

107. CONSULTATION ON CHURCH UNION (COCU):

“UCC Response to the COCU Consensus”

(1989)

*From the 1960s through the 1980s the United Church of Christ sent representatives to the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). By 1988 the COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting (1984) had been amended to become the Churches in Covenant Communion: the Church of Christ Uniting. Its Part I, “The Covenanting Proposal,” affirms that “covenanting” did not require a change in “present church structures or of denominational names.” It is “not only a step on the way to union” but “an authentic form of union.” Second, the UCC also recognizes that action on the Consensus document requires more than a commitment to “study and reception” similar to the “UCC Response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (1985) (see vol. 7:106). Embracing the Consensus document calls for a “number of deliberate actions by the participating churches.” When a church claims the Consensus document it indicates its readiness “to participate in a new relationship of commitment with the participating churches which is not yet full organic union, but which is far more than a consultative relationship.” Third, the UCC is ready to recognize that the COCU Consensus document is an expression of the “Apostolic faith, order, worship and witness of the church,” and that it can anticipate the “Church Uniting which the participating bodies by the power of the Holy Spirit wish to become, and that it was a sufficient theological basis for the covenanting acts and the uniting process proposed” by the consultation. By the late 1980s a consensus was “emerging” among a group of churches on a “pilgrimage of faith and reconciliation.”*

At the same time, as we approach the Consensus document we are distressed when other churches (and some within our own church) perceive the document affirmations as a way of imposing a uniformity that tolerates no disagreement in Christ’s church. As Roger Hazelton, UCC theologian, has helped us to understand, “consensus theology” is constructive, not dogmatic, or even apologetic. It is theology which seeks to give “new visibility, new embodiment to the Church that lives in the midst of the churches.” Instead of “searching for some least common denominator, consensus theology keeps in view the unity of faith which can reform and renew the churches” (Roger Hazelton, “Consensus Theology: Reflections on the COCU Experience,” *Andover Newton Quarterly*, XII:1, p. 10).

I. Why Unity?

There is a general appreciation within the UCC for the image of church as a “family created by God in Christ out of all the tribes and nations and peoples.” Understanding the church as a sign to the world helps to counteract thinking about “ecumenism as merely a cooperative enterprise which we engage in for purely pragmatic ends.” Study groups agree that the biblical exegesis done in the first chapter provides a strong foundation.

UCC people are especially enthusiastic over the assertion that the task of unity today requires the resolution of “Contemporary Church-Dividing Issues,” as well as old division. In this matter, it is noted that the Consensus document sets an agenda which moves beyond the perspective of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Groups report that the church must be increasingly sensitive to issues of racism, sexism and prejudice against persons with disabilities. One group suggests that the “Alerts” appendices ought to be shared in connection with the Consensus document. Another group proposes an additional “church-dividing issue”: class. “Divisions caused by economic and cultural differences are very real, and challenge our predominantly middle-class churches. . . . Inclusiveness ought to be for all, not just against sexism and racism.” There are still other contemporary “church-dividing issues”: fundamentalism, biblical inerrancy, and methods of church growth. Although historic theological divisions are not the predominant concern of UCC people, the COCU covenanting process has the potential to help us heal not only these, but contemporary divisions within, as well as between our churches.

II. Unity: A Gift to Be Made Visible

The UCC agrees that ecumenical growth preserves heritage and tradition and embraces new commitments through repentance and conversion. It is important that change not be imposed from the outside. It is also important to remain open to new manifestations of Christ’s church.

Study groups celebrate the seven characteristics “fundamental to the quest for the visible unity of a Church Uniting which is truly catholic, truly evangelical and truly reformed” (II.6). They suggest that “Denominational barriers have already begun to break down in the eyes of the laity,” and therefore, church leaders need to “face up to the similarities in denominations.” However, they raise concern about “non-Christian allies in mission” (II.6.b), asking “how do we maintain our necessary evangelical witness in the midst of interfaith dialogue and action?” Finally, they affirm the vision of openness sustained in the Uniting Church by vigilant conscience, and authority balanced by accountability” (II.6.g).