

A Taste of Synod

Earlier this summer, I had the privilege to be a delegate to the 31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Baltimore. I had been to six previous Synod's but only as an exhibitor or a volunteer. That meant that I only got glimpses of the business sessions and never was an active participant. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed being a delegate.

So what is a "General Synod" anyway?

General Synod combines church business, inspiring worship, exhibits, social activism, and workshops. For many, Synod is also like a big family reunion as over 2000 clergy and lay people see old friends and renew acquaintances. Most importantly, Synod is a place where the church pauses to consider what Christ is calling us to be in the world today.

Various settings of the church are present at General Synod and engage in a variety of ways - making presentations during plenary sessions, setting up displays in the exhibit hall, sponsoring service projects, and offering workshops. There are also many groups that gather during Synod simply because so many people are already present.

Here's a short video from the opening general session, or plenary, including the Synod moderator and a segment of Rev. Tracy Blackmon's sermon.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXjSA1DbQWQ> (1:35)

Prior to Synod, Tracy Blackmon had been serving as the interim Executive Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries. She was officially elected to that position overwhelmingly by the Synod delegates a couple of days later. I wish I had time to share her entire sermon with you. It was amazing!

All church denominations have ways of governing themselves and many gather representatives every year or so to consider a range of issues relevant to the church. For the United Church of Christ, this gathering happens every two years and is called General Synod.

Business that comes before Synod include pronouncements, proposals for action, and resolutions. Specific rules govern the format, timing, and what vote is needed for passage. Such motions may be submitted by an association, conference, a specific ministry, or by a group of churches or delegates to Synod, in accordance with the rules. Items that are deemed routine or non-controversial will be presented directly to the plenary body while others are dealt with in hearings or are assigned to committees.

There are over 700 delegates to Synod selected by the 38 conferences of the UCC in proportion to their membership. All delegates are assigned to committees to consider one or more of the business items that have been submitted to Synod. I was assigned to a committee considering a resolution on Disability Justice. Other business items included revisions to the bylaws of the United Church of Christ, election of officers and directors, and a variety of resolutions. The issues ranged from “Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Church,” to responding to Gun Violence, and supporting a \$15 minimum wage. Most of these motions were “Resolutions of Witness” focused on moral and religious issues that confront the church, nation, or world, and consequently required a two-thirds vote for passage.

Committees debated the resolutions, modified them as they deemed appropriate, and then made recommendations regarding passage. I found it interesting that there were some resolutions where I thought I knew how I would vote prior to Synod but found myself swayed by statements made on the plenary floor. Sometimes, this was a result of testimony from persons directly affected by the resolution or sometimes after reflection on what role the church should play in such a matter.

In most cases, the resolutions included calls to action to local churches. Because of the polity of the United Church of Christ, the resolutions are not binding on local churches but are invitations to become educated on the issues and consider how to be engaged.

While the business was interesting to me, I was most affected by the worship, music, and certain presentations. In particular, I was impressed by the report by Rev. John Dorhauer, our General Minister and President. Much of his report reflected on the new Purpose, Vision, and Mission Statements of the UCC that were announced last fall.

The new UCC purpose statement comes from the Gospel of Matthew: ***To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.***

The vision statement reads: ***United in Christ's love, a just world for all.***

And the Mission statement is: ***United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.***

Here is a small segment from John Dorhauer's comments at Synod in which he outlines a new framework for pursuing love and justice as a unified church during his report to General Synod. It is followed by a video that was part of his report.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7i4aAuZM6k&list=PL6VgfHt6zEy62_c0N7VOMFpQXz8DTfiau&index=16 (:41)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZbMEMpRJ0k&list=PL6VgfHt6zEy62_c0N7VOMFpQXz8DTfiau&index=17 (3:54)

My goal was to give you a sampling of what I experienced during five days of Synod. The worship service today incorporated music and liturgies from the services. If you're interested in seeing more, many of the worship and business sessions are on YouTube. Just search for 2017 UCC General Synod. You can also find a complete list of resolutions and news articles about Synod on UCC.org. Perhaps there can be a time where the church can take a closer look at the resolutions and consider which speak to us. For instance, the resolution about Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Church

spoke deeply to me and I would like to see our church think about what that might mean for us.

I would encourage all of you to seek out opportunities to participate in the wider church, either here in the Ohio Conference event at the next General Synod. I hope to see you there and hear your stories upon your return!

Prepared by Cathy Green, Synod delegate from the Ohio Conference
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With the three videos, this message takes approximately 14 minutes. Please feel free to use and modify as necessary.