

General Synod

THE GATHERING OF THE WIDER CHURCH

prepare

What's behind all this?

According to the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, the General Synod is the gathering of a faith community representative of the wider Church to listen for and discern the call of God to the United Church of Christ. The General Synod deliberates, discerns, and identifies the mission of the wider Church of the United Church of Christ in God's world and receives and offers suggestions, invitations, challenges, and assistance in covenant with local churches, conferences, and other settings as they engage in mission together (Constitution, Article IX).

This description of the General Synod may sound rather broad. In practice, General Synod is a gathering of thousands of faithful members of the UCC for formal church witness, inspirational worship, and fellowship with friends (new and old). Together, the gathered people discern pronouncements, resolutions, church structure, and function. People advocate for issues that benefit from the faithful witness of the Church. All the while, those gathered join together in worship and discernment each day about where God is leading the Church and its people.

It will be important to note that "General Synod" is often the term people use for the actual event, but in our formal documents, "the General Synod" actually refers to a defined, collective, representative body of voting delegates sent by their conference to the event. The terminology can be confusing because the event of General Synod draws voting delegates, guests, and folks who are just generally interested in what is happening in the life of the UCC. But in our formal documents, when you see specific powers and responsibilities of the General Synod mentioned, those refer to the powers and responsibilities entrusted to the specific body of voting delegates sent by their conferences to the event.

To learn more about some of the powers and responsibilities given to the General Synod, as well as some of the details about their role, read through Article IX of the Constitution and Article III of the Bylaws.

One of the major tasks of the General Synod is to review, edit, and vote on pronouncements and resolutions. A pronouncement is a statement of Christian conviction on a matter of moral or social principle. These statements describe the

As you prepare for this session

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

Where is this going?

Participants will explore the purpose of General Synod and its connections to local churches.

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historic roots of the United Church of Christ and connect it to current identity and theology, noting the current engagement of various settings of the Church. A proposal for action usually accompanies a pronouncement. A proposal for action is a recommendation for specific directional statements and goals for implementing a pronouncement. Past pronouncements and proposals for action included calling the United Church of Christ to be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church. This pronouncement encourages the ongoing inclusiveness of our entire community of faith, understanding that it is vital to the future life and wholeness of the United Church of Christ to declare racial, ethnic, and cultural diversities as gifts from the God of creation who, through Jesus, demands love and justice for all peoples. Another, known as the Ministry Issues Pronouncement, sought to address the needs of the UCC for well prepared and faithful ministerial leadership for God's mission in the world both now and in the future. It called on the Church to expand the definition of learnedness and leadership and to provide multiple means for persons to be formed and prepared for authorized ministry in the UCC.

In addition to pronouncements and proposals for action, the General Synod works with resolutions. There are two types of resolutions. A resolution of witness is a Christian witness to the world. This type of resolution is an expression of the General Synod concerning a moral, ethical, or religious matter confronting the Church, the nation, or the world. When adopted, its purpose is to guide and help focus the wider Church's work. These resolutions, when passed, speak to local churches, associations, and conferences; they do not speak for them. However, because every setting of the church exists in covenant and relationship to all of the others, local churches, associations, and conferences are expected to listen closely to the resolutions of General Synod and discern what they mean for their ministry in their context.

The second kind of resolution is a prudential resolution. This type of resolution is for the purpose of church polity and policy. These resolutions establish policies, institute or revise structure or procedures, and authorize programs.

Participants' Perspectives

- Some participants will have been to a General Synod either as a guest or a delegate and may be familiar with the process and activities. They may be able to add to conversation by sharing their experiences of General Synod, and they may be able to compare and contrast experiences with people who have gone different years, since the experience of General Synod evolves over time.
- Some participants will have limited or no experience of the UCC outside of their local congregation. Some may not have any knowledge of General Synod, its role in our polity, or the kinds of decisions it makes. Learning about the wider gatherings of the Church may help them see and feel the connection between their local congregations and the wider UCC.

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encounter

Video

1. Warm Up

Ask participants to name and/or explain what it means to speak of the “wider Church” in the UCC. Remind participants about the covenantal relationships that exist between local congregations, associations, conferences, and the General Synod. Explore what basic understandings or assumptions they may have about what General Synod is or does.

2. Watch

“General Synod: The Gathering of the Wider Church”

3. Unpack

- What’s the purpose of General Synod? Who goes to General Synod? What do they do?
- What are resolutions? What purposes do they have? Do they matter?
- What is the relationship between local churches, associations, conferences, and the General Synod?
- Has anyone gone to General Synod or read resolutions or reports that have come from the General Synod? What did they notice?

Materials:

-Ability to show video

engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session’s themes.

Activity One: What They Said

The General Synod speaks *to* local churches, not *for* local churches. That is, the resolutions and actions passed by General Synod represent the position of the General Synod and help guide the work of the wider Church, but each local church has the responsibility to discern what the decisions of General Synod will mean for their local contexts. Use this time as an opportunity for participants to learn more about the types of resolutions, pronouncements, and actions General Synod has passed and the issues they have spoken to. All the while ask them how they may be speaking to their local context today.

Either in small groups or individually, invite participants to investigate a resolution that interests them and be prepared to summarize or explain it to the group. Have printouts of past resolutions or invite folks to choose from the full listing of past synod resolutions that are available through synod.uccpages.org in the archive section.

Materials:

Copies of resolutions or smart devices with internet access

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The following are some lesser known but important resolutions you might highlight for participants:

- Advocating for Funding to Construct Quality Affordable Housing
- Developing Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged Congregations for Mental Health
- Dismantling Discriminatory Systems of Mass Incarceration in the United States
- Full Communion Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the United Church of Canada
- Islam and the Muslim Community, To Counter Actions of Hostility Against
- Making UCC Church Buildings More Carbon Neutral
- Resisting Actions Seeking to Undermine the Status of Women in Society
- Urging Socially Responsible Investment Practices

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What kind of resolution is it?
- What is its purpose?
- What's the reasoning behind it?
- How does the resolution reflect the history, polity, or theology of the United Church of Christ?
- What setting of the church is the resolution intended to speak to? How might it speak to your local congregation? What might be your church's response?

Activity Two: Amending or Affirming

Resolutions are submitted and posted far in advance of General Synod, but the process for them has only just begun. At General Synod, a working group will be assigned to the resolution. They will explore its meaning, significance, and implications. They can amend some of the wording before submitting it back to the General Synod for vote. On the floor, further amendments may be put up for vote before the final form of resolution is ready for vote. Of course, there is conversation, collaboration, and debate all the way through the process to ensure that if a resolution is passed, it is a faithful witness of the Church to the world.

Take a look at what resolutions are coming up for the next General Synod and choose one resolution that is vital in the life of the wider Church or may be of special interest to your local church. Make copies of the proposed resolution.

As a group, read through the resolution. Point out the important features of a resolution such as who submitted it, their reasoning, their theological grounding, what they hope to accomplish, and what setting of the church will carry it out, if it is approved.

Since local churches listen to General Synod and then discern how the actions of General Synod are best lived out in their local context, ask participants how they might imagine this resolution would be received and interpreted in their congregations.

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Activity Three: Make a Case

Resolutions, as you'd imagine, don't always pass. Some are too bland. Some are too controversial. Some get tabled or are in need of more refining or fine-tuning before the General Synod will consider them again.

Take a look at what resolutions are coming up for the next General Synod and see if any are likely to spark some substantial conversation. Or you could adapt this exercise to center on a debated resolution at a General Synod that has recently taken place. Choose one resolution and make enough copies of it for each person. Be prepared to speak to the importance of the resolution and any background information people may need to understand the weight of the resolution.

Divide the group into three parts. One group will be General Synod delegates arguing for the resolution. One group will be the General Synod delegates arguing against it. The third group are the not yet decided General Synod delegates who can swing the vote.

Give each side some time to prepare their points. Let them know that just as at General Synod, each speaker is limited to two minutes. (If you'd like to have the full effect, use a timer with a visible countdown and have participants use a microphone. After the speaker has used their two minutes, turn the microphone off). Have folks line up, present their case, and return to their seats. When people have finished, call for a vote (bonus points if there's a parliamentarian in the room who can direct the group by way of the current edition of Robert's Rules of Order).

Debrief on what the experience was like and what participants experienced in the process of arguing out their case or coming to a decision.

Activity Four: Writing a Resolution

If there is something that your church is passionate about, or if you'd like them to experience the process of constructing a resolution for General Synod, spend some time walking them through the writing process and the necessary elements of a resolution.

Because the process of writing a resolution is directed by the standing rules of the General Synod, visit synod.uccpages.org to see the current directions if you wish to actually pursue submitting a resolution. Or, for the purposes of this exercise, use the format of a resolution as required by the Standing Rules for General Synod 31 outlined below.

Format: Resolutions shall include the following information in the following format sections.

- 1) A brief title with information providing the source of the resolution, the date of submission and any other information pertinent to the resolution. The title must accurately reflect the intent of the proposed

Materials:

- Copies of a resolution
- Optional: countdown timer and microphone

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motion. If presented at General Synod, the names and conferences of the delegates presenting the resolution shall be included.

- 2) A brief summary that accurately reflects the content of the resolution.
- 3) Biblical, theological and historical grounding. Describe how this action reflects the historic roots of the United Church of Christ and connect it to current identity and theology, noting the current engagement of various settings of the Church.
- 4) The text of the motion.
- 5) At the end, the statement, *The funding for the implementation of the resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.* There is no financial guarantee of any kind other than the annual budget determined by the United Church of Christ Board of Directors (73 GS 81).

The statement, *The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.* The implementing body is responsible for developing the strategy and program designed to implement the resolution.

With your group, use passed resolutions to give examples of how resolutions are written and structured.

wrap-up

Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you've discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do in response?

Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

Sending

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the ever developing witness of the UCC in its various settings and a blessing for each of the participants as they seek to be the church in the world.