

Statement on Pronouncements (1959)

22. GENERAL SYNOD:

“Pronouncements”

([1959] 1969, 1971)

GENERAL SYNOD

In 1957 the Uniting General Synod elected a twenty-four-member Executive Council (composed of twelve people from each of the uniting churches) to tend to the interim organizational details of the new denomination. During the two years when special commissions were at work drafting the UCC Statement of Faith and the UCC Constitution, the Executive Council formalized financial matters, encouraged ecumenical relationships, appointed a nominating committee, and dealt with practical issues.

One of its recommendations, approved by the 1959 General Synod, concerned the way in which all members of the United Church of Christ should understand “pronouncements” made by the General Synod or its instrumentalities. The recommendation emphasized that pronouncements speak only for the body that makes them, and as such, although they are morally binding, they are not legally binding on other parts of the church. This was difficult for people to understand. Debates over General Synod actions continued, and ten years later when people needed a reminder about the meaning of pronouncements, the 1969 General Synod reaffirmed its earlier 1959 “Statement on Pronouncements.”

When the Church or any of its Instrumentalities exercises a prophetic role in society, criticizing its complacency, judging its evils, and otherwise attempting to bear a Christian witness concerning issues on which opinions differ, no responsible group of Christians can hope to escape the penalty which the prophets and reformers have always incurred.

It can be hoped only that their Christian integrity will not be questioned just because the word they speak may be an unpopular one, and that they themselves are clear as to the nature and limits of the authority their utterances possess. To this end the Executive Council registers the following observations:

The General Synod, even though numerically and geographically the most widely representative body of the United Church, can claim authority and representative character for its utterances and enactments only in the measure of their inherent truth and fidelity to the Word of God.

A Church agency speaks only for itself, not for the whole fellowship, except as members of that fellowship concur or their assent is won by the weight of what is spoken.

An utterance of the General Synod or of any of its agencies binds no member of the United Church except as he is convinced and his commitment secured by what he accepts as the rightness of the utterance itself. This is axiomatic for the freedom of the Christian man.

The General Synod and its Instrumentalities, however, are composed of ministers and lay members whose devotion, interest and competence have been recognized in their selection by their fellow members to serve in such bodies; and their utterances and enactments therefore merit, even from those who disagree, respect and serious consideration.

Every agency is urged, in published announcements of its views, to make clear the authority on which its statement is based in a way to avoid any misunderstanding of other bodies in the matter.

Any agency which takes a position on an issue on which views diverge may serve to evoke creative exchange of thought and may, and frequently does, serve the Lord of the Church by stimulating the mind and pricking the conscience of the Church, its individual members, and of those outside the Church as well.

Because the Church agencies are composed of ministers and lay members chosen by their fellow members to serve where they do, we should thank God for the creative intelligence they exercise as followers of Christ in the discharge of their responsibilities, and judge their corporate word and deed as testimonies offered by them to us and the world in good faith.

We must remember always that many, if not most, of the Church's finest hours were when it stood for what the multitude denied or decried, and that the continuing symbol of the Church's faith and witness is a cross.