

Day Three Report

By Eric Anderson

Ah, Sunday. A day of relaxation and rest. A day of quiet and contemplation. Oh, there's some time for worship, to be sure. But the rest of the day? That's for simple joys.

At General Synod 2017 in Baltimore, things are... different.

The Hawai'i Conference delegation gathered with their counterparts of the Western Region once more for breakfast and to review issues they would be deciding. Geoff Brace, a member of the United Church Board, described proposed changes to the denomination's bylaws. Their aim, he said, is to allow national officers to respond to rapidly changing conditions, with portfolios suited both to the needs and to the officer's talents and commitments.

Some delegates returned to their committee assignments to complete their work. Hearings on major business items began an hour later, including a packed house for those responding to a proposed new Manual on Ministry.

The Manual (frequently abbreviated in UCC circles to MoM) offers guidance to association Church and Ministry committees, which oversee the formation, authorization, and oversight of authorized ministers. Hawai'i's own Eleanore Chong has been a member of the Habakkuk Group which prepared the draft document. The MoM proposal, she told the assembly, endeavors to ground itself in a sound theology of ministry.

It would make some major changes. It would end the classifications of Commissioned Minister for people engaged in ministries other than word and sacrament, and of Licensed Minister, which authorizes a pulpit and table ministry for a limited time and in a specified place. In place of licensure, the Habakkuk Group envisions a type of provisional ordination, or ordination while in training. The disparity in practice among churches – some of whom commission staff in music or Christian nurture, and some of whom do not – led the Group to recommend the end of association-level commissioning.

Those in the overflowing room lined up to provide their feedback, much of which affirmed the worth of the licensed and commissioned statuses. Synod delegates did not and will not consider any action related to the Manual on Ministry. Rather, feedback will be reviewed, and new drafts may follow. As associations adopt procedures based on a new manual, they will require changes to the UCC Constitution and bylaws, and the earliest a Synod could act on those questions is 2019.

Walking into the main hall in the afternoon, choral music delighted the ears. General Minister and President the Rev. John C. Dorhauer, the featured preacher, invited a number of others to add their voices to his. One by one, they told the stories of historic crises of faith, of injustices overcome, of needs considered, of barriers dismantled, and of promises that still await fulfillment.

With the music continuing to flow over them, those present united in the sacrament of Holy Communion with “three thousand of their closest friends,” with some passing the bread and chalice along their rows or tables, and others lining up to come forward and partake.

Evening brought the delegates back together, where they took up the first floor debates. They approved bylaw changes to enact a full communion agreement with the United Church of Canada, and enthusiastically elected the Rev. Traci Blackmon as Executive for Justice and Witness Ministries. They elected new members of the Board and Nominating Committees, as well as the moderator and vice moderator of the 2019 General Synod. They encouraged work toward a new funding model for the denomination, voted support for historic churches founded by the American Missionary Association, and decided to advocate for children living under Israeli military occupation. Further, they voted to support immigrants, and authorized the United Church Board to manage the denomination’s finances over the next biennium.

More work awaits the delegates on Monday, and on Tuesday – but they had already earned some time relaxing in any lovely spot of their choice!