



let it shine

Gathering Principles

It was an experiment in church unity, not arrived at easily and with costs borne in its founding and its formation. Still, on June 25, 1957 the delegates of the Uniting Synod at the Music Hall in Cleveland declared with one voice, “We do now, as the regularly constituted representatives of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and of the General Council of 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.”¹

What was happening in these two denominations that allowed for this bold step of union to take place? What guiding principles did they share in common that allowed them to demonstrate to the world a church “united in Christ”?

The name of our beloved denomination is one place to turn to for an answer. After World War II, there was a growing concern that expressed the need to demonstrate to the world a sense of togetherness. Even before the conclusion of the war there were preliminary conversations between the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church, initiated by Samuel Press of the Evangelical and Reformed church. They eventually led to a “Basis of Union,” the document that would demonstrate to the world that Christians could be united. This emphasis on **Christian Unity** was a powerful guiding principle that led to the formation of the UCC. This principle of unity was so central to our formation that the denomination was formed before a Statement of Faith or a Constitution and Bylaws were written.

We are the United Church of *Christ*, and **the centrality of Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church** was another guiding principle. Our unity is found in him. We do not believe that a pastor or lay leader is the Head of the Church, nor a General Minister and President or a Conference Minister. We turn solely to Jesus Christ to lead us as our Savior, Teacher and Head.

Freedom of Conscience also was a guiding principle. It was one of the “Six Principles”² of the Christian Church, one of the four predecessor bodies that became the UCC. This principle allows for each believer to express his or her faith as led by the Holy Spirit.

The emphasis on **the local congregation** was another guiding principle. This expression of the church was understood to be the “base unit” of the denomination. The local congregation was seen as the primary site from which all other ministries flowed.

The church’s active role in the “public square” also was a guiding principle. The predecessor denominations had a long history of engagement and involvement with critical issues facing the world, such as slavery, women’s rights, civil rights, health care and issues of economic justice. The church as a social witness was a critical aspect of the merger.

The final guiding principle was **a commitment to education, mission and outreach**. The predecessor bodies believed that public education was critical to the society as a whole and for faithful leadership within the church. Domestic and International Mission societies bound the merging bodies together with a commitment to sharing and spreading the Gospel with great passion and zeal for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Six guiding principles provided a vision for the forming of the United Church of Christ 50 years ago. This solid foundation has allowed the UCC to build for the future on these principles, and to develop new principles, since God is “still speaking”!

Footnotes

¹Minutes, Uniting General Synod, June 25-27, 1957, p. 58

²<http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/chrchu.html>

Reflection

- Among the six guiding principles, which ones would your local congregation most closely identify with?
- If you were adding additional guiding principles to the United Church of Christ today what would those be?

Resources

- *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, Louis Gunneman, United Church Press, Cleveland Ohio, 1977
- www.ucc.org – Short course on United Church of Christ history
- *The Evolution of a UCC Style*, Randi Jones Walker, United Church Press, Cleveland Ohio, 2005

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