

United and Uniting
John 17:20

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Christ

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Did you know that I actually attended two seminaries? I graduated from Boston University School of Theology, as I am sure you know. But my first seminary courses were from Wake Forest Divinity School in North Carolina. Dave and I were living in rural southwestern Virginia at the time, and there were no seminaries near us. Dave, bless him, was doing a national job search to find a position that was near a seminary so that I could begin my studies. While we waited, I took a few courses at Wake Forest, which was two and a half hours away, over a beautiful mountain pass. The gorgeous scenery on that drive kept me company on the long commute.

One of my favorite courses that year was called Multicultural Contexts for Ministry. It focused on urban ministries, and our course culminated with a trip to New York City. We stayed in an Episcopal seminary in Chelsea and made day trips out to ministry sites – to Ground Zero, where Episcopal seminarians had prayed around the clock as bodies from the Twin Towers were recovered; the grand and historic Trinity Episcopal Church near Wall Street; a Salvation Army program in the Bowery; a church's meal program that referred to clients as "guests" and served them with the same nice plates and flatware that the church members used; a scrappy little storefront church in Hell's Kitchen that served mostly the gay and transgender

community; and finally, we went to Riverside Church, that great cathedral built and endowed by the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller.

Here we were, this small group of students from rural North Carolina and Virginia, scared and excited to be in New York City at all, overwhelmed by the huge diversity of ministries we visited, and sitting at last in a quiet evening service led by none other than the iconic Rev. James Forbes, the first African American pastor to lead that august church. It was a mind-blowing week for someone like me, who had not ever considered living in a big city, let alone doing ministry there.

My most vivid memory from that whole week occurred after the service at Riverside Church. Our class was invited back to a conference room to meet with some of the Trustees, to learn how a church like that is financed and staffed and administered. Then, the Trustees left, and quietly, Rev. Forbes entered the room and sat with us to answer our questions. One of the students said, "Rev. Forbes, your parishioners are white and black and Latino and Asian. What advice would you give to white churches about how to be welcoming to others?"

A warm smile spread over Rev. Forbes's face. He said, "I think of all the young couples I have married over the years. I always have them in for several sessions of premarital counseling, and one of the things we talk about is moving in together. I listen very carefully. Sometimes the groom will

turn to the bride and say, 'Honey, I love you so much. You know you are welcome in my house. It's plenty big, and it's already set up... Maybe we can put your furniture in the rec room downstairs. There's probably room for it there.'" Rev. Forbes said, "That marriage is in trouble before it begins. If you are going to come together, no one gets to go on just as they were before. The house has to belong to both of you, and everyone's furniture needs to be on the main floor of the house."

What does it take to unite with someone who is different from you?

Apparently, you can't just invite them into your lovely home and tell them to put their furniture in the basement. But how much of your own furniture – your own self – do you have to give up to enter into a true marriage? And why would you do that, anyway? What kind of love moves us out of our own lives into a shared life with another? That's a personal, individual question, of course, but it is also a question for churches, and for whole denominations. How do we go from being separated from one another, isolated, "us" and "them," to being a new, united whole, where everyone is on the inside, everyone is "us"?

Today, we are considering the history of the **United** Church of Christ, a denomination founded in 1957 in the marriage of churches from four strands of the Christian faith. Four strands. We are of the Congregational tradition, descended from Pilgrims and Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, fiercely protective of our congregational autonomy. Congregational churches

were mostly in New England. The second strand was a relatively small group of "Christian Churches" that emerged around 1800 in reaction to the theological and organizational rigidity of some other denominations. The Christian Churches were scattered through the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic states. These two strands, the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches joined together in 1937 and became the "Congregational Christian" Churches, similar in theology to one another and still fiercely protective of congregational autonomy.

Strand three was the Reformed Church in the United States, which traced its beginnings to congregations of German settlers in Pennsylvania, beginning about 1725. They were from the Calvinist strain of the Reformed tradition. Strand four was the Evangelical Synod of North America, founded in 1841, which was more Lutheran in its theology. These two strands, the Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod, joined together in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Their governance was more denominational, with no focus at all on congregational autonomy. They tend to accord very high status to their pastors. Their theology is reminiscent of the Lutheran church from which many of these churches descended. The Evangelical and Reformed Church was found mostly in Pennsylvania and the Midwest.

So, by 1937 there were two denominations instead of four: the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Talks to merge these two new denominations into one larger body began almost immediately, and they did not go well. There was a chicken-and-egg disagreement. Should the decision be made first for union, with decisions on structure and governance to follow? Or should the structure and governance of the new denomination be determined first, before the vote for union was held, so that people would know more about what sort of united church they were voting for?

This was a crucial question, akin to deciding whose furniture stays and whose furniture goes. Congregationalists were not willing to sign up for any new union that would deprive them of local church autonomy. The Evangelical and Reformed denomination was ready to make the decision at a denominational level, and they couldn't understand how the Congregational Christians could let individual congregations decide whether to go along with the merger or not.

In the end, we decided to keep some of everyone's furniture in our new house. The UCC Constitution states that "the basic unit of life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church," and it affirms that "the autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action." On the other hand, we live and work and worship in covenant with the other settings of the UCC. As the UCC Constitution says, "Actions, decisions, or advice emanating from the General Synod, a Conference, or an Association should be held in the highest regard by every

Local Church.” They can’t tell us what to do, but we have to respect what they say. Sort of like a marriage. We get to keep some of our furniture, and we have to respect and honor the furniture our spouse brings with them. No one’s stuff is relegated to the basement.

Why would we go through all this effort? Why did we not simply remain Congregational churches? Or Congregational Christian churches? Why try to figure out how to make a new life with a group of believers whose traditions were more denominational, whose theology was more Lutheran, who live and worship mostly in the Midwest? Why did we do this?

The answer is purely theological. It is based on Jesus’ final prayer for his disciples and for all of us who would believe in him. He prayed “that they may all be one.” You can see it right there on the UCC crest on the front of your bulletin. “That they may all be one.” That was Jesus’ dying wish for us, that we wouldn’t all go off into our own corners, our own houses, and sit comfortably in our own furniture. He prayed that we would come together, that we would be united with one another in his name. That we would be one, united Body of Christ.

And so, we united, and we continue to seek other avenues to unite further with other groups of believers. Right now, there is an open search-and-call process between the UCC and the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Canada. Pastors from these denominations may serve churches of the

others without much fanfare at all. And we are at different stages of talks in opening ourselves to other denominations, as well. The United Church of Christ is a United and Uniting church, because that was Jesus' dying prayer for us, a prayer that we do our best to live into every day.

"Uniting" goes beyond than "welcoming." Uniting requires each person to break open, break out of the shell that isolates them from the other, to honor what is unique and special in the other, to open themselves to new possibilities and new growth.

Thanks be to God for the courage of our founders, from four strands of the Christian tradition, to be loosen their grasp on their own traditions and so that they could build a new and larger home with other believers. May we have that courage as well, to break open our own hearts and our own church so that we are truly open to all of God's children.

Amen