

General Synod Report

I was part of the Montana Northern Wyoming delegation that included our Conference Minister, Marc Stewart, and our three voting delegates Rev. Nick Knoblach of the Broadus Church, Rev. Lynne Spencer Smith of the Great Falls Church, and Sophia Heilman of Billings First Church.

We had a full schedule, every day. On Thursday, my day began with an 8am meeting with Conference Moderators from across the denomination, across the country. For those of you who have attended professional meetings, it will not surprise you that this gathering was one of the most important simply because we had the opportunity to network. We connected. We heard others who share the same concerns and are working towards similar goals. We now have a mailing list so that we can reach out to one another for information, advice and support.

Over the next few days, delegates gathered to learn more about their resolutions and to discuss them. We had the opportunity to hear from most of the committees at our Western Region Caucus each morning. This allowed us to share what we had learned and to hear different perspectives. As these resolutions were then presented to the full body of General Synod, each committee presented the resolution and their recommendation. Delegates were able to speak for or against the resolution. When the discussion was over, delegates voted.

Writing, considering and passing these resolutions is an important part of the work of local congregations. And it is unique because, unlike so many denominations, we are not bound by these resolutions. In the United Church of Christ, the national gathering does not dictate to local congregations. These resolutions speak TO local congregations, not FOR them. So let's accept our responsibility to listen and then determine how we will respond. All resolutions are available at <http://ucceverywhere.org/synod/>

I want to share with you about one particular resolution that was expected to be controversial. This resolution, called "Stewardship of Exhibit Space as a Mission of Justice" proposed that the displays in the exhibition hall align with core values and past resolutions of the UCC. At the heart of this resolution were two different values. On the one hand, the United Church of Christ has affirmed Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual persons and their ministries and has affirmed marriage equality. On the other hand, the group of congregations calling themselves Faithful and Welcoming seek to encourage and connect congregations who "advocate for an historic understanding of sexuality and marriage.

I spent time at the Faithful and Welcoming booth and talked to the folks who are members. They call themselves ECOTs (Evangelical, Conservative, Orthodox and Traditional), which describes some of us in the Montana Northern Wyoming Conference. Faithful and Welcoming see themselves as a gathering place for those UCC congregations who want to remain in the denomination, but also want to embrace and use traditions and language that are important to them. In addition, they really do seem to want open and respectful dialogue on these issues.

I also spent time listening to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Some were very clear and vocal that they did not want to see the Faithful and Welcoming group denied a place in the exhibit hall. They felt it was important for them to be there, to have a place at the table, and to be part of transformative conversations. A group of young LGBTQ+ youth and allies felt very

differently. They talked about the problems LGBTQ+ youth face (kicked out of homes, high rates of suicide) and said they want Synod to be a place where queer young people can just feel totally at home without having to be confronted by a group that sees them as wrong.

We wrestled with this. Our Western Region invited members of the Faithful and Welcoming group to come and speak to us in our early morning caucus. As a region, we began to see this as more than who can be in the Exhibit Hall. This resolution gets at the heart of who we aspire to be as the United Church of Christ. We came to some consensus that what was needed was not a Resolution but more opportunities for respectful dialogue between people who disagree. And standing at microphones along with 800 representatives of local churches from across the country was simply not the best venue for this conversation. We also agreed that we felt it would be appropriate to have a covenant for any who wish to display in the Exhibit Hall.

This resolution brought two different values to the table, the value of affirming the identity and gifts of our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers, and the value of affirming the Evangelical, conservative, orthodox and traditional voices in our denomination. We could have chosen to side with one value over the other. But, by the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our higher values came to the forefront. "That they may all be one." These words that are printed on our hymnal, emblazoned across our denomination logo, really do guide us in our actions. In the end, the Resolution did not pass.

"That they may all be one." This was Christ's prayer for his followers. That we would find ways to accept our differences and affirm one another. That we would hold hands with those who live, love, look and pray differently, and hold one another accountable. I see this being lived out in our local churches and in our Conference each and every week. "That they may all be one." It was a blessing to see it lived out at our national gathering as well.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Tracy Heilman, Moderator
Pastor of Columbus Community Congregational Church, UCC