

Randy VanDeventer  
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### **Theological Ethos Of The UCC**

Perhaps it is the 1950s language, but I find myself struck by the fact that the language used in the UCC Constitution is quite traditional. For a denomination that has forged a relatively progressive reputation and history, the theological framework of its founding documents is nothing short of orthodox.<sup>1</sup> I got a similar sense in reading the UCC Statement Of Faith. I can imagine that many people in my own congregation would be quite uncomfortable and perhaps surprised to find such traditional sounding language in these documents.

In journeying farther into the Constitution, one begins to wonder about the sustainability of the autonomous church model in a system where it seems as though each individual unit has total freedom to act independently of the General Synod (Article V. 18). I find Article V.19 to be an important clarification, however. Having just established firm autonomy for each church, the UCC Constitution does make a brief stand for its own authority. I wonder what it looks like practically for UCC congregations that exist in tension with General Synod (i.e. churches that are not open and affirming) to hold “Actions by, or decisions emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association... in the highest regard...”. It does seem overall that the General Synod is set up to maintain a certain amount of authority without having to start from a place of absolute power.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Article V.11- professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as requisite for membership.

I am sure to not be alone in valuing the idea that the UCC's statement of faith is meant as testimony rather than a test. This idea brings me back to the beginnings of my journey away from the more rigid kind of faith that defined my younger years. I recall being struck deeply by an idea in a book called *Velvet Elvis* by author Rob Bell, in which Bell compares a faith that is like a trampoline to a faith that is more like a brick wall. When one's faith is a brick wall, any small compromise or questioning compromises the entire structure. By contrast, one can take a spring out of a trampoline in order to probe and question it while still being able to jump. Bell advocates inviting others to jump with us rather than bashing them against our brick wall. I think this is precisely the idea behind the UCC laying out a statement of faith. It serves as a starting point rather than a hurdle.

The open nature of that starting point, I think, is what enables us to approach our faith in a way that is better suited to a post-modern world. The non-creedal nature of things means that we are free to claim a place in the Christian tradition without forcing any kind of assent to things that we may find difficult within that history (hard texts, violent actions of predecessors, etc.). I also enjoyed hearing that people were willing to question and change things right from the start. Roger Shinn pointed out that the fourth of the seven parts of the statement was changed from its original language to modify some of the verbs to participles due to certain theological objections, which changed the thrust and meaning of things substantially (Christ *reconciling* the world rather than having already *reconciled*).<sup>2</sup> I can see the roots of an idea like "God is still speaking" even in

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<sup>2</sup> Shinn, Roger. "Historical Reflections On The Statement Of Faith." p. 12.



these early developments. This trajectory means that we are better set up to wrestle and struggle with our faith rather than live with the pressure of submission to that of our forebears. I would hope that as a minister I might be able to motivate current laypersons in our denomination to be more familiar with our Statement of Faith so that they may continue what seems like a rich tradition of healthy interaction with it.

### **Formation of UCC Style**

The earliest seeds of the union that led to the forming of the United Church of Christ can be traced to a small community of clergy that convened a study group in St. Louis in the late 1930s, including ministers from both the Evangelical and Reformed Church as well as the Congregational Christian Churches. The making public of such intentions led to the seminal Basis Of Union, a document that would be scrutinized over and over again through the years leading up to 1957, and something that served as the starting point for all manner of controversy and debate surrounding the idea of a merger. The differences in background, history, and structure between the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed communities made for a natural chasm. Aside from bridging the gap between communities, each denomination had much work in store for itself in order to take the steps that would eventually lead to union.

It seems in retrospect that the prospect of union posed to each denomination some questions about their own identities, and what parts of them were and were not negotiable. For each group, there are at least two processes at hand: that of a general union with another ecclesiastical body, and that of putting one's own denominational identity and history at stake in merging it with another. On the congregational side, there was much worry about the preservation of con-

gregational polity. There were questions about the authority of autonomous congregations versus that of the larger ecclesial body.<sup>3</sup> On the Evangelical and Reformed side, the years leading up to the merger were in large part spent working out a denominational identity as a newly formed group in 1934, perhaps making the push toward yet another joining of church bodies seem hasty, especially given the obvious notion that a union with the Congregational Churches would be a more complicated process.

It should also be said that the commitment to union being a starting point meant that each side of the table saw fit to seek harmony rather than build boundaries, that is, at least from the standpoint of the leadership influencing the push toward union. That very sentiment, at certain points along the way, seems to have been the only thing sustaining the hope of a merger at all. The fact that the Basis of Union was re-drafted so many times over a number of years shows just how difficult the idea was for some, and yet a social climate leaning heavily towards ever more unity seemed to inspire these early leaders to commit to something that was more than merely exploratory.

I was somewhat surprised to find in myself a measure of sympathy for the argument that fellowship- rather than organizational union- was favorable. The issue at hand for those making this argument (Neil H. Swanson Jr., for example) was whether or not churches in different denominations are still ultimately a part of one Church with Christ as its source, and whether or not a sacrifice of values was worth fitting a square merger into a round hole. Swanson's brief argument makes me wonder where I might have stood at the time. It makes sense to say that Christian unity does not necessitate an organizational merger, although there seems to be some sub-

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gunnemann, Louis H., and Charles S. Rooks. *The shaping of the United Church of Christ : an essay in the history of American Christianity*. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1999. Print. p. 42



text, particularly in the arguments of Fred Hoskins, regarding the Church's responsibility given the social climate of the day. Perhaps the acute sense of a wider mission in the wake of the first two world wars may have created an urgency that is difficult to understand today.

Ultimately, much in the same way that we committed to merger long before digging too deep into the details, the union was finalized *first*, and thereafter our communities continued the process of working out what life together as one Church looks like both theologically and politically. The body that was joined from each preceding denomination in 1956 to explore basic Christian doctrine, which Gunneman describes as a crucial step to finalizing the union,<sup>4</sup> illustrates the notion that once it is confirmed that a relatively small amount of non-negotiable basics are agreed upon, the more perplexing work still lies ahead. In the end it became clear that finalizing the union itself was not the cause of trepidation for either community's naysayers, but rather the work that would come after; and so the union was made in recognition that a merger is a process rather than a singular event.

### **The Sacraments**

The UCC website's "What We Believe" section contains a statement on communion that involves several strands of meaning, culminating with a reminder: "It [communion] is a great mystery; we claim it by faith." One of these strands is the idea of gathering in unity with one another and with the Church at large. One of the important elements of communion is that it is a ritual shared throughout the global church (with very few exceptions), and that reminder is meant to instill a sense of community and solidarity for each individual that partakes.

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<sup>4</sup> Gunneman & Rooks, 52.

Another important strand of meaning is the reminder of Christ's sacrifice in the elements of bread and wine. Given that there is room for much diversity regarding the nature of 'Christ's sacrifice' and what it means, I do appreciate the commitment to its importance. It is consistent with the UCC's emphasis of the gracious acts of God in worship, and it certainly maintains a loyalty to scripture's depiction of the story.

In thinking of the significance of communion, I am reminded of the rabbinic line of thinking that argues that, because of the moment's eternal significance, all of the Jewish people- past, present, and future- were somehow present at Sinai. I like that line of thinking, and I believe it can be faithfully adapted for the communion table. In a moment so significant in our history, perhaps it would be helpful to think of one's self as present at the table with Christ, being called to partake in the culminating chapter of his ministry, and to repeat the act in order to remember Jesus and his story.

And so we can see some timeless themes here that beg for constant renewal and interpretation. The relevancy of communion for today's world has everything to do with how we feel these themes matter in our context. We must continue to ask how and why gathering at the table is significant in a world that so often seeks to see us divided. We must continue to ask how and why Christ laying down his life is significant, and be constantly reminded that God is willing to be inserted fully into human flesh in order to extend ultimate grace and love to all of creation. We must think about what participation in this process means when we feel joyful, afraid, angry, or confused. The meaning of communion is available to us anew each time we come to the table, and I think that reminder in and of itself can be transformative and enlivening.



In baptism, we are again taking place in a ritual that has been a central part of the Christian story since the days of the early church. Again, for the UCC, this is an act of connectedness, binding the participant in community with all who participate in the sacrament. The UCC also preserves the importance of baptism as a public act, which is not always the case for Christians. This proviso serves to further instill the sense of this sacrament as grounded in community.

Gunneman and Cole-Turner suggested in their essay “Baptism: A Sacrament of Christian Vocation” that baptism was properly represented in their context as a moment to consider the idea of vocation. Unique as that focused perspective might be, they do not see themselves to be inventing a new layer of meaning for baptism, and they understand that it has had varying import for different Christians throughout history. Seeing little need to quarrel about the more economical concerns of ages past (i.e. baptism in exchange for eternity in heaven), Gunneman and Cole-Turner put focus on being “called to share in Christ’s baptism,” naming that idea as the ground floor of Christian vocation.<sup>5</sup> Most of the language surrounding their argument is picked straight from the New Testament, and ultimately this leads them to call for more seriousness in guiding people through the process of discernment and education that culminates in baptism. They seem to be advocating for a framing of baptism as something more significant than a simple outward sign of one’s entry into a particular religious tribe. They notice that this was not the case for Jesus himself, and although there have been times in which baptism as a bold marker of one’s identity may have had a rightful place of importance, we exist in a moment where that emphasis is not necessarily appropriate.

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<sup>5</sup> Gunneman, Louis H. & Cole-Turner, Ronald S. “Baptism: A Sacrament of Christian Vocation.” *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 178.



Again, as with the sacrament of communion, there are myriad ways to frame baptism that are imbued with meaning. The task of the minister is simply to connect the dots. I think that there are lots of churches that overplay the idea of baptism as official entry into a certain club, and in so doing lose sight of the responsibility to educate the baptized on the origin of the sacrament as well as the theological options that stand before us in order to make contemporary meaning out of an ancient ritual. If we believe that baptism connects us to Jesus, then perhaps we can begin with the story of his baptism and ask ourselves where we might fit, and wonder what that moment of calling and vocation means in our own lives. Also, we would do well to use the reminder of baptism as a continual reminder of our bond to Jesus and his ministry. I once attended a baptism at my congregation in which the pastor flung water from the font into the congregation in order to remind us of our own baptism. While the ritual is a singular event, the commitment and the call that it represents are ever present, and we can preserve the importance and the relevance of this sacrament so long as we can hold on to that call.

### **Justice And Witness**

The UCC's Statement of Mission states that one of the primary commitments of the denomination is "To hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace". The UCC's conception of justice and peace could be explained by an overview of the issues with which the denomination is concerned, myriad as they are. The predication that we serve a loving God leads us to conclude that God's concern for us ought to inspire our own concern for one another. "The theoretical realm of Christian social concern is everything which affects the total well-being of everyone, whether it is called spiritual, social, psychological, emotional, secular, material, or



whatever. All is part of God's world and related to God's purpose."<sup>6</sup> Generally, the concern for justice involves being on guard against the marginalization of God's creation, human or otherwise. The group *Christians for Justice Action*, in setting out their mission, wrote "In matters of justice, may we in the UCC always stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed through reflection, prayer and action."<sup>7</sup> This commitment is perhaps a step further than that of the types of church communities I was a part of before joining the UCC. While so much of the evangelical church focuses on getting outside of the walls of their own buildings, doing so commendably in many ways; the role which they often seek to fill is one merely of stopgap support. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick are all vital parts of ministry to be certain.

However, the UCC's conception of justice takes things slightly further, asking questions about how the marginalized came to be so. My experience in the evangelical church has been that the politics of its conservative culture constructs a barrier to taking that extra step. As the Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." Discouraging as that may be, it is not to say that Christians are not politically active across the theological spectrum. I find this to be a healthy reality, despite the apparent dissonance in the mixture of a concern for social justice with a wing of the church that has been wed to a political party that often finds itself in an adverse relationship with the poor.

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<sup>6</sup> Burch, Hobart A. "Social Action and Service: Christian Love." *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 511.

<sup>7</sup> "Social Action and Service: Christian Love." *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 508.



Furthermore, the UCC's conception of peace and justice is unique in that it is not undergirded by an ultimate desire to "win souls" for Jesus in the sense that the churches I was formerly a part of are. The UCC's ultimate concern seems to be that of making the world look more like the kingdom of God, trusting that the struggle to bring that reality to bear in this day and age is the true work of making disciples and declaring Jesus as Lord. In fact, the Biblical concept of shalom is often employed in the economic sense of retribution, used in several ways to advocate a sense of wholeness (cf. Exodus 22:1; Lev. 5:16, 24:21). Thus, the pursuit of peace is more often than not the pursuit of equity and equality rather than the search for a sense of irenic serenity. Again, this unique concern for justice allows for a serious look at systemic sin, as systems of injustice are viewed as obstacles to shalom.

When we concern ourselves with justice and peace as vital elements of the gospel, it is not long until we discover how those commitments can inspire us to serve and be present outside the walls of the church. Now, we embark on shaky territory when we begin combining our faith with a political agenda. However, witness is best seen in terms of *influence* rather than *power*; and the UCC does seem to make that distinction. Also, so long as peace and justice remain at the heart of social action, all faiths that share those concerns will find common ground in their public witness.

Henry K. Yordon illustrates wonderfully the relationship between parish ministry and wider witness in his essay "My Visions of a New Jerusalem," speaking to a concept of witness that sees the confining of the gospel to the pulpit a practice in neutering the full potential of the Good News. Yordon describes a ministry in which, yes, he is certainly meant to attend to the stereotypical functions of a parish minister, although his ministry also includes an involvement in



preaching the gospel throughout his city: "I am needed at the Board of Realtors banquet to inform them of their ministry in this community."<sup>8</sup> Witness certainly pertains to the sharing of the gospel amongst the community of saints, but it is also vital that it be shared with the wider community, especially because doing so should always lead us to support and speak out for the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society.

The UCC's commitment to diversity stems from the idea that a single person or group of persons cannot possibly have the first and final word on the fullness of life. Thus, the embrace of 'the other' is vital not only to human experience in general, but specifically in our context for the experience of God's loving grace as it is found in the life of a vast array of people of all different cultures and lifestyles. We see this commitment play out practically in the example of the Nineteenth General Synod's call for the UCC to be a multiracial and multicultural church, which "embodies [multiracial and multicultural] diversities as gifts of the human family and rejoices in the variety of God's grace."<sup>9</sup> True to the usual trajectory of moving from pulpit into the public, the description of what this means begins with a theoretical basis that quickly moves outward, stating that "A multiracial and multicultural church engages in effective prophetic advocacy and public policy development on the issues of racial, social, economic and environmental justice..."<sup>10</sup> This commitment to reflect Biblical values of justice and peace in the very structure

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<sup>8</sup> Yordon, Henry K. "Urban Ministry: My Visions of a New Jerusalem." *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 486.

<sup>9</sup> Forbes, James L. "Seeking Change: A Multiracial and Multicultural Church." *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 653.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 654



of the denomination shows a complete picture of how peace, justice, and witness work together in the UCC.

Perhaps an important question for churches committed to diversity would be to ask ourselves if there are any areas in which it is not so welcome in our own communities. In my congregation, because of a relatively uniform progressive outlook, it would seem that there is less room for political diversity than in some other areas. Whatever the case, it is worth noting that the worship hour on Sunday mornings remains a highly concentrated version of an already segregated America, and that poses a problem in and of itself. The faculty of Chicago Theological Seminary posed an important question in this regard in their piece on pluralism from 1980: “What can congregations that are relatively homogeneous internally contribute to addressing the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious problems created by diversity in international, national, and denominational life.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that the UCC is not comprised of wonderfully diverse crowds. Rather, it speaks to the idea that, insofar as our congregations are indeed homogeneous in one area or another, we risk the ability to fully appreciate the ‘other,’ and must be on guard to avoid that.

### **Autonomy and Covenant**

The tension between the concepts of autonomy and covenant is illustrative of a long denominational history of suspicions about the relationship between individual congregations and the larger structures of the denomination. The worries of our Congregational forebears regarding the fate of congregational polity within a new denomination that would include a merger with a

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<sup>11</sup> Chicago Theological Seminary Faculty. “Confronting Change: Being Christian in a Pluralistic World.” *The Living Theological Heritage Of The United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Vol. 7. Trost, F. R., & Brown Zikmund, B. (Eds.), The Pilgrim Press, 2005, p. 651.