The United Church of Christ

Only six years after the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States came into being and three years after the Evangelical and Reformed Church was formed, an event occurred involving certain members of these new denominations that launched the ultimately successful union negotiations between them. In January 1937, Truman Douglass, a prominent Congregational Christian minister in St. Louis, invited a small group of local ministers and professors to meet together—including George M. Gibson, who wrote the syllabus for the discussion, and Samuel Press, president of Eden Theological Seminary—"for the purpose of redefining and clarifying the bases of [their] faith and work." After several months of working together on the fundamentals of their faith and ministry, the group came to feel that they had "a strong unity of thought and mind" around the primary things of importance, and that perhaps their denominational fellowships might also be able to come together in unity (see vol. 6:70).

In 1938, knowing that his Congregational Christian colleagues Douglass and Gibson were in Beloit, Wisconsin, attending a meeting of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, Press, who was chair of the Evangelical and Reformed Church's Commission on Closer Relations with Other Churches, sent them a telegram. In it he asked, "What about a rapprochement between our communions looking toward union?" Soon thereafter, an informal meeting was held in Chicago between Press and Douglas Horton, minister of the Congregational Christian General Council. Horton sent an overture to George W. Richards, president of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, proposing official conversations between the two denominations. Thus began fifteen years of union negotiations between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, two denominations which at first glance seemed unlikely partners for church union.

About the same time, another discussion emerged that invited denominations based on congregational principles (Congregational Christian, Baptist, and Disciples) to envision church union. During the second World Conference on Faith and Order, held in Edinburgh in 1937, two editorials in the *Christian Century* raised important questions about congregational polity. Did the Congregational emphasis on the autonomy of every local church hold congregational denominations back from affirming the doctrine of the catholic and organic unity of the church that undergirded ecumenical discussion? Could the two doctrines be reconciled (see vol. 6:71)? These editorials raised the issue that Washington Gladden, a progressive Social Gospel leader and Congregational pastor, had raised thirty years earlier, namely, whether Congregationalism had sufficiently clarified the issue of autonomy versus fellowship (or "connectionalism") in its denominational self-understanding (see vol. 6:3). The different perspectives on this issue, and the differing views of Congregationalism that they generated, dominated the ecumenical work of Congregational Christian leaders for the next twenty years.

During the early stages of union conversations between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, each recognized the potential to create something radically new for church unions in the United States: organic union between two denominations quite different from each other. There were economic and social differences when the Congregationalists and the Christians united in 1931, and they differed considerably in style of worship. Nevertheless, each insisted upon local church autonomy and rejected creedal authority, while upholding the freedom of individual conscience. Each had a relatively informal intradenominational power structure and an intense commitment to union. Their union brought together distant relatives within the ecclesiastical world.

So also did the 1934 union between the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States. The Evangelical and Reformed Church united people with a common heritage rooted in the German and Swiss Protestant Reformation. Both of these German immigrant denominations had evolved to gain status as mainstream denominations; both had a constitutional tradition where lines of authority within church government were clear. Like the Congregational Christian Churches, the Evangelical and Reformed Church was a union of ecclesiastical relatives.

Although at first glance a union between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church could have been viewed as an unlikely partnership, these two denominations had both developed a deep concern for church unity. By the late 1930s they were ready for a new challenge.

Union Negotiations

Official endorsement to enter into union negotiations came from the Evangelical and Reformed General Synod and the Congregational Christian General Council in 1942. A Joint Committee on Union began its work shortly thereafter. Reporting on the beginning of these negotiations, an editorial in the *Christian Century* on October 21, 1942, first described the two churches with language that would become very important to the United Church of Christ: "It is a significant and heartening fact that these two churches which have had a taste of union want more of it! They are not content to be merely *united* churches, but wish to be *uniting* churches. The impulse for unity, once it has been released in action, tends to take the form of a mission, with the Holy Spirit (which is the Spirit of unity) increasingly in charge."

Leaders in both denominations had learned the tools of their craft well during the years in which they had represented the four antecedent denominations, and they entered energetically into the task of providing a broader forum for their union discussions. George W. Richards, president of Lancaster Theological Seminary, continued an extraordinary ecumenical career, which he had begun in the Reformed Church in the United States, by publishing an article in the Congregational Christian magazine *Advance,* introducing the Evangelical and Reformed Church to Congregational Christian readers. At the same time, he touched lightly upon what would become the most sensitive area between the churches. "If you will permit me to use my autonomy, without authority, I venture to affirm that in due time it may be possible to deauthorize the Evangelical and Reformed Church at the top and to deauthorize the Congregational Christian Church at the bottom, without interfering with the Lordship of Christ" (see vol. 6:72). Douglas Horton, minister of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, prepared a companion article for *Advance* on the differences between the two denominations in faith and practice (see vol. 6:73). During 1947 alone, the monthly Congregational Christian magazine *Advance* published more than thirteen substantive articles discussing the advantages and disadvantages of union, followed the next year by articles on the spiritual, social, and sociological aspects of union. The *Messenger,* the comparable journal of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, also sought to stimulate interest in union by thoroughly addressing the issues and publishing articles detailing the pros and cons of union. Open letters were solicited by the newspaper giving opinions on the merger (see vol. 6:74). *Advance* published prayers for those on both sides of the union discussions and articles showing how local churches were presenting the prospective union to their church members (see vol. 6:75). *Youth* magazine, a journal of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, introduced its young people to the youth organization of the Congregational Christian Churches, discussed theological and practical

grounds for union, and outlined for its readers the most significant points in the "Basis of Union." By June 1948, *Youth* celebrated the union of the Pilgrim Fellowship of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Youth Fellowship of the Evangelical and Reformed Church to create "The Youth Fellowship of the United Church of Christ" (see vol. 6:76). The *Messenger* even published part of a presidential address by Hampton Adams to the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ. In that speech Adams anticipated the union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church "within the next two or three years," and he made the first mention of what years later would become a "partnership" between the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Church leaders did their best to educate and involve members in all settings of both denominations in issues of union.

At the same time as the denominations got to know each other better, the Joint Committee on Union worked to prepare and revise drafts of the Basis of Union and to send out periodic reports highlighting the points of debate that were beginning to emerge. The final draft of the Basis of Union was finished in 1947 and adopted by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in July of that year (see vol. 6:77).

Eager to make sure that the Basis of Union was not misunderstood, the Joint Committee of the two denominations published a "Primer of Union" giving information about the historical background of both denominations, statistics, polity, the understanding of ministry, and answers to commonly asked questions regarding the union (see vol. 6:78). As early as 1944, the Joint Committee had drawn up a proposed schedule for the consummation of the union, including a two-year period of getting acquainted in local, regional, and national settings; a joint meeting of the national assemblies in 1946; and final preparatory steps for the consummation of the union in 1947. The Congregational Christian General Council and the Evangelical and Reformed General Synod approved the steps as proposed, and the goal of union seemed well prepared and assured.

Agitation Against Union

In spite of all this educational work on all sides, the old debate within Congregationalism about local congregational autonomy became increasingly heated. Congregational Christian opponents of the union maintained that Congregational Christian principles would be violated by the proposed union. Their primary and most overarching concern was that the union would produce what they called "an authoritarian church"—overrunning the autonomy of local churches by forcing them to become "one church," controlling their property rights, choosing their minister, and even telling them what to believe by requiring assent to a statement of faith. Connected with this was the conviction that the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches was overstepping its role in an authoritarian decision to allocate to itself the right to determine the way in which the decision would be made. Critics argued that such a decision was the responsibility of autonomous local churches themselves. Lesser fears concerned whether the proposed constitution for the new denomination, to be written after the new church was born, would further restrict the autonomy of local churches after union had become fact and it was too late to redress such restriction. Finally, it was feared that the proposed union of the various mission boards and agencies of the Congregational Christian Churches with the comparable boards in the Evangelical and Reformed Church would put funds meant for Congregational use under "alien" control.

Fears within the Congregational Christian Churches were exacerbated by a strong negative statement produced by a meeting held in Evanston, Illinois, in November 1947 (see vol.

6:79); by the prolific antimerger pamphleteering of Malcolm K. Burton, Midwestern defender of congregational principles (see vol. 6:80); by Marion J. Bradshaw, leader of a group seeking to continue the work of the Evanston meeting through "The Committee for the Continuation of the Congregational Christian Churches" (see vol. 6:81); and by the efforts of Henry David Gray, a pastor in Hartford, Connecticut, who saw himself as "a mediator" in the controversy (see vol. 6:82).

The intensity of these antimerger activities continued to raise doubts among Congregational Christian people. The League to Uphold Congregational Principles and the Committee for the Continuation of Congregational Christian Churches of the United States joined forces for some particularly virulent pieces (see vol. 6:83). It soon became clear to those who believed that this particular church union was a good idea that they needed to focus discussion within the denomination on the central issues raised by the opposition: the meaning of autonomy in Congregationalism and the nature of relationships between local congregations and regional or national entities, as well as with other denominations.

Addressing Concerns

Proponents for the union heard all of these concerns and mounted a well-organized campaign to educate members and alleviate fears. The Congregational Christian General Council, meeting in Oberlin in 1948, added a set of "Interpretations" to the Basis of Union to explain points in the latter that had given rise to misunderstandings (see vol. 6:84). The Oberlin meeting endorsed the Basis of Union with Interpretations by an overwhelmingly positive vote of 1000 to 11 (some reports say 12)

Unfortunately, the Interpretations led to difficulties within the Evangelical and Reformed Church. It was not clear to the Evangelical and Reformed Church whether the Interpretations changed the meaning of the Basis of Union in any particulars; and furthermore, once the Interpretations were added, the General Synod and the regional synods of the Evangelical and Reformed Church needed to vote again.

Evangelical and Reformed Church members were concerned that a new concept had been introduced in the Interpretations, a concept that at first seemed quite unacceptable. Paragraph (a) of the Interpretations read, "The Basis of Union calls for a union of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the General Synod of the United Church of Christ." For the Evangelical and Reformed Church, this narrow definition of union was theologically thin. Organic union took place between whole churches, not between the executive committees of churches. The Interpretations clarified for Evangelical and Reformed leaders how the principle of the "local autonomy" of every congregation in the polity of the Congregational Christian Churches made it impossible for the Congregational Christian General Council to act for all the congregations. Yet, theologically it also affirmed that the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches was itself called together as "church." The General Council, as church, could make decisions for itself and invite local churches to affirm or reject them. The Interpretations led both denominations to deeper understandings of their differences in polity, and eventually the additional language was accepted by to the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Proponents of union among the Congregational Christians tried to allay fears by answering every conceivable question. They pointed out places in the Basis of Union where local church autonomy was positively guaranteed, and noted that the Interpretations specifically said that the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches "acts only for itself" and not

for the local churches. They also sought to allay constitutional fears by pointing out that the constitution, yet to be written for the new denomination, would "define and regulate" the role of the new General Synod, but it would only "describe" the "free and voluntary relationships" that local churches, associations, and conferences might choose to enter. They tried to reduce financial anxieties by asserting that merged boards in the new church would all remain independent in administering their funds.

Finally, in 1948 the General Council adopted "Comments on the Interpretations of the Basis of Union," written by Evangelical and Reformed leader George W. Richards, lest anyone misunderstand the purpose of the Interpretations. To reassure Congregational Christian congregations, a pamphlet was prepared and circulated by respected Congregational historian Frederick L. Fagley, explaining to local church members that the United Church of Christ would not compromise the autonomy of any local congregation (see vol. 6:85).

During the campaign to convince local Congregational Christian churches to vote for the Basis of Union with Interpretations, it had been stated repeatedly that the union would not be consummated unless it was supported by a 75 percent favorable vote of local congregations. This was not a legal stipulation, but it was considered a good faith promise. Therefore, after the General Council submitted the Basis of Union with Interpretations to local congregations, conferences and associations for advice, it faced a procedural crisis when only 72.8 percent of voting local congregations endorsed the merger. After some soul searching, and in spite of the less than 75 percent vote, the Congregational Christian leadership decided to move ahead, confident that God was with them on their long journey toward unity. The leadership of the anti-merger movement, however, felt just as strongly that God opposed the union. Many of them could not understand how any continuation of the union process could be justified when the vote had failed to reach 75 percent.

Nevertheless, at its meeting in Cleveland in February 1949, the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches once again approved the "Basis of Union with Interpretations," this time by a vote of 757 to 172. And a few months later, in May 1949 the Evangelical and Reformed synods voted their approval of the same. Once again, a uniting General Synod was scheduled to give birth to the proposed United Church of Christ, this time it was to be June 26, 1950.

Church Union around the World

It is important to note that while these two United States denominations struggled toward union with one another, Christians all over the world also were increasing their commitment to church unity. The global ecumenical movement created an exciting atmosphere of hope and expectation among all Christian churches and increased the pressure within all denominations to seek church union. Leaders of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church were pioneers in international union efforts, even as they labored to bring their own small union into being at home.

When Willard L. Sperry, dean of Harvard Divinity School, participated in the World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh in 1937, he told the readers of *Advance* that world movements for Christian unity were no longer an "academic elective," or an "ecclesiastical luxury"; the situation in the mission fields, and the "organized and fully self-conscious theories of race, class, and state which [were] candidly anti-Christian" springing up within Christendom itself, made a united voice in the church "a spiritual and moral necessity" (see vol. 6:86). An editorial in *Advance* the same year declared that the "common peril from war, materialism, racial

and national dominations, and political and economic dictatorships" had made imperative a Life and Work Conference in Oxford, England, on "Church, Community, and State." Churches around the globe were coming to a visceral awareness that if the church of Jesus Christ was going to make a compelling witness in their threatened and divided world, churches not only had to act as one, they had to be one. The "Affirmation of Union" sent out to the churches by the Edinburgh meeting made this point with passion.

Both the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches had participated (in their earlier denominational forms) in the Federal Council of Churches from its inception in 1908. At the same time, Henry Smith Leiper, the United States secretary of the World Council of Churches, regularly broadened the horizons of *Advance* readers by reporting on "Ecumenical Milestones" such as the Second World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo; the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches, which met with the International Missionary Council to plan the first World Assembly of the Churches; the meeting of the most representative conference of theological seminary students ever held in Oxford, Ohio; and the International Missionary Council meeting in Whitby, Canada. All of these events made 1947 an astonishing year.

In 1938, the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church had greeted the provisional formation of the World Council of Churches of Christ enthusiastically. Although delayed by World

War II, when the first assembly of the World Council of Churches finally was held in 1948, they were there. Meeting under the theme "Man's Disorder and God's Design," churches from forty-four countries sent 351 official delegates, and hundreds of alternates, consultants, accredited visitors, youth delegates, and representatives of the press to Amsterdam. It had taken almost thirty years for churches around the world to accept responsibility for a permanent ecumenical body.

Members of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches took key leadership roles in this new ecumenical organization. H. Richard Niebuhr, well-known Evangelical theologian, presented a major address to the section of the assembly dealing with "The Universal Church in God's Design," and Douglas Horton, minister of the Congregational Christian Churches, served as chair of the American Committee for the World Council, and of the nominating committee of the World Council's Central Committee. After the assembly, Horton said, "The actual meeting of the churches is more important than anything which was done. The spirit making for union has achieved a body. The churches that participated are one in a new sense. The ecumenical movement at last has a roof over its head. We can stand up to the forces about us in a way which was never possible before." For many, the extraordinary significance of the event was best expressed at the moment when the "Message of the Assembly" was adopted: "Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another. Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to Him, and have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together."

The fact that 147 churches so separated by history and tradition could actually come together and stay together made the participating churches strikingly conscious that the central point around which they all gathered was Jesus Christ and his saving work. They affirmed that "the World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior"; its stated goal was "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance toward that unity in order that the world may believe."

The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches were euphoric over the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches. For months the pages of *Advance* and of the *Messenger* were full of glowing, eyewitness accounts and assessments of this historic occasion. Local church federations and ecumenical gatherings were newly inspired to do their work as part of, and necessary to, a growing worldwide ecumenical movement (see vol. 6:87).

The World Council of Churches set about offering counsel and providing opportunities for united action, but it had no power to legislate for the churches. Its authority consisted simply in the truth and wisdom of its pronouncements. Nevertheless, questions were soon raised about the meaning of membership in the World Council. Within several years, it sought to explain itself without doing violence to the diverse understandings of the Christian church held by its members. At a meeting in Toronto in 1950, a statement on "The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches" was received by the Central Committee and commended for study and comment to the churches (see vol. 6:88). The statement did two things: it acknowledged that the World Council "deals in provisional ways with divisions between existing churches, which ought not to be, because they contradict the very nature of the Church," and it recognized that there was a place in the World Council "for those churches which recognize other churches as churches in the full and true sense, and for those which do not." All member churches might not be able to accept each other as true and pure churches, but they had decided not to remain in isolation and they had come together to explore their differences in mutual respect, trusting in the Holy Spirit. This "Toronto Statement" set a new tone for ecumenical relationships around the world and provided important support for the ongoing union efforts of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed churches.

As already noted, the Congregational, Christian, and Evangelical and Reformed denominations were founding members of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 and supported it continuously for forty years. George W. Richards of the Evangelical and Reformed Church was a key leader in the Federal Council during most of those years. In 1950, when the Federal Council was reconstituted into the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America—with twenty-nine participating denominations and eight participating interdenominational agencies—the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church were founding members (see vol. 6:89).

The creation of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches were important ecumenical milestones. Yet, even as they came of age, the seeds for deeper understandings of church union were being sown. When the Congregational Christian General Council met at Grinnell, Iowa, in June 1946, a resolution was passed asking the Federal Council of Churches to invite those denominations that recognized each other's ministries and sacraments to send official representatives to a plenary conference to explore the possibility of developing an even closer union. Twelve years later, in May 1958, eight of the largest denominations in the United States met at the first Greenwich Conference on Church Union and developed an ambitious plan of union for what they tentatively named a "United Church in the United States" (see vol. 6:90). This action was an inspiration in the formation of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which came into being in 1960.

The story of the Consultation on Church Union has carried forward the ecumenical vocation of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church beyond their own union. From 1960 to 2000, four major COCU unity proposals were developed. Understandings of church union shifted from a 1984 consensus statement that "covenant

communion" was an "interim step" on the way to organic union, to a conviction that even though covenant communion might not find expression in forms and structures, it was a visible and organic kind of union. The historic distinction between federal and organic union began to blur as churches gained an appreciation of each other through "communion in sacred things." This stance has led COCU denominations to seek mutual recognition of one another's ministries, and the "reconciliation of ministries." In 1999, after nearly forty years of theological dialogue, the nine major denominations belonging to COCU affirmed a "new relationship" to be called "Churches Uniting in Christ."

In the 1940s, however, such collaboration was only a dream as the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church negotiated their union. They took each step as it came, but they believed that they were part of a movement that would eventually unite churches around the world.

Years in Court

Unfortunately, on April 18, 1949, the vision of Christian unity that informed the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed union had another setback. On that date the Cadman Memorial Church in Brooklyn, New York, and the Cadman Memorial Congregational Society filed suit against Helen Kenyon, moderator of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, challenging the right of the General Council to negotiate the union. This court case and its appeals took four long years to resolve. During those years, the Congregational Christian advocates for union struggled to keep a positive momentum going, while their Evangelical and Reformed colleagues sought to stand faithfully by them. It was a very difficult time.

In 1950, a lower court in New York supported the Cadman Memorial Church in its decision, and issued a permanent injunction against any collaborative or joint activity between the two denominations. While still under injunction, the Congregational Christian General Council reaffirmed its hope that union could be effected between the two bodies, and appealed the decision. In 1952 the courts ruled in favor of the denominational leaders, but the reversal was immediately appealed by the Cadman Church. Once again the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches reaffirmed its desire for and intention to consummate the union, while the Evangelical and Reformed Church patiently waited.

In the course of the legal/ecclesiastical arguments of the case, different understandings of Congregationalism were formulated and upheld, and efforts were made to resolve the differences. As minister of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, Douglas Horton in 1950 reminded the General Council that John Robinson, minister to the Pilgrims in 1620, had spoken "Of Equability and Perseverance in Well Doing" needed by people on both sides of the debate they were having with the Church of England, calling for a redoubling of energies in those ministries where God's will remained clear to all. The General Council tried to make peace. It appointed a Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity with representatives from both sides of the issue, who were asked to study the historic documents and current practices of Congregational polity in order to find some way out of the impasse. Unfortunately, a "reconciling conclusion" was never reached. The General Council published the report of the committee in 1954 "for information only," carrying neither the approval nor the disapproval of the General Council or of the Executive Committee. There was no need to say more, because on December 3, 1953, the New York court of appeals upheld the position of the

General Council and dismissed the Cadman case. The legal appeals to stop the formation of the United Church of Christ had run their course (see vol. 6:91).

The United Church of Christ

Once the issues were settled in the courts, union advocates sought to regain their earlier momentum toward union and overcome new fears that had developed within the Evangelical and Reformed Church that the proposed church would need to place too much emphasis on congregational principles. Both churches were delighted to discover that in spite of the court case, their joint commitment to union was still strong. By mid-1954, negotiations were renewed. Seasoned committee members were optimistic, but they were not naive. They knew that success would depend upon cultivating genuine ecumenical dialogue among all of their members again.

For the next few years, the leaders of both churches developed an exhaustive program to prepare the two denominations for union, bringing into action all the techniques and procedures that their ecumenical experiences had taught them. "Get acquainted" meetings were held for lay leaders of both churches in Indiana, Texas, California, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. A joint committee was formed to set up a shared stewardship project "to help demonstrate the added strength which a united church will have." Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed leaders took joint action on recommendations for getting acquainted, including suggestions that local churches, commissions, boards, conferences, synods, associations, and other denominational groups invite fraternal delegates and observers to each other's meetings "to foster fellowship and understanding"; and that the Executive Committee of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches provide subscriptions to *Advance* for members of the General Council of the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the latter reciprocate with subscriptions to the *Messenger*. Some two hundred Evangelical and Reformed clergy voluntarily exchanged pulpits with an equal number of Congregational Christian ministers in what the *Messenger* referred to as "the most extensive get-acquainted program ever attempted by Protestant bodies in America." Most of the spring meetings of the Evangelical and Reformed synods in 1956 invited representatives of the Congregational Christian Churches to address them, and set aside time to consider problems that had to be met before union could be effected.

At the annual convocation of Eden Theological Seminary in 1956, Albert Buckner Coe, moderator of the Congregational Christian Churches, gave four lectures introducing Congregationalism to the more than two hundred ministers in attendance. A remarkable series of informative articles appeared simultaneously in *Advance* and the *Messenger*, describing the history, programs, and organization of the two communions. Members of the Executive Committee of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches and the General Council of the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church issued a joint "Report to the Churches," urging church members to be controlled by their faith and not their fears, and expressing their resolve to go forward toward union. Prominent church leaders who had been part of the union movement from the beginning began to collect little-known details "for the archives," and once again published personal statements enthusiastically supporting union. It is difficult to imagine any further step that could have been taken to secure union in the minds and hearts of people in the local congregations of both denominations.

Some remaining opponents to union among the Congregational Christians founded the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches to provide an alternative national

body for concerned congregations, but in the end only 5 percent of local Congregational Christian congregations joined.

When the votes were taken in 1956, both denominations voted overwhelmingly to move toward a "Uniting General Synod" in 1957, trusting each other enough to allow the writing of a new constitution, the preparation of a statement of faith and the merging of the national boards of the two churches to occur at a later date.

The interval between 1956 and the Uniting General Synod in 1957 was marked by one last skirmish between the Congregational Christian General Council and antimerger groups. A final attempt was made to halt the union through the civil courts, but that legal maneuver was unsuccessful.

When finally convened, the Uniting General Synod was a carefully orchestrated event culminating more than fifteen years of effort. It was filled with gratitude, joy, and celebration that God had stayed with everyone throughout the process, and that they were finally able to consummate a union that they believed to have been God's will from the beginning. Not surprisingly, some of the most profound moments of the synod were expressed in worship.

The formal "Declaration of Union" preceding the service of worship on the evening of June 25, 1957, expressed eloquently the conviction of both churches that God had called them together and been active on their behalf. Recalling the biblical mandate to make Christ's church one, Fred Hoskins, minister and secretary of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, used language reminiscent of the 1804 "LastWill and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" and echoed in the preamble to the Basis of Union: "moved by the conviction that we are all united in spirit and purpose and are in agreement on the substance of the Christian faith and the essential character of the Christian life; affirming our devotion to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our membership in the holy catholic church, which is greater than any single church and than all the churches together; believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die; and confronting the divisions and hostilities of our world, and hearing with a deepened sense of responsibility the prayer of our Lord 'that they may all be one even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they are also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.' "

Short addresses were given by James E.Wagner, president of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and Hoskins, both speaking to aspects of the participants' feelings of the moment. Wagner addressed the nostalgia of those looking backward at the denomination they had loved so much, anxious about all the change and newness that the United Church of Christ would certainly bring, fearful suddenly about whether they were really doing God's will. He expressed confidence that, as one denomination, God would bring them all "some better thing" that neither of the two had possessed alone, and that they would all be further enriched by the oneness and fullness they would share together in Christ (see vol. 6:92). Hoskins's address was predominantly a jubilant thanksgiving to the triune God, who had supported them throughout their struggle toward union. Carrying the spirits of all of those present with him, he began and ended his address with the declaration "God be praised for this hour! Christ be exalted for this joy!" (see vol. 6:92).

The following morning, delegates to the Uniting Synod came together in the Old Stone Church (Presbyterian) located on the square in downtown Cleveland for a celebration of the Lord's Supper, "conceived in this instance," as explained in the program, "not only in terms of its traditional significance but also as the symbol of dedication of the delegates to the solemn

responsibilities which are theirs and of their acknowledgment that, without the blessings of Almighty God and the guidance of his Holy Spirit, all their doings are nothing worth and shall be brought to nought."

The heady joy and gratitude for the day found expression in several hymns, inspired by the union, that had been composed by pastors William C. Nelson and Gerald H. Hinkle, and in eloquent prayers offered at different times in the proceedings by Douglas Horton, former minister and secretary of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches; Gerhard Grauer, Chairman of the Commission on Closer Relations with Other Churches; and Samuel Press, president emeritus of Eden Theological Seminary, who was recognized along with Truman Douglass as having begun the movement toward union so many years earlier. (See vol. 6:93)

At the conclusion of the festivities, the General Synod of the new denomination sent out a "Message to the Churches from the Uniting General Synod" (see vol. 6:94). Addressed to "the Members of our Fellowship and to the Whole Church of Jesus Christ throughout the World," the message was signed by the leaders of the new denomination: Moderators Louis W. Goebel and GeorgeW. Hastings; Co-presidents Fred Hoskins and James E. Wagner; and Co-secretaries Fred S. Buschmeyer and Sheldon E. Mackey.

Fully aware that the United Church of Christ was an unusual accomplishment for Protestantism in the United States—a union of two denominations with different national and cultural origins, different church polity and intradenominational structures—the message made clear that the forces behind their union were theological, indeed christological. They came together "because the two companies of Christians have held and hold the same basic belief, that Christ and Christ alone is Head of the Church. From Him derive the understanding of God as Father, the participation in the same Spirit, the doctrines of faith, the influence toward holiness, the duties of divine worship, the apprehension of the significance of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the observance of church order, the mutual love of Christians, and their dedication to the betterment of the world. To be drawn to Him is to be drawn to one another, and to acknowledge Him as Head is to feel pain in dismemberment one from the other." The message also affirmed that union was not a state once and for all achieved, but "a process, informed by growth and adventure" and leading finally to "communion fulfilled in Christ."

The local *Cleveland Plain Dealer* recognized the joy and significance of the union. In a cartoon entitled "Blessed Event," the newspaper pictured the arrival of the United Church of Christ as the birth of a baby brought by the proverbial stork. This baby would continue to grow and develop along its whole life's journey—in this case, toward the union of all of Christ's followers throughout the whole inhabited earth (see vol. 6:94).

From Elsabeth Slaughter Hilke, ed. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ, Vol. VI: Growing Toward Unity* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 503-518.