

# Theology Matters

*The 211<sup>th</sup> General Assembly has sent to the presbyteries for their vote an excerpt from the Report of the Eighteenth Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) asking whether it shall be “ecumenical guidance” for the church under G-15.0302b. If a majority of the presbyteries approve this excerpt as guidance, we believe the Presbyterian Church will be significantly changed. Local congregations will lose their independence. The articles in this issue of Theology Matters examine the serious concerns raised by Presbyterian approval of this excerpt. Theology Matters has been sent to every PCUSA congregation as a resource in preparation for the vote by presbyteries.*

## Churches Uniting in Christ (CUiC): Selling Our Birthright

By Paul Leggett

The former Church of Christ Uniting, itself a variation of the earlier Consultation on Church Union (COCU), has not disappeared. It has metamorphosized into yet another form with yet another acronym. The new version is CUiC standing for “Churches Uniting in Christ.” In a few months every presbytery in the PCUSA will be voting on this latest proposal for ecumenical union. As of now it seems that far too few of them are aware of the profound implications this new proposal will have on the life not only of our denomination but on that of individual congregations as well. This lack of awareness has all the ingredients of a major tragedy.

This issue is all the more serious due to the lack of attention and indeed, even interest, that has been shown it. It is nothing less than astonishing that the whole

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CUiC proposal has not produced an outcry especially among the more evangelical members of the PCUSA. There may be a number of legitimate reasons for this including preoccupation with other matters such as PJC cases and so forth. I confess that I was myself in this category until the situation was called to my attention and I sat down and read through the proposal. It is my earnest conviction that this is a matter of real urgency especially since all presbyteries will be voting on the CUiC proposal this coming year.

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So, really, what's the big deal? It's no longer COCU. We're not talking about bishops any more. Don't we already have the same kind of agreement now with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Reformed Church in America and United Church of Christ? The fact is that the current recommendation on CUiC now before the presbyteries is a real and present threat to the "peace, unity and purity" of the church. If adopted, we would, in effect, be approving guidelines which would alter fundamental Reformed and Presbyterian beliefs about the nature of the church. This is so for three basic reasons.

## 1. CUiC asks us to abandon our fundamental criteria for recognizing a true church of Jesus Christ.

In the CUiC proposal we are asked to "affirm the following visible marks that express the relationship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the other participating communions in Churches Uniting in Christ." What then follows is a list of "mutual recognitions" the member churches would acknowledge in one another. The first of these is a "*Mutual recognition of each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ*" (italics theirs). Following this first "mutual recognition" is a list of various expressions of faith in God, Jesus Christ, Scripture and Tradition as well as Baptism and ordained ministry. The specific content of these assertions will have to be discussed later. For now we must deal with the general statement of "mutual recognition."

This statement calls us to "publicly recognize" that "each [church] affirms the apostolic faith." What is notable here is that no criteria are offered or even suggested to verify that a particular church communion is actually true to "the apostolic faith." This completely bypasses a fundamental principle of the Reformed doctrine of the church. The entire Reformation movement struggled with the question of what are the marks of a true as opposed to a false church. No claim to upholding the truth of the Gospel could be taken at face value, including the claims of one's own church. This was not a peripheral question for the Reformers. It was at the very heart of their understanding of what the church is. Unfortunately for us, the question has become largely peripheral. We often don't even think in terms of evaluating ourselves or others by what our confessions call the "marks," or "notes" by which we are called to distinguish the true from the false church. On the other hand, this issue was a matter of spiritual life or death for the Reformers. For them the true church was identified by its proclamation of the Scriptures alone as the Word of God, by its practice and by its discipline, not by its history, structure or social role.

This was especially the case with John Calvin in the final (1559) edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Calvin here devotes most of the fourth book to the question of distinguishing the true from the false church. His criteria are relatively simple in their basic formula. The true church exists where the Word of God is rightly preached and the Sacraments rightly administered. This simple statement was in no way simplistic, however. Calvin devoted hundreds of pages to its analysis. This standard for him always had to be carefully understood and applied. He says,

For, in order that the title 'church' may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name 'church' must be tested by this standard as by a touchstone. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV,1,11)

The Scots Confession (1560) in our *Book of Confessions* makes very clear that a careful study of the marks that distinguish the true from the false church was essential to the life and health of the church (*Book of Confessions* 3.18). This same critical focus is found throughout the historical statements in our *Book of Confessions* (cf. 5.134, 5.139, 6.140-6.145) as well as most of the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century. The French Confession of 1559 which has recently been commended to us for study puts the issue this way:

At the same time we believe that it is appropriate to discern, carefully and prudently, what is the true church, for this designation has been abused too often. Following the word of God then, we say that the faithful community covenants to follow the word of God and the pure religion which derives from it, benefiting from this throughout its life... (article XXVII).

This is not simply a concern of the Reformation and post-Reformation church. The Barmen Declaration speaking against the German Christian attempt to take over the church in Nazi Germany is based entirely on the question of recognizing the difference between the true and the false church (*Book of Confessions* 8.07ff.). The Brief Statement of Faith, adopted by the PCUSA in 1991, states that the Spirit gives us courage, among other things, "to unmask idolatries in Church and culture" (*Book of Confessions* 10.4 line 69). The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa's doctrinal stance on apartheid raised questions in our own time about their status as a "true church."

The point at issue in all this is that there can be no recognition of an authentic church without an examination of the marks of the true church since, as the Scots Confession puts it, "Satan has labored from the beginning to adorn his pestilent synagogue with the title of the Kirk [Church] of God...." (*Book of Confessions* 3.18). It is never claimed that even a true church will be perfect or free from error. The application of the "true marks" requires careful discernment as Calvin makes clear. Calvin illustrates his point by comparing Judah

under Rehoboam with Israel under Jeroboam. He claims that Israel in that situation was no longer a “true church” because of near total idolatry, while Judah, which admittedly was far from perfect, was still a “true church” (*Institutes* IV,II,7).

The problem with the CUiC proposal is that it ignores the question of the criteria of a true church altogether. It simply asserts that all the member churches recognize “each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ.” To do so without raising the issue of how these churches, the PCUSA included, are evidencing the visible marks of a true church bypasses an essential feature of Reformed belief and practice. For the sake of argument it may well be that all member churches, ourselves (hopefully) included, actually fulfill the marks of the true church. That is not the point. The question at stake is what sort of church uniting is being proposed. If we are not prepared to deal with the criteria of what defines a true, as opposed to a false, church, then we cannot claim that we are seeking an “authentic expression of the one church of Jesus Christ.” The statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the German Church struggle is particularly apt here:

A church which no longer takes the rejection of false teaching seriously no longer takes truth, i.e. its salvation, seriously, and ultimately no longer takes the community seriously, no matter how pious or well organized it may be. (*The Way to Freedom* [New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1966], p. 189).

The fact that the CUiC proposal never attempts to deal with the criteria of the marks of a true church robs it of viability as a serious proposal for any church union.

The objection that may be raised at this point is that CUiC is not trying to be a genuine church union (in spite of its name). We are only talking here about mutual recognition and cooperation so that doctrinal considerations on the nature of the church really do not apply. This however brings us to the second major concern.

## **2. CUiC proposes a union which threatens the historic autonomy of PCUSA congregations.**

It is important to quote from the proposal itself to see what sort of union is being envisioned:

The relationship expressed through these visible marks is not structural consolidation but a unity in diversity among churches that, though many, understand themselves to be one community in Christ. From the moment of inauguration, *the life of these churches will be visibly intertwined as never before* (italics mine). From the moment of inauguration, their relationship, with God’s help, *will not be one of friendly*

*coexistence and consultation but of binding community* (italics mine) that actively embodies the love of Christ which ties them to one another.

What is being proposed here is far more than a “formula of agreement” such as we presently have with the Lutherans, Reformed Church and UCC. There are several characteristics of this “binding community” that we should note. First, lest we think this is a union in name only, we should observe that the proposal calls for “appropriate structures of accountability” which would hold member churches “mutually accountable.” Second, there are specific implications that this mutual accountability would have. These would include having “conversation” with other congregations of CUiC regarding “major decisions about the mission of a congregation or judicatory.” It would also involve representatives from CUiC taking part in Baptisms, installation services and “key decision making groups.” Overseeing all this is the statement that the common life of the members of CUiC will “need to be served in its *local, regional and national expressions, by structures of mutual empowerment and accountability*” (italics mine).

We need to recognize that the CUiC proposal imagines a congregational life different from that which Presbyterian congregations at least presently enjoy. If we enter into CUiC we are also acknowledging a new measure of “accountability.” Consider for a moment that no PCUSA congregation is asked to have presbytery representatives attending Baptisms and church installation services, much less sitting in on “key decision making groups.” (This of course does not apply to ordination services of a minister which, while frequently held in a local church, are nonetheless services of the presbytery not the particular congregation.)

One has to ask what will be these “appropriate structures of accountability?” What will be their “appropriate means for consultation and decision making?” Who will belong to these “structures?” How will they be chosen? And what measures will be taken to hold “churches mutually accountable to the commitments they have made?” And, to whom (if anyone), will these structures themselves be held accountable?

To raise these questions is not to speak against the idea of accountability per se. It is however one of the great hallmarks of the Presbyterian system that the local congregation in its government and guidance is under the responsibility of the session all of whose members have been elected by the local congregation. The local Presbyterian congregation enjoys a wide latitude of autonomy. It is of course not free to do anything it pleases. It can be held accountable by the presbytery. Yet members of presbytery do not ask to sit in on “key decision making groups.” We do not even feel the need to consult with the presbytery on “major decisions” about the ministry of the congregation. A congregation may, if it chooses, ask for

input from presbytery. We may well argue that it might be wise to do so and, in fact, we should do so more often. However, there is at present no “structure of accountability” examining the life of a Presbyterian congregation. That could well change if we enter into the CUiC proposal.

We need to understand that a positive vote on the CUiC proposal may well set us on a path that is very different from what Presbyterian congregations have experienced up to this time.

This brings us to the third concern.

### **3. CUiC proposes a union that is theologically inadequate.**

We have already mentioned the fact that the CUiC proposal does not deal with the issue of the criteria for the marks of the true church. We need to consider however what marks it does lift up as defining the “Churches Uniting in Christ.”

In the proposal’s discussion of the “visible marks” which, as we pointed out above, it already assumes member churches possess, the following theological assertions are made:

- faith in the one God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems and sanctifies;
- commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and as the incarnate and risen Lord;
- faithfulness to the Holy Scripture, which testifies to Tradition and to which Tradition testifies, as containing all things necessary for our salvation as well as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith....

Do we need to raise any question about these? Aren’t they obviously expressions of the apostolic faith? In reality these statements are more problematic for what they don’t say than what they do. We certainly can’t ask for a full statement of faith in a brief catalogue such as this. We should however note certain things. First, the statement about God is not really a Trinitarian one. The “one God” is described in terms of function. God “through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems and sanctifies.” Are “Word” and “Spirit” here equal persons with “God?” Well, they could be but not necessarily. It would seem that a brief summary statement of the “Apostolic Faith” could say something about God in three persons, as the Trinity or the “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Nor is the statement about Jesus Christ without ambiguity. One could argue that the divinity of Christ is implied as the “incarnate and risen Lord.” But is implication enough? What’s wrong with echoing the Nicene Creed as the Brief Statement does, “fully human, fully God?”

I can only speak for myself but I confess I wonder, in the light of CUiC’s avowed goal “to be in conversation with representatives of Judaism and Islam and other living faiths” along with the stated goal of “many concentric circles in varying degrees of agreement and affiliation with us,” is there perhaps an attempt here to play down key doctrines like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ in order to facilitate such “conversation” and the forming of these “concentric circles”? Does the omission of apostolic terms like “Father” and “Son” offer concessions to some feminist or even post-modern concerns with a view to their inclusion in the “concentric circles?” Does the inclusion of “Tradition” along with “Scripture” suggest some qualifying of Scriptural authority perhaps to make more palatable the paragraph on the “intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation and class.” On the face of it this statement does not run counter to what PCUSA positions have stated depending, however, on what the intended meaning of such phrases as “all marginalization and exclusion” and, of course, “sexual orientation” actually means. For an example of the Reformed view on “Tradition” note the comments from the Second Helvetic Confession (*Book of Confessions* 5.014):

Likewise *we reject human traditions*, even if they be adorned with high-sounding titles, as though they were divine and apostolical, delivered to the Church by the living voice of the apostles, and, as it were, through the hands of apostolical men to succeeding bishops which, when compared with the Scriptures, disagree with them... (italics mine).

These concerns are further reflected in the definition of mission which CUiC proposes. The clear focus of this definition is “a shared mission to combat racism.” This opposition to racism is further defined by “challenging the system of white privilege that has so distorted life in this society and in the churches themselves.” The concern here cannot be with a clear statement to repudiate racism. Racism in general and “white privilege” in particular are sins which must be recognized and opposed wherever they are encountered. And certainly the church *has* been weak in this area and indeed *needs* to be called to account.

The question, however, must be with the issue of racism being the defining one in a statement of “Christ’s mission.” To be sure, “proclamation of the gospel, evangelism, education” are included but the “particular and emphatic call” is for the erasing of racism. Unfortunately, past experience with ecumenical efforts in this area, including examples within the PCUSA itself, have generally meant that the evangelistic proclamation of the gospel (the first of the Great Ends of the Church) often is minimized to the point of being virtually non-existent. By all means, let us place a clear emphasis on witnessing against racism. However, have we been any less weak on “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind,” “the shelter,

nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,” “the maintenance of divine worship” or “the preservation of the truth?”

Are we looking at an unbalanced view of the mission of the church? I believe we are. If we are really concerned about the issue of racism, why aren't we pursuing some form of union with the National Baptist Church or the Church of God in Christ as well as the African American denominations in CUiC? Is the issue really racism? Or is it a particular ideological reading of the Gospel? There are many African-American denominations that take strong stands on racism but also emphasize evangelism and church growth far more than we do.

The problem comes down to this. Theology is being redefined as social policy. Evangelism once again is being made secondary to “conversation” and “cooperation.” The difference is that CUiC includes not only these questionable redefinitions but also calls for “structures of accountability” to enforce them. Any question on this is quickly answered by reading the second appendix of the

CUiC proposal entitled, “Call to Christian Commitment and Action to Combat Racism.” The larger problem here is not the need to combat racism but rather the empowering of a particular structure to accomplish that purpose. Yes, as the appendix states, “Racism is about power.” Power, however, takes many forms. The twentieth century has clearly taught us that attempts to control one set of power abuses have often led to other, equally pernicious abuses of power. This has especially been the case when the groups intending to overcome abuse are not themselves clearly defined and clearly accountable.

As Presbyterians faithful to Scripture and to the best of our tradition we need to pursue church unity and social justice. We need also to focus on all the Great Ends of the Church which have been sadly neglected by us. We need to seek God's leading humbly and prayerfully. The answer to these needs however is not the “new relationship” of Churches Uniting in Christ.

Some solutions are worse than the problem.

## Questions & Answers on CUiC

### **1. Are we just voting on a concept now and will be able to vote later on specifics of the proposal? NO.**

Nothing in the document indicates that there will be other opportunities to vote. This is more than a vote on a concept. It is a vote to give a blank check to CUiC to proceed. Unless there would be specific changes to the Constitution, which would become necessary, and no changes are proposed at this time, no other vote is needed for CUiC to be inaugurated and implemented. All of the suggestions in the report from COCU can be implemented without a change to the constitution. For example, their proposal to send a CUiC delegate to participate in the life of the local congregation, requires no constitutional change. Our “yes” vote would give them permission to send their delegated participant.

**2. Aren't most of the troublesome issues being raised in parts of the report other than the excerpt of the report we are voting on and therefore won't necessarily be implemented? NO.** The issues of theology and the call for the new structures of accountability are in the excerpt we are voting on. The remainder of the issues are included in the sections on “Implications for Local and Regional Life” and “Structures of Mutual Empowerment” and “Wider Relations” which are portions of the report that are not being voted on. However, these sections are clearly meant to be the implications of a “Yes” vote on the general concept. To assume we are voting on a plan while rejecting the form of implementation is making a false distinction. They are telling us what they intend to do. If we vote “yes,” we are accepting their total plan.

**3. Does this plan, if approved, require new structures? YES.** Item 9 under “Visible Marks of Churches Uniting In Christ” calls for, “Appropriate structures of accountability and appropriate means for consultation and decision making.”

**4. What is the function of these structures?** Item 9 under “Visible Marks of Churches Uniting in Christ” says these structures are “for holding churches mutually accountable to the commitments they have made.” It goes on, “the life of these churches will be visibly intertwined as never before. From the moment of inauguration, their relationship, with God's help, will not be one of friendly coexistence and consultation but of binding community....” These structures will enforce the “binding community” they envision.

**5. Will these structures impact the local congregation? YES** The report says in Section VII “Implications for Local and Regional Life” that “major decisions about the mission of a congregation or judicatory involve conversation with other congregations or judicatories of Churches Uniting in Christ; that a common lectionary be used...; that services of ordination involve the presence and participation of persons from other Churches Uniting in Christ.” In addition there will be, “church [CUiC] representatives present for Baptisms, installation services and in key decision making groups” and “participation by delegated members in the life of the congregation of a partner church.”

**6. Will these representatives have voice at these functions? NO.** According to our polity, non-session members may only speak if the body elects to give them that privilege. Similarly, anyone can attend installation services or Baptisms but cannot participate unless invited. What is the purpose of these representatives attending decision making meetings if they are not able to speak? Will they report back to other bodies who will exert pressure if decisions are not made according to CUiC’s agenda of mandating inclusiveness requirements, including gender and sexual orientation inclusiveness? Also consider that if they are given the privilege of the floor, such persons may be seen as “authorities” and have undue influence over session decisions.

**7. Do we know how much these local, regional and national bodies will cost us? NO.** No financial implications are given.

**8. Do we know how these bodies will be constituted? NO.** Under section “IX Structures of Mutual Empowerment and Accountability” the report calls for a committee to be established to design these structures: “we recommend an Implementation Strategy Conference be convened as soon as possible to clarify the nature of the structures that will best serve the member churches in this new relationship. This conference will include the Executive Committee and other key leaders of member communions.”

**9. Who will sit on these structures? Will there be equal numbers from each member denomination? What role will bishops play? Will there be parity between elders and clergy for Presbyterians?** None of this has been decided.

**10. Will we be able to vote our approval of these structures once they are designed? Probably not.** Unless these structures specifically alter our Constitution, there is no need for a vote. We do not vote on the organization of other ecumenical bodies to which we belong like the WCC and NCC. If we vote “yes” to accept these statements as “guidance” we are accepting whatever structure they design.

**11. Who will pay for these structures? We will.** There will be staff salary costs, site costs, travel expenses, phones, copy machines, etc.

**12. Is there a way to resolve grievances between the CUiC’s local, regional and national structures and Presbyterian congregations, presbyteries and the national church? Between CUiC and the PCUSA constitution? NO.**

**13. What is the stated purpose of CUiC?** CUiC’s stated purpose is the “intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation, and class.”

**14. Does this mean calling God, “Sophia?” It could.** The term “opposing all marginalization and exclusion in the church” are buzz words which are usually invoked by those promoting a radical feminist and pro-homosexual ordination stance. Most radical feminists argue that the use of female names for God is a primary way to reverse the exclusion that some women feel when God is referred to as “Father.”

**15. Does this mean CUiC will work to overturn the PCUSA constitution prohibiting the ordination of practicing gays, lesbians and bisexuals? It could.** Practicing gays, lesbians and bisexuals often argue that they feel “marginalized” and “excluded” by the church’s stance prohibiting ordination.

**16. Will it be a problem to “recognize that one another’s ordained ministries...possess not only the inward call of the Spirit but also Christ’s commission through his body, the church.” YES.** Several of the member denominations have ordained practicing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. We cannot recognize a practicing homosexual UCC pastor as having “Christ’s commission through his body the church,” when the PCUSA Constitution specifically

denies such recognition to a PCUSA pastor. We cannot affirm in the UCC what we forbid in our own denomination as contrary to the will of God.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) General Synod in July 1995 passed a resolution called the “UCC Response to Churches in Covenant Communion and Proposed Recommended Action.” The General Synod said, “the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church is a gift that the United Church of Christ brings into the continuing dialogue within the Church of Christ Uniting.

In the Disciples of Christ each region makes the decision on whether it will or will not ordain practicing homosexuals. A number of regions seem to be ordaining practicing homosexuals. In the Episcopal Church it seems that about one-half of the dioceses are allowing the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

**17. Isn't this like the Lutheran Agreement that the PCUSA just entered? NO** The Lutheran Agreement is for cooperation and dialogue. There are no policies generated and there is no separate body that will enforce the policies. CUiC is “Churches UNITING in Christ.” It is a relationship of Union not dialogue. To impose this union there will be “appropriate structures of accountability and appropriate means for consultation and decision making.” These structures are “for effecting the marks of the new relationship and for holding churches mutually accountable to the commitments they have made.” The commitments of whom? The commitments of the people serving on the structures of accountability? What if one church is a member of CUiC but disagrees with a commitment that others in CUiC have agreed on?

**18. Is the theology of CUiC consistent with Reformed faith? It is not clear whether it is consistent.** In the section on the “Visible Marks of the Churches Uniting in Christ,” it lays out faith statements. The wording lends itself to the heresy of modalism where God took on three “masks” to perform three functions: creation, redemption and sanctification. The wording does not make clear there are three persons, one God. Nor does it make clear that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God through whose work alone redemption is accomplished. The statements leave open the possibility that while we may find salvation through Christ, others may find it elsewhere.

This theological pluralism is further developed when the report speaks of widening the circles of relationship within CUiC (Section V. Marks of the Fuller Unity We Seek). It would seek “ever-expanding circle[s]” which may include the Reformed Church in America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Holiness, Baptist. Then it goes on to “still larger circle[s]” which would include “representatives of Judaism and Islam and other living faiths, as well as in cooperation with all persons and movements of good will and human affirmation. We see a potential for many concentric circles in varying degrees of agreement and affiliation with us.” The report goes on, “Thus we long for the total reconciliation of the whole human family....”

## The Old COCU and the New CUiC: How Similar are They?

**The Old COCU (The Church of Christ Uniting or Churches in Covenant Communion) which was defeated by the presbyteries in 1997**

1. Inclusiveness – “A covenant communion of churches is, by definition, committed to become truly inclusive. Each partner is enriched by sharing in the gifts that God has given to the other. Each partner works to take down walls of alienation that exist between the churches, and to overcome attitudes which tend to marginalize persons in regard to race, class, age, gender, disabilities, marital status, sexual orientation and positions of power and powerlessness, and to live toward a church in which all

**The New CUiC (Churches Uniting in Christ) which is being voted on now by presbyteries**

1. Inclusiveness – “Intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation and class.”

participate in the wholeness of Christ.” “Inclusiveness is not just a matter of goodwill, but of the justice which the gospel demands.” “There can be no unity for the church unless it is truly inclusive.”

2. Covenanting Councils – “Wherever covenanting occurs—nationally, regionally, or locally—one of the inaugural covenanting acts will be the formation of a covenanting council in each such ‘place.’ The reason for doing this is that the church unity will be neither visible nor organic if it is not embodied in tangible form. The church exists not alone in the mind. It takes up space on the earth. It can be seen. It can act, and be accountable for its actions. In a covenant communion of churches, therefore, it is essential that there be a company of persons who representatively give expression and leadership to its common life. Such groups we refer to as covenanting councils.”

3. Ordained ministries – “Mutual recognition of ordained ministries is intended to acknowledge in these ministries the manifest blessing of God and the fruit of the Spirit, and to affirm that they are rooted in the apostolic tradition....Reconciliation of ordained ministries is intended to refer to the actions by the churches, both separately and together, whereby the ordained ministries of each covenanting church become one ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to all.”

4. Recognition of other churches as members of the true Church – “A church’s membership in the Consultation on Church Union implies at least some recognition of the other member churches as participants in the one church of Jesus Christ.

5. Bishops – “Each church may assign or continue to use such names for these offices as it may desire; however, in the shared life of the churches they commonly will be identified as deacons, presbyters, and bishops of the covenant communion of the church.”

2. Structures of accountability – “This common life will need to be served, in its local, regional and national expressions, by structures of mutual empowerment and accountability.” “While some provision must be made for effecting the marks of the new relationship and for holding the churches mutually accountable to the commitments they have made....From the moment of inauguration, the life of these churches will be visibly intertwined as never before. From the moment of inauguration, their relationship, with God’s help, will not be one of friendly coexistence and consultation but of binding community....”

3. Ordained ministries – “[P]articipating churches will publicly recognize that one another’s ordained ministries are given by God as instruments of God’s grace, that these ministries seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ, and that these ministries possess not only the inward call of the Spirit but also Christ’s commission through his body, the church. Such recognition is seen as part of an effort to realize mutual reconciliation of ministry by 2007.”

4. Recognition of other churches as members of the one true church of Jesus Christ – “Mutual recognition of each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ.”

5. Bishops – “The ministry of oversight needs special attention so that churches with corporate or personal oversight and those with oversight in the historic succession of bishops can be reconciled in a way that invites universal recognition. In order to further that end, this Plenary instructs the Executive Committee to convene in the near future a meeting of representatives from the nine churches in COCU to clarify the meaning of reconciliation of ministry.”

## **Do Fences Make Good Neighbors? Getting to Know Who’s Who in CUiC**

**By Randall Otto**

When United Methodist Bishop William Boyd Grove of Charleston, West Virginia told representatives of nine

denominations during a communion service closing their January 20-24, 1999 meeting in St. Louis that God



wills that Christian churches dwell in unity, he cited Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall." In that famous poem, Frost declares that before building a wall, "I'd ask to know what I was walling in and walling out" and casts doubt on the notion that "good fences make good neighbors."<sup>1</sup> Grove's sermon came after the delegates to the 18<sup>th</sup> Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) approved a report describing the next steps to be taken in an effort spanning almost forty years of trying to find a viable form of church unity. That report recommends that participating churches "enter into a new relationship to be called Churches Uniting in Christ, and that they together inaugurate this new relationship through public declaration and liturgical celebration during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the year 2002."<sup>2</sup>

Those who will be asked to concur with this agreement ought to know what they are "walling in and walling out." They ought to know "who's who in COCU." Do they know and embrace these neighbors sufficiently to knock down the fences which have separated them? Or should they continue to talk together over the fences that exist? Who are the participating churches in COCU and for what do they stand? The purpose of this article is to provide clergy and laity in the Presbyterian Church (USA) with a brief historical and theological overview of the participating churches.

Each of these churches must "desire to effect a new relationship among the churches of the Consultation in the near future, by giving visible expression to all marks of communion that are now possible" (*Report*, p. 3).

### **Who are the Present Participants?**

The majority of the participants in COCU are from the Methodist tradition. Methodism was conceived in England in 1729 when a small group of Oxford University students were ridiculed as "Bible Bigots," the "Holy Club" and "Methodists" because they spent so much time in methodical prayer and Bible reading. Led by John and Charles Wesley, two sons of a Church of England clergyman, they emphasized the need of sanctification and holiness. These members of the Holy Club held their ground against jeering students and went out to share the gospel and pray with the poor and disenfranchised of English society.

John Wesley attended a religious meeting on Aldersgate Street in May, 1738, where he heard the preacher read Martin Luther's preface to his *Commentary on Romans* and felt his heart "strangely warmed" in personal acceptance of the Reformer's doctrine of justification by faith. Charles had a similar transforming religious experience days later, so that both were hence empowered for a life of preaching and revivalism throughout England, emphasizing conversion and holiness. Subsequently, the Wesleys' zeal became unacceptable to the staid Church of

England. When refused pulpits, they then took their message to the fields and streets, John preaching repentance, regeneration, justification and sanctification in the open air and Charles writing numerous hymns of revival. Their many converts, particularly from among the poor and lowly, required that they organize into societies.

Between 1739-1744, the organizational elements of Methodism were implemented: the circuit system, an itinerant ministry of mostly lay preachers, class meetings and annual conferences. In 1739 Wesley drew up a set of general rules which, with his *Notes on the New Testament* (1754), *Sermons* (4 volumes), and Articles of Religion, constitute Methodism's doctrinal standards. "No motif in the Wesleyan tradition has been more constant than the link between Christian doctrine and Christian living. Methodists have always been strictly enjoined to maintain the unity of faith and good works through the means of grace, as seen in John Wesley's *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies* (1743)."<sup>3</sup> Methodism has "never built theological fences or walls to keep anyone out; they have stressed the great foundation beliefs of Protestantism and offered common theological ground."<sup>4</sup> "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason" (*Book of Discipline*). This "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," as it is known, thus allows for openness based on personal experience and thought.

Methodism is Arminian in theology, a name based on the reaction against the perceived determinism of Calvinism urged by the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Arminians insist that divine sovereignty does not denigrate human free will, that each person is able to improve upon the grace given all to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died to make salvation possible for all humanity and did not die specifically for the elect. Wesley's accents to Arminianism included the possibility of perfection in this life through progressive sanctification in love. This involved a very narrow definition of sin: "Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly."<sup>5</sup>

The law of love was evident in Wesley's advocacy of abolitionism, free medical help, prison reform, and literacy through the Sunday School movement. In 1784 Wesley ordained two men as ministers and set apart Thomas Coke as superintendent of the Methodist Church in America. Not until after Wesley's death in 1791 did the Methodists in England organize into a communion separate from the Church of England.

### **1. The African Methodist Episcopal Church**

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) is one of the three largest Methodist groups in the U.S. It was

organized in 1816 following two decades of tension between white and black Methodists in Philadelphia. In 1787 a number of members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia withdrew in protest against racial discrimination. Richard Allen, a manumitted layperson, had founded Bethel Church for Negro Methodists in 1793 with the assistance of Bishop William White of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and was ordained a deacon (the first of his race in American Methodism) two years later. In 1816 Allen became the first bishop of the A.M.E. Church.

The organization of the A.M.E. Church was the result of racial discrimination rather than of any theological or doctrinal concern. The A.M.E. Church is a member of the family of Methodist Churches. Its founder, Richard Allen, felt that no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of his people as well as did Methodism with its emphasis upon the plain and simple gospel which the unlearned could understand, and its orderly system of rules and regulations which the underdeveloped needed. He felt that "Methodism had what the 'African' needed to encourage him to make progress, to worship [sic] God freely, and to fill every office for which he had the capability."<sup>6</sup>

The church remains committed to Arminian theology as interpreted by John Wesley. Although initially a northern church, it experienced great growth in the South following the Civil War, increasing from 20,000 members in 1864 to almost 400,000 twenty years later. The official home page of the church says, "Today, the A.M.E. Church has 18 active bishops and more than a million members scattered throughout the 50 States in the U.S.A., the Dominion of Canada, South America, West Africa, South Africa and the West Indies," though information on <http://www.adherents.com> commonly puts the figure at about 3,000,000 adherents worldwide and 2,000,000 communicant members.

## **2. African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church**

The AME Zion Church was also founded by black members protesting racial discrimination at John Street Church in New York City in 1796. Consequently this group founded the Zion church in 1800 and, apparently not wishing the "undesired influence of Bishop Allen,"<sup>7</sup> announced itself to be another national church in 1821 at its first annual conference, where it elected James Varick, who had led the John Street revolt, as its first bishop. The name African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was formally approved in 1848. Because the church was plagued by controversy in its early years, it only had 5,000 members at the dawn of the Civil War; twenty years later it numbered around 300,000. Today it has over 1,200,000 adherents worldwide, mostly in the U.S., with the largest concentration by far in North Carolina.

## **3. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church**

This body was established in 1870 after the request of black membership was granted to form a distinct body from the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Originally called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, its name was changed to the present in 1954. It is Methodist in doctrine, with 800,000 adherents in 3,000 churches worldwide.

Bishop Nathan L. Lindsey of the CME headquartered in Memphis said that they supported CUiC because it would bring churches closer together and move toward "eradicating racism." He said while the CME "does not condone" homosexual practice, he does not think the fact that the UCC does is a problem. He said, "the differences can be worked out." In a phone interview he almost seemed to make light of the issue saying, that the UCC does up front what other churches do "in the closet" in ordaining practicing gays and lesbians. He did then call back and emphasize that the CME does not condone homosexual behavior because it is "unbiblical."

## **4. United Methodist Church**

The United Methodist Church is the result of the 1939 merger of three Methodist bodies (Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal South and Methodist Protestant churches), and a 1968 union of the Evangelical United Brethren and The Methodist churches. The earlier Methodist Protestant Church had been founded in 1830 in protest against clerical domination and the exclusion of lay input in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Evangelical United Brethren grew out of two German sects that flourished particularly in Pennsylvania in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and had merged in 1946 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

The doctrines of all these bodies were similar, founded in Wesleyan-Arminian theology and episcopal church government. Their preachers often exchanged pulpits and worked together. The only difference was language: German among the Brethren, English among the Methodists. As English became their common tongue, there was no impediment to merger, which occurred in Dallas in 1968, forming the largest Methodist body in America (and second largest Protestant denomination, next to the Southern Baptist Convention) with 8.5 million members in the U.S. and 10 million worldwide.

According to Mark Tooley, at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, The United Methodist Church's official position on homosexual ordination states, "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to service in the United Methodist Church."

Regarding the blessing of same sex unions the church's position is, "Marriages that celebrate homosexual union

shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.”

Tooley stated that the United Methodist Church is governed by a General Conference of nearly 1000 delegates that meets every four years. The church's stance opposing homosexual practice dates to 1972. The prohibition against the ordination of practicing homosexuals dates to 1976. Both stances have been upheld by subsequent General Conferences. The 1996 General Conference ratified the prohibition against same-sex unions. There is also a church law against church funding for pro-homosexual advocacy. The church's Judicial Council functions as a “supreme court” and has upheld the church's positions on homosexuality when challenged.

The United Methodist Church has 68 active bishops, who are charged with upholding the laws of the church. At least ten of the 50 bishops in the U.S. have publicly stated their opposition to the current church stance against homosexual practice. All bishops have said they will uphold church policy, yet clearly some do so less vigorously than others.

Over 1300 United Methodist clergy (out of about 40,000) have signed a statement in support of same-sex unions. Almost 400 clergy have signed a statement expressing their willingness to conduct same-sex unions.

In 1997 the Rev. Jimmy Creech of Omaha, Nebraska was the first to test the 1996 ban on same-sex unions by presiding over a lesbian union. At his 1998 trial, the required two thirds of the clergy jury declined to convict Creech. However, the bishop of Nebraska declined to re-appoint Creech to any congregation. This year a church-less Rev. Creech conducted another ceremony in his native North Carolina and will face another trial in Nebraska, where he retains his clergy status.

In 1998 the Rev. Greg Dell of Chicago conducted a ceremony for two homosexual men. A jury voted in 1999 to remove him from his pulpit until he pledged not to conduct another same-sex union. However, a regional church court ruled that Dell's punishment could not be indefinite. He will return to his pulpit after a one year suspension.

Early this year 68 active United Methodist clergy from northern California presided over a lesbian union in Sacramento. Numerous retired clergy from elsewhere in the country also participated. Charges have been filed against all of the California clergy but so far no trial date has been set. More recently this year a United Methodist congregation in Houston held a same-sex union on the street in front of its church so as to not violate church law. A clergyman from another denomination presided.

## 5. Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is an amalgam of two 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Restorationist groups, the Christians and the Disciples of Christ, that merged in 1832. With nearly a million members in the U.S. and Canada, it is one of the largest faith groups founded on American soil.

Barton Stone was a Presbyterian minister who, after a revival in 1801 in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, formed with others a separate presbytery denouncing all human creeds and appealing to the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. Stone believed that “deeds are more important than creeds.” After disciplinary action was brought against him, he and his followers dissolved their denominational ties to enter into unity with “the body of Christ at large” and called themselves, simply, “Christians,” a movement that spread across Kentucky, Ohio, and the central states.

Thomas Campbell came to America from Scotland in 1807. He was chastised by Pennsylvania church authorities for refusing to use Presbyterian creeds as terms of communion. In 1808 he and others founded the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania. That group adopted the motto, well-known by Disciples, “Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Campbell and others were called “Reformers,” for their desire to restore the Church's first century roots. This way of life came to be known as the “Restoration Movement.” In 1830 Campbell, his son Alexander, and the Christian Association became known as “Disciples.”

Thomas Campbell's passion for Christian unity is summed up in his proclamation, “The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.” This statement is the first and key proposition of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, a work called by some the “Magna Carta” of the movement that preceded the denomination known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Campbell's son Alexander gave the movement its formative theology, urging that each church be autonomous, independent, without creeds, without authority except for the Bible, and without clerical titles. The Lord's Supper was to be observed weekly and baptism was by immersion for adult believers. Some Disciples “do not accept the doctrine of original sin,” and “are not concerned with speculation about the Trinity.”<sup>8</sup> With faith in Christ as Lord being the only requirement for membership, there is great latitude allowed in interpretation and life.

In 1968 the Disciples restructured themselves into a denomination, adopted a representative form of government and the official name Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Those churches that did not enter

into the restructure program are usually designated as "Independent Christian Churches (Churches of Christ).

According to Rev. Richard Bowman, Executive Director of the renewal group Disciples Heritage Fellowship, "The Disciples of Christ Church leadership is clearly promoting acceptance of the gay and lesbian lifestyle and ordination. In view of the large gay and lesbian presence at the General Assembly of the church and in view of the fact that we know of numerous gay and lesbian pastors, this is going to be an open and affirming denomination in the near future unless lay persons voice their concerns to the leadership."

Bowman continued, "Resolution 9719 was passed at the Denver General Assembly in 1997 that said 'The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has historically affirmed that all persons who are baptized and make the 'Good Confession' that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God are members of His body, the church. Thus, there can be no exclusion of persons from the church on the basis of sexual orientation.'"

Bowman explained that the denomination includes local congregations, regional bodies and the national body. Each of the three levels is autonomous. Therefore, the ordination of practicing, unrepentant homosexuals is decided by each region, although there is a clear effort by the national leadership to move the denomination to be open and affirming of practicing homosexuals.

## 6. United Church of Christ

The United Church of Christ (UCC), which calls itself "a *united* and *uniting* church," was born on June 25, 1957, as the result of a union of four traditions. Two of these were the Congregational Churches of the English Reformation with Puritan New England roots in America, and the Christian Church with American frontier origins. These two denominations were concerned with freedom of religious expression and the autonomy of local congregations and united on June 17, 1931, to become the Congregational Christian Churches. The other two denominations were the Evangelical Synod of North America, a 19th-century German-American church planted in the Mississippi Valley frontier, and the Reformed Church in the United States, founded by 18<sup>th</sup> Century German-speaking settlers in Pennsylvania and neighboring colonies. The parent churches in Europe were of German and Swiss heritage, conscientious followers of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions of the Reformation, and united to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church on June 26, 1934.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches shared a strong commitment to freedom of religious expression under Christ. Their union forced accommodation between congregational and presbyterian forms of church

government. The constitution of the UCC explicitly gives priority to the autonomy of the local church, so congregationalism is the predominant form of government. Thus, the General Synod, which meets biennially, serves in an advisory capacity only; its statements are not binding on any local congregation. Both denominations found their authority in the Bible and were more concerned with what unites Christians than with what divides them. In their marriage, a church that valued the free congregational tradition was strengthened by one that remained faithful to the liturgical tradition of Reformed church worship and to catechetical teaching. A tradition that maintained important aspects of European Protestantism was broadened by one that, in mutual covenant with Christ, embraced diversity and freedom.

The UCC's website lists its beliefs as follows and in this order (<http://www.ucc.org/who/whatis.htm>):

\* *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. Down through the centuries, however, Christians have shared their faith with one another through creeds, confessions, catechisms and other statements of faith. Historic statements such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Evangelical Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, the Cambridge Platform and the Kansas City Statement of Faith are valued in our church as authentic *testimonies* of faith. In 1959, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a Statement of Faith prepared especially for congregations of the United Church. Many of us use this statement as a common affirmation of faith in worship and as a basis for study.

\* *There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word.* This classic statement 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 expectancy for new insights and 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 *ministers*—servants—rather than as persons in authority. Their task is to guide, to instruct, and to enable the ministry of all Christians rather than to do the work of ministry for us.

\* *Responsible Freedom.* As individual members, 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. Likewise, associations of churches, conferences, the General Synod and the churchwide “covenanted ministries” of the United Church of Christ are free to act in their particular spheres of responsibility. Yet all are constrained by love to live in a covenantal relationship with one another and with the local churches in order to make manifest the unity of the body of Christ and thus to carry out God’s mission in the world more effectively. The members, congregations, associations, conferences, General Synod, and covenanted ministries are free in relation to the world. We affirm that the authority of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and interpreted with the aid of the Holy Spirit stands above and judges all human culture, institutions and laws.

There are 1.4 million members of churches affiliated with the UCC. Most of those in the U.S. are in New England and the Midwest. The UCC is the only body within recognized Christendom which officially allows the ordination of practicing and openly gay individuals. “The United Church of Christ allows its regional units [associations] to determine whether their churches can ordain gays and whether ministers can officiate at same sex unions. Nationally, 273 of its 6,100 congregations have voted affirmatively.”<sup>9</sup>

## 7. International Council of Community Churches

In 1950, two fellowships in the Community Church Movement joined in a historic merger, becoming the International Council of Community Churches (ICCC). “At the time, their joining represented the largest interracial merger of religious bodies in America. The new creation was the International Council of Community Churches. Member churches and centers united to be a fellowship of ecumenically-minded, freedom-loving churches cooperating in fulfilling the mission of the Church in the world. As a post-denominational movement for over 40 years, the Council has witnessed and worked for Christian unity and reconciliation in human society.”<sup>10</sup>

The stated purpose of the ICCC is “to be an answer to Christ’s prayer: ‘That they may all be one’ (John 17), to affirm the worth and dignity of every person, to attend to human need and suffering throughout the world, to seek and share the truth, and to build toward a new world of peace.” It endeavors to do this by affirming “individual freedom of conscience,” protecting and promoting “church self-determination,” proclaiming “that the love of God, which unites, can overcome any division,” and by being “an integral partner in the worldwide ecumenical movement.” It provides “opportunities to further the unity of Christians, the understanding of God-centered religions, the reconciliation of humankind, and to build with God a world of peace and wholeness.” The Council holds an Annual Conference to which every member unit can send two voting delegates, only one of which can be a cleric. There are about 250,000 members in the ICCC.

The ICCC website under “ICCC Local Community Churches” includes, “Light of Christ Community Church” at <http://www.SANCTASOPHIA.ORG/Iccc.html>. That website lists the “Tenets of Light of Christ Community Church, Inc. as “We Believe:

- \* In One Almighty Power in the Universe, the Cause of all creation;
- \* that in the heart of every living form is found a spark of that Almighty Power;
- \* that each human being can bloom and unfold spiritual potentials and radiate beauty, goodness, and truth;
- \* that humanity is guided by Great Ones, who are the Saviors of the world
- \* that Christ is the vision of perfection, the teachings are the path leading to perfection;
- \* the spirit of each human being is immortal;
- \* that all humanity is becoming One Family; we love all religions, traditions, nations and races without discrimination of color, creed, or sex;

- \* that each individual must shine personal light and live a life of honesty, nobility, simplicity, and justice;
- \* in generosity, in sharing, in giving and receiving in accord with the Laws of Abundance;
- \* that culture and beauty will unite humanity, that a life of sacrificial service reveals and manifest inner divinity; it is only in giving of your life (making sacred) that one truly Becomes.

When ICCC Executive Director Rev. Dr. Michael E. Livingston was asked the denomination's policy on homosexual ordination, he said that they had no official stance, that it is a local church, autonomy issue for them. He expressed "real disappointment if this CUiC didn't happen" saying they would be "aggressive" in supporting it.

## 8. The Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church is the American branch of the Anglican Communion, a tradition rooted in the Church of England. When the Church of England spread throughout the British Empire, sister churches sprang up. These churches, while autonomous in their governance, are bound together by tradition, Scripture, and the inheritance they have received from the Church of England. They together make up the Anglican Communion, a body headed spiritually by the Archbishop of Canterbury and having some 80 million members, making it the second largest Christian body in the world. There are about 2,400,000 Episcopalians in the U.S., Mexico, and Central America, all under the presiding bishop of the church.

The Episcopal Church came into existence as an independent denomination after the American Revolution. A 1783 conference of Episcopal churches met in Annapolis, Maryland, and formally adopted the name Protestant Episcopal Church— "Protestant" to distinguish it from the Roman Catholic Church, and "Episcopal" to distinguish it from the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. Six years later a constitution was formally adopted and the *Book of Common Prayer* revised for American use.

Although it subscribes to the historic Creeds (the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed), considers the Bible to be divinely inspired, and holds the Eucharist or Lord's Supper to be the central act of Christian worship, "the Episcopal Church grants great latitude in interpretation of doctrine. It tends to stress less the confession of particular beliefs than the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* in public worship."<sup>11</sup> The articles of the Church of England are generally accepted, but adherence to them is not required. The church "allows for variation, individuality, independent thinking, and religious liberty."<sup>12</sup>

The Episcopal Church issued "an extensive report" clarifying its 1994 General Convention declaration that it is "not ready" to enter into covenant communion, together with the Church's reservations and principles which will guide its continued participation in the process.<sup>13</sup>

The Episcopal Church has no official position on the ordination of practicing homosexuals but it has long been open to the gay rights agenda. As many as one-half of the dioceses in the church seem to be permitting unofficially the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

Although the Anglican Communion passed a Resolution in 1998 disapproving the ordination of practicing homosexuals as "contrary to Scripture," a sizeable number of American bishops and dioceses have disassociated themselves from that Resolution.

In 1996 Bishop Walter Righter was charged in a church trial with violating church doctrine when he ordained a practicing homosexual. The court acquitted Righter on the grounds that homosexuality was not a part of the core doctrine of the church. According to Dr. Stephen Noll, academic dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry outside of Pittsburgh, "the Righter case set a precedent by which other bishops could ordain practicing homosexuals with impunity." Noll observed in a phone interview, "Short of a miracle, the Episcopal church seems set on endorsing homosexuality in a few years."

## Do Walls Make Good Neighbors?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) affirms there is one Church and that visible unity is a good to be sought. "Visible oneness, by which a diversity of persons, gifts, and understandings, is brought together, is an important sign of the unity of God's people. It is also a means by which that unity is achieved. Further, while divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity and is willing to seek and to maintain communion and community with all other branches of the one, catholic Church" (*Book of Order* G-4.0203).

Does the proposed CUiC union further obscure genuine unity in Christ? I think it does. It does morally and theologically.

The United Church of Christ is the only denomination to officially affirm the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Several of the other denominations, like the International Council of Community Churches and the Disciples of Christ, do not have an official position, but leave the decision up to the local congregation or regional bodies. Other groups, like the United Methodist and Episcopal denominations, have official positions prohibiting

ordination, but because of their church governance, at times find it difficult to enforce the church law.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a confessional church. Those confessional statements, while subordinate to the Scriptures, are nonetheless standards. "They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed" (*Book of Order* G-2.0200). Freedom of conscience is permitted, but only "insofar as it does not seriously depart from the confessional standards."

Other members in COCU do not have confessions, leaving what they believe up to the individual, the congregation or in some cases regional bodies. Some churches, like the Light of Christ Community Church, have beliefs which are not Christo/centric, Trinitarian, or even monotheistic.

Other groups exalt human ability at the expense of God's sovereignty in Arminianism, or subsume the authority of Scripture to tradition and experience.

Many other questions surrounding polity issues and the structural integrity of this union have been raised in earlier discussions. The Methodist and the Episcopal churches both recognize bishops as an ordained hierarchy, while the Presbyterian and Christian churches do not. The Disciples still do not sprinkle infants and each of these denominations employ ministers in church positions differently. These concerns, as important as they are, pale in comparison to the more fundamental concerns of how theological and ecclesiastical life together is to be based. It is far from clear that these concerns have been sufficiently addressed, let alone resolved.

## Conclusion

As anyone knows, living with or next to someone who feels free to think as he or she wishes and has standards very different from one's own can be very difficult. In most cases, it is simply not desirable. As this is true in a neighborhood, it is also true in ecumenical endeavors which call for public expressions of visible unity. The Presbyterian Church already affirms the organic and

spiritual unity of the true people of God in the Church, despite its denominational differentiation. While a greater visible unity is a goal to be sought, "the unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it" (G-4.0201). It seems more appropriate to continue to talk over the existing fences as good neighbors rather than knock the fences down and live together in an uneasy tension.

1. Jean C. Lyles "Walls Between Churches Must Come Tumbling Down, Bishop Says," Presbyterian News Service 99039, January 28, 1999.
2. The full text of "Report of the Eighteenth Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union" may be accessed online at <http://www.cocu.org>. The report notes that this week "is a symbolically appropriate time for such a celebration," since Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday also falls in that time.
3. [http://www.umc.org/churchlibrary/discipline/doctrinalstandards/doctrinal\\_heritage.htm#Distinctive](http://www.umc.org/churchlibrary/discipline/doctrinalstandards/doctrinal_heritage.htm#Distinctive). The official website of the United Methodist Church is <http://www.umc.org/>
4. Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (8<sup>th</sup> ed rev. by Samuel S. Hill; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 162-163.
5. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 rep.), 12:394.
6. <http://www.ame-church.org/> the official website of the AME church.
7. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 708-709.
8. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations*, 75.
9. Associated Press. "Religion around the world," title of subsection: "DENVER CHURCH AGREES TO SANCTION GAY MARRIAGES" in *Deseret News*, Saturday, March 27, 1999 ([http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/libstory\\_reg?dn99&9903290059](http://www.desnews.com/cgi-bin/libstory_reg?dn99&9903290059)).
11. <http://www.akcache.com/community/iccc-nat.html>, from which all information and quotes concerning the ICCS is taken.
12. Scott I. Paradise, "What is the Episcopal Church?," <http://www.mit.edu/~tb/anglican/intro/ec-what.html> (an unofficial site). The church's official site is <http://www.dfms.org/index.html>.
13. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations*, 107.
14. "The celebration is not likely to include the Episcopal Church. Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold told the plenary, "The Episcopal delegation votes yes but will not be able to commend it to our General Convention for consideration until agreement has been reached with regard to the reconciliation of ministries.'" (James Solheim, "Episcopalians still find obstacles in plan for church unity," Episcopal News Service 99-2287 [<http://dfms.org/ens/99-2287.html>])

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# Amendment F: Replacing the GAC

## Statement of the Presbyterian Renewal Network

This amendment to be voted on by the presbyteries would replace the currently elected General Assembly Council (GAC) with two appointed bodies. The current GAC of over 90 members is elected as a result of nominations from lower governing bodies. This current GAC would be replaced by two smaller appointed bodies. The following statement by the Presbyterian Renewal Network was adopted at its meeting October 25, 1999, in Louisville, KY

The Presbyterian Renewal Network [includes renewal leaders from 15 independent renewal organizations] expresses its concern that the proposed amendment to the constitution creating the Council of the Assembly would be a step away from traditional Presbyterian representative government. The effect of the amendment would be to remove power from local governing bodies and vest more power in a small, appointed body. We urge all Presbyterians to seriously review the implications of this proposed change in the *Book of Order*.

We believe it is essential to uphold a church government of elders and ministers called and commissioned by congregations and presbyteries. All church bodies must be open and accountable to the Scriptures, the church's constitution, the decisions of governing bodies, and the input of all its members.

Amendment F would make significant changes in six sections of the Book of Order. It would introduce another layer of government between the current General Assembly entities and the General Assembly itself. The new Council of the Assembly would take over various functions now exercised by the General Assembly Council. But the GAC, downgraded and renamed as the Mission Agency, would retain other responsibilities. In itself, this multiplication and blurring of structures tends to diminish accountability.

Most seriously, the newly created and empowered Council of the Assembly would be less representative than the current General Assembly Council. Today it is presbyteries and synods that elect over two-thirds of the members of the GAC. But, under Amendment F, none of the 21 members of the new Council of the Assembly would be elected by the lower governing bodies that fund the General Assembly mission programs. Nine would be appointed by General Assembly entities that receive funding—five from the Mission Agency and one each from the Board of Pensions, the Presbyterian Foundation, the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program. Three would be the moderators of the three most recent assemblies. The remaining nine would be three commissioners apiece from the three most recent assemblies. The language of Amendment F leaves undecided the crucial question of who would select those nine. It makes no provision for them to be chosen by presbyteries or synods.

We appreciate the goal of the proposed amendment—the desire for a body of more manageable size that would coordinate the work of all entities carrying out the General Assembly mission directives. We urge presbytery commissioners to vote against it because it moves us away from elected representation.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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