

General Synod 2023

A Reflection for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Scripture Readings

“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. 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 43:18-19

“In the same way the Mother loves me, I have loved you. Never stop walking this road of love. 10 By doing what the Mother has told me, I have remained in God’s love. 11 As you walk in my ways, my love will remain in you. I am saying this so your hearts will be filled with the same joy I have. 12 “To walk the road with me, you must love each other in the same way I have loved you. - From the First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament - as adapted and read at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, 2023.

(slide 1)

Last week, with your support, I attended the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. This happens every two years - although we will be moving to every three years in 2028. I want to share some highlights from this year’s Synod.

First, for those of you who haven't taken Comparative Polity or who find that it's more important to know about how this local church works than to understand our regional and national connections - let me offer just a bit of background.

We are Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ is our national denomination. What makes the UCC special is that we are connected to in Covenant, that is to say, promise - not bound. Our local church makes promises to the Metropolitan Boston Association, our regional conference, and our national setting. And they make promises to us. One of the biggest promises in both directions is that we listen to each other.

Covenant is "a way of being committed to each other as God is committed to us, a way of being defined by, accountable to and responsible for each other." (Walter Brueggemann)

(slide 2)

We say in the UCC that the association, conference, and national settings speak to the churches - not for the churches. And the association, conference, and national settings are made up of representatives of local churches. General Synod is a meeting of voting members of local churches. There were 736 voting delegates from all over the country in Indianapolis last week. And hundreds of visitors, like me.

"The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action." (UCC Constitution)

The UCC is non-hierarchical, and non-credal. Pilgrim Church makes its own decisions about our property, our pastors, our theological commitments like being Open and Affirming.

But each gathering of the church provides resources, and challenges, that are good for us. And it's only at General Synod that we get to see the broad diversity of language, ability, tradition, race, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, that make up the UCC. We learn from one another and we worship together, and when we go back to our local churches we bring all that back for the good of the church. As Rev. JJ Flagg, one of our preachers, said - we come back to act more like God and do more like God.

So here are some highlights from last week.

We elected our new General Minister and President, the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson. She is the first woman, the first woman of African descent, and the first immigrant to be elected to this important position. She comes from many years of interfaith and ecumenical work on behalf of the United Church of Christ and I think that's really important because with her leadership we will continue to partner with other Christian traditions and other faith traditions in the US and around the world. Karen Georgia Thompson has been like a member of LICA on a national and international scale. So I'm excited for her.

(Slides 3 & 4)

But on a personal level, I was thrilled to see these three people together: Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk (Mother Delk); Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund (BBZ); and Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson. These are the three women nominated over course of the UCC to be General Minister and President. Karen Georgia Thompson is the first to be elected. Mama Delk and BBZ were nominated but not elected.

They are two of the matriarchs of the UCC and I got to spend time with them both, time I will treasure forever.

(Slides 5 & 6)

Dr. Delk spent much of Synod sharing the good word of a just published book on the Afro-Christian Convention. If you have been closely following my preaching over the last year you know some of this story. The origin story of the UCC used to be told as a merger of four traditions. That story left out the Afro-Christian Convention - and y'all have to know that was systemic racism at work within our tradition - but at this Synod the Afro-Christian tradition was recognized as our Fifth Stream, and our outgoing General Minister offered a powerful apology for its prior exclusion. This is important stuff in the work of anti-racism, and is the national church showing the way.

Speaking of which, we heard from Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be AntiRacist* - a book I highly recommend - and from Bryan Stevenson whose book *Just Mercy* has inspired so many to action.

(Slide 7)

But we also heard from an unnamed member of a local UCC Church in Indiana and I want to tell you what he said in an open forum. He was born into St. Matthew's Evangelical and Reformed Church in the mid-sixties. (Evangelical and Reformed were two of our Streams.) By the time he was baptized, the UCC had formed and his church was known as St. Matthew's United Church of Christ, which is to this day. But 66 years later, he sat at General Synod and heard a Very Famous Speaker who the UCC paid a lot of money to for her visit, refer to everyone at Synod as Congregationalists. When, he asked, would we be truly all be the United Church of Christ. It was a provocative question with local implications - Pilgrim was founded

after the UCC merger, but 66 years later many of us say Pilgrim Congregational. An important covenantal challenge, I think.

Okay, I've got just a few more highlights to share.

What did I experience that would be useful to life of this congregation? Some of it doesn't come with pictures, so I'll share some unrelated photos as I go.

I took a Narcan training at Synod. That's the medication that can halt an opioid overdose long enough to get emergency medical treatment. And I brought back several doses.

Slide 8, 9

I went to a session on UCC churches responding to Antisemitism. Many of you know that Pilgrim members are deeply involved in a local interfaith effort - and coincidentally the workshop leader is a UCC pastor on the staff of ADL Connecticut who has Lexington ties.

I attended a luncheon on Reproductive Justice and the work of the UCC to advocate for Reproductive Justice. And I attended a workshop on local church vitality.

(Remaining Slides through GF)

Now, speaking of local church vitality. Being connected to the whole UCC tells us some critical things.

We are not alone. Lemme say that again. We are not alone. From the first words of our first Synod session through the end, every speaker referenced the challenges that local churches are facing in a post-CoVid, socially and politically polarized moment, a moment when we might even wonder if the world is falling apart around us. There was a lot of fear in the room. Just to name the church impact clearly: Local churches, and the UCC and every progressive Christian tradition, and every Christian tradition in the US, face declining membership and participation. Weirdly, there's also not enough ministers to serve all of our churches, which is kind of a paradox. It was cathartic to hear all of it named aloud. And also - I'll just say that comparatively speaking, Pilgrim on a good day in October (which is what I call an average Sunday) is doing okay. Not only that but I told good stories from Thai church that inspired others.

And there were challenging and provocative and hopeful words spoken to guide and inspire our churches.

Jamar Doyle, on the national staff, suggested that our tradition has been on autopilot, that we have been cruise control Christians. Hard to hear, but a good call to intentionality and innovation. Karen Georgia Thompson asked us to remember that God is at work now. And Nadia Bolz-Weber benedicted us: When we stand on the rock of this old old story, one hand back to the hope of the prophets, one hand reaching forward to the promise of God, we can stand firmly in the reality of this challenging present and not have it consume us.

So much more to say and to share over coming months. But I want to close with a really personal moment. I was in the exhibit hall, picking up swag and TShirts and pens - when I heard a voice. Rebecca! I turned and saw George Graham, whom I have known for 35 years. We both went to a church in another tradition back in Nashville, and

we both found a new home in the UCC. And we reconnected at General Synod. And I give thanks.

Synod, and our association and conference, are not just for pastors. Many lay members connect with the wider church in these ways and come home energized and inspired - and you can, too. Let me know if you want to learn more.

Amen.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dhdr5ggtyahafMCuufom0PrHjpDmzDN0mdXUQrhb4TQ/edit> 55:30 - We are the Church – Into the Scripture reading -

<https://www.ucc.org/gs34-opening-worship/> - 56:40 - God has work for us to do.