

It all started with the Reformation in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 97 theses against some doctrines and practices of the church on door of Wittenberg Cathedral. At the same time, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, were in Switzerland looking for a different way to do church. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli all felt that the Bible and not the Pope held the authority for the church. The seeds for the Protestant church were sown in Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia. The Reformed churches that originated in Switzerland spread through Germany, France, Transylvania, Holland, England and Scotland.

So how did we get from Europe to Greenbelt, Maryland? It's pretty epic really and amazingly interesting, even if you are not a history geek. Most of the information that you will hear today can be found in "The Short History of the UCC". You can find it on the UCC.org website under, the tab About Us. I also printed off some copies. It involves kings and princes and strong willed women and men. It has more good stuff than I could possibly fit into 10 minutes on a Sunday morning. When I took UCC polity we spent 20 hours on history so I am going to try to just give you the highlights.

The characteristics of the United Church of Christ can be summarized in part by the key words in the names that formed our union: Christian, Reformed, Congregational, Evangelical.

■ The *Congregational Churches* were organized when the Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation (1620) and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1629) acknowledged their essential unity in the Cambridge Platform of 1648.

- The *Christian Churches* sprang up in the late 1700s and early 1800s in reaction to the theological and organizational rigidity of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches of the time.
- The *Reformed Church in the United States* traced its beginnings to congregations of German settlers in Pennsylvania founded from 1725 on. Later, its ranks were swelled by Reformed immigrants from Switzerland, Hungary and other countries.
- The *Evangelical Synod of North America* traced its beginnings to an association of German Evangelical pastors in Missouri. This association, founded in 1841, reflected the 1817 union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany.

Congregational

This is the oldest branch of our denomination. Its roots are in England

In 1567 a group known as the Separatists began meeting as a private church and the Congregational Way was born.

In 1607 members of the church began to leave England, first to the Netherlands and then to the United States.

The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock are the forefathers of what was to become the congregational church. The history of this branch of the UCC is tied into the founding times of our nation and for the first hundred years you probably would not recognize the church today, then but early on in the history of the Congregationalist there began to develop a strong concern for human rights.

Christian Church

Of all of the United Church of Christ Traditions, the Christian Church is the most uniquely American in origin and character. In the 1800's there was a religious moment in the US call The Great Awakening. Rooted in the Methodist system Is was, among other things a movement to more simplicity in worship. It also grew out of the expanding westward movement of American. Many Methodist wanted the newly formed frontier churches to be free to deal with the needs and concerns that they had that were different from those of more established churches.

In the 1820 a movement known as the Christian Connection was established which affirmed six principles of the church

- Christ, the only head of the Church
- The Bible, sufficient rule of faith and practice
- Christian Character, the only measurement for membership
- The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture and liberty of conscience
- The name "Christian, worthy for Christ's followers
- Unity of all Christ's followers in behalf of the world

On June 17, 1931 in Seattle Washington The Congregational Church and the Christian Church merged

The new Congregational Christian Church was stirred by the "deep need of humanity for justice, security, and spiritual freedom and growth, aware of the urgent demand within our churches for action to match our gospel and

clearly persuaded that the gospel of Jesus can be the solvent of social as of all other problems”

Meanwhile, over in Germany the German Evangelical Church rose out of the destruction of the 30 year war in 1618-1648 After the war, religious life was dispirited and had no leadership. The churches were divided from one another because each individual prince and land owner could decide how their principalities were going to worship. The German princes were greedy and lavished heavy taxes on the poor. In 1709 People began to leave Germany for England, and from there they moved to the American Colonys mostly in Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia and N &S Carolinian forming the German Reformed Church in the United States

Things got better for those who stayed in German In 1817 The Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union was founded by the order of Fredrick William III of Prussia Uniting the German Lutheran and the German reformed Churches.

Between 1830-1845 40,000 members of the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union left Germany and joined the westward movement in the United States. They mostly settled in Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin. Known as the Evangelical Synod of North America, the denomination was made up of free thinkers who placed their hopes in science, education and teaching. The guiding principle of the ECSNA was Christ Alone, Faith Alone, The Bible Alone.

For many of the same reasons that the Congregational Christian Church merged, the German Reformed and Evangelical churches merged on June 26 1934

On June 25, 1957, the United Church of Christ, a united and always uniting church was born in Cleveland Ohio. On this day, four churches from the Reformed tradition, meaning we were born out of the Reformation in the 16th century, merged together, binding 6,500 congregations and approximately 1,800,000 members. We became on that day, the youngest American denomination, but our background makes us one of the oldest in the Protestant church.

The two denominations came together with a shared strong commitment under Christ of Religious expression. They were more concerned with what united Christians instead of what divided them.

What we believe

We can tell you more about the United Church of Christ with the help of seven phrases from Scripture and Tradition which express our commitments.

■ *That they may all be one.* [John 17:21] This motto of the United Church of Christ reflects the spirit of unity on which it is based and points toward future efforts to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. We are a uniting church as well as a united church.

■ *In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.* The unity that we seek requires neither an uncritical acceptance of any point of view, nor rigid formulation of doctrine. It does require mutual understanding and agreement as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential.

■ *The unity of the church is not of its own making.* It is a gift of God. But expressions of that unity are as diverse as there are individuals. The common thread that runs through all is love.

■ *Testimonies of faith rather than tests of faith.* Because faith can be expressed in many different ways, the United Church of Christ has no formula that is a *test* of faith..

■ *There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word.* This affirmation by one of the founders of the Congregational tradition assumes the primacy of the Bible as a source for understanding the Good News and as a foundation for all statements of faith. It recognizes that the Bible, though written in specific historical times and places, still speaks to us in our present condition. It declares that the study of the scriptures is not limited by past interpretations, but it is pursued with the expectation of new insights and God's help for living today.

■ *The Priesthood of All Believers.* All members of the United Church of Christ are called to minister to others and to participate as equals in the common worship of God, each with direct access to the mercies of God through personal prayer and devotion.

Recognition is given to those among us who have received special training in pastoral, priestly, educational and administrative functions, but these persons are regarded as *servants*—rather than as persons in authority. Their task is to guide, to instruct, to enable the ministry of all Christians rather than to do the work of ministry for us.

■ *Responsible Freedom.* As individual members of the Body of Christ, we are free to believe and act in accordance with our perception of God's will for our lives. But we are called to live in a loving, covenantal relationship with one another—gathering in communities of faith, congregations of believers, local churches.

Each congregation or local church is free to act in accordance with the collective decision of its members, guided by the working of the Spirit in the light of the scriptures. But it also is called to live in a covenantal relationship with other congregations for the sharing of insights and for cooperative action under the authority of Christ.

. But we recognize our calling both as individuals and as the church to live in the world:

- To proclaim in word and action the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- To work for reconciliation and the unity of the broken Body of Christ.
- To seek justice and liberation for all.

This is the challenge of the United Church of Christ.

