



“Becoming U.C.C.”
Pastor Andy CastroLang
June 30, 2019

Scripture (ERV):

John 17:21

²¹ Father, I pray that all who believe in me can be one.

You are in me and I am in you.

I pray that they can also be one in us.

Then the world will believe that you sent me.

Sermon:

Two years after the end of World War II Americans everywhere were busy trying to live happy lives by looking forward, not back.

There was a boom on...a boom in the economy, a boom in babies, a boom in optimism.

My parents were part of that generation, and they were forever changed by the opportunities granted through the G.I. Bill. Dad went for advanced degrees, and Mom and Dad both went for building a family...eight kids by the time they were done!

In that time in the USA, that seemed so hopeful and open to new possibilities for so many, a couple of seminary presidents agreed to sit down over coffee together and chat theology.

And from that conversation came a vision, a hope-filled vision of Christians' agreeing, Christians' supporting one another and Christians' uniting to heal what was sick, repair what was broken, and love one another through thick and thin!

Thus began a 10-year process of looking at one another with fresh eyes...eyes that looked past the differences, to the uniting elements.

For the Congregational Christian Church of America, and the German Evangelical and Reformed Church in America...it seemed the right thing to do. It was time, and past time, to reunite as Christians under the headship of Jesus Christ, and time and past time to end mutual suspicion, name calling, harassing and judging of one another.

Ten years later, after lots of ink had been poured out, and almost endless conversations were held over theology, and polity, and covenant and autonomy...the United Church of Christ was born, on June 25, 1957.

Four different Christian streams of religious community came together...with lots of history and variety, lots of cultural uniqueness, and cultural quirks. Speaking English and German, Samoan, Hawaiian, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Hungarian, Lakota and more.

Becoming U.C.C. was no easy feat. But it was an amazing act of community building and Kin-dom of God building that marked the energy of the mid-twentieth century. Many Christian groups embarked on internal reunification and reconciliation, and did amazing work, restoring communion and renewing conversation among many separate groups: Lutherans and Presbyterians and Methodists to name a few!

Even Roman Catholics were moved to reach out to other Christians!

It must have been an amazing time...church people together, listening and learning from each other, instead of burning each other at the stake!

Nowadays, it seems like a distant memory of the past. It seems as if many are back to calling one another names, back to barring our Communion tables from one another, back to days of shame and blame and fear of each other.

I don't believe that is how it is supposed to be! Nor did our founders!

Because when we became the United Church of Christ we vowed that working with other Christians wouldn't be a side job...it would be at the heart of being UCC.

It is in my ordination vows:

“Do you accept the faith and order of the United Church of Christ; and will you, as an ordained minister in this communion, ecumenically reach out toward all who are in Christ and show Christian love to people of other faiths and people of no faith?”

And it was my responsibility to answer, *“I do and I will, relying on God’s grace.”*

It is in our new member prayers:

“By your baptism you were made one with us in the body of Christ, the church. Today we rejoice in your pilgrimage of faith which has brought you this to time and place. We give thanks for every community of faith that has been your spiritual home, and we celebrate your presence in this household of faith.”

What our forebears did in becoming UCC in 1957, we are called to continue today and tomorrow.

We are still uniting: we share ministers, churches, camps and pulpits with the Disciples of Christ, and most recently, we reached an accord with the United Church of Canada.

We still believe in the prayer of Jesus that is on our church emblem: “that they may all be one”, words from the gospel of John.

And as we become ever more UCC, it becomes ever more clear that we do this through a *generous* theology that allows for great variety, diversity, creativity.

There is no one way to be United Church of Christ!

We have “tall steeple churches” and house churches, and storefront churches.

We have lay ministers, and Ph.D. ministers, women ministers, LGBTQIA+ ministers, ministers in wheelchairs.

We sing from hymnbooks, or from slides projected on a wall. We have organ music, and rock bands, and chanting in Latin.

Yes, really!

Becoming more and more the United Church of Christ means that we also share buildings and commitments to Christian service in love, with Methodists and Presbyterians, with the Church of the Brethren, the Moravian church, the Lutherans, the Armenians! Yes, we have, and yes we do! I don’t know if it still exists, but years ago there was a UCC church that hired a married Roman Catholic priest to be their pastor/priest!

Westminster, too, is growing into its self-awareness as a congregation of the United Church of Christ by sharing work, friendship, outreach, and service, with Mary and the Fig Tree paper; Tracy and the Faith and Values network she has created; Paul Benz and Elise DeGooyer at the Faith Action Network, and Katie and Carol at the Spokane Alliance. Working with people of other faiths, and people of no faith.

I've always believed that we are better together. And I believe Jesus modeled the way to live together; with new friends and old, sometimes argumentative, necessarily humble, willing to learn and change, and always diverse!

This Jesus way means opening the doors of our hearts, and the doors of our lives, to all the new and old ways we know of being the Body of Christ Jesus.

The UCC is 62 years old this month. Let us continue to learn how to be the United Church of Christ that Jesus would want to see; in beauty and diversity, with mutual respect, humility, humor, and love.