



let it shine

The Association: Bound in a Covenant Community

She kneels. It is a holy moment, as she is surrounded by the company of saints in this place to be ordained.

Hands old and young stretch out to touch her bowed head.

She feels the weight of centuries, the burden of all those who have gone before her, as she kneels to claim the blessing of her own ordination.

Their hands reach out in love, offering a wistful blessing, a daring benediction, in tender recognition of their common calling. But they press down on her, too, and she suddenly feels the burden of her place in this church she loves—the burden of preaching good news to the broken-hearted, of speaking truth to the unholy powers, of calling out the names of those whose names and hearts are known only by God, of adding her smile to a frowning, weeping world.

In the United Church of Christ, those hands that reach out to ordain a new pastor are the hands of the ministers of an Association, the covenant community of neighboring congregations and authorized ministers which is “the tie that binds” autonomous local congregations together. There has always been a need for a mutually recognized partnership, which also provides oversight for our local churches and ministers.

In Connecticut, this harks back to the Saybrook Platform of 1708, which established “consociations” of churches in a district (usually a county) that would hold “final jurisdiction to which particular churches might refer cases too difficult to be well adjusted by themselves.” Through these councils, later known as Associations, churches could be sure that candidates for ministry were well trained, mature, and faithful. The Association, on behalf of its local churches, was able to authorize and discipline its clergy and hold its congregations in covenant, sharing a common concern for the health and well being of the church.

Those Associations historically have provided collegiality and mutual support for clergy and congregations. Through Associations, our churches work together in common mission projects. These might include working together on a Habitat for Humanity “build” or constructing a cabin at Silver Lake Conference Center on behalf of the Association. Some Associations have special joint worship services, choir festivals, and dinner meetings. These efforts build a sense of the larger church in our local congregations.

Our UCC Polity—How Our Church Works

Through their Committees on Church and Ministry, Associations maintain the official standing of all authorized ministers of the United Church of Christ. They also hold the standing of churches in our denomination, nurturing new communities of faith to join the United Church of Christ as well. Association Committees oversee seminary students and others who may be preparing for the ministry. In time, the “Ecclesiastical Councils” of an Association will examine these students and ordain them for ministry in the United Church of Christ.

Similarly, the Association, through its Committee on Church and Ministry, installs new ministers as they come to pastor local churches, perform chaplaincy at hospitals and other institutions, or engage in other recognized covenant ministries in the church. Those Committees, on behalf of the Association, also provide oversight of our clergy, conducting periodic reviews and helping to assure that they are healthy, faithful, and trusted pastors to our churches. When necessary, they also may discipline clergy who have acted unethically, broken covenant with the church, or demonstrated a lack of fitness for continued ministry in the church.

The Rev. Nathanael Guptill, Connecticut Conference Minister from 1962-1980, sometimes quipped about the mail sent to the Conference addressed to the “Untied” Church of Christ. Sometimes we do, indeed, feel “untied.” Associations provide a crucial tie that binds us together in the peace of Christ.

Reflection:

- Do you recall occasions in which your Association gathered with your church to celebrate special occasions in ministry or to share in your work?
- What challenges or opportunities might your church better meet in partnership with the other churches in your Association, with which you are in covenant?
- What could we do as congregations and Associations to identify and encourage future UCC ministers in our midst and to help them discern their gifts for ministry?

Resources:

- The Constitution of the UCC: www.ucc.org/aboutus/constitution.htm
- Manual on the Ministry of the UCC: www.ucc.org/ministers/manual
- Manual on Church of the UCC: www.ucc.org/ministers/church

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