

*“Historical Reflections on the Statement of Faith”\**

In this Year of our Lord 1997, on this 221st anniversary of our country's independence, and this tenth day of the forty-first year of the United Church of Christ, I am pleased to respond to your invitation to reflect on the origin and history of our church's Statement of Faith. Of all that might be said, what should I pack into these few minutes?

With an author's irrepressible urge for self-promotion, I mention that I have written a book on the subject.<sup>1</sup> That both simplifies and complicates my task. I could repeat the high points of the book, and there's no way to avoid some bits of repetition. But some of you have read it--maybe you were required to in a polity course--and you have a right to hear something different. For those who have not, I don't

\*Presented at the Historical Council Luncheon July 4, 1997, General Synod XXI, Columbus, OH, by Roger L. Shinn, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

<sup>1</sup> Roger L. Shinn, Confessing Our Faith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1990).

want to offer you any excuse to continue avoiding it, so again I should do something different. What I shall do is give a personal memoir of what happened. Memoirs are always incomplete and one-sided, but they can be source materials for more comprehensive histories. At the risk of exposing my biases or indulging in an ego-trip, I am doing what I have never done before--although once or twice I have done fragments of it in response to direct questions--telling the story as this one participant experienced it. If it might be said that I am coming out of the closet, the door has always had a few cracks in it.

### **The Background**

Our Connecticut Conference Minister, Davida Foy Crabtree, has been reminding us that President Avery Post frequently pointed out that the United Church of Christ adopted its Statement of Faith before adopting a constitution.<sup>2</sup> She and he found in that sequence a nice symbol that for us our faith precedes our legal structure.

2 The United Church of Christ came into existence at the uniting General Synod in Cleveland, June 25, 1957. It approved the Statement of Faith at its General Synod in Oberlin in 1959. It adopted its Constitution at an adjourned session of that General Synod a year later.

Even before that the uniting churches had agreed on a

Even before that the uniting churches had agreed on a document, known as a Basis of Union, which made two important prescriptions for the present issue. First, it said that the proposed Statement of Faith would be "a testimony, and not a test, of faith."<sup>3</sup> It may be, as The Christian Century said, that a testimony is, in a profound sense, a test. But the United Church wants its confession of faith to be a joyful act of worship, not a legal document for the definition of orthodoxy.

Second, the Basis of Union in well-crafted words called for fidelity to a traditional faith and freshness of expression. The faith which unites us and to which we bear witness is the faith in God which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments set forth, which the ancient church expressed in the ecumenical creeds, to which our own spiritual fathers gave utterance in the evangelical confessions of

<sup>3</sup> Basis of Union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church with the Interpretation, Article IV, Section F, in Louis H. Gunnemann, The Shaping of the United Church of Christ (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1977), p.211.

the Reformation, and which we are in duty bound to express in words of our time as God himself gives us light.<sup>4</sup>

That set a profound challenge--faithfulness both to a past heritage and to contemporary experience.

### **The Story of the Formulation**

The origins of the Statement, like so many events in history, are a revealing example of the interaction of resolute purpose and historical contingency. They involve four years of activity in two stages.

The co-presidents of the uniting churches, Fred Hoskins and James Wagner, seeking to implement the Basis of Union, had appointed a committee of sixteen members, with a general expectation that they were to work toward a Statement of Faith. Then legal challenges, instituted by opponents of the union, meant that their action was premature. But there was nothing illegal about a "Committee to Study Basic Christian Doctrine," and this committee did just that, with an awareness that their work was pointing toward a Statement of Faith, if

<sup>4</sup> Basis of Union, Article II, ed. Cit., p. 208.

and when that should become possible. When the legal barriers were removed, the Uniting General Synod elected a commission of thirty (fifteen from each of the uniting churches), plus the co-presidents as ex officio members, to prepare the Statement. The members included theologians, pastors, and lay people from various walks of life. Almost none was from the church bureaucracy. Five were women. Although there was some ethnic diversity--the Magyars were included--we cannot avoid noticing today that none was African-American or Hispanic. Fraternal observers--from the Disciples of Christ, the Council of Community Churches, and on one occasion the Evangelical Church of the Union (Germany)--were present.

Since I, with some others, was a member of both the committee and the commission, I cannot entirely separate the two in my memory. But the total process involved study of many expressions of faith: the ancient ecumenical creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the Reformation confessions, Congregational covenants, the Barmen Declaration, the Batak Creed of Indonesia, the confessions of the United Church of Canada and the Church of South India, the doctrinal basis of the World Council of Churches. We asked repeatedly: What was the occasion for these declarations? What controversies did they try to settle? How did they express both a given Gospel and the peculiar historical circumstances of their times?

What threats to faith did they aim to oppose? What can we learn from them? What comparable challenges does the United Church of Christ face today?

One of my contributions--since I said that this is a personal memoir--was to point to a statement of an eminent theologian of the United Church, H. Richard Niebuhr: "The preaching of the early Christian church ... was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples."<sup>5</sup> We looked at some of the declarations in the New Testament--at what biblical scholars have identified as the kerygma, the earliest proclamations of faith--and confirmed Niebuhr's judgment. We looked also at Old Testament declarations and found a similar pattern of pointing to events in which people of faith discerned the activity of God. What if we should try to do something comparable? I heard favorable comments, but none of us saw the way to do that.

Our leaders (Elmer Arndt and Douglas Horton with the co-secretaries Robert Moss and Loring Chase) proposed that

<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1946), p. 43.

each of us then write a statement. Twenty-three of us did so. Those statements were then distributed to all of us, with no identification of authors. At our next meeting we discussed them in detail, moving toward a rough consensus on themes to accent. Then the executive committee proposed that they select four statements (still not knowing the authors) and ask the writers to do new statements, taking into account the general discussion.

A few weeks went by. On a hot summer day in Nashville, I was loading the car for a drive with my wife and two daughters, to the Deering Conference Center in New Hampshire where I frequently taught in a three-week pastors' school organized by Truman Douglass and the Board for Homeland Ministries. The day's mail arrived just before we took off. I quickly opened an interesting envelope and found an invitation to draft one of the statements. My mind started racing. At our first rest stop, I jotted down a few notes, then added more at each stop. That evening, in a motel, I gathered the scattered notes and almost had a full draft. In the next few days I made revisions, not very many. I mailed in my effort. Soon the mail brought the four drafts, again unidentified by author. At the next meeting of the commission, at the Pittsburgh airport where, if memory is right, we had all our meetings, the executive committee recommended this draft as the basis for our continuing discussions. We combed over it

in general discussion, then in small groups working on differing sentences, then back again in plenary session. Every line, indeed every word, got attention. Sometimes, considering alternate wordings, we tried reading each of them aloud in unison; frequently that test determined our choice.

Toward the end of two or three days we had proposed additions, deletions, and modifications. The group asked Roger Hazelton to join me in one more revision. We brought it back to the group, who after a night's sleep and a little more discussion adopted it for recommendation to General Synod.

The draft was soon published in The United Church Herald, The Christian Century, and The New York Times. Extensive discussion followed: in local churches, in correspondence from eminent theologians, pastors, and laypeople, sometimes internationally. Rarely have so many people been involved in discussion of a declaration of faith. This discussion made a difference.

When the Commission presented the Statement at the General Synod in Oberlin, animated discussion followed. Several people marveled at the spectacle of the General Synod actually discussing theology. There was general consensus that amendments from the floor were probably

not a very good procedure. Instead, the commission listened carefully, then met and made revisions. A day or two later it presented a revised statement to the General Synod, which adopted it with the singing of the Doxology and the unison reading of the statement as an act of worship.

Let me try to make one point without undue vanity or humility. The Statement came out of a group process. No one on the Commission, working alone, would have produced anything resembling it. Our shared studies and conversations affected every line. But at one point somebody, for better or worse, had to become the voice of the group. It was given to me to be that. I wrote what I could not have written on my own. Then my draft went back to the Commission and to wider publics. The version approved by General Synod was structurally identical with my draft. The wording was, at several points, improved.

#### **The Content: Tradition and Innovation**

The Statement does not aim to displace the classical Christian creeds. They are enduring confessions, which have shaped the church and still shape it. The Statement, trying to do for our time what they did for their time, makes one big change in structure. The traditional creeds were mostly triadic in form: an article on the Father, one on the Son, and one on the Holy Spirit with perhaps some miscellanies.

This Statement, in apparent contrast, between an opening declaration and a concluding ascription, has seven declarations of acts of God.

Some have asked: Is the non-triadic Statement trinitarian? My answer has always been, "as trinitarian as the New Testament." Like the New Testament, it testifies--I refer at the moment to the original version--to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But again, like the New Testament, it nowhere organizes its testimony around those three headings.

I remember one uneasy moment connected with this issue. James Pike, once an atheistic or agnostic lawyer of some distinction, converted to Christianity, then became a priest and later bishop in the Episcopal Church. In his restlessness he began to deviate from Episcopal doctrine, on his way to what he considered a post-Christian belief. Somewhere along the line, in a book that I cannot now locate, he wrote a criticism of trinitarian doctrine. Then, in a passage that I can only paraphrase from memory, he said: "People ask whether Christian faith can be stated without the doctrine of the Trinity. The answer is that it has been done. The United Church of Christ did it." Reading that, I had a hidden wish to suppress it. I didn't want it to fuel doctrinal controversies within the United Church. But I'd rather face it than repress it. I repeat that the Statement is as trinitarian as the New Testament.

In its departure from the classical creeds, it is closer than they to the biblical witness. Advocates of some versions of trinitarian doctrine may want to add to it, and they should. They have no reason to nullify it.

In its seven declarations of the deeds of God, the subject of each sentence is God (or a pronoun for God). Then comes an active verb. The central sentence, the fourth of the seven, varies the structure in two ways. First, it begins not with a word for God but with the phrase, "In Jesus of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord...." Second, it changes tense. The other six are written in the present tense--a historical present to indicate that what happened is still happening. This one shifts to the present perfect tense: God "has come among us and shared our common lot." That is to give the declaration about Jesus the historical concreteness in time and place that has always been so important to Christian faith. These two variations, with the central location, give that declaration a special importance that influences all the rest. Unfortunately the version in The New Century Hymnal, while verbally accurate, has a major error in format, collapsing this declaration into the preceding one and thus hiding its central significance. I hope it will be corrected in future printings.

Before I leave that question of tense, I should point out the greatest revision made in the Statement during the General

Synod. The draft said:

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth,  
our crucified and risen Lord,  
[God] has come to us,  
shared our common lot,  
conquered sin and death,  
and reconciled the world to himself.

Some critics, including some lay people, found that too comfortable. Has all that really been done? Theologians at that time were emphasizing the once-for-allness (the *einmaligkeit*, as the Germans put it) of God's deed in Christ. They were echoing St. Augustine: "For once Christ died for our sins, and, rising from the dead, he dieth no more."<sup>6</sup> I resonated with Augustine, but I felt the force of the objection. Could I say, in the generation of the Holocaust, that the world had been reconciled to God? At the General Synod the Commission changed two of those verbs to participles, to indicate that what God once did must still go on.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XII, 13.

<sup>7</sup> The change brings the wording closer to the testimony of St. Paul: "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." 2 Cor.5:19.

There is a second variation from most of the classical creeds. The Statement says more about our call to activity in the contemporary world. Its longer sentences have that accent. I suppose the phrases most often quoted are: "to accept the cost and joy of discipleship," and "courage in the struggle for justice and peace." Here, also, I think the Statement is true to the New Testament. Thus in the two ways in which the Statement may seem to be innovative, I think it is really traditional--that is, biblical.

### **The Later History**

Now, forty years later, the Statement itself has a history. A change of consciousness came with remarkable suddenness. As late as 1971, the Eighth General Synod, taking account of a "faith crisis," called on the United Church of Christ to "celebrate the Statement of Faith." I thought that a bit of an exaggeration; I would have preferred to celebrate God with the words of the Statement of Faith.

But already a new gender consciousness was at work in the church. The Statement was loaded with male pronouns. The original Commission had given only slight attention to that. The women said that everybody would realize that God is not a male. When later discussions arose, those women engaged in some mutual correspondence and shared it with me. Mostly they thought change was unnecessary.

In my last conversation with one of them a few years ago, she expressed her unabashed enthusiasm for the original version. But for the most part women and men alike saw a need for change. Within four years of the call for "celebration" the Executive Council requested the Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL) to begin a study to decide whether a new statement was desirable. In 1976 OCLL asked local churches to take part in the study. Then in October of that year President Robert Moss, during his terminal illness, wrote a revision, intending it to contribute to further discussion. The eleventh General Synod in 1977 commended that version to the church for study, use, and response through OCLL.

At one stage OCLL invited me, among others, to a meeting on the subject. I was unable to attend, but sent a letter. I had been discussing the Statement with two women, seminary students, in a tutorial course in UCC polity. We had begun to think about changing the Statement to a doxology, addressed to God. Thus it would resemble many of the Psalms, and it would have the advantage that "you" is inclusively masculine and feminine. I sent this suggestion to OCLL. For all I know, others may have proposed the same idea. The Thirteenth General Synod asked the Executive Council in cooperation with OCLL to "identify an interim version" of the Statement in time for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Church in 1982.

The Executive Council approved a doxological version on October 31, 1981. The Fourteenth General Synod in 1983 affirmed both the original Statement of 1959 and the new revision "until such time as a new statement of faith is received." That is where matters now stand.

But what about that "new" Statement? The Thirteenth General Synod, while asking for the interim version, "requested the President of the Church, through the Consultation on Church Union and other world communions to explore the joint development of a new Statement of Faith ... as expeditiously as possible" and asked that the new statement "affirm the triune nature of God, calling forth images to express the inclusiveness of our faith." "As expeditiously as possible," it turns out, means very slowly.

As new ecumenical bridges are built, perhaps some of them at this current General Synod, new rifts appear. I do not want to join those theologians who regard "the interim" as the time until the final apocalypse, but I do not expect it to end next week. After hearing President Paul Sherry's stirring address to the General Synod this morning, I think that the Statement is still helpful in the interim.

Meanwhile, we have many things to think of. The latest version, while correcting gender bias, made some other



theological changes, whether purposeful or inadvertent. Some Christians regard it as more individualistic, more pietistic than the original. And, to some, it is less trinitarian, contrary to the intention of the General Synod.

One reason is a new emphasis on the Trinity among some Christians, including feminists but not only them, on a belief that includes recognition of relationalism within the Godhead. Thus some of the most progressive and some of the most traditional groups in the church, for quite different reasons, want to reaffirm a strong trinitarianism. I give an example. A thoughtful woman, presenting her ordination paper recently to her association in Connecticut, emphasized her sensitivity to gender issues, yet chose to build her own statement around the original Statement of Faith. When asked why, she said that the latest revision, while correcting gender bias, lost the relational quality signified by the language of Father and Son. I am myself groping in the "interim," still searching. I use the example to show what we already know: the responsibility and joy of theological inquiry never end. History does not confer on us our finished identity, but it enlightens us as we constantly reconstruct that identity.

That must be enough for today. If this memoir has been too one-sided, too self-indulgent, forgive me. The church is the community where we correct one another in Christian love.

#### Additional Sources Listed by Dr. Shinn

For further information about the Statement of Faith see the official record of its adoption in the Minutes of the Second General Synod, pp.7-8, 27-30, 111-17.

The extensive minutes of the Commission that prepared the statement have been deposited in the UCC Archives at the Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Loring D. Chase, co-secretary of the Commission, has written a short but colorful and instructive summary of the story, first published in United Church Herald, March 26, 1959. Reprinted in Paul. F. Mehl, Classic Christian Creeds: A Coursebook for Leaders of Adults (United Church Press, 1964), pp.114-19.

See also Harold E. Fey's news report in The Christian Century, 22 July 1959.

## STATEMENT OF FAITH

*The Original Version, 1959\**

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being,  
creates man in his own image  
and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness  
and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will  
declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and  
risen Lord,

he has come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death  
and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,  
tongues, and races.

He calls us into his church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be his servants in the service of men,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
his presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him. Amen.

\*Statement of Faith, approved by the Second General Synod of the United Church of Christ, 1959.

## STATEMENT OF FAITH

*The Revision of 1977\**

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being,  
creates humankind in the divine image,  
and sets before us the ways of life and death.  
God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness  
and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of  
righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and  
risen Lord,

God has come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death

and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,  
tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be servants in the service of the whole human family,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end,

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen.

\*Statement of Faith, revised by Robert V. Moss, Jr., President of the United Church of Christ, 1969-76, and recommended for use by the Eleventh General Synod, 1977.

## STATEMENT OF FAITH

*The Revision of 1981: A Doxology\**

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being,  
create persons in your own image,  
and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness  
and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will  
declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and  
risen Savior,

you have come to us  
and shared our common lot,  
conquering sin and death

and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,  
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,  
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,  
tongues, and races.

You call us into your church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.

\*Statement of Faith, Revised 1981 (in the form of a Doxology), affirmed by the Fourteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ.