



## United Church of Christ / Congregationalism

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The United Church of Christ is an American Protestant denomination formed in 1957 as a result of a merger of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches, and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Its history, social policies, and ecumenicalism directly reflect the evolution of the church/state relationship and the involvement of the church in social progress.

The merger negotiations, which began in 1942, were beset at one point by litigation in secular courts, spurred by concern of some Congregationalists over what they feared would be loss of congregational autonomy. The formal name, "United Church of Christ" (not preceded by "the") was chosen in 1943 in a deliberate attempt to disavow any claims to exclusivity. The 1957 Constitution sets forth the church's principles of faith, but guarantees the autonomy of local congregations; and many UCC churches retain the word "Congregational" in their names.

United Churchmen and United Churchwomen, as they refer to themselves, maintain beliefs in the divinity of Jesus and the authority of his teachings, yet approach scripture in a spirit of inquiry rather than literalism. In their social, political, and international concerns most UCC congregations have taken positions toward the liberal side of the Protestant spectrum.

The 1957 merger is one example of the church's ecumenical orientation and part of a succession of efforts toward unity among several historically related Christian denominations. There have been parallel developments in Britain and Canada. A 1925 merger of Methodists, Congregationalists, and a substantial percentage of Presbyterians resulted in the United Church of Canada. In 1972 most British Congregationalists and Presbyterians merged to form the United Reform Church there.

### **UCC's Antecedents**

The Evangelical and Reformed Church was itself a result of a previous merger. The Evangelical branch derived directly from the Lutheran Reformation and was established in the Mississippi valley by German and Swiss missionary societies. The Reformed Church was brought to the mid-Atlantic States by German and Swiss settlers in the eighteenth century, and retained German as its language until the early 1900s.

Both traditions valued the freedom of religious expression, the authority of Jesus's teachings as revealed in scripture (over that of clerical authority), and both derived vitality from their situation within frontier society. Uneasy over the fragmentation of Protestantism, the two denominations established their union in 1934.

Congregationalism was one of the outcomes of dissenting theologies arising in England in the sixteenth century. It stemmed from the Separatists, a movement that favored breaking away from the Church of England rather than reforming it. Its presence in England was alternately tolerated or threatened, depending on who ruled from the throne. During one period of persecution, one group--the Mayflower



A photograph of the First Congregational Church of Long Beach, California by Kaihsu Tai. The church is an open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ.

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Separatists--took refuge in Holland and then sailed to America to found the colony at Plymouth.

In America, Congregationalism was especially strong in New England. Historically, it is associated with those known today as Pilgrims or Puritans (organizers of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies), and it influenced the nature of governance of those colonies.

In England, the denomination became associated with educational reform, missionary work, and ecumenical activities. American Congregationalists founded institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Williams, Amherst, and Oberlin, but administered them free from sectarianism.

Methodism in England and Unitarianism in the United States both exerted theological influences as well as competition for membership. Congregationalism grew increasingly liberal in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

### **Glbtc Concerns**

Glbtc-inclusiveness in the United Church of Christ dates to the early 1970s, when pioneering local congregations began establishing such policies. The UCC General Synod adopted an "Open and Affirming" (ONA) resolution in 1985, encouraging its bodies to welcome persons of all sexual orientations into full life and ministry of the church. This policy was later amended to include all gender identities.

In 1987, the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns established the ONA program to provide leadership and resources for local congregations. After a period of study, discussion, prayer, and reflection, a congregation adopts an "open and affirming" statement and requests to be included in the Coalition's public listing of ONA congregations. At the close of 2003, the list included more than 400 churches.

Among the Coalition's programs are the People of Color Institute to address concerns of glbtc people of color; a Youth and Young Adult Program concerned with teen suicide and providing safe spaces for youth; and BAMN! ("By Any Means, Necessary!"), a network of bisexual clergy and lay members.

The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries publishes a curriculum for AIDS prevention. The United Church of Christ has been ordaining openly gay clergy since 1972. Its ongoing efforts in this area are designed to make the church, as a whole, "a place of extravagant welcome."

The outreach effort of the United Church has included aggressive advertising campaigns stressing the Church's commitment to inclusivity. The campaigns have been especially noteworthy at a time when many other denominations have been seen as demonizing glbtc people, attacking gay rights, or distancing themselves from controversial issues.

Making good on its pledge of inclusivity, the Church's General Synod in 2005 endorsed marriage equality, becoming one of the first mainline denominations in the United States to go on record in favor of same-sex marriage.

In response to the United Church's endorsement of same-sex marriage, several congregations voted to disaffiliate. But the decision also attracted new members, including a predominantly gay "mega-church."

In 2006, Dallas's Cathedral of Hope, formally affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and perhaps the world's largest predominantly glbtc congregation, voted to join the United Church. It became the denomination's third largest congregation and by far the largest in the South Central region.

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