

A church is a group of people who are together because they have been called together by God and because they have agreed to be together. The local church is “the basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ.”

## History and Background

Christians began to gather with other Christians in Jerusalem where they lived together and shared their wealth. As the message of Jesus Christ was carried out from Jerusalem, churches were established in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Rome and other places where the good news was taken. We know because letters were sent to the churches there. We also know that although the Christians gathered because of love and commitment to Christ, they sometimes disagreed about doctrine and had interpersonal clashes.

By the Middle Ages the local church had become the parish. All the people who lived in one town or the same part of town belonged to the same church served by a parish priest. The Protestant Reformation broke up the parish system to some extent, for not everyone wanted to be part of the parish of the Roman Church.

When the Congregationalists came to America, the parish was related to the system of government. People who lived within one area paid taxes which helped support the church

there. This worked well until people with other religious convictions arrived and refused to support the established church.

Although the style has varied, the local church has been the way that the Christian Church has continued from generation to generation. People get together knowing that Jesus said “where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them” (Matthew 18:20 TEV). By gathering, they are better able to “go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples” (Matthew 28:19 TEV).

## Common Practices

United Church of Christ churches are in every state of the United States, in Puerto Rico, even some over the border from their home conferences, in Canada. Most are relatively small; a few are really big. The church buildings and their congregations look different. They reflect the heritage of their members: African, Asian, English, German, Hispanic, Hungarian, Native American, and more. Increasingly, they are multicultural. They are in urban neighborhoods and farming villages and are part of the suburban sprawl.

Part of the mission of the denomination is to help establish new churches. Every year there are new local churches that become part of the United Church of Christ. On the other hand, more than one percent of our churches were established before 1700.

United Church of Christ members differ in ways they worship, understand their mission and interpret the Bible. There may be differences among members of one church or from church to church. A service of worship in a United Church of Christ in a New Hampshire village might be very similar to, or very different from, a service of worship in rural Missouri or in an Hispanic church in the Southwest, or an Hispanic church in Pennsylvania! Some churches have remained closely tied to their denominational heritage as well as their ethnic heritage. Some churches closely identify with the Evangelical or Reformed traditions, some with the Congregational and others with the Christian tradition. Many celebrate their United Church of Christ identity. In early 2005 more than a third of the United Church of Christ congregations identified themselves with the “God is Still Speaking” identity campaign of the denomination.

How they carry out their mission may be tied to the community in which they live. An urban church may set up a soup kitchen, while members of a suburban church deliver meals to those who cannot prepare them.

The church calls people to gather for worship, support and mission, and the church sends its members to the community for ministry in their daily lives.

## Characteristics of a Local Church

You become a member of a church through baptism and acknowledgment of faith in Jesus Christ. You may have become a member of your church through confirmation, profession or reaffirmation of your faith or by letter of transfer from another church. You and the other Christians who gather in your church covenant to:

- **Worship God** through regular participation in services of word and sacrament and services of thanksgiving and commemoration to celebrate the gifts and experiences of life in church and community.
- **Tell the story of God's love in Jesus** through study of the Word, preaching, education and evangelism.
- **Serve God and others** through support, being peacemakers and advocating justice in structures and justice for individuals.
- **Be a community of faith** by developing support groups in the church and living Christian lives in the world.
- **Be engaged in biblical, ethical and theological reflection** that leads to new decisions of obedience to the gospel.

The power of the people gathered in God is greater than it would be if each individual member went about doing the same thing. Your church can do more with the sick, hungry, homeless, neglected, imprisoned and un-churched than you and your friends could, each taking your money and time and gifts and making an effort individually. By pooling money, time, enthusiasm and energy, your church's mission can be more than the sum of the individuals' capabilities.

The local church is often a primary place for members to find support and concern for themselves. The church nurtures and strengthens its members with love, discipline and worship. Members visit and support the ill, lonely, frightened and troubled; and they rejoice with one another and with God's people everywhere. They worship, and study, and give and receive support, so that they can carry out their call to ministry and mission.

The United Church of Christ stands in the tradition that believes the Holy Spirit is calling local churches to ministry in ways that are *particularly* understood by each local church. Local churches in the United Church of Christ are in covenant with one another and at the same time they are autonomous. They determine and modify their structure, program, theological position and policies.

The national bodies, conference, General Synod or any other group or leader can influence a local church but cannot force it to take a stand, call a pastor or contribute to an all-church offering. The relationship between settings of the church is covenantal, rather than authoritarian.

Within the covenant, and while maintaining autonomy, local churches in the United Church of Christ have entered into a free and voluntary association with other United Church of Christ churches, by virtue of being members of the denomination.. They covenant together in associations and conferences and are represented at General Synod. They take on "a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension."<sup>2</sup>

They are also members of the Church Universal and bear responsibility for ministry beyond the United Church of Christ.

The local church calls leaders--paid and volunteer, female and male, part-time and full-time--to oversee the work of the church, call forth gifts and provide vision. Some are ordained by the association "to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership."<sup>3</sup> Others are commissioned by the association to perform other specific ministries on behalf of the United Church of

Christ. The church is responsible for supporting these leaders and developing gifts in its members.

## Issues Facing the Church

- How can local churches carve out an identity as part of the United Church of Christ regardless of their age and roots?
- How can local churches tied to a particular part of the United Church of Christ heritage learn about and appreciate other traditions?

## Questions

- Could the church be the Church Universal without local churches?
- How is each of the five functions of a church carried out in your church?
- In what ways does your church show its autonomy?
- In what ways does your church show its covenantal relationship to other parts of the United Church of Christ?

<sup>3</sup> Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, Article V, paragraph 20.

<sup>1</sup> Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, Article IV, paragraph 7.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, Article V, paragraph 14.