

SHINE, GOD'S PEOPLE JOIN OTHERS IN CHRIST

We are a united and uniting church



LIGHT A CANDLE

Holy and merciful God,
you call us into the future with hopeful hearts,
with dreams overflowing with expectation.
Remind us of the vision of our forebears,
who sought to live faithfully the prayer of Jesus:
“that they may all be one.”
Strengthen our hands for service, our hearts for nurture,
and our minds for understanding
that our vocations of reconciliation may be gifts
to the faithful ministry
of your whole church. Amen.

DURING A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE, consider ways in which your life has been shaped or touched by Christians from other denominations or traditions.

- » How has your life of faith been affected by those people and communities?
- » What have you discovered about your own faith and the UCC as you encountered Christians from other churches?
- » When did you experience a sense of nurture? When did you experience an uncomfortable challenge?
- » What part of the Bible did you begin to hear differently?

A SHINING MOMENT

Imagine yourself at the founding General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio, in

1957. The atmosphere is charged as delegates gather for the historic moment. They will witness the birth of this denomination formed across relationships that many believed impossible. Doubts remain. How will these diverse Christians ever come together to form one family? What do we have in common that will hold us together?

The delegation from the Congregational Christian family is seated across the aisle from one of the Evangelical and Reformed families and you've never met anyone from the other part of this new denomination. How do they worship? What hymns do they sing? What stories do their preachers tell? And yet amid the doubts and anxiety there is for you also an air of excitement and exuberance.

Finally, this relationship, so long in the making, has come to pass! Many are of a mind to give the entire moment over simply to celebration. Instead, in that moment,



you hear bold and prophetic words from the co-moderators of the founding General Synod, Louis W. Goebel and George W. Hastings, in a letter to the delegates:

At this moment of the joyous new access of life imparted by the union, the United Church of Christ is stricken in conscience at its continuing separation from the rest of the Church, and it prays for the day when the greater Church of Jesus Christ, now hindered and weakened by many divisions, will come to visible reality, one flock, one shepherd, through the influence of One who is alive in every part of [Christ's] Church.¹

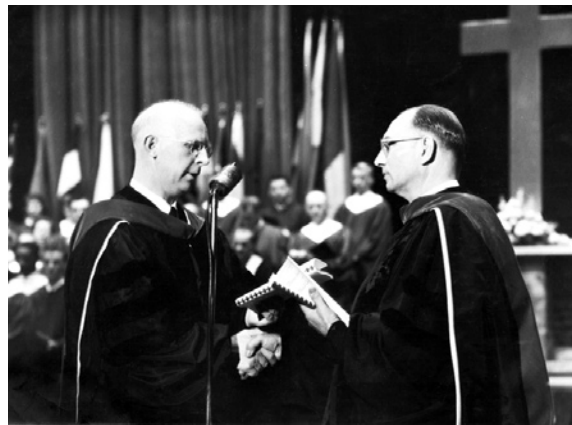
Our forebears remind us fifty years later that even in the midst of our celebration of a vision fulfilled, we are never quite done with the work of building relationships in the church — beyond our own door and beyond our denomination. That is our vocation as a united and uniting church.

OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT

As we celebrate the first fifty-year journey as a united and uniting church, remember with gratitude the vision that our mothers and fathers in the faith held in trust for us. We now hold that vision in trust for our children.

In 1957 and the years immediately following the union, the coming together of our congregations, including those of the Convention of the South, represented an important embrace of diversity in this new family. Today, however, we experience an even greater breadth of tradition as we include in our common life congregations of the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa, of the Church of South India, and so many others. Their faith, commitments, history, and culture enrich the whole of the United Church of Christ.

Christians from other denominations in the United States have also shaped us. The United Church of Christ currently includes almost five hundred federated congrega-



Dr. Fred Hoskins and Dr. James Wagner in the handshake that symbolized the start of the United Church of Christ in 1957.

tions. These are local churches formed across denominational lines and which share in the lives of two or more traditions.

We have formed many ecumenical partnerships and engage in dozens of ecumenical dialogues here in the United States and around the world. Every day since June 25, 1957, the United Church of Christ has grown and matured through relationship with other Christians. We have not been the same church since that moment. Our formal partners have included the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa, and the Alliance of Baptists.

We know that the unity of the church is always for the sake of the mission and ministry of the church. When Jesus prayed “that they may all be one,” he didn’t finish the sentence by saying “so that their choirs might be bigger,” or “so that they might have enough kids for a youth group,” or “so that they might be able to afford a custodian.” He

“THE UCC HAS ALWAYS AND WILL ALWAYS unite with sisters and brothers of all faiths in witnessing that a new world of God’s justice, unity, compassion, and peace is possible.”

— *The Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo, executive minister, UCC Justice and Witness Ministries*



prayed “that they may all be one that the world might believe ...”

As a united and uniting church we know that difference is to be celebrated and can be sustained in a body committed to relationship. Differences can never be an excuse for division, even when it is difficult.

This possibility of Christian unity is ever before us. Washington Gladden, a minister from the Congregational tradition, told this story in 1904:

One of my Methodist brethren in Columbus once told me of a little experience of his ... in getting a cow into her stall. It was a moonlit evening ... when the stable door was opened and the cow had got her head inside she saw, directly across the passage way that led to her stall, what looked to her to be a bar of silver. It was [only] a beam of moonlight ... coming through an aperture in the wall.

The cow [however] stopped short before this barrier. Doubtless it appeared to her insurmountable. She may even have been impressed ... that it was a barrier placed in her path by heaven itself, and that it would be sacrilege to break it down or jump over it. But constrained thereto by a little vigorous prodding ... she made a desperate lunge and found her way to her stall and was soon rejoicing in her fodder. My friend said that the surprise of the cow in her discovery that a barrier so formidable could be overcome so easily was remarkable.²

We know that our ecumenical vocation must never lose sight of the holy food beyond any barrier, real or imagined. We pray and work for the day when all Christians will be able to come to the table together and know God’s holy presence.

“That they may all be one ...”

— *John 17:23*

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

Each and every congregation of the United Church of Christ can add its special gift to the unity of the church. Think through the history of your own local church and identify moments when you have contributed to Jesus’ prayer for unity. In what ways have those moments offered both blessing and challenge? What did you learn? How did you grow?

Prayerfully respond to these questions:

- » How can your local church make more visible the unity of the church in your community in the days ahead?

- » What steps might you take to initiate relationships where there have been none before?
- » Are there specific projects or visions that your congregation can dream that would contribute to Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one"?

Not only is God calling your local congregation to a renewed commitment to be "united and uniting," God is calling the wider United Church of Christ to greater commitment. Please share your discoveries and hopes also with others in

the UCC. Discuss these questions, and then go online at <www.ucc.org/50.questions>. Let us know how God is touching your congregation.

- » What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a united and uniting church?
- » What hope would your congregation like to share with the national setting for our denomination's future in ecumenical and interfaith relations?

¹ "Message to the Churches from the Uniting General Synod," *The Living Theological Heritage*, volume 6 (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 751.

² Washington Gladden, "A Proposal for Church Union," *The Living Theological Heritage*, volume 6 (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 33-34.

This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Lydia Veliko, minister for ecumenical relations, Office of General Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland Ohio. For more resources about the UCC commitment to be a united and uniting church, see online resources at <www.ucc.org/ecumenical/> and "What Matters" at <www.uccvitality.org>.