

What It Means to be Part of the United Church of Christ

We recognize and honor four key principles:

1. The United Church of Christ is a non-dogmatic church

From the 2nd paragraph of the preamble to the UCC Constitution:

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.

2. The relationship between autonomy and covenant in the UCC

Paragraph 18 of the Constitution of the UCC:

The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal; to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it.

ARTICLE III COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, **to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission.** Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. **Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others.** In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.

3. The church is a theocracy, not a democracy

The United Church of Christ, formed June 25, 1957, by the union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States **in order to express more fully the oneness in Christ of the churches composing it, to make more effective their common witness in Him, and to serve His kingdom in the world**, hereby adopts this Constitution.

The Salem Covenant, 1629:

We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke in all his waies as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.

4. In the UCC, authority is shared among various levels or settings of ministry

If each local congregation is autonomous, then who or what has authority in the UCC?

As is the case with other Christian communions, members of the United Church of Christ are sometimes divided on issues that evoke passion and, frequently, anger. Disagreement is not unique to the UCC and, in fact, has been a part of the Christian community since the earliest days of the church. Sharp disagreement is not a sign that a church has become "dysfunctional." What matters is how we approach disagreement. The UCC's approach is unique in that disputes over theology or practice cannot be settled by a legislative body empowered to impose a solution that binds every local congregation. No such body exists in our church: General Synod, our biennial church wide meeting, speaks with a moral voice to the local congregation, but congregations have the freedom to disagree.

This means that "authority" can sometimes be elusive in the UCC. Through our covenants, we all acknowledge the authority of Christ and believe that the Bible is the authentic testimony to Christ, but what does this mean in practice? There is no magisterium, or centralized teaching authority, to settle arguments in the church. Authority is decentralized, and located in the local congregation. To be honest, we have to acknowledge that this tradition can be frustrating for many members of our congregations. In any case, the diffusion of authority in the UCC can also be liberating. It means we have to work harder at relationships between local congregations. We have to listen to each other, to scripture, and to the voices of our ancestors expressed in the tradition. We have to be passionate in our search for the truth, and cannot settle for the cliché that all will be well if we simply "agree to disagree."