



UCC @50

our history

our *future*

J. Martin Bailey and W. Evan Golder, co-editors

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Produced for the
50th Anniversary Committee
United Church of Christ
Cleveland, Ohio

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The Preamble defines our faith

by Clyde J. Steckel

The preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ is a scant three paragraphs long. Remarkably, the preamble, particularly its second paragraph, has played a defining role in the faith identity of the UCC while remaining virtually unknown in most local churches. (In Paragraph 1, the Synod adopted the Constitution; in paragraph 3, it defined the relationships among the various parts of the UCC.)

The preamble is uniquely authoritative in the UCC. It is a statement of the faith and practice of the church to which all have assented by voting, as congregations or synods, when they join the denomination. Nothing else was voted on by the whole church—not the Statement of Faith, *Manual on Ministry*, *Book of Worship*, *The New Century Hymnal*, or the Stillspeaking identity initiative. In a church that prizes local and individual autonomy on matters of faith and practice, it is not surprising that this one statement carrying formal authority should be neglected or even unknown.

The preamble, along with the rest of the Constitution and Bylaws, was written by the Commission to Prepare a Constitution (30 members, 15 each from the uniting denominations) elected by General Synod 1 in 1957. Gerhard Grauer, pastor of St. Paul's UCC in Chicago, chaired the Commission.

Much was required of this preamble. It had to sum up and carry forward the longer ecclesial and faith affirmations appearing in the Basis of Union of 1948. The preamble affirms that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church and that the church is comprised of those who confess Jesus Christ as Son of God and Savior. Though these would hardly seem disputed points, I think that the UCC today, 50 years later, might state its core convictions differently, perhaps starting with hospitality, diversity, justice action, and a God who is still speaking.

Many would argue, I among them, that these values are grounded in Jesus Christ, but many others would have misgivings about an implied exclusivism in confessing Christ.

UCC representatives to ecumenical dialogues have relied on the preamble to answer questions about whether the UCC is a truly Christian body or has any shared Christological convictions. Committees on the ministry have used the preamble to counter suggestions that churches or ministers can believe anything they want. Those who explain the UCC view of the authority of scripture have cited its words, "It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures..." in order to affirm the authority of the Word rather than the literal words, a distinction that does not satisfy everyone. And the third paragraph makes it clear that the Constitution "defines and regulates" only the General Synod and its related bodies, while other settings like local churches relate in a free and voluntary manner (we now say, "in covenant") with one another and the General Synod.

These vital services performed by the preamble, however, remain in the deep background of UCC discourse. And that is too bad.

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Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, paragraph 2

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

