

Serving as a Delegate in the United Church of Christ

Some have inquired about the nature of the responsibility of delegates to the Conference Annual Meeting and their authority. In response, here is my understanding as Conference Minister:

When the Annual Meeting gathers, it does so as a setting of the Church of Jesus Christ. As such, it is the responsibility of the delegates and ministers to listen to one another and to discern the mind of Christ on the issues before the Meeting. For over 350 years, such gatherings have been understood to be essential to discernment. If it were not so, there would be no need for the Meeting; people could simply send in written ballots. Because we are the Body of Christ and therefore joined in organic union with one another, we believe it essential that all in attendance remain open to the movement of the Holy Spirit among those gathered. Until this past year, I had not heard of a church instructing its delegates to vote in a particular way; indeed, I believe such direction runs against historical Congregationalism's understanding and conviction, as well as the polity of the United Church of Christ.

Many delegations from churches will come to the Meeting favored with insights from dialogue among the members of the church about issues that are known ahead of time and shared in the mailings about the Meeting. In the United Church of Christ, we often speak of delegates being "informed, not instructed." Delegates are elected by their congregation as persons of respect with delegated authority to vote their conscience as they discern the mind of Christ for the Conference and its ministry and mission.

One final comment: often resolutions are changed during the process of Annual Meeting, either as a result of the hearings or in the course of the debate. Thus the chances are slim that a particular resolution or affirmation would remain as worded in the advance materials. This is another reason delegates must be free to vote according to the understanding they develop with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Meeting. I can remember any number of times when I came to Annual Meeting as a local church minister expecting to vote a particular way and changed my mind based on prayer and the dialogue and advocacy of others!

I hope this is helpful as we all prayerfully approach our Annual Meeting.

Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree
Conference Minister