



# let it shine

## The "Sweet Communion" of the Local Church

In 1801, the General Association of Connecticut (the Congregational predecessor to the Connecticut Conference) authorized a new Psalter for use in public worship in Connecticut churches. Timothy Dwight of New

Haven, President of Yale University and a former pastor in Connecticut churches, had been charged with revising the 1719 Psalter of Isaac Watts and adding such new Psalm texts as seemed appropriate. One of those new compositions, "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord," (his version of Psalm 137) has lived to be the oldest, continuously sung American-composed hymn, appearing in revised form in our *New Century Hymnal* at number 312. The fourth verse of Dwight's original version reads:

Beyond my highest joys I prize her [the church's] heavenly ways,  
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.

Dwight's poem reflects the depth of love that so many have for the local churches of which they are members, whether that membership goes back many generations or has come in the last year. As members of local churches, we rejoice in "sweet communion," both the Lord's Supper and the community of believers we find at worship, mission, meetings, and companionship, week in and week out. The "solemn vows" of our own baptisms and the baptisms we celebrate in our church family, our rituals of receiving new members, the weddings and civil unions blessed in our midst—all draw us together in a spirit of love and hope. The music we make together in song and in service keeps us going in difficult times. What Dwight prized above all has been and continues to be central to the life of local churches since the time of Paul's colleagues, Priscilla and Aquila, and the church that gathered in their home.

Should Paul or Dr. Dwight happen into one of our 5,725 United Church of Christ congregations today, however, he would certainly be surprised by how our heavenly ways have adapted to a new century. Those "hymns of love and praise" ring out in Spanish, English, Samoan, Korean, Hawaiian and dozens of other languages. Along with baptisms and Holy Communion, our worship

services might feature film clips, dance, and innovative art and architecture. The leadership of those congregations, both clergy and lay, comes from all ages, tongues and races, as well as genders and sexual orientations.

UCC Polity proclaims the local church to be the "basic unit of life and organization" of our denomination, and churches across our cities, towns, villages and countryside show that life every day in "the ongoing work of Christian witness." While our local congregations do not all look alike, worship alike or even always agree on Christian theology and practice, we are alike in seeking to discern God's will for us each in our local place and as we join together to serve God's people around the world. As a UCC hymn writer of the present day, Dr. Ruth Duck, has written:

By your Spirit of creation keep us bold for risking still,  
Eager in anticipation, ever strong to do your will.  
Bind us close to one another, sharing life and death and birth,  
Welcoming as sister, brother, all your children on the earth.  
(*God, We Thank You For Our People*, NCH 376)

#### Reflection Questions:

- What are the stories you tell in your local church that define who you have been in the past?
- What are your church's strengths for ministry and mission?
- What do you "eagerly anticipate" in approaching the future in your church?

#### Resources:

- Allen H. Marheine, *You Belong: A Handbook for Church Members*, UCC Resources
- *Ready, Set, Grow: Congregational Vitality Resources*, [uccvitality.org](http://uccvitality.org)
- Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*, Alban Institute, 2004

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*Our UCC Polity—How our Church Works*

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