

**“THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE”**

**John 17:6-23**

**October 29, 2006**

**Reformation Sunday**

**Celebration of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Church of Christ**

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I am tempted, in the old tradition of our Puritan forbears to tell you at length the story of the United Church of Christ's beginnings – which would result in a two to three hour worship service, about normal for the Puritans. But, alas, I fear we are not as sturdy in our churchgoing as our 17th century ancestors, so I have tried to condense the documents of this book to about ten minutes of story. Which is difficult, not only because there's a lot of detail here, but because what I want to do this morning is to communicate the hope and the vision of those who conceived the United Church of Christ. They were at the beginning a mere handful of men - yes, in the beginning they were all men - churchmen who honestly believed that from the re-union of denominations would come the best possible hope not only for the church, but for the world.

The hope to reunite the body of Christ is far older than the United Church of Christ. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, various theological voices and commissions sought to put back together the church which had been fractured first into East and West beginning in the 5th century, and then into a hundred pieces at the time of the Protestant reformation. But the social and political circumstances of the 20th century brought a special urgency to the effort. In India, in Japan, in the US and Europe, between 1907 to 1937, a series of international congresses searched and prayed fervently for ways to reunite the church. Willard Sperry, Dean of Harvard Divinity School, spoke at the World Congress on faith and Order in Edinburgh in 1937, saying that in those days, it was no longer an “academic elective” or an ‘Ecclesiastical luxury” that churches find ways to unite with each other in common cause. Because of the “common peril from war, materialism, racial and national denominations, and political and economic dictatorships,” ecumenical union was now imperative.

But it was the experience of World War II, a second world-wide conflagration in under 25 years, that pushed the international ecumenical movement to the forefront of Christian endeavor. One local church pastor, writing in *Advance* magazine, the denominational magazine of the Congregational Christian churches, challenged in 1948, “Where and what is our witness, we who are the fractious and divided body of Christ? Is this what we would present to the world: Christians quarreling over polity, divided over sacraments, more attentive to our differences than to our allegiance to the One God and to our Lord Jesus Christ? How can we lead the nations to peace if we cannot make peace among ourselves? How can we unite to fight the evils of our age when we cannot acknowledge that that which unites us is of a far greater substance than our denominational particularities.”

In that spirit, a group of about a dozen ministers in the St. Louis area - some Congregational Christian, some Evangelical and Reformed - began to meet together informally to discuss what might be a theological basis for union between their two churches. One was Dr. S.D. Press,

President of Eden Theological seminary and chair of the Commission on Closer Relations with Other Denominations of the Evangelical and Reformed church. Another was Truman Douglas, a delegate to the General Council of the Congregational Christian church. At their mutual urging, the denominations began quiet conversations about the possibility of uniting, a union that would bring together in one denominational body churches that represented both the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions of the Protestant Reformation, for them a major symbolic healing of the body of Christ.

The joint commission published a formal plan of Union in 1948; then the loud discussion began. Many of you were around then. You know that there were many, particularly on the Congregational side, who raised objections. The major theological controversy was a concern that local congregations would lose their autonomy in this new church, that the central national structure of the new denomination would have too much power. The less savory, more acrimonious conversations were about the “social distinctions” between Congregational Christians and E and R’s—congregationalists being more upper-middle class of “Anglo-Saxon” heritage and the E and R’s being largely blue collar of “Continental German” heritage. Many charged the two groups would never enter into fellowship socially, could never share power, be the church together.

So began ten years of argument and opposition. The opposition was lengthy, organized, involved legal suits, and in good Congregational fashion, endless meetings. But in June 1957, the United Church of Christ became reality. Today is just the beginning of our celebration of our denominational half century. We have months yet to go, and I hope during that time that we can reflect together more about our history. But on this Reformation Sunday, I would point out what is most important. First, what began as the hopes and vision of a handful of men, through incredible hard work and diligent careful theological reflection, became reality. It can happen. It did happen. It can happen again. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we, like them, have the power to create real change, to do what seems impossible, for God.

Second, as a denomination, we have ever been—and I hope will ever be—challenging ourselves to include, to heal, through our openness to make more faithful the body of Christ. This mission has always been controversial. Whether the point of contention be Anglo-Saxons and Continentals, persons with disabilities, gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered folks, Pentecostal Hispanics, patriarchal Samoans...or God only knows who God will send us next. As we include more and more in our church, we do it not to be politically correct, but to be theologically challenged. How do we celebrate our oneness rather than fighting about our differences? How do we model unity and difference living together in peace? This challenge is our denominational heritage. It is a significant important religious quest. We are the spiritual heirs of a generation of men and women who believed the church could heal the world, that religion could be a positive good, that Christianity could lead the way to peace. Given the political circumstances of our day, that seems a dim and maybe naive hope. But then again, maybe not. Me, I prefer that we hold on to their vision, that we believe in the church and that God has called us to great things. God calls us as God called them to open our minds, our hearts, our faith, our arms ever yet wider. It is for us to decide how we will answer that call in our day. Thanks be to God. Amen.