State of the Church Address

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UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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A Tent of Our Own Making
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Good morning United Church of Christ. It is good to be present in this place, in this house, in this company of God's people. And what a joy it is to be gathered here together for this 35th General Synod with gratitude to the Missouri Mid-South and Kansas-Oklahoma Conferences for hosting us all. So a hand. It takes time and commitment to be present and I want to thank all of you for being here. I am grateful for all of you gathered here, for those present virtually, and for the extended UCC family. My gratitude. And to the visitors among us, thank you so much for deciding to join us for this General Synod.

This is my first General Synod as the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. And in 19 days, I will celebrate my 2 years on the job. That's 730 days, and so today is my 711th day on the job. Yes, I am counting. I am incredibly grateful to the staff of the National Ministries. The folks who actually make this work that I do probably a lot easier than it seems to be sometimes and so I'm thankful to our staff who show up every day on behalf of the United Church of Christ in a variety of ways that includes our senior staff and sometime next week you'll have a chance to see all of our staff who are present here at General Synod. There are about 91 members of the National Staff present here in Kansas City supporting General Synod. So when you see them, please give a shout out. These are the people who perform the ministry and mission of this denomination, and the work that we manifest around the world in the halls of justice in multi-lateral spaces, with our denominational partners and with you, as you minister in a variety of settings. Where you are. We have a tremendous leadership team with whom I work daily, and some of them are here. You see Bentley and Shari, who you heard from last night. Heather Kimmel is around here somewhere, Tami is here, and I saw Patrick Dugan as well. We are grateful to them and for their presence here.

On June 25th, the United Church of Christ turned 68. Yes, that is something to be applauded. That is sixty-eight years of ministry and mission, bearing witness to the gospel. Sixty-eight years of living into what it means to be a united and uniting church. Sixty-eight years of ecumenical relationships and global partnerships. In the words of that beautiful hymn, "We Limit Not the Truth of God": The hymn says,

…let a new and better hope
within our hearts be stirred–
the Lord hath yet more light and truth
to break forth from his word.[1]

[1] https://hymnary.org/text/we_limit_not_the_truth_of_god

There is yet more light and truth for the United Church of Christ to proclaim in the days, weeks, months and years ahead, resting in a new and better hope.

Identity

I want to talk a little bit this morning as we engage in this state of the church as we talk about identity.

In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus posed two questions to the disciples. He asked: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples said: "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus offered the second question: "But who do you say that I am?" It was in response to the second question that Peter declared: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." I believe that Jesus was clear about who he was. He understood the purpose for which he came and who he was in the midst of that. In his quest to bring a prophetic word to the oppressed, and in his ministry to ease the oppression of those around him, Jesus wanted to know how he was perceived. What did the people have to say about him? He does not weigh for the disciples the importance of their response. He follows up with a second question. To Peter's response, Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." My take away: perception matters. And sometimes, it is important for us to ask the hard questions about identity. Who we think we are is not always how people experience us. Who we think we are is experienced differently by those who are closest to us. And perhaps, just perhaps, how we perceive ourselves is different than either of those lenses.

Church, this morning as we ponder the state of the church, and more specifically the state of this United Church of Christ, I pose the following questions for us:

1. Who do people say the United Church of Christ is?
2. Who do you say the United Church of Christ is? And thirdly,
3. Who do you say the United Church of Christ should be? For this moment.

There is a lot to be said about who people would say we are. We are ecumenically rooted and committed as such. We belong to all the right ecumenical bodies, nationally and globally an active part of the alphabet soup in which the commitments we have for Christian unity is lived out collaboratively as we attempt to be present for the least of these. They may say, we are a just peace church. We are a multicultural multiracial church. We are open and affirming. We are welcoming to all. I would also say, depending on who you spoke with, people will say the United Church of Christ shows up. Our pastors, our members and our leaders are often seen in the public square as strong advocates for justice - marching, protesting, appealing to members of government on a variety of issues and concerns. We show up. We show out. We are justice warriors, and holy troublemakers. Turning over tables and declaring truth to power in this 21st century. We are usually the people in the room who get to the naming of the truth faster than others do, sometimes. And I would say depending on who you spoke with, people would say that the United Church of Christ does a lot of good. That's on the good side of things. And, all would not agree on who they think we are as the United Church of Christ, and that is because we can't even agree on who we are as the United Church of Christ, because that's just who we are. If there are external challenges to the question of identity, as Jesus' experience affirmed, I would say we are challenged internally in our perception of how we see ourselves as a church. A lot has been accomplished in these 68 years of ministry. We can point to the firsts, those accomplishments of which we are proud, in these years, and by our predecessor bodies, and we would still identify that there is

more for us to do. Church, we must resist the dangers of exceptionalism, the notion that who we are is at the center of response and engagement on all things. It is easy to believe that we always get it right and believe that those around us bring less value to the table, or somehow bring nothing more than we do. What we have accomplished, we have not done alone. We've done so in community. Instead we are a part of a great cloud of witnesses journeying with ecumenical partners and global partners in advocating for justice in a world where the church is not often seen as present in addressing the challenges. Even when we have taken radical steps ahead of other denominations many have stood by, cheering us along and supporting this denomination through, and have found their way when ready, to decisions that we have made as the United Church of Christ.

My task this morning is singular, it is to bring to you remarks on the state of the church. I can tell you lots of things about us - and I will. Perception is rooted in experience. My experiences of the United Church of Christ are not lived from the moment when I took the stage in Indianapolis in 2023 and accepted the call to serve as your General Minister and President. My perception of the UCC is well beyond the numbers that show up in the statistical report. My perception of the church is in my body – and it includes experiences of sexism, racism, and apathy. These experiences also say something about who we believe ourselves to be. I am not alone in experiences of the church that make me question what we mean when we say we have an extravagant welcome to all. Those too are a part of who we are and are not to be ignored. But to be named and challenged as continue to grow into what it is that God has called us to be. And yet, in spite of all of that. This church is also the place where hope springs eternal.

As a woman, a person of African descent, born in Jamaica, an immigrant to these United States, an ordained minister, the mother of two sons, the grandmother of three beautiful children of mixed race, I want this church - this church to live into the possibilities of a different future. Jesus said: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." People of God, siblings in Christ, the current state of the church cannot shift or change because of flesh and blood. It will take the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how we move forward together for the living of this day.

Who we are, how people experience us, and what God has in store for us may put three different responses before us. This does not mean they are not true. It is perhaps a place for rest, reflection and reimagining what it means to live more deeply as followers of Jesus. Into the deep is where we need to go as church. That is spiritual as much as it is anything else that we can identify. We are being called beyond the temporality of flesh and blood into deeper spiritual living.

Who Are We?

The 2023 Statistical Profile says a lot about who we are by the numbers. I had a copy that I was going to bring for show and tell but see the people in MESA and they can provide you with the profile. It's actually online at UCC.org. The statistical profile reports on the numerical shifts in the denominational membership, trends in our congregations and accomplishes far more than I can capture in the time allocated for this morning. The 2024 Statistical Profile is in progress and should be available in the fall of this year, with gratitude for the hard work of the Research and Data staff team. Right now we're still looking at the data from 2023, which is the 2022 data.

There has not been a time in the history of the church when challenges could not be identified, and challenges were not present. These days are no different. The prevailing narratives of our time point to decline in numbers of people in our pews, to churches closing and selling their buildings, and to the questioning of the relevance of faith communities in this society. This has been the narrative regarding the mainline churches in the global North. These narratives have been with us for some time. Truth be told the highest membership in the United Church of Christ was in 1957 at conception and the uniting General Synod. That was 68 years ago this past June.

We are a diverse church. The diversities in the church are not always obvious, yet we are the church, together. We come bringing with us our individual expressions and opinions to this place to which we are called to be present in ministry and mission. We are the church, an expression of God revealed. We are the church, the legacy of those who came before and believed that the visible unity of the church was worth the risk of letting go of their individual identity and individualism to create a new church built on the words in Jesus' "that they may all be one". This journey we are on as the United Church of Christ began in 1957.

Yet, that is not where the story of the United Church of Christ ends. We are a living witness of what the church can be and what the church can do, in the midst of our messiness and the diversities which are present among us. We have the opportunity to create the future of this United Church of Christ, led by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We are living Pentecost in these days. We are a part of the united and uniting church globally. It is possible to be both - united having gone through a process of coming together and uniting which means living into the possibility of receiving others into the unity of who we are. And this reality grounds our past, present and future.

By the Numbers…

These 68 years of ministry have seen changes in the demographic composition of who we are. We have less congregations than we had at the time of the united general synod in Cleveland in 1957. The racial/ethnic makeup of the church has changed too. While we are trending downward in membership, the growth in our congregations is actually increasing the diversity that is present in the life of the church. (Applause.) At the end of 2022, there were 4,603 congregations in the United Church of Christ with a total of over 700,000 members. The UCC's congregations represent about 1.3% of total U.S. congregations* while the membership of the UCC represents slightly less than one half of one percent (0.44%) of total U.S. religious adherents* and about 0.21% of the U.S. population.**[2] This is in the statistical profile, and if you haven't read it, you should.

Also from the profile comes the following quote: "A substantial majority of congregations in the UCC self-identify as White/Euro-American (meaning that most members of a congregation belong to that particular racial/ethnic group). Over time, however, the UCC as a whole is becoming more racially/ethnically diverse. And at this time in the UCC< we are more than 80% people of European descent.

But the numbers only tell one part of the story of the church. The numbers that are members of our congregations. Missing perhaps is the data on how many people we are serving and how we are impacting beyond the numbers in attendance on Sunday morning. The ministry and

[2] https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023statisticalreport.v11webUPDATED.pdf, p.4

mission of the church beyond Sunday morning is also the work of the church and are ways in which our congregations are meeting the needs of members and communities that are marginalized and in need. And we must begin to capture that as a part of our story.

I am a very proud member of Olmsted Community Church, part of the Heartland Conference. Our congregation is impacting the world well beyond the Sunday morning experience. Members of our congregation are working on a Habitat house. We have been taking shifts and turns and volunteering to get this house completed. We have provided housing and resources as a part of refugee resettlement in the United States. We have new members that are joining our church, with excitement to be a part of the attention to justice and advocacy. And a few weeks ago in church, we assembled disaster clean up buckets to be donated to Church World Service, during the sermon time in worship. It was the word in action. This too is church. That is my church. Your churches all have stories too. How do we begin to talk about the things that we are doing together, rather than counting empty seats on Sunday morning, and thinking that that's a measure of the vitality of who we are. (Applause.)

Our attention to the life of the church has to be disinvested from the numbers and the ABCs - attendance, building and cash that continue to distract from the ways in which our congregations are showing up in the world in meaningful ways. The stories of congregations that are operating food pantries, providing housing and shelter, they're providing child care, after school care and preschool, they're doing tutoring programs, they're working with addictions and breaking the cycles of addiction in our communities, and are providing additional witness to God at work in the world. This too is the work of the church - ministry we are doing - together. (Applause.) The future of the church means the data that we collect will move in a different direction as we tell a deeper story of the church in the world. God is still speaking and we are the evidence of the presence of the Divine. Are we ready to reimagine how we tell the stories of how we show up? And what it means to be church? Are we ready to change the ways in which we look at ourselves to bring new meaning to the ministry of the United Church of Christ in this twenty-first century and beyond?

Congregational vitality is not easily measured. Looking at how many people attend church on Sunday morning is not telling us whether a congregation is vital and impacting the spiritual, physical and social needs of its members and the community in which it is located. We have to change how we hear and make room for the stories that paint a picture of the church that reflects what we are doing and embraces the multitude of ministries that are being provided in communities that may not resemble the ones in which we minister. And in doing so, we will be able to understand who we are in a different way, beyond the pews and lived in the highways and byways of our communities. The good news of the gospel is being expressed and lived out in many ways. And if you don't believe me, go out into that exhibit hall and visit the tables of our ministries in the National Setting, and while you're at it, visit the table for the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, and visit the Insurance Board, and the Pension boards, and Cornerstone Fund, and the United Church Fund, and you will begin to see in that exhibit hall, a broader picture of who we are as the church beyond the people who are sitting in the individual pews on Sunday morning. (Applause.)

Who we are as a denomination is also seen in the size of our congregations. The vast majority (93.1%) of UCC members belong to congregations with 400 or fewer members. But here's the thing. Half of those attend congregations with 100 or fewer members. 25.7% of our

congregations have less than 50 members.[3] A part of the future is living with that reality and equipping our churches accordingly. This too is the church to be celebrated and appreciated. We have small and large congregations. We have churches that are in urban, rural, suburban, small town and large city settings. We have brick and mortar churches, virtual churches, churches in bars and restaurants. We are still doing that thing people! This too is the diversity of the church, and we have to begin to look at that as we equip the church together.

The diversities in the church are more than church size, race and geography. The reality of who we are beyond the numbers is that we are this big tent. We have multiple categories of diversities that reflect people, congregations and churches: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, church location, church size, theology, politics, language, finances, and the list goes on and on. We have person with disabilities, children, and other underrepresented groups, because children are underrepresented in the church, if you don't know it. We are not uniform in any way - we are diverse. This I believe, is our greatest strength in this church. It is our diversity. And yet, it is also our greatest weakness, because we have not attended to it.

This place that we occupy, this United Church of Christ is a big tent. And I want to tell you, big tent living ain't easy. It is a choice. It is a choice that each one of you in this room made, each one of you made a decision to be a part of this big tent. A choice to be together and we get to decide what it means for us to be together. We need to be able to see each other beyond what other people say. Big tent living requires that we see each other through a different set of lenses. Remember what Jesus said to this disciples in the text that I read: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven."

Living in this big tent requires being connected to God in ways that allow us to love in ways that transcend the intellectual machinations that tell us that others are not worthy, not good enough, or do not belong among us. That's the work of the flesh. That's the flesh and blood. To live in this big tent we need more than flesh and blood for living, we need to be wrapped and tapped into the God, living into the fulness of the Holy Spirit. That will require letting go of some of what we think we know about who we are and surrendering this moment to what God is revealing and unfurling among us.(Applause.) The spirit of God is a real thing, y'all. If you haven't experienced it, tap in.

The Church at Present

The state of the church has to be framed in the context of the current social reality in which we're living, in the United States and globally. The world is changing and the church with it. The current bent toward a nationalistic ideology formed in veiled Christian rhetoric has garnered the attention of many. While not the only issue of our day, it is hard to talk about the state of the church and not talk about what it means to be Christian in these times.

Nationalism is problematic and the term "Christian nationalism" is an oxymoron. (Applause.) Nationalism in the United States is not to be confused with the use of nationalism in some other places where nationalism is used synonymously with patriotism. In this country, those two terms are not synonymous. Here in the United States, nationalism is a spawn of American exceptionalism, a toxic presence that is rooted in hatred and the glorification of whiteness.

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[3] https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023statisticalreport.v11webUPDATED.pdf

(Applause.) Patriotism is the love of one's country. It is possible to love country and love people too. (Applause.)

These days of nationalistic fervor are impacting us here in the United Church of Christ. We have some of everybody that is present among us. And because we have some of everybody present among us, we did not all vote for the same person. We can point the finger if we want to. I am going to suggest we start with ourselves. We too are struggling with this great Divide that is being presented by this political climate. I keep asking myself: Why are we here? What is it that keeps us together? And if we think we are polarized and the differences are problematic, why are we still here? Why do we keep coming back? I have more questions, we don't have the time right now. But these are questions that we should be asking ourselves, what is it that keeps us coming back. And I believe that what keeps us coming back is not flesh and blood. It's the power of the Holy Spirit, it is God's presence.

In November last year, I gathered some of our leaders in the church. We had representation from our racial/ethnic ministries…and I wanted to begin this conversation about what it means for us to occupy this big tent, because here's the thing that I know about this Church. In all my years in the United Church of Christ, I keep hearing, that we agree to disagree. The thing I know about this church is that when we make a decision, there's always a committee or a task force. And when we have a committee or a task force, we keep minutes. And nobody can point me to the minutes of the meeting where we agreed to disagree. So I think it's still a conversation that we need to have. And we're going to talk about it.

In January I pondered next steps on that November conversation, as we continue to talk about what it means to be a big tent. We all may have different ideas of what a big tent is. We may not even agree that this is a big tent. And, in good UCC fashion we are going to ruminate on who built the tent, what color is the tent, how many entrances to the tent, and before we know it the tent as metaphor is lost, because we're actually talking about a tent! So the title for our second gathering was born, and we called it: A Tent of Our Own Making.

A Tent of Our Own Making happened in April in Cleveland. There were over 50 people who accepted the invitation to attend. Honestly, I thought we would have about 20 people, maybe 25. I wasn't expecting that many people would register the importance of what it means for us to talk about it means for us to be church. We had United Black Christians. El Colectivo. Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries. United Samoan Ministries. Ministers for Racial Social and Economic Justice. Disabilities ministries. Native Hawaiians. Open and Affirming Coalition. United Church Funds. All the leaders of our affiliated and associated church ministries. Because we didn't expect that many people to come, we were cramped into this little, tiny conference room without a window in Cleveland figuring out what it means to be church in this moment. That is a journey to discovering who we are and what we have to offer the world for this moment and into the twenty-first century. If we can't figure out who it is we are, we cannot live into the self-awareness necessary as a denomination to impact the world for this moment. This moment. I am sure that the people who brought this church together in 1957 that they wrestled, that's actually in the minutes. They argued and they fought. Right down to June 25 of 1957, and they still moved forward together. And in this moment, it is for us to sit and wrestle with what we need to be in this moment, so that we can be the church of the 22nd century, because the 21st century is almost gone, and we still haven't gotten it right. And we're living into a future for this church.

We are not trying to be diverse. The diversity is here. And it will continue to grow. The diversity I believe is actually the growth edge of the church. That is where we're going to grow. We're going to grow into the differences that continue to be perplexing to us. It is not possible to grow into uniformity because the world is not that place. So, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here, to this imperfect place, where we will not limit the truth of God. All are welcome to this place where we continue to discern together what it means to live under and yet create this tent. This thing of our imagination. All are welcome because God has yet more light and truth that will break forth from this place, from among us.

Together we have more ministries to create. More marching to do in case you haven't noticed. We have more protests to attend and to create. And we have more issues that we will advocate for. We have more people who will join us. We have more people who need us. And we have the message, the good news of the gospel to bring and to give to those around us. And most of all, church, we have God's love that extends beyond this flesh and blood that we occupy. We have the power of the Holy Spirit poured forth like the day of Pentecost. We will continue to show up as we grow up and grow into what God has for us. Because we are living beyond the numbers, we are yet becoming the church of Jesus Christ for the living of these days. And we get to do it - together. May it be so.