

“The Uniting Church of Christ”  
Galatians 3:23-29

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One of the parts of my identity that I am most proud is that I am a lifelong member of the United Church of Christ. For someone who has lived lots of places, picked up and put down different hobbies and interests, and frequently tries on different identities, there is not much I can say I am a lifelong member of except maybe for the United Church of Christ. There are relatively few of us out there. One of the distinguishing points of our wider church is that many people discover the UCC after being involved in other church denominations, and some people find us after not belonging to any church.

There is a wide spectrum of worship styles, theology, demographics, and regional differences between different UCC congregations. There is a new church start in Chicago that is mostly filled with millennials and meets in a brewery. Their worship resembles sacred storytelling. One of our oldest congregations is in Boston, where in 1706 their church baptized Benjamin Franklin on the day he was born. In Dallas, Texas there is a UCC congregation that is predominantly LGBTQ and boasts a membership of over 3,000 people, including satellite campuses around the country – our very own queer, progressive mega church. And then there are hundreds of congregations that look and feel similar to ours, but vary in their music styles, their beliefs in God, the way they make decisions, and the ministries they focus on.

Who else has been a part of another United Church of Christ congregation or perhaps has visited another congregation? I'm thinking specifically about the UCC because we are kicking off a month of exploring the UCC and all the things that make us who we are. If you have a memory about another UCC church, I'd like you to think for a minute about what that church was like – a lot of people or a few people, older or younger, white or Latinx or multiracial? Was there a

particular ministry they were known for or something special you remember about their worship service?

I'm going to tell you briefly about the congregation I grew up in, and then I want to invite a few folks to share their own brief story about another United Church of Christ congregation they have been to. And remember that there are UCC congregations right here in the Lansing area that you may have experienced – St. Stephens, Haslett Community Church, First Church Grand Ledge – just to name a few.

For example, the church I grew up in, First Congregational Church of Bakersfield, is smaller than Edgewood – about 150 members total. They are a progressive church in a conservative town so their progressive can be a little more conservative than other places. But they are open and affirming of all people and provide a needed voice in the community – in the 90s they were kicked out of the local ecumenical church group because they had a female pastor. They run and manage a fair trade gift shop that is the only one of its kind in the city. They have a long, deep partnership with a local prison ministry organization that enables and equips kids to be able to visit their parents in prison. They are a small church with a big heart, working to make a difference in ways in their community that many other churches shy away from.

Who else has a story of a UCC congregation?

I have one more story to help us better understand the diversity in the United Church of Christ. In order to become an ordained minister in the UCC, you have to go through a long, rigorous process that includes a lot of elements like education, internships, and psychological exams. The process is overseen by a group of representatives from your region, or Association, both clergy and church members. Your ordination is determined and held up by an Association,

from the beginning all the way through retirement. You don't get to pick who the representatives are that oversee your process, and it is likely that most won't meet you until you begin. In my ordination process, one of the final requirements was an oral exam by the Association committee. They were a tough group and I was a little nervous, but I worked with them for over three years and felt prepared to answer their questions which could range from theological to Biblical to personal.

My “little bit of nervousness” turned into “huge amounts of anxiety” when I arrived for the exam and there was a new face in this otherwise familiar group. The chairperson quickly pulled me aside. She told me that this new man was a member of the committee but had been very passive in his involvement until now. After reading my ordination paper, he decided he needed to be present for my exam.

She explained that he was a Hungarian orthodox minister from Transylvania who was serving of one of our local Hungarian orthodox UCC churches. I paused and asked two questions: “There are more than one Hungarian orthodox UCC churches?” and “Does he know I’m about as unorthodox as you can get?” She said, “Yes and yes. That is why he is here. He has some questions for you.”

The only thing I could do as I processed what that meant was pray to God for mercy. During the exam, my Hungarian orthodox minister from Transylvania questioned me from the beginning of Genesis all the way to the book of Revelation. He asked about God the Father, Jesus as Christ, and the Holy Spirit. He asked me questions that all these years later I would still be hard pressed to give a satisfactory answer to. I think the end of every one of our dialogues after his questions resulted in one of us saying, “We will have to agree to disagree.”

The Hungarian orthodox minister from Transylvania represented a completely different part of the United Church of Christ than I had ever known. It was a nerve-racking experience but

also affirming of the diversity of beliefs in our beloved UCC. When we say that we are going to create room at the table for everyone, we really do have to mean it. We have to mean it even when someone arrives who has a different opinion or a different experience or a different belief in God. Those moments of disagreement can often become opportunities for us to reflect on our own experiences and what they mean or an opportunity for us to articulate what it is we believe when we are faced with something we know we *don't* believe.

To be a part of the United Church of Christ is to be committed to wrestling with our siblings in Christ with what we believe and what we are called to do. We do this on a local level as our individual congregations set goals and commit themselves to ministry. We do this at a national level when our representatives meet every two years to set our national priorities for ministry and advocacy work – voting on resolutions for justice and peace that individual congregations or members may disagree with, but represent the bold public stance of the wider UCC. These votes and these priorities, here at home, regionally, and nationally, is our process of exploring our identity – defining and redefining what it means to be a part of the United Church of Christ. We cannot and do not assume that what it meant to be a part of the United Church of Christ is the same today as it was in 1957 when our denomination was founded, or in the 1600s when our earliest congregational forbearers came into existence.

This work of exploring identity - of really struggling with it in the context of community, here and in the wider church - is a deeply faithful practice. Throughout scripture we see this reoccurring theme: from the early Israelites defining one tribe from another, prophets reminding their people of their identity and responsibility as God's chosen people, Jesus challenging his culture's perception of insiders and outsiders and who is worthy of God's grace. We especially see this in Paul's letters to the early Christian church, including the Galatians. Identity was what early Christians were most preoccupied with as they sought to understand who they were, what

they were able to believe, and how they would live and worship together. The people of Galatia were in the midst of a struggle of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus as the church grew, growing from a small movement of people who knew him directly to inviting in folks who had never met Jesus, and even folks coming from different religions and nationalities. Paul urged them to create a new identity together, one that unified them in Christ despite, or perhaps because, of their differences. Paul reminded them that the love that united them through Christ was stronger than anything that might keep them apart.

In many ways this has always been and remains a central struggle in Christianity. Who has the power to decide what it means to be a Christian and what is required of you to claim and sustain that identity? What distinguishes one Christian denomination from the next, or how can churches within a shared denomination such as the United Church of Christ claim different identities in the midst of a larger unified identity?

This month we will explore the Core Values of the United Church of Christ – continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives – in the hope that as we better understand our wider identity, better understand our local church identity, and even understand our individual identities as followers of Jesus, which surely means something a little bit different for everyone gathered here today. Every week we, along with many other UCC congregations, proclaim *no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here*. I hope that we will go on this journey together, exploring our shared identity as members and friends of the UCC, sharing insights and learning that open up our own identities and values that we hold close.

Amen.