

Recent Relationship with the United Church of Christ

As early as 1995, the lay leaders of All Souls and the pastoral staff were disheartened by the theological and ecclesiological implications of the restructuring of the national offices of the United Church of Christ. They soon began to voice their concerns.

On June 11, 1997, the Minister, in consultation with the Executive Board of All Souls and the Deacons, sent a letter to Paul Sherry, President of the UCC, challenging the restructuring process. That letter is published as part of the *Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* in the 7th volume of that series. Correspondence and attempts at communication between leaders of All Souls and the national headquarters and the Maine Conference of the UCC continued for some considerable time.

Delegates of our church voted against the restructuring of the United Church of Christ at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ held at Bowdoin College. Those delegates suffered no illusion that their vote could be binding for All Souls. Only the congregation can bind the church (with exceptions set out in the Bylaws), and only the congregation can authorize a change in church polity or doctrine. Our delegates are routinely instructed that their votes at Association or Conference meetings may reflect their own views or perhaps even what they believe the wider congregation might approve or disapprove, but their votes cannot bind the congregation in any way. They, like the Conference at large, may speak to the church, but not for the church.

Nevertheless, our delegates voted against the restructuring of the UCC because they believed that the restructuring placed them in the position of violating the Bylaws of All Souls. The vote on restructuring, in their view, belonged to the congregation, not to its Delegates. They believed that whether they voted “yea” or “nay”, the vote had no meaning for the local church or for the wider denomination. The exclusion of local churches from the decisions around national restructuring made the restructuring invalid.

In view of the fact that our congregation did not have an opportunity to vote with other local churches in local church meetings on this fundamental change in the polity and structure of the United Church of Christ, the Deacons, Executive Board, and Pastoral Staff of All Souls Congregational Church held then, and continues to hold, that the changes in the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, the structure, theology and polity that they represent are not binding on our congregation.

In particular the elected leadership of the church and the Pastoral Staff rejected the *Missio Dei* theology that lies behind the restructuring. They reject the idea of different “settings” of the church (national, conference, association and local “settings”). The church is local by nature. Everything is present in the local church necessary for the salvation of souls and the work to which Christ calls us. Other “settings” of the church are simply not true church and have no legitimacy or claim upon our—or any—local church as if they were a church body with authority over or coercive powers toward local churches.

Many National and Conference level church officers now claim for the Conferences and their instruments the powers of the episcopate—the office of bishop. They have set about creating an alien church and, some would argue, a new religion as well.

Associations, Conferences and National Offices of the church should be servants of local churches and should be restricted from forming agendas for local churches. The restructured UCC is a hierarchical church which claims self-government at each level while relying on local churches for virtually all of their funding. Local churches were not given a vote; ratification of the restructured United Church of Christ was controlled at the Conference level. It was ratified by delegates to Conference meetings, most of whom were not authorized to speak for their congregation or to bind their congregation to a new church hierarchy or structure.

Church leadership at All Souls held that the restructuring of the denomination by a vote of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ and a ratifying vote of delegates of local congregations to the various United Church of Christ Conferences (as opposed to our custom of a vote by each local church) violated our own Bylaws requirement and sought to make this church amenable to other ecclesiastical judicatories. In other words, an outside judicatory made the decision on behalf of local churches. That is wrong.

Still, leaders of the church have felt an obligation, based on history and some shared ministries (Pilgrim Lodge for instance) to continue to work within the free fellowship of churches of the United Church of Christ. None of the church's leadership nor the congregation itself has voted to reject obligations of "mutual council, amity and cooperation involved in the free fellowship" of the United Church of Christ as practiced in times prior to the restructuring. Where the United Church of Christ and our local church share common aims and work, All Souls continues to share in those aims and that work. In this way, we continue to abide by the Bylaws of our church and to approach the wider denomination in the same way in which we cooperated with it before restructuring.

[Since the original restructuring, there have been attempts to restructure yet again at the national level. The restructuring did not work, but the structure it created is so ineffective and divided that a consensus on a more effective structure cannot be reached. So, the national church is divided within itself and structured in a way that leaves it weak and at odds with itself. A very good scholarly work on the problems of the United Church of Christ, from an organizational psychology perspective, can be found at http://www.sba.oakland.edu/faculty/schwartz/ROE_UCC.htm This is an academic paper entitled "Religion Against Itself: The Revolt of the Elite of the United Church of Christ," by Howard S. Schwartz of Oakland University.]

There have been other issues as well. The Deacons, Executive Board, Pastoral Staff and others in the church expressed dismay at more recent programs of the United Church of Christ. The "Stillspeaking" marketing campaign is a very good example. [A Pastoral Letter on this subject is available elsewhere on this site. Readers are also urged to read "Religion Against Itself," a study from the viewpoint of organizational psychology by Professor Howard Schwartz; an interesting perspective on the self-destructive tendencies of the denomination.] This church remains devoted to broad ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. We believe that we should strive toward Christian unity and, wherever possible, toward mutual care and friendship with people of other faiths.

Church leaders were therefore dismayed when the national offices of the UCC sponsored television advertisements that demeaned other Christian churches by suggesting that they would not be welcoming (compared to the United Church of Christ churches) or that they would, based on ignorant narrowness, eject people from their congregations because of physical disabilities, race or other differences. This was an attack on people of faith in other Christian communions and made the United Church of Christ appear arrogant and even hateful toward other Christians. The advertising campaign also demeaned those people whom the UCC identified as “different” by making their differences issues of Christian disunity and suggesting to them that other Christian churches are prejudiced against them.

Our Church leadership was saddened by the UCC claim that our churches were the ones in which Christians did not have to “check their brains at the door”. This is insulting to thoughtful Christians of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, and, particularly, Evangelical traditions who were understood to be the particular targets of this prejudicial and divisive national and conference level campaign. Such notions of UCC superiority are demonstrably untrue, particularly in a denomination such as ours which is so theologically innocent.

We at All Souls affirm our connections with the ecumenical and broader Church of Jesus Christ, and continue to long for and to work toward our unity of faith and mission, learning from our sisters and brothers in many and varying traditions and denominations. We honor their learning and we honor their faithfulness as they have been given to see it. We also recoil from actions of the national church which try to drive a wedge between our Christian churches and Jews. Fortunately many within our denomination (including the Board of Pensions) have also resisted these national church policies.

Church leadership at All Souls has also chosen not to follow the United Church of Christ custom of adding adjectives to church names in order to prove that “our church is just a little bit better than your church”. We look to earlier Congregational practice, set out in the Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches that “Christian is a sufficient name for Christ’s followers” and that we accept as a guiding principle a commitment to “the union of all the followers of Christ, that they shall all be one even as Christ prayed”. In spite of the UCC motto, based on this prayer of our Lord Jesus, the behavior of the denomination often appears to be dogmatic, exclusionary and judgmental in ways that are not useful to the kind of ecumenical communion and respect for which we long and toward which we have sought to labor.

We accept “congregational” as a designation of our form of government and acknowledge the United Church of Christ as the denomination with which we choose to exercise free association in matters that coincide with our mission and ministries. Beyond that, we believe that All Souls is sufficient both for identity and as invitation.