

12. A NEW CHURCH:

Two Anxieties

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Robert W. Spike (1923–66) was a Baptist/UCC minister who served as pastor of Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square in New York City (1949–56). Educated at Denison University, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and Columbia University, he was on the staff of the Congregational Christian Board for Home Missions (BHM) (1956–58) and the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM) (1958–63). In 1963 he became director of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches of Christ (1963–66), organizing the participation of more than forty thousand white Protestants in the "March on Washington" (1963). As someone new to the United Church of Christ Spike — through his article in the Christian Century (1963) — was able to address the lingering anxieties about the United Church of Christ among many UCC members.

Two Anxieties

... Two anxieties began to emerge in the days of final debate over the United Church constitution. These anxieties do not reflect present fixed positions or parties; on the national level at least, there prevail a remarkable degree of harmony and a great desire to consolidate the union. But these anxieties do represent real positions, and the tension between them has to do with the significant difference between presbyterial and congregational polity.

In this case at least, the tension is not fundamentally between centralized authority and local autonomy. The Evangelical side of the Evangelical and Reformed Church was notably congregational in heritage, and the Reformed Church, though more presbyterial in organization, participated in

that general congregational orientation which in actual practice characterizes most of Protestantism. On the other hand, many of the agencies of the Congregational Churches, particularly the home and overseas boards of missions, were far more centralized administratively than were the comparable agencies of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. To some extent the extreme autonomism of the continuing Congregationalists has been a reaction against this aspect of Congregational practice; the most bitter expressions of hostility from this group have been directed against the leadership of the national boards. The antimerger Congregationalists tend to misinterpret the union as another step in already overextended centralism.

The real tension has instead been between those who cherish an organic view of the church as a compact, integrated people and those who cherish the tradition of functional responsiveness to the needs of the world.

This assertion in no way implies that the Evangelical and Reformed peoples had no missionary spirit or that Congregationalists were without a doctrine of the church. To a certain extent the idea of union was congenial to so many in both wings of the United Church because of the excesses of both emphases. "Our German Reformed Zion," as John Williamson Nevin, one of the great leaders of the 19th-century Mercersburg movement, referred to it, was strong because of its high doctrine of the church and because it was small enough to foster deep familial ties and commonly accepted disciplines, but it tended also to be insulated from the world and to be too dependent on common national background for its unity. Congregationalism, closely linked to early American thought patterns that produced much of the nation's public philosophy, in the past century often was too open to the various winds blowing across the secular society. It tended to assimilate liberal gentilities too easily, too uncritically.

Evangelical and Reformed constituents have generally desired a broader church experience and larger encounter with the world; Congregational Christians have generally desired a deeper and more ordered churchmanship. But, in the process of union, many on both sides discovered how deeply they held and cherished the ethos of their own tradition. Close up, high churchmanship began to look like inflexibility and a too easy identification of the General Synod with *the Church*. Responsiveness to the times began to look like dilettantism and highhandedness on the part of the mission boards.

The two anxieties remain, but they are now in working harness and are no longer pulling against each other. The future of the United Church of Christ will be very largely affected by the degree to which these two spirits confront each other creatively and refuse to be smothered for the sake of a superficial harmony.