

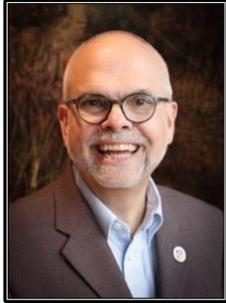


HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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15 And let the peace of Christ[b] rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. *-Colossians 3:15-16*

Grounded in a Song of Gratitude



Dear Beloved in Christ,

One of my earliest memories and experiences of the largeness of God happened one Sunday morning when I was 3 or 4 years old during worship. The congregation my father was serving as pastor had only recently completed the construction of the new church building. When I say, constructed the building, I mean that the members literally sawed the wood, laid the brick and finished the pews themselves.

In the sanctuary that carried all the smells of newness, we engaged the elements one might think of when it comes to worship: praying, hearing scripture read, and interpretation of the word through the sermon. But it was the singing that I most powerfully remember. On the Sunday of my memory, I paused my singing while everyone continued, and I just listened. All around me, I experienced the voices joined by a spirit of something that seemed larger than the sum of the parts.

I cannot fully explain it in words but later came to discover something of what the writer of Colossians counseled in his letter to the early church. I discovered a calling into the Body of Christ that is larger than anyone of us and includes all of us. Something about this experience revealed to me that our singing was about more than just allowing our vocal cords to move in some kind of synchronicity with each other at a physical level. Truly in that space of worship we were being tuned by and to the heart of God with a song of life that was more than just the hymn we were singing in that moment. Though I did not yet know these words, awe and gratitude filled me and changed me.



Recently, at the General Synod in Kansas City, where representatives of the United Church of Christ from across the country gathered along with ecumenical partners from around the world, this early memory rose up from deep within me. During Synod we did many things. We worshipped. We elected the Rev. Shari Prestemon as the new Associate General Minister and Co-Executive of Global Ministries. We discussed and voted on resolutions offered as conversation starters to the wider church and as calls for action in faithful response to the gospel. You can find a summary of those resolutions [here](#). I hope you will use these as conversation starters with your congregation and among your family and friends,

remembering that these Synod resolutions are meant to help us consider deep and often complex things in ways that intersect with the heart and mind of Christ.



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What stuck out for me again was the community formed by singing. Sometimes the songs were new to me, and I had to allow the newness to stretch my heart and mind. At other times, the songs were familiar, and I was led to belt them out from that deep place formed so long ago when I was 3 or 4. In all of it, I discovered myself woven into something that was larger than the sum of the parts. Again, I found myself pausing and giving thanks to God for so many precious gifts all around me, including our delegates who gave of their time – thank you so very much!

I found myself thankful for words of challenge and encouragement from our global partners who have always stretched the eyes of my heart to see the world more as God sees it. I was filled with gratitude for the wonderful variety of traditions brought together by the many cultures that are part of the United Church of Christ. **I was and am so very thankful to every one of you who supported our delegates through our Strengthen the Church offering.**

I was also very thankful that we have now been invited to **host the next General Synod in Cleveland from July 21-25, 2028.** Together, we will celebrate the **70th anniversary of the United Church of Christ.** I hope you will mark your calendars now.

The announcement of our hosting was made as our delegation ascended to the stage and belted out in song, “Cleveland Rocks! Cleveland Rocks! Cleveland Rocks!” There was laughter and delight. The truth is there is a song of love formed by the One who is Love. When we sing together God gifts us with a taste of what God seeks to make possible in the whole human family – a community formed by love for a joy unspeakable. In these days, may we trust this work of God’s spirit more and more and consent to its invitation to join in the chorus.



Blessings on you all!
Pastor Dave