

Rethinking Church and Mission

138. BACKGROUND PAPER:

“UCC Ecclesiology”

(1991)

The Advisory Commission on Structure (1987–89) concluded that there was “a lack of clarity and common understanding in the United Church of Christ about the nature and purpose of the church.” Therefore, after the Advisory Commission was asked to continue its work as the General Synod Committee on Structure (1989), it began by “looking at our ecclesiology, our understanding of the church’s essential nature and purpose.”

Thus the most fundamental documents of the UCC, the Constitution and the Statement of Faith, set forth this denomination’s beliefs about the nature of the church, as a covenant community of Christ’s people called to faithful mission in the world. By these authorities of Word, Spirit, the faith of the historic church, and the covenant of “common Christian experience and responsibility” (Constitution, Preamble, 2), the church declares that it is one and whole, that it remains in faithful continuity with the apostolic faith of the ancient and ecumenical church, and that unity is fundamental to its nature. These traditional “marks of the church” derived from the ancient creeds — one, holy, catholic and apostolic — are understood by the United Church of Christ as expressions of four basic purposes which have increasingly come to characterize its life:

A. To proclaim the gospel in all the world.

The church’s apostolic vocation is to proclaim the gospel, the good news of God’s reconciling and saving justification and sanctification in Jesus Christ. This is the good news of God’s universal and inclusive love in creation, in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s many gifts, in the promises of renewal and fulfillment in human history and all creation. This witness occurs as the scriptures are read, studied and preached; as the sacraments and liturgies of the church are celebrated; as Christians witness through deed, word and prayer in all realms of society; as Christians invite others to respond to the gospel by joining the gathered life of the church.

B. To gather and support communities of faith in their celebration and mission.

These gathered communities of faith — local churches and other expressions of the whole church — are nurtured through the work of the word and Spirit in preaching, worship and the sacraments; in education and

fellowship; in the mutual love and encouragement shared among all the faithful; in providing material and other resources to maintain the church and its mission in the world; in caring for the leadership and organizational structures required to sustain the gathered life of the churches; and in manifesting its multicultural, multiracial and inclusive character in each local church and in all other expressions of the church.

C. To labor for the creation and increase of God’s realm of justice and love in the world.

The gifts of God’s justice and love in the world require discernment and proclamation; participation in political and economic life; in government, business, education, the arts, health care, agriculture, science and technology — in all human activity — for the sake of the human fulfillment they bring, and in order to prevent their use in any way which diminishes or destroys the integrity of creation. These same gifts require witnessing against idolatries of race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation or ethnic background. God’s gifts of justice and love also require advocacy for the poor and oppressed and the affirmative inclusion of all people in the community of the church. And these same gifts require making common cause with movements for the transformation of individuals and the structures of society in keeping with the vision of God’s universal realm of justice and love.

D. To manifest more fully the unity of the church, all humankind, and the whole creation.

The United Church is a “united and uniting church” (By laws, V.230), believes that God both gives and intends such unity, and that all Christian communities are called to seek greater ecclesial unity. This unity is manifested through responsible and mutually accountable relationships among local churches, Associations, Conferences, the General Synod and its related bodies; through participation in ecumenical organizations at the local, regional, national and global levels; through movements for church union, partnerships, and other kinds of committed relationships on every continent. It is strengthened also through dialogue with other historic religions, particularly Judaism and Islam, where Christians share a significantly common faith heritage. Such dialogue is based upon mutual respect, clarity and conviction about one’s own faith stance, the commitment to speak and listen respectfully, and the conviction that each participant has something to give and receive in the dialogue. The commitment of the United Church of Christ to the unity of all humankind is expressed through its advocacy of a just peace for all the peoples and nations of the world, as well as its care for the victims of abuse and oppression. And its commitment to the unity of the whole creation is expressed in its commitment to the protection and enhancement of the national environment against threats to its integrity.