Establishing an Action Team to Conduct a Listening Campaign and Bring Recommendations on the Future of Christian Witness at General Synod

A Prudential Resolution

Submitted by:
Emma Brewer-Wallin, Board of Directors (Central Pacific Conference)
Rev. Diane Weible, Board of Directors (Northern California Nevada Conference)
Rev. Amelia Nugent, Massachusetts Conference
Rev. Matt Carriker, Massachusetts Conference
Rev. Mark Longhurst, Massachusetts Conference
Rev. Diane Johnson, Northern California Nevada Conference
Amelia Becker, Massachusetts Conference
Barbara Colliander, Northern California Nevada Conference
Rev. Jim CastroLang, Pacific Northwest Conference
Rev. Kent Gilbert, Indiana-Kentucky Conference
Casey Ream, Northern California Nevada Conference
Jonathan Guest, Massachusetts Conference

SUMMARY
This Resolution calls for an Action Team to embark on a listening campaign throughout the church in order to reevaluate the manner in which we discern and carry out our wider church Christian witness through General Synod. The Action Team would conduct its business through the Biblical practices of relational meetings, as used in broad-based and community organizing, so that we may build understanding and trust throughout the settings of the United Church of Christ. Upon listening to members across the denomination, the Action Team will make a recommendation about what General Synod can learn from the Conferences and Local Churches in order to faithfully and relationally enact our wider church’s Christian witness, in time for deliberation at General Synod Thirty Three.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL RATIONALE
In order to understand how to be the church, we often turn to the biblical image of the body, wherein we remember that there is one body but many members, and Jesus is the sole head. Paul reminds us that there are a variety of spiritual gifts – that there are many ways of acting out our faith because of God’s bountiful grace. Indeed, each of these ministries are bound together through the unity of the body: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Despite their differences, each part speaks to the others, and “if one member suffers, all suffer with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

The primacy of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church, a community of Christians “organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness” (United Church of Christ Constitution V.10). While worship and fellowship are faithfully carried out by the Local Churches, the responsibility of “the ongoing

1 For more information on relational meetings: http://bit.ly/RelationalMeeting
work of Christian witness” is shared amongst the other settings of the United Church of Christ, including General Synod.

“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” (United Church of Christ Constitution X.59). At present, that deliberation and discernment is significantly carried out through the mechanism of Resolutions of Witness, the means by which General Synod hears from the whole church, covenanting together, to discern its Christian witness.

As the United Church of Christ, we have instructed ourselves to “be the Church,” and, likewise, James instructs us to “be doers of the word, not merely hearers” (James 1:22). As Jesus reminds us, “if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?” (Mark 9:50) In the same way, if the Church has lost its churchiness, how can you season it?

When Jesus called his first disciples, Simon, James, and John were full of despair because their hard day’s work had not paid off. When Jesus showed them a new way, they were astonished but anxious that they themselves could not do what he had done. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus replied. “I will make you fish for people” (Luke 5:10). And so the first disciples followed Jesus by casting their nets wide and building relationships with all those they encountered.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we find words of encouragement for doing the hard work of Christian discipleship, and we are cautioned that we cannot do so without being in relationship with one another: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The Gospel of John reveals that it is in our one on one conversations with each other, when we take the time to ask what is on your heart and why are you weeping, that God shows up. Three days after Jesus is crucified, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to prepare the body, only to find that the tomb has been emptied. All four accounts describe a figure appearing to Mary to offer some explanation for what she has found. The figure in Luke asks, “why are you here?” but does not let her respond before he explains to her what has happened (Luke 24:5). It is only in John’s Gospel that the figure says, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and allows her to respond, listening to her answer – in fact, he asks again, and she answers again, the second time revealing more about who and what she holds most dearly (John 20:13-15). After her second reply, the figure says her name, and Mary recognizes her Teacher. It is through this conversation that the risen Christ is revealed.

**TEXT OF THE MOTION**
Whereas Resolutions of Witness are a means for the General Synod of the United Church of Christ to speak to the Church and to the world on matters moral, ethical, or religious, from a place of Christian conviction;

Whereas the polity of the United Church of Christ is such that General Synod may urge, call upon, or ask the varied settings primarily encountered – that is, the Local Church, the Association, and the Conference – to abide by the aspirations of a Resolution of Witness, the entity of General Synod has no Constitutional authority to do anything more;

Whereas God calls us to tremendous and abundant things, and so the missional priorities of the wider church does not infringe upon the autonomy of the local churches’ works of mercy and justice, nor does the discernment of General Synod interfere with the adjudication of the Holy Spirit leading the varied settings of the United Church of Christ to specific acts of mission and witness;

Whereas the attendees of General Synod, whether Delegates or Visitors, collectively hold tremendous power, as they are organizers, activists, and community leaders in their various settings and have the capacity to bear and launch the mission of the wider church, as determined by General Synod, in their local settings;

Whereas the material deprivation and moral crises of our communities and world require powerful responses, and in a time such as this, there is a need for Christian witness in the form of concerted action that goes beyond declarations of our Christian conviction;

Whereas the Thirty-first General Synod voted on twelve Resolutions of Witness and passed eleven, and through these acts, and through their Constitutional charge, General Synod 31 determined the following as the missional priorities of the wider church in the 2017-2019 Biennium: immigration, Palestine-Israel, Cuba, cultural diversity training, the Immokalee’s Workers’ boycott, climate change, gun violence, child abuse, corporal punishment, disability justice, and economic justice; each of these areas of witness constitute sacred work that that lay and clergy members of the United Church of Christ at all settings are leaders in;

Whereas eleven areas of focus is too many for any organization to dutifully dedicate itself, and as General Synod is charged with the “identification of the mission of the wider church,” General Synod has the authority to prayerfully, intentionally, and strategically identify a small number of focus areas for the wider church of the United Church of Christ in each Biennium;

Whereas deeper engagement with the charge to narrowly discern the mission of the United Church of Christ requires more fully knowing one another as followers of Christ, learning from one another as leaders in our various settings, and trusting one another as the body of the Church;

Whereas General Synod is a body of over 700 voting members of the United Church of Christ, and the work and ministry of General Synod is ongoing; additionally, General Synod is an event that marks the moment of transition between bienniums, and as such, it is both the genesis and culmination of the symbiotic, relational, and covenantal life cycle of the wider church;
Therefore be it resolved that the Thirty-second General Synod of the United Church of Christ invoke itself and its successor bodies to become Synod deployed, that is, taking up the work and ministry of General Synod in the time between meetings;

Be it resolved that the Thirty-second General Synod create an Action Team, comprised of nine Delegates, a minimum of one from each of the six regions, to conduct a listening campaign throughout the Conferences to ask how the various settings most energetically and thoroughly carry out Christian mission and witness; the Action Team shall receive training in methods of listening and relationship-building;

Be it resolved that all of the Thirty-second Synod Delegations — that is each of the Conferences, the Board of Directors, and each of the Historically Underrepresented Groups — shall nominate one of their Delegates to be Members of the Action Team; the 2019-2021 Chair of the Board of Directors, alongside the Moderator of the Thirty-third General Synod and a non-Delegate representative of the Council of Conference Ministers, shall select the nine Members from the 48 nominations; nominations and selections shall be made on the basis of demonstrated commitment to listening, relationship-building, and openness; the composition of the Action Team shall be a majority people of color, majority women or non-binary people, and majority people under 40; the nominations shall be submitted no later than two weeks following the close of General Synod 32 and the appointment of the Action Team shall be completed no later than six weeks following the close of General Synod 32;

Be it resolved the 39 Delegates nominated to the Action Team but not selected shall be consultants and partners for the Action Team in navigating their respective settings and in formulating the eventual recommendation about the future form of General Synod’s Christian witness;

Be it resolved that the Thirty-second General Synod calls upon the Conferences to invite members of the Action Team to be present at their Annual Meetings of this Biennium in order to hear from and build relationships with the members of the United Church of Christ;

Be it resolved that General Synod calls upon each of the Conferences to designate a Point Person to ensure that the Action Team hears from the current and emerging leaders who drive the work of the Conference and its local churches, and the Point Persons and the Action Team shall give particular attention to the contributions of members of currently and historically underrepresented groups, including people of color, low-income people, people with disabilities, youth and young adults, and LGBTQ people;

Be it resolved that the members of the Action Team shall attend the Annual Meetings in partnership with the 39 appointed Delegates not selected to the Action Team: that is, one member of the Action Team alongside the appointed Delegate of the local Conference, shall form a pair that together is responsible for the listening campaign in that Conference; the nine members of the Action Team shall attend an equal number of Annual Meetings so that they may share in the possibility of relationship-building and ability to hear what resonates across the denomination; and the travel and training costs for the nine members of the Action Team shall be covered;
Be it resolved that the Action Team will report their findings and recommended directions in October 2020 to the Board of Directors, acting as General Synod when Synod is not in session;

Be it resolved that the Action Team and its partners will take seriously their commission to undertake the work of Synod between meetings by faithfully building relationships with members of the United Church of Christ across the denomination and prayerfully listening to the concerns of the Church in order to bring a recommendation about a reimagined form of General Synod’s leadership of the wider church’s Christian witness to General Synod 33.

**FUNDING**
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.

**IMPLEMENTATION**
The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.