

No. 8915

RESOLUTION ON ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIP

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

BACKGROUND

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ affirm the New Testament understanding of the essential unity of Christ's church and recognize that there is a need for visible unity. The churches have turned to each other and to other churches to speak of how this unity can be realized.

This biblical understanding of our essential unity has led both churches into other ecumenical settings as well. The churches' efforts to heed the gospel call to overcome the separations that early beset the church of Jesus Christ have given birth to the Consultation on Church Union, the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches and other expressions of the ecumenical movement.

In 1911 the United Church of Christ's predecessor bodies and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) held their first conversations. Since 1961 official conversations have been aimed at achieving a deeper and more visible unity.

The declaration of an Ecumenical Partnership and establishment of an Ecumenical Partnership Committee by the Fifteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ (1985) and the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (1985) followed six years of work by a joint steering committee. A responsibility of the Ecumenical Partnership Committee was to take to the General Synod and the General Assembly in 1989 proposals for action that would lead to full communion between the two churches.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the gospel of Jesus Christ unites Christ's followers in a single community of faith and compels us to make our unity visible so "that the world may believe ..." (John 17:21, cf. Eph. 4:4-6, 1 Cor. 12:12-26); and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are witnessing in our local churches, regions/conferences, and in national and international settings, significant signs of the movement of the Holy Spirit toward unity; and

WHEREAS, the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have been partners in mission, in worship, and in theological conversation, and have affirmed a Common Vision Statement;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Seventeenth Synod of the United Church of Christ, meeting in Fort Worth, Texas (June 29-July 4, 1989) and the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana (July 28-August 2, 1989), make the following mutual declarations:

A. The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) acknowledges and celebrates before God that The United Church of Christ is a "true church," an authentic, faithful part of the one, universal body of Christ.

B. The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) declares and celebrates that a relationship of full communion now exists between our churches, by which is meant that:

- 1) Both churches are one in faith, and make common confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son/Child of the living God (Matthew 16:16, John 11:27);
- 2) Members of each partner church are members of the one universal church of Jesus Christ and thus are linked to one another as the members of one body;
- 3) Members share in celebrating The Lord's Supper/Holy Communion in local churches, associations/areas, regions/conferences, and in national and international meetings;
- 4) Ordained ministers of each partner church are truly ministers of word and sacrament; and
- 5) Both churches search for mutual ways of manifesting the common mission of witness and service.

C. The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) confesses participation in the sin of church division and commits itself to work, with God's help and together with its partner church, to effect greater unity in the whole church of Jesus Christ:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) encourages study of the biblical, theological, and practical implications of full communion; and authorizes the Ecumenical Partnership Committee to give guidance to the process; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) receives the following paragraphs as commentary on the meaning of full communion.

COMMENTARY

We envision full communion as a dynamic and growing relationship that is more than just accepting one another as we now are. It is a mutual commitment to grow together toward a vision of the church that enriches our theological traditions, enhances service and mission, and deepens worship. We will find diverse expressions of what it means to live in full communion in Christ as we experience life together.

There follows a commentary on the five aspects of the meaning of full communion. It must be understood within the context of our wider ecumenical commitments, especially the World Council of Churches (including the text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and the Consultation on Church Union. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, along with the seven other churches in the U.S.A. that are in the Consultation on Church Union, are laboring to achieve covenant communion in faith, sacraments, ministry and mission.

"After more than two decades of theological work by officially designated persons responsible to the most authoritative bodies in the several churches, it is now evident that an essential core of theological agreement exists and continues to grow among these churches in matters of faith, worship, sacrament, membership, ministry, and mission."

Churches in Covenant Communion,
approved by the Seventeenth Plenary
of the Consultation on Church Union
(December 1988) and sent to member churches for formal action.

1. Common Confession of Christ

Early Christians declared Jesus to be the Christ (Peter in Matthew 16:16 and Martha in John 11:27). Although the church has developed more extensive statements of faith, the Christian community finds its fundamental identity in this confession. In this resolution we begin by proclaiming our common devotion to the God who was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self (2 Cor. 5:19), the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). By it, we also declare our rejection of the distortions both of the gospel and of the cultural idols that constantly tempt us.

2. Mutual Recognition of Members

Baptism and membership in the church are inseparably linked. To be baptized into Christ is to become a member of the body of Christ, the church. For two churches to mutually recognize each other's members implies the recognition that the baptism administered by the partner church is a valid sacramental act. Baptism involves the gift of God's grace and the response of faith. Through baptism, all Christians are united by the Holy Spirit in the one universal church. Mutual recognition does not commit either church to giving up its normative practices (for Disciples, the dedication of infants and baptism by immersion of those who make a personal confession of faith; for the UCC, the sprinkling of the children of believing parents, normally followed, at an appropriate age, by confirmation) or the baptism by the sprinkling or immersion of adults. Mutual recognition of members allows for transfer of membership between Disciples and United Church of Christ local churches by letter.

This declaration is a testimony to the growing theological agreement on baptism among the churches, achieved through the ecumenical movement. It is an affirmation that differences of practice need no longer divide the churches. Partnership is therefore a process for moving beyond divisive disagreements and renewing our understanding of baptism, the sacrament of unity.

3. Common Celebration of the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion

The most powerful sign of Christian unity is the common sharing at the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to God's self, and offered us a new relationship of love and unity with one another. Celebrating the sacrament together, we are responding as one family with thanksgiving to what Christ has done for us, praying as one people that the Holy Spirit will lead us into deeper truth and unity, and remembering as one pilgrim people the promises of hope and salvation.

While it is already possible for these two churches to celebrate the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion together, this declaration of full communion encourages such common celebration more regularly and intentionally. Congregations that are geographically near each other are urged to find ways to share the sacred meal together at least once or twice a year, and to consider more frequent eucharis-

tic services. Conferences and regions, associations and areas are encouraged to plan opportunities to join around the Table regularly and so to bear witness to the conviction that the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion is the central event in the church's life. From it all things flow—engaging in mission, caring for the poor, struggling for justice and peace, making real an inclusive life in Christ, yearning for unity.

The United Church of Christ and the Disciples traditionally have had different eucharistic practices in two respects. Disciples congregations make the Lord's Supper the central point of each Sunday's worship, while most United Church of Christ local churches observe the sacrament monthly or quarterly. Nearly all United Church of Christ local churches have ordained or licensed ministers preside at the Table, whereas elders or ordained ministers preside among Disciples. Neither of these differences, however, need divide our two churches at the Table. The theological issues they raise are being explored in our churches and in the wider ecumenical dialogue in the Consultation on Church Union and in the World Council of Churches.

4. Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordained Ministries

Mutual recognition of ordained ministers (ministers of word and sacrament of the United Church of Christ; ordained elders and ministers of word and sacrament of the Disciples) is intended to acknowledge in the ministries of the partner church the manifest blessing of God and the fruit of the Spirit, and therefore to affirm them as true ministries of the one, holy Church of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation of ordained ministries is intended to refer to future actions by the churches, both separately and together, whereby their ordained ministries become one ministry of Jesus Christ.

Reconciliation is not intended to mean either that the standard of ministerial training and certification or differences in ministerial practice and placement process must become the same for both churches. Reconciliation means that an ordained minister of one partner church may function, whenever invited, and established procedures permit, as a minister to the other. Such action of recognition and reconciliation of these ordained ministries is in harmony with the wider ecumenical understandings.

Ordained ministry in these two partner churches is sufficiently similar in form and substance to pose no serious theological obstacle to the mutual recognition and reconciliation of these ordained ministries in subsequent liturgical celebrations.

5. Common Commitment to Mission

Unity and mission are inseparable. If we imagine ourselves to be sacramentally one yet do not engage together in mission, we deceive ourselves. Christ calls us to unite in one mission together in and to a suffering and divided world. The church is called to visible oneness as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's saving reconciliation of all things in Christ. In declaring full communion, these two churches acknowledge that they are partners together in God's mission to and for the whole world.

The mission of the church takes many forms. The church engages in mission through worship, through proclamation of the gospel, and through action. In worship, the church recalls and celebrates the mighty acts of God in creation, redemption, and providence. Thus graciously renewed in faith, hope, and love, its people are sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be ambassadors, witnesses, and servants of Christ in the world. In proclamation, the church tells the story by which its own life is defined. As it confesses unambiguously the Christ in whom it lives, the church invites all who will to enter its fellowship of life in Christ. In action, the church embodies God's justice, peace, and love. As the church reaches out to others, both individually and systemically, it manifests God's reconciling purpose and saving reign in all the earth.

In partnership, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ fully claim the mission and make deliberate commitment to engage in mission together, wherever and whenever possible.