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Editorial correspondence may be sent to either of the co-editors:

Clyde J. Steckel, 3000 Fifth Street Northwest, New Brighton, MN 55112 (612-633-4311).

Elizabeth Nordbeck, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, MA 02159 (617-964-1100).

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THE IDEA OF A CONFERENCE

Donald J. Severson

What role are conferences intended to play within the United Church of Christ? This paper begins with a historical background of the idea of the conference and then looks at the ways that the meaning of the term has been understood within the United Church of Christ. It concludes by raising some issues that require attention if a clearer and renewed conception of the meaning and role of the conference is to emerge.

BACKGROUND IN CONGREGATIONALISM

The word "conference" entered the United Church of Christ from the Congregational tradition. By the early twentieth century, it had attained general, but not universal, usage among Congregationalists as a title for a state organization that usually encompassed several associations.¹ The term "conference" had varied meanings within Congregationalism. In the older states it normally denoted annual statewide gatherings that included both clergy and lay delegates—unlike many associations, which were either made up exclusively of clergy or virtually clergy dominated). Agendas of conferences could be more wide-ranging than association agendas. The latter tended to focus on ecclesiastical credentialing actions and related theological/doctrinal issues. A century ago the leading historian of Congregationalism, Williston Walker, wrote:

The increasing desire on the part of the churches for consultation and local helpfulness has led to the general introduction into New England, in addition to the Associations, during the present century, of district and State meetings for discussion, composed of representatives of the churches and of the ministers, usually under the name "Conferences". These "Conferences" do not take the place of councils, they do not ad-

Donald J. Severson is Conference Minister of the Central Pacific Conference, United Church of Christ, and Chairperson of the Council of Conference Ministers.

vised in the formation or discontinuance of pastoral relationships, or in the establishment of new churches, nor do they attempt to solve church quarrels, as a council does; they are meetings for friendly discussion, and for the choice of representatives to state and national assemblies.²

Walker's description assumes that the reader knows that each of the New England states also had its own Missionary Society. Connecticut, in 1798, had been the first to form one, with the rest following in rapid succession. The American Home Missionary Society (A.H.M.S.), when formed in 1826, was initially a confederation of these various state societies. The existence of strong state Missionary Societies is thought to be the reason that the New England area was the last part of Congregationalism to adopt the type of conference structure which first developed farther west.

Walker does not tell us why the word "conference" was selected in New England. The source may have been the Methodist "Annual Conference", or it may have grown out of the "friendly discussions" that Walker refers to as the style of the meeting. It could be rooted in the phrase "Conference Grounds", used to describe ecclesiastical meeting places. Whatever the genesis, the word found, and has continued to hold, a place in the denominational lexicon.

In the newer states, conferences arose as an elaboration of missionary extension work. The American Home Missionary Society organized its work by districts, usually along state lines. Each district was assigned a Missionary Superintendent—the Society originally called them Agents—although a Superintendent, in some cases, might have responsibility for more than one district. Associations came into being after a sufficient number of congregations had been formed within a district. The Missionary Superintendents continued the Eastern tradition of the statewide annual gathering of ministers and representatives of congregations—usually called the General Association—in order to (1) negotiate with the Society for funds and missionaries, (2) assist in pastoral placement, (3) raise financial support³, (4) discuss common concerns such as the nearby denominational colleges or academies, (5) coordinate Sunday School work and publication, and (6) hold related meetings, such as those of the Women's Missionary Societies, the state Home Missionary Society, etc.

The use of the word "conference" in the west, however, stemmed from the limitations inherent in the role of the Missionary Superintendent. Because a growing number of congregations had moved beyond the need for mission help, some of the midwestern states began to form conferences as a way of expressing concern for the pastors and

congregations that were now on their own. The model soon spread across the denomination.

The pith of the matter seems to be that . . . our Congregational churches were better organized for extension than they were for maintaining and intensifying what they already had. So long as a church was in the process of formation, or as long as it could not support itself financially, it received a great deal of attention.⁴

Conferences of the west were also the first to have full-time leaders called "Conference Superintendents". The title was chosen in direct continuation of the term "Missionary Superintendent" of the prior era. A related development was that the midwestern and western state Missionary Societies soon found themselves merged with the newly formed conferences. Unlike the Missionary Superintendent, however, who in "Mission Conferences" was appointed by the American Home Missionary Society, the Conference Superintendent was either elected or nominated⁵ by the conference itself.

ROLE WITHIN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The founding document of the United Church of Christ, *The Basis of Union*, makes brief, but important, references to conferences:

Practice

C. The Congregations, through their ministers and through delegates elected from their membership, constitute Conferences for fellowship, counsel, and cooperation in all matters of common concern. The Conferences exist to make cooperation effective (a) among their Congregations and (b) between their Congregations and the General Synod, the Boards, commissions, agencies, and instrumentalities of the Church.

D. The Conferences, through delegates elected by them from the membership and ministers of the Congregations located within their respective bounds, constitute the General Synod.

Ministers and Congregations

C. The calling of a minister to a Congregation is a concern of the Church at large, represented in the Association or Conference, as well as of the minister and Congregation. . .⁶

Article VI of the Constitution and Article II of the Bylaws describe the responsibilities of "Associations and Conferences." It should be noted that the Constitution and Bylaws, in "lumping together" conferences and associations within one article, blur the important differences between those two bodies ecclesiologically, historically, and functionally. In a significant change from the *Basis of Union*, which held that

"The Conferences . . . constitute the General Synod", the Constitution holds that "the General Synod . . . is composed of delegates chosen by the Conferences, and of *ex-officio* delegates [Article VII, Paragraph 44]".

The Constitution and Bylaws generally portray associations and conferences as credentialing bodies, agencies serving local congregations, and points of linkage with the national levels of the church. This "housekeeping" view of the conference, along with its implications, was stated candidly when Truman B. Douglass, Executive Vice-President of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, addressed the Committee on Structure that had been established by General Synod V:

In my opinion the Board for Homeland Ministries will diminish its responsibilities for the purely maintenance functions of the existing denominational establishment. These will be increasingly the responsibilities of the conferences. The Board will try to discover the significant frontiers of mission in our society and engage in the research, experimentation, and development relative to the occupation of those frontiers.⁷

Establishment of a "Committee of Nine to Study Realignment of Conference and Synodical Boundaries" was one of the first actions of the newly created Executive Council of the United Church of Christ. The Committee continued to function until 1967.⁸ Organization of the new conferences was, as might be expected, a process that consumed much of the first decade of the life of the new denomination. Realignment of boundaries was complicated by several problems:

1. *Geographic boundary overlap* between the two previous denominational structures grew out of different patterns of fellowship and association. Congregationalists were largely organized along state lines, whereas the Evangelical and Reformed Church had been aligned according to area fellowship ties.

2. *Population distribution* was a factor, since centers of strength between the two denominations were sharply different. Where they impinged on one another, negotiations were required. Tensions around this issue proved particularly strong in the formation of the Central Atlantic Conference.

3. *Desegregation* was a major challenge in the South, and its urgency and complexities occupied a great deal of the committee's attention.

4. *Ethnicity and language* were issues presented by the presence of the Magyar Synod, the German Congregational Conference, and Puerto Rico.

5. *Viability* of conferences in the west and south was identified as a

concern, but realities of geography and resources limited the committee's range of options.

Occupied with the above issues and others, the committee's records show that it was unable to give much attention to the ecclesiological or philosophical issues clustering around the idea of a conference itself. The nearest reference appears in remarks by Yoshio Fukuyama, consultant to the Committee of Nine, presented in 1960 at a special meeting of Conference Superintendents and Synod Presidents. He shared the Committee's recommendation for Joint Study Committees to prepare specific plans in the new conferences, and then commented that the first task of the proposed committees would be to consider the "aims and purposes" of the new conference:

Aims and Purposes—the kind of study I am proposing would be irrelevant without first defining the basic purpose of a United Church State Conference. The concern here is both theological and functional. What are the norms against which organization is to take place? How is the role of the Conference defined in the context of denominational polity? How is it to be related to associations? Is its role juridical, administrative, promotional, educational, or what? Is it primarily to serve churches, church members, or ministers? If all of them, in what order of priority? What specific responsibilities are unique to the conference and not shared by other bodies? What is the conference's role in ecumenical relations? What is its relationship to the General Synod and to national agencies?⁹

It is worth noting that at this time [1960] in the organization of the new denomination—the very year that the Constitution and Bylaws were being voted on by Congregational Christian congregations and Evangelical and Reformed synods—the advice given to the newly forming conferences reveals an absence of theological clarity or direction regarding their purpose and role. Each new conference was left to figure it out for itself.

The new denomination did not exist for long before it experienced problems of structure. One of the central issues that emerged at the outset was tied to the vagueness of the treatment of conferences in the initial structure. The Fifth General Synod in 1965 created a Committee on Structure, to "study services and interrelationships of Conferences and Instrumentalities and the General Synod." The committee's final report is dated February 1, 1969. Chapter III of the report of the Committee on Structure focuses exclusively on "Relationships Between National Level and Conferences of the United Church of Christ". It identifies the inadequacy of the treatment of conferences in the Constitution, Bylaws, and structure. Especially notable are three observations made by the Committee in chapter III of its report:

(1) "Conferences are instruments of mission on behalf of their local churches. The Constitution and Bylaws do not clearly designate Conferences as major program instruments. Neither, however, is there any limiting provision." (2) "Thus, in many respects Conferences and Instrumentalities are separate agencies existing to do the same or very similar things. Much of the work needs to be financed by OCWM funds which are intended for support of both the national and Conference programs." (3) "F. Some Conferences with less than adequate resources should be assisted from the national level."¹⁰

With one exception¹¹, the recommendations proposed by the Committee in 1969 attempted to resolve the above-identified problems by increasing the visibility and influence of the Council of Conference Ministers. The inadequacy of the treatment of conferences *per se* within the Constitution and Bylaws was not addressed, nor was the issue of assistance for conferences with "less than adequate resources". The Committee on Structure also issued a series of general calls for improved collaboration and clarification, toward the goal of unified mission planning and delivery of services aimed at the elimination of duplication and conflict.

By 1970, the question of conference viability, which had been inherited from the former "mission conference" system, had reasserted itself within the United Church of Christ. Annual grants of aid—a continuation of the old model—were being provided by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to such conferences as Southeast, Montana, and Intermountain (Idaho, Utah, Wyoming). In 1971, the President's office and the Colorado Conference began conversations with the Intermountain Conference about its challenges and difficulties. By 1974, Intermountain had been dissolved and its territory divided among Montana, Colorado, and Oregon, leaving three conferences where four had formerly existed. During the 1970s as well, a Great Plains Consortium, involving several conferences and national instrumentalities, attempted to wrestle with issues of effective conference mission in the face of population decline and problems of small church viability. These concerns for the "small membership, geographically dispersed conferences" have continued to occupy attention until the present day—most recently through participation of four conferences in the process called "Consultation on Conference Function" adopted by the Executive Council in 1986.¹²

ISSUES THAT CALL FOR ATTENTION

As the world approaches the twenty-first century, and as the United Church of Christ draws near to its fortieth birthday, the question of

the nature and role of its conferences needs serious and systematic attention. It is an important task for at least these four reasons:

1. Conferences exercise a major and growing role in expressing the mission of the United Church of Christ within their boundaries, but the Constitution is silent on this role of the conferences. The design, policies, and mandates of national instrumentalities often provide only token or minimal involvement of conferences in mission decisions, even those that directly affect the area served by the conference. Indeed, paragraph 47 of the Constitution, which enumerates the missional concerns of the church, appears as the preamble to Article VIII, which describes the work of the national instrumentalities. (One looks in vain, as well, for a constitutional reference to the mission role of the local congregation). Adequate constitutional, structural, and operational recognition of the significant missional role of conferences is long overdue.

2. In the second of his books about the United Church of Christ, Louis H. Gunnemann describes the principle of polity that informs the United Church of Christ as "*that of mutual accountability among persons and groups that acknowledge Christ as head. . .*"¹³ This principle is one way of stating one of the issues presently being addressed by the General Synod Committee on Structure. How, and with whom, do entities within the U.C.C. undergo and exercise mutual accountability? As itself a gathering of "persons and groups who acknowledge Christ as head", a conference can be a place of mutual accountability, while, at the same time, it seeks to be mutually accountable with its fellow conferences, and with the specifically national expressions of the church. Moving beyond our autonomies into responsible, accountable relationships is a challenge for all levels of the church. Conferences, with their intrinsic ties to both local congregations and national instrumentalities, would appear to be that key intersection where such "mutual accountability" is best located. Implementation of the principle of mutual accountability would seem to be of great importance for the unity of the church in life and mission.

3. The issue of unequal distribution of resources among conferences, although officially recognized for many years, calls for a fresh approach. Understood as it presently is, it sounds a lot like one of keeping weak institutions afloat. It is better seen, however, from the perspective of the call to foster a strong, effective presence of the life and mission of the United Church of Christ throughout the land. When seen as a call to faithfulness instead of a cry for maintenance, an energy for dynamic solutions—both within the "weak" conferences

themselves, and throughout all levels of the denomination—is more likely to emerge.

4. As noted above¹⁴, each conference was, at the time of its formulation, left to itself in "defining the basic purpose of a United Church . . . Conference". There would be value—for teachers and students of U.C.C. Polity, if for no one else—in drawing together these regionally developed understandings into a common, comprehensive understanding. This writer believes that the essence of conference is found in the term itself: *A conference is a focused continuing conversation, the topic of which is God's call to mission in the name of Jesus Christ.* All its activities can then be subsumed under the various topics that arise during that conversation.

Whatever the conclusion of such a study, however, the reality is that, without greater clarity, it will not be possible for conferences to realize their potential as key intersections in the life of the United Church of Christ. As this paper has attempted to show, the United Church of Christ has not yet come to appreciate or understand the critical role that conferences do play—let alone envision the richer contribution they could offer—to the life and witness of our church.

NOTES

1. Exceptions that continued until the formation of the United Church of Christ were in the use of the term "Convention," which referred to organizations encompassing several states, and the continued use of "General Association," such as in Hawai'i, where the statewide Evangelical Association encompassed several smaller associations.
2. Williston Walker, *History of the Congregational Churches in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 393.
3. In addition to the American Home Missionary Society, support was solicited for the other six of the "seven societies": the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Missionary Association, the American Education Association, the Congregational Church Building Society, the Congregational Board for Ministerial Assistance, and the Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society.
4. C. C. Merrill, *The State Conference* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1946), 6.
5. Elected by "Constituting Conferences." Nominated to the American Home Missionary Society and its successor, the Congregational Home Mission Society, by "Cooperating Conferences." The distinction arises out of the legal and financial relationship between the Conference and the Society.

6. *The Basis of Union*, 5, 8.
7. Quoted in L. H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York, United Church Press, 1977), 92.
8. Most of the records of the Committee of Nine are to be found in the Archives of the United Church of Christ, Lancaster, PA. Reports of the committee are in the minutes of General Synods 3—6.
9. Yoshio Fukuyama, "The Committee of Nine: Its Quest for Principles and Criteria," a paper presented at Buck Hill Falls, PA, January 1960, 15.
10. Report of the U.C.C. Committee on Structure (1969), 22—44.
11. The exception was the proposal for a Council on Mission Priorities, an ad hoc structure to foster joint planning and mutual understanding among and between conferences and instrumentalities. It did come into existence and functioned for some ten years.
12. A full description of the Consultation process and related developments would require much more detailed treatment than the focus of this paper allows. See General Synod 15, Resolution 85-GS-12.40, for a starting point.
13. Louis H. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), 162.
14. The reference is to the work of the "Committee of Nine on Realignment of Conference and Synodical Boundaries" and to the remarks of Yoshio Fukuyama to a special meeting in 1960.

UCC CONFERENCES AND THE COUNCIL OF CONFERENCE MINISTERS

Rollin O. Russell

I

Robert Paul points out the obvious: Any doctrine of the church must come from a doctrine of Christ. We believe that God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, is revealed to us in Jesus the Christ. Hence, Christ embodies the truth and reality of God. Thus the first question of ecclesiology is: "How can we show ourselves, corporately, to be the people of such a God?"¹

We begin by enumerating the principal affirmations about Christ as they shape the church's self-awareness:

- The theology of the *incarnation* requires the church to be in the world for the purpose of its redemption. Hence, the church is to be a people in mission, proclaiming God's reign. It is *apostolic*.
- *Reconciliation* to God and to one another is the purpose of redemption. Hence, the church is to be the agent and embodiment of unity. It is *one* and it is *catholic*, embracing the whole earth.
- *Servanthood* is the life Christ lived in order to bring about reconciliation. Hence the church is to be obedient, faithful in its servanthood. In this lies its piety. It is *holy*.
- *The Holy Spirit* is the presence of Christ in the church, continuing to inspire its mission, to enable its unity, to shape its servanthood, and to broaden the embrace of its catholicity. Hence, the church is always growing and changing according to God's guidance. It is *reformed* and *reforming*.

Other insights into Christology could be enumerated and their impli-

Rollin O. Russell is Conference Minister of the Southern Conference, United Church of Christ, and Vice-Chairperson of the Council of Conference Ministers.

cations for the church identified, but this provides a sufficient basis: The church is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*; it is truly *reformed and reforming*. It is united and uniting.

The next question is: How do we order ourselves to be and to do what the church is and does, and what is the place of conferences in that order?

The United Church of Christ honors the Christological source for ecclesiology in the Preamble to its Constitution by acknowledging "as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior."² The Preamble then describes "the free and voluntary relationships which the Local Churches, Associations, Conferences and ministers sustain with the General Synod and with each other."³ By enumerating the pattern of organization in this way—congregations, associations, conferences, General Synod—the Preamble indicates a "lateral relationship [that is] basic to our ecclesiology because each component is an expression of the church itself, and not (as an instrumentality) a part of the church, a special interest in or part of the church's work."⁴ This lateral relationship—an expression of mutual ministry where all elements work as equals under the headship of Christ—is fundamental in the order of the United Church of Christ. It makes all expressions of the church equally responsible to embody the oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity that are the marks of the church. Further, this lateral relationship is the proper context of mutual interaction that assures that the church will be *semper reformanda*. Hans Peter Keiling has characterized this as "a qualitatively new church order for the United Church of Christ."⁵ Louis Gunneman characterized it as polity in process.

Question 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism implies this very insight: "What do you believe concerning the Holy Catholic Church"?

Answer: I believe that from the beginning to the end of this world, and from the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his word, gathers, protects and preserves for himself in the unity of the same faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.⁶

By being part of a local congregation of believers, one is automatically part of the great congregation gathered by Christ from the whole human family. Whether local or universal, it is the one church, living in unity and faithfulness.

It is both interesting and instructive in view of this lateral ordering that Douglas Horton is said to have referred to the conference as a "congregation of congregations". Again, the nature and purpose of a conference is the same as that of the local church or General Synod: that it embody the marks of the church through its unity (*one*), its wor-

ship and piety (*holy*), its ecumenicity (*catholic*), and its evangelical outreach (*apostolic*), always attentive to the *reforming* power of the Holy Spirit.

Just as there is one church, so there is one ministry. The conference minister is to represent to the conference its vocation to be the church, and is to lead it in Christ's way, just as the local pastor is to represent to the local congregation its corporate vocation to be the church, and lead it in Christ's way. As Horton indicates, the conference minister's "work is to be to the conference what the devoted pastor is to [the] congregation, a shepherd and bishop of souls."⁷

All that is basic. Given the nature and purpose of the conference in our church order of lateral relationships of mutuality, the core questions become: How does such a body function in such a system? What is the role of its principal leader, the conference minister? What is the role of the Council of Conference Ministers in the life of the United Church of Christ?

II

Louis Gunnemann makes it graphically clear that while this church order of lateral mutuality is admirably consistent with our historic covenant theology, there is a critical flaw.

The ecclesiastical institutionalization [or domestication!] of the covenant paradigm has inevitably muted its radical potentiality. . . . The secularized covenant concept of the Enlightenment . . . appeared as a social contract, subtly altering the church's understanding of covenant. The shift was from obligation for the "welfare of the other" to "mutual self-advantage and limited liability."⁸

Hence we have mutual autonomy rather than mutual responsibility, and though we posture as a united and uniting church, our unity is suspect, as is the integrity of our order. As Gunneman continues: "Self consciousness about the principle of autonomy was reflected in uncertainty about the limits of mutual responsibility."⁹ The focus was shifted to the protection of rights as a prior consideration.

The language of autonomy is applied forcefully to the local church in our Constitution, but it also makes clear that we are autonomous at every level. The problem, then, is how mutual responsibility and mutual accountability can be asserted in our church order of lateral relationships. The unit best positioned to fulfill that function is the conference.

As a "congregation of congregations" the conference is the place where otherwise autonomous local churches freely bind themselves

together to accomplish common goals, extending mission and witness within its bounds. It is *apostolic*. Through the church and ministry structures of its associations, the member congregations make themselves accountable to one another, at least in principle. The conference is also the place where congregations turn for assistance in times of need—everything from endorsement of loan applications, to leadership training, to help when there is a local dispute. Hence, it is the most practical and appropriate arena for mutual responsibility and accountability, freely self-imposed by the member congregations. That is our covenant version of disciplined piety: obedience to Christ our head through mutual servanthood. It is *holy*.

Further, the conferences of the United Church of Christ are the most immediate link for local churches to the wider church. Conferences elect delegates to the General Synod. Conferences assume the responsibility for mission implementation and mission interpretation, for ecumenical relationships, and increasingly are engaged in international ecumenical partnerships. Conferences embody the unity of the member churches and symbolize the unity and catholicity of the whole church. Thus, conferences fulfill in their own sphere the critical marks of the church: *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic*. Further, they provide the arena where mutual responsibility and accountability can best occur.

The position descriptions of most conference ministers reflect this unique character of the conference in our church order. In the bylaws or job descriptions of many, we are described as, "Pastor to pastors and pastor at large to the congregations." This expresses our role as agents in the system of mutual responsibility and mutual accountability. We "represent the conference to the United Church of Christ and represent the United Church of Christ to the Conference." This phrase expresses our role as principal leaders in the unity of the whole church and in its broader mutual responsibility and accountability. All of us also have some language in our job descriptions that designates us as "spiritual leaders", responsible for the servanthood and piety of the churches and people.

Thus, conferences are the units in our church order best suited by nature and purpose to bring genuine mutual responsibility and accountability to our lateral relationships. They play a central role in making our covenant authentic. Conference ministers are entrusted with the responsibility to see that the conferences are faithful to their nature and purpose. The Council of Conference Ministers is that church-wide body of those who, together, bear that responsibility for the whole church. It should understand itself in this way; it should

order its life to fulfill that enormous responsibility; and it might well be so recognized in the Constitution and Bylaws.

III

Given this description of the fundamental character of the church and the Conferences, and of the role of the Conference Ministers, the Council of Conference Ministers might undertake a particular discipline as essential to its purpose. Its central and continuous task should be to assess the overall life of the United Church of Christ in classical terms:

- What is the state of our unity? Are we faithful to our commitment to be united and uniting?
- What is the state of our worship? our covenant life? our servanthood? our piety of obedience to Christ?
- What is the state of our catholicity, our inclusiveness and solidarity with all God's people?
- What is the state of our apostolicity, our evangelical witness to God's new realm and our service in it?
- How is the Spirit reforming our church? How can we be responsive to the Spirit's promptings?

Each Conference Minister asks one or more of these questions in some form every day, as do others from their perspectives and in relation to their responsibilities. No group asks them continuously or from the comprehensive perspective of the Council of Conference Ministers. The United Church of Christ needs such an ongoing pastoral conversation, and the Council is an appropriate place for it to happen. The Council can fulfill a critical role in our church order of lateral mutuality by continuously calling the church to faithfulness to its fundamental nature and mission in this way.

[Originally prepared for the Council of Conference Ministers as part of its participation in the ongoing conversation regarding the structure of the United Church of Christ]

NOTES

1. Robert S. Paul, *Freedom With Order* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), 65.
2. *Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ* (New York: Executive Council, 1992), 2.

3. *Ibid.*
4. Paul, *Freedom With Order*, 55.
5. Louis Gunnemann, *United and Uniting* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), 31.
6. *The Heidelberg Catechism* (New York: United Church Press, 1962), 54.
7. Douglas Horton, *The United Church of Christ* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 174.
8. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting*, 47.
9. *Ibid.*, 138.