During the second week of July, the United Church of Christ national church meeting, General Synod 33 (GS33), met from July 11 to 18. General Synod 33 was scheduled to be hosted in Kansas City, MO but was instead held virtually due to safety concerns during the continuing Covid-19 pandemic. The use of sophisticated meeting software was purchased from the Presbyterian Church USA that made this unique virtual General Synod meeting possible.

Since Synod was eight days long, it is not possible to do full justice in a review in one article, so the review of GS33 will be submitted in an eight-part series. Part 1 will cover the opening plenary, and subsequent parts will cover the other three plenaries, the keynote speakers, and review each of the 11 resolutions that were brought to the virtual floor.

GS33 began on July 11 with youth and young adult programs held between 2:30 PM–4 PM CST. Opening worship began at 4 PM CST and was led by Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. It was during this opening worship that the Synod participants were blessed by the wonderful artistry and talent of the musicians and videographers that made the worship videos possible.

GS33 officially began with Plenary 1, which started at 5:30 CST. The Synod meetings were led by the Rev. Penny Lowes, who served as GS33 Moderator. Moderator Lowes opened GS33 with a welcome, a reflection, and a moment of centering prayer. The Synod leadership was introduced, and the report of the Credential Committee was heard. The Credential Committee reported that there were 715 total delegates, comprising 13% youth and young adult, 57% female, and 46% laypersons. They reported that GS33 the delegation was a significant reflection of the UC's commitment to diversity. The Committee also reported that the delegation met the requirements for a quorum, so the Moderator officially declared that a quorum was in place.

The plenary continued with other in-house business, such as a review of the use of the meeting software, adoption of the agenda, and several standing committee reports, including the report from the Board of Directors. The eleven Resolutions were introduced, three of which were voted on during this plenary (more about the resolutions in later installments). Special honored guests were introduced, along with ecumenical and international guests. The Three Great Loves (launched in 2017, GS31) was officially closed with a video that shared about this emphasis and thanksgiving for the program. In its place, a new initiative was launched, entitled, Join The Movement (see: www.jointhemovementucc.org). The Pension Board provided its report regarding its $3 million capital campaign to support financially struggling ministers. The Race Audit was also provided; this is a multi-year initiative to examine how racial inequity is reflected in the UCC, sharing that the UCC is 85% ethnically white.

The last item of business for Plenary 1 was to vote on three of the eleven submitted resolutions. These resolutions did not need committee work, so were voted on in this first plenary. The resolutions “Becoming a Church of Contemplatives in Action,” “A Resolution to Declare and Respond to Racism as a Public Health Crisis,” and “A Resolution to Recognize the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024)” were voted on. All three resolutions passed with a large majority.

The last item of business for Plenary 1 was to introduce the renomination of the Rev. Traci Blackmon to a second term as the UCC Associate General Minister. Rev. Blackmon was introduced by the Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree, and Blackmon delivered a powerful speech entitled “Together” that was a sermonic call to the power of the “We”. Her challenge asked us what we can do when we work together for the betterment of our communities, the glory of God, and the witness to our faith in Jesus Christ.

Plenary was concluded with announcements and then a theological reflection by the youth. The youth challenged us with their firm statement, “I am resilient!” Following the youth reflection, GS33 was in recess until Plenary 2, held on July 16.
An important part of the experience of attending General Synod is visiting the exhibit room. With a virtual Synod meeting, we had a virtual exhibit room. Access to the virtual Exhibit Hall was possible through the General Synod 33 (GS33) meeting website (meet.ucc.org – this was the same web portal where we accessed the other Synod events). There were eighty-two exhibitors represented in the Exhibit Hall. Some of the exhibitors included: the UCC resources store, the Justice and Peace Network, the UCC Cornerstone Fund, and the Pension Boards. There were numerous colleges and theological schools represented, including our CUE (Chicago, United, and Eden) seminaries. Visitors to the Exhibit Hall also had the opportunity to purchase art, music, stoles, and UCC themed clothing.

There were eleven resolutions brought to the virtual floor of GS33. Three of the resolutions were voted on during the opening plenary on July 11. All three of the resolutions were Resolutions of Witness, so they required a 2/3 majority vote to pass. The first resolution voted on was “Becoming a Church of Contemplatives in Action.” The purpose of this resolution was to seek the church’s integration of action for justice alongside an intentional commitment to the life of prayer. Adopting the resolution would empower the UCC to root its collective life of activism for justice in the prayerful life of contemplation. This resolution passed with a 93% in favor vote. The second resolution voted on was “A Resolution to Declare and Respond to Racism as a Public Health Crisis.” The purpose of this resolution called the United Church of Christ to recognize that racism is a public health crisis and engage in actions to bring an end to this crisis. This resolution passed with a 96% majority vote. The third resolution voted on during Plenary 1 was “A Resolution to Recognize the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024).” This resolution had the three-fold purpose of calling the United Church of Christ to 1) acknowledge this Decade, 2) adopt its frameworks for addressing the issues affecting African descendant people, and 3) promote the Decade and resulting outcomes for advocating for the rights of African descendant people. This resolution passed with a 94% majority vote.

The delegates and guests of GS33 gathered Monday, July 12 at 6:30 CST for greetings and announcements. The keynote speaker this evening was Valarie Kaur. Ms. Kaur is a social activist and filmmaker and is active in leading campaigns for civil and human rights. She delivered an inspiring lecture that recounted the story of how she began as a social justice activist following the death of a Sikh family friend in the first hate crime after 9/11. Her talk included her two-decade journey of creating story-based advocacy and her efforts to bring about policy changes for such things as, hate crimes, racial profiling, and marriage equality. Following her talk was an equally informative time of question and answer.
An important part of being a delegate to General Synod is being a part of a caucus. The Tri-Conference Ministries caucus was comprised of the delegations of the South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa Conferences. Our TCM caucus was led by our Executive Conference Minister, the Rev. Brigit Stevens, with support from the TCM associate conference ministers. Typically, the members of the caucus to Synod would have morning meetings to discuss issues and share information and would sit together at the table designated for each delegation. The handicap of not meeting in person is that there is not a table to sit around. The early morning meetings in a hotel conference room were replaced with Zoom meetings. The members of the TCM caucus also gathered using a virtual group meeting app called GroupMe. Using the GroupMe app helped to build camaraderie and keep the cohesiveness of our caucus.

Yet another feature of attending Synod is taking part in the workshops. Fifty separate workshops, covering a wide range of topics, were available to attend. The topics addressed issues such as money, Bible, social justice, conflict, anti-racism, local church issues, gender, and sexual diversity. Like the rest of GS33, all of the workshops were accessible to attend by a virtual platform. The workshop schedule began on July 7, four days before the start of Synod, and continued during the following week.

The only official Synod event on the evening of July 13 was announcements. The extra time provided an opportunity to catch up on reviewing the information about the resolutions.

One of the eleven resolutions brought to GS33 was “A Resolution to Advocate and Act to Change the Cash Bail Bond System to Eliminate Racial and Social Injustices in the Present System.” The purpose of this resolution was to call the United Church of Christ to advocate and act to change the Cash Bail Bond System in the United States to be more just to economically disadvantaged people. During Plenary 3, held on July 17, this resolution passed with a 98% majority.

Another resolution passed in Plenary 3 was, “A Commitment To Gender Safety & Equity In Ministry Settings.” This Resolution of Witness called faith communities to renewed accountability for the theology of equality that the UCC has long professed. After discussion to strengthen the language to include the role of the local congregation and the language for non-binary, the resolution passed with a 97% majority.

A third resolution on the agenda of Plenary 3 was, “A Resolution Encouraging To End 128 Years Of War Between The United States Of America And The Hawaiian Kingdom.” The purpose of this resolution was to call the United Church of Christ to actualize its historical commitment to justice and peace with the Hawaiian Kingdom. The resolution called upon the leadership of the UCC to urge the governor of Hawaii and the government of the United States of America to honor international law under the charter of the United Nations regarding the legal treatment of Native people of an occupied territory. As a Resolution of Witness, it needed a 2/3 majority vote to pass. The resolution received a 60.75% approval, falling short of the needed 2/3 majority to pass. More about this resolution in parts 7 and 8.
Several resolutions were brought to General Synod. In one manner or another, each of the resolutions addressed an issue of social justice, seeking equality and providing a voice to people on the margins. Three resolutions were voted on during Plenary 1, three more were voted on during Plenary 3, and the remaining resolutions were voted on in Plenary 4.

A resolution addressed during Plenary 4 was a Prudential Resolution entitled, “The Alliance of Associate Ministers of the United Church of Christ Request to be Recognized as a Formal Group.” The intention of creating the Alliance of ACMs as a formal group was “to be a supportive expression of the Living Christ, in relationship with one another and with the Body of Christ, in all its forms.” There was some contention connected with this resolution. During the debate, a motion was made to refer it to the UCC Board, but the motion was defeated. The resolution passed with an 82% majority.

Another resolution discussed in Plenary 4 was, “Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel.” This Resolution of Witness calls on the nation of Israel to act with justice toward the Palestinian people, in line with the prophets recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Committee discussion on this resolution worked to soften the language of the resolution to make it a more useful tool for inter-faith discussions. During the debate, two motions were made to add the words sin and apartheid back into the resolution, both of which passed. The resolution passed as amended with an 83% majority.

After the afternoon activities for youth and young adults, GS33 gathered for worship at 7 PM CST. The worship service was co-led by the Rev. Jaquan Beacham and Rev. Nancy Rosas and used the theme of GS33, based on Psalm 1. The service opened with a video performance by Christian Parrish Takes the Gun, known professionally as Supaman. Parrish Takes the Gun is an Apsáalooke rapper and fancy dancer from Crow Agency, Montana. The service was also blessed by the talents of Joel and Aimee Pakan, Rev. Julian DeShazier (a Christian rapper professionally known as J.Kwest), Pete Seeger, Mia McClain, Tracy Howe, and the GS33 virtual choir. The rousing sermon was then delivered by the Rev. Michelle Higgins. The approach Rev. Higgins used for her message was an intoning musical style accompanied by piano, percussion, and electric guitar. Her message both inspired and challenged us to delight in the law of the LORD under the tree planted by streams of living water. The Rev. Dr. Monica Dawkins-Smith gave the call to the offering that was to go to the Thursday In Black fund (funds used to end violence against women). Following the offering, we were led in a moving water ceremony. The Wednesday evening worship was a moving, challenging, and inspiring experience.
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One of the eleven resolutions voted on during Plenary 4 was, “A Resolution to Ban the Practices of Conversion Therapy.” The purpose of the resolution was to urge congregations and other settings of the UCC to advocate for a ban on conversion or reparative therapy. It also calls churches to strengthen their efforts to reach members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially youth, with the Good News that their sexual orientation or gender identity is a gift from God. Those speaking from the floor in favor of this resolution shared heart-wrenching stories of their traumatic experiences of enduring these so-called therapies. It was disappointing when the floor was closed to begin the vote, many thinking that these stories all needed to be heard. The resolution was passed with a resounding 99% approval.

Another resolution voted on during Plenary 4 had the creative title, “‘Who will speak for the Trees?’ A Resolution on the Rights of Nature.” The purpose of this resolution was to call for a change in the human relationship with nature from viewing it as an object and a commodity to the recognition that we are all interconnected in the web of life. There was little discussion for this resolution and it was adopted with a 96% majority.

The eleventh resolution brought to GS33 was entitled, “A Resolution On Protecting Workers At Churches and Other Religious Institutions.” This resolution intended to call the United Church of Christ to discern and implement appropriate measures to protect their employees. This resolution was referred to the UCC Board of Directors and was not voted on during the plenary sessions.

Thursday afternoon continued the activities for youth and young adults, including Home Groups, Game Night, and the Youth Escape Room. This also was the day that the committee work began. Seven committees were given the task of working on one of the resolutions. Each committee assigned to a resolution had the responsibility to review and edit the resolution and then recommend it to the floor of the plenary.

At 7:30 PM CST, GS33 gathered for a time of celebration. During the hour of celebration, we heard from various areas in the life of the United Church of Christ where God is at work in mighty ways. People from different agencies and conferences shared, including our own TCM member, Louie Blue Coat, a member of the leadership of the Dakota Association in the South Dakota Conference.
Early in the afternoon of Friday, July 16, the resolution committees continued their work. None of the committees finished their work during the Thursday committee sessions. A subcommittee helped to speed up the work of the committee on Hawaiian sovereignty. This group rewrote the resolves portion of the resolution to make it more actionable yet remain in the spirit of the original writers. The committee dealing with Israel and Palestine spent much of their debate trying to soften the language of the resolution. During the plenary debate, much of this was added back into the resolution.

At mid-afternoon, Plenary 2 met. At the start of Plenary 2, we heard the first of the Speak Outs. The Speak Outs were pre-recorded videos submitted by people wishing to highlight something they saw as important. Since none of the committees finished their work during the first work session, none of the resolutions were presented on the floor for voting. Several items scheduled for Plenary 3 and 4 were then moved to Plenary 2.

Areas of the church highlighted during Plenary 2 included a report about Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) and the report from the Center for Analytics, Research and Development and Data (CARDD). Part of the CARDD report was to share the data about the effects of Covid-19 in our churches. We were shown videos highlighting the Cornerstone Fund and the Insurance Board. We heard reports from Just World Covenants, Global Ministries, the Church Building & Loan Fund, Pension Boards, and the United Church Funds. We were given a presentation by Rev. John Dorhauer on behalf of the National Council of Churches about the soon-to-be-released NRSVue (NRSV updated edition) Bible. We also heard more about the new “Join the Movement” national church emphasis. During Plenary 2, the moderator offered thanks and celebration for the seven new church starts and the ministries of new and retiring Conference Ministers. Plenary 2 closed with announcements and was then adjourned.

At 6 PM CST, GS33 gathered to hear our keynote speaker. Speaking this night was the Rev. Adam Russell Taylor. Rev. Taylor is the president of Sojourners (a social action organization) and author of Mobilizing Hope: Faith-Inspired Activism for a Post Civil Rights Generation. In his talk, Taylor shared that our society currently is in a toxic moment, and working toward the “beloved community” is the cure. He told us that followers of Christ need to enter into a David-and-Goliath battle against two societal viruses named, “systemic racism” and “toxic polarization.” The cure for these viruses is in the building of the beloved community. We do this, says Taylor, by using the “five smooth stones” of 1) “Imago Dei equality” – all are made in God’s images and of infinite and equal worth. 2) “Ubuntu interdependence” – the African value of the common good, “I am because we are.” 3) “Radical welcome” – a value, if applied to the U.S. immigration system, could transform it. 4) “Environmental protection” – requiring a shift away from the notion of “dominion” over the earth to being “caretakers of the world’s resources and beauty.” 5) “Dignity for all” – expressed concretely in such things as the United Nations’ sustainability goals. If the US American church would prioritize the building of the beloved community, Rev. Taylor admonished, it would transform the state of Christian witness and rehabilitate the reputation of the church. Rev. Taylor’s message paired well with the keynote message we heard earlier Monday evening from Ms. Valarie Kaur.
The Saturday, July 17, agenda of GS33 started with the Valerie Russell Lecture, featuring Dr. Joy DeGruy. Dr. DeGruy is a nationally and internationally renowned researcher and educator whose research focuses on the intersection of racism, trauma, violence, and American chattel slavery. DeGruy talked about the various familiar narratives in history and culture. When these narratives are examined more closely, DeGruy said, they become more fraught with contradictions. Dr. DeGruy cited several examples of how the truth of systemic racism is, “hidden in plain sight.” “America’s pathology is her denial.” DeGruy said. “It’s her secrets that make her sick.” If we can face these truths, hidden in plain sight, we can move in the direction of healing.

Time was set on the Synod agenda for committees to meet and finish their work if need be. All of the committees had finished their work on Friday except for the committee working on the resolution regarding the rights of nature. This committee took a little more time to improve the wording of the resolution. During this block of time, the Young Adult Project was also hosted. At 8 PM CST, a young adult escape room event was also held. At 1:30 PM CST hearings were held to meet the candidates, for the church budget, concerning bylaws, and regarding nominations. Links were provided for GS33 delegates and visitors to sit in on the meetings.

At 3 PM CST, Plenary 3 began. Plenary 3 was led by the Vice-Moderator Robert Sandman. The meeting began with more Speak Out videos. The Speak Outs highlighted such things as the Common Global Ministries Board, Global Mission Internship, Queer of God, Dying With Dignity, DACA, and environmental justice.

The State of the Church address was delivered by UCC General Minister and President, the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer. In his address, Rev. Dorhauer said that he believed the collective body of the United Church of Christ is living into Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one.” With vigor and creativity, the church is taking on, Dorhauer said, the “twin pandemics of Covid-19 and racism, and also the urgency of the crisis of climate change. His measure for the denomination’s health and vitality is the “ongoing efforts to heed the call of the Holy Spirit and continue to display our courage in the struggle.” Dorhauer cited examples of unity, welcome, love, and justice at every level of the church and how so many have answered the call to be “agents of transformation” in mission. Rev. Dorhauer reminded us that, “Our narrative is not one of decline and diminishment, but of relevance to and in a world that is looking for a body fully committed to a love that seeks a just world for all.”

Following Rev. Dorhauer’s State of the Church address, four of the resolutions were slated for a vote on the floor of Plenary. Because of the length of time taken for discussion of the resolutions, the fourth resolution on the agenda was bumped to Plenary 4. The first two resolutions, “A Resolution to Advocate and Act to Change the Cash Bail Bond System” and “A Commitment to Gender Safety & Equity in Ministry Settings,” had minimal discussion and both passed with a large majority. The third resolution, “A Resolution Encouraging to End 128 Years of War Between the United States of America and the Hawaiian Kingdom” received a lot of floor debate. A motion was made to postpone voting on the resolution indefinitely. This motion was defeated. With so much debate for and against the resolution, a motion was made to extend Plenary 3 by an hour. This motion was also defeated, so the vote was called. The resolution received a 60.75% majority, narrowly missing the 2/3 majority needed to pass. Plenary 3 was concluded with Rev. Dorhauer offering a prayer, praying in part, “the good people of Hawaii and its Native citizens who continue to bear the pain and the wounds of a colonial past whose footprint is far from gone,” and for the UCC as it “wrestles with its legacy of colonialism.”

Following Plenary 3, the Implementation Conversations meetings began. The purpose of these meetings was to strategize how best to implement the resolutions in our local communities. Despite the resolution being defeated, the Hawaiian Sovereignty meeting still took place. In that meeting, the video that was intended to be used for the resolution intensive was played in full to correct the misinformation the other video caused.
General Synod 33 concluded on Sunday, July 18 with Plenary 4, and the closing worship. Plenary 4 was called to order at 1:30 PM CST and we heard from the last of the Speak Outs, which highlighted the Mental Health Network (WISE). A motion was made and passed to move up on the agenda to vote on the Committee Block. The following items concerning General Synod bylaws were dealt with en bloc: removing the use of Roberts Rules, making it possible to visit virtually, changing language relating to race and gender to be more diverse and inclusive, amend to include that the Board must have a transgender and/or non-binary member, and Common Services Corp. provisions to be removed. The GS bylaws changes proposals all passed with a majority except for the proposal to remove Robert’s Rules. The remaining resolutions were brought to the Plenary floor for voting: “The Alliance of Associate Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ Request to be Recognized as a Formal Group,” “Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel,” “A Resolution to Ban the Practice of Conversion Therapy,” and “Who will speak for the Trees?” A Resolution on the Rights of Nature.” All of these resolutions easily passed with a strong majority. The Plenary agenda then moved to the 2021 Financial Update Report. The Report included the audited Financial Statements for 2018, 2019, and 2020, the National Basic Support Allocation Base, and the Percentage Allocation of Denominational Support.

The Antoinette Brown Awards were announced, honoring one woman with the Catalyst Award, and two women with the Trailblazer Award. Other awards included recipients of the Movement Maker. Elections followed on the Plenary agenda. Elections included the re-election of the Rev. Traci Blackmon to another four-year term as Associate General Minister. The recommendation to re-elect Rev. Blackmon passed with a 96% majority. Other elections included the UCC Board, the Nominating Committee Class of 2027, General Synod 34 Moderator, and Assistant Moderator. Following the elections was a memorial tribute to the life and ministry of the Rev. Keith Mills, Conference Minister of the Northern Plains Conference, who died unexpectedly this year on February 1.

Following the tribute to Rev. Mills, a motion was made to reconsider the Hawaiian Sovereignty resolution. The motion received a 62% majority, but not a 2/3 majority, so was understood to have not passed. With this determination, the Plenary agenda continued. Near the end of the Plenary session, it was announced that the parliamentarians had determined that the vote to revisit the resolution on Hawaiian Sovereignty had passed because it did not need a 2/3 majority. The Plenary then proceeded with the vote, which this time received the necessary 2/3 majority, passing with a 68% approval.

Plenary 4 concluded with an invitation by the Indiana-Kentucky Conference Minister to Indianapolis for General Synod 34. We were blessed with a musical reflection by our Theological Reflector, singer, songwriter, Ken Medema. The gavel was passed from Rev. Penny Lowe to Mr. Robert Sandman and General Synod 33 was adjourned.

The closing worship followed Plenary 4, starting at 5 PM CST, with the Youth Closing Celebration starting at 6 PM CST. The service, led by the Revs. Mia McClain, John Dorhauer, Traci Blackmon, and Karen Georgia Thompson, offered a remembrance of those lost in the Covid-19 pandemic, celebrated Holy Communion. The service had the theme “air,” “resurrection,” and “breathe.” Worshippers were tutored in a breathing exercise at the beginning of the service and invited to pause to breathe at various times throughout the service. The message, “I Am Breathing,” was delivered by Rev. Thompson, the UCC Associate General Minister for Wider Church Ministries and Operations. The worship service featured the talents of Michelle Hecht, William Snell, Jr. (Walks with a Pipe – Cannupa Yuha Mani), Rev. Vahisha Hasan, Keon Heywood, Shannon Kearse-High, M. Barclay, Cheryl Williams, Tracy Howe, Adrienne Hurd, Dione McClain-Freeney, Amanda Udis-Kessler, Bryan Johnson, Patrick Henderson, Mia McClain, Kevon Carter, Natalia Serna (La Muna), and the General Synod virtual choirs.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. David R. Jennys
GS33 Delegate, South Dakota Conference

*Note: Special thanks to Abbie Greene, who graciously shared here notes of the Plenary sessions. Her notes greatly helped in the writing of my reviews.