

# THE NEW UNITED CHURCH AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

From *A Pilgrim People* by Charles A. Maxfield

“United” was the first name of the United Church of Christ, the center of its denominational identity. This new denomination entered union discussions with other denominations before its own union was complete. The UCC soon had to divert its attention from more plans of union to concentrate on its own internal ongoing process of becoming one people of God, (1) creating a common identity from different denominational traditions; (2) uniting by inclusion into the leadership of the church, racial, ethnic and other groups that had been on the margins; and (3) uniting with Christ’s compassion for the poor. A third round of organic union did not materialize.

Those who believed the UCC’s ecumenical ardor was fading, proposed in 1986 that the President have a full time staff assistant for ecumenical affairs. Because of financial restraints the position was not created until 1991, when John Thomas entered this new office.

Marjorie H. Royle of BHM Research Department reported in 1990:

Has the ecumenical movement stalled? If ecumenism is understood as the union of denominations into one new denomination, that seems to be true. . . . Ecumenists, themselves, see the lack of progress toward denominational union, not as a failure, but as a sign that the ecumenical movement has moved forward toward a new understanding of unity.<sup>1</sup>

Its commitment to catholicity severely tested by the long process of union, the UCC was unwilling to immediately enter another organic union.

The UCC continued involvement in ecumenical activities, from the local to the global level. A World Council of Churches consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, released in 1982, was thoroughly studied on all levels of the UCC, and General Synod adopted a response in 1985. As a consensus statement, BEM described a theology and policies of faith and order that no one denomination followed; it represented a direction toward which all denominations could move, and facilitated ecumenical activities.

The UCC continued to search for ways to grow in spiritual unity with other Christians. Four significant efforts, leading to new relationships short of organic union, were (1) partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), (2) Consultation on Church Union, (3) full communion with the Evangelical Church of

the Union in Germany, and (4) a formula of agreement among Lutheran and Reformed churches.

### Ecumenical Partnership

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) expressed interest in participating in the Congregational Christian-Evangelical and Reformed union discussions in 1946. The latter two denominations believed their negotiations had progressed too far to introduce a third party at that point, but promised to consider union with the Disciples as soon as the UCC union was accomplished. Accordingly, Disciples observer-consultants participated in the UCC commissions on the constitution and the Statement of Faith.

The Disciples of Christ had discussed union with Christians and Congregationalists several times in the past. Disciples shared with the UCC a commitment to Christian unity, congregational polity, and one founder—Barton Stone.

The UCC and Disciples began talks on union in 1962, and in 1965 General Synod authorized the UCC Commission on Christian Unity to develop a Plan of Union when it believed the time was right. In 1966 the two denominations suspended union conversations in deference to the Consultation on Church Union (see next section).

The UCC and Disciples resumed talks in 1977, and in 1979 agreed to a six year “covenant for study” across the denominations. This study revealed a “widespread apathy towards union.” In 1985 the two denominations declared an “ecumenical partnership,” which was to be more than cooperation but less than organic union.

The United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) recognized “full communion” in 1989, established procedures for mutual recognition of ministers in 1994, and united their foreign mission work in a “Common Global Mission Board” in 1 January 1996.

### Consultation on Church Union

*I am moved by the conviction that Jesus Christ, whom all of us confess as our divine Lord and Savior, wills that His church be one.*

Eugene Carson Blake, stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, elaborated on this conviction in a sermon at Grace Episcopal Cathedral, San Francisco, on 4 December, 1960, by calling on the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches to invite the Methodist Church and the new United Church of Christ “to form with us a plan of

union both catholic and reformed.” Such a union would bring most American main line Protestants into one denomination.

On 9 April 1962, representatives of the four denominations met and gave birth to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). The number of participating denominations grew through inclusion of groups with whom the four charter members had close relations, and through most of its history COCU had from six to ten members. The Consultation soon reached theological consensus and prepared a *Plan of Union* which it commended to the churches in 1970. Over 1300 study groups across the country examined the *Plan*. Responses, reported to the Consultation in 1973, were overwhelmingly negative. The *Plan* created too much bureaucracy and a “Parish” system that left congregations with less control over their own lives than they had in any of the existing denominations. The office and powers of “bishop” were too authoritarian for the UCC. The Consultation could never resolve the issue of apostolic succession through bishops in a way fully satisfactory to both Episcopalians and the other denominations.

The Consultation did not prepare a new plan, neither did it dissolve. COCU was the only major church union discussion to include both predominantly White and predominantly African American denominations. It had the potential of addressing not just the theological and ecclesial divisions in the church, but also the racial divide. So it continued, looking for ways to promote unity short of union.

In 1984 the Consultation sent a theological statement, the *COCU Consensus*, to the churches, which the UCC General Synod accepted in 1989 as a “sufficient theological basis” for a covenant with the other denominations. COCU followed up this theological document in 1988 with *Churches in Covenant Communion*. This proposal called for intercommunion, mutual recognition of ministers, cooperation in missions, and “covenanting councils” with oversight of the covenant. UCC General Synod approved *Churches in Covenant Communion*, as did all the other denominations except the Episcopalians. This proposal was revised, not requiring covenanting councils, and postponing action on mutual recognition of ministers to a future date. In this form the proposal, now called “Churches Uniting in Christ” (CUIC) was approved by the denominations, including the UCC, in 2001, and went into effect in January, 2002<sup>2</sup>

### Kirchengemeinschaft

Soon after the uniting General Synod in 1957, two representatives of the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) of Germany approached the co-presidents of the new United Church of Christ to discuss closer ties between the EKU and the UCC.

The Evangelical Church of the Union was a federation of *landeskirchen* (state churches) in Germany that united Lutheran and Reformed churches. The Evangelical Synod had looked to the ECU as its parent, providing it with most of its members through immigration, although they never had formal ties. Both the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christians had assisted the German church in reconstruction after World War II and had participated in pastoral exchanges. The ECU, as the largest united church in the world, followed with interest the development of the UCC. Following the formation of the UCC, the two denominations continued to cultivate their relationship with pastoral exchanges and visits of delegations.

Germany was divided by the Cold War into two states, communist East Germany and democratic West Germany. In 1972 the ECU was forced to divide into two synods, reflecting the political boundary. In this crisis of isolation the ECU-East looked to still closer relations with the UCC. Through common contacts with the UCC, the East and West Synods of the ECU could keep in touch with each other. Also, having to justify its existence in an atheist and socialist state, the Eastern Synod found the UCC position on peace and social justice, expressed in Sound Teaching, to be helpful. From the UCC perspective, closer ties with a church in another country was an antidote for American provincialism.

At the invitation of the ECU-East, contact with the UCC increased and the relationship deepened. After further discussions of theology and ministry, the two German synods in 1980 voted to enter *kirchengemeinschaft* (full communion) with the United Church of Christ, which reciprocated in 1981. *Kirchengemeinschaft* included mutual recognition of ministers and full fellowship of pulpit and altar.

*Kirchengemeinschaft* led to more exchanges of pastors, lectures of scholars, discussion of social issues, and partnership agreements between regional bodies of the two denominations. Following *Kirchengemeinschaft* the UCC entered into numerous partnerships with denominations in other countries. Each agreement was different, pertaining to issues in that unique relationship. The ECU-UCC was the most intimate of these relationships, as the churches explored together issues of theology, ministry and society.

### Formula of Agreement

In 1973 the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe, and union churches derived from them, adopted a plan, called the Leuenberg Agreement, by which they could have full communion and recognition of each other's ministers. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and Lutheran World Federation began

similar discussions in 1982. In the United States, Lutheran-Reformed dialogue began in 1962.

Lutheran-Reformed dialogue directed itself to resolving the theological disagreements of the Sixteenth Century, in particular the understanding of communion. The potential benefits would include the possibility of shared ministry in union churches and local cooperation in many small communities.

Although the United Church of Christ had roots in both traditions, it was looked upon as a member of the Reformed side because of its membership in the WARC. The UCC did not enter the dialogue until the second round of discussions in 1972. A proposal for reconciliation and mutual recognition, *Invitation to Action*, was sent to the churches in 1984. As the Lutheran churches, who could not agree on their position toward the dialogue, entered a process of union with each other, action was delayed until the new Evangelical Lutheran Church of America could organize and re-examine the proposal as one body. Some Lutherans had problems with the UCC because its polity did not bind ministers to particular confessions. After further discussion, the Formula of Agreement was presented to the churches and approved by all four bodies in 1997.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Marjorie H. Royle, "The Meaning of an Ecumenical Partnership" (Nov. 1990), 1-2. UCC Papers, UBHFMM Research--Findings and Reports, 1972-2000, box 1.
2. Member denominations of CUIC were: African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Episcopal Church, International Council of Community Churches, Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

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