

140. A NEW OLD FRAMEWORK:

“Covenantal Relationships”

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When the United Church of Christ named the central theological concept behind its restructuring in the 1990s it chose “covenant.” A new Article III, entitled “Covenantal Relationships,” is now found in the UCC Constitution: “The United Church of Christ is composed of . . . ,” “the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner.”

William A. Hulteen Jr. (b. 1936) is a UCC minister educated at Boston University and Boston University School of Theology. After serving pastorates in Massachusetts (1965–72) he joined the staff of the Ohio Conference UCC (1972–74). In 1975 he moved to the national UCC Office for Church Life and Leadership (OCLL), serving for twenty-five years (1975–2000) and ending his career as its executive director (1988–2000). Reflecting on the importance of the new Article III on “Covenantal Relationships” in the 2000 proposed UCC Constitution, Hulteen insists that the United Church of Christ has already become comfortable with describing its structure as “covenantal polity.” The UCC is “in covenant with God.” UCC people are “in covenant with each other and God.” The substance of covenantal polity names “parties relating to each other,” describes “a particular manner of relating,” characterizes “the identity and ends to which those relationships are given,” and becomes “an instrument for the ongoing generation of conjoined commitments and activity.” Covenantal polity understands authority, responsibility, accountability, and boundaries in new ways.

God Does Not Coerce, God Invites

God invites and does not coerce a people to be in covenant with God and each other. As God does not coerce, neither is coercion an instrumental characteristic of covenantal polity. Free willing of commitment to be and remain in covenant with God and each other is a hallmark of covenantal polity in which the unity of all is fostered by community in Christ.

Saying this is a reminder of the stellar work of Robert Paul in his *Freedom with Order: The Doctrine of the Church in the United Church of Christ*.²

Any study of the history of church governance is cognizant of times when the vested or assumed power of a few or of the state in relation to religion has been coercive and to the advantage of those in control. It is

no wonder that United Church of Christ polity abhors coercive activity, no matter its form of approach or source.

At the same time, though, it is important to acknowledge that significant discourse and dialogue need to be regularly present. They provide for the sharing of both insight and conviction with testimony being subject to challenge or acceptance with neither fear of reprisal nor reward of favor. The absence of such testimony provides a vacuum in which unfaithful notions go unnoticed and bland sameness becomes a touchstone for lackluster and incomplete unity. Vigorous testimony participates in and enlivens the development of a polity that invites but does not coerce.

The offering of testimony is, at times, confused with *speaking for* or as *binding upon*. This confusion is understandable in that many persons contend with hierarchical organizations in day to day life, organizations in which *speaking for* or something being *binding upon* is a reality. But that is not the way of the United Church of Christ. A seldom used example is that no local church speaks for or holds its statements or actions as binding upon other local churches, associations, conferences, or the General Synod. Expressions of the church can and need to offer testimony that can be considered and joined, but assent is willful. Somehow, the United Church of Christ needs to help itself and others “get it.”

Covenantal polity needs to take seriously the presence of autonomy with hospitality on behalf of the contribution of invitation and not coercion to the healthy presence of such a governance.

The work of Donald Freeman is a helpful place to begin in the development of a constructive understanding of autonomy in the life of the United Church of Christ. “Every unit of the church,” says Freeman, “while in covenant with the other units, has a non-transferable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it — God’s will and way for it — in its time and place.”³ Doing so places autonomy within a positive context of responsibility and does not limit its presence to the reductionism of “freedom from.” Autonomy has, in this responsibility-oriented understanding of it, a responsible “freedom to” quality. As the “nontransferable responsibility” to which Freeman alludes is acted out, autonomy is not a fence, but becomes a threshold for entering into a covenantal behavior in which testimony is offered, expected, considered, and even joined.

Hospitality, understood here as a spiritual discipline, has to do with an abiding sense of engaging and welcoming the other, knowing that the other can be a source of insight into the ways and will of God. Hospitality is crucial given the multifaceted presence of diversity within the unity of the body of Christ. Instead of “you can’t tell me,” hospitality looks forward to considering and learning from and with the other. Tonalities of anticipation and humility keep pretentiousness and shallow stereotypes at bay and replace them with disciplined and hospitable openness to the gifts of insight and conviction being offered by and coming from others.