

“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 structures, 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.

Learn more about the big tent of the UCC at
[**www.ucc.org**](http://www.ucc.org)