

the Evolution *of a* UCC Style



History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ

Randi Jones Walker

*Barbara,
Thanks for
years of
encouragement
& wisdom
Randi*



UNITED
CHURCH
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dedication

*To the members of my UCC History classes, 1992–2003,
especially, Jeanette Zaragoza, Bea Morris, Evelyn Vigil,
Roger Barkley, Christopher Hayward, Johari Jabir,
Brenda Brown, Andrea Hartman, and Diana Coberly
who asked genuinely new questions.*

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Covenant Community

Congregationalism and Its Discontents



One could argue that this book should begin with this chapter on the question of the relationship of covenant and congregationalism in the life of the United Church of Christ. But to do that one would have to argue that this is the central issue among us, and I think it is not. Listening recently to the business of the Twenty-Fourth General Synod in Minneapolis, I reflected that the questions of diversity, cultural and theological, are much more at issue among UCC people. But as we struggle with these divisive issues, the ecclesiological question shows up in sharp relief. Where are these questions to be settled and with what authority for the rest of the Church? In the first chapter I explored the issues raised by our common origin story and its ecumenical idealism for a world that proved much more complex than its founders realized. In the next chapter, I opened up the question of that complexity as it emerges in the racial and cultural diversity of both our Church and in its larger cultural context. In the next two chapters, I traced the theological resources available in the United Church of Christ for discussing matters of diversity, both the theological diversity manifested in the Protestant Reformation, particularly the way in which the United Church of Christ attempts to hold those diverse streams together, and in the openness of the liberal style in theological thinking to entertain unusual questions and new ideas in the light of the Christian Gospel. However, I wish to illustrate the evolution of a culture, both intellectual and practical, in the United Church, not simply trace a theological trajectory. This project requires that we turn next to how these

particular theological developments and the diverse cultural context of present-day American society come together.

The engagement with cultural diversity is far more obvious in the national setting of the UCC, or in the Conferences, than it is in the local congregations, partly because the conversation is more concentrated and its ongoing expressions are more readily available. However each of these settings of the Church holds authority and uses it to shape the whole Church. For this reason, the dilemmas posed by a covenant ecclesiology expressed in a congregational form affect both the way we as a church define ourselves and how we live. For many, the key concept in our ecclesiology is contained in the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, and some might argue that this statement is the closest thing we have in the UCC to a dogma.

The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in the Constitution and 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 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 retain 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 ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it.¹

The critical importance of this paragraph in the formation of the United Church of Christ has been discussed in other places, so I will not work through that matter again here, but only note that the United Church of Christ is fundamentally defined here as a collection

of congregations. However, the paragraph preceding this paragraph, often overlooked in discussions of the role of the local congregation in the life of the UCC, changes the complexion of this congregationalism with the introduction of the context of fellowship within which we are to place all considerations of the local congregation.

The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility.²

While the independence of the local congregation is inalienable that independence never exists theologically outside of the covenant binding the whole Church together. Therefore, one of the key words today in the ecclesiology of the United Church of Christ is covenant, and it is prominent in the 2001 revisions of the Constitution and Bylaws. However, this has not always been the case.

While we think its use goes back to the Puritan era and has continually been part of our ecclesiological vocabulary, the word 'covenant' appears in United Church of Christ usage for the first time in the Statement of Faith (1959), "The Holy Spirit binds in covenant faithful people of all nations tongues and races."³ But the vocabulary of the Statement of Faith did not immediately appear in governance documents. Aside from the continued tradition of local church covenants in the Congregational Christian churches, the idea of covenant as a particularly important idea in the UCC is relatively new. The term covenant first appears in the Constitution of 1984 and in the 1986 Manual on Ministry as a theological idea underlying the commitments between authorized ministers, local churches, or other calling bodies and Associations.⁴ The 1984 Constitution and Bylaws, Article V Paragraph 22 reads "The Call of an Ordained Minister to a Local Church establishes a covenantal relationship . . ." The 1986 Manual on the Ministry indicated (page 3) the import of the addition to the constitution as providing for "new covenantal understandings and commitments between persons authorized for ministry, local churches, calling bodies, and the

United Church of Christ." Most recently covenant served as the central theological concept in the restructuring of the national setting of the church. In the 2000 edition of the Constitution and Bylaws, the new Article III defines a covenantal understanding for the whole church.

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.⁵

This represents a recovery into the late twentieth century context of an idea from the Puritan tradition.

United Church of Christ definitions of the Church and the ecclesiastical practices the denomination nurtures derive theologically from thinking about the nature of the Church as primarily covenantal, even when it has not been explicitly stated. In tension with this theological base is Congregational ecclesiology from two of the historical traditions within the church. While the Congregationalists developed the covenant theology out of the Reformed traditions of the Reformation, the addition of different understandings of the way covenant bestows authority has complicated any attempt to describe United Church of Christ ecclesiology simply as covenantal to the satisfaction either of those within the communion or those without.

The dilemmas of covenant in conflict with congregationalism are almost notorious within the United Church of Christ. In order to understand, and eventually resolve, these dilemmas it is necessary to look carefully at the nature of covenant, as it is found in the Bible to which they all refer, and how it was understood in the traditions, as well as the ways the United Church of Christ people currently understand it.

The Congregational, Reformed, Christian, and Evangelical traditions all had within their understandings of the nature and purpose of the Church some idea of a covenantal relationship both of the Church with God and the Church and its people with one another. Definitions and emphases differed in each communion. While each tradition drew its theology of covenant from the Bible, it is helpful to look historically at the traditions themselves and then look at the ways in which they used the Biblical texts. Finally we will look at the way in which the idea of covenant took shape in the formation and life of the United Church of Christ. All four traditions have also placed responsibility in the local congregation for being the church in its time and place, and given local congregations the freedom to develop their own ways of doing things and their own theological emphases in order to carry out that responsibility.

After considering this historical background, I wish to look at three cases which have tested aspects of covenant theology in relationship to congregationalism; the ordination of women, the issue of racism in the church, and the questions of sexual orientation. These issues have not only been points at which covenant and congregational ecclesiologies have been at odds, they are also points which test the covenant relationships of the United Church of Christ with the whole church in its ecumenical relationships. All of these examples challenge the idea that congregationalism alone defines UCC ecclesiology any more than covenant alone does. In all of them theological themes of the beloved community, covenant communion, and the mission of God emerge as the Church and the churches wrestle with their challenges.

The Biblical Ideas of Covenant and Local Congregation

In order to make some sense of these ideas of covenant within a Protestant American Christian understanding of the Church, let us look more closely now at how the idea is used in the Bible. The word occurs in Genesis early in the saga of the Hebrew people, first with Noah after the great flood, then with Abraham and Sarah, and finally with Moses and the people at Sinai. The word in Hebrew is *berith*, based in the verb meaning "to cut down the middle." And to mark a covenant a sacrificial animal was cut down the middle and burnt as an offering to God. *Berith* means to make an alliance of friendship, an agreement or pledge, a treaty, or a constitution between monarch and people. In the Hebrew language, it is an alliance between unequals.

One party is condescending to another. It is not the people who make a covenant with God, but God who makes a covenant with them. The terms of the covenant are not the same on both sides, the people promised faithful obedience, God promised faithful care and protection. In the case of the Church, in its covenant of grace with God, God has condescended to offer grace to humanity.

Translated into Greek, the Hebrew term loses its unequal connotation. *Diatheke* means a declaration of one's will or testament. But here the idea is one sided, the first party, the one making the will or covenant, is always understood but the second party, the one addressed, is implied and does not necessarily have any reciprocal will or testament to make. Later, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Latin, three different Latin words represented *berith* in different contexts. The first was *conventio*, literally "come together," signifying an agreement or pact. The second term was *constitutio*, to ordain, or to make it so. The third was a literal translation of *diatheke*, *testamentum*, to declare one's will. Those who translated the Bible into English, whether from Hebrew, Greek, or Latin found the Latin based *convener*, "to come together" most satisfying translation for the Greek and Hebrew terms and, along with the noun derived from it, *covenant*, this became the preferred English term for translating the Biblical words.

The question a present-day interpreter must ask, especially when a term is recovered for significant theological use in forming a community, is does the inequality inherent in the Hebrew *berith* carry over into the English *covenant* when used by the United Church of Christ to describe its ecclesiology? This is particularly relevant when we seek to base our theological language on Scripture. Certainly, the Church's covenant with God remains an unequal covenant although certain theological streams in the United Church of Christ allow us to think of a God who "empties himself [herself] and takes the form of a servant"⁶ thus an equal. The question nags where the term refers to our relationships with one another. At least for now, I believe we have taken the word only in its Latin connotation of an agreement among equals and that we use the word in its Biblical sense to recognize the gravity and spiritual power of our completely equal agreements to live together as God's people.

The idea of 'congregation' also occurs in both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. In the Hebrew the word is *kahal* and can mean simply

assembly of people, but theologically it refers to the assembly of the people of Israel to hear from God, as when Moses spoke to the people or when King Josiah called for an assembly of the people to hear the scroll of Deuteronomy read.⁷ In the stories of the return of the people from exile in Babylon, the *kahal* referred to the assembly of the redeemed in Jerusalem.

In the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint, the word for the congregation is *ekklesia*, meaning "called out from," also the term for a political or religious assembly. In the New Testament, the word for *ekklesia* always refers to the congregation, the assembly of the people, rather than, as we think of it in the English term "church" or the German "*kirche*" as ambiguously referring also to the building in which the congregation meets.⁸ Those who translated Christianity and its writings into Latin simply adopted the Greek term Latinizing it as "ecclesia." The Romans already used the term with respect to the political governing assemblies in the Greek cities. To them, the Church was simply another kind of Greek assembly. This minor fact suggests a deeper cultural current in the formation of Christianity. The Church took shape as an institution in a Greek cultural context, in which the governing authority rested, not with a single individual, or with a representative body but with the whole assembly of the citizens. It has of course been translated into many other cultural forms in the course of centuries, but the sense of congregation as a basic location of the wholeness of the Church has very deep roots. From this biblical vocabulary, later theologians shaped the theologies of the Church.

Calvin's Understanding of Covenant and Congregation

Calvin's interpretation of the biblical use of covenant has been most influential in the traditions of the United Church of Christ. He carefully preserved the inequality between God and humanity, but the equality of human beings with each other within the covenant Calvin regarded both Testaments to be witnesses to the same covenant. "The Old Testament was established upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ's intercession."⁹ From our perspective it is sometimes difficult to remember that Calvin's great objective theologically was to defend the freedom of God, not the freedom of the congregation. The *testamentum* or covenant of Scripture was the declaration of God's will. In Calvin's theology, the first covenant, the covenant God made with

Adam and Eve in the garden, reaffirmed in the covenant with Noah and his family, with Abraham and Sarah, with the Israelites in their "baptism" in crossing the Red Sea, and finally with the whole people of Israel at Mt. Sinai (or Horeb) is a covenant based on what human beings must *do* to be blessed. It was a covenant of *works* and human beings violated it from the beginning. However, Calvin regarded it as a covenant of *grace* for precisely this reason. Since no human being could keep all of its terms except by God's grace, the covenant of grace did not begin with Christ, as Christians often thought, but existed from the beginning. This was a covenant of unequals, and only by God's grace was humanity ever able to stay in the covenant at all.

In Calvin's thought, the covenant of grace is, for Christians, sealed in their participation in the sacraments. As circumcision was for the Jews, Baptism is the initial recognition of our incorporation into the covenant. "All believers have one common vow which, made in baptism, we confirm and, so to speak, sanction by catechism and receiving the Lord's Supper. For the sacraments are like contracts by which the Lord gives us his mercy; and we in turn promise him obedience."¹⁰ Calvin was in favor of infant baptism because he viewed incorporation into the covenant of grace as God's gift to us, not something we can ever understand or do for ourselves.¹¹ From the moment the elect are conceived they are in the covenant of grace and baptism is simply the outward sign of that incorporation. This is why for Calvin, it was important that each person know of her or his own baptism, not necessarily the literal story, but that each knows what baptism is, because we rely on this memory when we fall away from grace, as we all inevitably do, to find our way back. It becomes a light, a rope to hang onto, a map, a compass (to use a metaphor Calvin might not have known).

Communion for Calvin is also a sign, a seal of the covenant of grace, it is a sign of the "new" covenant, or the covenant written on the heart, not that written in the law.¹² Communion signifies the redemption of the person suffering under original sin. Original sin¹³ then is the inevitability of our falling away from the covenant. Inevitably we will break the covenant of grace and will not be able to find our way back unaided. Calvin's account of the atonement is based upon Augustine's reading of Paul, that humanity required a mediator to bridge the infinite gap between human and divine, a gap that for Calvin would have existed whether humanity sinned or not. Christ the

Redeemer as both human and divine is able to serve as this bridge.¹⁴ At the table in the Lord's Supper, a mystery fundamentally impervious to human curiosity, we receive this seal of redemption. Calvin said surprisingly little about communion, perhaps because of his interest in healing the breach between Luther and Zwingli on this matter. For our purposes it is important to note the role of the symbols of sacrifice and blood in Calvin's theology of the sacraments. For him the covenant is "cut" between God and human beings through a sacrifice that entails spilling blood (read life) by God the powerful one on behalf of the powerless. This covenant is a mystery, but also contains a visible aspect in the revelation of the Law as a guide for keeping within the covenant of grace. Communion signifies participation in the covenant. While Calvin never asserted that the congregation could know whether an individual was among the elect or not, the congregation, he thought, ought to take care that those whose lives were not lived according to the covenant did not receive communion because this possible violation of the covenant would endanger their souls even more.

The Covenant and Congregation in the Ecclesiology of the Traditions of the UCC

Covenant theology in the traditions of the United Church of Christ is rooted in the role the idea of covenant played in the Reformed traditions of the Reformation. We noted that it is necessary to understand the Reformed tradition as plural, and to note the differences between Zwingli and Calvin in the Reformed tradition of the Swiss cities, the German Reformed tradition that developed in proximity with the Lutherans, the Presbyterian expressions found in Scotland and England, and the more radical understandings of the Zwinglian Anabaptists and many of the English Puritans. In the United Church of Christ context it is sometimes helpful to note the connection of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions in the Evangelical Synod, and the Reformed roots of the Baptist and Presbyterian parts of the Christian tradition. By 1957 none of the four traditions of the United Church of Christ could be simply identified as Reformed as if that were a singular form of Protestantism. Each of them had developed a slightly different understanding of covenant.

In the United Church of Christ, we often regard Congregationalism as the tradition who introduced covenant into our discussions of ecclesi-

ology. There is no doubt that the classic tradition contributing to the United Church of Christ understanding of covenant is Congregationalist. However, it is not the only tradition to use ideas of covenant when discussing the nature and purpose of the church, and even in this tradition, the use of the idea of covenant occurs somewhat late, in the American context. The Puritan traditions placed emphasis in Augustinian forms of theology as interpreted by the reformers, particularly Zwingli and Calvin. In none of these traditions does the concept of covenant receive extended attention, except when theologians investigate the understanding of covenant in the Bible, or the nature of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, neither did William Ames, the primary Puritan theologian of the time. Ames' textbook, *The Marrow of Theology* (1629), originally written for children, but soon becoming required reading at Harvard and Yale, was for nearly a hundred years the standard in the field.¹⁵ Ames never used the concept of covenant to explain the nature of the church.



The Puritan concern with covenant¹⁶ began with the Reformed idea of the covenant of grace, particularly as Calvin had articulated it. For Robert Browne, the use of the term covenant with regard to the Church made it mutual among the members of the congregation with Christ understood as the monarch¹⁷ under whom the Church lives. The sacraments are the outward signs of that covenant. In particular, Browne argued that the covenant is voluntary on both sides, and therefore, a state church is an idea completely contradictory to the Gospel.

“In the meane time let them knowe that the Lords people is of the willing sorte. They shall come unto Zion and inquire the way to Jerusalem [Jer. 50:5], not by force nor compulsion, but with their faces thitherward: yea as the hee goates shall they be before the flocke, for the haste they have unto Zion, and they them selves shall call for the covenaunt, saying, Come let us cleve faste unto the Lorde in a perpetuall covenaunt that shall never be forgotten.”¹⁸

Later, most clearly in the American context, the Congregationalists in the Cambridge Platform developed the concept of the covenant as defining the establishment of a church. To fully understand the eccle-

siology of the Cambridge Platform 1648, it is necessary to look at two related contemporary statements of the nature of the church, the Westminster Confession of 1647 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. The Westminster Confession was crafted by a council of English Puritan church leaders, both Presbyterian and Congregational or Independent, meeting to advise the primarily Puritan English Parliament of that time on theological and ecclesiastical matters.¹⁹ Though they were all Reformed (Calvinist) in theology, Presbyterians held the majority at the Assembly, and therefore, their Confession has a Presbyterian flavor. For the Westminster Assembly ecclesiology rested on the theology of God's covenant of Grace.

The distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.²⁰

The Cambridge Platform stated the definition of a congregational (the Platform specifically rejected the term “independent”) church in this way.

A congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God and the mutual edification one of another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.²¹

This idea of covenant, also under the monarchy of Christ, defined as well the relationship of a group of congregations to each other. This covenant was between Christ and a group, an Association, of equal congregations. Their covenant with each other existed to further work of Christ in the world. The Cambridge Platform also delineated the reasons for this covenant.

When a company of believers purpose to gather into church fellowship, it is requisite for their safer proceeding and the maintaining of the communion of churches that they signify

their intent unto the neighbor churches, walking according unto the order of the gospel, and desire their presence, and help, and right hand of fellowship, which they ought readily to give unto them when there is no just cause of excepting against their proceedings.²²

The Cambridge Platform delineated the other matters besides assisting in the formation of new churches, which belong to Synods and Councils of churches. They were charged with debating and determining “controversies of faith and cases of conscience.” The results of such deliberations by synods and councils of churches were “so far as consonant to the Word of God, . . . to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement therewith (which is the principal ground thereof and without which they bind not at all) but also secondarily, for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.”²³ This is much stronger language regarding the strength of the relation of the individual congregations to each other than is usually given in characterizations of congregationalism. The Congregationalists left open the question of whether the Church meant always each congregation taken alone, or whether Church referred to the whole Church of which each congregation was an expression. The degree to which the covenant among them constituted a Church was never a settled matter in the Congregational communion. This relationship among neighboring churches was most strongly represented among the Connecticut congregations as outlined in the Saybrook Platform that defined the Consociation the final arbiter of disagreements among the churches.²⁴

The German Reformed tradition kept a more presbyterian understanding of covenant, and the covenant was expressed in its ecclesiastical structure. The Reformed churches shared with the Puritan Congregationalists Calvin’s theology of covenant of grace, that Baptism was the sacrament and sign of incorporation into the covenant.²⁵ The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper they also considered to be a seal of the covenant of grace as Calvin did. In the early eighteenth century, the scattered German Reformed congregations in Pennsylvania faced wide ranging attacks on their unity. Since they were so far from their German church organizations, had no settled pastor among them²⁶ and were placed in a setting of unprecedented religious diversity, they

called upon the Classis of Amsterdam to assist them by providing them with pastoral leadership and a sense of unity.²⁷ The Classis of Amsterdam already had churches in the area, though Dutch speaking. The consistories of these congregations took this step because they desired to be in covenant with others to preserve their sense of identity. “We were very desirous of enjoying the Seals of the Holy Covenant, which we had not been able to secure in this far-off region according to the custom of the Reformed Church, and for want of which some had resorted to Dissenters.”²⁸

As the church grew, the German Reformed congregations continued to seek to be in strong fellowship with each other, forming a Synod of their own in 1793.²⁹ The synod consisted of the ministers and church elders appointed by the congregations. Their purpose was, according to the Preamble to the “Synodal-Ordnung,” “to establish a wholesome Christian Discipline and to observe the same, not with a view to invade the rights of the civil authority, but that, governing themselves, they may not be exposed to the censure of others.”³⁰ Very much in the style of the Congregational church covenants, the stated purpose centers in the desire to support the Christian life rather than maintaining a particular doctrine. The “Synodal-Ordnung” did not stipulate a doctrinal standard beyond requiring candidates for ministry to have “a true conception of the doctrines of our Church.”

In the mid nineteenth century, the German Reformed Church faced a crisis similar to that in the Congregational communion a century before resulting in the “Half-Way Covenant.”³¹ Since the German Reformed Church practiced infant baptism, they began to question what it meant in an increasingly secularized society on the one hand and in the environment of the revivals and their understanding of conversion on the other. In addressing this issue, the Reformed understanding of covenant came into play.

It is presumed no one will question that it is necessary, at least highly important to the temporal and spiritual well-being of families who are in covenant with God, that they should rightly understand the intimate and deeply interesting relations they sustain to the Church of Christ and the duties which belong to such relations. The minute of Synod, in regard to Church membership, declares that *all baptized per-*

sons are members of the visible Church. This doubtless, is true; but it is also true, we think, that *all those who are included in God's gracious covenant with men [and women], are members of his outward Church*, though they may not have received the appointed token of such membership.³²

Since in the Hebrew tradition, those who were members of the covenant by virtue, for instance, of circumcision, but violated the covenant later in life were held to have cut themselves off from the covenant, so too a person baptized as an infant still had the responsibility of confirming that faith when they were old enough. Nonetheless, it was not the rite of baptism or confirmation itself that conferred participation in the covenant. This definition indicated a broad understanding of who was included in the covenant, and affirmed that it is God who includes people in the covenant, not the church. The letter sent by the Synod attempted to hold together the concern of those in the evangelical or revival camp of the importance of baptism for affirming a person's experience of renewal and forgiveness and those who held that the sacrament conveyed the church's acknowledgment of something God has done and was not itself an act that produced or confirmed salvation.

The Evangelical Synod was the only main tradition to use the concept of covenant, apart from the discussion of baptism. It does not seem to have been an important concept in Christian ecclesiology. The Evangelical Synod shared the general Reformed understanding of the baptismal covenant. In the United States, the German Evangelical churches were far more congregational in their approach to church order than their German compatriots. But the isolated congregations faced several difficulties which drove them to associate with one another just as the German Reformed and the Congregational churches had before them. In his initial call to the Evangelical church ministers to meet together in 1840, Louis Nollau wrote,

In order to establish and foster such fellowship, we propose, if God wills, to hold a fraternal gathering on Wednesday, October 14, 1840 in Gravois Settlement. It is not intended at this time that this meeting shall be a gathering of a "synod," but for the time being it shall simply afford an opportunity to become mutually acquainted. Some important matters will be

deliberated upon, and a covenant of fraternal fellowship will be made.³³

We can see familiar outlines of the need for mutual support among the congregations which led them to associate together in a covenant arrangement that made them more than simply advisory to one another, but nonetheless preserved a high respect for the local congregation and its determinations.

These forms of church life in covenant were not developed apart from broader political currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Particularly important was the philosophical tradition that led also to the Declaration of Independence and the formation of the Constitution of the United States. In their constitutional forms, Reformed church structures, like the Congregational forms, incorporated John Locke's thought on the covenantal (in the Latin sense) nature of society.

And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it; or else this original compact, whereby he with others incorporate into one society, would signify nothing, and be no compact, if he be left free, and under no other ties than he was in before the state of nature.³⁴

However, in the Reformed tradition, freedom signified freedom to obey Christ, not freedom to do simply as one wishes. That would be "antinomy" against order, government or law.

The Idea of the Local Congregation in the Ecclesiologies of the Main Traditions

While covenant is the ecclesiological idea most often associated with congregationalism, what first makes a congregation of people a church is the hope of a beloved community, a place where a person loves and is loved, and thus experiences tangibly the presence of God. This idea of the beloved community was pushed aside in the formation of a state church and existed mainly in the monastic orders if it survived at all. In the early periods of the modern age, as the state church began to weaken, the idea resurfaced among the Protestant ideas about the

church. While such Protestant churches as the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and most of the Reformed became national state churches, some followed an alternate path, the Puritan Separatists were among them. These Protestants returned to a New Testament idea of the church as the community of believers in or followers of Christ, who joined each other in such communities for mutual encouragement and eventually for the purpose of carrying out the mission they believed God had entrusted to them. The troubles the Reformed and the Congregationalists had with their venture in the English American colonies to form congregations based not on the model of the state church but on the model of the gathered community of believers, resulted from their inability in the early years to completely discard the idea of the state church of which everyone was a part. They did not know what to do when the believers who met their criteria for determining those whom God had called were so few, compared to the number who gathered for worship and confessed to belief in the doctrines of the church, but who lacked the experience of assurance of being among the elect. In both instances the more idealistic early Puritans had defined the church in terms of a covenant, but which only those who met the proper criteria could own. But what of the beloved community, what of the nature of the community as encouraging one another? I want to turn to the development of the idea of the local church and its independence or autonomy in the traditions of the UCC for some insights into the ways those who ultimately formed the UCC thought about the beloved community and its mission.

The local church in the traditions and especially the idea of its autonomy played a prominent role in the union discussions and remains a central aspect of any ecclesiological conversation in the UCC.³⁵ The question of the place of the local congregation in the ecclesiology of any church depends on many historical and theological factors. Within the traditions of the United Church of Christ, the Reformation context is important for understanding the concept of the local church or congregation in their ecclesiologies. The Reformed tradition in particular arose in the context of the Swiss cities where the local city population regarded itself as a single congregation, and reform was carried out by the city council with or without the cooperation of the bishop. In this way, the history of the Reformed tradition was different from that of the Lutheran (or Evangelical) tradition where the Reformation began with

an individual theologian, but was organized over an entire territory by the decision of the prince. Similarly in the English Reformation, the process began with the decision of the king and affected the whole nation. The Anabaptists or radicals withdrew altogether from the idea of a national or state church of any kind, and were the first to formulate both the separatist idea of a gathered church of the saints, as opposed to the more general idea of the visible church of all the people of the community. The radical reformers may have developed this idea out of necessity since they were excluded from the state churches. They might have followed the state church tradition had they been in the majority anywhere. The traditions of the United Church of Christ developed their ideas of the role of the local congregation out of these possibilities. The Congregational tradition remains the most important for understanding this matter and it is important now to take note of similar or alternative developments in the other traditions.

In the English Reformation, certain of the Puritans, developed the theological concept of the autonomy of the local congregation. The Puritans were the more radical of the English reformers, desiring the Church of England to more fully incorporate the Protestant principles, especially those of Calvin, into its theology and practice. The designers of the English Reformation instead created an ecclesiology and theology that would allow for unity across Protestant and Catholic lines. The central difficulty of this system for the Puritans lay in the continued connection of the church hierarchy with the state. The bishops were in essence state employees. In addition, the crown made episcopal appointments for secular political ends as well as for ecclesiastical purposes and did not take the local church's will into account. The Puritans were concerned when their churches were served by clergy whose theology and practice failed to meet their standards of piety, teaching, and practice. The majority of Puritans, Calvinist in their theology and tending toward a presbyterian understanding of church structure, remained in communion with the Church of England. Puritan pastors and bishops simply sought the affirmation of the congregation for their appointments and actions. The more radical Puritans, more Anabaptist in theology, formed separate congregations in an effort to keep their churches from corruption with state power, or from what they regarded as extra-biblical practices from the Roman Catholic tradition. The Puritans, therefore, developed two streams of

thought about the autonomy of the local congregation, one out of a separatist stance and the other from a desire to conform in some things for the sake of the unity of church and society.

Both of the Puritan concepts of the local congregation were rooted in the principle that Christ, not the Queen, or the local magistrate, or any human body, is the head of the Church. The separatist Robert Browne argued that "Yea the church hath more authoritie concerning Church government then Magistrates, as it is written, They shall followe thee, and shal goe in Chaines: they shall fall downe before thee, and make supplication unto thee.[Isa. 45:14]. . . . For all powers shall serve and obeye Christ, saith the Prophete."³⁶ Browne's theology of covenant centered on the divine government of the Church and the covenant of the people of God with God formed the foundation of his understanding that the Church should govern itself. In his 1582 "Treatise of Reformation without Taryng for Anie," Browne argued that the civil government or magistrates were not the appropriate rulers of the church, but should rather be ruled by it.

Be ashamed therefore ye foolish shepherdes, and laye not a burthen on the Magistrates, as though they should do that in building the Lordes kingdome, which the Apostles and Prophetes coulde not doo. They could not force Religion, as ye woulde have the Magistrate to do, and it was forbidden the Apostles to preache to the unworthie [Matt. 10:13-14], or to force a planting or governement of the Church. The Lordes kingdome is not by force, neither by an armie or strength [Zech. 4:6], as be the kingdomes of this worlde. Neither durst Moses, nor anie of the good Kings of Iuda force the people by lawe or by power to receive the church government, but after they received it, if then they fell away, and sought not the Lorde, they might put them to death. For the covenante was firste made, as it is written, they made a covenant to seeke the Lord God of their fathers, with all their harte, and with all their soule. . . .But the Lorde shall bring them downe to the dust, and to the pitt, as abhominable carkasses, which would be above the cloudes, yea which dare presume into the throne of Christe Iesus, and usurpe that authoritie and calling in his Church, which is opposed and contrarie to his kingdom and

government. . . .In the meane time let them knowe that the Lords people is of the willing sorte. . . . and they them selves shall call for the covenaut, saying, Come and let us cleave faste unto the Lorde in a perpetuall covenaut that shall never be forgotten.³⁷

The Church governed under the covenant that goes back to the time of Moses, in time will exist in the hearts of the people themselves, having no more need of external government. Thus Browne argued for separation from the false state church. Some of his followers eventually came to New England on the Mayflower in 1620 and worked there to establish this ecclesiastical order.

The nonseparating Puritans held a very similar idea, also derived from Calvin's reading of the New Testament on the organization of the Church. Henry Jacob, one of the earliest theologians of this group, believed that the Congregational ecclesiology could be worked out practically within the existing structures of the Church of England. His description of it, contained in his catechism, "Principles and Foundations of the Christian Religion,"³⁸ is more fully developed than Browne's of fifteen years before. Jacob places membership in the visible Church under the category of the "ordinary Generall means" of salvation.

The ordinary Generall meanes is, to be joyned a Member in som true Visible or Ministeriall Church of Christ. . . .[A Visible Church is constituted and gathered] By a free mutuall consent of Believers joyning & covenanting to live as Members of a holy Society togeather in all religious & vertuous duties as Christ & his Apostles did institute & practice in the Gospell. By such a free mutuall consent also all Civill perfect Corporations did first beginne.³⁹

Jacobs' reading of the early history of Christianity is that the church has always been found in plural form, in multiple congregations. And each of these congregations represents the whole church within itself. "A true Visible or Ministeriall Church of Christ is a particular Congregation being a spirituall perfect Corporation of Believers, & having power in it selfe immediately from Christ to administer all Religious meanes of faith to the members thereof."⁴⁰

John Robinson's "Just and Necessary Apology" offered another development in the concept of the particular congregation. Robinson, a separatist Puritan, developed Jacobs' argument about the New Treatment church, noting that in the New Testament it appears that each congregation consisted of all the believers in a particular place who met together, gathered, or convened, and "with one accord pour out their prayers unto God, when they all partake of one, and the same holy bread, 1 Cor. 10:17; and lastly, when they all together consent unanimously, either in the choice of the same officer, or censuring of the same offender."⁴¹ Robinson wrote his "Apology" to defend his congregation, then residing exile in Holland, against its critics in England. He had difficulty maintaining theologically a way to remain in communion with the Church of England whose bishops he regarded as having corrupted the faith. He believed the godly could no longer fully exercise the Christian religion within the state church. He favored the Pauline idea of individual churches, each of which represents within itself, in its Eucharistic celebration, the body of Christ. However, Robinson did regard the unity of the whole Church as a concern.

If any object, that there is one visible, and catholic church, comprehending as the parts thereof, all the particular churches, and several congregations of diverse places; as there is one ocean, or sea, diversely called, according to the divers regions by whose shores it passeth; and that therefore this matter is not worth labour spending about it, I answer, first, that the catholic church neither is, nor can be called visible: since only things singular are visible, and discerned by sense: whereas universals, or things catholic, are either only in the understanding, as some are of mind; or as others think better, are made such, to wit, universals, by the understanding abstracting from them all circumstantial accidents, considering that the kinds intelligible have their existence in nature, and is in the individuals.⁴²

For Robinson, the unity of the Church could be maintained visibly only in the local congregation. The local congregations can have unity only in a common bond of charity.⁴³ The beloved community, in his view, expressed itself best in the unity of the particular congregation.

We complete our survey of the ecclesiological thinking of the earliest generation of Puritan Congregationalists with William Ames, the nonseparatist, and most influential theologian among them, especially in the American context. Ames differed from Robinson in his definition of the whole church, and unlike Robinson, he articulated the place of covenant within the constitution of a church in this passage from his *Marrow of Theology*.

1. The church living upon earth, though it is not wholly visible, is visible in its parts both individually in its single members and collectively in its companies or congregations.
2. The first visibility is in the personal profession of men [and women]. This does not make a visible church, except as it exists in these particular members, i.e., it makes the church's members visible; the church itself, in its integral state does not become visible in the same place. Acts 19:1 *Paul . . . came to Ephesus where he found certain disciples.*
3. That visibility which is in companies or distinct congregations not only makes a visible church, but, so far as outward form is concerned, also makes as many visible churches as there are distinct congregations. Rev. 1:4, *The seven churches'* 2 Cor. 8:1, 19, *The churches of Macedonia. All the churches.*
4. These congregations are, so to speak, similar parts of the catholic church and partake both of its name and nature.
5. Therefore a particular church, in respect of the nature it has in common with all particular churches, is a species of the church as a genus; but in respect of the catholic church, which has the nature [*ratio*]⁴⁴ of a whole, it is a member made up of various individual members gathered together; and in respect of these members it is also a whole.⁴⁵

While Robinson leaned toward the sectarianism of the separatists in that he believed true faith cannot be separated from holiness of life, he located the unity of the churches in profession of a common faith. "They are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the faith which they profess. 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1."⁴⁶ However, Ames continued, the church is not simply a collection of believers.

Believers do not make a particular church, even though by chance many may meet and live together in the same place, unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves. Otherwise, any one church would often be dissolved into many, and many also merged into one.

This bond is a covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose [ratio] of the church and its edification. . . .

Therefore, no one is rightly admitted into the church except on confession of faith and promise of obedience.

This joining together by covenant makes a church only as it looks toward the exercise of the communion of saints. For the same believing men [and women] may join themselves in covenant to make a city or some civil society when their immediate concern is for the common civil good. But they cannot make a church except as in its constitution they intend holy communion with God and among themselves.⁴⁷

For William Ames, the intention of the believers to participate in holy communion with God and among themselves, is itself a gift of God's grace. Ames was thoroughly Augustinian and Calvinist in his view of human ability to live in a covenantal community.

Grace is the basis of that relation in which [humanity] is united with Christ Jesus. . . . The enlightening of the mind is not sufficient to produce this effect because it does not take away the corruption of the will. Nor does it communicate any new supernatural principle by which it may convert itself. . . . This act of faith depends partly upon an inborn principle or attitude toward grace and partly upon the action of God moving before and stirring it up. John 6:44, *None can come to me, unless the Father . . . draws him.*⁴⁸

It was upon these foundations that the New England Puritan Congregationalists elaborated their distinctive form of polity. We turn now to the Cambridge Platform (1648) to note the further developments of this idea.

The two covenants, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, underlay the Puritan understanding of the church. The church

then is "the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and this is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fillith all in all."⁴⁹ The Puritans agreed also with most Protestants and Catholics of their day, that "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" outside the church.⁵⁰ The few Congregational or Independent delegates to the Assembly agreed with almost all of the Westminster Confession. They differed only on the points regarding church government. The Westminster Confession was, in this regard, definitely Presbyterian.

For the better government and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils. [Acts 15, 2,4,6] . . . III. It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of public worship of God, and government of his Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.⁵¹

Likewise, in New England, the synod of the New England Congregationalists meeting in Cambridge from 1646–1648 in order to influence English policy toward Congregationalism and to defend their orthodoxy and polity against their Presbyterian neighbors, agreed with the theological substance of the Westminster Confession, differing only in their understanding of the nature of the Church. The Cambridge Platform was the result of their deliberations. They did not claim that Congregational churches were the only true churches, but that, "a congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church,⁵² consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God and the mutual edification of one another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus."⁵³ In this ecclesiology, the local church is an expression of the covenant of grace, it is gathered, or rather called by God. Individuals have a choice about joining, and do so upon giving an

account of a converting experience. Having been called into the church through this experience, they make a voluntary covenant with others who have been so called, or after the establishment of the church covenant subsequent new members own it, make it their own.

This form then being by mutual covenant, it followeth, it is not faith in the heart, nor the profession of that faith, nor cohabitation, nor baptism. 1. Not faith in the heart? Because that is invisible. 2. Not a bare profession, because that declar-eth them no more to be members of one church than of another. 3. Not cohabitation; atheists and infidels may dwell together with believers. 4. Not baptism, because it presupposeth a church-estate, as circumcision in the Old Testament, which gave no being unto the church, the church being before it and in the wilderness without it. Seals presuppose a covenant already in being. One person is a complete subject of baptism, but one person is incapable of being a church.⁵⁴

The Cambridge Platform reiterated the principles of the Westminster Confession regarding the role of Synods and Councils but limited the authority of a synod over a particular local church.

It belongeth unto synods and councils to debate and determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience, to clear from the Word holy directions for the holy worship of God and good government of the church, to bear witness against mal-administration and corruption in doctrine or manners in any particular church, and to give directions for the reformation thereof – not to exercise church censures in way of discipline, nor any other act of church authority or jurisdiction, which that presidential synod [the one in Acts 15] did forbear.⁵⁵

The Cambridge Synod reaffirmed the doctrinal position of the Congregationalists in the Reformed tradition, but set forth a different ecclesiology from that of the Westminster Assembly. This ecclesiology, of the Church as a gathered particular local congregation whose members, called into the Church by God through an immediate experience of conversion, live in covenant with one another and live as a congregation accountable in fellowship to the other neighboring churches, remained the foundation of Congregational understanding of the

nature of the church. In the Cambridge Platform and in the Westminster Confession, there is nothing said of the church's mission outside of its own fellowship. The worship of God and edification of the faithful remained the central task of the church. In this ecclesiology, the mission of God is the responsibility of the members of the church in their daily work rather than some organized enterprise of the church as an institution. Just as the visible church is more or less apparent in given times and places, so too the complete expression of this Congregational ecclesiology in the Congregational churches was more or less apparent. In key times in the history of Congregationalism, the separatist principle gained ascendancy and the fellowship of the churches among each other thinned out or failed altogether. Always in congregational ecclesiology, the tension remained between the way the local particular congregation comes to interpret the will of God for it and the way its neighbors respond to that interpretation. Even in Presbyterian or more generally Reformed polity the tension existed though the location of the power to act resided primarily in the larger group rather than in the local congregation.

The Christian churches shared the Congregational view that the local congregation was in itself complete. If anything, the Christians were even more strictly congregational in their theology than the Congregationalists. One of the founding theologians of the Christian movement, Rice Haggard, wrote a pamphlet outlining his ecclesiology. "What is a christian church, but a voluntary society, stipulating to walk by the rules of the gospel?"⁵⁶ The gospel, Haggard claimed was crystal clear. It needed no ecclesiastical body to interpret it for the individual believer, nor did it need to be clarified by creeds. Haggard elaborated his idea of the Church from the New Testament.

Let all christians consider themselves members one of another: because in the estimation of scripture they are so indeed. This is illustrated and proved from Christ himself being the foundation, and his church the house, or superstructure built upon that foundation—he is the vine, they are the branches—he is the head, and they are the members of his body, knit together by joints and bands. And therefore they are members one of another in particular. Hence it follows, [t]hat all christians ought to be members of one church. Because we find but one

foundation for a church, and that is Christ; "and other foundation can no [one] lay." All therefore that is built upon that foundation, is one superstructure, or one body in Christ. This is his mystical body, and no other. And the name of this body originates from its head, which makes it the christian church, or church of Christ.⁵⁷

The Christian movement was reluctant to elaborate further than the imagery and theology of the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. They insisted on the independence of the local congregation. This principle, one of the five or six by which Christians identified their movement, was delineated in several places. In the "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery," marking the withdrawal of several ministers from that Presbyterian body to the Christian movement, they set forth their congregational ideals.

We *will*, that the church of Christ resume her native right of internal government—try her candidates for the ministry, as to their soundness in the faith, acquaintance with experimental religion, gravity and aptness to teach; and admit no proof of their authority but Christ speaking in them. We will, that the church of Christ look up to the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest, and that she resume her primitive right of trying those *who say they are apostles and are not*.

We *will*, that each particular church, as a body, actuated by the same spirit choose her own preacher, and support him by a free will offering, without a written *call* or *subscription*—admit members—remove offences; and never henceforth delegate her right of government to any⁵⁸

On the other hand, the Christians envisioned all churches united on these principles, so that Haggard could hope all Christians to be members of one church. For the Christians the Church also signified the universal Church, whether it could now be said to be visible in its unity or not. From individual membership in a local congregation, to that congregation's membership in a convention, any visible unity was entirely voluntary or uncoerced. In its "Manifesto," the General Convention of the Christian Church declared, "It is the steadfast belief of this body that Christ established but *one* Church, designing that all

his followers, as members of that one body, should harmoniously work together for the salvation of the world."⁵⁹ While rejecting the division of the Church into "sects," its division into local congregations was its natural form. The differences among them should not be the occasion for division of the whole Church. "It is our belief that entire unanimity of opinion upon matters of theological doctrine and ecclesiastical polity, is unattainable, so long as "we see through a mirror darkly;" but that a unity of love, forbearance and cooperation is fully within the reach of all true christians."⁶⁰

Certainly, the unity of the whole Church, or that of the local congregation did not depend for Christians on a particular statement of Christian doctrine. In his 1838 article in the *Christian Palladium*, Simon Clough, an itinerant minister in Maine, wrote giving an extensive argument against the use of creeds "as terms of Christian communion." The only standard of Christian faith and practice was "the pure word of life, and light, and truth,—the Oracles of the Living God."⁶¹ The Christians began, as an alternative to doctrine and a strict interpretation of an experience of grace, to give a more liberal set of criteria by which a person could become a member of the Church.

"Church membership is predicable on the same ground with Christian fellowship. [Those] who is [are] Christian [are] fit subject[s] for membership in any gospel church. To be a Christian is to have the love of God and fellowship of Christ, and should be loved and received by all Christians as a brother [or sister], and admitted to all the privileges of the church of God."⁶²

Any position, theological or political that clashes with the fruits of the Spirit has no part in the Body of Christ. This theology essentially expressed the idea of the beloved community as the foundation for the life of the local church.

Nicholas Summerbell made the local church the central piece in his instructions about how to organize a church outlined in the *Christian Pulpit* which he founded in 1869. He suggested that all founding members answer affirmatively four questions, "Do you believe on the Son of God?" "Are you living a prayerful life?" "Are you willing to receive the Bible as your only rule of faith and life?" and "Are you willing to fellowship all God's people?" Leaving aside the

inevitability of differences of interpretation on these matters, the local church may be organized.

The church thus organized is independent in faith and fellowship. It controls its own property, chooses its own minister, declares its own faith and fellowship. It may represent itself in conference or convention or not, owing allegiance alone to the Lord, and to the Bible. If it united in conference with other churches, it is yet only bound to them in a larger body, each remaining still free in local matters."⁶³

African American Christians did not emphasize the independence of the local congregation, though they were organized congregationally. In the "Revised Ritual of the Christian Church," 1901, the Afro-Christian Convention clarified the relationship of the individual member to the whole church, and the procedures local churches should use for governance and worship, but never mentioned the place of the local church in the larger Christian denomination.⁶⁴ Without a strongly developed idea of the relationship of the congregations to one another, only the general theological idea that there is a single Church, the Christians were in practice even more congregational than the Congregationalists.

The Evangelical Synod's ecclesiology, like that of the Christians, predicated all discussion of the church as a local congregation on the premise of the entire body of Christians, the One Holy Universal Christian Church.⁶⁵ Schleiermacher's characterization of the purpose of the church written in response to the union of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in Prussia, sounds very similar to American Christian talk about the church.

The work of the Reformation was not, therefore, to found a Lutheran Church . . . nor was it to found a Reformed Church, but to bring forth in renewed glory the Evangelical Church, which is guided and governed by its founder, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. He is the quickening centre of the Church, from Him comes all, to Him all returns: He is the Beginning and End: in Him we believe, and through Him alone we are blessed . . . We ought not, therefore, to call ourselves Lutheran nor Reformed, but we ought to call ourselves

Evangelical Christians, after His name and His holy evangel; for in our name our faith and our confession ought to be made known.⁶⁶

Like the Christians, the Evangelical Synod placed a high value on Christian unity in the context of a highly congregational practice. The German Evangelical tradition was shaped strongly by the pietism of Philip Jakob Spener. In his *Pia Desideria* he listed six principles by which a Christian should live. They should be well acquainted with Scripture, they should avoid controversy in order to further Christian unity, and they should live a holy life. The clergy should stress the importance of Christian life over knowledge of the faith, though theological training is also important for developing a faithful ministry. Finally, sermons should evoke faith and not merely teach doctrine.⁶⁷

This Pietist style carried over into the American German Evangelical churches. They cultivated a disinterest in theological controversy. In addition, they were reluctant to make doctrine a central concern of the church.⁶⁸ They organized themselves congregationally. The *Kirchenverein*, or church society, was an organization of the pastors. Not all of the churches joined the society, but it remained influential. Each congregation was independent and had its own constitution.⁶⁹ The congregations elected their own pastors from several candidates by majority vote, sometimes for very short terms, and could dismiss the pastor similarly. Congregations were typically governed by a body of elders or *Aelteste*. Another factor influencing the development of these churches was the presence of a group of "rationalists" who, much like the Unitarians in Congregational circles, desired a more Enlightenment approach to religious life than the pietist approach of the majority of German Evangelicals. These rationalists objected most strongly to any creation of a hierarchical church order because of the danger of ultimately reestablishing a state church. Even the creation of a *verein*, more of a club than an ecclesiastical structure, made them suspicious. Along with the Christians and the Congregationalists, the German Evangelical churches were essentially congregational in their church organization.

Underlying Evangelical congregationalism was a biblical idea of the church similar to that of the Christians. The *Evangelical Catechism* treated the Church under the section on the Holy Spirit, paragraphs 87-100.

By the one holy universal Christian Church we mean the entire body of true Christians. . . . The Christian Church is called the "one" Church because it has one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, as it is written. . . . The church is called holy because the Holy Spirit works mightily in it by Word and Sacrament to the end that all its members shall be made holy. . . . The Church is called universal because God has meant it for all, . . . and because everyone finds in it what he [or she] needs. . . . The Church is called Christian because Christ alone [is] its foundation, its head and its ideal. . . . The mission of the Church is to extend the Kingdom of God, that is, to lead [human beings] to Christ and to establish Christian principles in every relation of life. . . . The Church has indeed existed in all times as the true Church, but has frequently erred and been corrupted; its future perfection, however, is certain, according to God's promise. . . . By the communion of saints we understand that all Christians, as members of one body, should love and help one another in all things. . . . The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and preserves the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. . . . In the Christian Church the Holy Spirit daily and abundantly forgives me and all believers all sins.⁷⁰

This is a highly active understanding of the Church, not focused on the ontology or "being" of the Church but rather on Christian participation in the "Misseo Dei" the Mission of God. In addition, as an expression of the activity of the Holy Spirit, the Church participates in the activity of God in the world. For the Evangelical Synod, the theological idea of covenant did not play a role in its understanding of the local church, nor did it play the kind of role it did in the Reformed Church and the Congregational churches' theological emphasis on the covenant of Grace. But the idea of the unity of all the churches was of central importance.

This brings us to the Reformed Church of the United States and its understanding of the local church. The doctrinal positions of the Reformed Church were perhaps the strongest and most clearly stated of all the traditions making up the United Church of Christ. The pri-

mary sources of Reformed doctrine lay in the tradition of Calvin formalized in the Canons of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism. Both of these contain only brief definitions of the local Church and both regard the Church as gathered by God and preserved, at least as a remnant, until the end of the world. The Heidelberg Catechism, first published in 1563 stated it this way in Question 54:

What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"? I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race (Gen. 26: 3 b-4; Rev. 5:9), the Son of God (Col. 1:18), by his Spirit and his Word (Isa. 59:21), gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith (Acts 13:47-48; Eph. 4:3-6; 5:25-27), a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it eternally (John 10:28).⁷¹

The answer to this question indicates that the believer's incorporation into the Body of Christ exists both at the level of the Universal Church and that of the local gathered community. The answer to Question 54 is deliberately ambiguous. The Reformed tradition was the least congregational among the traditions of the UCC, though in the American colonial context, the Reformed congregations from necessity exercised considerable autonomy.⁷² The earliest German Reformed churches established in Pennsylvania and other areas of the American colonies behaved congregationally. With few ministers, the local congregations relied on lay leadership and initiative. However, unlike the Congregationalists who embraced this local independence, the Reformed people looked to the traditional Reformed presbyterial structures to insure the health of their churches.

A relatively close-knit denominational life emerged from the frontier soil. . . . Foremost for the welfare of the churches was the need to regularize the ministry. Church people had been accustomed to a ministry established according to theologically well-grounded principles. They respected and honored the profession as necessary in the scheme of salvation and indispensable for the religious and intellectual leadership of the Christian community. The radical sects, with their easy

recognition of self-appointed preachers, scandalized many who saw in the practice the road to religious anarchy.⁷³

The ambiguity of the formulation about the church remained as the Reformed Churches formed first the Coetus under the Classis of Amsterdam, and finally an American Synod. Their doctrine theologically defined both the local congregation and the whole Church, and undergirded a church order, a principle that fostered both theological seriousness and competency in the ministry.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Reformed ecclesiology received new attention. The Mercersburg theological movement put before the German Reformed Church what its theologians Philip Schaff and John Nevin regarded as an ecumenical ecclesiology more faithful to the New Testament and the early church, and containing the possibility of the reunion of Christianity. The Mercersburg theology created lively debate, and although it was not adopted officially within the church it did remain an open possibility and served in the twentieth century to stimulate thinking in the United Church of Christ, particularly about liturgy and ecumenical life. Nevin, in an article summing up the main points of the Mercersburg theology wrote:

The question of the Church, in its true form, is at bottom always a question of Christ. It reaches back to the constitution of the Redeemer's person. It has to do at once, where it begins, with the mystery of the incarnation. It lies, in such views, at the foundation of all Christian theology; not because it seeks to place the Church before Christ, as shallow thinkers pretend; but because it seeks to determine the full historical significance of Christ, as "Head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."⁷⁴

In the traditions of the United Church of Christ, we have two intertwining ecclesiological principles underlying the existence of the local congregations and shaping their understanding of their relationships to each other. They are related in turn to more fully developed theological streams of thought. Three of the traditions, the Congregational, the Christian, and the German Evangelicals locate the fullness of the church as Body of Christ in the local congregation, and its relationship with other congregations is an expression of their mis-

sion together, or their shared fellowship in Christ. Three of the traditions, a different three, the Christians, the German Evangelicals, and the German Reformed, ground their understanding of ecclesiology in the idea of the Universal or Catholic Church. Therefore, we find at the two ends of this spectrum the Reformed people who simply did not imagine a single congregation apart from its life together with the rest of the churches, and at the other the Congregationalists for whom the local church was so central, that they said little about the Universal or Catholic Church. As we look further at these ecclesiastical principles, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, it is important to note the alternative views, and that some of these positions that we find in the nineteenth century literature were shaped by certain schools of German historiography, namely those of Hegel and Harnack, as well as the Protestant tradition of suspicion of Catholic forms, and the Puritan experience of the political power of bishops.

The Problem of Unity in a Congregational Polity

From the above ruminations on our traditions and their thinking over three hundred years about covenant and congregation, it comes as no surprise to us that ecclesiological questions in the UCC tend to be framed as polity questions, and that they overwhelmingly have to do with authority. The question of who is authorized to serve in what capacity, particularly to represent the church, congregation or denomination, in a wider context, is particularly persistent. Our theology of ministry, in addition, is a matter of interest in late twentieth century as our participation in ecumenical conversations deepens, particularly in the Consultation on Church Union/Churches Uniting in Christ, in our partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and in our participation in the World Council of Churches Faith and Order conversations. Finally, we live in a society increasingly apt to bring its controversies to courts of secular justice, where the church's lines of authority, defined theologically rather than legally, may not be clear. In all of these arenas the United Church of Christ has faced a call to clarify its understanding of the Church, its Ministry, and its mechanisms of granting authority.

Four major works on ecclesiology in the United Church of Christ all agree that while congregationalism is a fundamental aspect or form of ecclesial life in the UCC, it does not serve as an adequate definition

of the nature and purpose of the Church as represented in our denomination. In addition, they all tend to focus on the organizational structure of the church rather than its theological meaning. Immediately after its founding, Douglas Horton described the UCC, ecclesologically, as presbyterian in legislative function because it works through representatives, episcopal in its administrative system since it works through superintendents (Conference Ministers) and congregational in its judicial function, "since the congregations and several groupings make their own decisions and have no judge over them but Christ and the decent respect they have for all their brethren [and sisters] in Christ."⁷⁵ Horton confined his discussion of ecclesiology to the formal polity or organization of the church. Jon Fogle, minister of Salem United Church of Christ in Cambelltown, Pennsylvania, followed suit, defining ecclesiology as the way authority is distributed in the church. He argued that the congregation expresses its implicit ecclesiology most clearly in its calling of a pastor, that call representing in concrete form, the call by Christ.⁷⁶

Robert Paul, in his *Freedom with Order* rooted his discussion of the order or polity of the UCC much more explicitly in a theology of the Church as a branch of Christology.⁷⁷ "The church points to God through Jesus Christ. . . . to a communal expression of what God revealed to us about the divine nature of Jesus Christ."⁷⁸ This theology may be implicit in UCC ecclesiological thinking, but most recent discussions focus on the form of covenant polity we have developed with little connection to Robert Paul's Christological suggestion.⁷⁹ We find the most recent articulation of ecclesiology in the United Church of Christ is the statement prepared as a guide for the recent restructuring of the national setting of the church.

Thus the most fundamental documents of the UCC, the Constitution and the Statement of Faith, set forth the denomination's beliefs about the nature of the church, as a covenant community of Christ's people called to faithful mission in the world. By these authorities of Word, Spirit, the faith of the historic church, and the covenant of "common Christian experience and responsibility," (Constitution, Preamble, 2), the church declares that it is one and whole, . . . that it remains in faithful continuity with the apostolic faith of the ancient and

ecumenical church, and that unity is fundamental to its nature. These traditional "marks of the church" derived from the ancient creeds—one, holy, catholic and apostolic—are understood by the United Church of Christ as expressions of four basic purposes which have increasingly come to characterize its life: to proclaim the gospel to all the world, to gather and support communities of faith in their celebration and mission, to labor for the creation and increase of God's realm of justice and love in the world, and to manifest more fully the unity of the church, all humankind, and the whole creation.⁸⁰

"The nature of the church, as a covenant community of Christ's people called to faithful mission in the world," begins to set forth the way in which the beloved community, covenant communion, and the mission of God interrelate with one another. The ordering of the Church and its ministry, derive from the nature and mission of the Church. I would not want to leave the reader at this point thinking that the UCC has achieved consensus about the nature and purpose of the Church. It has not, and continues to reflect in its various settings on the meaning of its community, its covenants, and its mission in relation to its understanding of Jesus Christ.

Ecclesiology, Congregationalism, and Questions of Authority

In the final sections, I would like to sketch briefly the outlines of the knotty problem of authority and the beginning of a UCC definition of episcopé. To illustrate the issues before us in developing this part of our ecclesiology, I want to use two cases, that of the ordination of women in the nineteenth century, illustrated by Antoinette Brown, and that of the ordination of William Johnson, an openly gay man, in the twentieth century. Both of these cases illustrate the ways in which formal and informal authority plays between the local congregation and the larger representations of the Church Universal in which it stands in covenant.

The ecumenical movement in which the traditions of the United Church of Christ participated and out of which the idea of a United Church was formed, developed over the course of the twentieth century an understanding of ministry that many believe can be held as a consensus among most Christian churches.⁸¹ Out of our essentially though not

completely congregational polity, we are called in responding to these consensus proposals to describe the location, within the United Church of Christ, of the three kinds of ministry set forth in the New Testament, deacons, presbyters (or elders) and bishops. As I write this, we stand at the beginning of a process of engaging these consensus positions and it may not be long before we have more clarity. So far we have seen that in the United Church of Christ, three themes arise in our thinking about the nature of the Church, that the Church is the beloved community of followers of Christ, gathered by the Holy Spirit into covenant communion with each other and with Christ, for the purpose of carrying out God's mission (such as we may understand it in our finitude). This community of followers of Christ is expressed in the United Church of Christ in the local congregation. Our traditions claim a biblical basis for understanding the Church as a local body of Christians both free and responsible for carrying out the mission of God in their setting, but in communion at least, and perhaps in covenant with other congregations in other places. Above we have seen the variety of histories and practice lying behind the basic congregational form.

The ecumenical consensus on ministry we are called to engage now, asks us to identify how the biblical three-fold order of ministry, deacons, presbyters (elders) and bishops are located in our church polity and how they function. These three forms of ministry are found in some form in most churches, and there is a general ecumenical understanding that deacons serve more locally, particularly in charitable activities, serving the needs of the congregation, and in certain liturgical ways; that presbyters are for the most part those who preside at the table and preach in a local congregation, but represent the whole Church in that congregation; and that bishops are involved in oversight and are concerned with the unity of the Church in its belief and practice. We live in a time in the history of Christianity when we know that the Church has never achieved complete uniformity in faith and practice. Nor do most of us any longer believe that it should. However, the churches who participate in the ecumenical movement are concerned with the unity of the Church's witness underlying all of our diversity. The ecumenical discussions about what we can say in common about our forms of ministry proceed hand in hand with discussions about a common confession of the Christian faith. Both conversations remain open and lively.

In the United Church of Christ, deacons are present in many congregations as lay people who serve the church in particular capacities, and are elected or chosen by the congregation and so authorized to do their work. They may have roles in serving communion, helping the pastor with visitation or other pastoral care duties, or may do other things in service to the congregation. But even if the congregation does not have people called deacons, chances are it has some people who perform a similar function within the congregation. Similarly, nearly all of our congregations have a leader who can be identified as a presbyter or elder. For the most part this is the pastor of the church, whether ordained or not. This is the person who preaches, baptizes, probably presides at the Communion table, and generally provides the pastoral care of the congregation. There may be more than one person who serves as pastor and teacher in the congregation. Some of our congregations, especially from the Reformed or Christian traditions, may also have lay elders, ordained or not, who carry out many of the presbyter's tasks. The presbyters, unlike the deacons, are ordinarily authorized by that congregation in covenant relationship with the larger Association of churches in the neighborhood, usually by ordination or licensing. So far, the United Church of Christ is in agreement with the general ecumenical consensus, though we have differences with some denominations particularly over the office of bishop, discussed further below, and over the role of gender and sexual orientation in determining who may be called to these offices. We will look more closely at these matters shortly.

The point where the United Church of Christ fits least comfortably with the ecumenical consensus is that of the office of *episcopé* or bishop. We are congregational in nature because of historical experiences of a corrupt *episcopé* in the European state churches.⁸² Our ancestors rejected the office of bishop,⁸³ even when they did not reject the idea of a state church. But the work of *episcopé* exists in all the traditions of the UCC as well as in our own polity. As we have participated as a church in these ecumenical conversations, we have been called upon to give an account of our *episcopé* to the other churches. We do have people, individuals as well as groups, who give attention to the unity of the church and perform the oversight of our churches and our clergy. The outsider to the UCC expects us to begin our account of *episcopé* with the Conference Minister. This person looks most like other churches' bishops. However,

in the UCC, we must begin with the role of the laity in episcopé before the rest of our structure will be clear.⁸⁴

In a congregational understanding of the Church, and where the congregation itself calls and authorizes its own leadership, whether in consultation with other congregations or not, that congregation of lay people is in fact involved in the oversight of itself and its leaders. The members of the congregation, singly and together, have the responsibility to maintain their unity in the context of their love for one another and to represent collectively the presence of Christ in their larger community. This responsibility calls them to evaluate and take a larger view of themselves. The German Evangelical theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher grounded the oversight of the church, and therefore, the office of bishop in the members of the local congregation.

While so much can be gathered from our credal passages, they do not make clear the scope or manner in which this whole office resides in the congregation, or how the congregation exercises it. In point of fact, it exercises it not merely indirectly, by ordering and distributing the offices to which legislation and judgement are formally assigned (for how could the holders of these offices come to have such abilities and faculties, unless they have previously had some experience of them?), but each individual as such also exercises a punitive office, in an independent and informal manner, by the judgements he [or she] passes upon what goes on in the congregation, and by praise and blame. Not only so: legislative action is exerted by each through everything he [or she] does that goes to form public opinion; and public opinion must always be the living fount of expressly legislative acts, for these acts are simply a definite way of gaining recognition for public opinion in Church affairs. If in this sphere anything be attempted which is not a pure expression of the way in which, at a particular time and place, human nature in union with the divine Spirit is seeking to give actual form to itself and its concerns, then the attempt fails, and the law, which is thus incapable of securing its own recognition, simply reveals an imperfection in the church. Inevitably the Church is disturbed, and it is only through controversy that agreement (all the more conscious

for what has occurred) can be regained, and along with it a less ambiguous state of the whole body.⁸⁵

In our ecclesiology, we maintain that no one outside of the congregation has enough experience of its context to prescribe what that congregation ought to do or which leadership it should call. The congregation is left free to discern its mission and call its ministry and is responsible for doing so. Even in the New Testament it is clear that this is a burden for the churches and they began to seek outside advice. The record of early Christianity also indicates that they gave one another advice whether asked or not. Paul wrote to churches other than the one he resided at in that moment and early leaders such as Clement of Rome who wrote apparently unsolicited letters to the Corinthian church followed in that tradition. In every tradition of the UCC, an initial pure congregationalism gave way to a system whereby Association, Coetus, Convention or Synod grew up to support and advise the churches, and to help them remain in communion with what they regarded as mainstream Christianity.

Because of their ordaining authority in the United Church of Christ, Associations are the most logical place to look in our polity for episcopal authority. Indeed, the Associations perform all the functions of episcopé within the UCC. They bring congregations into the UCC, they examine and ordain the clergy,⁸⁶ and they may vote not to approve a minister called by a congregation for standing in the Association or to expel a minister or congregation who violates the covenant with the Association. Thus the Associations hold most of the episcopal or oversight authority in the UCC. Seldom, in my experience, does an Association recognize the import of their authority or their decisions. One of the discontents of congregationalism lies in the willingness of congregations, meeting together as the Association, to advise the neighboring congregations or to approve or disapprove their actions, but when meeting separately as congregations, their discomfort with and failure to receive Association recommendations with which they as a congregation disagree. The covenant among the congregations of an Association does not always hold them in peace or in unity.

While Association, Coetus, Synod, and Convention serve well in their oversight of the clergy in the traditions of the UCC and in the present setting, the oversight of the churches themselves is, for the

most part, left in the hands of the lay members of those congregations. The covenant of the clergy with the Associations is usually strong, but the covenant of the churches of an Association with each other is not always. Thus, one of the concerns churches in ecumenical dialogue with the United Church of Christ express is their concern that not all congregations will honor the ecumenical agreements the denomination makes.⁸⁷ In the UCC, we live into our covenants rather than make them matters of legislation.



This brings us to the consideration of that office that from the outside seems the most likely candidate for bishop in the United Church of Christ polity, the Conference Minister.⁸⁸ With the formal and informal authority lodged already in the local congregation and the Association, what role is left for the Conference Minister who can neither appoint and dismiss clergy, nor exercise any discipline over the congregations. The ambiguity of this office in the UCC comes in part from its history. The Conference Minister is not an office that grew naturally from the colonial era churches, nor did it arise to serve the needs of existing congregations. Instead, the Conference Minister was an outgrowth of the home missionary movement, particularly that of the Congregationalists, but also from the efforts of expansion in the other traditions as well. In each case, a superintendent served to guide the establishment of new churches in a given area. That superintendent, by virtue of being the conduit for funds, took on the role of oversight of the new congregations. Only when a number of self-supporting congregations were established in a neighborhood did an Association develop. By that time the Conference Superintendent already held considerable influence and actual power, and could on occasion over-ride the decisions of an Association.⁸⁹ To this day, in the West where Congregational home mission activity was extensive, the Associations are relatively weak and the Conferences strong, whereas in New England, the Associations are generally strong and the Conferences are weak.

An office not even mentioned in the first UCC Constitution, the Conference Minister's role and function in the UCC has been discussed lately, particularly with regard to the recent restructuring of the national setting of the church. Two important articles about the role of conferences and conference ministers in the UCC make the service of

the covenants which bind the church together the primary responsibility of the conferences. Rollin Russell argues that in a polity in which every setting of the church is autonomous, the conference is the body best able to call forth mutual accountability and responsibility. The conference is situated, by virtue of choosing delegates to the General Synod, as a link between the local congregations and the national settings of the church.⁹⁰ That situation in between makes the Conference Minister the one officer who can call both the local churches and the national setting of the church into accountability for their covenants with each other, to ask whether the church at all its levels is being faithful, and to provide oversight of the mission activities of the whole UCC.⁹¹ Writing after the restructuring of the national setting of the UCC, John Lynes concludes the same thing about the nature of the conference ministry.⁹² While the nature of the Conference Minister's office remains without clarity, what the new structure does say is that the Conference serves to foster the covenant relationship between the local churches and the wider settings of the UCC. In the title of his article, Lynes provides a biblical or theological image for the role of the Conference Minister, the shepherd of a flock. Here we have a link to the ancient symbol of the bishop with the shepherd's crooked staff. I would argue, and have argued, that the Conference Minister has an episcopal role in our communion, though always shared with the Association and the local congregations.

If I have discerned correctly that the three main aspects of our United Church of Christ ecclesiology are that the church is the beloved community gathered together in covenant communion to further the mission of God, then I would propose that the role of the Conference Minister and in many cases also the Association Minister, is the oversight of all these things.⁹³ The Conference Minister has no authority simply by virtue of office to tell a congregation what to do, but does have the right of a pastor to serve the beloved community. If the Conference Minister has done his or her pastoral work among the churches, they will have a basis of trust from which to listen. The Conference Minister is also the servant of the covenant communion, the one who stands in the middle of all the covenantal relationships that serve to organize the life and work of the United Church of Christ and works to strengthen and interpret those covenants. And finally, the Conference is the location of the mission work that is too large for the

local congregations to undertake alone, but is nearby in its scope. The Conference Minister is also, as Russell and Lynes have outlined, the person who keeps before the churches their covenant relationships with each other. The United Church of Christ as a body of completely free and responsible congregations, but bound together in covenant, communion with each other at all the levels of the denomination's life. We experience both the gifts and the discontents of this kind of covenant congregationalism. In the final section of this chapter, I would like to illustrate how these gifts and discontents work themselves out, particularly in the ordination process.

Practical Illustrations of the Gifts and Ambiguities of Our Episcopé

Issues of power, authority, and Christian community involved in understanding both the gifts and discontents of congregationalism. Two cases which test two aspects of the covenant—one the internal covenant among the congregations and the second the ecumenical covenant with the whole church—are the nineteenth century ordination of Antoinette Brown and the twentieth century ordination of William Johnson.⁹⁴ In both of these cases, the freedom of the local congregation or Association proved to be a factor enabling a revolutionary change, but that same local freedom proved to be a discontent both to the larger body of the church and to the group whose part in the leadership of the church had been newly recognized in a single ordination.

In 1853, the Congregational Church of Butler, New York, ordained Antoinette Brown to be its pastor. Brown was not the first woman in a church in the United States to preach by any means.⁹⁵ However, she was the earliest for which we have record, to be ordained in any of the traditions of the UCC. Her ordination illustrates the freedom of a congregation to order its own affairs, to call its own pastor, and to ordain her. This allowed the Congregationalists and eventually the United Church of Christ in the twentieth century to celebrate their pioneering role in the opening of the church to women's leadership. Unfortunately, Brown's ordination and ministerial standing was valid only in the Butler congregation because the Association did not ratify the congregation's choice, and did not participate in the ordination. This irregularity in her ordination limited her service and influence in the Congregational churches and after a short term at the Butler church she left to pursue other women's rights work. She eventually became a Unitarian minister.

The freedom of the congregation allows revolutionary things to happen in the Church but, unless in the larger covenant community everyone agrees, that the congregation becomes isolated and the effects of its revolutionary action are muted. It was over thirty years before a Congregational Association ordained a woman. This was Mary Moorland, ordained in 1889 in the Wyanet, Illinois Congregational Church⁹⁶ by a council of the Association known today as the Prairie Association.⁹⁷ Unlike the women ordained earlier, and perhaps because of her regular ordination, she served as a minister for nineteen years in four different congregations in Illinois.

The ordinations of Brown and Moorland were noted in those circles interested in women's rights, but they did not generate extensive controversy. In the ensuing decades, until the explosion in the number of ordained women in the late 1960s and 70s, a steadily increasing number of women were ordained to ministry by Congregational Associations and Christian churches.⁹⁸ While the prevailing and largely unquestioned assumption in the Congregational churches of the time was that Paul prohibited women from preaching, and therefore, from ordination, many men and women noted other biblical passages that seemed on the contrary to allow it. These churches and Associations that did ordain women found the practical need for ministry and the woman's obvious qualifications to override the prohibitions contained in an ambiguous biblical record.⁹⁹ In fact, in the records of early deliberations on the ordination of women, there was not substantial appeal to the bible, except occasionally to the passage in Joel that "your sons and daughters will prophesy." The arguments instead centered on the desperate need of the churches for ministers and the availability of a qualified candidate whose only drawback was female gender.¹⁰⁰ Unlike many denominations that struggled more with the issue, the Methodists and Presbyterians for example, congregations of the UCC remain far more willing to ordain a woman they know to serve someone else's church than to call a woman they do not know to be their pastor. Most of the ordained women in the UCC serve in ministries outside the local congregation, or as associate pastors or pastors of very small churches. In summary, while the ordination of women certainly never became a threat to the unity of the United Church of Christ or any of its traditions, its openness does not necessarily mean that women have full opportunity to serve. Congregationalism made

women's ordination possible quite early, but that very congregationalism keeps ordained women out of many UCC pulpits.

More recently, the ordination of ministers of a variety of sexual orientations, has on the other hand caused great public controversy among UCC congregations and has threatened the unity of the church. On the surface, this seems like an analogous situation to that of a century ago when women were ordained. The freedom of the local body, in this case an Association, made it possible for an openly gay man to be ordained in the early 1970s. And as in the case of women, while that local freedom made such an ordination possible, it also made rejection of such a position equally possible and also keeps gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual ministers out of most UCC pulpits, even in congregations that pride themselves on being Open and Affirming.

The ordination of William Johnson by the Golden Gate Association in 1973 came as the UCC was challenged by the issues of racial justice, inclusive language for women, the end of the Vietnam War, the legalization of abortion, the precipitous decline of liberal Protestantism and the rise of the Religious Right. The anxieties of the era seemed to crystallize around the issues of sexual and gender identity. If I have read both the support and opposition to this ordination correctly, I believe that the depth of the controversy lies precisely in the connection of sexuality and gender identity with our fundamental understanding of beloved community. A major voice for the opposition, Donald Bloesch, focused on three matters of concern within our life in the United Church of Christ, inclusive language, particularly that which uses specifically feminine theological vocabulary and imagery; tolerance of maintaining women's right to chose abortion to end a pregnancy; and the ordination of LGBT persons to ministry. All of these issues, he argues, contribute to the deterioration of both the quality of family life and our ecumenical relationships. In other words, they strike at the heart of the beloved community and its covenant with God as he understands it.¹⁰¹

As with the ordination of women in the previous century, there has been surprisingly little theological work done on the issue within the United Church of Christ, one of the chief complaints of those opposed to it and one of the obstacles standing in the way of the Open and Affirming process as well. As early as 1960, Rev. Robert W. Wood, a gay United Church of Christ pastor published *Christ and the Homosexual*, a

work declaring that one need not be heterosexual to be Christian. Shortly after Johnson's ordination UCC scholar James Nelson published a work on sexuality in general, *Embodiment* in which he sought to make a place for human sexual experience in theological thinking. These works laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in trying to understand the LGBT experience of sexuality theologically.¹⁰² Particularly in recent years theological discussion of LGBT concerns as well as women's concerns and those of other marginalized groups has called into question the meaning of the Church's claim that the Bible is authority.¹⁰³ Rooted in the liberal approach, the UCC entertains doubt about more traditional understandings of biblical authority, and has not to this moment completely finished considering the implications of this doubt. The Bible, we recognize, may have different kinds of authority. Is it a letter that kills and a spirit that gives life, or is it a law that we are bound to live by to the last iota? Though most in the UCC would agree that Jesus provides for us the lens through which to read the rest of Scripture, we do not all agree on how to use that lens. Congregationalism gives each congregation both the freedom and the responsibility to discern the meaning of the Bible for its life. The covenant communion of the congregations with each other gives each the responsibility of engaging in a common conversation. As these examples illustrate, unity in the United Church of Christ comes only slowly, certainly not by majority vote.

The idea of the Congregation, as completely within itself representing the Church, as the Congregationalists would put it, is a difficult idea to reconcile always with the other ideal of the UCC, that of the unity of the church, "that they all may be one." The key problem for the concluding chapter lies in this question of the relation of the many to the one. What is it theologically that allows for the emergence of the idea of the unity of the churches or congregations out of so many separate expressions?