

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

On June 25, 1957, in Cleveland, Ohio, three hundred and forty-one representatives of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and three hundred and forty-one representatives of the Congregational and Christian Churches covenanted together, on behalf of their churches:

We do now, as the regularly constituted representatives of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, declare ourselves to be one body and our union consummated in this act establishing the United Church of Christ, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This community of Christians, the United Church of Christ (UCC), has a story. That story stretches back to the days of the Reformation and beyond. The story moves forward, from June 25, 1957 to the present and continues into the future. Who were these people? What did it mean to them to be a Christian? How did they express their faith? How do they live out their faith?

Telling the story of the United Church of Christ is more complex than it looks on the surface. To define the boundaries of what we mean by “the United Church of Christ and its antecedents,” I identify five ways of looking at this history – five levels that enter into defining the United Church of Christ. In this book we will use all five.

First there is the story of four churches that became two, and then one. The Congregational and Christian Churches came together in 1931 to form the Congregational Christian Churches. The Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States merged in 1934 to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church. These two bodies united in the United Church of Christ. The traditional way of telling the UCC story is to tell the four stories, then two stories, then one story.

Second are the stories of smaller groups that are part of the UCC. These histories remained hidden as long as denominational histories followed the first level. Barbara Brown Zikmund collected some of these histories in two volumes of *Hidden Histories of the United Church of Christ*. The history of the UCC includes the Hungarian Reformed, Evangelical Protestant, African-American and

American Indian groups and others. In addition, Hawaii and Puerto Rico Conferences have their own unique histories. These formerly “hidden histories” include (a) smaller groups that united with the UCC or one of its predecessors, (b) immigrant groups whose church affiliation or beliefs in the old country caused them to associate with the UCC or one of its predecessors, and (c) native and immigrant groups to whom the UCC and its predecessors ministered in America.

Third, the formation of the United Church of Christ was, in addition to the union of churches, a union of mission boards. Some of those mission boards had an independent history before they became connected to one of the groups that joined the UCC. Three major mission boards founded by Congregationalists and Presbyterians working together, in time became de facto Congregational boards, and later part of the United Church of Christ. These were the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), American Home Missionary Society (AHMS), and American Missionary Association (AMA). Their stories are also part of the story of the United Church of Christ, even though some persons in their employ may have called themselves by other denominational names.

Fourth, the story of the United Church of Christ must include an understanding of the interface of the UCC with other denominations. One Presbyterian historian wrote of the Presbyterians and Congregationalists in New York State, “It is impossible to write separately of the histories of two denominations that were so closely related.”¹ The same could be said of Christians and Disciples of Christ in the Ohio Valley, or of the Reformed and Lutherans in Pennsylvania. We must have some knowledge of these other denominations, to understand what happened in the UCC and its antecedents.

Fifth, there are some congregations of the United Church of Christ that identify with none of the above. For example, in Union Springs, New York, the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Methodist churches united in 1994. They wanted to affiliate with only one denomination, but did not want to have “winners” and “losers” in their congregation, so they selected another denomination – the United Church of Christ. In many places people organized a “Community Church,” and after a period of time decided to affiliate with a denomination, choosing the United Church of Christ or one of its antecedents. There are also congregations that have joined from other denominations, and congregations that have chosen to affiliate with the UCC in addition to their original denomination.

¹Robert Hastings Nichols, *Presbyterianism in New York State: A History of the Synod and Its Predecessors* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 87.

What is the United Church of Christ? In the year 2000 it was a fellowship of 5,923 congregations. The proportion that came into the denomination through each of the four major branches was as follows:²

Congregational	46%
Reformed	19%
Evangelical	15%
Christian	6%

Many congregations were organized or entered the denomination after the merger process began, as follows:

Congregational Christian	6%
Evangelical and Reformed	2%
United Church of Christ	8%

This added up to more than 100% because 122 congregations were local unions of congregations from different branches of the UCC, therefore counted more than once.

These seven categories include other groups (non-ethnic) that have joined the UCC family, such as the Congregational Methodists, Evangelical Protestants, and Schwenkfelders, and congregations with clear ethnic identities, such as African American (also Cape Verdian, Haitian and Sudanese), American Indian (including Arikara, Dakota/Lakota, Hidatsa, Ho Cak, and Mandan), Armenian, Assyrian, Chinese, East Indian, Filipino, Finnish, German Congregational, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Magyar, Samoan, Marshalese, Portuguese, Swedish, Taiwanese, and Welsh.

When you study the United Church of Christ, you will be struck by its diversity, and may ask, "What on earth do all these groups have in common?" I have come up with three words that describe common elements, and help to make the many stories one story. I call these the "C" word, the "P" word, and the

²These statistics have been developed with the personal assistance of Dr. Richard Taylor, who has done extensive research in the origins of the local congregations of the UCC.

“L” word.

“C” is for *catholic*. This word comes from the Latin and means *universal*. In the Apostles’ Creed when we say we believe in “the holy catholic Church,” we affirm that the church is ONE. In spite of our many separated denominations, we see the church as One, and work for its unity. In the last fifty years we have come to use the word *ecumenical* in place of the word *catholic*. The groups that came together to form the United Church of Christ all had a *catholic* spirit. They all had a vision of the church as One and whole and larger than themselves.

“P” stands for *piety*. This word is not commonly used in the United Church of Christ today. But throughout the history of the various groups that have come together to form the United Church of Christ, it has been an important word and an important idea. Piety includes three elements: (1) inward cultivation of a relationship with God, (2) outward discipline of religious observances for nurturing that relationship, and (3) disciplines of moral and social behavior which express that relationship. Today we often use the word *spirituality*, rather than piety. Spirituality can be used as a synonym for piety only if we clearly understand that spirituality, like piety, has an outward, active, social, aspect, as well as an inner dimension.

“P” can also stand for *Pietism*. This historic movement of a particular style of piety, originating in Germany in the Seventeenth Century, had a profound impact on all of the groups that eventually came into the United Church of Christ. Pietism will be explored in depth in Chapter Five.

“L” is for *liberal*. The root of liberal is *liberty*, which means to be free. At least two meanings of liberal have been pervasive throughout the UCC and its antecedents.

(1). The word *liberal* as used in the King James Bible most often meant *generous*, as in the phrase, “a liberal gift.” It implies compassion – an active concern for the needs of others. The UCC and its antecedents have expressed their liberal concern for others through missions, health and welfare institutions, and social activism.

(2). The word *liberal* has often been used for freedom of thought, meaning “broad-minded.” When the Pilgrims left the Netherlands in 1620 their pastor advised them, “God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from His Holy Word.” Openness to new ways of thinking and doing, willingness to listen to new ideas and to tolerate diversity, has often characterized the life of the UCC and its

antecedents. Groups that have formed the UCC have tended to draw the boundaries of orthodoxy broadly, rather than narrowly. They have preferred to tolerate those with whom they disagreed, rather than to exclude them.

These three words, *catholic*, *pious*, and *liberal*, define three themes that we will discern throughout this book, as we trace the history of the United Church of Christ and its antecedents.