

## MATURING IN CHRIST

### A Theological Perspective for Conference Ministry

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#### THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

The Church of Jesus Christ might be described as a worship-centered, prayer-based, Spirit-guided, learning-inspired, faith-forming, love-flowing, mission-engaging, peace-promoting, justice-seeking, and grace-incarnating multi-cultural, multi-racial communion of disciples of Christ, accessible to all. Grounded in faith, covenanted in love, sustained by grace, and nurtured by hope, it seeks to be a faithful instrument for engaging in God's mission (*Missio Dei*) in the world. It is brought into being by the ever-faithful God of the covenant, and through Christ's creative action and promise, is One. Any particular expression of the Church of Jesus Christ must always bear this in mind as it seeks to be faithful to the Gospel and this promise and action of Christ.

As part of the emergence of the Protestant expression of the One Church of Jesus Christ, primarily within the development of the Reformed faith and order, the United Church of Christ seeks to live in the reality of this Oneness and in doing so holds fast to several fundamental tenets.

Firstly, it affirms that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, and that everything in its faith and life flow from this central affirmation.

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, it acknowledges and turns to the Biblical witness as its fundamental source for its faith and life as a Church. The Word in the Old and New Testaments (earlier and later "covenants") always shapes the ministry of the Church.

It [the UCC] looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, it affirms and acknowledges every person of faith to be a minister of the Gospel. Everyone who is baptized into Christ's Church is not only a member of that communion, but called to be a servant in that ministry. The Church's ministry is the ministry of all its baptized members.

The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society. The UCC seeks to undergird the ministry of its members by nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service.<sup>3</sup>

Fourthly, from the communion of baptized disciples of Christ in Christ's Church, the UCC believes that God calls some to serve as "ordained ministers" of the Gospel and shepherds (as Pastor and Teacher) of the Church. As baptized members of Christ's Church, such persons share in the ministry of the Church, but through special training and spiritual discipline and discernment, they are "called" by God and the Church to lead others as their Pastor and Teacher.

The UCC recognizes that God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required.<sup>4</sup>

Fifthly, the UCC lives within a covenantal polity. The basic and fundamental expression of the Church for the UCC is the local congregation. It is primarily (though not exclusively) within particular communions of disciples of Christ in specific communities that the UCC believes the work of ministry needs to be focused and carried out.

The basic unit of the life and organization of the UCC is the Local Church.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing that responsibility for and accountability in certain parts of the Church's ministry falls to the whole Church (and not simply the local congregation), the UCC organizes itself into Associations, Conferences, and Covenanted Ministries.

Associations and Conferences are bodies organized on a territorial basis to perform certain functions in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

There are four Covenanted Ministries as defined and set forth in the Constitution and the By-Laws of the UCC: Office of General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries.<sup>7</sup>

The United Church of Christ recognizes and affirms each of these different forms as an "expression" of the Church and understands all to be in covenantal relationship with one another.

Within the UCC, the various expressions of the Church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the Church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole Church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of the others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the UCC seek to work together in all God's ways.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the United Church of Christ is but one part of the Church of Jesus Christ engaged in God's mission in the world, and, as a part, draws some of its definitive marks from the Protestant Reformed tradition. It recognizes and affirms Christ as the Head of the Church and turns to the Biblical witness in Holy Scripture as the primary guide for its faith and life. It firmly believes in the priesthood of all believers, who are called together to be in covenant with God and one another in local congregations, engaged in God's mission in a particular community. Everything the UCC does as a servant community is for that mission and is geared toward enhancing the ministry of the local congregation. The UCC affirms that some of its baptized disciples are called to serve as Pastors and Teachers. It is part of the responsibility of the Church to equip and nurture these persons in this role as Pastor and Teacher and to authorize them to engage in this ministry in any of the expressions of the Church. Finally, the covenantal polity of the UCC insists that each expression of the Church interact with every other expression of the Church as a partner in engaging in God's mission in the world.

1. *Constitution of the United Church of Christ*, Preamble, Paragraph 2.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Op.cit.*, Article VI, Paragraph 20.
4. *Ibid.*, Paragraph 21.
5. *Op. cit.*, Article V, Paragraph 9.
6. *Op. cit.*, Article VIII, Paragraph 37.
7. *Op. cit.*, Article X, 57.
8. *Op. cit.*, Article III. 6.