

Historic Diversity

I Corinthians 12:12-26; John 17:21

Tomorrow, June 25th, the United Church of Christ will be 50 years old. Seven thousand persons, by far the most ever, will gather for the General Synod of the UCC in Hartford, Connecticut, among them Joe and Noel, to celebrate this glorious and special occasion.

The fact that the United Church of Christ exists at all is significant when you consider that it is made up of two former denominations which merged in 1957 to form the UCC. Those were the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical & Reformed Church. And these two denominations were each a product of a merger of two previous denominations, the Congregationalists with the Christians and the Evangelical Church with the Reformed Church. So, in essence, the UCC is comprised of four different denominational groups each with its own unique history, yet with overlapping and reinforcing views of the mission and nature of the Church.

The individual histories of the four of them are exciting and fascinating, but not something we can cover in a sermon. What I would like to do is to lift up those themes of commitment, those passions which each first held individually, and which led them to discover one another and eventually unite. What is amazing is that these four denominations came from different places and peoples and traditions, and yet they found each in a common bond of faith and commitment. They even had different styles of church government or polity. One was congregational (with a small “c”) with authority centered in the local church or congregation. The other was Presbyterian like with authority centered in the classis, and association of district churches. And yet they united.

Let me begin by asking those of you who came from either pair of the two uniting groups in 1957, namely the Congregational Christian Churches or the Evangelical & Reformed Church to raise your hands. Who of you were originally either E&R or Congregationalists? Just as I suspected. Very few! We come from a wide variety of church backgrounds, even some with no church background, and yet we have found each other. We have come together in this church. We are committed to what it stands for. This is

parallel to the story of the denomination which we claim and which we know as the United Church of Christ, even though some, if not many, of you may not be that familiar with the UCC. No wonder our denomination is referred to as “a beautiful, heady, exasperating mix”.

The first thing to note is that the United Church of Christ and its forbears believed passionately in freedom: freedom to worship, freedom to express their faith in their own way, and freedom from governments or church authorities forcing them to believe and worship in ways they could not in conscience do.

We all know the story of the Pilgrims, who later joined with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony. They originated in 16th century England where in their protests against the restrictions of the Church of England, they became known as Separatists or Independents. They later left England in search of greater freedom in Holland. It was from there that they set sail for the new world, landing eventually at Plymouth. In time they called themselves Congregationalists after the style of free churches they established.

Our German ancestors from the Reformed and Evangelical traditions struggled to find freedom for their ways against the pressures of the Lutheran and Catholic churches to have them conform. When they came to this country in search of freedom, some came to William Penn’s Philadelphia, then spread west into Pennsylvania and south to the Shenandoah Valley and into North Carolina. Others settled in the Midwest mostly in the Mississippi Valley.

The last of our four predecessor denominations was a small group which called itself Christian. It was unique in that it began in this country rather than in Europe. These people left other denominations because they believed that all churches should unite and be open. They believed that there should not even be any theological or other requirements for baptism or to participate in Communion. All should be free to come and worship and all were welcome.

This passion for freedom led to a spirit of openness and acceptance of others seeking refuge and freedom, except for the early Puritans of Massachusetts who in their early years treated dissenters and questioners harshly while driving others away. And yet, one of them, Thomas Hooker, established a

new colony in Connecticut and so stressed the principles of freedom that he is considered by many to be the father of democracy in America. At the same time, those Puritans still back in England or Holland maintained an open and accepting spirit to all who sought to worship in freedom. What is perhaps most amazing of all is seen in the words of John Robinson, a pastor, who addressed those Pilgrims as they departed Holland in 1620. He declared “the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word”. In other words, he was saying some four centuries ago using an old English style of expression, that “God Is Still Speaking”. What a heritage! Freedom to believe as we choose, freedom to express that belief as we feel led, and freedom to become a part of the UCC regardless of our church background or our particular theology. That is something we celebrate in this church. We say as part of our statement of openness and acceptance of all who come that “we invite people of every . . . spiritual background into the full life and ministry of this congregation”. That is what we believe and declare now, and that is part of our heritage.

Second, as our name states, the UCC is a united church, but that is only part of the story. For the UCC declares itself to be not only a united but a **uniting** church. As I mentioned before, that little group which called itself Christian disdained denominations and felt that all churches should unite. Our German Protestant predecessors during their early years in this country sought to cooperate with different Reformed, Lutheran and other churches by sharing pastors and churches. The Congregationalists joined with Presbyterians in some mission efforts on the frontiers while working cooperatively with other denominations.

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has been at the forefront of ecumenical efforts toward church unity. It has been a leader in the National and World Council of Churches as well as the Consultation on Church Union, an effort by some ten denominations in the 60’s to explore seriously greater church unity not only in faith and practice but in organization. However, to this day the UCC is the only major denomination in this country that has brought together church bodies of different backgrounds and practices to form a new united church. Different Lutheran groups have united but only with one another. Methodists and also Presbyterians have united in recent decades but only but only among themselves to repair the split between north and south that tore them apart at the time of the Civil War. Today the UCC is in conversation and study with the Disciples of Christ to explore greater cooperation and unity. Already the

United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ are involved jointly in mission projects around the world. So the UCC still seeks to be a uniting as well as a united church.

Finally, our church forebears from each of our four predecessor denominations have always had a passion for social justice.

The passion for greater unity with other Christians on the part of our constituent forebears began with their concern for one another and spread from there. It also grew out of their missionary efforts to share their faith with others. It confronted them with the needs of humanity while their faith led them to the cause of social justice. In 1789, long before the Civil War, James O'Kelly, a southerner, one of the founders of the Christian churches, condemned slavery and welcomed blacks into the church. Though it took a while, way too long, for women to be accepted as equals and recognized for their leadership and gifts, early on women played a prominent role in both the Congregational churches and the two German groups leading to the first ordination of a woman in 1853. After the Civil War, the Congregationalist American Missionary Association founded schools and colleges for blacks including ones like Fisk University which are prominent today. Our religious ancestors defended the rights of Indians to stay on their lands including a famous case in behalf of the Cherokees before the Supreme Court. They won that case only to have it later undone by President Andrew Jackson, when he had thousands from this area forcibly removed to Oklahoma in the notorious "veil of tears" march. Washington Gladden, the father of the social gospel, pushed for the right of laborers to organize. In our own time the United Church of Christ provided bail for "the Wilmington 10", a group of civil rights activists in our coastal city which included a staff member of the UCC, and supported them for years until they were finally vindicated. The list goes on and on from declaring itself a just peace church to a pioneering study on the full dimensions of human sexuality, from more humane treatment of those who are incarcerated to advocating for the needs of the handicapped, from minority rights to sexual preference rights to immigrant rights. In all of these and many more the UCC has pioneered in standing up for the downtrodden, the abused, the rejected, the exploited because we believe that this is what Jesus calls us to do.

These passions have led, as I said earlier" to a beautiful, heady and exasperating mix" – **beautiful** in the rich tapestry of our diversity, both in our origins and now – **heady** not only because our leaders from the beginning until now believed that faith involved not just the heart but the

head, but because the pioneering stands our denomination has taken and continues to take – and **exasperating** because like our local church here, we are such passionate people about what we believe that we often have disagreements with one another, but family disagreements.

What a heritage! What a denomination! What a church! Have we made mistakes? Of course we have from the very beginning, but we passionately believe that God is not only still speaking, but calling and leading us to new ways of witnessing in our needy and troubled world.

What do we do with this heritage? We celebrate it especially on this anniversary day. But we are called to more than a party. We are called to be servants to one another and to our needy and troubled world. We are called to be faithful to the diverse and rich heritages of the many groups which make up the United Church of Christ. We are called to continue the courageous witness of the UCC for freedom for all people everywhere, to work for greater unity in the Body of Christ, “unity in diversity” as one of our spiritual ancestors called it, and we are called to be passionate participants in the continuing struggles for social justice throughout our nation and our world.

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