

United

Rev. John Allen

What does it mean to be united? We are living in a moment now where division pulls at us in every corner of our lives.

In our nation, we are at this moment bitterly divided not over mere questions of the best techniques to reaching shared goals, but we are divided over the basic question of who we are and what our goals should be.

These divisions do not cut only through the chambers of congress, or the boundaries of states and districts, but through families, through dinner tables, between old friends, and even in churches.

In our own congregation we are living through an expression of this broader social dynamic as we continue to grapple with strong and competing ideas about who we are meant to be as a church and how best we can live out and express our beliefs and values.

As we step each day closer to an extraordinarily consequential election, I sense all around me stress and anxiety growing. I hear from many of you, and feel for myself, anxiety and fear.

I have heard from many that they struggle to sleep and that their brains feels foggy. It is a deeply uneasy things to walk in a world that is torn and tearing. To live in a time of division, and pulling apart.

And it is stressful, and lonely, to live without any clear thought of what we all share.

And so, the true, but hopelessly pithy, thing to say is that we need to come together. We need unity.

But let me ask again. In a moment like this. What does it mean to be united?

In the waning days of the Second World War, people in this church, and thousands of other church's like it were asking the same question.

Albeit in a very different circumstance, they were asking, what does it mean to be united?

In 1943, after several years of negotiation, leaders of the Congregational Christian Churches and Evangelical and Reformed Church published a pamphlet called "The Basis of Union" making a case and outlining a plan for how their two groups could be come one to form what they proposed calling "The United Church of Christ"

The Congregational Christian Church was comprised of about 5800 congregational churches including ours. These were churches who traced their ancestry to English Puritans, like the Pilgrims.

The Evangelical and Reformed churches represented about 3000 churches. These churches traced their history to German Reformed churches in the midwest.

This proposed merger was quite controversial.

Our church voted to accept this basis of union on March 14, 1948. I could not find any minutes or accounts of that meeting in our church records. Although I did find one note indicating that the meeting has lasted five hours.

The heart of the controversy was simple, it was our question.

What does it mean to be united?

Congregationalists were deeply concerned that joining this new denomination would deprive them of something which they valued very highly, the independence of their local churches. They feared that joining the United Church of Christ would lead to a slow erosion of their right to govern themselves and to exist as distinct, local, churches.

In support of the merger, others argued that the church could most faithfully carry out its calling in the world through the development of fellowship, through working together, and through systems and habits of mutual care and support.

Each side had a hope and a fear.

Those against the merger hoped that an independent churches would continue to function as local outcroppings of the universal church, free to shape their destiny and practice by their own conscience and discernment. They feared becoming mere franchises of a religion prescribed to them by others they did not know.

Those who sought merger hoped that by emphasizing responsibility to one another the mission of the whole church might be elevated. They feared that increasingly fragmented churches would be unsustainable, and ultimately fail in any effort to offer a coherent Christian witness.

What would it mean to be united?

Over the course of the next decade, the answer to that question came into focus. Eventually the denominations that gathered together to form the United Church of Christ would say, as we do today, that we are united by covenant.

Covenant. A bond of commitment that does not erase the distinctness of individuals, but that emphasizes our responsibility to one another.

Rev. Russel Boynton wrote this pamphlet in support of the merger. This is the copy that was sent to our church. It begins with these words:

“The essential genius of Congregationalism is the effective combination of freedom and fellowship so that not only may God’s word be heard, but God’s will be done. The tension between these two, freedom and fellowship, defines the area in which our very lives are lived.”

And of course this step that our fore-bearers took was not the end of a journey but the beginning. In fact the preamble of the constitution of the United Church of Christ says that we, “affirm the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.”

Those who formed our denomination did not settle us onto a stable foundation, but rather set us on a fulcrum, calling each of us, in every expression of the church to find our footing between freedom and fellowship, between the call of our conscience and what we owe to one another. They set us into covenant with one another.

And I believe that this image of covenant might also open us to an answer to our question. The question we ask ourselves today. What does it mean to be united?

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The prophet Jeremiah offers us a beautiful vision. The day is coming... when God will establish a new covenant...

The prophet Jeremiah imagined a new covenant. Not like the old covenant carved on stone and enforced with structure and legal apparatus.

A new covenant. Inscribed in people’s very hearts.

He imagined a world where they would not even need to teach one another to seek God because God’s presence would be unmistakable. Where people scarcely need to explain themselves to each other, because the way of God is so indelibly inscribed on their lives that they see with the same eyes and feel with the same heart.

Its a world we are a long way from.

Not to say we’ve never tried. History is marred by crude human attempts at unity. But they fall into the same pattern: ignoring, demeaning, or even eliminating what is different they end up seeking through power and domination to achieve some idealized uniformity.

That is not what it is to be united.

I think that some of the pain we are living through as a society right now is tied to an awakening. A realization that we will not find the unity we seek in mere uniformity. Nor will we find a unity by demanding purity of one another.

Nor will we find it simply by giving up on what we hold to be true, or watering down our convictions in order to make them more palatable to others.

Most attempts at unity are shallow. Because they really just entail letting go of either our freedom or our fellowship.

Covenant. Our calling. Is the uneasy balance of holding onto each. Of believing that neither can be sacrificed and that the Holy Spirit moves to transform lives and transform the world when we stand honestly in our covenantal relationships with one another.

What does it mean to be united?

Not just what does it mean to be united as a denomination, but what does it mean to be united as a church, or what would it mean to be united as a nation, or even, what would it mean to be united as a whole human family?

It means to be able to hold our conscience in contact with our community. It means life balanced together on that fulcrum. It does not need to mean compromising the convictions of our heart. It doesn't even have to mean finding middle ground. It isn't agreeing to disagree. It is certainly not avoiding the hard topics.

It all but guarantees that at times our knees will shake with both anger and fear.

To be united can simply be to covenant to live in this tension together. Between what our hearts demand of us, and what we demand of one another. To speak with conviction and to listen with grace. To offer words of challenge with care.

And to do this because we believe that covenant is true unity. That is the type of space in which the Spirit works to transform lives and transform the world.

There were some in those early days that proposed a different name for our new denomination.

Rather than the United Church of Christ, they suggested, the Uniting Church of Christ.

Mindful that unity is not a state-of-being but lifelong work. That unity is not ever a settled fact but is always being made and remade in our covenantal life together. United and uniting.