

UCC elects first woman—and first woman of African descent—to lead denomination

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#)

July 5, 2023



Karen Georgia Thompson (courtesy photo)

The United Church of Christ elected its first female general minister and president on Monday at its 34th general synod in Indianapolis.

Karen Georgia Thompson's election also makes her the first woman of African descent to lead the mainline denomination.

"Today, United Church of Christ, we created a first together. It won't be the last first," Thompson, dressed in white, told delegates afterward.

Those delegates overwhelmingly approved Thompson's nomination to a four-year term as general minister and president of the UCC on Monday morning, breaking into song and applause as the results of the vote—626 yeses to 43 nos—were announced.

Thompson is the third woman to be nominated to lead the UCC, which celebrated its 66th anniversary days before general synod began.

While neither Yvonne Delk (nominated in 1989) nor Barbara Brown Zikmund (nominated in 1999) ultimately were elected to lead the denomination, Thompson said during her [nomination speech](#), "Their ministries have individually and collectively shaped the UCC and paved the way for women to serve in ministry in the UCC, opening wide the doors of this denomination."

She pointed to Delk and Zikmund's nominations throughout her candidacy and again in her acceptance speech Monday, because, she said, "I think when we talk about being progressive, we need to remember our own history that this has been tried and done—and without success."

Thompson is associate general minister for the UCC's wider church ministries and co-executive for its global ministries, and she recently was elected to the executive committee of the World Council of Churches, according to the denomination. She has served the UCC for 14 years: previously as minister for racial justice and minister for ecumenical and interfaith relations.

Before Monday's vote, Noah Brewer-Wallin, chair of the search committee that recommended Thompson, praised the "unique and intimate perspective" she brings to the role of general minister and president from those previous roles within the denomination.

After graduating from Brooklyn College, Thompson earned a Master of Public Administration from North Carolina Central University, a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary and a Doctorate in Ministry from Seattle University, according to the UCC. She wrote her dissertation on the "religious multiplicity" of African Caribbean people, which includes practices from both African Traditional Religions and Christianity.

Born in Jamaica, she said she brings "a global view to the church."

She also brings experience leading ecumenical organizations like the National Council of Churches, the Caribbean and North American Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and Churches Uniting in Christ, according to the UCC.

That is reflected in what the denomination [described](#) as the heart of Thompson's work and her vision for the UCC: religious multiplicity and diversity, justice for marginalized communities worldwide, and affirming spiritual practices beyond mainline Christianity.

"The United Church of Christ, I think, continues to live into and honor a legacy of what we call progressive engagement in the public sphere, and I would like to see that happen, and I do wonder what that means for our 21st-century existence. I think we're only as progressive as the next thing that we encounter," Thompson said in an interview.

She added, "I believe that when we talk about being progressive in the United Church of Christ, we talk about no matter who you are or where you are in life's journey, all are welcome here. I want to push us to think about what it means for us to broaden that welcome in terms of how we understand hospitality in the church, who's welcome, who's invited. How do we ensure not that when people come, we're making adjustments for their participation, but what do we need to do to ensure that when people come, we are already ready for their participation?"

Thompson will step into the role of general minister and president on August 1. She [follows](#) John Dorhauer, who is finishing eight years in the role.

The theme of this year's general synod, which ran from June 30 to July 4, is "Making All Things New," inspired by [a passage in the biblical book of Isaiah](#): "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

About 2,000 people—including [733 voting delegates](#)—attended the meeting, which kicked off with a message from [keynote speaker](#) Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ordained pastor in the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a bestselling author. —Religion News Service