

Ten Basic Questions, or, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about the UCC...

by Elizabeth C. Nordbeck

- 1. What IS the United Church of Christ, anyway?** The UCC is a union of four traditions, each of which has its own history and regional presence. These are
- * **Congregationalists** (a New England tradition that traces its American roots back to the Pilgrims and Puritans, and its English roots back to the 1580s)
 - * **Christians** (an indigenous, east coast American tradition that grew out of post-revolutionary revivalism, around 1800)
 - * **Reformed** (a German immigrant tradition that was brought to the mid-Atlantic states in the early 1700s; another wave of immigration in the 1830s brought the Reformed tradition to parts of the mid-west)
 - * **Evangelicals** (a German tradition from Prussia, brought to the mid-west by immigrants around 1840)

The UCC was formed in 1957. Prior to that union, Congregationalists and Christians had united in 1931, and Evangelicals and Reformed had united in 1934.

2. Why did these groups unite, and what in the world did they have in common? They united because they believed deeply that Jesus calls Christians to be one, for the sake of the credibility of the gospel in the world. Although they were different in many ways, by the mid-20th century they shared a concern for mission and social action, an emphasis on education for both laity and clergy, commitment to Christian nurture for the propagation of the faith, a conviction that the many denominations should be one, and a generally progressive or liberal theological outlook.

3. Liberal!? I always hear that the UCC is “liberal.” What does this mean? The UCC is part of a group of churches often called the “Protestant mainline” churches. Although all of these denominations include people of widely varying theological viewpoints, they are generally considered “liberal” because 1) they understand the Bible as authoritative, but in some respects culturally conditioned; 2) they affirm culture itself and the possibility of human progress; 3) they affirm that “God is still speaking,” that “God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word”—that is, that each generation must seek both to understand and to articulate God’s word freshly. It is this conviction that historically, and today, has inspired some members of the UCC and its constituent traditions to take social stands (such as opposition to slavery) that have been controversial.

When someone questions you about the UCC’s liberal theological perspectives, tell them this: “The UCC is dogmatic about not being dogmatic.” That’s what we mean by “liberal.”

4. So, then, what does the United Church of Christ believe? If anyone should ask you this, tell them to re-frame the question! Why? Unlike some churches--e.g., Roman Catholicism--the UCC has no magisterium, or overarching governing body, that determines the specifics of faith and practice. Each local church articulates its own

theological stance, often in a written covenant or statement of faith. This means that there is a great deal of theological diversity within the UCC. However, by voting to be part of the UCC itself, local congregations have indicated two important convictions. First, they have assented implicitly to four broad themes that distinguish the United Church of Christ among denominations: mission, ecumenism, diversity, justice. Second, and even more important, they have assented to certain very basic principles that are stated in the UCC's founding documents. These documents indicate, among other things, that

* Jesus Christ (not a pope or bishop or president) is the head of the church

* the UCC claims as its own the historic creeds and confessions of the church, as well as the writings of the Protestant reformers

The UCC thus stands in the historic tradition of Protestant orthodoxy. However, it uses formal statements of orthodoxy as testimonies, not tests, of those things commonly held among its members. An excellent consensus statement of general UCC understanding is the motto of Eden Theological Seminary, a school in the Evangelical tradition: *In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty,- in all things, charity.*

5. But what does the UCC believe about the Bible and biblical authority?

There is no single "UCC understanding" about the Bible. Generally, however, UCC members understand something like the following: the Bible is uniquely authoritative, although tradition, experience, and reason are also important sources of authority. The Bible is not a rulebook, a history book, a geography book, or a genealogy text. Rather it is a divinely inspired drama- the drama of God's plan of salvation for God's own family. As such, it is not to be read as a series of proof-texts, but in its entirety, for its broad and unequivocal themes of judgment, forgiveness, love, and redemption.

6. How is the UCC governed? The polity, or governance, of the UCC is ultimately congregational, that is, each local church has the full legal authority (often referred to as autonomy) to handle its own affairs. However, for the sake of good order as well as mission, mutual accountability is paired with autonomy: **local churches** agree to work together in regional **associations** to authorize ministries and to handle disciplinary matters. **Conferences**, made up of associations, provide local churches with needed services, and provide a link with the church in its national setting. **General Synod** is a representative national body, made up of delegates from conferences and others; it meets biennially to do the work of the denomination.

Each of these *settings of the church* --local, regional, and national--ideally relates to the others covenantally. This does not mean, for example, that local churches must do or agree with what is decided at General Synod; General Synod speaks *to, not for*, the churches. However, being in covenant does suggest that local churches should consider Synod's actions prayerfully and fully, even if they ultimately disagree. The reverse, of course, is also true.

7. But what, exactly, does “covenant” mean, and how does it relate to the UCC?

Most often these days, we hear the word “covenant” used legally or contractually, as a *quid pro quo* (“if you do this for me, I’ll do that for you”). Theologically, however, “covenant” is very different; it is a biblical concept that refers to a mutual agreement, in God’s presence, between parties. (Perhaps the most famous covenant is that of the Salem Church (now Danvers, MA) of 1629: “*We covenant with the Lord and one with an other and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.*”)

In the UCC, the different settings of the church-local, regional and national-are in covenant. This means that they agree to respond to one another seriously, respectfully, and prayerfully-or in other words, they agree, “to walk together in all God’s ways,” even in the midst of disagreements. Nationally, the bodies that carry out denominational mission-General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries-are called “covenanted” ministries, signaling the mutual responsibility they too have with the rest of the church. Some people have even suggested that our entire system of governance should be called “covenant polity.”

8. I disagree politically with what I see coming out of the conference and the national setting of the church. Why are they so unresponsive to people like me, and what can I do about it?

The UCC, like the United States, can be understood as a representative democracy in which majority rules. (One can argue that a consensus model might be better, but so far, only the Quakers have managed that-and they aren’t even a fully Christian group anymore.) Being a representative democracy means that there really is no “us” and “them;” the people who vote for or against certain matters are members of local churches-just like us-who are chosen as delegates. If the conference, or the Synod, appears unresponsive to particular interests, it is generally because

- 1) individuals who hold certain views have not been active and vocal within their association and conference, or
- 2) those interests represent a minority viewpoint and have been voted down.

Sometimes an individual may decide, after prayerful consideration, that his or her views are sufficiently different from those of the majority that the best solution is to seek a new fellowship. This is true in the UCC, as in all denominations. Thankfully, in America we are blessed with a wide variety of churches that together meet the diverse devotional and theological needs of most faithful Christians. Neither local congregations nor individual believers should feel guilt or anger about the occasional need for some to seek new denominational homes.

9. Okay, General Synod and the conferences speak “to, not for” the churches. But if they are spending money on things I don’t approve of, aren’t they in some sense acting for me, without my agreement?

Good point; any governing body that handles finances must make decisions about them without checking each decision with the entire constituency -and some of those decisions will be ones we ourselves wouldn’t have made. Again it’s important to remember the nature

of representative democracy. The entire structure of the UCC, in both its original and its restructured form, was designed, vetted, amended, and ultimately approved by people like us—representatives of local churches, including both laity and clergy—who believed they were collectively following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (This is very different from, say, a structure that is created by councils of bishops or clergy only.) The UCC's various social action priorities and all structures that support them have also been approved by representatives like us.

10. I'm a Congregationalist. I don't want anyone telling me what to do. Why should my local church have anything to do with this denomination? It's a profound misunderstanding of historic Congregationalism to think that autonomy was ever absolute. In fact, from 1620 on, Congregational churches regularly met together and mutually agreed to abide by common advisory decisions about matters of discipline, mission, and ministry. Typically, "vicinage councils" were called when a local church needed advice and counsel, and the decision of the vicinage council was generally accepted voluntarily. (Today's associations play a similar role in the United Church of Christ.) Autonomy always has been coupled with accountability in the New England Congregational tradition. The United Church of Christ represents a gathering of churches that have agreed to be mutually accountable for the same good reasons. Congregationalists joined together historically: for the sake of discipline, mission, and ministry—all of which can be done more efficiently and effectively in cooperative settings.

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