

**UEK-Versammlung am 11.11.2024 in Würzburg**  
**Vortrag von Frau Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson**  
**General Minister and President, United Church of Christ**

## **The State and Future of the Church**

### **Greetings and Introductory Remarks**

It is my pleasure to be present with you for this assembly of the UEK, as you meet to conduct the business of the church, and once again commemorate and celebrate your unity in Christ. To commemorate is to remember. In gathering you remember you are one in Christ, brought together by the power of the Holy Spirit. And together, as you remember your baptism you will celebrate the joy of fellowship and relationships as you take the eucharist, and once again live God's love given freely for us all through Jesus Christ. Thank you for the invitation to be present with you on the occasion.

With me is my colleague Rev. Mark Pettis who serves as the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Minister for the United Church of Christ. Mark succeeded me in the role as the ecumenical officer for our church, a role he has now been doing successfully for over three years. I am grateful for his gifts, his passion for justice and his commitment to the unity of the church. Dr. Peter Makari sends his regrets. Due to other commitments, Peter could not travel with us. He sends his greetings and love for you and wishes every success for your time together.

We bring you greetings from the United Church of Christ. Ours is a long and storied history of partnership lived with intention, founded on a history of common ancestors whose witness and faith were brought into the United States. That we are united and uniting churches with strong commitments to the unity of the church and to a deeper, richer ecumenical relationship rooted in love and justice are gifts we hold with gratitude. We will continue to live into Jesus' prayer 'that they

may all be one” (John 17:21) through the active engagement of this partnership, which is evidenced by the *landeskirchens*, conferences, associations and congregations of our two churches who meet, visit and pray for and with each other. As we embark on a new journey together, we do so remembering those who came before us and the ministry and mission yet ahead of us.

As I prepared for this time together, I was reminded that on this day when we meet in joy, it is Armistice Day in Germany and Veteran’s Day in the United States, also known as Remembrance Day. Let us not forget the wars fought on this soil and the wars currently being waged in various parts of our world, today we remember. We pray for peace for our siblings around the world whose lives are disrupted by war and civil unrest. Please pause with me for a moment of silence and silent prayers.

### **Challenge and Opportunity**

In my time today, I want to offer personal reflections on the state and future of the church in the United States, with an incorporated vision for the United Church of Christ. August 1 marked the first anniversary of my call to serve as the General Minister and President. This is my fourth role in ministry within the National Ministries of the United Church of Christ which I have served for 15 years now, including 8 years as the ecumenical officer which afforded me the opportunity to be actively engaged in this partnership between the UCC and our German partners. My reflections from this perspective point to the possibilities and future of the church in the United States and globally in continued witness to God’s love as we seek a just world for all.

The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957. As we head towards our 70th anniversary as a church, this is a time of reflection as we think about the past, present and future of the church. The past year has been focused on attending to structural changes. The process of unifying the

ministries of the church has been on-going with the unified governance process being initiated in 2000. We are still in the throes of implementing bylaws changes which address the structural changes in the church. There are additional bylaws changes coming to the General Synod in 2025 as we aim to finalize the structural changes and create a more nimble and unified structure. The upcoming General Synod will be the last in the biennium cycle as we will move to a triennium starting in 2028. This will be a time of change and opportunity for the church.

When we gather in Kansas City in 2025, one of the resolutions we will consider will be the creation of the Keystone Conference as the 4 conferences in Pennsylvania join to become one conference. This will follow the creation of the Southern New England Conference and the Tri-Conference both of which are comprised of multiple conferences which have seen fit to do ministry in intentional unity. These shifts point to some of the responses coming as leadership in the church addresses the needs of the church comprehensively in a time when resources as shrinking and spiritual, physical and emotional needs are increasing.

Change is all around us. The church is changing as the world is changing. Changes in attitude toward the church are evident along with the decreased influence of the church even as some voices that identify themselves as Christian are proving problematic in the political and social arenas.

What lies ahead for the church is unknown. In the unknown is the clarity that the church will continue to exist, it will be much different than it was 70 years ago.

**no hands for time**

by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

trapped  
longing for a past  
glorified by colossal husks  
topped with mammoth gilded steeples  
turned behemoth albatross

standing in ravaged lots  
no one stopping or curious  
no major loss  
feeding greedily  
on borrowed time

confused  
discussing definitions  
with language promoting servile submission  
exclusively naming selective inclusivity  
amidst an absence  
of diverse races  
condemning dark faces  
navel gazing  
drinking wine  
on borrowed time

broken  
seeking relevance  
while damming waters to dry places  
stopping spirits destined to join  
the Ocean wide  
busy counting empty spaces  
no opinions worth naming  
dreaming of excess  
planting graves  
on borrowed time

fixated  
fixing itself  
no hands to lend  
refusing to help  
watching countless young lives waste away  
endowments and planned given  
mounting crosses on dilapidated buildings  
deliberating a fading history  
on borrowed time

disenchanted  
preaching poverty  
light of the world  
rehearsing philosophies  
missing purpose and rudderless  
with no rewind

a broken clock  
with no tick tock  
who needs hands  
when you long stopped  
wasted away yesterday  
on borrowed time

KGAT  
14:17  
11 October 2017  
Cluj Napoca, Romania

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### **Diminishing Numbers**

The church is alive and well in the United States. I want to begin there, even as I realize that the predominant narrative in the church is focused on decline. The United Church of Christ and other mainline denominations are facing the reality that the numbers in the pews are steadily decreasing, the income and support for the church is decreasing, and yet the call to serve continues to come and the needs are ever increasing before us. The role of the church in ministry and mission continues to be necessary and needed among us.

At the end of 2022, there were 4,603 congregations in the United Church of Christ with a total of 712,296 members. The UCC's congregations represent about 1.3% of total U.S. congregations\* while the membership of the UCC represents slightly less than one half of one percent (0.44%) of total U.S. religious adherents\* and about 0.21% of the U.S. population.\*\* UCC membership is concentrated in the Great Lakes, Middle Atlantic, and New England regions of the country. This data was collected as a part of the annual statistical profile of the United Church of Christ.

This data in the statistical profile, identifies that the United Church of Christ like much of the mainline denominations in the US continues to experience numerical decline in membership. This

has been the trend for over 50 years with the more recent documentation of the phenomenon seeming to have started in the past twenty years. As the profile notes: “From 2012 to 2022 alone, the UCC encountered a net loss of 551 congregations and 286,610 members. Some of this decline, however, began prior to the formation of the denomination in 1957 as the number of congregations steadily decreased despite membership increases in the UCC’s early years” (<https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023statisticalreport.v11webUPDATED.pdf>).

Last year in 2023, 53 churches closed (with more likely to be reported). That’s one a week. A significant increase from 2022 when 39 closed. Ten years ago in 2013, 27 churches closed. These churches chose to complete their ministries. This number does not include churches that merged, were removed by CARDD or associations, or withdrew.

This data is reflective of a larger trend in the United States which is the large numbers of individuals who are disaffiliating from religious traditions including Christianity. The rise of the “nones” and the “Spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” has been well documented. In a 2022 article titled *Modeling the Future of Religion in America*, the Pew Research Center estimated that in 2020, about 64% of Americans, including children, were Christian. People who are religiously unaffiliated, sometimes called religious “nones,” accounted for 30% of the U.S. population. Adherents of all other religions – including Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists – totaled about 6%. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>).

The article concludes that “depending on whether religious switching continues at recent rates, speeds up or stops entirely, the projections show Christians of all ages shrinking from 64% to between a little more than half (54%) and just above one-third (35%) of all Americans by 2070. Over that same period, “nones” would rise from the current 30% to somewhere between 34% and 52% of

the U.S. population” (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>). While disaffiliation is contributing to decline, the decline in numbers is changing the context of church in many communities.

The vast majority (93.1%) of UCC members belong to congregations with 400 or fewer members with half (50.7%) attending congregations with 100 or fewer members. This reflects an overall trend within the UCC of membership being increasingly concentrated in smaller churches; in 2012, 89.3% of UCC members belonged to churches with 400 members or fewer and 41.1% belonged to churches with 100 members or fewer. The biggest changes in the past 10 years have been in churches with less than 50 members, which have increased from 18.8% to 25.7% of members since 2012, and churches with 201-400 members, which have decreased from 21.1% to 15.8% of members since 2012 (<https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023statisticalreport.v11webUPDATED.pdf>)

There is cause for concern as membership and attendance in churches and houses of worship continue to show decline. And yet, these numbers are only one part of the current realities of the church. The years of pandemic caused major shifts in the church. These trends are yet to be fully documented and continue to inform how the church is doing. Church attendance now includes those in worship, those attending live virtually, and yet others who are watching the recorded church service. Congregations are meeting in hybrid ways, some meeting virtually two weeks per month and in person two weeks per month. And we are finding congregations choosing to meet in spaces and places which are beyond the traditional church building.

The metrics of attendance, building and cash are no longer realistic for talking about the life of the church. Many of our congregations are now smaller and yet they are providing a variety of

ministries and mission that are making a change in the world. Shifting how we talk about the church is paramount, and perhaps overdue. We have congregations that are impacting their communities with advocacy, food ministries, housing programs, elderly and childcare programs, addiction ministries and more. Churches are opening their doors beyond Sunday mornings. The church is changing, and the metrics will need to shift to accommodate the changes.

### **blooming bones**

by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

*The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"*  
(Ezekiel 37:1-3)

valley of dry bones  
absent of life  
Can these dry bones live?  
evidence of wanting  
a stockpile of life gone  
piled high to the sky  
devoid of breath  
no purpose  
none collecting  
none commenting  
all watching  
these dry bones  
none to prophesy

standing in the valley  
staring at these bones  
their confounded presence  
haunting the living  
their brittle dryness  
glistening in the sun  
filtering through leaves  
their stark whiteness  
contrasting grass  
green of trees  
fertile earth brown



bodies  
no longer flesh and breath  
Can these dry bones live?  
who will prophesy?

what died  
leaving this valley of bones?  
the breath  
of our humanity?  
our will to live love?  
disparaging skin  
as sin  
decrying gender  
as inferior  
depicting human sexuality  
as ungodly  
prophesy to the dryness  
bringing breath to the slain

who died  
leaving this valley of bones?  
is this pile of whiteness  
African Ancestors long passed?  
our black and brown children  
prematurely taken  
mistaken as threat?  
their white bones  
in the sun  
mocking the glorification of whiteness  
undistinguishable  
from the bones of bitter oppressors  
who will prophesy to these bones?

standing in the valley  
staring at these bones  
listening to the breadth  
of a past forgotten  
wishing for the wisdom  
of Ancestors crying  
bones weeping dryness  
tears unseen  
as the clouds roll over  
the sky opens  
speaking into this valley

waters rolling down  
bringing a new thing  
blowing from the four winds

tear drops  
rain drops  
waters of hope  
splashing dreams and visions  
the Mystery  
of dust turned mud  
pollen from trees  
these bones live  
from them emerge petals  
blooming bones  
in the valley  
a new generation  
watching hope emerge  
standing in the valley  
staring at these bones  
prophesying truth

7:56  
KGAT  
26 March 2018  
Macdonough, GA

### **Justice and the Prophetic Voice**

The relevance of the church in the public square is also in question. These days in the United States, the dominant Christian voice is the Christian right. While the number of Christians is declining, the decline in the mainline and the current political climate which is intertwined with Christian nationalism has rendered it that much harder to hear the progressive Christian voices and the call for justice in the United States and globally. Is the church a broken clock which has lost its ability to tell the time? How will the church keep up with the time and the times in which we live?

Christian nationalism in the United States is not new. However, it has risen to the forefront of public discourse alongside the presidential election. According to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, “The Christian nationalist movement is largely white, reflecting the long entanglement of nationalism and racism that is our collective inheritance since the earliest days of America’s colonial settlement. In white nationalism this history is sanitized, removing the sins of genocide, slavery, Jim Crow laws, and all the many ways in which racism has saturated and sustained our society, thereby removing any felt need for repentance or repair”

(<https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/>).

Christian nationalism carries a message that is contrary to the gospel and the love of God given through Jesus Christ. These messages are hurtful, hate filled and are also lacking in justice for those who are marginalized. It has an anti-immigrant rhetoric and devalues the worth and dignity of racial ethnic and minorities people who are made in the image of God.

As the elections loom in the United States many are watching and wondering about the voice of Christians in the political discourse as the rights of women, African descendant people and other people of color, the LGBTQIA communities, immigrants and others are ignored. These largely minority communities find themselves targets of a flawed religious ideology that seeks to identify the United States as a Christian nation at the expense of immigrants while a revisionist history is written to glorify whiteness.

Members of the United Church of Christ have long taken seriously the commandment to love God with heart and soul and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:36-40). The United

Church of Christ General Synod has spoken on a variety of issues that are now being impacted by the views of Christian nationalists who tend to be contrary to seeking justice for all.

“Where the Bible has at its core the story of a people committed to welcoming aliens and strangers because they themselves were aliens and strangers, and to defending the oppressed because they themselves were once oppressed, the Christian nationalist narrative rejects the stranger and judges the oppressed as deserving of their oppression. Where the Bible declares that all human beings are made in the image of God, American Christian nationalists regard only certain people - “advanced,” white, Christian, English-speaking - to have the full measure of God’s image” (<https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/>). Regardless of the outcome of the elections on November 5, the road to healing and unity will be a long one for a church divided.

### **Big Tent: Diversity Among Us**

The rise of Christian nationalism and the upcoming elections have drawn attention to the diversity in the United Church of Christ. The denomination is diverse in many ways including language, racial/ethnic, theology, political views, church size, type of ministries, location (urban, rural, small town), and a host of other categories. The recent years have amplified the reality of the diversities present in the UCC. While noting the predominance of progressive voices in the United Church of Christ, ours is a denomination where there is a wide range of Christian beliefs.

This rich diversity is important to who we are as a united and uniting church formed in 1957 with multiple denominations. The historic naming of four streams in the uniting General Synod proved problematic with the identification of the fifth stream which is the Afro Christian Church.

There is also a sixth stream in the presence of Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico which became the Puerto Conference of the UCC. As we reclaim this history it is also an acknowledgement of the privilege of whiteness in the exclusion of the story of the birth of the UCC.

I believe the diversity we hold in the UCC is one sign of our progressive Christianity along with our prioritization of justice and attention to the marginalization in our communities. Our commitment to love God and to love our neighbors should be fully experienced in the life of the church where we continue to say: “no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, all are welcome here.” That extravagant welcome is to all. All means all. Yet the tension present in diversity continues to be a challenge for us.

Our diversity is realized in many ways. One area of diversity which is not as noticeable as some others mentioned is language. The Statistical Profile notes: “Unsurprisingly, the most commonly listed language for both was English, which was regularly spoken by 99.6% of responding congregations and used in worship by 99.8%. Beyond this, however, congregations listed at least 30 other languages or dialects in the “regularly spoken” category and at least 17 separate languages or dialects for use in worship” p.44.

The language diversity represents some of the migrant communities that are a part of the United Church of Christ. Those 30 languages and dialects in our churches are representative of the racial/ethnic diversity in the church. Micronesian languages (including Chuukese, Kosraean, Marshallese, and Pohnpeian), with additional entries coming from the Polynesian languages (Tongan and Samoan, in addition to Hawaiian itself), the languages of the Philippines (Tagalog, Ilocano), Japanese, and Mandarin. Spanish, German, and Japanese. The attention to diversity is important. All of the diversity that is present so that all can feel welcome among us.

## A Vision for the Church

The National Ministries of the UCC adopted six programmatic priorities for our work. These priorities are identified for focus 2025 - 2028. These priorities are a way that we will live out the mission, vision and purpose of the UCC.

**Purpose Statement (from the Gospel of Matthew):** To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

**Vision Statement:** United in Christ's love, a just world for all.

**Mission statement:** United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.

The 10-year vision for the UCC which was created in 2016 was that church would evidence:

**Christ-Driven Connection** - Striving to imitate the life of Christ, the transformative United Church of Christ will encourage authentic connection and compassion between individuals, local communities, and the world using creative, agile technologies and partnerships.

**God-Centered Action** - In ten years, the United Church of Christ will be committed to building deep partnerships in community that produce collective social action. We will boldly and actively endeavor to bring justice for all. We will be invitational as well as self-reflective, engaging the internal work of welcoming radical difference and truth-telling against systems of oppression that have held God's beloved people captive.

**Spirit-Led Leadership** - In ten years, the transformative United Church of Christ will be an innovative, nimble, and credible source of institutional support, moving with Spirit and intention, able to vision courageously and respond swiftly to/for the communities and world in which we live for the sake of the gospel.

The ten-year vision will continue to be held before the church as we continue **to seek a just world for all**. Living Christ is about action on behalf of others as we seek to love God with all our hearts.

## Programmatic Priorities

The programmatic priorities adopted by the national ministries are designed to address contemporary issues in the church. These are both challenges and opportunities for the church now. These six priorities are: leadership development, spiritual formation, strengthening the church, reshaping the narrative, decolonization, and climate action.

Each of these priorities can be expanded well beyond mention for additional pages. The ministries and mission of the mission of the church will be impact focused, to show what the church is doing through quantitative and qualitative data. The gathering of stories in addition to the numerical data will be important for the church moving forward.

### **The Future**

The future of the UCC must confront the history of the church, the privileges the church has enjoyed over time, and the current ministries of the church which is different and yet emerging among us. The UCC will celebrate 70 years in 2027. It will be a time of celebration and reflection. It will also be a time for embracing the change for moving forward in the days ahead. The church will be around in another 70 years. The church in 2057 celebrating 100 years will not and should not be the church of 1957.

Looking beyond this moment, we continue to embrace innovation as rich as those Ancestors before us did when they imagined, prayed and were led by the Holy Spirit to create this church we have today. We pray the same will create a future where God is indeed still speaking, and we will see a just world for all.

Anmerkung: Aufgrund der Wahlen in den USA am 05.11.2024 wurde am Ende des Vortrages von Frau Dr. Thompson folgender Link für das Plenum abgespielt:

<https://www.youtube.com/@uccvideos>