

Reflections on General Synod 32

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The 20 delegates that made up the Indiana-Kentucky Conference delegation for the 32nd General Synod of the United Church of Christ have returned home from a week of reflection, community building, celebrating, voting, debating, protesting, marching, and attempting to get to the heart of our identity as a denomination. What an experience it was, friends. As always, it is exhilarating to connect with colleagues and friends, exhausting morning till night, tense through times of disagreement, yet hopeful as God works in our midst as we gather. The power of this gathering for me has been our capacity for resiliency to stay at the table and live in covenant even when our conversations remind us of our differences and diversity of faith across this denomination. In a world where there is significant polarization, we need a Church like the United Church of Christ to be having these hard conversations with each other with dignity, grace, justice, love, and compassion. Did we accomplish this as a Church at synod? My answer is that there were glimpses...but not yet.

One of my observations of this Synod was just how closely our conversations and resolutions dovetailed with our being a Just Peace Conference. Many years ago our Conference designated itself as a Just Peace Conference, having worked for three decades advocating and partnering with our siblings in Christ in Sri Lanka. The four elements of a Just Peace are:

- Justice for the Earth
- Justice for the Economy
- Justice for the Neighbor
- Justice for the Global Community

As we discerned our life together as a denomination, many of the resolutions and debates centered in these four areas. Resolutions included condemning private prisons, recognizing opioid addiction as a public health crisis, addressing global migration, recognizing the complexity of poverty and evictions in the United States, denouncing white supremacy and sexual violence, condemning the use of Styrofoam, publicly supporting the Green New Deal, calling us to step back from the brink of nuclear war, and getting to the heart of the local church as the basic unit of our polity. The most challenging resolution was resolution committee 8, which addressed the use of exhibit space at Synod. At the heart of this resolution brought forth by the Michigan Conference was a challenge to find a systemic solution to how exhibit space is used by those groups that may not be affirming of the LGBTQ community, particularly the Faithful and Welcoming movement in our denomination. Resolution 8 really pushed us to think long and hard about our statement, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Does this statement have limitations? How far does our extravagant welcome extend? In the end,

this resolution, while tense and strongly debated on both sides, was tabled to be handled by the United Church of Christ Board of Directors to set up a behavioral covenant for those using exhibit hall space.

I was grateful to see that the work we do as a Conference around Just Peace, which extends into these four areas, seemed to span most of our conversations as a denomination. This also suggests to me that the conversations we had at our Annual Gathering around “Who is our neighbor?” was the exact right conversation at this time. The world needs us engaged in that conversation and I am so grateful to our delegates who lived out courageous conversations with depth, hope, and compassion. The Indiana-Kentucky Conference was represented well by these delegates. Sarah Frische-Mouri Hannigan led a committee, several individuals took leadership and spoke on the floor during debate, they tweaked resolution submissions in committee, and Sarah Lund worked to have the Mental Health Network be recognized as an historically underrepresented group—the IKC offered a significant voice to this Synod.

It is my sense that Synod is a national, perhaps even international and inter-denominational, conversation about who God is calling us to be in this season of the Church’s life. That’s why I find it thrilling to be a part of this Church. Are we having this conversation and living this covenant perfectly? Of course not. But, getting closer to the kingdom of God, closer to living as a Covenant people, will require courage to have the kinds of knotty conversations we had at Synod. But those conversations were only the beginning. The important work starts now. How will we as a Conference carry on these important conversations? There is some significant conversation at this moment coming out of Synod about wanting to become a WISE Conference for Mental Health. I am certain that we will hear more about this as we discern together as a conference at our next annual gathering.

One of the other important conversations coming out of Synod was about the ongoing crisis at our nation’s southern border and the treatment of children. Several IKC folks went to the border this January 2019; we spoke at annual gathering about our experience. I would like to invite you to continue the conversation by joining me on a trip to the border. We will be taking a group of 15 people to the border in Arizona with our partners at the Good Shepherd UCC in January 2020. These partners already work and advocate there. See our blurb about the trip in this email, and look for a separate email coming out next week. But don’t wait. If you’d like to be on this trip, email me by July 31st at c.abbott@ikcucc.org to express your interest.

In the end, if Synod did anything for me it reminded me of our deep and abiding connection as God’s people, that there is a broader calling of our life together than just the local setting of ministry, and that being a part of something that is as expansive as the United Church of Christ demands that we have hard conversations with each other that are rooted in the compassion of Christ. I look forward to having such conversations with you in this biennium leading to General Synod 33 in Kansas City.