

General Minister and President ***Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson*** *on*

"Living Under a Big Tent"

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here."

Many UCC congregations use words like these at the beginning of worship. As your General Minister and President, I wonder, "what do we mean when we utter these words?"

These expansive words imply radical inclusion and have welcomed many into the church - some back to church - in a way they had never known. While we experience differences in our ideologies and ideas, we feel called to a lived expression of inclusion based on love. We want to be a safe space for all to live lives that draw us closer to God through Jesus Christ.

This too is commitment. We may be in different locations on this spiritual journey, yet we are similarly trying to find our way well beyond the daily living of our physical lives. Yet we commit to being a "big tent" of expansive welcome. The term "big tent" refers to a group that includes many different groups or ideas, and as a result can attract a wide range of supporters. This type of diversity is not easy to sustain when there is such a wide range of views, and yet, in the United Church of Christ (UCC) we find God calling us to live under a big tent.

The wide range of diversities among us run along theological, political, racial/ethnic, church size, leadership, worship style, and even geographic lines. We are small and large, urban and rural, on-line and in-person, store-front and traditional church struc-

tures, Open and Affirming (ONA) and Evangelical, Conservative, Orthodox, or Traditional (ECOT), and much more. All of these and in between are a part of the UCC.

When I think of life in the UCC, I am often reminded of Jesus' words when he was asked which commandment was the first. He responded that the first was loving God and added: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31). Much can be said about who is the neighbor. The neighbor includes strangers and certainly includes those we journey with in this denomination we call the UCC. Jesus did not say love the people who are like-minded, nor did he say love the people who are like you. Jesus taught a big lesson: love your neighbor as yourself.

In this big tent, we find ourselves at odds sometimes. We do not always agree. Our differences seem to outweigh the similarities we share. Jesus' prayer for his disciples is one we hold as a motto for the UCC: "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). Unity does not mean uniformity. We are called to hold the differences we bring with us and honor the differences in each other. God's love can be the glue that holds us together.

Loving each other amid our differences can be challenging. Civil discourse takes practice. We will need patience for hard conversations. Instead of defending our positions, we will need to listen in love. We will need courage to honor the diversities already present and emerging among us. Challenging, certainly; but together, we can live under this big tent of God's love learning and growing with each other.

We cannot do this alone. We need each other. More so, we need to experience God's love alive and present working in us, through us, and among us as we continue to answer the call to love and to be welcoming of all who come through the doors of the church. Whether left, right or center in our theological or political leanings - all are welcome to be a part of the UCC.

OUR CHURCH'S WIDER MISSION

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Learn more about the big tent of the UCC at
https://www.ucc.org



"The LORD God placed the human in the Garden of Eden as its gardener, to tend and care for it."

- Genesis 2:15

Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt, Minister for Environmental Justice, grounds his work in the first calling of humans to care for the earth; to tend and care for it as we hear in Genesis. The United Church of Christ helped launch the environmental justice movement through the Commission on Racial Justice several decades ago. The commission saw – earlier than most – the close connection between environmental questions and racial justice. Between our faith and our history, the UCC brings a unique witness to environmental justice.

"I use the term 'environmental justice' because it points to a central moral dimension of the multiple crises we face today," explains Brooks. "Environmental concerns like climate change and pollution do not impact everyone equally. We want to address the way systemic racism and economic exploitation relate to the creation care. The UCC's emphasize on equity represents a crucial voice in the climate and creation conversation."

Environmental justice work can seem overwhelming. But by working together, we can experience hope.

First, we can gain hope by acting for change. Hope is a verb. Brooks and his team provide practical resources for congregations and members, from installing solar panels and reducing their carbon footprint to advocating for policy changes that benefit people and the planet. And importantly, we don't act alone. People across the UCC and beyond join us in this work.

Second, hope grows from our roots. Our work on environmental justice connects us to the deep prophetic tradition of scripture. The prophets inspire Brooks to focus his ministry on three things: centering justice, going public, and confronting those in power.

Third, hope builds upon hope. UCC advocates for justice have won important environmental advancements in the past, and we are building momentum for success in the future.

In all these ways, we can experience hope in the environmental justice movement.

That hope will be given voice at the Earth Day Summit on April 21, 2024. Climate activist Bill McKibben will speak at the Church of Christ UCC at Dartmouth College. You can learn more and register to participate in-person or virtually at www.ucc.org/earthsummit.

Congregations and people across the United Church of Christ act and advocate for environmental justice. Together, we address our first calling to tend and care for the earth. Gifts to OCWM Basic Support make possible crucial programs like our witness on environmental justice.



Learn more about Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt's work at
https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice-ministries/

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"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

– Isaiah 43: 19.

Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay and a team of writers she recruits produce weekly worship resources known as Worship Ways for UCC congregations. She also writes weekly Sermon Seeds for pastors and Weekly Seeds for adult Bible study (see link at back of insert). "Worship is the most formative experience we have in the church. Most people engage their church through worship. So worship needs to be more than just informative. I want it to help change lives."

In her commitment to inspirational worship, Cheryl brings a new perspective to familiar Biblical stories and annual celebrations.

"I'm convinced God continues to do a 'new thing' through worship. I want people to have fresh eyes when looking at a story. This leads to a deeper understanding of God and who we are as God's creation."

Before becoming a minister, Cheryl spent over a decade working in business and away from church. But God reached out to her during a time of grief and brought

her back through the vitality and openness of a local congregation. In her own life, she's experienced God making something new.

Cheryl wants to return to the dynamism of worship in the early church.

Our spiritual ancestors started a movement. "At our best, the church engages people on a journey. But too often, we turn church into a destination, isolating ourselves and focusing on faith as a location set apart from the rest of our lives." The prayers of Worship Ways, the ideas offered in Sermon Seeds, and the questions raised in Weekly Seeds all aim to reclaim spirituality as a journey, a movement.

Music matters deeply to the experience of worship. People remember hymns more than scripture verses. "We carry music with us as we leave worship." Cheryl questions the hymns she suggests. Is it justice-centered or commercialized? Does it build our connections or encourage individualism? "I always seek music rooted in Jesus Christ's revolutionary liberation."

Cheryl's ministry also engages local leaders through workshops at Association and Conference gatherings, webinars, and special events. This year, she will host an event to reimagine rituals in the United Church of Christ. "I'm excited to bring together artists and writers to offer new resources to local congregations."

Worship Ways and other resources from the national ministries of the UCC expand our understanding of God and ourselves. Our gifts to OCWM Basic Support make possible resources like Worship Ways that strengthen local congregations.

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Learn more about Worship Ways at
www.ucc.org/WorshipWays



"Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand watch by night in the house of the Lord."

- Psalm 134: 1.

We may not have a night watch guarding our sanctuaries at night. Still, the United Church of Christ's general counsel, Heather Kimmel, does look out for the interests of congregations and provides guidance to avoid risks. Heather observes, "As a lawyer, I have the rare opportunity to work for an organization whose values I stand behind."

Heather works closely with our conference minister when a congregation encounters a problem. Rev. Franz Rigert, Conference Minister for Wisconsin and Chair of the Council of Conference Minister, appreciates her help. "Heather provides conferences excellent guidance on legal and ecclesiastical issues. After a Federal District Judge in Wisconsin struck down the ministerial housing allowance as unconstitutional, clergy were anxious. Heather sent regular, reassuring briefs to conference ministers until its constitutionality was upheld by the Seventh Court of Appeals."



Churches can't function when legal roadblocks arise. Heather helps congregations

like ours avoid those problems by providing insight on leases, copyrights, and best practices.

Our leaders can find these insights on her "General Counsel Blog." Whether it's direct counsel to national leaders and conference ministers or insights through her blog, Heather helps leaders avoid costly mistakes.

The United Church of Christ national leaders often speak to justice concerns we hold in our hearts. Many justice issues involve questions that come before the Supreme Court. Heather closely reviews cases to consider if the General Synod (the public voice of our Christian movement) will file or join in an amicus brief. She works closely with our national leaders and partners in other religious movements to speak to our values through amicus briefs.

In a recent brief, the UCC joined interfaith partners to file a brief in the Kennedy v. Bremerton case. The case centered on the public prayer by a football coach following games in violation of school policy. After unsuccessful attempts to find alternative solutions, the school district did not renew the coach's contract. Our brief supported the school district in the case, arguing that the coach's speech – as an employee at a school event – was restricted by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. While the majority of the court disagreed, Heather ensured our UCC values were well represented in the brief.

Congregations need a legal advocate who can give voice to our values and help us avoid costly mistakes. The gifts to OCWM Basic Support make possible crucial programs like the Office of General Counsel that strengthen local congregations.

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