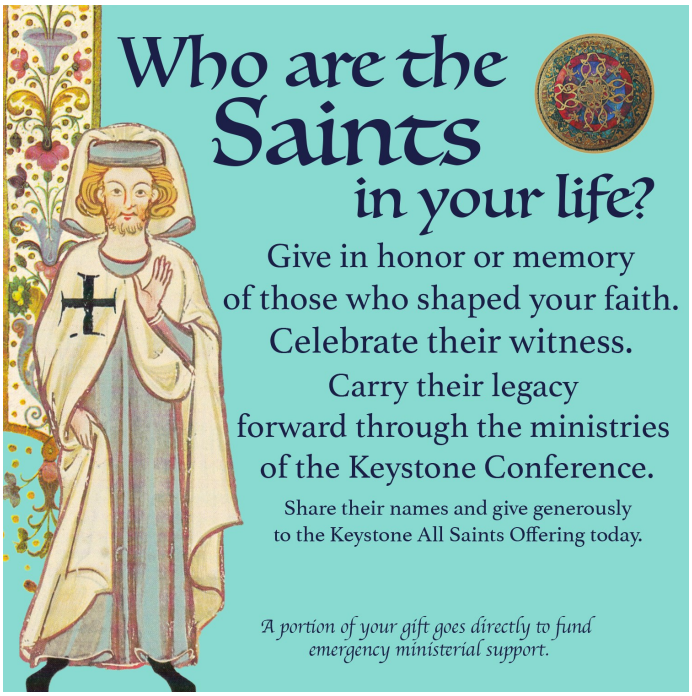
A tent cannot stand without tension. But neither can it stand without people willing to hold it together.

We do not belong to one another because we agree on everything. We belong to one another because we belong to Christ. And that is reason enough to keep working, listening, and loving.

Join me, Executive Conference Minister Carrie Call, and several Keystone participants from A Tent of Our Own Making on Wednesday, October 28, at 6:30 p.m. for a conversation about this ongoing churchwide project, what we learned, and what it might mean for our life together in Keystone. Register by clicking on the link on the website calendar.

Shalom,

Nora
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