

let it shine

Galatians 3:23-29

June 24, 2007

Tomorrow, on June 25, 2007, the United Church of Christ will celebrate its 50th anniversary. It is a young church, younger than a good many of its members, younger than a good many of us! But it's an old church too, weaving together the strands of other traditions with long histories -- Congregational, Evangelical, Christian, Reformed -- which in turn trace their roots to the Reformation and to a long line of faithful witnesses and teachers and prophets and evangelists dating back to Jesus' own disciples.

The birth of the United Church of Christ by the merger of two distinct churches is like a marriage that joins a man and a woman with two distinct personal histories and two distinct family traditions. Their union is something new, something entirely different than anything that came before, but their life together is built on the people and experiences and commitments that shaped them before they were married.

We are formed by what we were ... but if we cannot give up what we were, we will never become what we can be.

We are a church woven together of many church traditions, many more even than the UCC's four root denominations. Let me prove it to you!

How many of you were raised in the Lutheran tradition or have attended Lutheran churches?

How many of you were raised in the Methodist tradition or have attended Methodist churches?

How many of you were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition or have attended Roman Catholic churches?

How many of you were raised in the Presbyterian tradition or have attended Presbyterian churches?

How many of you were raised in non-denominational or interdenominational or independent evangelical churches?

How many of you were raised in the Baptist tradition or have attended Baptist churches?

How many of you were raised in one of our root denominations, in Congregational churches or E&R churches?

We are a case in point: the modern Christian church is marked by ever-diminishing denominational loyalties. Many of you settled here, not because you were specifically looking for a UCC congregation, but because you felt comfortable here or welcomed here or challenged here. For many people it is not the name on the outside that matters, but the quality of life on the inside. We see ourselves as followers of Jesus and as members of a particular church family, not as cheerleaders and advocates for any denomination.

So why make a big deal out of a denominational anniversary? So the UCC is 50 years old? So what? What does that matter to me and to my church?

What does the United Church of Christ matter? A lot!

The United Church of Christ offers a means of connection to the wider church. It reminds us that we are not really members of First Congregational Church in Waterloo, but members of the church of Jesus Christ in all its places and with all its faces. We can get so caught up in our own plans and projects and politics that we forget that. Being part of a denomination and participating in UCC activities remind us that it's not just about us.

The United Church of Christ offers support and help and counsel in times of crisis. I've been there, a member of the Northeast Association Church and Ministry committee when we stepped in to help churches deal with ministerial misconduct or divisions among the membership. I know the sincerity and integrity of our desire to help churches heal and move forward and I know the sincerity and integrity and wisdom of the conference staff that have reached out to hurting churches often making themselves targets for criticism and abuse. And I've seen the struggles of churches and pastors that had no denominational affiliation and have had to go it alone when faced with a crisis, increasing the risk of long-term damage.

The United Church of Christ offers placement support, helping churches find and call new pastors. The Iowa Conference forwards resumes and recruits candidates and coaches search committees and performs background checks. I would not be here if the Iowa Conference had not recruited me and asked me if they could submit my profile to several Iowa churches, including this one!

The United Church of Christ provides a wealth of resources for mission and education and worship: position papers and action networks, lectionary resources linking biblical texts with poetry and art, creative liturgies and and new music. The United Church of Christ gave us the New Century Hymnal! It's a good book! Sure it's flawed and incomplete, any hymnal is, but it's a good book! Let me give you a short list of hymns and songs we would not have available if we were limited to the Pilgrim Hymnal: *Amazing Grace*, *Great Is Your Faithfulness*, *By Gracious Powers*, *When in Our Music God is Glorified*, *In the Bulb There is a Flower*, *I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry*, *Precious Lord, This Little Light of Mine*. I know some of you balk at learning new hymns, but learning new hymns is a good thing! It's one way we grow our faith and keep it fresh and relevant and the New Century Hymnal has lots of good new hymns!

The United Church of Christ provides a means of empowering our mission. The UCC coordinates our response to human disasters: 911, Katrina, the tsunami disaster. The UCC provides opportunities for effective giving and meaningful service. The UCC give us a means of participating in a Christian witness that is indeed worldwide.

And the United Church of Christ challenges our complacency, speaking with a prophetic voice that addresses both our culture and our churches. It's a voice that is sometimes unsettling and disturbing and controversial, but it is a voice that urges us to take our faith seriously, to examine the real implications of following Jesus and to apply our faith to the problems and injustices of our own day. At the UCC General Synod now taking place in Hartford, Connecticut, delegates will consider and debate resolutions on immigration policy, marriage, depleted uranium weapons, toxic waste, and end of life issues.

These are just some of the blessings of being a part of the church that tomorrow celebrates its 50th anniversary. But for all of its benefits, the United Church of Christ is still a church not the church, one expression of the church among many. At its best, at its heart, is the passion that motivated its creation, a passion for Christian unity.

We call ourselves a united and uniting church, which means the job is not yet done, the church is not yet complete. The moderators at the founding ceremony itself acknowledged the unfinished task:

At this moment of the joyous new access of life imparted by the union, the United Church of Christ is stricken in conscience at its continuing separation from the rest of the Church, and it prays for the day when the greater Church of Jesus Christ, now hindered and weakened by many divisions, will come to visible reality, one flock, one shepherd, through the influence of One who is alive in every part of [his] Church ...

The ebbing of denominational loyalties and the cross-fertilization of folks among many different churches is in some ways a good thing, even something the United Church of Christ strives for. You will find in the Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ this statement: *The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession ...* In the the United Church of Christ, if you call yourself a follower of Jesus, you are my brother, you are my sister, no more questions needed! We are one in Christ, in Christ alone.

We echo the sentiments of Paul in his letter to the Galatian church: we are one in Christ, in Christ alone. It is our union with Christ that brings us together across divisions of race and class and gender: *There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.*

The Galatian church was being told that some distinctions matter: adherence to the Law, adoption of Jewish identity and practice, but Paul insists that it is faith in Christ alone, our union with Christ by faith, that makes us children of God and makes us one. He understood, as many other early church leaders understood, as Jesus understood and taught them, as I hope we understand, that the unity of the church is its strongest witness. They will know we are Christians, and that our Christian faith is something real and life-changing, by our love, by our love for one another.

Think of the impact of a group of people that love each other and care for each other and work side by side, not because of any common background or common interests or common tastes, but just because they are brought together by Jesus. Such a church can only exist where there is an ongoing willingness to sacrifice what I have, to give up what I want, to give in to what you need, to give over power and control to Jesus. We can only have one Head: not a collegium of officers, not a minister or a Board of Trustees, not the congregation itself, only Christ!

If our Christian witness is to be genuine, if it is to be effective, if it is to make a difference in other people's lives and our own, we must seek to follow Christ and Christ alone, and to embrace any and all who join us on that same path.

This is why we say: *No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*

This is why we invite any and all to share the communion table with us.

This is why the UCC has liberal placement policies and often will permit a minister of another denomination to serve a UCC church.

But we can do better. The United Church of Christ can do better. It's not just about joining hands and hearts with other mainline denominations, with other like-minded Christians. It's about joining hands and hearts with Christians of all kinds, of all traditions -- evangelical and pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Episcopal, high church and low church, right wing and left wing -- because we understand that Christian unity has nothing to do with wings, or high and lows, or names and titles, or political agendas, or worship styles, but only with Christ. We are one in union with Christ. Oneness is not something we have to create, but something Christ has already made. We just have to live it.

So happy anniversary, UCC! Thank you for your witness to the Christ who breaks down the walls that divide us. But I do not wish you a long life! I wish you an early death, when the dream of your founders, Jesus' dream, that all may be one, will be realized.

In the meantime, *let it shine ... let it shine!* And what is "it"? The light of Christ in us!