

→ Paul

Full Communion: Disciples-UCC Ecumenical Partnership (1989)

"We envision full communion as a dynamic and growing relationship that is more than just accepting one another as we now are. It is a mutual commitment to grow together toward a vision of the church that enriches our theological traditions, enhances service and mission, and deepens worship. We will find diverse expressions of what it means to live in full communion in Christ as we experience life together.

There follows a commentary on the five aspects of the meaning of full communion. It must be understood within the context of our wider ecumenical commitments, especially the World Council of Churches (including its text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*) and the Consultation on Church Union (now CUIC).

"After more than two decades of theological work by officially designated persons responsible to the most authoritative bodies in the several churches, it is now evident that an essential core of theological agreement exists and continues to grow among these churches in matters of faith, worship, sacrament, membership, ministry, and mission." (*Churches in Covenant Communion, approved by the 17th Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union (December 1988) and sent to member churches for formal action*).

1. Common Confession of Christ

Early Christians declared Jesus to be the Christ (Peter in Matthew 16:16 and Martha in John 11:27). Although the church has developed more extensive statements of faith, the Christian community finds its fundamental identity in this confession. In this resolution we begin by proclaiming our common devotion to the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self (2 Cor. 5:19), the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). By it we also declare our rejection of the distortions both of the gospel and of the cultural idols that constantly tempt us.

2. Mutual Recognition of Members

Baptism and membership in the church are inseparably linked. To be baptized into Christ is to become a member of the body of Christ, the church. For two churches mutually to recognize each other's members implies the recognition that the baptism administered by the partner church is a valid sacramental act. Baptism involves the gift of God's grace and the response of faith. Through baptism, all Christians are united by the Holy Spirit in the one universal church.

Mutual recognition does not commit either church to give up its normative practices (for Disciples, the dedication of infants and baptism by immersion of those who make a personal confession of faith; for the United Church of Christ, the sprinkling of the children of believing parents, normally followed, at an appropriate age, by confirmation) or the baptism by the sprinkling or immersion of adults. Mutual recognition of members allows for transfer of membership between Disciples and United Church of Christ local churches by letter.

This declaration is a testimony to the growing theological agreement on baptism among the churches, achieved through the ecumenical movement. It is an affirmation that

differences of practice need no longer divide the churches. Partnership is therefore a process for moving beyond divisive disagreements and renewing our understanding of baptism, the sacrament of unity.

3. Common Celebration of the Lord's Supper Holy Communion

The most powerful sign of Christian unity is the common sharing at the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to God's self, and offered us a new relationship of love and unity with one another. Celebrating the sacrament together, we are responding as one family with thanksgiving to what Christ has done for us, praying as one people that the Holy Spirit will lead us into deeper truth and unity, and remembering as one pilgrim people the promises of hope and salvation.

While it is already possible for these two churches to celebrate the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion together, this declaration of full communion encourages such common celebration more regularly and intentionally. Congregations that are geographically near each other are urged to find ways to share in the sacred meal together at least once or twice a year, and to consider more frequent eucharistic services. Conferences and regions, associations and areas are encouraged to plan opportunities to join around the Table regularly and so to bear witness to the conviction that the Lord's Supper/Holy communion is the central event in the church's life.

From it all things flow – engaging in mission, caring for the poor, struggling for justice and peace, making real an inclusive life in Christ, yearning for unity.

The United Church of Christ and the Disciples traditionally have had different eucharistic practices in two respects. Disciples congregations make the Lord's Supper the central point of each Sunday's worship, while most United Church of Christ local churches observe the sacrament monthly or quarterly. Nearly all United Church of Christ local churches have ordained or licensed ministers preside at the Table, whereas elders or ordained ministers preside among Disciples. Neither of these differences, however, need divide our two churches at the Table. The theological issues they raise are being explored in our churches and in the wider ecumenical dialogue in the Consultation on Church Union and in the World Council of Churches.

4. Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordained Ministries

Mutual recognition of ordained ministries (ministers of word and sacrament of the United Church of Christ; ordained elders and ministers of word and sacrament of the Disciples) is intended to acknowledge in the ministries of the partner church the manifest blessing of God and the fruit of the Spirit, and therefore to affirm them as true ministries of the one, holy Church of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation of ordained ministries is intended to refer to future actions by the churches, both separately and together, whereby their ordained ministries become one ministry of Jesus Christ.

Reconciliation is not intended to mean either that the standard of ministerial training and certification or differences in ministerial practice and placement process must become the same for both churches. Reconciliation means that an ordained minister of one partner

church may function, whenever invited, and as established procedures permit, as a minister to the other.

Such action of recognition and reconciliation of these ordained ministries is in harmony with the wider ecumenical understandings.

Ordained ministry in these two partner churches is sufficiently similar in form and substance to pose no serious theological obstacle to the mutual recognition and reconciliation of these ordained ministries in subsequent liturgical celebrations.

5. Common Commitment to Mission

Unity and mission are inseparable. If we imagine ourselves to be sacramentally one and do not engage together in mission, we deceive ourselves. Christ calls us to unite in one mission in and to a suffering and divided world. The church is called to visible oneness as a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's saving reconciliation of all things in Christ. In declaring full communion, these two churches acknowledge that they are partners together in God's mission to and for the whole world.

The mission of the church takes many forms. The church engages in mission through worship, through proclamation of the gospel, and through action. In worship, the church recalls and celebrates the mighty acts of God in creation, redemption, and providence. Thus graciously renewed in faith, hope, and love, its people are sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be ambassadors, witnesses, and servants of Christ in the world. In proclamation, the church tells the story by which its own life is defined. As it confesses unambiguously the Christ in whom it lives; the church invites all who will to enter its fellowship of life in Christ. In its action, the church embodies God's justice, peace, and love. As the church reaches out to others, both individually and systemically, it manifests God's reconciling purpose and saving reign in all the earth.

In partnership, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ fully claim the mission and make deliberate commitment to engage in mission together, wherever and whenever possible.