

## Moves Toward Unity

Early in the 20th century, the Holy Spirit began to inspire a worldwide movement toward Christian unity. The United Church of Christ was, and is, only one part of this larger movement. The ecumenical movement calls the churches to restore their oneness in Christ either by uniting into larger bodies or by preserving their unique identities but linking with other churches in relationships of "full communion."

Two world wars and religious sectarianism had made clear a need for the church to take seriously its responsibility as agents of God's healing, and in repentance, to acknowledge in its divisions a mutual need for Christ's redemption. The World Council of Churches—Protestant Anglican and Orthodox—met at Amsterdam in 1948 under the theme "Man's Disorder and God's Design." In 1961, it merged with the International Missionary Council. The Second Vatican Council at Rome, called by Pope John XXIII, met between 1962 and 1965 with a primary purpose of "peace and unity." At the end of the four-year council, Pope Paul VI prayed with non-Catholic Christian observers at an ecumenical service and resolved to "remove from memory" the events of A.D. 1054—the year of the Great Schism between the Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) churches.

### Begins in India

The World Council of Churches (1948) and the National Council of Churches (1949) did not "unite" the separated churches but brought them together in a conciliar movement. At the same time, some Protestants and Anglicans were entering into church unions that created one church out of many. This movement began early in the 20th century with the South Indian United Church (1908). Later in the century two larger united churches were formed in the subcontinent: the Church of South India and the Church of North India. Other conspicuous unions were Church of Christ in China (1927), Kyodan in Japan (1941), the United Church of Christ of the Philippines (1948) and the National Christian Council of Indonesia (1950).

Between 1900 and 1950, Congregational churches in ten countries united with other denominations, many losing the name "Congregational." Others followed as the United Church movement proliferated. In the United States, the Congregational Churches had, since 1890, been making overtures of unity toward other church bodies. German "union" (Lutheran-Reformed) churches in western Pennsylvania and in Iowa, recognized and received as German Congregational Churches in 1927, were absorbed and integrated.

During and following World War I Congregational associations in the United States received into fellowship the Armenian Evangelicals, a refugee remnant of the 19th-century reform movement in the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkey. During a period of Turkish persecution of Armenians which culminated in the massacre of 1915, thousands of Armenians escaped to America—including many Evangelicals. In the 1980s there are 16 Armenian Evangelical churches holding membership in the United Church of Christ. Locally, the "association" relationship among churches made it easy to extend congregational fellowship across denominational lines.

### Christians and Congregationalists

Although it had begun as a movement to unite Christians, the Christian Church in the United States (perhaps because of its long travail over its own North-South division and its disinterest in organizational structure) had remained separatist. Correspondence with Congregationalists led to a meeting in 1926, where the two groups decided to explore the possibility of union. On June 27, 1931, at Seattle, Washington, the Christian Church, with a membership of 100,000—including 30,000 members of the 65 churches in its Afro-American Convention—joined with the Congregational Churches of nearly a million members. They saw their temporal organization of Christian believers as one manifestation of the church universal—a denomination that they intended would remain adaptable, enabling a faithful response to the biblical Word of God in any time, in any place, among any people.

### Evangelicals and Reformed

Such an understanding of the church had also matured in the Evangelical and the Reformed churches from

seeds planted centuries before in Switzerland and Germany and replanted in America by the Mercersburg movement. With resolve strengthened by the great ecumenical assemblies, the Reformed Church in the United States, led by George W. Richards, in 1918, produced a Plan of Federal Union in hope of uniting churches of the Reformed heritage. Similarly inspired, Samuel Press, supported by the local churches represented at the 1925 General Conference, led the Evangelical Synod of North America to undertake negotiations looking toward organic union. While other communions of shared tradition had become involved, by 1930, only the Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod pursued their long-hoped-for union.

After six years of negotiation, a Plan of Union was ratified in 1932 by the General Synod of the Reformed Church and, one year later, by the Evangelical Synod at its General Convention. Significant and unprecedented was the decision to unite and then to work out a constitution and other structures—surely an act of Christian obedience, trust and faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. On June 26, 1934, the Evangelical and Reformed Church was born in Cleveland, Ohio.

Source:<http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/ecum.htm>  
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