

**Celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Church of Christ**  
June 25, 1957 – June 25, 2017

***It seemed so easy, or at least logical at the time\****

The ecumenical momentum of the early twentieth century propelled four denominations together within two and a half short decades. The **Congregational** and **Christian** denominations seemed scarcely to have any differences. The **Reformed Church of the United States** and the **Evangelical Synod of North America** shared a German ecumenical heritage and courageously united before sorting out their common beliefs and organizational form under which they would live together. Almost immediately, encouraged by their success, the two new churches began to talk to one another. Though the road to their union would prove unexpectedly rough, it did not take them long, in the great sweep of Christian history, to form the **United Church of Christ**. Represented among these four traditions are almost all of the diverse streams of the Reformation. Could this new American denomination be the one to heal these old, old breaches of Christian community? It seemed that perhaps, it might.

Perhaps it could have done this if these theological and organizational differences were all that needed healing in the post-World War II world. Already in the conversations about union, the four denominations encountered divisions of class and culture. Soon after the new denomination settled the matter of a constitution and a statement of faith, the question of race surfaced. Could a church talk creditably about unity, human or ecclesiastical, while it remained divided by race? The UCC had been, it turned out, a union forged largely by white folks. It did not occur to most of the white majority to ask about the question of race in this great project of Christian unity.

The ink was scarcely dry on the Statement of Faith, when another question arose in the context of a larger cultural debate about language and gender. Did the Statement of Faith, or indeed any Christian statement, include women? As the white race presumed to include or represent the others, so men represented women and no one was aware of an alternative! Thus class, race, and gender divisions in American culture and all of humanity sought consideration by those who prayed with Christ. Other divisions appeared: divisions of sexual orientation, biblical interpretation, language, generation, region, and politics and polity. If the United Church of Christ claimed as its vocation the unity of the Church, it did so just in time to face the late twentieth century onslaught of plurality in, and division of, humanity.

The ideal that seemed so easy at first challenged the denomination to its core. Could the simple four stream history of the United Church of Christ carry the freight of healing a far wider range of division? It is as if the United Church of Christ, in its formation, attempted the culmination of several movements in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century blending together the ecumenical optimism, the evangelical enthusiasm for the growth of Christianity, the liberal theological aim of making Christian thought accessible to the modern mind, and the social gospel's concern for human justice, only to find that this culmination happened just as three of these movement collapsed as driving forces in American and, perhaps, also world Christianity.

In the following pages we will present three issues that confronted and challenged this new denomination at every level and step, and which are still present today: *race, peace/war, and immigration*. While these were not the only issues that kept some individual churches from joining the United Church of Christ (law suits to prevent the union began as early as 1948), they remained contentious among clergy and laity into the twenty-first century and our 60<sup>th</sup> year.

Below are a few early milestones that provided a foundation for the new denomination's future action for justice, or a slippery slope into cultural relativity, depending on your theological understanding.

**1959** Southern television stations impose a news blackout on the civil rights movement. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asks the UCC to intervene. The UCC Office of Communications wins in federal court a ruling that the airways are public, not private, property.

**1966** Ordination of the first Hispanic minister in the continental US.

**1969** General Synod calls for withdrawal from Vietnam and support of US policies to lessen rivalries in Middle East.

**1971** Created a Task Force on the Role and Status of Women in the Church and Society.

**1971-1980** Gregory Congregational Church in Wilmington NC stormed by National Guard troops. Among those arrested and imprisoned, Ben Chavis, a field worker for the UCC Commission for Racial Justice. The UCC provides legal assistance and moral and financial support for all ten charged.

**1972** Ordination of the first openly gay minister.

**1976** General Synod elects as President first African American leader of a racially integrated mainline church in US.

**1977** Decision to develop a Book of Worship with inclusive language.

**1985** General Synod affirms the UCC as a Just Peace Church.

**1995** General Synod affirms the dignity and self-worth of immigrants.

**2005** General Synod passes a resolution supporting same-gender marriage equality.

\*Excerpts from *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*, Randi Jones Walker, United Church Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 2005 and [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

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## Wilmington Ten to Ferguson and Beyond

Racial tension had been building for years throughout the country but when North Carolina National Guard troops stormed **Gregory Congregational Church** in **February, 1971**, it shocked most members of the United Church of Christ nationwide. Only days earlier **Rev. Eugene Templeton**, Gregory's white pastor, requested the help of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ). Templeton, with the support of his trustees, had offered the church as a meeting place for black students boycotting Wilmington's two "integrated" high schools. He feared for their safety as members of the Rights of White People and Klan were armed and riding through black neighborhoods while the local police stood idly by. Templeton and his wife received death threats. A black Baptist minister, **Rev. David Vaughn**, was shot by white vigilantes outside the church as he tried to persuade the men protecting the church to go home. The next night a grocery store one block from the church was torched. The police shot and killed 17 year old Steve Mitchell who police claimed was shooting at firemen. Gunfire continued through the night as police allowed white men in various vehicles to cruise by the church. The parsonage, near the church, was riddled with bullet holes. A well-known white supremacist, Harvey Cumber, drove through the police lines around the church, got out of his vehicle in front of the church, brandishing his gun. He was shot and killed by an unknown person defending the church. The next morning the National Guard broke into the church to find only the caretaker and one other person. Newspaper reports that claimed they found dynamite proved false.

**February 1971** was a decisive month for the United Church of Christ and its Commission for Racial Justice. From its inception in **1957**, black church leaders had urged the predominately white denomination to take stronger and more visible positions on race. In **1969** the General Synod created the Commission, which had its roots in the Southern Conference of North Carolina-Virginia, an uncomfortable mix of white Congregational churches and predominately black Christian churches.

One year after the incidents around Gregory Congregational, **Ben Chavis**, the CRJ staff member, eight young black men, and one white woman were arrested for the arson of the grocery store and conspiring to shoot responding police and firemen. Chavis, as a CRJ staff member, needed legal support. The CRJ, and UCC, got its legal experience in 1968 by defending Marie Hill, a 17 year old convicted and sentenced to death in North Carolina. The legal team that the UCC hired got the conviction overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in **1971**. The UCC hired the same legal team to defend the Wilmington Ten, as they became known, and though eventually successful, it took decades. The Wilmington Ten were found guilty and sentenced to a collective 282 years of prison. After three violent months in prison, the UCC, fearing for their safety during the appeal process, put up over \$1 million in bail for the entire group. Thus, a denomination that in **1972** was only fifteen years old when the arrest warrants were issued, was now called to invest its name, its faith, and its resources into the struggle for freedom, not just for its own staff member, Ben Chavis, but for the nine others as well. The journey would not be easy, and there were members of the denomination who disagreed vehemently with the leadership's decision to support and, especially, to put up bail money for the group. Some could not believe there would be misconduct by the criminal justice system. It took 40 years, but the stain of a false conviction was finally lifted. The Wilmington Ten, who became political prisoners in North Carolina in 1972 for a crime they didn't commit, got their pardon from the state's governor in **2013**. After decades of persistence, UCC leaders past and present now say, finally, justice has prevailed--there. After his release from prison, Ben Chavis returned to the field of civil rights and by **1985** had been elected Executive Director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice.

**Michael Brown**, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, **2014**, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. The shooting prompted protests that continued for weeks. On Nov. 24, the St. Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury decided not to indict Mr. Wilson. The announcement set off another wave of protests. As the buildings that were burned during the race-related riots came down one by one, St. Peter's Evangelical United Church of Christ has broken ground on a new community resource center that signifies its commitment to help rebuild the city. **Rev. Traci Blackmon** of Christ the King United Church of Christ became nationally recognized as a prominent voice for social change after Michael Brown was shot just miles from her church. She immediately got involved in organizing the Black Lives Matter movement, effectively assisting and collaborating with the people in the community working for justice. In **2017** she was appointed as the Executive Minister of UCC Justice and Witness Ministries, basically the same position held by Ben Chavis over thirty years ago.

**2016: White Privilege: Let's Talk. A Resource for Transformation Dialogue** is a UCC curriculum designed to invite church members to engage in safe, meaningful, substantive, and bold conversations on race and white accountability for a culture lacking justice for all, co-authored by Rev. Blackmon.

For more information: *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice, and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970's*, Kenneth Robert Janken, University of North Carolina Press, 2015, and *Blood Done Sign My Name*, Timothy B. Tyson, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2004, and [www.ucc.org/justice](http://www.ucc.org/justice).

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### *The Long and Difficult Path to Peace....*

While at the national level the United Church of Christ had come into being in 1957, organizing and actually functioning as a new denomination was an even greater challenge at the state level. In Wisconsin, years of preparation came together on **June 11, 1963** when the first annual meeting of the **Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ** was held at Lawrence College in Appleton. This newly created conference brought together the **North and South Wisconsin Synods of the Evangelical and Reformed Church** (a decision made at the Synod level) and a great majority of the churches in the **Congregational Christian Conference** (decisions made by each church) for a total of 329 congregations and 107,608 members. The number of Congregational Christian churches that declined, or actively fought against, the merger was significant in some areas such as Wauwatosa, Oconomowoc, and Green Bay. A report in 1961 stated that a higher percentage of members in Wisconsin voted *against the UCC merger* than the country as a whole, 25% versus 16.4%.

In addition to theological and polity differences, some Congregational Christian churches were seriously divided over issues of race (some Wisconsin communities had statutes forbidding African Americans to stay overnight in their city limits), and increasingly, the conflict in Vietnam. The Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis were not distant memories and the nuclear arms race was heating up. At the same time, churches of every denomination were losing members for a variety of reasons. As the UCC merger, or failure to merge for some, continued, three reasons were reported for those who left their church: the church interfered too much in public affairs, the church was not active enough in public affairs, or the church had lost its spiritual focus. The experience of Baraboo's First Congregational demonstrated the turmoil of the mid to late sixties. Perceived as too active in public affairs, and specifically the pastor's opposition to the Vietnam War, the membership dropped to twelve as long standing members and friends left. The remaining members voted on closing the church. By a vote of seven to five, they stayed open but struggled for years after. In two short years the Wisconsin Conference shrunk to 94,939, *a loss of 12,669 members since its inaugural annual meeting in 1963*.

As the U.S. involvement in Vietnam escalated, so did the protests against the war. Churches found it more difficult to ignore moral and political issues. UCC youth, as others their age, demanded at least open discussion. In **1966** the **Wisconsin Conference Youth Ministry** conducted its annual Spring Youth Conference with the theme "Youth Views the Possibilities for Peace." The concluding speaker was Wisconsin's Senior Senator, William Proxmire, then becoming known for his opposition to the Vietnam conflict. By 1966 youth protests became more frequent on college campus and even in some high schools. The UCC Sixth General Synod (**1967**) affirmed the right of conscientious objection to participation in a particular war or in war waged under particular circumstances, as well as the right of conscientious objection to participation in war. By the Eighth General Synod (**1971**) three resolutions were passed to end U.S. participation in the war. The war ended April 30, 1975. Though the Christians who protested the war in Vietnam, and those who supported the war, were both overly confident that God absolutely blessed their viewpoint, through the experience each side learned something about the ambiguity of politics and the paradox of religion and faith.

At the Thirteenth General Synod (**1981**), a youth delegate from Kansas proposed a resolution calling on the UCC to become a "peace church" (amended from the original wording which used 'pacifist' and changed two years later to 'peacemaking'). This resolution passed, but it became clear that further study was needed throughout the life of the church to define what a UCC approach to war and peace would be. The UCC Office for Church in Society appointed a **Peace Theology Development Team**, which included the Wisconsin Conference Minister, **Rev. Frederick Trost**. In **1986** the Team's document was published as *A Just Peace Church* and continues to be used today.

For 36 years, the **Just Peace Church pronouncement** has inspired a grassroots movement of UCC congregations committed to corporately naming and boldly proclaiming a public identity as a justice-doing, peace-seeking church. The Just Peace pronouncement articulated the UCC position on war and peace distinct from other approaches such as crusade, pacifism, or "just war." Grounded in UCC polity and covenantal theology, the position focuses attention on alleviating systemic injustice of all types using non-violence and calls us to offer the message, grounded in the hope of reconciliation in Jesus, that "Peace is possible."

Sources: *A Just Peace Church*, Susan Thistlethwaite, ed., United Church Press, Cleveland, 1986. "Christian Responses to Vietnam: The Organization of Dissent", Mark G. Toulouse, Religion-Culture Web Forum, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu>, 2007. *That All May Be One: Historical Essays on the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ*, Barbara Dotts Paul, ed., 2007. *The Prophetic Vision: Social Policy Statements from the United Church of Christ (1957 to 1991)*, and [www.ucc.org/history](http://www.ucc.org/history).

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**Immigration**

*When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you were an immigrant in the land of Egypt. Leviticus 19:33-34*

Concern for aliens is found throughout the Bible, particularly in the Hebrew scripture. The United Church of Christ has demonstrated a long standing, ongoing concern with immigration in the United States and elsewhere and with the well being of immigrants. **As early as 1981**, General Synod 13 issued a **Pronouncement, “Justice in Immigration”** which called for **refugees and immigrants** to be given constitutional and labor rights; declared opposition to sanctions against employers; urged penalties against exploitation; supported the granting of regular legal status to undocumented persons; and called for the church to support immigrants and refugees. Other major resolutions and pronouncements include:

**1995** General Synod 20: Affirming the Dignity and Self-Worth of Immigrants.

**1999** General Synod 22: Border justice issues.

**2001** General Synod 23: Emergency Resolution to end the death of migrants on the U. S.-Mexico border by offering water in Christ's Name.

**2005** General Synod 25: In a resolution opposing the *construction of a wall* - also known as a “security fence” - *between Israel and Palestine*: “We are called to be people of reconciliation and called to engage in the act of reconciliation... When barriers are constructed, hostility that exists becomes exacerbated. Differences between peoples can only be addressed through bringing them together, not by adding further divisions. By breaking down walls that separate, we actively seek peace and reconciliation in the world and attempt to follow Jesus’ example.” [Sadly, today we can insert “*between the United States and Mexico*”, or “*between the United States and the world*” in our opposition to walls or “security fences.”]

**2007** General Synod 26: Call for a more humane US immigration policy; end immigrant deaths; support immigrant communities: border enforcement strategy is inhumane and ineffective, guarantee rights to immigrant workers.

**2013** General Synod 29 passed the Resolution Supporting *Compassionate Comprehensive Immigration Reform* and the *Protection of the Human Rights of Immigrants*.

**General Synod 31 June 30 – July 4, 2017 Baltimore, Maryland**

As the United Church of Christ entered into its 61<sup>st</sup> year and convened its 31<sup>st</sup> General Synod, the **Conferences of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Northern California-Nevada, Massachusetts and Central Pacific** submitted the following resolution: **On Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Church.**

This resolution calls on the United Church of Christ and its congregations to become Immigrant Welcoming as it recognizes the ongoing struggles of refugees and migrants who come to the United States seeking safety, security, freedom and opportunity but instead experience suffering as they fear raids, deportation, and witness their families being torn apart. It further encourages the development of policies to facilitate this.

This resolution is in keeping with the commitment of the United Church of Christ to provide extravagant welcome to all God’s Children. As negative stereotyping of immigrants increases, becoming an “immigrant welcoming” church provides a critical alternative witness rooted in Biblical and theological principles the United Church of Christ deeply values. **The resolution was approved on July 2** by 96% of the voting delegates. [See the complete resolution at [www.uccfiles.com/synod/resolutions/GS31-11](http://www.uccfiles.com/synod/resolutions/GS31-11)]

**Immigration Prayer**

*Creator God*, open our eyes so we can see you in the eyes of our immigrant brothers and sisters, eyes downcast for having lived so long in the shadows, eyes challenging us to join them in the streets or picket lines, eyes lifted looking for the Christ light in us.

*Compassionate God*, who has come to dwell among us, open our ears to hear the cries of your children, children being separated from their parents, rounded up in raids, led to detention centers, silently giving up dreams.

*God of Justice*, who crosses all boundaries, give us courage to resist, to say NO to unfair labor practices, to unjust laws like SB 1070, 287g contracts.

Give us the strength to stand with and for your inclusive love, faith to believe, another world is necessary and possible. **Let it begin with us. Amen**