

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Faith and Organization in the United Church of Christ

Roger L. Shinn

Pp 493 – 522 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change*: “The United Church of Christ: Redefining Unity in Christ as Unity in Diversity” by Barbara Brown Zikmund and “Strategy and Restructure in the United Church of Christ” by Emily Barman and Mark Chaves.

Resources from the *Organizing Religious Work Project* of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research
hrr.hartsem.edu

CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.
I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956-

BR515.C526 2005
280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

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Faith and Organization in the United Church of Christ

Roger L. Shinn

What is the relation between the faith of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and its changing organizational structures? When does organization make faith effective in the world, and when does it smother or distort faith? Why is the UCC now modifying its structure? This essay, relying on the Zikmund historical introduction (pp. 458-65) and the Barman/Chaves sociological case study (pp. 466-92), explores the theological meanings of the reorganization now taking place. This present look into the relations between faith and organization in the UCC is an invitation to this whole church to participate in a continuing venture.

Five Assumptions

My focus is on the UCC today — on this specific fragment of the universal church at this particular time. However, none of us looks at our own time with eyes innocent of past experience. I begin, therefore, with five assumptions that have come out of centuries of experience. Such assumptions do not take the place of empirical investigations of fresh evidence, but they can help us to understand and interpret current evidence.

◆ Christian faith generates community, and community requires organization.

From the New Testament onward, Christian faith has constantly created community, and community has then generated organization. Intimate communities have slight formal structures. The family does not need a written constitution and bylaws, but it develops role distinctions, patterns of mutual

responsibility and authority, habits of living together and using money. Larger communities need more elaborate organization. Although the church through most of its centuries lived without *Robert's Rules of Order* or checking accounts in banks, it had organizational structures. The arguments between Peter and Paul, recorded in the New Testament, are both theological and organizational. The church from its beginning was organizing religious work.

◆ **When faith generates organization, organization then reinforces or distorts faith.**

Ideally, the organization expresses the faith. Organizations quickly exhibit their own dynamics and survival impulses, however. The popular suspicion of "organized religion" shows that there may be friction between faith and organization. As William James put it, "the spirit of politics and lust of dogmatic rule" are "apt . . . to contaminate the original impulse."¹ The budgetary processes of churches, for example, are never based solely on the Sermon on the Mount.

◆ **Christian faith historically has worked itself out in many forms of organization.**

Think of the diverse locations of authority. There are the papacy, Orthodox *sobornost*, "scripture and right reason" (Martin Luther), the Quaker common mind, biblical fundamentalism, Pentecostal inspiration by the Holy Spirit, democratic structures, and personal conscience. Advocates of each of these appeal to the gospel for its grounding, but others challenge that claim because the New Testament itself shows diversity. In addition, changing times bring new opportunities and new temptations. The New Testament says nothing about pension funds and Web sites. For better or worse, church organizations are products of human ingenuity.

◆ **Constant partners of all churches are the cultures that surround and infuse Christian communities.**

Churches are shaped by culture, usually more than they realize. Language, as an example, is a product of culture, carrying its own weight of meanings. Throughout Christian history many cultures influenced the church. Some obvious cases are the Roman Empire, feudalism, European nationalism, racial arrogance and prejudice, the Enlightenment and the rise of democracy, the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism and socialism, imperialism and liberation movements, the impulse to indigenize the church in many societies,

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 335.

and contemporary globalization. Culture gives churches new opportunities, and it can enslave them.

- ◆ A continuous process in religious communities is “the routinization of charisma.”

The term is modern, invented by the eminent German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), but the process is as old as human society. It operates in all religions. The Christian church begins as an innovative, freshening movement initiated by Jesus of Nazareth, who both draws strength from and challenges a tradition. Charisma — the initial enthusiasm, spontaneity, and Pentecostal fervor — marks its first generation. Then quickly the church begins to routinize its practices. Charisma, if not routinized, dissolves or gets lost in the second and third (maybe even the first) generation. However, routinization can also stifle the innovative power of charisma. Church organization and reorganization is a constant process of routinization, frequently challenged by attempts to recover the original charisma.

Theological Unity and Diversity in the UCC

The theology of a church is a consensual theology from which its members, with all their diversities, find guidance or deviate. To discover the theology of a church — local, denominational, national, ethnic, or ecumenical — is a perplexing task. There are varieties of theology within every church, as there are in the New Testament. The formal theology of a church, as of an individual, may differ from the implicit theology of its worship, its hymnody, its organizational structures, its processes of decision making, and perhaps especially its budget. All these express the beliefs of the people. The implicit theology is likely to be more powerful than the formal theology.

In 1949 the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches adopted a *Basis of Union* that guided their formation of the UCC and still reverberates in its life. That agreement included this statement: “The faith which unites us and to which we bear witness is that faith in God which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments set forth, which the ancient Church expressed in the ecumenical creeds, to which our own spiritual fathers gave utterance in the evangelical confessions of the Reformation, and which we are in duty bound to express in the words of our time as God Himself gives us light.”²

2. Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (New York: United Church Press, 1977). See pp. 207-25 for the complete text of the *Basis of Union*.

The *Basis of Union* called for the preparation of a Statement of Faith, to be “regarded as a testimony, and not a test, of faith.” That statement was adopted by the Second General Synod in 1959, even before the enactment of a constitution in 1961. It has since been twice revised, without any change in its structure, in order to achieve a gender-neutral language. The most recent version follows:

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.³

The Statement of Faith evokes clashing responses. Robert S. Paul has said, “[T]he thrust of that biblical faith was beautifully expressed in what is still the best and briefest of all twentieth-century creedal statements, our own Statement of Faith.” Thomas C. Reeves disagrees: “Written in unisex language, it omitted the historic triadic form of the Trinity, skimmed over traditional doctrinal matters, eliminated many references to miraculous events in the Bible accounts, and rejected the exclusiveness of Christian truth.”⁴

3. This is the revision of 1981, affirmed by the Fourteenth General Synod. For all three versions, see the UCC Web site: www.ucc.org/faith/faith.htm.

4. Robert S. Paul, *Freedom with Order: The Doctrine of the Church in the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), p. 51; Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 177.

From its beginning, the UCC has recognized a responsibility both to its heritage and to new opportunities. Its declared faith is the faith “set forth” in the Scriptures and expressed in traditional creeds and confessions, but which we “are in duty bound to express in the words of our time as God Himself gives us light.” The Bible is basic to the faith, but there is no hint of “verbal inspiration” or “inerrancy.” Traditional creeds “express” the faith, but contemporary testimony is not only permitted — it is a “duty.” Our contemporary testimonies, like those of the past, are not final. Future generations will recognize their duties to express the faith “set forth in Scriptures” in the words of their time.

On the official UCC Web site under the link “Faith” is found the following introductory statement:

The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the creeds of the ecumenical councils, the confessions of the Reformation. The UCC has roots in the “covenantal” tradition — meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. Christ alone is Head of the church. We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.⁵

Linked to this introduction are the texts (usually complete, sometimes abridged) of sixteen documents. These include three excerpts from New Testament epistles (all expressing “high Christologies”), the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, documents of the Protestant Reformation and later history, the Barmen Declaration, and recent declarations of the UCC.

These statements appear to point to an intensely theological church with deep roots in tradition, yet alert to the contemporary world. The introductory statement itself is entitled with that characteristic phrase, “Testimonies, but not tests of the faith,” and appears under the main heading “Testimonies of the Faith.” All of this is clear evidence that none are regarded as definitive, final declarations. They embody a calculated ambiguity, rising out of the “balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith,” as stated in the preface to them all. The UCC chooses to live with that deliberate ambiguity rather than presume to solve it by grasping one pole of the ambiguity, either a final definition of doctrine or a looser, rootless faith. The continuing struggle with those problems, with all its exhilaration and perplexity, affects the current reorganization of this church.

5. See www.ucc.org/faith/index.html.

There is a further irony in the theological situation of the UCC. Although the Web site represents a church of deep theological concern, former UCC president Avery Post wrote in 1987 of the “apparent theological dormancy” and of “an ecclesiological deficit” in the UCC.⁶ Initially the UCC had a Theological Commission, but it disappeared early. In 1998 the theological seminaries of the UCC, concerned about the neglect of theology, initiated the semiannual journal *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*. The irony deepens with the realization that during its formative years, the membership of the UCC included three theologians who belong on almost any shortlist of the most eminent of their time: Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. How can we account for this gap between theological intensity and dormancy? One reason is that the church’s polity, with its great emphasis on congregational freedom, can lead inadvertently to a neglect of theology. Another reason is that the implicit theology that guides decisions sometimes differs from the declared theology.

The Two Big Issues in the Current Reorganization

The UCC is now completing major organizational changes. As the Zikmund introduction and Barman/Chaves case study have shown, these fall into two groups: problems inherent in the original constitution, and revised concepts of Christian mission in response to historical challenges during the over forty years of the UCC.

Problems in Constitutional Structures

The initial constitution sought to enact a “balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith,” to quote the official denominational Web site. One outcome is the distribution of responsibilities and powers between the UCC, nationally and ecumenically, and the local churches. Here theology and polity interact.

For any Christian church the ultimate authority is divine. This does not mean that a “big boss in the sky” simply dictates doctrines and commands. It means that the Creator has built into the creation characteristics that human caprice cannot neglect. Truth and morality are not merely our preferences. In scriptural terms, Christ taught with authority (Mark 1:22 and Matt. 7:29) and acted with authority (Luke 20:1-8).

6. Avery D. Post, foreword to *Freedom with Order*, by Robert S. Paul, pp. v-vi.

Then the arguments begin. Some churches see authority flowing from God through a hierarchy reaching down to the people. Others, notably the UCC, understand God to reach out to God's people, who respond by choosing officials to lead, organize, and perhaps correct the activities of the people. Neither of these models is an unalloyed system. The most hierarchical church sometimes hears voices of unaccredited prophets. The most democratic church expects leaders to call it to faithfulness and new opportunities. The constitution of the UCC shows a concern for the balance of freedom and fidelity to apostolic faith. An ironic reader might observe that the constitution follows the maxim, sometimes attributed to Yogi Berra but probably older: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

The preamble to the constitution declares:

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.⁷

That paragraph roots the UCC firmly in Christian tradition. It is not a naive faith in *vox populi, vox Dei*, but it surely is not a reliance on human hierarchies. The next paragraph of the preamble refers to "the free and voluntary relationships which the Local Churches, Associations, Conference and ministers sustain with the General Synod and with each other."

Lurking in the preamble are problems that emerge throughout the constitution. A tangled history complicated the problems. A long (1949-53) and tortuous legal action sought to block the formation of the UCC on the grounds that it interfered with the autonomy of local congregations in the Congregational Christian Churches. The challenge was eventually rejected by the court, but it led to a dogmatic formulation of the rights of congregations. The consti-

7. All citations of the constitution are from the amended edition of 1999, available on the UCC Web site. The wording is identical with the original edition of 1961, but the articles and sections have been renumbered.

tution (art. V, sec. 10) defines the local church in terms consistent with the preamble: "A Local Church is composed of persons who, believing in God as heavenly Father, and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness." However, a later paragraph (art. V, sec. 18) says in sterner, legal language:

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 it 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 regain 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 control of any real or personal property owned by it.

Christians who distinguish sources within the Bible sometimes try similar source criticism on the constitution. They guess that section 10 was written by theologians and section 18 by lawyers. Theologians, with an eye to eternity, hesitate to prescribe for "any future time." Lawyers may do that. The legalistic language of section 18 is followed by the moralistic section 19: "Action by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every local church." The prohibitions are enforceable; the softer moral advice ("should be") is not.

One early and frequent hope was that the UCC might be "a united and a uniting" church. The logo of the UCC with its biblical slogan, "That they may all be one," expresses a yearning for Christian unity. However, ecumenical conversations show suspicions that section 18 may prevent inclusion of the UCC in any larger union. In the negotiations that recently led to mutual recognition of ministries among several denominations (see the Zikmund introduction), there was apprehension that the UCC was excluding itself by its constitution. Some asked, "Can a church with such sweeping congregational autonomy give any assurance

that it is a 'Christian' church?" Nonetheless, the conversations continued with sufficient trust that the UCC squeaked in on the new agreements.

The current organizational changes rely on the words "covenant" and "covenanted ministries" to describe the mutual relations within the UCC. Simultaneously, several other denominations included in this study, with no evidence of collusion, are using those terms. In its biblical history, covenant involves fidelity and moral responsibilities far beyond any that are enforceable in human courts.⁸ It is especially significant for the UCC, which values it as an alternative to creedal requirements or rigid definitions of "apostolic succession."

Thus major organizational problems of the UCC follow from the relation between a theology of covenant and a polity of congregational autonomy. Other issues also appear in the merging of the structures of the uniting denominations. Any joining of elaborate organizations jeopardizes old bureaucracies. Competition over prestige and turf leads to wins, losses, and compromises. This is a truism in corporate mergers, openly discussed in the business pages of newspapers. In churches the situation is both better and worse. Church leaders do not flaunt their ambitions and jealousies as they defend their interests. They declare higher goals than profit and power. They pledge to subordinate their own good to a larger good. Yet precisely because of that commitment, they may overlook the mixed human motives that lurk in all communities. They may identify their responsibilities and powers with the good of the church while their rivals do the same.

Thus the constitution led to a kind of caste system, as the Zikmund introduction and Barman/Chaves case study have shown. Ironically this anti-hierarchical church developed a hierarchy (although that offensive term was never used) of three levels: "recognized" instrumentalities that had long prior histories and substantial financial endowments (principally the Board for Homeland Ministries and the Board for World Ministries, often called the "Big Boards"), "established" instrumentalities dependent on the budget adopted by the General Synod, and lesser "bodies" which might be commissions, committees, or offices. Thus the constitution became an invitation to competition and empire building.⁹

8. See William A. Hulteen, Jr., "United Church of Christ Covenantal Polity," *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 12, no. 2 (fall 1997): 43-53; Yorke Peeler, "Some Thoughts on Covenant and the United Church of Christ," *Prism* 14, no. 1 (spring 1999): 95-102.

9. For the sake of full disclosure, I should state that I was the first president of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries — not a full-time paid job. The chief executive officer was the innovative and forceful executive vice president, Truman Douglass. Personal experience inevitably covers these paragraphs, but the data in them are verifiable from publicly available sources, including minutes of the General Synods.

The Big Boards, under imaginative and energetic leadership from their executive vice presidents, were often ahead of their times, initiating progressive policies that the General Synod later adopted. They were also jealous of their powers, resisting attempts of General Synods to direct them. Over the years, as the Barman/Chaves case study has shown, financial stringency meant that the budgets of the Big Boards relied increasingly on their own endowments, a fact that provoked resentment from other agencies that were entirely dependent financially on the General Synod.

In this complex picture, the presidency of the UCC was a constitutionally weak office. One reason was theological resistance to location of authority in any person. A less theological reason was the political negotiations in which the Big Boards defended their powers. Competent presidents through their personal gifts exercised considerable influence, but only by persuasion, not by constitutional authority. Veterans of the process understood this. So did successive presidents, sometimes to their near despair. Delegates to the General Synod often learned, to their surprise, that the president they elected actually had little constitutional power.

Over the years there were attempts, usually ineffective, to meet these constitutional problems. The current changes are more far-reaching than any proposed in the past. It is easy to see their intention, harder to predict their results.

Responses to Changing Historical Challenges

From its beginning, the UCC sought to respond to historical challenges. Often identified in the public press as an activist church, it addressed contemporary issues: human rights, racial justice, economic justice, war and peace. Its Statement of Faith gave far more attention to demands of contemporary discipleship than classical creeds. Both uniting communions had developed energetic agencies for social action, and the UCC strengthened and expanded these interests. Two examples are significant.

The first is racial justice and appreciation. The two uniting churches had commitments, conspicuous in the climate of those bygone times, to racial justice. At least sometimes, Congregationalism had advocated on behalf of slaves before the Civil War, as in the famous case of the rebellion of the Africans on the slave ship *Amistad*. Later it established schools and colleges for the emancipated slaves. The Evangelical and Reformed Church (originally German and Magyar) had a smaller African American membership, but its social action agency included an African American leader and vigorously advocated racial equality. However, changing times brought recognition of the vestiges of pater-

nalism that lurked in traditional white advocacy of black causes. If old white liberals sought to be color-blind, new developments sometimes required a heightened awareness of race in order to overcome past habits and institutions. New questions arose. When did genuine equality require affirmative action to repair inequalities? What did it mean to recognize black Christians, not as objects of white efforts for justice, but as active leaders in the formation of policies and programs? Such issues arose in the early General Synods.

A second example is the participation and leadership of women. The UCC was, by traditional standards, progressive. Both uniting denominations had ordained women at a time when many churches did not. Even so, the original leadership was overwhelmingly male. The early history showed signs of expectation that the leadership would continue to be primarily male, not by design but by habits that were scarcely recognized. Hymns, liturgies, and the original Statement of Faith echoed linguistic habits that soon became offensive.

New sensitivities required organizational changes. General Synods added more organizations to the "instrumentalities" and "bodies" already defined by the constitution. Those new agencies sometimes worked effectively to the benefit of the whole church. They had two limitations, however. First, although emergent groups won their own fiefdoms, places where they were really in charge, they were not necessarily powerful among the makers and shakers of the larger church. Second, the new bodies added to the overlapping and competing organizations in an already chaotic structure. The organizational issue, then, was to find ways to incorporate formerly neglected groups intimately within the whole church without letting them get lost there. The UCC responded with a recognition and celebration of diversity, to be embedded openly and firmly in its structures. Did this mean affirmative action? Yes. Did it mean quotas? Again, yes. That word, frightening to many people in the church and the public, was affirmed. There was resistance, sometimes silent, sometimes expressed, but the new policies swept the day.

Inevitably there were questions about the ways to relate diversity to the original aim of the UCC inscribed in its logo, "That they may all be one." The Barman/Chaves case study has referred to a theology of unity amidst diversity that has been the core of the UCC since its inception. The authors quote the declared goal of a church that "confesses and acts out its faith in the one sovereign God who through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities and cultures." This is surely a worthy goal. Harmony is richer than simple melody. Harmonies that include dissonances can be more stirring than those that express only sweetness and calm. Dissonance is not inevitably good music, however.

The Christian church in its nature includes diversity, as the Zikmund in-

roduction has shown. Such diversity is evident in the New Testament. A church without diversity is not an authentic church, but diversity does not make it a church. There is more diversity in any New York subway train at rush hour or in the body politic of any city than in any congregation of the UCC or in the national staff. Diversity — the diversity to which the UCC aspires and which it has partly achieved — refutes all those naive claims to unity that are really efforts of a dominant group to impose its version of unity on others. It requires a digging deep for the sources of unity, and that is a continuing task for the UCC.

Friendly questioners and less friendly critics have pointed out that the UCC did not initiate the movement for diversity at this time in history. The whole society was talking about, quarreling about, and sometimes acting on diversity. Critics therefore ask whether the UCC, in championing diversity, is acting out of its faith or simply riding the crest of a cultural wave. Many protest groups — ethnic, economic, feminist, gay and lesbian, and the physically handicapped — force diversity on the attention of society. Arguments about equal opportunity, discrimination, and quotas engage the Congress and state legislatures, the courts, business management, labor unions, country clubs, television networks, and the press. The churches could not have avoided the issue if they had tried.

That does not refute the theological authenticity of the commitment to diversity. The biblical prophets point to the activity of God in secular processes of history. Second Isaiah hears God say to the pagan Cyrus, “I arm you, though you do not know me” (Isa. 45:5). The church has often been nudged by secular forces to appropriate the insights of its own faith. Only after many centuries did the church realize that its faith required the end of human slavery, an institution taken for granted even in the New Testament, while that same Scripture destroyed its justification.

The church must try to discern those tides and storms of history that it should encourage and those that it should resist. The UCC today acts on the belief that secular movements of human liberation are theologically valid. Of course, not all rhetoric of liberation is divine. The same sin that infects tyrants can infect protestors and revolutionaries. Embedded in the Christian gospel from the beginning, however, is the impulse to appreciate outsiders. Think of Jesus and Samaritans (Luke 17:11-19 and John 4:7-30), of Paul and the Gentiles.

If the UCC is therefore prodded through a widespread cultural movement to recognize impulses inherent in its own faith, it can thank God for that prodding. It can also thank God that its own history has pointed it toward the present moment. Even while it recognizes its own participation in the sins of racism, sexism, nationalism, and predatory economic practices, it also gives

thanks for its historic actions in relation to slavery and injustice. It can with honesty say it is carrying into practice theological convictions it has recognized (often too dimly) in its past.

One evidence of the appreciation of diversity is the presence of interest groups within the UCC. Any member with a few friends can start such a group. It needs no approval from above. It generates its own programs. The General Synods encourage such groups by giving them "voice without vote," a privilege that they exercise effectively. They form networks of communication and issue publications (self-financed). The General Synod helps them schedule meetings concurrent with the synod. As evidence of diversity, we can consider the remarkable list of twenty-three groups granted voice without vote at the General Synod of 1999.¹⁰ Other self-initiated voluntary organizations that did not seek voice at the General Synod include "Confessing Christ," and *Colleague: A Journal of Theological Reflection by Pastors of the United Church of Christ*, and the aforementioned *Prism*. At recent General Synods a self-initiated group has produced and paid for *Balaam's Courier*, an opinionated and often satirical daily commentary eagerly grasped by delegates who chuckle over it or complain about it.

Deep into its processes, the Committee on Structure prepared the document "Missio Dei" for the General Synod of 1997. Although brief, it was written as a biblical and theological base for the new structures. It does not entirely quiet suspicions that when the church makes practical organizational decisions, theology may be an afterthought. Now and then, in the National Council of Churches or a denomination, a committee has developed a proposal, completed a draft, and then said, "Now let's get somebody to write a theological basis for this."

It may be that a theological preface, even though written late in the game, verbalizes commitments that informed the whole game. Thus, an implicit theology becomes explicit. Still, the suspicions do not quite die. The interviews

10. On this list were: Association of United Church of Christ Intentional Interim Ministers; Association of United Church Educators; Biblical Witness Fellowship; Christians for Justice Action; Council for Hispanic Ministries; Focus Renewal Ministries; Housing and Community Development Task Force; Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice; National Committee on Persons with Disabilities; Network for Environmental and Economic Responsibility; Pacific Islander Asian American Ministries; Spiritual Development Network; Student Ecumenical Partnership; United Black Christians; UCC Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns; UCC Chaplains in Health Care; UCC Expression of Marriage Encounter; UCC Fellowship of Reconciliation; UCC Friends for Life; UCC Military Chaplains; UCC Parents of Lesbians and Gays; UCC Office Support Staff Network; and UCC Urban Ministries Network.

conducted by Barman/Chaves show that denominational staff often talk more easily about diversity than about theological convictions. There are reasons for theological reticence. Some diversities are identifiable and measurable. Theological convictions are harder to verbalize and quantify, above all in a church that declares its fundamental theological statements to be "testimonies, not tests" of faith.

In addition, theological discussion, especially as it seeks common ground beneath diversity, easily lapses into platitudes. The Christian gospel is not platitudinous. It originated in a startling declaration that was good news to some and a threat to others. In the routinization of charisma, however, the old words became familiar and lost their sting. Theological extravagance has hurt the church as often as theological restraint. It is therefore understandable that church members, whether in congregations or in General Synods or on national staffs, should show restraint in their theological expression.

Yet theological commitment remains important. It is the subtle but persistent element in the question so often asked in the UCC: Just what is our identity? The union that formed the UCC meant a realization that some old identities were inadequate. Evangelical and Reformed people had long celebrated — sometimes well, sometimes too provincially — their descent from German and Magyar Lutherans and Calvinists, an identity worth remembering but too limited ethnically. Congregationalists had long celebrated — sometimes well, sometimes too proudly — their descent from New England Pilgrims, an identity also worth remembering, but too limited to Anglo American people. In enlarging those traditional identities, the UCC is asking how to avoid dissolving into an amorphous association. It constitutionally "acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." How does it relate diversity to that unity? In its continuing search for its identity and mission, the UCC will not find the answer in a theological formula. Its answer, however, cannot avoid theology.

Institutionalizing Change

Three prominent issues emerge in the current organizational changes.

Simplification of Structures

I have earlier and untactfully referred to the chaotic multiplication of agencies with overlapping and competing responsibilities. Because the number of such agencies is now reduced, some observers talk of centralization. Rightly, I think,

the Barman/Chaves case study prefers the word "simplification." Another word might be "democratization." Now, for the first time, all the major officers of the UCC are elected by the General Synod. The Big Boards have voluntarily given up their independence, and their successors have accepted accountability to the General Synod and to the whole church. At the same time, they have gained greater participation in the larger life of the denomination. Similarly, smaller agencies have been incorporated into larger ones, with a reduction of free-wheeling independence but, again, greater access to the big decisions.

The changeover, though bumpy enough to produce some painful bruises, showed many evidences of generosity and good will. The key word in much of the negotiation, I have said earlier, was *covenant*. Obviously, no structures can guarantee covenant in its deeper biblical and spiritual meanings. Yet in the complex relation between faith and organization, some organizational structures support and some subvert covenantal responsibility. There is now hope that the new structures may encourage both democratic participation and wise, courageous leadership.

Continued Exploration of Diversity

The UCC has resolved to be an interracial, interethnic, and multicultural church. Of those three terms, it has hesitated to define "multicultural." The intention is fairly clear. An interracial and interethnic church should welcome the richness of cultural traditions within its covenantal fellowship.

One expression of this commitment is *The New Century Hymnal* (1995). It draws on the resources of many cultures. Some of its hymns come from ancient Greek and Latin sources. Many are the well-known hymns of Western traditions, both Catholic and Protestant, and a few are Jewish. A considerable number are contemporary. Many are African American and Hispanic. Others are Filipino, Japanese, South African and Ghanaian, Moravian, American Dakotan and Lakotan. One is Hindu in origin. Some of these appear in their original languages as well as in translations. There are a few old-fashioned "gospel" hymns that were thought too sentimental and individualistic for predecessor hymnals in the UCC. Worship at the General Synod, including music and dance from various cultural traditions as well as the music from this hymnal, has widened the horizons of worshipers, often in exhilarating ways.

The new inclusiveness naturally requires exclusions. In its rejection of gender and ethnic bias, the hymnal more rigorously excludes or modifies hymns that show such bias than do other "new wave" denominational hymnals. Its modernization of language sometimes upsets rhymes and versification, so

that a slight change (e.g., from “thee” to “you”) may set off a chain reaction throughout a whole hymn. These verbal changes, advertently or inadvertently, sometimes bring major theological changes.¹¹ A wistful and often expressed hope was that all hymns would be “hymns that everybody can sing” — really an impossibility in a large hymnal emphasizing diversity. Some worshipers occasionally say silently, “Dear God, please understand that I sing this not because I believe it but because I want to join in the worship of a covenantal community.”

Multiculturalism is surely enriching the UCC, but some members ask what cultural inclusiveness does about cultural traits that are hostile to Christian faith. In a famous saying of Paul Tillich, “Culture is a form of expression of religion, and religion is the substance of culture.”¹² I am not entirely convinced that he was right, or even that he agreed with that all the time, but he pointed to a tough issue. Some religions and some cultures, Tillich knew well, are idolatrous. Some cultures endorse slavery, some practice polygamy, some enforce caste distinctions, some require female genital mutilation, some foment holy wars, and some bless predatory economic practices. Christian faith has historically expressed itself in many cultures. It has been captured and distorted by some. Thus the Christian faith must maintain some leverage against culture, some courage to reject cultural habits — including, in the first place, habits of the culture in which it has made itself at home.

The church has worked on this issue through long centuries. Early in the fifth century, Saint Augustine pointed out that the church calls people out of all nations and languages with their diverse “manners, laws, and institutions.” Rather than abolish these diversities, the church “preserves and adapts them.” That is multiculturalism, even though the word had not been invented. But Augustine put a limit on the appreciation of diversity: the point at which it injures “faith and godliness.” Here the church must dissent to the point of provoking “anger and hatred and persecutions.”¹³ The worldwide church still faces persecution in some cultures. In American culture it is more likely to be seduced

11. United Church of Christ, *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995). For theological discussions of the hymnal, see Arthur G. Clyde, “*The New Century Hymnal: A Theological and Liturgical Expression*,” *Prism* 10, no. 2 (fall 1995): 27-35; John Ferguson, “*The New Century Hymnal: A Review*,” *Prism* 10, no. 2 (fall 1995): 36-41; and Richard L. Christensen, “What Language Shall We Recognize? A Critique of *The New Century Hymnal*,” *Prism* 10, no. 2 (fall 1995): 42-52. See also articles by fourteen authors in Richard L. Christensen, ed., *How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song? An Assessment of "The New Century Hymnal"* (Centerville, Mass.: Confessing Christ, 1997).

12. Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?* trans. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 73.

13. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods and George Wilson (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1950), bk. XIX, chap. 17.

than persecuted. The UCC must ask when multiculturalism is a faithful openness to varieties of culture and when it is a too comfortable accommodation to moods of the time.

The intent of multiculturalism certainly accords with Christian faith, but its sloganizing may be too hasty. For some people the reliance on parliamentary procedure in the General Synod appears to be the imposition of one quite specific culture upon a multicultural church. To most of us conditioned by Western culture, it is a reasonable way to conduct meetings with respect both for majorities and minorities, and with some blend of discipline and freedom. Due to the expansion of international organizations, it is extending its influence around the world almost as fast as Coca-Cola and McDonald's. It is a distinctive product of cultural history, developed only in recent centuries. In some cultural contexts, it is strange and alien.

A continuing issue for the UCC will be a closer examination of multiculturalism with all its unexplored possibilities. Here the UCC may be wise to consult that classic book *Christ and Culture*, written by one of its eminent theologians, H. Richard Niebuhr. Are UCC policies unintentionally drifting into his description of "the Christ of culture," modified to include the several Christs of diverse subcultures? Are they ignoring the possibility of "Christ against culture" or, more important, "Christ transforming culture"?¹⁴ These questions, which have troubled the church throughout its history, have new resonance in the pursuits of multiculturalism.

Declining Membership and Budgets

A big issue not accented in the current reorganization but always present, is declining membership, a characteristic of all the so-called mainline denominations. The Barman/Chaves case study reports the basic information for the UCC. With declining membership come financial troubles that require organizational changes. The exercise of trimming budgets is one clue to the values of any organization, whether family, business, or government, as well as church. It is not a totally reliable clue because whatever the most ardent priorities of faith, some bills must be paid immediately. Roofs leak unexpectedly. A church cannot renege on contracts or on promises to pensioners. The mission of the church requires an infrastructure, and a democratic church requires a costly General Synod or some comparable body. The peril is that sustaining the infrastructure can dominate the budget while the purposes of the church get undernourished.

14. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

Every day, members and leaders of the UCC are asking what changes must be made to keep budgets in balance. If the answer is not at first glance theological, it soon reaches theological depths.

Theological Reflections

In a broad sense, every page of this essay has been theological. However, the approach to theology has usually been oblique, moving from political-legal-organizational actions to the beliefs they express or contradict. It is now time to lift up theology for more direct examination. In doing this, I shall continue to focus on the UCC, but its concerns will frequently merge with the generic concerns of other churches responding to the same historical problems and opportunities. No church can isolate itself from the wider culture. That may be especially true of the UCC, since it does not rely on the identifying marks of some other churches: a firm doctrinal formula, a carefully cultivated liturgy, a prescribed form of apostolic succession, or an enacted discipline. Seven themes deserve attention here.

Theological Roots and Beliefs

The UCC is intentionally a mini-ecumenical movement uniting several theological and ethnic traditions (see the Zikmund introduction), with the great exceptions, we must not forget, of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The churches that united to form it had roots in the Protestant Reformation. The Evangelical and Reformed tradition was a synthesis of German Lutheranism and Calvinism with a strain of Magyar heritage. The Congregational tradition was originally Calvinist (via English Puritanism), greatly liberalized in polity. "The Christian Church," which united with the Congregationalists in 1931, brought elements of Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian traditions, adapted to the eighteenth-century American frontier. As these traditions interacted in the UCC, they maintained the Calvinist commitment to influence the world — the whole secular world. As one eminent Roman Catholic historian writes, Calvin "inspired Protestantism with the will to dominate the world and to change society and culture."¹⁵

Calvin's Geneva is often described, with reason if not with strictest accu-

15. Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), p. 45.

racy, as a theocratic state. New England Pilgrims wanted their communities to resemble the biblical "city set upon a hill," as Governor Winthrop quoted the New Testament. Congregationalism was the state church in Connecticut until 1818, in New Hampshire until 1819, and in Massachusetts until 1833, well past the adoption of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.

That Calvinist impulse experienced many reinterpretations as it moved through the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the antislavery movement, the Social Gospel, and postmodernism. Although the Social Gospel endorsed separation of church and state, its foremost theologian, the Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch, still sought to "Christianize the social order,"¹⁶ a language that sounds strange in the pluralistic sensitivity of our society. Today the UCC, along with other churches, is experimenting with appropriate methods of influencing the whole body politic, not only by guiding its own members but also by organizing efforts to persuade Congress and public officials.

To use the terms made familiar by Ernst Troeltsch, the UCC knows well that it is neither "church" nor "sect." That is, it cannot and does not want to be the traditional territorial church shaping the whole society. And it has no desire to be a sect, a self-conscious faithful minority avoiding involvement and entanglement in the society's political processes. It wants, within the blessings and disciplines of a pluralistic society, to influence public life.

Exemplifying this experimental venture are the resolutions on public policy adopted by every General Synod. These are sometimes satirized as "resolutionary Christianity." Even friendly critics point out that the General Synod adopts in a few days resolutions that would strain the competence of its members even if they had weeks to work on them. The influential social ethicist James Gustafson has objected to "the intellectual and academic flabbiness of most of the 'pronouncements,' whether by church agencies or by individuals."¹⁷ He clearly has the UCC, though not it alone, in mind. The UCC is not likely to take the opposite path of maintaining silence on public issues of moral import. The General Synods have been gradually limiting the number of resolutions and enhancing the process of their review by large committees prior to the action of the synod. This is not a retreat from the public sphere. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow points out that several Protestant denominations are judging that a concentration on few issues may be a better strategy than trying "to keep all pots simmering at once."¹⁸ There will be no final answer to questions about the

16. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

17. James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 2 in *Ethics and Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 318.

18. Robert Wuthnow, "The Moral Minority," *American Prospect* 11, no. 13 (May 22, 2000):

church's involvement in public issues, but the UCC will not give up its conviction of a God-given responsibility to public life.

Law and Gospel

The relation of love and law has been a perennial theological issue from the New Testament until today. Two popular slogans express the divided mind of American society. One response to social wrongs is, "There ought to be a law about that." A contrary saying is, "You can't legislate morality." Neither slogan ever silences the other. To those who say morality cannot be legislated, the answer is that almost every law legislates morality — quite obviously laws against murder and theft. True, there is no way to legislate love or mercy or forgiveness, but some of the requirements of love, including some measure of justice, can be legislated.

In the theological traditions of the UCC, Martin Luther drew a sharp distinction between law and gospel. He remembered Augustine's summary of Christian morality, "Love, and do as you please," with the awareness that if you truly love, what you please will please God. Calvin was more likely to say, "Love, and enact love through moral laws and structures." If you say that that makes too simple a contrast between Luther and Calvin, I agree, but as a rough description it will do. The UCC draws on both traditions but inclines toward the Calvinistic.

Therefore the UCC enacts quotas. A pure society might need no quotas of representation for women, ethnic groups, and youth. However, if we were to wait for the conquering of all prejudice, much of it unconscious, we would have a long wait until the day of fair representation. This reliance on quotas has its costs. Law, whether in the Bible or in today's world, is a routinization of charisma, which runs the risk of inflexibility and legalism. In current practice the UCC gives great authority to nominating committees. Nominations from the floor risk upsetting the careful distribution of offices that a nominating committee can manage. We hear occasional protests that the power given to nomination committees is undemocratic. We hear questions about the wisdom of telling a conference, "You must elect to the General Synod a set percentage of clergy and laity, of women, of African Americans, and of youth." So far, the UCC meets those objections partly by creating large nominating committees that represent many interests, then giving those committees great power. At this time in its history, the UCC is choosing a few legalisms rather than risking the perpetuation of the fruits of prejudice.

Will these legalisms be helpful in an unforeseeable future? We cannot

now know. Laws designed for a historical situation are not eternal. The UCC is not inclined to repeat the grandiosity of its constitution, which forbids certain actions "now, or at any future time." Reorganization is a continuing process.

Revised Understandings of Mission

Every change in organization reflects some understanding of the mission of the church, but many modifications of mission operate subtly within structures. The UCC frequently revises and restates its beliefs about its mission. We cherish the phrase "New occasions teach new duties," from a stirring hymn by James Russell Lowell. One example of such change in recent years is the way we have reconceived the meaning of world mission in the church.

A missionary hymn, written by Mary Ann Thompson in 1870 and well known to our older members, contains this stanza:

Behold how many thousands still are lying
Bound in the darksome prison-house of sin,
With none to tell them of the Saviour's dying,
Or of the life He died for them to win.

The Pilgrim Hymnal (1958) omitted that stanza, and *The New Century Hymnal* (1995), for all its inclusiveness, excludes the entire hymn. The stanza emerged at a time when the purposes of "foreign missions" gave a prominent place to converting the heathen.

Gradually the aim of conversion diminished. Nobody talks any more of "the evangelization of the world in our generation," the famous slogan of John R. Mott. We have become more aware that Christian missions were too often the accomplices of Western imperialism, military or economic. (I say "too often," but not always. Militarists and expanding industrialists frequently saw Christian missionaries as their enemies.) Today, world missions, while still supporting Christian communities around the world (as partners, not as dependent clients), are more likely to seek interfaith conversations than to proselytize.

There are at least two reasons for this change. One is the plain evidence that several world religions are tenacious and resurgent. The more theological reason is the awareness that missions, as in the hymn just quoted, have too often made judgments that only God can make. The changing attitude need not lessen Christian loyalty to Christ. The church may wish that all people would know the story of Christ, then in freedom make their own decisions of faith. The church also may realize that all religions express the experience and aspira-

tions of people from whom we can learn something. Finally, it may realize that, though the traditional biblical warnings against idolatry are still real and urgent, our primary responsibility may be to expose the hidden idolatries of our own society, sometimes of our own churches, before taking on the idolatries of the whole world.

The UCC is not likely to revise its constitutional affirmation of "Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior," as its "sole head." Its Statement of Faith declares: "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you [God] have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself." This belief does not, however, presume to set limits to God's ways of reaching out in liberating and reconciling action. Evangelism is still a good word in the UCC, but it is not immediately equated with proselytizing. Here is a theological opportunity to reconsider historic ideas of evangelism and foreign missions, relating belief in Christ to the pluralism of the modern world. If the Theological Commission of the early years of the UCC should be revived, it might find this responsibility worthy of its efforts.

Changing Ecumenism

In its early days, I have already said, the UCC hoped to be "a united and uniting church." Now that hope appears a little too triumphalist, too expectant of top-down ecumenism. The union that formed the UCC did not become a center for other unions. Some things happened on a larger scale. In its document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches reached consensus that had gone unrealized for centuries.¹⁹ In addition, the more recent agreement of several American denominations on mutual acceptance of ministries (see the Barman/Chaves case study) is a real achievement.

More influential in local churches has been the growth of an ecumenical spirit among people who may not know how to pronounce or spell "ecumenism." Across the country, churches (Protestant and Catholic), synagogues, and sometimes mosques work together to help the needy, to open opportunities for youth, or to solve other local problems. More cautiously, they worship and pray together. Some traditional barriers simply fade away. That fading may be a sign of maturity. It can also be an enervating indifferentism. The respected scholar

19. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), a document adopted by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in Lima, Peru, 1982.

Randall Balmer sees particularity dissolving into a bland good-natured loss of cutting edge. He believes that "the fashionable currents of inclusiveness and ecumenicity," though "noble impulses," have "exacted a price."²⁰ His words deserve attention, but his own data show the perils of static provincialisms.

Meanwhile, new antagonisms appear. Religious conflicts erupt over homosexuality and abortion. If Christian social action was formerly a "liberal" movement, the political activism of the Religious Right makes for new polarization. Religious fault lines, and not always the old ones, still can cause earthquakes.

In the UCC the Biblical Witness Fellowship frequently challenges the church, suspecting doctrinal laxity and easy accommodation to the secular culture. The denomination, if rarely convinced by this fellowship, has come to realize that a church that celebrates diversity should listen appreciatively to dissents from within. *The New Century Hymnal*, I have mentioned, has restored some hymns that express the "old-time religion."

As ecumenical trends rub out old differences, churches ask what happens to their historical heritages. Are they to be erased in a new cosmopolitanism? The denominations that formed the UCC have traditions cherished even in these latter days. Some older members remember when German was a language of worship in Evangelical and Reformed churches. Others feel the power of the Mayflower Compact and the Pilgrim tradition, still preserved in hymnody and in names like Pilgrim Fellowship and Pilgrim Press. The Magyar Synod continues the Hungarian Reformed tradition. In all these cases, the particularity is freely acknowledged, not imposed by others.

African American particularity is radically different. One hymn long cherished in the UCC begins, "O God, beneath thy guiding hand, Our exiled fathers crossed the sea." For most of us, it was never literally true. Our fathers and mothers crossed the sea long after the Pilgrims who are celebrated in the hymn. That did not matter, because we adopted the Pilgrims as ancestors, just as we adopted Abraham and Sarah as more distant ancestors, and so we rejoiced in the hymn. Black people know, however, that their fathers and mothers crossed the sea in slave ships. They were bought and sold, often beaten, deprived of education and opportunity. Even so, many of them found in Christian faith resources that inspired their struggle for freedom. They contributed their spirituals to Christian worship. Their churches became both compassionate and tough communities. When white men bossed plantation, industry, and government, black churches developed their own leadership and style. Whatever the future of a multicultural and multiracial church, it must not rub out the gifts of those churches.

20. Randall Balmer, *Grant Us Courage: Travels along the Mainline of American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 5.

In a short but classical work of 1954,²¹ W. A. Visser 't Hooft distinguished between Stoic equality, based on the sameness of all people, and Christian equality, which cherishes particular historical heritages. More recent history has confirmed his insight. People want to be appreciated not only in their common humanity but also in their differing histories.

Nobody quite knows what historical particularities will mean organizationally. We are fumbling for answers. *The New Century Hymnal* includes more spirituals than past hymnals and excludes celebration of exiled fathers who crossed the sea. More radically, it excludes all patriotic hymns with two possible exceptions. It uses James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often called the Negro National Anthem — a hymn worthy to grace any American hymnal. The second is a radically rewritten "America the Beautiful." The editors clearly wanted to avoid national idolatry and militarism. Should they have heeded the call of Kenneth Boulding, the great Quaker and pacifist social scientist, who called for "a redeemed nationalism" that keeps alive particular historical memories?

Structurally, the Magyar Synod persists even though the UCC intended to wipe out ethnic judicatories. The new structures prescribe specific representation of African Americans. They designate representation of eight "historically underrepresented constituencies," listed in the Barman/Chaves case study. Looking ahead, we may ask whether African Americans will want to preserve churches that, without exclusion of others, continue meaningful styles of worship and fellowship. How can they contribute to a multicultural church without being simply absorbed? Even an unimaginably sinless church might find perplexities here; a church that confesses sin finds more.

The Gap between Leaders and Members at Large

The Barman/Chaves case study reports a distance (an "indifference," "wariness," even "alienation") of local churches from denominational leadership. The avowed diversity, so evident in the national staff, has had scarcely a ripple of effect on most local churches. The larger Organizing Religious Work study shows that this distancing is frequent across denominations. The American culture just now shows a broad distrust of big government and bureaucracies, a distrust curiously fostered both by libertarians on the far right and by the recent New Left. That distrust seeps into churches. The problem is especially dis-

21. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Racial Problem* (Paris: UNESCO, 1954).

turbing to the UCC, whose constitution declares, "The basic unit of life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church." What should a church do about the distance that separates its duly elected officials and top administrative staff from the general membership in congregations spread across the country?

If the gap is typical of many denominations, it has some distinctive characteristics in the UCC. For example, the General Synod, largely elected by the conferences, comes from local churches but is usually in tune with national leadership. To take a significant case, the General Synod has said for several years now that homosexuality should not be a barrier to ordination, in contrast to Methodist and Presbyterian positions. Practically, however, it is sometimes a barrier (although certainly not always) because a candidate for ordination may be denied the required endorsement of the local church. It also is a barrier, hidden or open, to a call to ministry in some local churches.

The congregational polity means that the membership at large may simply ignore national policies. If a local Presbyterian church objects to national policies, it is likely to fight back. The local UCC congregation is more likely to go its own way undisturbed or simply drop out of the denomination. The loss of congregations has been one cause, though not a major cause, of declining membership in the UCC.

The gap between leadership and constituencies, traceable to many causes, raises a deep theological issue. What kind of leadership does a church committed to Jesus Christ really want? Surely leaders should not merely echo popular opinion. Leaders often aspire to be prophetic, and any church with biblical roots will appreciate that. Can prophetic leadership become elitism, however, a little too confident in its own superiority?

Why does the General Synod differ so much from the popular attitudes of church members? This is partly because, although elected, it is a highly select group. Only the more committed members, especially if they are hardworking business and professional people, will give up a week of vacation to go to General Synod. Beyond that, something happens to people at the General Synod. Frequently a delegate is heard to say, "I don't know how I'm going to explain this vote to the folks back home." Gunnar Myrdal, the famous Swedish social scientist employed by the Carnegie Foundation to study the racial problem in America, wrote, "When the man in the street acts through his orderly collective bodies, he acts more as an American, as a Christian, and as a humanitarian than if he were acting independently."²² It is even more likely that delegates to Gen-

22. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1994, 1962), p. 80.

eral Synod, highly conscious that they are acting for the church, reminded by daily worship about who they are, think and feel differently from the way they think and feel day in and day out.

The General Synod of 1999 adopted a policy that encourages congregational study of proposed resolutions and guidance to the General Synod, without inhibiting the responsibility of delegates to vote their own consciences under the influence of the deliberations at the synod. This is a practice observed only occasionally in the past. Will it mean a dulling of the General Synod, a radicalizing of congregations, or a deeper education of the church at large? We do not yet know.

Changing Patterns of Membership

I have already commented on loss of membership as one stimulus to the reorganization of the UCC. What is the theological meaning of this loss, typical of many Protestant denominations? A common habit refers (a little too easily) to mainline churches as the so-called "seven sisters": the United Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ (and its predecessor churches), and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These seven have been important for their stability, their educational levels, and their influence on society. All American presidents except Abraham Lincoln came from these churches, until the elections of Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy and the Southern Baptists Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. These denominations experienced remarkable growth in membership in the years following the Second World War, but went into major decline in the 1960s.

In 1972 Dean Kelley, on the staff of the National Council of Churches, published *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. He described the decline in membership of "major church groups." In terms intended to disturb, he used the word "dying." He attributed the loss to a neglect of concern for "the ultimate meaning of life" and argued that "strict churches" were growing while undemanding churches were shrinking. Kelley stirred many controversies but reaffirmed his argument in successive editions of his book.²³ The most thorough discussion of his work, involving thirty researchers, showed that the losses were

23. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972, 1977; with a new preface for the Rose edition, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986).

largely due to a failure to attract young people and not to the social action of the churches.²⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argued in 1992 that throughout American history, denominations have declined to the degree that they “rejected traditional doctrines and ceased to make serious demands on their followers.”²⁵ Wade Clark Roof in 1993 produced data to show that the biggest exodus from “mainline Protestantism” was to conservative Protestantism, among people who wanted “stronger moral guidance” and “a deeper Christian faith.” He found that more than half the Protestant baby boom generation “feel that the churches have lost the spiritual part of religion.”²⁶ Thomas Reeves in 1996 used the data for a polemic against “liberal Christianity.”²⁷ But Nancy Ammerman, after a detailed study of congregations, concluded that “congregations that do *not* try new programs and new forms of outreach when they are faced with environmental change are not likely to survive the life spans of their current members.”²⁸

Membership statistics do not measure depth of faith, but the reasons for membership growth and decline may have theological significance. As the UCC first became aware of declining membership, one (although certainly not the only) response was, “That means we must be doing something right.” There could be a grain of truth in that guess. Both the Bible and the history of the church show that faithfulness is often unpopular. Mass evangelism is often related to a biblical literalism that the UCC for the most part rejects. Religious television, offering religion on easy terms, may become a substitute for church participation. Such reasoning certainly does not justify complacency, however. One challenge to the new Local Church Ministries will be to ask what membership loss means, not simply to the budget and program of the UCC, but to its theology.

The Stimulating yet Seductive American Culture

Most Americans are aware of cultural changes that affect all persons and organizations within the society. Scholarly books, the press, and television often de-

24. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-78* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

25. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 1.

26. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), pp. 177, 236.

27. Reeves, *The Empty Church*.

28. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 323.

scribe them. Here I can refer to them only briefly and only as they infiltrate churches.

One clue is the decline of denominational loyalty. The usual estimate is that upwards of 30 percent of Americans switch denominations during their lifetimes. Most of these changes are from one Protestant denomination to another, but some are between Protestantism and Catholicism (both ways) and between Judaism and Christianity (again, both ways). Some amount to religious conversions, but more do not. Some are occasioned by marriage. Others come when families move into a new area and look for a new church home, often with less attention to denomination and formal belief than to convenience, congeniality, and styles of music and preaching. In part, we can cheer these changes. There are gains when church membership is freely chosen, not just perpetuated by habit. There are gains in the appreciation of differences, replacing old dogmatisms. There is also some evidence that "those who choose a religion typically are more committed than those who were born into the same religion."²⁹ Yet we may wonder about the fading of old commitments. When is it indifference over matters that really are important? When is it relaxing old covenants and acquiescing to looser, less demanding associations?

In their influential *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his associates discerned a "cancerous" individualism with an accompanying decline in social organizations, whether labor unions, parent-teacher associations, or bowling leagues. Many church leaders, who have trouble persuading members to teach in Sunday schools, get to choir practice, or attend evening meetings, are surprised with Bellah's claim that the organizations that most successfully resist this trend are churches.³⁰

Peter Berger's important book, *The Sacred Canopy*, made a strong case that the development of modern economies permeating all social institutions has put churches in a consumer-oriented society where religion must be marketed: "It must be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy.' The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. . . . Now, the religious groups must organize themselves in such a way as to woo a population of consumers, in competition with other groups having the same purpose."³¹ Berger set loose a torrent of literature on

29. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 153.

30. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

31. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1990, first published in 1967), p. 138.

the same theme. In 1992 Finke and Stark referred exuberantly to “an unregulated religious economy” and quoted nothing less than Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* on the advantages for religion of operating in a competitive economy.³² Two years later, Laurence Moore published *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*.³³ In 1996 Thomas Reeves’s *The Empty Church* included a chapter entitled “Consumer Christianity.” In 1999 Wade Clark Roof, more restrained than Finke and Stark but more cheerful than Berger, entitled his book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*.

In this cultural environment, churches are frequently described as competitors in a consumer-oriented economy. Pastors are likened to entrepreneurs trying to maintain a share of a market. In a *New York Times Magazine* column entitled “God Is in the Packaging,” writer Michael Lewis told of a study by the Harvard Business School of a booming church in Illinois. Only in America, I suppose, would an elite business school do such a study of a church. Lewis’s own conclusion from the study was this: “One of the miracles of modern capitalism is its ability to stimulate demand for the most banal products (bottled water, for instance) simply by crafting it a new image. Something like this appears to be behind the revival in demand for Jesus Christ.”³⁴

Anybody can find evidence to qualify though not necessarily refute that judgment, yet it must make churches uneasy. When compared with traditional established churches, often coercive both physically and spiritually, the current freedom and tolerance of competitive churches have virtues. A culture in which individuals shop for their churches in a free market has lost something, however, when compared with churches that are covenant communities, asking members for commitment and loyalty. We may hope that in their current attention to reorganization the UCC and comparable denominations will recognize the profound theological concerns that underlie institutional forms.

Anticipation

“By the time you have grown up, the church’s form will have changed greatly.” Those famous words were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the infant baptism of his grandnephew, namesake, and godson. They came out of Tegel

32. Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, p. 52. They cite Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), pp. 740-41.

33. R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

34. *New York Times Magazine*, July 21, 1996, pp. 14, 16.

prison, where Bonhoeffer was held under suspicions — accurate, in fact — of complicity in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler. As his imagination leapt into the future, Bonhoeffer hoped for “something quite new and revolutionary,” for “conversion and purification.”³⁵ He was too wise to make predictions, however. As it turned out, the church had more stamina (or was it inertia?) than he expected. Changes there have been, though not all of them could be called “purification.” More changes there will be. We cannot foresee them with any certainty. Most of us did not expect the resurgence of world religions, the global appeal of fundamentalisms, the wars in which religion was a cause or a pretext. Nor did we expect the events in which a hidden grace brought hope into confusion and strife.

Without presuming to predict, we can stretch our minds by asking a few questions about the future:

- Will Christians become a self-conscious minority in lands that once thought themselves Christian? Will “conversion and purification” restore a high commitment to faith in Christ?
- Will the tides of secularism sweep through cultures, overwhelming biblically illiterate churches?
- Will the movement of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (1994) reshape the religious scene in the United States?
- Will the commodification of religion continue with churches becoming support communities, theologically indifferent but useful to people who crave self-esteem and community in a fragmented world?
- Will the center of Christian population shift from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern and from the West to the East, with consequent changes in the understanding and practice of faith?

Such questions, although unanswerable, may widen our horizons. One task of theology is to enlarge the context within which we face our day-to-day decisions. In the momentous changes of our time, denominational reorganizations are slight events, but they may be signs of faithfulness and readiness to respond to the challenges of a tumultuous history. Those who believe in the freedom of God and of God’s human creatures will expect surprises in times of hope and peril. Yet planning, both venturesome and prudent, is consistent with readiness for surprises.

35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 300.