

31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ

Comments from the 2017 Pacific Northwest Conference Delegation to the 31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ



From Left to Right: Emma Ritchie, Nathaniel Mahlberg, Jill Komura, Mike Denton, Kyna Shilling, Peter Ilgenfritz, and Wendy Blight

In the big messy gathering of UCC humans I experienced in Cleveland this past Fourth of July weekend, I found an earnest body of folks who had something to teach me about how to be a Sermon-on-the-Mount kind of Jesus follower in our present time of crisis. What impressed me most was the strength in struggling inwardly with our own weaknesses, as we show our strength in struggling outwardly against the abuses of power that roar around us. There is a willingness to be honest with ourselves that, for example, however inclusive of the gifts of all God's people we think we are as the UCC, we still as a whole show discrimination against woman, people of color, and LGBTQ folks in our hiring practices.

At the same time as there is a willingness to be honest with ourselves, for example, about the great cost we are called to risk to protect our immigrant siblings and neighbors in our present time. I am happy to report that this kind call to both inward and outward honesty and boldness, faithfulness and critical mindedness, resonates in the conversation I have had post-synod with the local congregation I serve, which is not particularly identified with the UCC as a national body.

Between us as a cohort, I want to offer that I really enjoyed getting to know you all do the degree we did in working together this way. One piece of food for thought: I voted for the "right to death with dignity" resolution. All those from my church I spoke with before hand supported it. Yet I was relieved it didn't pass because I saw that the disagreement was substantive and I wanted the larger body to work to a consensus on the matter.

-Nathaniel Mahlberg, member of First Congregational Church in Walla Walla

I come back thankful and stimulated by the conversations I took part in at General Synod. We passed resolutions on a host of critical issues and I come away deeply thankful for the stewards of our church's ministry who have the essential gifts of listening for the Spirit and crafting and tweaking language. The engagement in committees – hearing about resolutions and shaping responses to bring to the floor of Synod was an important part of the first couple of days of our work. This kind of language crafting is not my strength and made me grow all the more grateful to those who do this so well. Also thanks to Pacific Northwest Conference member David Anderson who again this year played a central role at Synod in crafting and holding this process of committee hearings!

I come home inspired about what our denomination is doing in in the national setting and in conferences throughout the country. We were reminded many times, that “this is our time” as church to live into our call to help make a just world for all. The world, our country and communities need our witness. I am honored to have served as a delegate from our conference and pleased now to have the opportunity in some new ways to offer my financial gifts to support the work of the church in our national and conference settings.

--Peter Ilgenfritz, member of University Congregational United Church of Christ

“There is a river whose streams make glad the City of God.” (Psalm 46:4)

The scriptural anchor for this year's General Synod in Baltimore seemed a perfect metaphor to me. As a relative newbie to the United Church of Christ, I was struck most in my five days at the Baltimore Convention Center by the myriad of streams, eddies and cross-currents visible in the floor debate and the hearings I attended. There was so much to take in. It was hard not to be swept up, inspired and energized, and at times a bit overwhelmed. One moment I truly felt the many different currents pulling in varied directions was sitting in the packed hearing of the Habakkuk team, whose role is to propose revisions to the Manual on Ministry. They are not yet finished with their work, and were flooded with heartfelt responses.

I was also very impressed by the integrity of the *process* throughout Synod. Such an articulate, passionate and persevering denomination! The shifting tenor of the debates and the careful and creative re-crafting of language showed that participants were genuinely *listening* to one another. The hearing to which I was assigned, on Corporal Punishment of children, was a shining example of the delegates dedication to listening to one another. In a very informative “Educational Intensive,” the data made clear to the committee how use of corporal punishment in American public institutions and school settings is used disproportionately against children of color. Yet, the committee was split over the distinction of the use of corporal punishment in public versus private (home) settings that was part of the original language of the resolution as proposed. After some intense discussion between people of differing racial backgrounds, the committee was persuaded to change the language of the resolution to be a denominational call against corporal punishment in a variety of public, or institutional settings, but removing the condemnatory language against corporal punishment in private settings by parents. The voice of African Americans, in particular, was not only heard in the committee room that day, it guided the drafting of the resolution eventually passed on the floor before the general body, as well.

--Jill Komura, member of The United Churches of Olympia

"Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them" - Matthew 18:20

This is my favorite bible verse, and it certainly jumped to mind when I entered the crowded Baltimore Convention Center to join thousands of United Church of Christ delegates, clergy, and friends who were part of General Synod 2017.

I couldn't help but think, "Wow, if Jesus is here when we've only got 2 or 3 people in a room, what must he think of this!" This passage is apt for the process of Synod, because (in context) Jesus is talking about how members of the church find consensus, and the whole weekend was one big experiment in listening to and sharing diverse perspectives, finding the ways we agree and disagree, making mistakes and making amends, and being the (big) church together.

I was a member of Committee 10, tasked with discussing a Resolution of Witness in Support of Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse and Neglect. The resolution calls on all settings of the church to take seriously our commitment to love and inclusion and welcome, and to provide public support for the healing needs of the many adult survivors in our congregations. It also calls for educational materials, and for advocacy around policies that support survivors. This is a sensitive and personal topic for many, and the committee discussion was passionate and vulnerable. I was particularly interested in a debate over the use of the word "survivor" -- for some, it is a label that doesn't fit them yet, as they still feel like victims who haven't yet survived the impact of their childhood abuse. For others, the act of claiming their survivor-ship has been essential to their healing process. After much discussion and some edits in wording, the resolution passed out of committee and was approved on the floor of Synod.

--Kyna Shilling, member of Plymouth Church, Seattle

I had not ever been a delegate to General Synod, but I had attended several national gatherings in previous years. This year felt different. Not only was I a voting delegate, seated where the action happens, but the focus was on justice. Having recently adopted the Vision Statement, "United in Christ's love, a just world for all", the church resounded with that theme for the five days we were there. Of course, we in the UCC always put a lot of emphasis on social justice, but this year I felt that it had come to the center of our theology and our work. I have returned inspired and ready to work with you toward a just world for all in our Pacific NW Conference!

My committee assignment was the resolution in Support of Legislation Authorizing Medical Aid in Dying. The committee received an excellent presentation from a doctor who has studied this issue for many years. We also heard from the former husband of a woman who was terminally ill, in great pain and in hospice care. They had to move to Oregon so that she could end her life legally and with dignity. His comments were heartfelt. The resolution was approved with minor changes in our committee but did not receive the two thirds majority that it needed from the plenary.

This is a sensitive issue and in the end, I think there were too many questions remaining. For those wanting more information, [here](#) is an article written about the resolution, and [here](#) is an article written after the resolution was presented in plenary and didn't pass.

--Wendy Blight, member of Alki UCC