

**HIDDEN
HISTORIES
IN THE
UNITED
CHURCH OF
CHRIST**

2

edited by

Barbara Brown Zikmund

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For
my father
Henry Daniels Brown
1910-1970
who taught me to love history
and to look beyond the
obvious

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INTRODUCTION

Unity and Diversity

Barbara Brown Zikmund

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST is a case study of religious pluralism in twentieth-century America. Not only does it carry on the traditions of the German Reformed, Congregational, German Evangelical, and Christian denominations, but it also seeks to embody more flexible understandings of church unity in the face of diversity. It is a good example of the complex developments that make American religious history so unique.

The first volume of *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ* made the case that the history of the UCC cannot be adequately defined in terms of four denominational “streams” becoming one. When such “historical orthodoxy” dominates, parts of the history get lost, methods for preserving materials become too narrow, historical interpretations may be biased, and past events are treated out of context. An adequate history of the UCC must be nourished by “hidden histories” that seldom surface within the traditional fourfold approach.

It is important, therefore, to move beyond UCC historical orthodoxy and examine the history of special movements, women, and ethnic communities. The earlier book contained material on native Americans, blacks, Hungarians, Armenians, German Congregationalists, Schwenkfelders, and Japanese-American churches, along with an examination of laywomen’s ministries and information about theological variety in Reformed history.

All these histories show that the United Church of Christ has been wrestling with pluralism for a long time. An adequate history of the UCC must retrieve and assimilate these histories. Then those who have been lost or slighted by standard interpretations of the past may experience justice. Unity in diversity requires that the United Church of Christ locate, preserve, and freely share all these histories.

A second volume of hidden histories is important for two reasons. There is need to redress some of the obvious omissions in the first collection. Chapters on the Christians, the Evangelical Protestants, and the Chinese Congregationalists explore more of the confessional, ecclesiastical, and ethnic variety of UCC history. This second volume also examines more deeply what it means for the United Church of Christ to celebrate its “unity in diversity.” What are some of the historical pressures and experiences leading toward unity in the UCC? What instances of diversity and differentiation have helped the UCC define itself more precisely in a pluralistic age?

The first six chapters in this book show ways in which the history of the United Church of Christ and its historical antecedents moves from particularity toward unity. The efforts of peoples of faith to share sacred space, preserve liberty of conscience, get beyond sectarianism, combine intellectual rigor and popular piety, streamline denominational structures, and cultivate communication networks have shaped the unity of the United Church of Christ.

At the same time, there are other stories that show how unity has been broken, redefined, and stretched by diversity. The last four chapters of the book lift up two controversies leading to denominational fragmentation and clarification, efforts to provide special training for women’s ministries and an example of ethnic church experience. They show how unity in diversity must reckon with theological, ecclesiastical, gender, and ethnic differences.

EXPRESSION OF UNITY

The interplay of unity and diversity within United Church of Christ history has, on the whole, been a healthy experience. Part One explores various ways in which particular histories have shaped UCC understandings of unity. When the founders of the UCC came together under the biblical hope that “we may all be one,” they built on earlier experience. Evangelical, Reformed, Christian, and Congregational people grounded their ecumenical vision in concrete experiences.

The first chapter in this collection takes a closer look at what are known as “union churches.” Eighteenth-century Europe was plagued with wars, unstable governments, and deplorable economic conditions. As German Reformed and German Lutheran immigrants arrived in colonial America, there were so few people of either religious tradition that the two groups found it easy to share church buildings. Both groups already had experience with common facilities in Germany. Besides, cooperation on the rural frontier was a way of life. In time, churches developed traditions, official guidelines, and policies whereby two congregations could build and maintain one church structure for their mutual benefit.

What originally began out of expediency, because of the scarcity of educated ministers, the poverty of the people, and desires to share their common German language and culture, became a way of life. These positive experiences of denominational cooperation at the grassroots level showed members of UCC churches that ecumenical understanding can begin with the very practical matters that emerge when two congregations share the same sacred space.

Another experience of unity is found in the development of a small but progressive group of German churches in the Ohio River valley. Chapter 2 explores the origins of the Smithfield Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during the American Revolution. It explains how a movement spreading from that city eventually established a group of churches that cherished religious freedom, welcomed diversity of opinion, and respected the right of individual conviction.

These churches were fiercely independent. As a matter of principle they had no creed, allowing members to fashion their faith for themselves, based on their own thinking and experience. They also insisted on the autonomy of each congregation, for fear of opening the door to “outside control.” And finally, they emphasized the authority of the laity, not the clergy, to “work out” any problems in the churches.

Although these churches were wary of all ecclesiastical organizations, by the late nineteenth century they had organized themselves into a loose federation known as the German Evangelical Protestant Church of North America. Evangelical because it was grounded in the gospel (the evangel), and Protestant because it protested against any compulsion in matters of faith and conscience. Their small size, however, led them to seek a wider fellowship with the National Council of Congregational Churches in 1925, and through that connection they became part of the United Church of Christ.

The third chapter takes a longer look at the history of the Christian denomination. Although the Christians are technically one of the “four streams” within standard United Church of Christ history, their story is seldom adequately treated. This is because Christian origins are found in North Carolina and Virginia, on the Kentucky-Ohio frontier, and in New England. They are also divided into separate black and white developments.

Chapter 3 looks especially at the “Christian Connexion” in New England, showing how its an-

tisectarian stance, its attitudes toward women in ministry, its expansion beyond New England, its definitions of ministry and theology, and its ecumenical tenacity continue to strengthen the UCC. Over the years Christian principles became denominational beliefs. They remained broad enough, however, to invite other Christians into mutual fellowship and cooperation. In 1931 the Christians joined with the Congregationalists, and in the 1950s most New England Christian churches became part of the United Church of Christ. Always deeply committed to church unity beyond sectarian labels, the Christian legacy strengthens UCC ecumenical identity.

Another way of seeing how historical experiences have shaped the United Church of Christ is examined in the fourth chapter. Within the history of the Evangelical Synod of North America, the little-known heresy trial of Karl Emil Otto in 1880 presents a unique example of theological leadership and the struggle for denominational integrity. Otto was initially condemned for his use of German scholarship and its challenge to biblical authority. His case was one of the earliest to raise this issue among American Protestants.

In defense, Otto pointed to the 1848 confessional statement of the Evangelical Church. It stated that where the resources of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions disagreed, Evangelical believers “adhered strictly to the passages of Holy Scripture bearing on the subject” and “the liberty of conscience prevailing in the Evangelical Church.”

Although Otto was initially condemned, he was later informally vindicated. As the years went by, his approach to scriptural authority, learning, individual conscience, and willingness to allow missionary-like accommodation to American life prevailed. The Evangelical Synod learned how to live with a creative tension between sound biblical criticism and flexible churchly pietism. This legacy has become part of the United Church of Christ.

Chapter 5 approaches the issue of unity from the standpoint of ecclesiastical structures. It describes the ways in which women’s mission work in the Congregational churches was developed during the nineteenth century by four independent women’s mission boards. The boards came into being to support women missionaries and facilitate outreach to women. They worked cooperatively with male-dominated mission boards, but they raised their own funds and maintained control over their own projects.

By the early twentieth century, however, the ideal of bureaucratic efficiency, the increasing centralization of Congregationalism, pressure from missionaries to get beyond embarrassing divisions in the mission field, a general concern for cooperation, and the desire of younger women not to have separate women’s organizations called for change in women’s relationship to the mission boards. Great energy was expended to consolidate structures without losing the strengths of women’s work. Finally, in 1927, three of the four women’s boards were absorbed into the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

In retrospect this consolidation was probably not in the best interests of women. The women tended to thrive when there was cooperation among separate organizations and when they could continue to control their own money and mission priorities. Pressure from the central Congregational bureaucracy and women’s own desires to enter the mainstream of church and national life were instrumental in bringing about the merger. This story shows the ambiguity of unified structures in relationship to genuine unity in the church.

Finally, chapter 6 addresses the importance of communication for church unity by examining the legacy of religious journalism from the Christian denomination. From the publication of the Her-

ald of Gospel Liberty in 1808 (the first religious newspaper in the world) to the UCC News in the 1980s, the health of the United Church of Christ has been nurtured by newspapers and magazines.

Herald founder-editor Elias Smith argued that liberty with respect to one's duty to God was essential. As the Christian movement grew, newspapers shaped and supported its identity. Newspapers provided "the unifying force of the whole church" and directed the energy of the church toward common purposes. Furthermore, the commitment of the Christian Church to justice was reinforced and enabled by a network of helpful publications. An understanding of the importance of journalism within the Christian tradition is but another way to explain the commitment of the United Church of Christ to unity.

The first six hidden histories should be read, therefore, as evidence defining and supporting unitive forces at work within the United Church of Christ. Taken together they show how a self-defined "united and uniting" church, which only came into being in 1957, can draw on concrete historical experiences to strengthen its ecumenical commitment.

DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

In the midst of these experiences that have supported and produced the strong commitment of the United Church of Christ to unity, there are also histories of brokenness and fragmentation. Through theological and ecclesiastical controversy, through efforts to set up separate programs for women, and through the evolution of ethnic church life, the United Church of Christ has coped with diversity.

The results have not always been constructive, but they have shown the church that a vision of unity can be enriched through awareness of diversity. Part Two examines four histories that highlight issues of diversity in UCC history.

Chapter 7 shows this process by examining the impact of the life and work of an eighteenth-century German Reformed pastor, Philip William Otterbein. Otterbein was a German Pietist who tried to remain faithful to the church of his heritage, while at the same time responding in innovative ways to the spiritual needs of the people. On the American frontier he became a leader in the Methodist-oriented German Brethren movement. Although he supported classes for spiritual nurture in the local church, he did not ask those in the movement to leave their churches. Otterbein continued to serve German Reformed churches and claimed that the United Brethren movement was an "unsectarian" development. In time, however, the United Brethren organized into a separate denomination, becoming part of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and more recently finding a place in the United Methodist Church.

Otterbein's work is important for the United Church of Christ because, despite his concern for local church life and the "experience" of salvation, he refused to ignore the larger bond of unity among all Christians. Questions of polity never dimmed his vision of a common life in Jesus Christ. He always held the Heidelberg Catechism in high regard, and even as a charismatic leader of an evangelical movement that later became a separate denomination, he remained a minister of the German Reformed Church until his death in 1813.

In the early twentieth century the United Brethren and the Reformed Church in the United States sought reconciliation. Plans were formulated for a united church, which would have included the Evangelical Synod of North America. Although this "United Church in America" never material-

ized, those ecumenical conversations shaped the later Evangelical and Reformed union.

The story of Otterbein is not the only controversy grounded in German Reformed history to produce another denomination. Chapter 8 presents the history of John Winebrenner and the Churches of God.

In this controversy John Winebrenner, a German Reformed pastor influenced by New Measures revivalism, was dismissed by his church and the synod in the 1820s for his views on the Bible, the church, free will, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and foot washing. His followers officially organized, forming a denomination known as the Churches of God, General Conference.

In the 1840s John Winebrenner became an antagonist of John Williamson Nevin, professor at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. The dialogue between them about revivalism and evangelistic techniques led to early expressions of "Mercersburg Theology." Although both men lamented the low level of piety in mid-nineteenth-century America, they had different solutions. Winebrenner stressed the importance of individual regeneration through new birth. Nevin stressed a deeper knowledge of what it means to be a Christian through catechism and confirmation. Winebrenner saw the true church as a gathering of regenerate people. Nevin emphasized that the church was established by God through Christ.

The controversy with Winebrenner made the German Reformed Church more aware of its theological boundaries. Although today the UCC may not find itself comfortable with the Winebrenner theological legacy, the way in which Winebrenner combined a progressive commitment to social reform with evangelical conviction is a useful model.

Chapter 9 approaches the issue of diversity with regard to women. Although women have shared their gifts in the church for many years, and the first woman was ordained to the Congregational ministry in 1853, efforts to establish special channels for women's ministries within the denominations that make up the United Church of Christ did not take shape until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first volume of Hidden Histories noted the ways in which the deaconess movement supported and channeled women's gifts. Chapter 9 in this volume documents the history of the Chicago Congregational Training School for Women.

The CTSW was established in 1909 through the efforts of Florence Amanda Fensham. Although women could receive a regular ministerial degree in several theological schools, there was need for a separate institution dedicated to theological education for women. At the school, young women who were eager to do something with their lives prepared for missionary service, social work, teaching, and the demanding career of a minister's wife. The school was especially committed to promoting professional stature for salaried women workers in the church. Its focused approach on women's education, however, did not last. In 1926 it was assimilated into the Chicago Theological Seminary.

Nevertheless, the Congregational Training School for Women was a creative response within its own time to the issue of women's preparation for church leadership. Although its assumptions about gender differences in the church are no longer appropriate, it did take seriously the implications of gender diversity in church and society that remain important to the United Church of Christ.

Finally, chapter 10 uses the history of Chinese Congregationalism to emphasize issues of ethnic diversity within the United Church of Christ. Beyond its English and German ethos, the UCC has

included-and continues to attract-other ethnic groups. Stories of native American, Hungarian, Armenian, and Japanese UCC church life were included in the first volume of hidden histories. This chapter on the Chinese churches documents another group with longstanding connections to the UCC. In the future, histories of Hawaiian, Mexican, Samoan, and Filipino churches will need to be written. It may be necessary to delay the work, however, in order to get historical distance on recent events. Nevertheless, it is important for the United Church of Christ to define its unity in a manner that includes ethnic diversity.

Chinese Congregationalism in the United Church of Christ dates its origins from schools established by the American Missionary Association to serve the needs of Chinese immigrants in California, and from mission work authorized by the Hawaiian Evangelical Association to evangelize Chinese plantation workers in Hawaii.

In California, AMA superintendent William C. Pond supported Chinese members in his own church and worked as an agent for the California Chinese Mission. The CCM eventually founded and supported forty-nine Chinese mission schools. Only three of these remain as self-consciously Chinese churches related to the United Church of Christ: San Francisco, Berkeley, and San Diego.

In Hawaii, Chinese immigration patterns were different. Although Chinese mission churches and schools were started on all the islands, only four churches continue-three self-consciously Chinese churches in Honolulu, and one in Hilo, which recently dropped its Chinese name.

The situation of Chinese-Americans has dramatically changed during the latter half of the twentieth century. The old Chinese communities in major cities have matured, and recent waves of immigrants from Taiwan and Southeast Asia have led to the establishment of several new UCC Chinese churches since 1970.

Furthermore, denominational affiliation is only one part of what it means to be part of an ethnic Chinese church in the UCC. Increasingly UCC Chinese people relate ecumenically to other Chinese churches through organizations like the National Conference of Chinese Churches in America and to other Asian ethnic churches within the UCC through the UCC Pacific and Asian American Ministries. The story of the Chinese in the UCC shows how ethnic diversity itself becomes another force for the unity of the Christian church.

Hidden histories in the United Church of Christ can be interpreted in many ways. If it is possible to sustain denominational integrity in a pluralistic world, the United Church of Christ provides an interesting case study. Its diverse history contains examples and resources that promote church unity. At the same time, its diversity highlights issues that forever divide the Christian community: theology, ecclesiology, gender, and ethnicity (including race). Only time will tell if Paul's words about seeing in part-but someday seeing face to face-will be fulfilled in the United Church of Christ.