

“The Household of God”

I Corinthians 12.12–31a

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Paul provides a wonderfully solid, bodily image of the church. It isn’t a wishy-washy, nebulous statement about who we are as the church: it’s a clear statement...in the flesh: we are all different parts of the body of Christ.

During the 1950s and early 60s, the model of our culture was to be homogeneity...fitting in and being like everybody else. In architecture, it was burgeoning suburbia: “little boxes on the hillside” that all looked alike. If you were a cultural progressive, it meant believing in the “melting pot,” which really meant that everyone in America should fit in: and should look, think, and act in generally the same manner.

It was in that cultural milieu that the United Church of Christ was born fifty years ago, in 1957.

In that “melting pot” model of ecumenism, we started to think that all Christian denominations were not such a good thing and that we should all come together and lose a substantial measure of our difference and just be one. After all, Jesus’ prayer from John’s gospel, used on the UCC crest, is “that they may all be one. And the way a lot of folks read that is “that they may all be the same.”

Ecumenism has the same root as the words “economics” and comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means household. Often, when people use ecumenical interchangeably with interfaith, but technically, ecumenical refers to the Christian church and its multitude of parts.

The ecumenical movement in the country after the Second World War mirrored the ideal of the melting pot as well, looking forward to the day when all denominational lines would blur and eventually disappear, because down deep we’re all the same.

And there are a lot of signs in the way we worship that the ecumenical movement has had a significant impact. Look around you: paraments over the pulpit? Not in a Congregational church! Ministers wearing albs and stoles? I never saw that growing up in the UCC. How about the use of the Revised Common Lectionary (the texts virtually all mainline churches use)? Today, the same text you heard from 1 Corinthians is also being heard at St. Paul’s Episcopal, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran, Harmony Presbyterian, and many other churches around town.

Well, times have changed. The metaphor of the melting pot is being replaced by the mixed salad, where each culture brings and retains its distinctive color, texture, and flavor. And that can be a tremendously enriching thing. Whether it’s going to an Asian-American festival at CSU or joining a Cinco de Mayo celebration or listening to the choir of the Abyssinian Church, we are learning to appreciate cultural differences, rather than to insist they melt into the background.

For me, that’s true in our United Church of Christ culture, as well. The Congregational and Christian Churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957. Does that mean that Phil Hoefer and Ruth Jakubauskas need to lose all his German Evangelical roots or that Carl Mohr needs to abandon his German Reformed heritage? No way! Does it mean that we at Plymouth need to forget our German founders? Certainly not. Personally, I’m not ready to give up all of my “Congregationalness,” which in my family goes back to the 1630s in Connecticut. It’s part of who I am as a minister, as a Christian, and as a person. But, I see my own sense of Congregationalism within the framework of being part of this glorious amalgamation called the United Church of Christ.

I think one of the reasons people shy away from recognizing each others' differences is that...we might disagree. Heaven forbid! If we are all one, then we won't disagree on anything, right?! Part of the genius of our Reformed heritage, which we share with Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and others, is that we acknowledge that ultimate authority in terms of biblical interpretation and Christian ethics rests with our own discernment as Christians. Presbyterians say that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," not a moral declaration from the General Assembly, let alone a papal encyclical. In the UCC, we say that General Synod "speaks to our churches, not for our churches." Guess what...we're going to disagree! And that's healthy, because we bring different viewpoints to the table. And the sooner we acknowledge that, the better off we'll be. If we are open about our differences, and if we can hear one another, we can be enriched by our interactions and our life together. St. Augustine gave sage advice, which Eden Seminary uses as its motto: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity."

Many of you may not know that I worked with the Colorado Council of Churches as the UCC's representative to the Christian Unity Commission, and one of the most profound statements about ecumenism I heard came from a Disciple of Christ minister, Jim Ryan, who chairs the Colorado Council. In reference to Jesus' prayer, he said that the church already is one, we just have to start acting like it.

Instead of trying to all be the same, perhaps the different limbs of the church need to start acknowledging what they and others bring to the body of Christ. Presbyterians bring order; Episcopalians bring great liturgy; Pentecostals bring fervor; Lutherans bring piety; Roman Catholics bring tradition; Disciples of Christ bring the ministry of the laity. And we in the UCC bring intellectual engagement and social conscience. We all have distinctive gifts, and we all have something to contribute to the whole. We don't need to stop being who we are at our core in order to be part of the body of Christ.

When we come to the table, we may not agree. And the issues are not inconsequential. Most of us in the UCC are all in favor of women in ordained ministry, but that's a non-starter for Southern Baptists. Episcopalians are pro-choice and Roman Catholics are against abortion. Presbyterians are pro-Palestinian and many evangelicals are pro-Israel. Think of an issue, and your likely to find two Christian groups who will disagree on it. Or as I've sometimes said, when two or three UCC folks are gathered, you'll have at least a half dozen opinions.

But we don't have to agree. What we need to do is acknowledge our oneness in Christ. Some won't do that. The Vatican's pronouncement six years ago didn't do a lot to foster Christian unity. It declares that churches that do not have a "valid episcopate [bishops] and the genuine and integral substance of the eucharistic mystery are not churches in the proper sense." It also describes other religions as deficient paths to salvation. Having said that, most of my experiences with American Catholics have had a far more cooperative flavor.



With all the disagreement on various thorny issues, there is one issue on which all major denominations agree, with the notable exception of the Southern Baptist Convention. I want to be clear that I am encouraging you as individual followers of Jesus Christ to grapple with this issue in the light of your faith, and that it is up to each of us to decide where we stand on this issue.

Here is what the United Methodist bishops say: "As elected and consecrated bishops of the church, we repent of our complicity in what we believe to be the unjust and immoral invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the face of the United States Administration's rush toward military action based on misleading information, too many of us were silent."

I am not trying to convince you to believe one thing or another about the war in Iraq. I am not telling you that you need to agree, but I want you to hear the witness of our ecumenical brothers and sisters: different limbs of the body of Christ.

Listen to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: “We hope our nation has moved beyond the divisive rhetoric of the recent campaign and the shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to ‘cut and run’ versus ‘stay the course,’” said the statement. “Our nation needs a much more substantive, civil, and nonpartisan discussion of ways to plan and secure a responsible transition in Iraq.”

A resolution passed by the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly last summer reads: “From the beginning, it has been the judgment of many church leaders, both in the United States and elsewhere, that an invasion of Iraq has been unwise, immoral, and illegal. The 216th General Assembly (2004) concurs with this judgment. That judgment has also been evident in widespread public feeling in numerous countries, including countries long friendly to the United States.” Even the National Association of Evangelicals wrote to President Bush imploring him to exhaust all other means before going to war in Iraq.

Whether we as individuals agree or disagree with those statements, we are bound to listen with open minds and open hearts when so many parts of the body of Christ are speaking with one voice.

John Thomas, general minister and president of the UCC, issued this statement just over a week ago: “People of faith are not and must not be naïve. The reality of evil is very much a part of our world. It is evil that must be restrained. The bipartisan Iraq Study Group recognized this and called for a diminishing but more strategic military force to be joined by a new and aggressive regional diplomacy that would press all in the region – our friends and enemies alike – to take responsibility for the evil they condone or in which they are complicit, and to join together across ideological and national interests to restrain the violence that threatens all. Such an approach lacks the seductive appeal of a grand “war on terror,” the morally convenient but suspect naming of an “axis of evil,” or the notion of an epic ideological battle between the forces of democracy and oppression. Instead it requires a much more honest view of the world that calls for coalitions that are real rather than illusory. It requires the humility to acknowledge that we cannot impose our solutions by military force alone, and the courage to take initiatives even with partners we find threatening.”

“As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”

We must listen with our hearts and minds open. As Christians, we must respond not simply in our own self-interest, nor even in our national interest, but as Christ would respond.

Theresa of Avila said,
 “Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
 no hands but yours, no feet but your.
 Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s
 compassion is to look out to the world.
 Yours are the feet with which Christ is to
 go about doing good.
 Yours are the hands with which Christ is to
 bless all people now.”

So, let us with all our brothers and sisters in the church universal, be the body of Christ. Amen.