

A pleasure to be among my Rock Spring friends again. I seem to have become more involved in the life of the UCC since our time together, instead of less involved. But my days are busy, and there is still time for pleasure in the famous wood shop.

There are four primary areas I want to cover. The first is work leading up to the Synod meeting. The second is the process for considering resolutions that come before the Synod. The third is to note the primary elements of the resolution. And finally, a word about the atmosphere and spirit of the floor debate and response to the vote.

This was the first General Synod I had ever attended. As an interesting side note, my father was part of the Uniting General Synod in Cleveland 48 years previously—while I was half a world away in the Philippines on my junior year abroad.

The delegates to the GS are nominated by the Associations elected by the annual meetings of the Central Atlantic Conference. In addition, Conference Ministers and Conference Moderators or presidents are delegates. There were five delegates from the Potomac Association. The number is determined by the number of members of the churches in the Associations as reported in the UCC Year Book of statistics.

The entire Central Atlantic Conference delegation met for a series of three orientation sessions that began early in 2005. Each delegate was assigned one or more of the resolutions to study and to prepare an introductory presentation for the benefit of the whole delegation.

There was a total of 31 resolutions before the Synod. Most resolutions begin in a local congregation and have been approved by an Association and sent forward by action within the Conference's annual, and, if approved, perhaps with changes, sent on to the national church for consideration by the Synod. The national bodies of the church may also initiate resolutions for consideration.

And so we arrived in Atlanta, having studied and discussed the business that would come before the synod.

II

The process for considering resolutions is very specific. Each resolution is assigned to a Committee for consideration before being sent to the plenary session of the synod. There were 16 committees in the 25th Synod. The membership of the committees was assigned in advance and came as a part of each delegate's registration materials. I was assigned to Committee 10, which dealt with a resolution calling for minimum compensation benefits for clerical employees of the Conferences and Associations of the UCC. Yes, there are clerical folks who do not receive any pension benefits!

Each of these committees met first as Community groups for Bible study. We agreed to guidelines for ways in which to listen and be respectful of the opinions of others. The Bible study times were separate from Committee deliberation times.

Committee 3 was chaired by Elizabeth Nordbeck, whom some of you may know. I believe she grew up in the Westmoreland Church, was for a time professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary and subsequently academic dean at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts.

Committee 3 dealt with three resolutions related to marriage equality. One was submitted

by the Southern California/Nevada Conference. A second had been submitted by the Central Atlantic Conference, but after learning of the first, the CAC annual meeting had voted two weeks earlier to defer to the Southern California/Nevada resolution. A third resolution was titled "Marriage is Between One Man and One Woman," submitted, I believe, by the Calvin Synod, a small group of very conservative churches, formerly part of the Evangelical and Reformed church.

The committees were governed by specific rules. Each committee has an assigned facilitator as well as a resource person who was well familiar with the proposed resolution. Each committee member was identified by his or her assignment noted on their delegate credentials.

Observers were welcome to attend the committee sessions. For the first part of the session, the resolution under consideration would be reviewed. Open discussion would follow. Observers as well as committee members could ask questions, express views (without criticizing in a negative way other opinions.) The committees could clarify content, but they could not change the substance of the text. Substance could only be changed by debate and action on the floor of the synod's plenary sessions.

After ample opportunity for observers to ask questions and understand the resolution, the bar of the house, as it is called, would be closed. From that point on, only the members of the committee would continue discussion until such time as the members came to a consensus that they were ready to recommend to the plenary session of the General Synod either approval or rejection of the resolution.

You can imagine that the discussion in Committee 10 did not take long, either for clarification of the resolution's meaning, or for recommending to the body of the General Synod that this resolution be approved in support of clerical staff in our Conferences and Associations receiving minimum contributions to their pensions equal to 4% of salary. Nor was our committee room packed with observers!

The discussion in Committee 3 went on for several hours, reaching from the morning to well into the afternoon. The room was packed to overflowing, upwards of four hundred people in addition to the official committee members.

The resolution on Marriage Equality came to the floor of the synod on Monday, July 4, 2005—Independence Day. In addition to the delegates, there were many observers in the gallery.

In her report to the synod delegates, Ms. Nordbeck moved that the resolution be adopted. The motion was seconded. She noted that the discussion in committee was so "quiet and respectful that, by the afternoon, members of the media had disappeared looking for more action and controversy." She said that the committee had re-organized the "Be it Resolved" paragraphs into "those that provide prophetic witness and those that are meant to support our members' and congregations' deliberations and considerations of the actions of this synod" (quotations from the minutes of the meeting).

The United Church News summarized:

"The marriage equality resolution: (1) affirms equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender and declares that the government should not interfere with couples regardless of gender who choose to marry and share fully in the rights, responsibilities and commitment of legally recognized marriage; (2) affirms equal access to the basic rights, institutional protections and quality of life conferred by the recognition of marriage; (3) calls for an end

to rhetoric that fuels hostility, misunderstanding, fear and hatred expressed toward gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons; (4) asks officers of the church to communicate the resolution to local, state and national legislators, urging them to support equal marriage rights; (5) calls upon all settings of the church to engage in serious, respectful, and prayerful discussion of the covenantal relationship of marriage and equal marriage rights; (6) calls upon congregations, after prayerful, biblical, theological and historical study, to consider adopting Wedding Policies that do not discriminate against couples based on gender; and (7) urges congregations and individuals in the UCC to prayerfully consider and support local, state and national legislation to grant equal marriage rights to couples regardless of gender, and to work against legislation, including constitutional amendments, which denies rights to couples based on gender.”

The procedures for debate on the floor of the Synod were clear. There were three microphones on the floor: one for speakers in favor, one for speakers against, and one for persons seeking a point of order or a point of clarification. Speakers were alternated between for and against. The debate on the floor lasted about an hour.

John Decenback, our Central Atlantic Conference Minister, noted that two weeks earlier the CAC had voted to back the resolution put forth by Southern California/Nevada Conference. He noted, “This is the right place to be.” Steve Gray, Conference Minister in Indiana/Kentucky, noted there is both a cost as well as a joy attached to this resolution and hoped the Synod would allow two additional years before acting.

The first amendment proposed inserting additional language at line 163 (164) after the word bodies, “and acknowledging the pain and struggle their passage will engender within ...” No one sought to speak to the Amendment, and it was approved virtually unanimously.

A delegate from the New Hampshire Conference (who had identified himself as a former legislator), proposed an amendment that would change the substance of the resolution, first to change the title to read “Resolution in Support of Equal Rights for All in Covenanted Relationships.” In addition, to amend line 116, by replacing “same-gender marriage” with “same-gender covenanted relationships,” lines 123, 144, 168-69 and 180-181 by replacing “equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender” with “equal rights for couples in covenanted relationships regardless of gender,” and line 146 by deleting the words “marry and.”

The maker of the resolution was asked by a delegate to define “covenanted relationships.” The gentleman defined covenanted relationship as “a term for a relationship between people where they make a covenant with each other.”

At this point, a delegate from Pennsylvania Northeast Conference moved that the vote be postponed until the next General Synod. Another moved that the decision be postponed until the next morning. Both motions failed by wide margins.

Debate continued on the Amendments to the stated lines of the resolution. In the end, the proposed change in the title and the proposed amendments to the stated lines were defeated by large margins.

After more discussion, pro and con, the Moderator attempted to end debate but agreed to continue if delegates had points to make that had not previously been made. After some further commentary by both those in favor and those opposed, a motion to end debate was made and seconded.

A point of order from a delegate requested that vote be by secret ballot. Although the Moderator said the parliamentarian ruled the request out of order, he asked the General Synod to indicate by voice if delegates wished to amend the General Synod bylaws to allow a secret ballot. The response was “no”—resoundingly, I might add.

At this moment, the Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson, Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries, requested a moment of silent prayer. A hush fell upon the room. In a moment the Moderator called for a vote on the main motion on the substitute resolution (the combined Resolution from Committee 3).

Those delegates in favor of the resolution were asked to raise their green voting cards. An overwhelming number of cards were raised. There appeared to be 85- 90% of the delegates cards held aloft. Those opposed were asked to raise their cards, and also any abstentions. The motion was declared carried.

There was complete silence in the hall. President and General Minister John Thomas rose and asked the delegates to join him in prayer.

This moment was, my friends, one of the most powerful and spiritually overwhelming moments in my life. By way of closing, I ask you to join me in offering that prayer once again, recognizing the pastoral care which it provides to us all, no matter where we may be in our journeys of faith and struggle with this issue. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, to you we live, to you we suffer, to you we die. Yours will we be in life and in death. Today, as in ancient Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you.

We give thanks for your presence during these days of prayer and discernment, and especially for your presence here this morning. We have felt your warm embrace, stilling us as we tremble with joy, with hope, with fear, with disappointment. Remind us that as we are tempted to run from each other, so too we run from you. We know that every choice confers a cost, so let us attend in the coming hours and days to those for whom this decision confers a particular burden.

Let us find words that comfort rather than congratulate; let us seek to be a community of grace and forgiveness rather than organizing constituencies of protest; let us use our hands not to clap, but to wipe away every tear. And in all this may we know in surprising new ways the comfort of belonging to You.

This is our prayer. Hear us, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Two final comments.

First, resolutions of the General Synod are not binding on congregations. They are expressions of the sense of the delegates gathered. The General Synod does not legislate for the local congregation. These resolutions are a way of speaking to congregations, not speaking for them. That’s why they are called resolutions of witness when they are about important issues. Remember that our church polity, our form of governance, is covenantal; that is, we agree to be together and to respect our differences.

Second, one of the most important keys to this resolution is its request that churches and individuals take the time and effort to study, discuss and pray about the resolution and its

affirmation. I'm pleased to know that Rock Spring is responding in exactly that way. This will be a much richer congregation because of the effort you are putting forth.

Thank you.