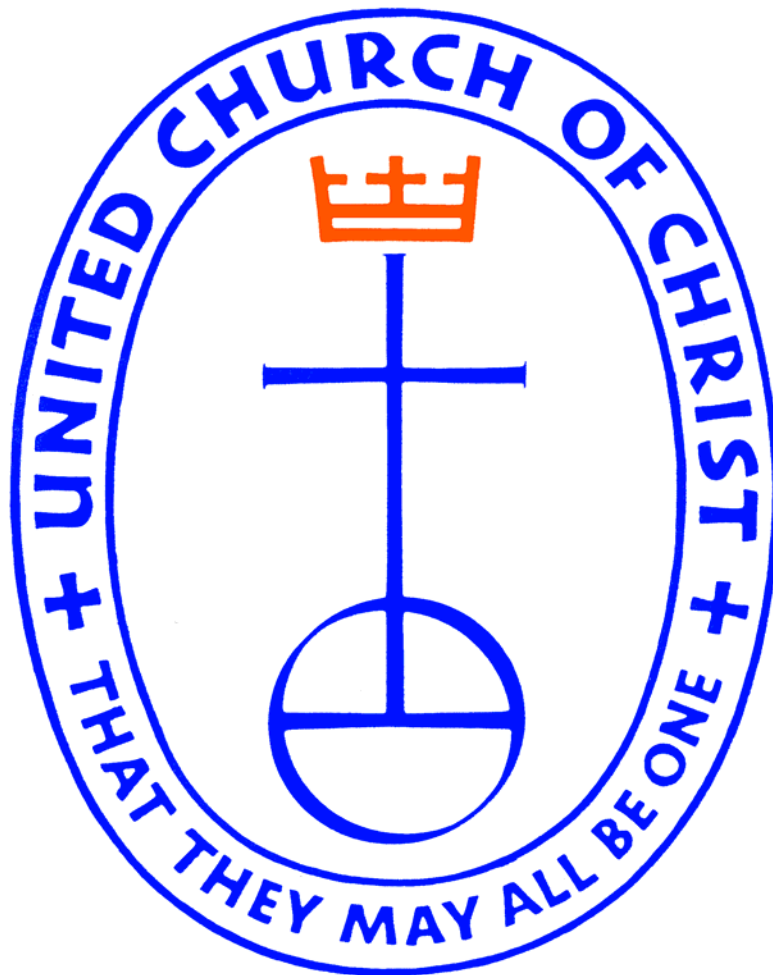


# The United Church of Christ



A Short Course on UCC History and Polity

# **THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

## **A short course on UCC History and Polity**

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE CONFERENCE MINISTER

Welcome. We are delighted that you are interested in learning more about the United Church of Christ, especially its rich history and the unique ways it is organized for the ministry to which God calls it. In one sense, the United Church of Christ is one of the “younger” denominations among the Christian Churches. It was born in 1957 through a union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. These two communions were themselves already the result of a spirit of uniting for common mission that had occurred in the 1930’s.

While it is a young denomination, the United Church of Christ shares common roots in the Pentecost experience where the disciples of Jesus began to recognize their identity and mission to be Christ’s Body, active in the world. More specifically, the United Church of Christ’s roots are in the Protest Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From the early reformed and protest movements of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin to Separatists and Puritans who came to these shores seeking freedom, to New England Congregationalists and Swiss and German Reformed immigrants who settled in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the German families who pushed the frontier along the Mississippi and Ohio valleys and the Christian groups in the south, the history of the United Church of Christ is rich indeed, and can be a source of pride and identity to our church today.

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has been shaped by a passion for union. The name chosen in 1957 was the “United Church of Christ”, but the real power behind its formation was that it would be both a “united and a uniting church.” The expectation was that God wasn’t done with this church yet, and that in both spirit and practical work with other denominations, the UCC should seek to continue to bring about further unity within Christ’s Church. This spirit is expressed in the United Church of Christ motto, from Jesus’ prayer to God “that they may all be one.”

This small booklet is certainly not a full history or complete guide to the United Church of Christ. It is, however, a wonderful place to begin; to inquire, be curious, and learn more about our church. The United Church of Christ has, throughout its history, suffered from something of an identity crisis, with people having difficulty pinning down its beliefs and its congregational organizational structure. This book can be a great starting point for you to begin to understand and, if you are a part of the United Church of Christ, to claim its rich identity and be drawn more deeply into its ministry.

I’m grateful to those who had the vision to put this booklet together, particularly my colleague on the Conference staff, the Rev. Gail O’Neal, Minister for Christian Nurture and Congregational Life and director of our Lay Academy. I wish each of you who read this book the grace to grow in faith and the blessing that comes from being drawn more deeply into the heritage and the present ministry of the United Church of Christ.



David S. Moyer  
Conference Minister

## INTRODUCTION

This resource is offered at a time when people of other faith traditions, people of little or no faith traditions, and even some long-time United Church of Christ members are asking questions about who we are as a denomination and why it matters. These are good questions and the work we can do together to explore the answers points to a covenantal model of Christian community.

We are pleased to offer this very short, simple four-session study on the United Church of Christ. You most likely will find many other resources and opportunities in the coming years to add to it. This is just a start. We offer it as a blessing to your ministry and on our life together as a UCC denomination.

This material is being made available in a variety of ways:

- As a printed resource – feel free to make copies as needed.
- On the Wisconsin Conference web site at [www.wcucc.org](http://www.wcucc.org). You may download and print copies as needed. You will need Adobe Acrobat to retain the format. You can download that for free at [www.download-it-free.com/acrobat](http://www.download-it-free.com/acrobat).
- On a CD so you can download and print or attach it to your own church's website.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS RESOURCE

1. You may choose to gather a small group of interested people from your church for four sessions of exploration.
  - This might be a new member orientation program.
  - Long-time members may appreciate a refresher of their own faith tradition.
  - A combined group of new and long-time members would be rich with questions and stories. Teaching is a great way to learn together.
2. Ask participants to find and review the different resources listed, then provide a summary of their findings. Discuss questions with the entire group.
3. Participants could download and provide copies for those without internet access.
4. Train a core team of members to lead this as an adult education class.
  - Meet on Sunday morning prior to or following worship.
  - Meet at a local bookstore, restaurant, coffee or wine shop.
  - Meet as a small group, rotating among homes for each of the four sessions.
  - Invite ecumenical neighbors who want to know more about the United Church of Christ.
  - Consider offering a UCC refresher course each year.
5. Offer a short-course to your confirmation class. Ask them to “report” to the congregation. They might write something for the bulletin or newsletter, verbally report during worship or create a visual presentation that reflects their images of the United Church of Christ.
6. Ask your creative educators to adapt this for children and youth in your congregation.
7. Post on your own website and invite people to gather for discussion.
8. Schedule a weekend retreat using the United Church of Christ as a focus.

## IDENTITY

### Who are we? What do we believe?

#### Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for life and for calling us together in faith. Guide our thinking, our listening and speaking today. Touch our hearts and minds with the gift of your grace. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Hymn\*** – one of these may be sung, recited together or read as a liturgy.

495 – Called as Partners in Christ's Service

308 – At the Font We Start Our Journey

395 – In Christ there is no East or West

313 – Like a Tree Beside the Waters

#### Introduction

Each of us is a unique individual, created by a loving God. Parents can readily tell you how two children from the same family can bear the same name but be completely different in character, size and hair color. So too can God create different churches within the same story of faith.

The United Church of Christ is a unique denomination with over 5,000 churches across the United States and just over one million members. We are a Trinitarian church meaning we believe in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We believe that through baptism, we belong, body and soul, to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We read and study the Bible to help us discern God's will for our lives and communities. You can explore more about our core beliefs at [www.stillspeaking.com/about/beliefs](http://www.stillspeaking.com/about/beliefs).

These may not sound very different from other Protestant denominations. Our uniqueness comes in how we apply our beliefs as Christians as we "make this faith our own" through worship, thought, expression and purity of heart.

The United Church of Christ has always had a mind and heart for justice for all. Long before it was popular, our denomination took stands for the rights of others: slaves, African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, people without a strong voice of their own; because we understand them to be our brothers and sisters in Christ. Often that puts us at odds with the dominant culture and that can cause quite a stir.

Although we are not a global denomination, the UCC denomination is home to Korean, Samoan, African American, Euro-American, and Hispanic congregations. Our denomination professes to be "multi-racial, multicultural, open and affirming, accessible to all, and a just peace church." The God is Still Speaking Initiative (never place a period where God has placed a comma) has said that "whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." The United Church of Christ endeavors above all to be a hospitable, welcoming denomination in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our life together is based on covenant, the covenant that God first forged with humankind which serves as a likeness for our actions towards one another. A covenant suggests a relationship of mutual accountability. We're more familiar with contracts which are based on an "if," "then," set of circumstances. Keeping covenant means we can look and act quite differently from one another, heartily disagreeing with one another on many things yet still be part of the Body of Christ. One of the first documents prepared for this new denomination was a *Book of Worship*. That implies that worship is central to our life together in Christ.

**Resources for Exploration\*\*** – go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) and [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)

- Statement of Faith – can also be found in *The New Century Hymnal*
- Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
- Annual Report of the United Church of Christ
- *What We Believe* – [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)
- Firsts – [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)
- *Who Do We Say We Are* – a short video at [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)
- Top 10 Reasons to Check us Out – [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)
- *UCC Book of Worship* – your pastor likely uses this resource

### Questions

1. What are the core beliefs of the United Church of Christ?
2. How do these beliefs compare with your understanding of the Christian faith?
3. How does a covenant differ from a contract?
4. What three words would you use to describe the United Church of Christ?
5. In what ways does your church reflect the diversity of the United Church of Christ?
6. What makes a church welcoming?

### Prayer

We give you thanks for calling the United Church of Christ to be a faithful witness in the world and giving us unique voices with which to speak. As we have been claimed, help us to claim your son, Jesus Christ as the shaper of our lives that we might live out this faith with great hope and love. We ask this in his name. Amen.

\*Hymn selections are from *The New Century Hymnal*

\*\*Most resources listed here are also available in inexpensive, printed form

## HISTORY

**Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?**

### Prayer

Faithful God, you are ageless in time yet as close as the breath we breathe. We give thanks for all who have gone before us, writing the chapters in the story of faith we now claim. Be with us now. Open our minds and hearts to you and one another. In the name of Jesus Christ who was, is and shall be. Amen.

**Hymn** – one of these may be sung, recited together or read as a liturgy.

400 – Christ is Made the Sure Foundation

386 – The Church's One Foundation

20 - God of Abraham and Sarah

110 – Now Bless the God of Israel

### Introduction

The denomination of the United Church of Christ has old, wise roots that extend hundreds of years, yet it often feels new and evolving, full of adolescence. How can that be?

We have a unique history; a story to tell and be part of just as other denominations have. The story was begun long ago by faithful people in other lands, people who loved God and wanted to serve the living Christ as they understood the Gospel instructed them to do. You have probably heard of them; they were the Pilgrims and the Puritans who came to this land in the 1600 and 1700's. Many of them immigrated to the United States seeking liberty to practice their faith. This early search for freedom continues to shape our beliefs, our actions and the structure of the United Church of Christ to the present day.

We are part of the reformed tradition. In 1517, Martin Luther tacked a list of 95 protests on the door of the local Roman Catholic Church. He felt the Church had made some bad choices and hoped that it could reorient itself in more faithful ways. Many circumstances led to the "protestant" tradition breaking away from the Roman Catholic tradition. Thus, our UCC roots date back to this early act of independence.

Following Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) brought the reformed movement to Switzerland. Settling in Zurich as a priest, Zwingli believed strongly in local governance under the Lordship of Christ and that Scripture, not a Pope, should be the binding authority for both state and church. His theology and the changes it wrought marked a visible breach with the theories and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

John Calvin (1509-64), a French theologian, followed Zwingli in Switzerland. Calvin was a scholar and author, favoring the organization of ideas and institutions. Beyond reforming the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin wanted to articulate a theology of God.

True wisdom comes through knowledge of God and one's self. Because humans are prone to sin, Scripture is the lens through which we can seek that true knowledge. God is good and the source of all goodness. We are saved by grace and obedience becomes our human response.

As you discovered in the first session on identity, bold moves are not uncommon in the United Church of Christ. We have a legacy of "firsts" which describe our very beginnings. Yet another milestone took place in more recent times. In 1931, the Congregational Church and the Christian Church merged to form the Congregational Christian Church. A few years later in 1934, the Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Reformed Church in the United States to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

In 1957, after many years of prayerful discussion, these young denominations of the Protestant faith joined together as a new denomination, the United Church of Christ. Given this short span of church history, it's no wonder we still experience growing pains as a denomination; we're still very young! In 2007, we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of the United Church of Christ.

**Resources for Exploration** – go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) and [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)

- *Amistad Rising* – a video about the slave rebellion of 1839
- *We Walk Together* – a video about the UCC
- *Hidden Histories* – two books to download or read online
- *History of the UCC* – a short course online, also in print form as *History and Program* – a booklet available from United Church Press

### Questions

1. From what stream did your church evolve?
2. What are the traces of that stream still at work in your church today?
3. What are some of the ways the UCC is unique historically?
4. Who are some of the major shapers of what would eventually be the United Church of Christ? What theology did they contribute?
5. What does the history of the UCC tell us about our present denomination?

### Prayer

Steadfast God, we thank you for our beginnings; the rich histories which created this denomination and the gifts of all those who write our current chapters. Guide our steps. May we remember that we belong to you in every age, time and place. And just as we have come from somewhere, direct our steps towards the future, that we may too be faithful and fruitful to your realm. We boldly ask this in the name of our brother, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## POLITY

### How does The United Church of Christ work?

#### Prayer

Creating God, you breathed the breath of life and set the world in motion, creating order out of chaos. We thank you for the gift of one another and this faith in Jesus Christ which binds us together. Guide us as we step out in faith. In the name of the one who walks with us always. Amen.

**Hymn-** one of these may be sung, recited together or read as a liturgy.

393 – Blessed Be the Tie that Binds

324 – Baptized into Your Name Most Holy

49 – Ask Me What Great Thing I Know

#### Introduction

True to its independent beginnings, the United Church of Christ is structured a bit differently from other denominations. What binds us together as a denomination is Jesus Christ as head of the church, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” We exist as a denomination in covenant with God and with one another as individual congregations. The UCC does not have a hierarchical authority of governance although each local congregation belongs to wider and wider circles of covenantal relationship.

The primary unit of authority resides in the local congregation. Each church calls its own leadership, adopts its own constitution, governs itself independently and sets its own course for the future. That brings each church a great freedom and also a great responsibility to be part of the covenant of discipleship we share.

Just as individual Christians need the fellowship of community to be faithful, local congregations are often gathered into a larger circle called an Association pastored by an Association Minister. An Association provides resources for churches to search and call pastors and leaders, programs to enrich and safeguard congregational life and the means for churches to network with one another, share resources, study, learn and work with one another. Together we can accomplish more of God’s mission.

Associations are often part of a still wider circle called the Conference staffed by Conference Ministers. Conferences comprise larger geographical areas and can also provide a wider range of services and programs. Associations and Conferences are always directed by the needs of the local congregations which they serve. They also draw local churches into wider circles of mission and ministry, where hearts, hands and dollars make a deeper impact. It is often through these wider circles that the United Church of Christ has a global awareness. Associations and Conferences have yearly meetings to conduct business and build fellowship.

The widest circle of covenant is the national body of the United Church of Christ currently at home in the Church House in Cleveland, Ohio. Using funds given by local

congregations through Our Church's Wider Mission, churches are able to participate in global and national mission projects, disaster relief programs, pension and group insurance programs, worship and education resources, grants for church development and growth, all of which bring staff and resources back to the local church in many ways.

The UCC has a Collegium of officers; a circle of leadership with five people who serve as leaders in covenant with one another and all the local churches. These include a General Minister, Associate General Minister, and Executive Ministers for Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries.

General Synod, the gathering of the national church, meets every two years at a different location to conduct the business of the United Church of Christ. Delegates from local congregations bring representation from each Conference and Association to the plenary sessions. The General Synod always speaks "to" the local congregation, not "for" it, leaving each local congregation to determine its own conscience of thought. Items of business are brought by congregations before the General Synod for the good of the denomination.

**Resources for Exploration** - go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) and [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com)

- *History and Program* – a booklet available from United Church Press
- Preamble, Constitution and Bylaws of The United Church of Christ
- Logo Design of The United Church of Christ
- *Where All Are Welcome* – short video available on the UCC web site
- Our Church's Wider Ministry
- United Church of Christ Desk Calendar

### Questions

1. What other organizations do you know are governed by a covenantal structure?
2. What might be the benefits of such a structure?
3. What might be the difficulties of such a structure?
4. Who are the leaders of your Association and Conference?
5. What resources have been made available to you from these wider circles?

### Prayer

Loving God, we give thanks for all the ways you gather us in Christian community, giving shape, sustenance and purpose to our life together. We pray for the leadership of our local congregation and the ever widening circles which comprise The United Church of Christ. Guide all our steps that our witness might be a true reflection of your will and way for this world. In the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## ISSUES

Why do we care? What do we care about?

### Prayer

O God of Mercy, we give thanks for all the ways you reach out to those who need you. You call us together as the Church to be your witness, to speak a word of love and justice in a world broken by sin. We confess we have not always lived according to what you desire. We ask your forgiveness for what we have done and left undone. Lift our lives beyond what is to what is possible. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Hymn-** one of these may be sung, recited together or read as a liturgy.

436 – God of Grace and God of Glory

448 – Take My Life and Let It Be

539 – Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant

558 – O How Glorious, Full of Wonder

575 – O for a World

### Introduction

Just as other denominations, the United Church of Christ has a particular lens through which we read scriptures; a lens of justice in our case. We take to heart the teachings of Jesus Christ about reaching out to people who have been marginalized in society by virtue of discrimination in all its forms. We believe the Gospel compels us to extend the hand of Christian hospitality in the Great Commandment, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Each generation of Christians is challenged to discern “who is my neighbor” as they attempt to draw Christ’s circle wider.

Our heritage has been one of stepping out in faith and witness to advocate for people and policies. This has often seemed radical and contrary to current popular opinion.

It was early Congregationalists who befriended and defended Mendi slaves from the Amistad schooner in their quest to be free to return home in 1839; twenty five years before the United States fought the Civil War to end slavery. You might guess that many people who supported slavery were offended by these efforts and based their justification on scripture.

Evangelicals were among the first to establish numerous schools, orphanages, hospitals and churches in the 1800’s to assist the growing influx of German immigrants arriving in the United States. Their schools were the forerunners of the American public school system. Their missionary zeal led to the deaconess hospital movement.

This road of social justice hasn’t been easy to follow; rather a challenge of faith and witness to the world and often one another. Sometimes our covenantal bonds feel stretched to the breaking point!

Our United Church of Christ logo is encircled by the words, “that they may all be one” reflecting Jesus words from John 17:21, if not in mind; then in Spirit. Only through the abiding love of Jesus Christ can we begin to ask the questions:

- Who is our neighbor?
- What does our neighbor need?”
- Can we be part of meeting that need?

### **Resources for Exploration**

- *UCC Calendar of Prayer*
- *Public Policy Briefing Book* – from Justice and Witness Ministries
- *Amistad Rising*– a video about the slave rebellion of 1839
- Our Church’s Wider Mission
- Global Partnerships

### **Questions**

1. What does your church do to reflect God’s mission to the world?
2. What are some of the greatest needs in your area that are yet unmet?
3. What stories in the past year have pulled at your heart and purse strings?
4. What is the greatest issue we face as The United Church of Christ in today’s world?

### **Prayer**

O God, in your great wisdom, you see the needs of your people. You desire food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, a word of compassion for those who grieve, a word of peace for all who suffer violence, a hope for the future for all who stumble on life’s way; an end to that which destroys the body and devastates the soul. Help us to see through your eyes, with your compassion and your desire for all of creation. Strengthen our souls for the road which lies ahead. In the name of the One who became a servant in service to others. Amen.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESOURCES

### At [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org):

- Statement of Faith – can also be found in *The New Century Hymnal*
- Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
- Annual Report of the United Church of Christ
- *Who Do We Say We Are* – a short video
- *We Walk Together* – a video about the UCC
- *Hidden Histories* – two books to download or read online
- *History of the UCC* – a short course online, also in print form as *History and Program* – a booklet available from United Church Press
- Preamble, Constitution and Bylaws of The United Church of Christ
- Logo Design of The United Church of Christ
- *Where All Are Welcome* – short video

### At [www.stillspeaking.com](http://www.stillspeaking.com):

- What We Believe
- Firsts
- Top 10 Reasons to Check us Out

### From United Church Press:

- *UCC Book of Worship*
- *Amistad Rising* – a video about the slave rebellion of 1839
- *History and Program*
- Our Church's Wider Ministry brochure
- United Church of Christ Desk Calendar
- *UCC Calendar of Prayer*
- *Public Policy Briefing Book* – from Justice and Witness Ministries
- Global Partnerships
- *Living Theological Heritage* – a 7 book set
- UCC Desk Calendar

**Books for More Information**

- *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay on the History of American Christianity* by Louis H. Gunnemann (United Church Press, 1977)
- *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, Edited by Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (United Church Press, 1990)
- *Confessing Our Faith: An Interpretation of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ* by Roger L. Shinn (Pilgrim Press, 1990)
- *A History of the Christian Church* by Walker, Norris, Lotz and Handy (Scribner and Sons, New York, 1985)
- *The Evolution of a UCC Style* by Randi Jones Walker (United Church Press, 2005)

**NOTES AND QUESTIONS**

