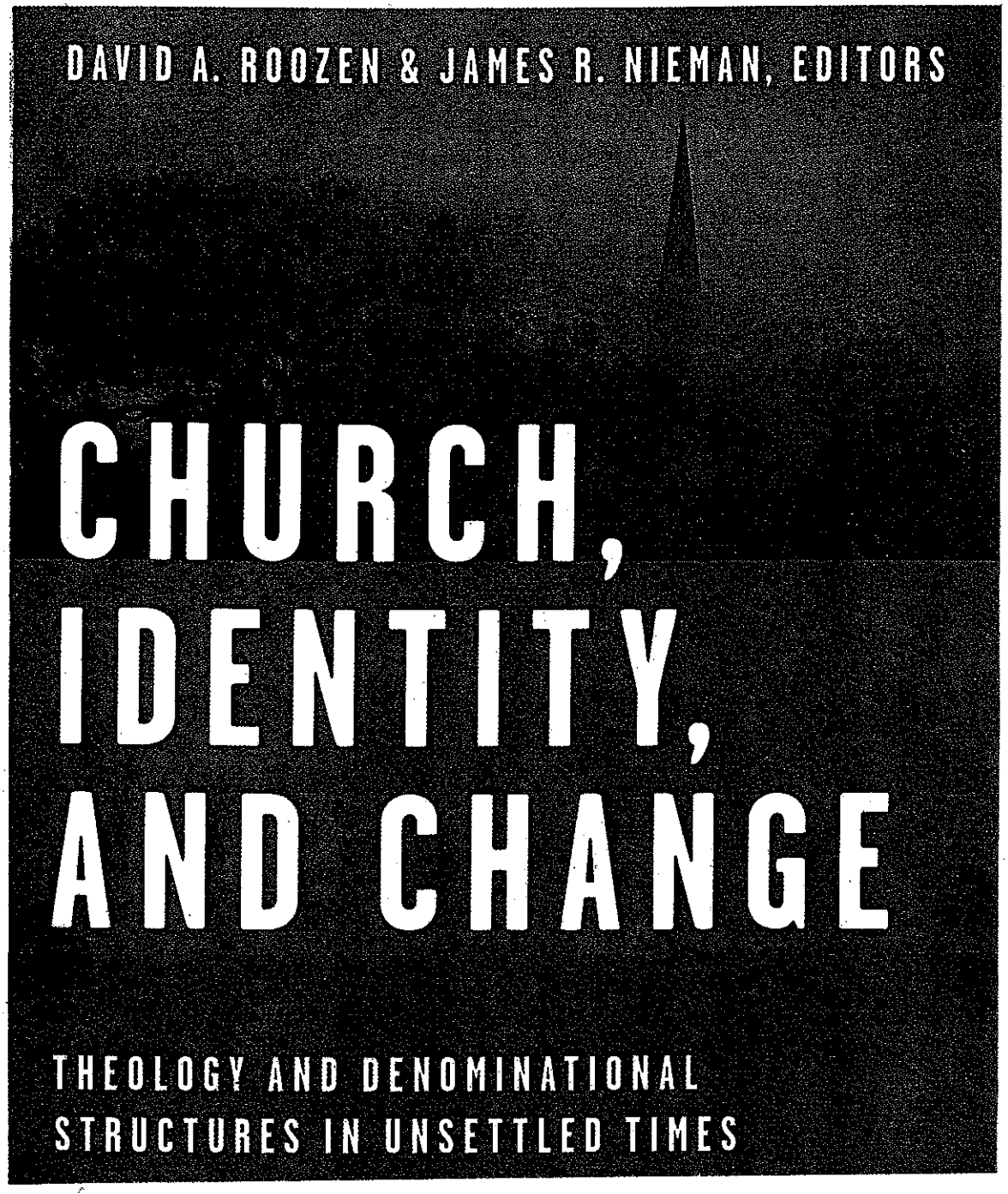

The United Church of Christ: Redefining Unity in Christ as Unity in Diversity

Barbara Brown Zikmund

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times

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The Christian church has struggled with questions of diversity and unity for over two thousand years. In the first century questions revolved around how Christian converts from outside the Jewish community could become part of the church. After considerable debate, Christian leaders decided that anyone could become a Christian without converting to Judaism first. God, concluded the first-century church, was in Christ reconciling the *world.*

As Christian history unfolded, however, the church was often more preoccupied with preserving its orthodoxy than with reconciling the world. Creeds and doctrines developed to ensure that no error or heresy from secular philosophies or other religions distorted or diluted the gospel. Indeed, early Christianity was extremely skeptical about diversity and feared syncretism, the blending of religious ideas. Yet, even as the church sought to define and protect the purity of Christianity, key Greco-Roman ideas intruded into and reshaped its Hebraic origins. From its very beginnings, Christianity has been a mixture of eternal truths and diverse cultural values and contexts.

Early Christian history is filled with efforts to keep Christianity pure. In the fourth century the Greek churches and the Middle Eastern churches divided over how Christians understood the relationship of Jesus to God in what historians came to call the "Arian controversy." In the eleventh century the Greek and the Roman churches divided over questions of ecclesiastical authority, icons, and interpretations of the Holy Spirit. In the sixteenth century the Western Roman Catholic Church further divided over ecclesiastical corruption and the role of Scripture, resulting in various Protestant denominations. By the twentieth century the Christian church had fragmented into hundreds of groups, each trying to be faithful to God by promoting its particular understanding of the gospel in faith and practice. Instead of embodying Christian

unity in a world of diversity and pluralism, the Christian church had become a prime illustration of the ways in which diversity and pluralism erode human community.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the economically dominant cultures and peoples in the Northern Hemisphere sought to share their worldview (or impose their ideas on everyone else, depending upon one's perspective), the proliferation of Christian churches and denominations began to disturb many Christians. Jesus had promised unity, yet his church was shamefully divided. For various theological, social, cultural, and historical reasons, Christians began to look for ways to reclaim their lost commonalities and overcome the fragmentation of the "body of Christ." The search for Christian unity generated an "ecumenical movement" which encouraged mergers and reunions of related ecclesiastical bodies throughout the early part of the twentieth century.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is rooted in this history. It brings together a wide variety of traditions with deep commitments to Christian unity. Its particular story begins in the sixteenth-century European Reformation. By 1550 some of the Reformed followers of Zwingli and Calvin had found each other in the Swiss Rhineland and embraced a generous interpretation of their Reformed faith in the Heidelberg Catechism. In the eighteenth century descendants of these German Reformed people settled in the American colonies. There they further enriched their confessional life and nurtured a lively appreciation for liturgical tradition and pre-Reformation traditions.

A bit later, other Lutheran and Reformed groups became involved in a grassroots spiritual movement that focused upon personal faith and practice. Known as Pietism, it inspired Lutheran and Reformed believers to support mission work among all Germans settling on the American frontier.

Finally, by the mid–nineteenth century various new groups of German immigrants brought a different kind of German church experience to America. These newcomers, mostly from northern Europe, had overcome many of the historic animosities between Lutheran and Reformed Protestants in a Prussian "unionist" movement. They arrived in America with a keen appreciation for the shared legacies of Lutheran and Reformed faith and practice. They called themselves German Evangelicals and nourished a practical irenic piety with special sensitivity to wider social movements.

By the early twentieth century these two groups of German immigrants, rooted in German church history and American frontier patterns, embraced a growing ecumenical spirit. In 1934 the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America came together to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R).

The UCC also draws upon radical reform movements within English church history. In seventeenth-century England, Puritans and Separatists did not believe that Anglican reforms of Roman Catholicism went far enough. Deeply influenced by the Reformed theology of Calvin, some English radicals fled to the Netherlands and eventually to America — others migrated directly to establish a Puritan commonwealth in New England. In their zeal for religious freedom they developed an ecclesiology based on the centrality of the local congregation. Although in practice early Congregationalism could be extremely self-serving and unyielding, Congregationalism eventually developed important principles for dealing with religious change and diversity. By the 1930s the Congregationalists merged with a very small denomination known as the "Christians."

The Christians resisted being known as a denomination. They were the product of anti-ecclesiastical and antidenominational thinking which flourished during the American revolutionary period. As American patriots, the Christians believed they were part of a new democratic experiment in politics and religion. They were impatient with old religious ideas and practices, rejecting all schools of thought and traditional denominational or party labels. They were free spirits inspired by frontier revivals and very suspicious of hierarchy and confessions. "Just call us 'Christians,'" they insisted.

For over one hundred years the Christians went their separate way. However, by the early twentieth century they too began to worry about the fragmentation of the Christian church. They discovered that they had a great deal in common with the Congregationalists, cultivating an understanding of the church as a voluntary association of disciples gathered and bound together through covenants. In the 1930s they merged with the Congregationalists to create the National Council of Congregational Christian Churches (CC). Although many local congregations were only vaguely aware of this alliance, the collaborative educational and mission work of the Congregational Christian Churches was impressive.

The E&R and CC came into being in the early twentieth century, but their antecedent groups had all participated in the global mission movements of the nineteenth century. They wondered out loud how the spectacle of a divided church could give hope to a divided world. They were influenced by historical-critical biblical scholarship which invited them to read and interpret Scripture in dynamic ways. They were deeply committed to overcoming the internal divisions created by the historical circumstances of class, race, language, and culture within their churches and in twentieth-century society. And they participated in some of the early ecumenical meetings which led to the formation of the Federal Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the Na-

tional Council of Churches. Through ecumenical fellowship experienced in worship and service, the E&R and CC denominations discovered that they had more in common than they imagined.

Louis Gunnemann, longtime historian of the formation of the UCC, points out that in the premerger conversations there was a theological assumption that "Christ's will and the believer's duty" coalesced in the act of church union, leading to the "subordination of doctrinal differences to the goal of Christian unity."[1] As a consequence, when the UCC was formed in 1957, two things happened. The new UCC neglected and even avoided formal theological or ecclesiological questions about its identity as a church; and second, the UCC embraced social activism without developing a "clearly articulated theological grounding." Leaders and members of the new UCC consistently failed "to articulate the faith foundations, theologically identified, of the social responsibility they so devotedly espoused." In the end, according to Gunnemann, the new UCC came of age in the social ferment of the sixties and was overwhelmed with tasks, coming up short on the "vision, time and energy for sustained theological reflection."[2]

Ironically, although the subordination of doctrinal differences to the goal of Christian unity was later recognized and criticized, at the time it was celebrated as a turning point in American Protestantism and in the ecumenical movement. People rejoiced that two very different church traditions had been able to consummate union precisely because they deliberately downplayed doctrinal concerns (or, as Shinn argues in his following theological essay, sought to embody a "calculated ambiguity"). They also downplayed differences in polity and structure, a fact that years later led increasing numbers to think that the UCC had, right from its inception, a dangerous "ecclesiological deficit."

From the standpoint of history there are many reasons that the leaders of the CC and E&R stepped into the unknown to create the UCC. The Congregationalists drew upon their longtime sense of civic responsibility and commitment to local participatory decision making unencumbered by hierarchy. They honestly believed that God was creating a new thing and that their involvement in a new united church was consistent with their Congregational principles. The Christians reaffirmed their judgment that denominational factions were unnecessary and unity a given. The German Reformed tradition had developed a new appreciation for the pre-Reformation church and the shared witness of all Christians, based on the work of key nineteenth-century Reformed thinkers

1. Louis H. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), pp. 26-27.

2. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting*, pp. 27-28.

at their Mercersburg Seminary in Franklin County, Pennsylvania (subsequently moving to Lancaster, Pennsylvania). And the German Evangelicals reclaimed their practical piety which had always insisted "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity." Buoyed by the earlier successful mergers of the 1930s which created the CC and E&R denominations, inspired by a growing global ecumenical enthusiasm, chastened by two world wars, and bound together through new biblical scholarship and extraordinary theological leaders, these four traditions took the risk. Jesus prayed for his disciples in the Gospel of John, "that they might all be one," and for a time in the 1950s national leaders rooted in Congregational, Christian, German Reformed, and German Evangelical histories believed that God was calling them into a new form of church.

As with most human organizations, however, the new grew out of the old. The merger was a blend of two very different patterns of church order. On the one hand the E&R Church had a presbyterial or representational structure. Things were centralized and decisions made by the national general synod, or other national offices were binding on local congregations. Budgets were dependent upon a modest but regular flow of local congregational support.

On the other hand the CC churches had a decentralized past. Congregationalism did not even have a national structure until the mid–nineteenth century, over two hundred years after its arrival in New England. Instead of a national organization, Congregational Christian mission outreach was fueled by local initiatives in partnership with a variety of special interest national boards and affinity groups loosely connected to the National Council — a board for church extension, a board for homeland mission, a board for Christian education, etc. By the 1960s these national "boards" formed by the Congregational Christian churches had merged and pooled their rather sizable endowments. And after 1957, when the national CC boards merged with parallel entities in the E&R Church to create the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and the United Church Board for World Ministries, they were careful to protect their independence. In 1961 the new UCC constitution stated that the homeland and world mission boards were "recognized instrumentalities" of the United Church of Christ. Recognized instrumentalities agreed to serve as national agencies of the new denomination, but they were not subject to the direction of the general synod. All other entities, created and funded by the general synod through voluntary contributions flowing from local congregations, were known as "established instrumentalities."

This arrangement was a creative compromise. The two "Big Boards" were zealous to protect their resources. New ideas were often layered on to old assumptions and limited by old habits. At the same time, the autonomy of the Big

Boards with their sizable endowments allowed them to do very creative and prophetic things unencumbered by the need for national votes or synod budgets. It is important to note that much of the vitality of the UCC during the 1960s and 1970s flows out of this unconventional denominational structure.

The United Church of Christ was created in 1957, but in retrospect many feel it is more accurate to say that "the merger" was voted on in 1957, but the theological and structural integration was still not fully consummated. Forty-plus years later, an increasingly unequal resource base among national instrumentalities stimulated the denomination to correct the imbalance. Membership losses and declining revenues from local congregations had caused general synod budgets to shrink, while prudent investing had given the Big Boards more and more financial power. In one sense, it is possible to say that the 2000 restructuring of the UCC described in the Barnam/Chaves sociological case study and the Shinn theological essay is an attempt to finally complete the merger.

Restructuring, however, has also caused the UCC to recast its understanding of its ecumenical vocation. During the ten-year process leading up to the 2000 constitution, UCC leaders examined the so-called ecclesiological deficit. Rather than going back to a classic ecclesiology (thinking about the church), they chose to focus upon missiology (thinking about the church as an agent for God's mission in the world).

Drawing upon the traditions which flow into the UCC from its antecedent denominations, and recognizing its commitment to diversity since 1957, this most recent restructuring is motivated by at least two agendas, as shown by the following case study and theological essay. First, it seeks to change the relationships between the organizational units of the church so that they reflect a more balanced and just distribution of money and power. This is done so that the church can be more effective as God's mission. And second, it presses the UCC to understand its long-standing ecumenical calling in some new ways. The history of the UCC shows that there have always been remarkable diversity and openness in its various expressions. Although there have been times when an unexamined "historical orthodoxy" has limited its horizons, there have also been times of remarkable prophetic solidarity with diverse peoples and traditions.

Historians of the ecumenical movement like to distinguish between those Christians that focus upon unity issues related to faith and order and those who define and explore unity through shared life and work. The UCC, as it moves into the next stage of its life, seems to be suggesting a third (different) vision of Christian unity, *one rooted in who makes up the church, not in what it confesses or even what it does.* As the case study and theological essay note, when contempo-

rary UCC leaders are asked about the ecumenical vocation of the UCC, more and more of them find themselves defining ecumenicity in terms of the union of diverse persons.

This understanding of ecumenicity in terms of diversity has not been claimed overtly; rather it has come about somewhat indirectly. It is a product of the ecumenical life of the UCC since the early 1970s. At that time the UCC was involved in a wider ecumenical venture known as the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). In COCU initial efforts were made to craft a plan of union for denominations even more diverse than the UCC by focusing upon differences related to faith, worship, and ministry. If they could develop a theological basis for the mutual recognition of members and ministries, the various church leaders in the COCU denominations felt that union might be possible. Eventually, however, COCU concluded that the contemporary ecumenical agenda was more complex. COCU, and the UCC within it, came to see that there were certain nontheological issues which were "church dividing." The issues of racism, sexism, institutionalism, and exclusivistic congregationalism kept the church from its unity in Christ. Until these nontheological issues were confronted, the COCU leaders argued, Christian unity was in jeopardy and the Christian church in danger of continuing to contribute to the erosion of human community.

Since the early 1970s the UCC has lived with this assumption embedded in the early work of COCU. The findings of the case study and theological essay show that there is a new understanding of church unity emerging in the national setting of the UCC when key leaders no longer define ecumenical identity and activity in terms of efforts to heal divisions between different religious or confessional camps. Rather the focus has shifted to define the oneness of Christ as that which results when the church is able to "bind in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities and cultures."[3]

Some observers suggest that the UCC has lost its ecumenical nerve and is no longer as committed to Christian unity as it was. It may be, however, that UCC ecumenical passion has not waned, it is simply being defined differently. The merger that created the UCC in 1957 paid little attention to resolving doctrinal divisions. It was preoccupied with structure and overcoming cultural differences. At its inception the UCC merger surprised people. Ecumenical observers wondered how two such different traditions and cultures could merge — Germans and English, confessional and nonconfessional, congregational and presbyterial, rural and urban, professionals and blue-collar workers, etc.

3. "Statement of Christian Conviction of the Proposed Pronouncement Calling the United Church of Christ to Be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church," *General Synod Minutes 1993*, 39-40.

From the standpoint of history, therefore, to define the ecumenical vocation of the contemporary UCC in terms of creating a "true multiracial and multicultural church" is not a new way of being the church for the UCC, although it may be a new way of speaking about ecumenism. The recent restructuring of the UCC simply stretches classic definitions of church unity, based on a new vision of theological and organizational oneness. In these times the UCC has moved from speaking about a unity in Christ which calls Christians into closer relationships with other Christians, to a commitment under Christ to be a new people cultivating a "oneness of community embracing diversity." If the church is ultimately "the body of Christ," then this vision of the UCC as a multiracial, multicultural church is merely a new answer to Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one."