

ON BEING AN UNFINISHED CHURCH:

Reflections on Diversity in the United Church of Christ Today

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Lectures about diversity usually begin with biblical images that all of us know very well. There is the body with its many parts, the vine and its branches, the house with many rooms. These passages tell us unambiguously that diversity is essential and good, and central to the very life and heartbeat of Christian community. "We were all made," Paul says, "to drink of one Spirit." What these texts do not tell us, however, is that diversity, which *is* essential and good and central, is also often messy and unpleasant and confusing. These passages do not mention that embracing diversity, like practicing forgiveness, is a lifetime commitment that has to be learned again each time we are asked—by circumstance or by conviction—to do it. These passages do not mention that forging unity out of diversity requires not only understanding of "the other," but also—and before all else—deep understanding of oneself and one's community.

So in the following comments, I want to do three things. First, I want to help us—we who are the United Church of Christ—to understand ourselves more deeply. Second, I want to be frank about some of the fundamental messiness that is at the core of our common life—as members of the United Church of Christ, especially, but also as contemporary Christians. Finally, I want to suggest some ways that we might begin to think about and manage our messiness.

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I.

What sort of church *is* the United Church of Christ, anyway? Of course, we are unquestionably a Protestant Christian Church, in the Reformed tradition. But what are some of the qualities that define the United Church of Christ, *specifically*? If you check out the denomination's website, or order some of the pamphlets that are listed in the back of the UCC Desk Calendar and Plan Book, you will learn that we are a "united and uniting" church. We are a "multi-racial, multi-cultural" church. We are an "open and affirming" church. We are a "just peace" church. We are a "church attentive to the world." These are helpful and important ways of understanding ourselves—or more accurately, of understanding what many of us aspire to be as a people of God. But they tell only part of the story of who we really are. They are helpful in the same way that the Pledge of Allegiance is helpful in revealing who we are as Americans. "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." This is a laudable goal that is, sadly, far from reality. It defines us as Americans in part, but it does not reveal the messiness and turmoil that are part of our national journey of becoming.

Let me begin, then, by sharing four brief descriptions that I believe *are* accurate ways of understanding who we are as we journey toward the unity and fellowship that God would have us achieve. Here is the first description:

The United Church of Christ is a new church with an old soul. Here is an historical question. Can you answer it correctly? Which date is correct as a founding date for our denomination: a) 1517; b) 1620; c) 1794; or d) 1957? Of course, the correct answer is actually e) all the above—and more. The United Church of Christ was founded in June, 1957, in Cleveland, Ohio. But its roots go all the way back to the Protestant Reformation. They go back to 1517, when Martin Luther took his bold stand against the Roman Catholic hierarchy and its abuses. They go back to 1620, when the Pilgrims sailed from Holland and found their way to Massachusetts. They go back to 1710, when the first wave of German Reformed immigrants settled along the east coast, and to 1820, when a second wave moved inland to the Midwest. They go back to 1794, when the renegade Methodist James O'Kelly changed the name of his followers from "Republican Methodists" to simply "Christians." They go back to 1817, when King Frederick Wilhelm III created the Church of the Prussian Union from which the German Evangelical tradition emerged.

All this makes for a very rich—and a very messy—fellowship. Although the United Church of Christ is nearly half a century old, many of our members still have loyalties to their founding traditions that are stronger than their loyalty to this “new” tradition. And these loyalties translate into concrete attitudes toward our shared life in the United Church of Christ. For example: after the 1957 union, many clergy from the Evangelical and Reformed tradition asked for a common liturgical resource to express the essential unity they believed existed among local churches. After much study, discussion, and public vetting, the UCC Office for Church Life and Leadership prepared a fine resource in the mid-1980s. When the text was finally published, however, there was no “the” in front of the title. It was not *The Book of Worship*, but simply *Book of Worship*. The reason was that a definite article such as “the”—or even the more cautious and indefinite “a”—might suggest that the text was actually *authoritative*, a requirement of fellowship and not a resource for it. Such an idea would have been deeply offensive to persons of Congregational or Christian heritage, who thirty years after the union continued to celebrate the essential autonomy, rather than the essential unity, of the churches.

Another seventeen years have passed since *Book of Worship* was published. But these old loyalties still affect the way we understand and assess our denomination today. They affect how we understand the nature of ordained ministry. They affect our willingness to participate in “Make a Difference” campaigns or in Our Churches’ Wider Mission and other all-church offerings. They affect our openness to conference guidelines about pastoral salaries and benefits. They even affect our interest in attending annual conference meetings, and tolerating talks about diversity.

Now, here is a second description. *Theologically, the United Church of Christ is a do-it-yourself denomination.* Other denominations, like the Presbyterians and Lutherans and Roman Catholics, have accessible creeds and confessions, catechisms and books of order that tell the people in great detail what they should believe in order to be faithful members. But the United Church of Christ has nothing of the sort. Here is another test question. Where would you find one single, basic and authoritative description or summary of United Church of Christ doctrine? The answer is that there is no such place. This is certainly not to say that the United Church of Christ *has* no doctrine. It is true that one can find intimations of doctrine—statements about our essential common theological understandings—in a number of places. The *Basis of*

Union, which was an important document that preceded the 1957 union, names our deep commitment to church unity. The *Constitution and Bylaws*, through innumerable revisions and a major denominational re-structuring, unwaveringly affirms that Jesus Christ is the sole head of our church. It also proclaims that we name as our own the historic creeds and confessions of Christendom as well as the insights of the Protestant reformers to ground our faith. *Book of Worship* asks three basic theological questions of new members and confirmands in the services that welcome them: Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Like other historic creeds and confessions, the UCC Statement of Faith—all three official versions of it—rehearses the drama of grace; moreover, it reflects belief in a God who has acted and still acts on behalf of humankind and the created order. The pronouncements of General Synod reveal our conviction that Christians, too, are called to act—not to set themselves apart but to be fully engaged with the joys and sorrows of the world.

But these statements obviously leave a great deal unsaid. We *have* no definitive UCC statements about the nature of the Trinity, the sacraments, or the atonement; we have no definitive common understanding about sin and salvation, heaven and hell, grace and judgment. We have no stated consensus about how to read the Bible. There is a joke that has been around in UCC circles for awhile; some of you have probably heard it. It concerns an ecumenical group that is trying to determine the answer to a thorny theological problem. The Baptist in the group finally says, "I'll see what the Holy Bible tells us." The Roman Catholic says, "Let me check the Pope's pronouncements." The Presbyterian says, "I'll look at the Westminster Confession." The Assemblies of God member says, "Let me wait on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." The Lutheran says, "I'll read the Augsburg Confession." And the UCC member says, "Well, it *seems* to me. . . ."

No wonder that pastors in the United Church of Christ sometimes find it very hard to answer their new members' urgent question, "What does the United Church of Christ believe?" No wonder that these same new members are sometimes baffled to find themselves theologically at odds with veteran church members. And no wonder that old-timers sometimes feel as if *their* church, the church of their childhood, has been stolen away. Make no mistake: this do-it-yourself theology is a rich and precious gift that affirms the worth of each believer's private and prayerful judgment. But it is a very *messy* gift, indeed.

Here is a third, statement. *The United Church of Christ is a church full of accidental ecumenists.* Let me explain what I mean by this. Nor-

mally we think of ecumenists as people who intentionally pursue reconciliation and change across denominational boundaries, for the sake of the essential unity of the church. But the United Church of Christ is home—both a temporary and permanent one—to many people whose primary identity and affiliations originated—and often still reside—elsewhere. I call this phenomenon “accidental ecumenism.” It is changing our churches in ways that we have only just begun to see.

Lately, I have been making a habit of taking informal surveys when I teach a class or speak at public church gatherings. There are two questions I like to ask: “How many of you are lifetime members of the United Church of Christ or one of its predecessor bodies?” and “How many of you have been a member of one or more other denominations at some time?” In my UCC history and polity class at Andover Newton this past fall, the number of self-identified lifetime UCC members was fewer than 10 percent—a number more than equaled by the number of former Unitarians and Roman Catholics. In addition, the class contained in lesser numbers former Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists, and Episcopalians, along with one former Mormon, a self-identified former fundamentalist, and a Pentecostal. These are the future leaders of our denomination: faithful men and women who speak in tongues, revere the Westminster Confession, and do not know the difference between the Congregational Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Accidental ecumenism is not a phenomenon unique to the United Church of Christ. United Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and even Lutherans are experiencing the same infusion of “foreigners.” But of all mainline Protestants, we are arguably the most inviting to the greatest number of newcomers. One of my former students, an African-American former Unitarian Universalist, memorably calls the United Church of Christ “the last house on the left,” a welcoming place where people who share a belief in Christ, but otherwise differ greatly, can find a home. For people in transition, we are a navigable fellowship. We set no daunting theological hurdles in front of them. We send no doctrine police after them. We do not ask them to assent to specific creedal formulas, nor do we demand an account of their conversions. We welcome them, for the most part, just as they are. But these marvelously capacious doors open into a messy, mixed-up community. Sometimes very conservative people wander in and are warmly welcomed, even into membership, and don’t realize what they’ve gotten into the pastor preaches her annual sermon against the death penalty. Sometimes very liberal people wander in and don’t realize what *they’ve* got-

ten into until the pastor asks the simple question in new members' class, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

And sometimes our communities begin to change before we even knew it. Here is an example. Most of us who grew up Congregationalists in the 1950s and 60s had little or no experience of Lent. As a child I recall seeing otherwise clean people on the local bus with dirt on their faces. My mother said that this was something Roman Catholics did. Today, forty percent of new members of the United Church of Christ in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, where I live and work, are former Roman Catholics. Ash Wednesday services in New England are now not only common, but are growing in popularity. In some of our churches, you can tell the new members from the old by the disdain—or the eagerness—with which they greet these "accidental" innovations.

Now, here is the fourth and last statement about the UCC. *By design, the United Church of Christ is an unfinished church.* In a sense, all Christian churches are unfinished in these between-times before the final consummation of God's realm. Churches within our Protestant tradition know themselves as "reformed churches, always reforming," and this understanding offers a helpful hedge against triumphalism—or against any easy sense that we Christians have the answers for now and all times. All of us share in a kind of cosmic messiness, waiting for the moment when the disparate pieces will come together and the diversities will be reconciled. But in these between-times, the United Church of Christ is demonstrably less finished than some of its partner churches.

The Basis of Union that formed the United Church of Christ articulates this unfinishedness very clearly. Its writers declared themselves to be a new body, "believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that Church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die." In other words, this denomination declared itself willing to go out of business even before it was formally organized. This new denomination not only anticipated, but committed itself to, more or less permanent upheaval and change for the sake of God's realm.

But that is not all. Consider the UCC Statement of Faith. Here is a last test question: Where would you go to find the UCC Statement of Faith? If you answered cleverly, "Which Statement of Faith?" you would be on the right track. The United Church of Christ has not one but three official Statements of Faith: an original, adopted in 1959 and authored mainly by Professor Roger Shinn; a revised inclusive language version penned by UCC President Robert Moss in 1977; and a

second revision, in the form of a doxology, adopted in 1981. Why do we have three statements? Other statements of belief have come down to us intact after 1700 years; ours lasted less than twenty. According to Roger Shinn, the original statement of faith was written to be re-written. It was never meant to be permanent. Instead it was, he writes, an interim document; but "how long that interim will be, nobody knows."

II.

So here we are, in Oliver Powell's famous words, this "beautiful, heady, exasperating [and we may well add, very messy] mix" that seems to embody anything but perfect harmony. Why is the task of living together harmoniously and peaceably so difficult?

One answer to this question has to do with a tension that every Christian man and woman lives in today. It is the tension between memory and hope—or to put it a bit differently, it is the tension between "the church has always done it that way!" and "the church is called to be prophetic!" Anyone who doesn't understand what I mean by this tension need only think *New Century Hymnal* to understand. We are not like the early Christians, who believed that Jesus was coming again very soon to consummate what his birth and death and resurrection had already begun. For us it is different. We have, each one of us, made our various accommodations with these prolonged between-times. The trouble is that we do not all make our accommodations the same way.

Let me offer my favorite example of what I mean. About five years ago, the Massachusetts Council of Churches held a conference on the future of the churches in the 21st century. They wanted a "liberal" and an "evangelical" to speak, each representing the perspective of his or her own theological community. I was the liberal, and the president of Eastern Nazarene College, a school just north of Boston, was the evangelical. He and I made our initial presentations, and it was remarkable how similar they were. We agreed about the major problems that beset our churches today. We agreed about the problems that beset culture at large. We even agreed about the Bible and evangelism and the churches' role in public policy matters. But then each of us was asked to say a final word about the agenda for our churches as they entered the new millennium.

This is what I said, more or less:

In the face of all these challenges, we need to be aware that God has still more light to break forth from the Word. Our God is a God of astonishing revelations, a God who habitually turns all our fondest expectations

upside-down, a God who disrupts our familiar habits and offers us sparkling hope and startling visions. And so we need to be open to the new occasions and new duties to which God is surely calling us.

This is what *he* said, more or less:

In the face of all these challenges, we need to hold fast to whatever is permanent, eternal, unchanging, steadfast. Our God is a God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow; God's are the everlasting arms that sustain us, and on this rock we can find our dwelling-place and *know* that we are on solid ground that will not shift like water or sand.

I trust that you get the point. We are who we are as Christians in part because we deal with these between-times very, very differently. I hope you get another point, too: my colleague and I were both right. Our God is a God of steadfastness *and* a God of surprises; our God is a God who comforts *and* a God who makes us uncomfortable. And somehow we who labor together have to find our homes in the midst of this hard and holy tension between memory and hope, between order and prophecy, between rootedness and freedom. This is a messy and confusing task. Many of us, perhaps most of us, will tilt in one direction or another more often than not, and those who do not may let cynicism and hopelessness overwhelm them.

Why is it sometimes so difficult for us to live together? There is a second matter that has much more to do with our particular identity as the United Church of Christ. Although I was born and raised a Congregationalist—and some corner of my being will always have warm, independent Congregational blood flowing through it—I have come to believe that this free church polity of ours is actually a very messy thing for a people who need to be about the tasks of sharing the gospel and building up the church together harmoniously.

It would be easier if we had bishops, like the Methodists and Episcopalians. Then our conference leaders could sit in their offices and simply *tell* us to clothe ourselves in love and be kind and patient and forbearing with one another. But in this church we don't have the luxury of *ipse dixit*, of hard verbs like "direct" and "order" and "mandate." We are, it is often said, a church of soft verbs. In the United Church of Christ, we "suggest." We "recommend." We "urge."

It would be easier if we had a Book of Discipline, like the Presbyterians. Then we could be clear about how to behave and what to believe, and about doing all things decently and in order. But we do not have the luxury of rules and formal discipline. We're a do-it-yourself church of covenants and consensual standards and conversation—a great deal of conversation.

It would be easier if we were simply an old church, like the Roman Catholics. Then we could lift up Tradition with a capital "T" and genuflect to it, and say to heck with innovations and re-imagining and re-interpreting the old story for new generations. But we do not have the luxury of a long common history. We're a church that is still inventing itself, an unfinished church.

Or again: It would be easier if we were simply a new church, like the Assemblies of God. Then we could listen every day for the voice of the Holy Spirit calling us to brand new things, and like Ralph Waldo Emerson we could be "endless seekers, with no past at our backs." But instead there are those stubborn roots of ours, reaching all the way back to the Reformation. We are a new church with an old soul, and that makes things complicated.

Almost certainly it would be easier if we had these things or if we were these things—but thank God we do not, and we are not. Thank God that our church—this messy, motley church—belongs not to a distant and abstract "them," not to forebears dimly remembered, not to rulebooks hardly anyone knows, but to us, to you and to me—who together must invent and re-invent, build and re-build it daily. That, I think, is the one hope for us: that each of us in our different places will begin to re-invest, to re-form ourselves in an image more nearly like that of the one whose name we bear, and whose gospel we are carrying into this new millennium.

III.

These days we are thinking—many of us, prayerfully and hard, in worship and in workshops and meetings of all sorts—about our common life as members of the United Church of Christ. Because of who we are and where we are in our evolution—as I have already said—this is a messy and difficult task. So I want to suggest two or three things that we need to be about together if we are to bear with one another harmoniously in the midst of all our messiness and incompleteness.

First: we need to name the demons that beset us as a body. What are some of these? Fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar and the "other;" incivility and arrogance about the things we hold to be true; reticence and passivity; ignorance and cynicism; frustration and weariness. There is more, no doubt, that others could name. We need to grant ourselves safe space for this naming exercise without fear of mutual vilification, whether subtle or overt; we need to give ourselves permission, in effect, to talk openly in the sanctuary about things that we usually save for the parking lot.

Here is the second thing: naming the demons that beset us is good and necessary. But we need to practice naming the demons *without demonizing anyone*. This is no small task. It is terrifically easy to conflate persons and ideas, so that the ideas one rejects also condemns to rejection those who hold them. The task of separating belief and believer is as hard a task as any that Christians have—as hard, even, as forgiveness. But to do anything less is to say “no” to our brother or sister when the God who has chosen me *and* you has already said “yes” to both of us.

Finally, and most important: we need, whenever we are gathered together, to practice the discipline of profound theological humility. Paul himself said it best in his letter to another heady and exasperating people, the Corinthians: “But now we see as in a mirror dimly; then we will see face to face. Now we know *in part*; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Listen carefully now to the words of our own heritage, the one we share both as Christians and as members of the United Church of Christ. First there is the voice of scripture: “*Now we know in part.*” There is the voice of Pilgrim pastor John Robinson, bidding farewell to his people as they sailed into unknown waters: “*God has yet more light and truth to break forth from His holy word.*” There is the voice of New England poet James Russell Lowell, speaking out against the evils of slavery during the nineteenth century: “*New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient goods uncouth/ We must upward still, and onward who would keep abreast of truth.*” There are the voices of the German Evangelical founders of Eden Seminary: “*In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.*” This fundamental notion—of partiality, tentativity, humility in our understanding of God’s ways—is in our UCC bones; it is in our Congregational chromosomes; it is in our Evangelical and Reformed molecules. Therefore, we need to live it out with one another, because there is simply no other way to be the church together. We need to make a mental addendum to each one of our declarations, each one of our resolutions, each one of our biblical interpretations, each one of our passionate, private “it seems to me’s”: “*What if we are wrong?*”

So, then: can we work together on becoming a church of kindness and forbearance, a church with a foot in the past and an eye on the future, a church that confesses its faults aloud, a church of profound theological humility *and* profound theological passion? Are we ready to be a church where inclusivity is not just for those who are positioned to the left or right of center, a church where disagreement can happen without disagreeableness, a church where no one need fear vilification or scorn or marginalization because he or she speaks a discomfiting word?

The apostle Paul shows us a way. The tools are compassion and kindness, humility and patience. Those tools are in our hands now, yours and mine, passed down the many generations to us from Colossae and Constantinople, from Holland and Heidelberg. So let us be about our work together.

