

That We
May All
(Finally!)
Be One

Covenant, Hospitality, and
the Expanding Identity of
the United Church of Christ

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INTRODUCTION

Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ



COVENANT AND HOSPITALITY ARE THEMES THAT KEEP TURNING UP IN THE life of the United Church of Christ. Each, it seems, is gift, joy, touchstone, and challenge for us.

Because we came into being as a uniting church, hospitality is in our genetic makeup, and we have cultivated our bent for it. Covenant remains more problematic for us and is frequently outdone by autonomy in tests of strength and inclination. Only when I had settled in to produce this volume on life in the United Church of Christ did I realize that hospitality and covenant may well be calling us back to our identity as a united and uniting church. Hospitality and covenant may also carry us forward to new expressions and applications of unity. One thing is certain. For us, unity will never be unanimity. Instead, we seek a unity that holds all of our independent and disparate voices in a creative tension, “a unity that defies our common understanding of the word.”¹

The United Church of Christ is a composite denomination. That is, we are a conceptual whole made up of complicated and related parts. We are a composite of the descendants of native peoples, immigrants, and those forced to come ashore in the Americas. We are a composition, formed and

forming, by westward voyagers as well as those who have traveled east, north, and south to take up with this movement of the Spirit.

The United Church of Christ is not hierarchical. There are no imposed doctrines. Congregations do not worship, undertake mission, or organize themselves according to uniform standards. Local Churches are autonomous—not controlled by regional or national church traditions or governance patterns.

Actually, all four settings of the UCC are autonomous—Local Churches, Associations and Conferences (regional bodies), and General Synod (national). Yet our constitution calls upon each setting of the church to honor and respect the work and ministry of the others in a covenantal relationship.

With our diverse cultures and histories, with our organizational autonomy and individual freedom of belief, our UCC identity is complex. Our unity is not always apparent. Who are we as the United Church of Christ? Sometimes the pronoun “we” seems too puny to handle us. The varied voices of the UCC can put a strain on the power of the first person plural pronoun to adequately represent (all of) “us.” Who is “we” in the UCC?

Hospitality is all about expanding the definition of “we” to embrace strangers, enemies, those “we” have not looked for, those “we” have not wanted around, those who are alien and “other,” those who are “them” *vis a vis* “us.” This is of particular importance to us as a composite denomination where we cannot realistically expect to find total accord with one another in belief or in practice. The ethic of hospitality pushes us all and always to reform, restate, and celebrate the dimensions of “we,” and to be gracious and compassionate to one another in our common pursuit of the radical and redemptive call to follow Jesus.

For a decade and a half I served as Conference Minister for Northern California and Nevada. This setting of our church is marked by cultural and theological diversity that verges on the flamboyant. The gifts and backgrounds of new congregations and new members continue to amp up the diversity. It was there that I learned, deep down and by heart, the truth of

the declaration so often voiced at Conference gatherings, “Those who were ‘them’ yesterday are ‘us’ today, and ‘we’ are forever changed.”

It is revealing to take note of how we use “we,” “us,” “they,” and “them” to talk about our church. When do we speak of the UCC as “we”? When does the UCC become “they”? “them, over there”? When does a gap between “we” and “they” call for a diagnostic review of our covenantal relationship?

UCC scholar of Hebrew scripture Walter Brueggemann describes covenantal relationship as “a way of being committed to each other as God is committed to us, a way of being defined by, accountable to, and responsible for each other.”² In covenant we are “pledged to solidarity across ideological lines and prepared to live in sustained engagement with one another in ways that impinge on and eventually transform all parties to the transaction.”³

A newspaper reporter once contacted me for an article about City of Refuge UCC. Early in the interview, the reporter asked, “Isn’t their worship style hard for you in the UCC to handle?” To this I could only respond, “City of Refuge is a United Church of Christ congregation whose style of worship is Pentecostal. That means that the United Church of Christ’s worship style is Pentecostal—*and* high church, and eclectic, and New England Congregational, and Afro-Christian, and Samoan Congregational, and German Reformed, and Would you like to rephrase your question?”

When City of Refuge joined the United Church of Christ, when Kalavaria Congregational Christian joined, when Community Congregational joined, when any church joins, the “we” we had been is changed. Not homogenized. Not standardized. Not reduced to lowest terms. Those who were “them” yesterday are “us” today, and “we” are forever changed. All parties are eventually transformed.

Transformation is not a wimpy thing. That Latin prefix “trans” is freighted with a mass of meaning: across, on the other side, beyond. Not just predictable developmental changes but a clearer, deeper, truer rendering of that which we are created to be.

There is more to transformation than “self-improvement and spiritual ecstasies.”⁴ In transformation we are sent from the familiar to face the ap-

pallingly, and the appealingly, different. Transformation of lives, of churches, of communities, demands the courage to traverse vast and intimidating terrain, to skate across the predictable and wind up at “beyond” for the sake of becoming who we are called to be.

Those who were “them” yesterday are “us” today, and “we” are forever changed. We are transformed in our understanding of ourselves, transformed as a community. Forever changed. Forever open to more change. Not haphazardly, but in response to the ancient call to relationship in covenant that changes everything: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod. 6:7). Not swept along in a bandwagon mentality, but imbued with the faithful uncertainty and constant trust of Pastor John Robinson, “There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s Holy Word.”⁵

In the next chapters we will follow the roots and gauge the realities of our UCC engagement with covenant and hospitality. We will talk about our life together as united yet autonomous. We will talk story. We will talk “polity.”

We can define polity simply as a group’s governance structure, how we are constituted as an organized body. We can also take a long view of polity and look into the sense of community among the people who make up any more-or-less organized body, among the people who gather around the table and find the communion of wholeness and healing.

Many years ago, at a gathering of the network of UCC teachers of history and polity, UCC historian Barbara Brown Zikmund remarked that it is impossible to learn UCC polity in isolation. “There must always be conversation,” she said. And most likely—although she was too circumspect to mention it—there will be questions upon questions and a certain level of contentiousness. This book is less theory of polity than it is description, based on lots of experience and conversations. It is intended to prompt conversations that engage us all with the various settings of the United Church of Christ, exchanges of ideas and experience with our companions on the journey, and exploration of sources beyond this text. Please

stop along the way to talk with others. Our individual stories are the stories of our church. Our shared stories build up the church. This book will, I hope, move us in the UCC to claim the church, in ever deepening ways, even as the church claims us. And I hope that the stories, questions, and histories recorded here will generate insight for the faith journeys of readers who are not part of the United Church of Christ.

USING THIS BOOK

It perhaps goes without saying that you will feel free to contribute your thoughts, narratives, and examples; to interrupt, rearrange, or skip over any of the materials presented; and to raise or research questions at any point.

We will refer to the UCC Constitution and Bylaws as an organizational map. Unless otherwise designated, we'll use the UCC Constitution and Bylaws of 2015. The themes of hospitality and covenant will recur throughout the book. The first part (chapters 1–3) sets the context, with our founding vision of unity and freedom. The three middle parts (chapters 4–17) deal with the arrangements of structure and accountability within our church: Local Churches, the Wider Church, and Ministry. The last part (chapters 18–21) brings us back to consideration of transformation, identity, and unity with an eye toward our future.

You'll find questions for reflection, comment, and conversation—either face-to-face or electronic—throughout the book.

PART I

Our Church's Founding Vision of Unity and Freedom



*Part I begins with our motto,
“That they may all be one,” and
moves into the founding vision
of our church, which assumes an
array of beliefs, interpretations,
and sources of revelation, and is
not distressed at the prospect.*

*We will look at the distinctions
between unity and unanimity, the
prospects for a unity of multiple
voices, and the risk and fluidity
of life in covenant.*

PART II

Local Churches



In part II we will look to our Local Churches, defined in our constitution as “the basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ.” It is within our Local Churches that the welcome table is spread and where the primary discernment and the front-line determination is made of who is “we” in the UCC.

We will look at hospitality, discernment, vitality, conflict, and the ways in which members of Local Churches live in covenant.

PART III

The Wider Church



We now proceed to part III, where we will widen our exploration of covenant to include the relationships between and among Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and General Synod and its affiliated and associated ministries.

We will study and question the ways in which each setting of the United Church of Christ acknowledges and engages the “integrity and existence of the other units of church life and their own legitimacy.”¹

We will reflect on the lapses of hospitality that can occur within our church when we come into contact those we perceive as alien to us. We will face into the difficulty posed when we find it awkward or distasteful to use the pronoun “we” to speak of our church in its entirety.

PART IV

Ministry



In this fourth part we will examine God’s call to “the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ.”¹

We will consider those ministries in and on behalf of the church for which authorization is required.²

We will hear from members of Committees on Ministry and Conference and Association staff about the complexities of authorized ministry and the processes of authorization and oversight of ministry for the good of Christ’s church—which may be our most visible and most used proving ground for the workability of covenant and hospitality. We will also look at how congregations call ministers and how ministers seek calls.

The final chapter in this part, chapter 17, is a glossary of terms used in the authorization and oversight of ministry in the UCC.

PART V

Identity and Unity



Part V calls us back to our identity, asks questions about who we are and the theological grounding of our identity. Are we “freedom’s church”? Are we a united and uniting church that holds in a creative tension all of our independent and disparate voices? Are we “like an archipelago . . . part of the same group, but still islands—separate and alone”? What stories do we tell that incorporate us all and tie us together, that function as our myth, that tell us who we are? Are we caught in a faceoff between autonomy and unity? Have we rashly sidestepped the orientation to hospitality? Are we in covenant?
