

One of Webster's definitions of polity is "a specific form of church government." It is the cloth which binds the churches together in a denomination and varies in style and design with each denomination. Polity is the manner in which a denomination governs and administers its life and relationships among the individuals, churches and groups within it.

## History and Background

What churches believe about the nature of the church, its relation to God and its purpose in the world largely influences how they organize and govern themselves.

There are two or three basic theological issues that are at the heart of polity decisions. One of these is the understanding of the freedom of God and the free movement of the Holy Spirit. Polity questions related to this understanding include:

- What form of church government, structure and organization is most responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit?
- What makes church government, structure and organization unresponsive, or a hindrance to the movement of the Holy Spirit?
- How can church government, structure and organization maintain a healthy tension between its valued tradition and its ability to be flexible and take risks in new directions?
- Is there a way to understand and make the distinction between the

action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer, and the activity of the Spirit in the life of the church?

- How does God speak to us through one another, and how are we prepared to listen?

A second theological issue related to polity decisions has to do with human freedom and sinfulness. Polity questions related to this understanding include:

- Recognizing the presence of human sin, is the individual Christian more or less competent than a group of Christians to discern the mind of Christ?
- Should the freedom of the individual be preserved in all matters of faith and practice?
- Churches are described as having congregational polity, Episcopal polity or Presbyterian polity. While there are complex meanings of these terms, there are also simple distinctions. **Congregational polity** affirms the freedom of the individual in all matters of faith and practice. It affirms the freedom of the local church to govern its own affairs apart from the control of regional church councils or associations of churches. Supporters of congregational polity can recount periods in church history when God's freedom was threatened by an ecclesiastical order supported by governmental power. They seek to prevent this from occurring again. **Episcopal polity** is based on convictions about the office of leaders in the church. The offices of

bishop, elder, deacon and pastor are instruments through which the tradition is honored and nurtured and through which the Holy Spirit speaks, moves and leads. Authority resides in the office.

**Presbyterian polity** is based on convictions about the value of associations of churches, and church councils. This is a representative form of church government in which delegates or representatives from local churches gather to discern the mind of Christ. Proponents of this form of polity believe that in such a gathering the group, led by the Holy Spirit, can take action and make decisions. Gathered in such meetings, the representatives are seen as full expressions of the church. As such, their actions and decisions do not need to be affirmed or approved by the local churches for them to be valid expressions of the church.

## Polity in the United Church of Christ

While it is possible for some denominations to identify their polity as one of the three types just described, the United Church of Christ is not able to do this. One of the creative dimensions of the United Church of Christ is its blending of aspects of each of the types of polities.

Douglas Horton, writing in **Reform and Renewal** (page 38), describes United Church of Christ polity in parallel terms to the branches of civil

government.

The United Church of Christ is on its administrative side, Episcopal; on its legislative side, Presbyterian; and on its judicial side, congregational.

The statement "on its administrative side, Episcopal" recognizes that leaders have been chosen and authorized to act on behalf of the church in certain matters. An example of this is often seen in the office of the conference minister. Conference ministers are the chief executives or administrative officers of the 39 conferences of the United Church of Christ. In this role they provide leadership to the churches in their mission and ministry, and they guide policy formation, program development and program implementation in their conferences. They also exercise pastoral oversight for the ordained ministers and churches in their conferences. As is true of pastors of local churches, they are looked to for their wisdom and guidance in matters of faith and order.

"On its legislative side, Presbyterian" recognizes that some decisions are made by representatives in called meetings of associations, of conferences and of the General Synod. These decisions determine how the different parts of the United Church of Christ will be together, how they will together engage in mission and ministry and how they will order their lives and relationships. The United Church of Christ values these settings as gatherings where the mind of Christ can be discerned. In most cases, delegates to these meetings do not go

instructed by their local church as to how to vote on particular measures. Rather, they are free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

“On its judicial side, congregational” recognizes that the local church does not relinquish its own authority to decide about its own life. The Constitution of the United Church of Christ states that “The autonomy of the local church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action”... The General Synod, conferences, associations, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, or its conference ministers cannot decide for the local church.

One of the best descriptions of United Church of Christ polity is to call it a dynamic “partnership covenant.” Partnership covenant values the commitment the parts of the United Church of Christ have made to one another to live together, to work together in behalf of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world, to support one another and to call one another to accountability. It recognizes that while no one part of the church can decide for any other part, we are bound continually to listen to one another, to take one another with great seriousness and to open ourselves to being influenced by one another. The Constitution of the United Church of Christ speaks of this spirit of covenant partnership: “Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a conference or an association, should be held in the highest regard by every

local church.”

The covenant partnership preserves these concepts:

- Christ as Head of the church.
- The priesthood of all believers.
- The autonomy of the local church.
- Covenant among members creating a caring, sharing, accountable fellowship.
- Ordained ministers and churches bound in covenanted relationships.

You probably identify yourself with the local church where you have your membership. Your church may be large or small, rich or poor, rural or urban, liberal or conservative. Whatever its size or shape, your church makes its own decisions about worship, creed, membership, mission, finances and leadership. But your church does not lead its life in a vacuum. Members participate in the life of your conference or association, and study the actions of your conference, your association, and the General Synod. Your church uses resources prepared by the national bodies of the United Church of Christ. You may be led by a pastor prepared in a United Church of Christ seminary and ordained by a United Church of Christ association. Your church has called a pastor who has been granted ordained ministerial standing in a United Church of Christ association, who participates in the life of the United Church of Christ and ministers on behalf of the whole denomination as well as for your own congregation. In calling a pastor your congregation is assisted by its association or conference. In these and many other

ways the life of your local church is influenced, enriched and related by other settings of the church.

Local churches join in covenant partnership with one another and with the association, conference and national settings of the denomination in order to be faithful and obedient to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The purpose of partnership is to be effective and faithful in the mission given to the church. This is always the question to ask of polity arrangements: Do they contribute to increased obedience, faithfulness and effectiveness in being the church in the world on behalf of the gospel and mission of Jesus Christ?

In the United Church of Christ, churches covenant as partners in:

- **Associations**--regional gatherings of churches.
- **Conferences**--39 larger regional gatherings of churches, many including all United Church of Christ churches in a state.
- **General Synod**--a national gathering of representatives from conferences.

**Associations** provide the avenue by which local churches are associated with the United Church of Christ. (In some places the conference serves as the association). The association (or conference), recognizes the credentials, of ordained ministers and is also is the place where they hold standing as ministers of the United Church of Christ. In some places, associations have staff and promote programs. **Conferences**, which include the associations within their

geographic boundaries, coordinate programs, aid and counsel churches and clergy, help in placement of clergy and provide services such as workshops and camping programs. They are self-governing and each has a chief executive officer, the conference minister.

The **General Synod** includes more than 700 representatives who meet every two years. It sets policies and adopts a budget for work carried on by the national settings of the church. It elects national officers and an Executive Council, as well as most of the Boards of other national ministries.

Programs on behalf of the church are carried on by your church, the association of churches and clergy around you, your conference and the General Synod, through national bodies. These bodies include the Covenanted, Affiliated, and Associated Ministries, Councils, and others.

When these groupings communicate with each other—which is frequent—the message never is “you must, because we say so.” Rather, the message is, “because we are all part of one church seeking to serve Christ, we need to take seriously what each other is saying.” So General Synod listens to local churches and local churches listen to General Synod. Both listen to associations and conferences.

You may have noticed that people in the news media don't always understand United Church of Christ polity. They write things like, “The

United Church of Christ says ...” or “The United Church of Christ does ....” They would be more accurate if they wrote, “The 19th General Synod said ...” or “The 23rd annual meeting of the Ohio Conference did ...” or “The recent annual meeting of First Church on the Green decided....” In each case, the responsibility for the actual decision rests only with those who were present at the meeting, but the responsibility for taking seriously what was decided rests with all of us who are in covenant partnership with those who were present.

## Implications

United Church of Christ polity is particularly suited to, and receptive to, decision-making initiative in any setting. Since no setting of the church has ultimate responsibility for any other setting, every setting must accept its own decision-making responsibilities. If your local church discerns that something needs to be done, it will start doing it, and will let others know the importance it attaches to the task, in the hope others will take that task seriously, too.

There is the major risk that what one says the other will not take seriously, and the responsibility will not be widely shared. The best way to see that something happens in and through the settings of United Church of Christ is to take the time and effort to build as broad and as deep a consensus of support as possible, rather than to depend on the long-range influence of anyone component of the organization.

The cutting edge of partnership covenant may well be our continuing effort to find new ways to take seriously what other partners in the covenant are saying and doing. The temptation is to focus all of our efforts on making sure that no branch of the church coerces any other branch. But in the process of that effort, we may lose opportunities to make the kind of powerful witness that Christ may need from us and that we might be able to make if we each affirmed both in freedom, and in responsibility, the “ties that bind” us to each other.

United Church of Christ polity has a built-in commitment toward ecumenism. If we are to take seriously what every gathering of Christians is saying, we dare not limit our careful hearing to those who are in our denomination only.

Our polity also has a built-in commitment toward a concern for the world in which we live. The nature of the covenant of reconciliation that God has established through Christ is hardly limited to Christians alone. The concern for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner in Matthew 25:31-46 makes this clear. Nor, if we read that parable carefully, does the Holy Spirit single out Christians as the only ones who are acceptable spokespersons. Our ultimate hope should be to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say-through every channel-and to respond in faith. We cannot fulfill that hope unless we take seriously the needs and concerns of the world Christ died to serve.

## Questions

- What are the strengths and problems of United Church of Christ polity in comparison to the polities of other denominations?
- If you had to describe the value and genius of United Church of Christ polity to a newcomer to your church who knew nothing about the denomination, what would you say? What would you need to add for those who had no experience with any church organization?
- If we were to take more seriously the theological belief that God's Holy Spirit can speak to us through gatherings of persons outside the United Church of Christ, what changes do you feel would have to be made in life and programming in your local church? In the denomination as a whole?
- In what ways do you see United Church of Christ polity serving the mission of the denomination? In what ways does it hinder the mission?
- How does the United Church of Christ answer the questions found in the history and background section of this description?  
In what ways do you experience congregational, Episcopal and Presbyterian aspects of our polity and how do you react to them?

## Action Suggestions

- Take an issue or need that concerns you in whatever grouping you are gathered. Study the bylaws of your

group and the bylaws of the United Church of Christ to determine how you can most effectively bring that issue or need to the other partners in the United Church of Christ covenant. Follow through on trying to build a broad consensus of support to meet the issue or need.

- Research the important issues or needs that other settings of the United Church of Christ have lifted up in the past two years. Create a forum in which your group can seriously consider one or more of those issues or needs. Make sure your group understands that no one is forcing you to take any action, but try to determine how you can best serve as responsible partners in covenant to those other groups who have raised these issues and needs.
- How do you feel when you read in the news that the United Church of Christ has said or done something with which you disagree? Rewrite that news article for your own benefit so that it accurately reflects the polity of “partnership covenant.” Now how do you feel about the news article?
- How can you most responsibly express your disagreement as partners in covenant?
- Use these books for further reading and study. **The Shaping of the United Church of Christ** by Louis H. Gunnemann (United Church Press, 1977) and **Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movement, and Polity in the United Church of Christ**, edited by Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe and Daniel L. Johnson (The Pilgrim Press, 1990)

# UCC Polity

**The Evolution Of A UCC Style: History, Ecclesiology, And Culture Of The United Church Of Christ** edited by Randi Walker, (United Church Press, 2005) and **Freedom with Order: the Doctrine Of the Church in the UCC** by Robert S. Paul (New York: United Church Press, 1987. Check with your conference Resource Center for these and related materials available to loan. Books published by United Church Press and The Pilgrim Press may be ordered from United Church Press/The Pilgrim Press, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115. Telephone, toll-free, 800- 537-3394.

- Browse the United Church of Christ website, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).
- The Parish Life and Leadership Team of Local Church Ministries has prepared a document that explores the covenant relationship between local churches and associations (or conferences acting as associations.) You can download this document and others having to do with the polity of the United Church of Christ, from their web page: [www.ucc.org/ministers](http://www.ucc.org/ministers)
- Suggest that your association convene a conversation among its member churches to explore the meaning of their covenant relationships.