

Continued

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**REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIP COMMITTEE OF THE  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) AND THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**RECEIVED by the General Assembly**

In 1985 the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ declared an "ecumenical partnership" between our churches that would seek "visible oneness" as the "ultimate goal and overarching context in which the partnership will evolve." Three primary tasks were identified to give direction to this new relationship: mission, theological work, and worship. The whole life and memberships of both denominations were invited to move ahead in shaping and implementing the partnership venture, "at their own pace and in their own ways."

Over the past two years, a rich diversity of programs have been initiated by congregations, conferences, and regions which give concrete expression to our growing partnership. To highlight some of these activities and events is to begin to see the potential of the partnership for our denominations in the coming years.

In Nebraska, the regional and conference staff have been meeting together for several years, and are moving to explore possibilities of shared staff and joint offices.

In Indiana, a joint Disciples-UCC Task Force prepared and distributed a booklet to every congregation in December, 1986 which brought together prayers and worship resources on the theme of unity written by lay persons and pastors.

In Arkansas, a proposal was developed by the Disciples regional Commission on Ecumenical Concerns inviting the Maine Conference of the UCC to establish a special relationship between them to facilitate one-on-one sharing, thus making the "partner church" known in an area where there are few congregations available for direct contact.

In Kansas, UCCs and Disciples have come together for joint leadership development events (BEST — Becoming Effective Servants Together) offering 30-40 workshops for laypersons and

As partners, we are working toward a time when our churches will be able to claim "full communion", a relationship characterized by a mutual recognition of baptism, full eucharistic fellowship, the mutual recognition of members and ordained ministers, a common commitment to confess the gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world, and common decision-making. We are working toward a time when our two churches can claim together our oneness in Jesus Christ: in one baptism, in one celebration of the Lord's Supper, in one mission to the world. We are working toward a time when our churches can say without qualification: your baptism is our baptism, your Table is our Table, your people and pastors are ours, your mission and witness is ours, your decisions we own and respect.

The Ecumenical Partnership Committee met four times in 1986-87. In order to enable the Committee members to meet national/general staff personnel from the partner denomination, meetings of the Committee took place in denominational offices in Indianapolis (May, 1986) and New York City (November, 1986). Working Groups for Mission, Theology, and Worship were established within the structure of the Committee, with primary responsibility for each area given to the corresponding Working Group. Preliminary work done by the Working Groups is then offered to the entire Committee. The Committee is composed of ten members from each partner church. Two members of the Committee, with full voice and vote, are present as representatives of churches in the Consultation on Church Union, thus underscoring our churches' commitment to do all its work in relation to the wider ecumenical context.

This report encompasses the work done to date by the Committee, classified in relation to the four responsibilities given to the Ecumenical Partnership Committee.

**1) Provide general guidance to the Ecumenical Partnership in the areas of mission, theological work and worship.**

**A. MISSION**

An inventory of mission programs (homeland and overseas) currently being implemented by the partner churches was taken to see where more cooperative work could be done and what areas of mission might be seen as new territory for both churches. Based on that inventory of General/Regional/Conference programs already underway, the Mission Working Group will be focusing for the near future on: racial and ethnic leadership empowerment, urban ministries, and congregational development and new church establishment. Key leaders in these areas from both denominations are meeting with the Mission Working Group to help assess the potential and impact of Partnership mission efforts in those three areas.

**B. THEOLOGY**

The Committee took careful note of the ecumenical convergence on baptism and the Lord's Supper achieved through the World Council of Churches and the Consultation on Church Union (a process of convergence in which both of our churches have participated) and concluded that there are no theological reasons why we should remain separated by these sacraments. The ecumenical convergence has enabled us to see, (i) that our different practices and understandings can be thankfully embraced as legitimate diversities in the one church, and (ii) that the real question is not how to negotiate agreement on the basis of what we have been but to envision together the fullness of baptismal life and full communion to which we are called. The Committee will be drafting a statement on the nature of partnership to serve as a basis for discussion throughout our two churches in 1988 on what it means to be partners.

Based upon its present outline of work, the Theology Working Group anticipates that by 1989 the Partnership Committee will have substantive recommendations to make to the churches related to

three key elements of "full communion": mutual recognition of baptism, regular sharing around the Lord's Table, and the mutual recognition of ordained ministers.

**C. WORSHIP**

The Worship Working Group had a clear assignment from the General Assembly and General Synod to prepare a worship service in celebration of the Ecumenical Partnership, which will be used for the first time at the 1987 General Synod and General Assembly. The Committee offers this worship service to be used (in joint services where possible) in all Disciples and United Church of Christ congregations on May 1, 1988, Partnership Sunday. A sub-group of the Committee is preparing materials to be used by local congregations in preparation for the Partnership Sunday worship service.

**2) Listen and respond to the partnership experiences of people throughout the two churches, so that insights might be shared and deepened.**

As the Committee began its work, there seemed to be two areas of the country that were having totally different partnership experiences which the Committee felt should be investigated for our own education. The Northeast Region of the Christian Church and the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ were joining forces in the Western Area of that state, and those involved viewed the experience so positively they urged greater unity between our churches. The November, 1986 Committee meeting in New York City was the occasion for representatives from the Western Area to meet with the Committee to share their experience and answer questions. Because of the experience in the Western Area with ministerial standing, those representatives have been asked to prepare a preliminary statement on "ministry" for the use of the Theology Working Group. The area of the country which recently saw less positive results from a cooperative venture (which included the Church of the Brethren), was the Northwest Region/Washington North Idaho Conference. The Committee plans to meet with representatives of this area to gain insight from their experience as well.

Members of the Partnership Committee have also volunteered to become communication "links" with assigned regions and conferences in order to:

- facilitate more personal sharing with the Committee on local developments, concerns and initiatives;
- provide personal contact by being available to share with ecumenical bodies and conference/regional assemblies;
- encourage more direct sharing with regions/conferences about the work of the Committee.

**3) Encourage understanding of and participation in the Ecumenical Partnership in order that it may be claimed more fully throughout the two churches.**

Education within our two denominations about the work of the Committee is a crucial element of our work. The Committee seeks to accomplish this education in three ways:

- news releases prior to and following Committee meetings;
- a new publication entitled "News of the Partnership", focusing on the work of the Committee and sent to church leaders (clergy and laity) of both denominations;
- interpretive articles from the Committee and regions/conferences/congregations concerning partnership work to be printed in The Disciple and United Church News, current denominational publications.

**4) Formulate and make recommendations, at appropriate times, on further specific steps and activities between these two churches in the pursuit of full communion and visible unity.**

While recommendations from the Committee have been called for at the 1989 General Synod/General Assembly, the Committee has made one recommendation early on in its life. At our first full meeting, the Committee voted to request, "that by January 1988 all major events in both denominations be planned as a shared experience between the two churches."

It is becoming increasingly clear to members of the Committee that the Holy Spirit is present and active in our work and deliberations together as we seek new ways for our churches to live as partners. Committee members have come to know and trust each other and are able to be honest about those things that still separate us, while also being able to celebrate those many things that already unite our two denominations. We feel both sure and hopeful that our present course reflects the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our two churches.

As we report on the first efforts of the Ecumenical Partnership Committee and the growing grass roots partnership efforts, we want to acknowledge our belief that we are being led by the Holy Spirit, we are on the road God wills for us to travel together as we seek to work with one another as partners, struggling with basic questions of church life in the areas of mission, theology and worship. We continue to work toward the end that our certainty and hopefulness may be shared by all members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ.

**Committee Members**

- \*John R. Bean (Disciples)
- John R. Compton (Disciples)
- Paul A. Crow, Jr. (Disciples)
- Thomas E. Dipko (UCC)
- Ruth Evans (UCC)
- Joyce Funk (Disciples)
- Ferdinand Garcia (Disciples)
- \*James O. Gilliom (UCC)
- Tecumseh X. Graham (AMEZ)
- Dolores Highbaugh (Disciples)

- John O. Humbert (Disciples)
- Norman Jackson (UCC)
- Michael Kinnamon (Disciples)
- Ervin Milton (UCC)
- Elizabeth Nordbeck (UCC)
- Avery D. Post (UCC)
- Dorothy Robinson (UCC)
- Daniel Romero (UCC)
- C. Shelby Rooks (UCC)
- Nancy Brink Spleth (Disciples)

- David W. A. Taylor (Presbyterian)
- A. Guy Waldrop (Disciples)

**Staff**

- Charles Cooper (UCC)
- Florence A. Coppola (UCC)
- Robert K. Welsh (Disciples)

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