

Implications of the Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ministries United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ consider a proposal for the "Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordained Ministries," developed by a joint working group of the Office for Church Life and Leadership and the Leadership Center of the Division of Homeland Ministries and circulated during 1992, the Ecumenical Partnership Committee offers the following perspective as information to our churches.

The mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries, as proposed to our two churches, are set in the context of the Consultation on Church Union and are consistent with the understandings set forth in Churches in Covenant Communion. Mutual recognition and mutual reconciliation of ministries are two related actions which have three fundamental implications. They

- (1) affirm and celebrate the unity God has given,
- (2) respect the polity cherished by our two traditions,
- (3) anticipate ongoing renewal and transformation.

(1) The mutual recognition of ordained ministers, declared in 1989 by the General Assembly and the General Synod, affirms and celebrates that "ordained ministers of each partner church are truly ministers of word and sacrament." In the language of the Consultation on Church Union, mutual recognition of ordained ministers "is intended to acknowledge in these ministries the manifest blessing of God in the fruit of the Spirit, and to affirm they are rooted in the apostolic tradition," (Churches in Covenant Communion, p. 21). By virtue of the declaration of Full Communion in 1989, the mutual recognition of ordained ministries is a present reality in the life of our two churches. It fulfills one dimension of the Vision of Ecumenical Partnership, adopted in 1988 by the Ecumenical Partnership Committee, which

looks toward that day when our two churches can claim together our oneness in Jesus Christ, a time when we can say without qualification: Your baptism is our baptism, your table is our table, your people and pastors are ours, your mission and witness are ours, your decisions we own and respect, (Vision Statement, 1988, emphasis added).

Reconciliation of ordained ministries refers to actions by our two churches (paraphrasing the Consultation on Church Union), "both separately and together whereby the ordained ministries of our two churches become one ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to both," (see Covenant Communion, p. 21). It means "that an ordained minister of one partner church may function, whenever invited, and as established procedures permit, as a minister of the other, (from the Commentary to the Declaration of Full Communion, 1989)." The procedures being proposed are an attempt to express the uniqueness of the Ecumenical

Partnership among the other ecumenical relationships of our two churches. Again, to use language of the Consultation, reconciliation

will make possible an enrichment of the ordained ministry for each church, as well as provide a new and visible demonstration of our essential unity in faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission, (Covenant Communion, p. 22).

(2) Mutual reconciliation of ministries will enhance the possibility for ordained ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to serve in United Church of Christ settings, and for ordained ministers of the United Church of Christ to serve in Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) settings. It is an attempt to "discover," as the Vision Statement of Ecumenical Partnership puts it, "the means by which the ministries of one church will be able to function effectively as ministries to and on behalf of both churches." Movement of ministers from settings in one denomination to settings in another is by invitation, "as established procedures permit." The right and responsibility of each local church to determine to whom a call will be extended remains inviolate. Decisions about ordination, authorization, and standing will continue to reside with the regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the associations (or Conferences acting as associations) of the United Church of Christ.

(3) Mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries, while demonstrating an essential unity, do not imply uniformity of practice, procedures, or belief. Recognition "does not obscure real differences," (Covenant Communion, p. 21). Currently there are serious issues related to ordination that occasion difficult debate not only between our two churches, but also within each of our two churches. The ordination of gay and lesbian persons is one such issue among others. Mutual recognition and reconciliation do not require consensus on this issue or others, nor do the two actions assume that such consensus already exists. What is implied is that we will no longer deal with these questions in isolation, but will struggle together and in the context of the wider ecumenical movement. Mutual recognition and reconciliation open our two churches to acknowledging both the headship of Christ over every ecclesial tradition and the freedom of the Spirit to work in and through these traditions however the Spirit wills," (Covenant Communion, p. 21).

Affirming and celebrating the gift of visible unity, safeguarding the freedom of conscience and the polity both churches prize, and opening ourselves to the renewing and transforming work of the Holy Spirit are three key elements of what our two churches, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement, mean by the mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries. The loss of any of these elements diminishes the other two, and distorts our vision of Ecumenical Partnership. Together, they help us become more faithful to our historical and essential ecumenical vocation.

*Adopted by the Ecumenical Partnership Committee
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