

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

prepare

What's behind all this?

In a previous unit, participants were invited to explore actions and functions of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. There they learned that 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 UCC.

Participants also learned General Synod does this work of deliberation, discernment, and identifying the mission of the Church, in part, through pronouncements, proposals for action, and resolutions. A *pronouncement* is a statement of Christian conviction on a matter of moral or social principle and a *proposal for action* is a recommendation for implementing a pronouncement. A *resolution of witness* is a Christian witness to the world (usually concerning a moral, ethical, or religious matter) meant to guide and help focus the wider Church's work. A *prudential resolution* is for the purpose of establishing policies, instituting or revising structure or procedures, and authorizing programs within the wider Church.

What is important to remember is that these actions of General Synod, when passed, speak *to* the wider Church and the world, but they do not necessarily speak *for* local churches, associations, or conferences. It remains up to each of these other settings of the Church to listen closely to the resolutions of General Synod and discern what they mean for the ministry in their context.

In the UCC's polity (the way we organize ourselves), one way that local churches, associations, or conferences respond to the work and words of General Synod is to designate themselves as being in support of a particular pronouncement or resolution. They do this by engaging in a process of discernment and education, and if they arrive at a decision to affirm it, make a formal, public *statement of witness*. There are variety of designations and ways that churches make statements of witness. A church could affirm they are an Accessible to All (A2A) congregation, a Creation Justice congregation, an Intercultural and Multi-ethnic (I'M) congregation, a Just Peace congregation, a Global Mission Church, an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation, a WISE Congregation for Mental Health, a God Is Still Speaking (GISS) congregation, and/or an Immigrant Welcoming congregation. Examining these various designations and understanding their role within the life of the UCC will help participants see the intersection of the UCC's history, polity, and theology in action.

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 different UCC church designations and statements of public witness as a way of seeing how the relationship between General Synod and other settings of the Church is lived into.

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

Participants' Perspectives

- Some participants are curious about the authority of the General Synod and whether the pronouncements or resolutions dictate what local churches or other settings must do. Help them to understand that the General Synod speaks *to* local churches, not *for* local churches. Some churches choose to affirm the resolutions and actions passed by General Synod by adopting a church designation and making a public statement of witness.
- Some participants will be familiar with some designations and perhaps not others. Examining a variety of church designations allows participants to see a broad picture of what is important to the UCC and its congregations.
- Some participants will have strong opinions about whether their local church, association, or conference should or should not have particular designations or make a statement of public witness. It may be important to ask people to be charitable with one another as you move through discussions.

encounter

Video

1. Warm Up

Ask participants if their local church (or association or conference) has a UCC designation or has made a statement of public witness.

If so, ask participants about the process they experienced in arriving at the decision and if, at that time, they had a sense that they were affirming the work of General Synod and a connection to the wider Church.

If participants indicate that their local setting does not have any UCC designations nor has it made any statements of public witness, ask them whether designations or statements of public witness have ever been brought up for discussion, and, if not, if they have a sense why.

2. Watch

“Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness: Responding to the General Synod”

3. Unpack

- What designations or statements of public witness have you heard of before? Which were new?
- What other designations or statements of public witness are you aware of in the UCC? What is the history behind them?
- Connect these to earlier conversations about UCC polity. How do designations demonstrate a unique UCC polity?

Materials:

-Ability to show video

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

- Connect these to earlier conversations about UCC theology. How do designations demonstrate a unique aspect of UCC theology?

engage

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

Activity One: Accessible to All (A2A)

Accessible to All (A2A) is the terminology used within the UCC to refer to congregations that have completed the Accessible to All process and thereby made the commitment to be physically and attitudinally welcoming of people with disabilities.

Pass out a copy of the original resolution passed by General Synod, "Called to Wholeness in Christ: Becoming a Church Accessible to All" (2005).

Read through it together and unpack it:

- What's the goal of this resolution?
- What's the historical context of this resolution?
- What's the theological reasoning behind it?
- Is your congregation A2A? Why or why not?
- Is being or becoming A2A and making a public witness about it important in your local setting?

In response to this resolution, a process was created for congregations to designate themselves as being A2A. The United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries has a description of the process and resources congregations use for becoming A2A on their website.

Give participants some time to read through the materials with the group to get a sense of the depth of this process and its impact:

- Examine the A2A checklist as a way of seeing the attitudinal, spiritual, and physical commitments of becoming A2A.
- Look through the resource "Any Body, Every Body, Christ's Body" available on uccdm.org. This is the central resource for study and for becoming A2A. This is a long document so you may want to select a portion for use here.
- Go over the building audit.

After looking through the materials, ask participants to synthesize what they've been learning.

- How is this designation reflective of the UCC's history, polity, and theology? More specifically, how does this designation embody covenant between the settings of the Church, a commitment to justice, autonomy of local churches, dedication to the teachings of Jesus, and love of neighbor, etc.?

Materials:

Copies of the resolution, A2A check list, "Any Body, Every Body, Christ's Body," and the building audit

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

Activity Two: A Multiracial and Multicultural Church

The General Synod called upon the UCC in all its settings to be a true multiracial and multicultural church. This was intended to be a “living pronouncement” and to encourage the ongoing inclusiveness of our entire community of faith. The pronouncement affirmed that it is vital to the future life and wholeness of the UCC to declare racial, ethnic, and cultural diversities as gifts from the God of creation who through Jesus demands love and justice for all peoples. A multiracial and multicultural church is defined as a church that confesses and acts out its faith in covenant with faithful people of all races, ethnicities and cultures. A multiracial and multicultural church embodies these diversities as gifts to the human family and rejoices in the variety of God’s grace.

Pass out a copy of the original pronouncement passed by General Synod, “Calling on United Church of Christ to be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church” (1993).

Read through it together and unpack it:

- What’s the goal of this pronouncement?
- What’s the historical context of this pronouncement?
- What’s the theological reasoning behind it?
- Is your congregation multiracial and multicultural church? Why or why not?
- Is being or becoming a multiracial and multicultural church and making a public witness about it important in your local setting?

In response to this pronouncement, some congregations, associations, conferences, and other settings of the church worked through a process of discernment and education, and ultimately affirmed their commitment to being a multiracial and multicultural church. Ask participants if their church, association, or conference embody the following commitments of being a multiracial and multicultural church. What evidence of these commitments do they see? Or, if evidence is absent, why do they think that is?

Commitments of a Multiracial and Multicultural church:

- Affirms and lives out its faith in God as revealed through Jesus
- Knows we are interconnected with people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures
- Embodies and rejoices in these diversities as gifts to the human family
- Welcomes all people into the community of faith without discrimination because of color, race, ethnicity, language, or culture
- Formally recognizes and utilizes the racial and cultural varieties of gifts within the context of Christian unity
- Struggles within church and society to rid itself of the sin of racism which has prevented an authentic embrace of the races, ethnicities, and cultures in our denomination

Materials:

-Copies of the resolution

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

- Makes multiracial and multicultural inclusiveness a key organizing principle for church in society
- Works for justice and peace throughout the global community
- Reflects in its membership changing demographics
- Declares itself an anti-racist congregation

After looking through the materials ask participants to synthesize what they've been learning.

- How is this designation reflective of the UCC's history, polity, and theology? More specifically, you might ask how does this designation embody covenant between the settings of the church, a commitment to justice, autonomy of local churches, dedication to the teachings of Jesus, embracing of the Holy Spirit, honoring of creation, etc.?

Activity Three: Open and Affirming (ONA)

Open and Affirming (ONA) is the UCC's designation for congregations, campus ministries, and other bodies in the UCC which make a public covenant of welcome into their full life and ministry to persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions.

Pass out a copy of the original resolution passed by General Synod, "Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming" (1985).

Read through it together and unpack it:

- What's the goal of this resolution?
- What's the historical context of this resolution?
- What's the reasoning behind it, theologically?
- Is your congregation ONA? Why or why not?
- Is being or becoming ONA and making a public witness about it important in your local setting?

In response to this resolution, a process was created for congregations to designate themselves as being ONA. The Open and Affirming Coalition has many resources congregations use for becoming ONA (openandaffirming.org).

Give participants some time to read through the materials with the group to get a sense of the depth of this process and its impact:

- Examine the "Short Guide to a Successful ONA Process" for an overview of becoming ONA.
- Look through the resource, "Building an Inclusive Church." Here you'll find theological reflections as well as logistics. This is the central resource for study and for becoming ONA.
- Normally, the Coalition requires an extended period of study, prayer, reflection and dialogue before the congregation or governing body votes on an ONA covenant. Why is this important?
- The Open and Affirming Coalition certifies local churches and other

Take it one more step:

-In the last few years the UCC has been reviewing, evaluating, and envisioning this ministry for its future. As the denomination worked on its strategic plan for the future, emphasis has been placed on creating an additional designation and resources to train and equip churches for ministry in Intercultural and Multiethnic communities. Visit ucc.org to check in on the development.

Materials:

- Copies of the resolution
- Resources from the Open and Affirming Coalition

Church Designations and Statements of Public Witness

RESPONDING TO THE GENERAL SYNOD

settings of the UCC as “Open and Affirming” after adoption of an ONA covenant welcoming all persons into Christian fellowship. An explicit welcome to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is required to be ONA. Most ONA covenants also welcome other communities that historically have been excluded or marginalized. Why is this important? How does it reflect values and theology of the UCC?

After looking through the materials ask participants to synthesize what they’ve been learning about.

- How is this designation reflective of the UCC’s history, polity, and theology? How does this designation embody covenant between the settings of the Church, a commitment to justice, autonomy of local churches, dedication to the teachings of Jesus, embracing of the Holy Spirit, honoring of creation, etc.?

Activity Four: Other Designations

Investigate other UCC designations with your group using a process similar to the ones listed above. You will find resources on ucc.org for designations, their history, and their work. In addition to those explored above, consider exploring designations such as Creation Justice, Intercultural and Multiethnic (I’M), Just Peace, Global Mission, WISE (welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged for mental health), God Is Still Speaking (GISS), and/or Immigrant Welcoming.

wrap-up

Regroup

Gather 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 churches that have made or are in the midst of discernment about statements of public witness. Offer a prayer of blessing for each of the participants as they live into connection to the wider Church.