



FROM CAULDRON TO CHALICE

*Similarities and differences in
Pagan and Christian Traditions*

The United Church of Christ



As those of us gathered here today know, a lot of Christian traditions are borrowed from our pagan forbearers, although some of my colleagues would shudder at the thought. All Christians are related in faith to Judaism and are the spiritual descendants of the first followers of Jesus who spread through the world with the Gospel (the "Good News") of a loving God. It is through forums such as this we re-member our past without building more prejudicial walls.

The United Church of Christ traces its history back to both the Lutheran and Reformed movements. It presently binds in covenant about 6,000 congregations with 1.4 million members. One of the youngest of American churches, its background also makes it one of the oldest in Protestantism.

The United Church of Christ, a *united* and *uniting* church, was born as the result of a union of four traditions. Two of these were *the Congregational Churches* with roots in the New England colonies founded by the English Pilgrims and the Puritans, and *the Christian Church* with origins on the American frontier. These two denominations had a shared tradition of religious freedom and the right of local churches to govern their own life. They united on June 17, 1931 to become the Congregational Christian Churches.

The other two traditions were *the Reformed Church in the United States*, founded by 18th-century German and Swiss immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania and the mid-Atlantic region, and *the Evangelical Synod of North America*, a 19th-century church planted by German settlers along the Mississippi Valley. In these churches the "Lutheran" and "Reformed" traditions came together, and they were united on June 26, 1934, to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches shared a strong commitment to freedom of religious expression under the authority of Jesus Christ. They combined strong European ties, early colonial roots and the vitality of the American frontier church. Both denominations revered the Bible and were more interested in what unites Christians than with what divides them. They were united in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 25, 1957.

At the Uniting General Synod in Cleveland, Ohio, the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 23 years old, passionate in its impulse to unity, committed to "liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel," and the Congregational Christian Churches, 26 years old, a fellowship of biblical people living under a

covenant for responsible freedom in Christ, joined together as the United Church of Christ. The new church embodied the essence of both parents, a complement of freedom with order, of the English and European Reformations with the American Awakenings, of 17th-century separatism with 20th-century ecumenism, of presbyterian with congregational polities, of neo-orthodox with liberal theologies. Two million members joined hands.

In the church's first decade, racial and political unrest began to transform American society. The civil-rights movement came into its own led by men and women like the Rev. Andrew Young, a United Church of Christ pastor. The Vietnam War challenged America's confidence that its foreign and military policies were always guided by high moral purpose. These issues divided the United Church of Christ as they divided the entire country. But the tradition of social justice—with roots in the anti-slavery struggles of the mid-nineteenth century, and even earlier, in the Puritans' vision of a just community bound together by covenant—gave its members the courage they needed to face up to the changes that were transforming the world around them.

In the 1970s and 80s, the nation's falling birthrate ended the church's postwar spurt of growth. The UCC's membership began to decline, and struggling congregations closed their doors. It was clear that the UCC, if it was to survive, needed to be more inclusive, more open, and more confident.

Cultural, ethnic and racial traditions that were part of the UCC's "hidden history" claimed its attention. Members of the church began to realize how much they had to learn from the fervent evangelical spirit of its African American, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawai'ian, Pacific Islander, Asian and Hungarian congregations. Multiculturalism in the UCC was more than a confession of guilt for the sins of racism—although those sins were real enough; it was also an opportunity to see the face of Christ reflected in traditions that could breathe new life into the church.

New traditions also began to find their voice. The first openly gay man called to the Christian ministry was ordained by the UCC's Golden Gate Association in San Francisco in 1972. The movement to open the church's doors to gay and lesbian Christians was as controversial in the United Church of Christ as it continues to be in other Christian denominations, and the controversy has by no means ended. But as more and more congregations became "open and affirming," and as predominantly lesbian and gay congregations were organized and received into the church, it became clear that yet another tradition was expanding our identity and enriching the life of our fellowship.

Today, the identity of the United Church of Christ is not as clear-cut as it seemed to be in the 1950s. The theological debate in the church can no longer be labeled as "liberal *versus* neo-orthodox," a dichotomy that never was entirely accurate since conservative evangelicals, too, are part of our tradition. And there are thousands of Roman Catholics joining our

congregations. Certainly, our principle of freedom within covenant is a liberating experience for new members who find in our openness an alternative to the more authoritarian or hierarchical traditions they have left. But the gifts these "spiritual refugees" bring with them—the sacramental piety of the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, or the reverence for the Bible of the evangelical churches—can also deepen and broaden the faith of our community. We need them as much as they need us.

The United Church of Christ is a blend of traditions that are as old as Judaism's proclamation of one God who is the creator and lover of earth and heaven. Justifiably proud of this heritage, we would like to hand it on to our children. But ours is a *living* tradition: God, in the words of the writer of the Book of Revelation, is a God who "is and who was and who is to come." When women and men from other Christian traditions—or those who have never before identified with any religious faith—join our churches, they are writing a new chapter in the history of the United Church of Christ. They are also the authors of our tradition, and so any book about the history of our church must necessarily remain unfinished until our Savior returns to establish for all time God's loving reign among the people God created.

Rev Andrea L. Stoeckel