



# let it shine

## Polity in the United Church of Christ

A friend of mine asked this question when he heard I was teaching a course in United Church of Christ History, Theology and Polity. He said, “That’s not a word I am familiar with? What’s polity?”

I answered, “It’s the way we make decisions and govern the various settings of the Church. Polity is the way we structure our common life.” My friend looked at me with a blank stare, like “What does that mean?”

“Some churches or denominations rarely worry about polity and structure. For the United Church of Christ, however, concern about structures, especially among Congregationalists who often define themselves largely in terms of polity, can become obsessive. As a consequence UCC understanding of order and identity can remain at once inspiring and vulnerable and revisited again and again.” (*Living Theological History of the United Church of Christ*, Vol. VII, p.6)

The United Church of Christ has four “settings” for ministry: Local Churches, the UCC’s basic unit of life and organization; Associations, which hold the standing of local churches and authorized ministers; Conferences, which enable the cooperative ministry of the UCC in a geographical area; and the General Synod, which oversees the national and international ministry of the church. The relationships among these bodies have shifted and evolved throughout the UCC’s fifty years, leading to that inspiration and vulnerability.

The United Church of Christ brought together the Congregational Christian Churches, who used a congregational polity, with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which used a Presbyterian polity; the new denomination has evolved into a covenantal polity. After 50 years, the UCC continues to evolve, becoming more deeply grounded in our theology. What we believe about God and the nature of the church are crucial to how we make decisions for our ministry.

- Believing in the Priesthood of all Believers, the United Church of Christ treasures the discernment of all, with no one given greater or lesser power of voice or vote.

- Believing that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” the UCC holds accountability and covenant in relationship and tension with autonomy. Or as Donald Freeman wrote, “Every unit of the church, while in covenant with the other units, has a non-transferable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it—God’s will and way for it—in its time and place.”
- Believing we are fractured and not complete without a diversity of voices and peoples are the table, the UCC seeks to include the rich mixture of the church and human family.

The UCC’s “Covenantal Polity” is best expressed in Article III of the 1999 revision of the *Bylaws and Constitution of the United Church of Christ*.

*“Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church **listens, hears, and carefully considers the advise, counsel and requests of others.** In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God’s ways.”*

([www.ucc.org/aboutus/constitution.htm](http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/constitution.htm))

### Reflection

- What’s your working definition of polity?
- What Christian beliefs and values inform your definition and work?
- How do the Local Church, Association, Conference and National setting reflect in their structure and decision making what you believe about God, the church?
- Where are power and authority in these structures, decisions, and governance?
- How are they identified/named/claimed/shared?

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*Our UCC Polity—How Our Church Works*

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