

Introduction

Beyond Historical Orthodoxy

Barbara Brown Zikmund

"Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God." [1 Corinthians 2:6-7 RSV]

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is a denomination that reflects the pluralistic story of American Protestantism. Created in 1957, it is known for bringing together ecclesiastical bodies rooted in English Puritanism, American frontier revivalism, and German religious history. It takes seriously the calling of Christians to oneness in Christ and participates actively in the contemporary ecumenical movement. The prayer of Christ "that they may all be one" is central to its self-understanding.

Louis Gunnemann, who has written about this young denomination in *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, notes:

The formation of the United Church of Christ was a venture of faith, a response to a vision created out of the heritage of the past and in the context of new responsibilities. To know the beliefs, movements and events comprising that history is to begin to accept ownership and to be shaped by it. *

History, however, as with many academic ventures, sometimes gets into habits. Popular patterns of interpretation prevail for a time and then "revisionists" come along and new interpretations emerge. "What actually happened" does not change; it is simply seen with new eyes and shared with new understanding.

History is organic; it grows and flowers, it dies back and goes to seed. It needs tending, like a garden, to produce its best blooms. Sometimes it benefits from fertilizer. At other times careful pruning and even the grafting of old branches on to new stock will revive its beauty. The United Church of Christ organizes its history around the legacy of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. These two denominations, which were themselves the result of earlier unions, provide the raw material for the "historical orthodoxy" of the United Church of Christ. In UCC historical work, therefore, one commonly finds a careful balance between the "four streams which become one"—Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed. Churchpeople have come to expect that each tradition will receive its "one quarter time." But this is a distortion of history.

* Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (New York: United Church Press, 1977), p.197.

What happens when historical orthodoxy governs the exploration of the past? First, some parts of the history are lost forever when only half the story is told. Certain individuals and groups remain invisible. After a time they seem to have never existed or certain events seem to have never happened. The histories of women and of many racial and ethnic groups do not fit into the scope of historical orthodoxy, and they are forgotten or selectively remembered. Often those who were on the losing side of controversies are not given fair treatment.

Second, when historical orthodoxy prevails, the methods used to retrieve historical information and the type of research deemed legitimate are consciously and unconsciously limited. In some instances the oral traditions and unofficial memorabilia of a group are ignored because they fail to fit scholarly criteria. Again, the experience of ethnic groups or of peoples marginal to the dominant history is overlooked because it exists in stories and songs and languages foreign to the researcher. In such cases certain types of historical material are not recognized as being important.

Third, when historical orthodoxy dominates, typical research sources (such as letters, diaries, and journals) are read from only one perspective. Good history, however, approaches such materials with an open mind. For example, the records of missionaries contain profound insights into "native" world views and values. If these materials are read only through "white" or "colonial" eyes, the history of mission and the church is distorted. When they are examined from the standpoint of mission recipients, the picture changes.

Fourth, when historical orthodoxy governs the approach to materials, current events and special movements seem to emerge unrelated to any historical context. Yet few things in the church exist without some previous expression. The legacies of contemporary special interest groups are grounded in histories that need to be discovered and understood. But when historians settle into standard ways of "seeing" the past, the sources of contemporary change are difficult to discern.

History is not always neat and fair. And the UCC history is more complex than the historical orthodoxy that informs its self-image. The United Church of Christ is an extremely pluralistic and diverse denomination that is nourished by many "hidden histories." These important stories out of its past do not appear within the traditional fourfold history. Yet, as Gunnemann says, only when church people know the beliefs, movements, and events that make up their history will they be able to accept ownership and be shaped by that history.

"Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ" attempts to move beyond UCC historical orthodoxy. The hidden histories of the United Church of Christ are unknown. They need to be preserved and adequately shared within the denomination to enable ownership. This book seeks to expand knowledge about the diversity of contemporary church life. It will especially stretch leaders in their understanding of the UCC. It connects the United Church of Christ with some significant developments in American religious and ethnic history. More chapters could have been included, but this is a beginning. Another book exploring the histories of the Chinese, Hispanics, Hawaiians, and others could be developed.

This book began with plans for an optional event sponsored by the UCC Historical Council in cooperation with the Coordinating Center for Women at General Synod XIII of the United Church of Christ held on June 29, 1981, in Rochester, New York. Because of the interest generated in the "Unity and Diversity of the UCC" during that session, authors were found to write the eleven chapters that make up this collection. In rough chronological order the chapters document some of the hidden histories.

The first chapter is about the American Indian. Although contemporary historiography speaks of Native Americans, this essay retains the historical label Indian. The author of the chapter is not a member of the Indian community but writes from the perspective of the mission boards that initiated and maintained Christian work with American Indians for more than one hundred fifty years. In the not-too-distant future perhaps this story can be retold from a Native American perspective.

Most black history in the United Church of Christ is linked to the antislavery crusade of Yankee Congregationalists who worked throughout the nineteenth century to uplift and support their black sisters and brothers in the South. Some black UCC churches, however, do not come from that past. They are related to the development of the Christian denomination and evolved in the tidewater regions of Virginia and North Carolina, unconnected to black Congregationalism. This Afro-Christian connection is described in chapter 2.

The history of the German Reformed Church in Pennsylvania is the concern of the third chapter, which presents the nineteenth-century controversy between the Mercersburg movement and those who called themselves "Old Reformed." Some of the tensions within the United Church of Christ today are similar to this conflict between "high church" and "low church" factions.

Foreign mission activities set the stage for the fourth chapter, on Armenian Congregationalism. Because of the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the nineteenth-century, Armenian Christians of "evangelical persuasion" grew in numbers throughout the Ottoman Empire. Later, when Armenians came to the United States seeking refuge from persecution, they brought that legacy with them. From missionary beginnings Armenian Congregationalism moved to become part of the United Church of Christ.

The German heritage of the United Church of Christ is usually associated with the Evangelical and Reformed story. Chapter 5 tells how some German churches in the UCC were Congregational. These churches were organized on the midwestern frontier by German emigrants who came from Russia in the late nineteenth century. The emigrants were befriended by American Congregationalists but retained some of the Pietism they had nourished in Russia for several generations.

The image of the American Missionary Association (AMA) that is usually conveyed is one of white New England school teachers who went into the South after the Civil War to raise the educational level of blacks. Chapter 8 looks at that history from a different perspective and documents the involvement of blacks who worked for the AMA in education and in church development throughout the entire century.

Chapter 7 retrieves an important and often overlooked story of women in the church. Building on a German movement, in the late nineteenth century, the Evangelical Synod of North America offered women the opportunity of becoming deaconesses. These women shared their gifts in many health and welfare ministries sponsored by the church. Furthermore, their consecrated service gave them unique leadership opportunities as pioneer professional women.

The United Church of Christ has incorporated many diverse groups in its long history. Chapter 8 tells about a group—the Schwenkfelders—that seriously considered becoming part of the United Church of Christ but never did. Descendants of a sixteenth-century German reformer, they came to Pennsylvania in the colonial era and have been good neighbors to the German Reformed people for centuries.

Reformed hospitality, however, did result in a formal connection between the United Church of Christ and the Hungarian Reformed people. Chapter 9 explores the Hungarians' history in the United States and their independent status as the Magyar Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Within the United Church of Christ the Calvin Synod, a conference without geographical boundaries, continues to support UCC churches of Hungarian Reformed origins.

Chapter 10 returns to the story of women in the churches. This chapter explains how independent boards and organizations for women in the four denominations that formed the United Church of Christ provided a special power base for women at the turn of the twentieth century. It argues that these churchwomen changed the mission movement, helped women around the world, and set the stage for great changes in women's lives in the twentieth century.

The last chapter in the book, chapter 11, explores the development of Japanese Congregationalism in America. From Neesima Jo, who smuggled himself out of Japan in 1864, to the concentration camps of the 1940s and into the post-World War II period, the story of Japanese participation in the United Church of Christ is impressive.

Any examination of "hidden histories" is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, learning these stories is disturbing. Preconceptions and assumptions are stretched and challenged. This experience is painful, because these histories show how deeply captive the church is to cultural patterns of ethnocentrism, racism and sexism.

On the other hand, studies of this type highlight the strengths of pluralism. There is power for the entire church in knowing these stories; and for those who stand outside UCC historical orthodoxy these histories bring justice. The United Church of Christ seeks unity within its diversity. Only as it is able to locate, preserve, and share the fullness of that diversity will it be enabled to embrace the oneness of Christ.