

Study series on

The Covenant

between the
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)
and the
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The Unity We Seek



UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS

The conversations between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are part of the ecumenical movement. Through this modern movement, the churches seek to liberate themselves from their isolation and division and to gather themselves into a believing and witnessing fellowship which can fulfill the vocation to which God has called them. In our effort, it is necessary to use and to understand two terms: unity and union.

Unity is God-given. It is the essence of the relationship we share as Christians and as churches. Unity is not something we can make ourselves: it does not depend on our like-mindedness, nor is it destroyed by our diversity. Unity comes as a gift from God to all who receive new life in Jesus Christ. We symbolize this newness of life by one baptism in the Holy Spirit. Then, in the Eucharist, Christ unites us to himself and to one another, so that our unity is both fully personal and fully corporate. The unity which is most commonly experienced in worship also reaches out into all aspects of a congregation's life and work, including service in the world. The same unity links a congregation to all generations of the Church Universal, so that unity in Christ transcends both time and space through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Union describes the actual relationship of Christians and churches as they live out the unity which God has given. It has to do with the way we shape our organizations, perform our administrative programs, and make our decisions. If the unity we claim in Jesus Christ is authentic, it must express itself in union.

Yet today our churches do not live in union, or communion, with one another. We are divided socially, culturally, and ecclesiastically and we have not yet been able to agree even on the nature and preconditions for full communion. Therefore our churches live in an intolerable paradox: our disunity disfigures, some would say denies, the essential unity of the

Church. This paradox—or better, this contradiction—demands that we raise the question of church union.

UNITY AND MISSION: INTERRELATED ELEMENTS OF WITNESS

The journey of the ecumenical movement began with a missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910. There, the churches came to realize the negative effect of their division on their mission in the world. In an effort to find a common basis for union, the churches engaged in theological conversations, comparing their doctrines, sacramental practices, orders and structures of authority. In recent years, the comparative process has given way to the building of a new consensus in theological matters. Through decades of international conflict and social upheaval, the churches have grown toward a common understanding of the Lordship of Christ and the mission of the Church in the world. The formation of councils of churches and other ecumenical agencies has enabled the churches to act together in significant new ways.

Yet the churches remain divided. Only recently have we come to realize the role of certain non-theological matters in maintaining divisions and in further splintering existing communions. The same divisive forces which have fractured the human family have been at work in the churches also. When we attempt to unite the churches without challenging their reliance on, and involvement in, the oppressive systems of society, our motivation for union becomes suspect. Union then becomes only a matter of institutional survival or administrative efficiency.

A new, prayerful and more vigorous participation in common mission will help divided churches come to understand the necessity for union. The road runs from the shared practice of mission toward greater unity in faith. Why is this true?

A. The Church has been created, and is constantly being created, by God for mission in the world. In an important sense, this mission is prior to

the existence of the Church. The Church is made necessary and is actually created by God's call to share in the mission of bringing about justice and peace in the world.

B. Work for justice and peace requires us to see every aspect of our faith and common life in a new way. Comparing historic doctrines and present practices is not sufficient. We must ask together what is required of us by the present activity of God.

C. Participation in the struggle for justice and peace makes even more necessary our remembering the total history of the Church. That history embraces centuries of Christian mission before either the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) or the United Church of Christ emerged as a denomination. The recovery of unity in mission will require our churches to appropriate afresh the total Christian tradition in communion with those who have in the past understood it differently.

D. Unity in mission moves toward the renewal and reformation of the churches. Each partner in this dialogue must answer the question: what does your tradition bring to the joint mission which will contribute to the reformation of our existing churches and which will aid in the task of transforming the world? Genuine dialogue should not be aimed simply at the merger of present institutions but at creating new entities which will sustain the work of the Church as mission.

THE GOAL

The current work and study between the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are only a small part of the ecumenical movement. Any advance toward the union of our two churches should be consistent with this wider movement toward a truly whole and united Church. This implies that whatever union we may achieve must contribute to and build upon the following objectives:

1. It must be a union which witnesses more effectively to the world than is possible at present. This need is in keeping with Jesus' prayer wherein the church's unity gives credibility to our claim that he is the Messiah (John 17:21). It is in keeping with the Apostle Paul's conviction that the church's role in redeeming the world depends on its capacity to reconcile people within its own membership, however alienated they are in the world (Ephesians 3). The concern for unity expressed by Jesus and Paul did not grow from any interest in efficiency, esthetics, or tidiness. Rather, they believed that only a united church can witness to a reconciling Gospel. Just as it is the power of evil to alienate and divide, it is the power of the Gospel to reconcile and unite. What

kind of impact can the Church have if, in its own life, it is visibly inconsistent with the message it is sent to proclaim?

2. Whatever union we achieve must be visible.

For unity to be a witness to the world it must become so visible to people that they recognize it as a unity created by a reconciling power; indeed, it is that very reconciling power for which the world yearns today. The world must be able to see a living expression of the Good News which calls God's people to oneness with Him and with one another. The solution to visible divisions is not an invisible unity. Rather, only visible structures can be a sign of invisible unity in Christ, just as the Eucharist is a visible sign of Christ's invisible presence.

3. If the unity is to be visible, it follows that it must be local. This is not to suggest that unity need not be equally manifest in every part of the church's life, but to insist that unity must be realized precisely where people live and where they must struggle with all the forces which tend to alienate them. Among those forces are our habitual ways of doing things and of being Christian. Each congregation develops its own vested interests, its own identity, its own momentum, its own set of loyalties. Such forces encourage feelings of superiority to neighboring congregations and of competition with them for the available resources. Union must represent genuine changes in each congregation's attitudes and actions vis-a-vis its neighbors.

4. Union must be more than the recognition of diversity which would allow us to claim that we have achieved unity when, in reality, little significant change would have occurred. Among the vested interests of each congregation is its life in an existing denominational structure. To be sure, most members of our two communions have forgotten the original reasons for the emergence of their denomination. Even if they recalled those reasons they would realize how irrelevant they are in contemporary America. Even so, they fear any change as a potential threat to their identity as a member in the larger body. This fear induces us to prefer some form of unity which would not threaten what we have been or what we have done. Under pressure, our churches might be tempted to accept a kind of denominational detente, sometimes called "reconciled diversity." However, genuine union requires more than this if it is to represent true unity in Christ.

5. It is clear that the achievement of any significant form of union will require flexibility on the part of the present churches and their members; it is even more clear that union will mark an advance only if the new body displays continued capacities for growth. This term "body" recalls Paul's famous image

of the Church as the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4; Colossians 3). A body is one, yet it has many members serving various functions. It maintains its unity only by constantly adapting to new surroundings and challenges.

These are precisely the qualities we seek in uniting. The world in which we proclaim the Gospel is constantly changing; issues arise day by day which threaten to produce new divisions among the churches. If the union we achieve is incapable of adapting to these changes, it will not endure.

Unity in the body of Christ is not uniformity. We are different; our churches are different. Whatever form union may take, it must express the double truth: there is one Spirit who apportions gifts to the church, and the vast diversity of those gifts contributes to the common good. Both diversity and community can be traced to the activity of the one Spirit, the one Lord, the one God (I Corinthians 12:1-11). Whatever the shape of a united church, it must be conducive to flexibility in responding to new opportunities as we live together, witnessing in a changing world to the powerful love of God for that world.

FOCUSING THE ISSUES

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are engaged in a six-year period (1979-1985) wherein, by our study and work together, we shall seek to discern the meaning for our life of God's gift of oneness in Jesus Christ. During these years, members of our churches are working and studying together around the three issues of the sacraments, the ministry of ordained and lay persons, and appropriate forms of mission for the contemporary world. Then, in 1985, our churches will decide, in the light of God's call to unity, whether we are called to pursue formal union negotiations and, if so, what form our union might take.

The decisions which our churches face may be summarized as we consider again the opening paragraph of this study document. Are we united in a desire to liberate our separate churches (local and national) from their isolation and division? If so, what decisions must be made? Are we united in the desire to gather into a more faithful believing and witnessing fellowship? If so, what new structures must be created? Are we united in the desire to fulfill the common vocation to which God is calling us? If so, what actions must be taken?

Of course, we do not confront ourselves with issues and questions such as these; rather, the demand is made by the God who brought us into existence as a covenant community. God's covenant is a gracious promise which covers our entire future

and that of the world. Each step toward greater unity is a way of sharing in that promise, of becoming new creatures in a new world, of claiming citizenship in a holy city. Each decision we make, whether for increased alienation or for a greater reconciliation, is a response on our part to God's promise of a new life.

The character of this covenant is such that it impels us to include these minimal objectives in any movement toward union:

- the proclamation of a common faith in Jesus Christ,

- the celebration together of the sacraments as ways of showing forth Christ's death until he comes,

- the recognition that the members and the ministries in our divided churches do in fact belong to the whole church,

- the growing involvement of all congregations in the struggle for justice and peace,

- effective sharing in a common mission that is empowered by the self-giving love of the God we know in Jesus Christ,

- living together in hope, confident of the fulfillment of God's promise and open to radical changes in the churches and in the world,

- making all these realities both visible and local, beginning with ourselves as believers and as congregations.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Church union means seeking to be more fully responsive to Christ's gift of unity: it means living visibly as one community in the world. Union is unity incarnate, experienced and lived in fleshly form. It is not primarily a matter of organizational merger or uniformity of theology, liturgy, and practice. Yet we must face the fact that union has to do with the structures and the shape of the church. Those who are most impressed with the spiritual quality of unity are inevitably moved to search for structures which will manifest that unity wherever the Church's life finds expression. Unity in Christ cannot be confined within any given set of structures. In order to facilitate our growth in unity, new structures must exemplify greater diversity and flexibility than is evident in our present organizations, so that we may bring all of our particular traditions into a single, fully committed fellowship.

To sum up, it is God's gift of unity that poses for us the central questions: What will make the Church become visible to all humanity as one fellowship, united in God's love? What structures will reveal that oneness by enabling us to fulfill our common calling in a vast variety of places and cultures?

