

**No. 0123**

(Sense-of-the-Assembly)

**CHURCHES UNITING IN CHRIST**

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

**Background Information**

For nearly forty years, member communions in the Consultation on Church Union have engaged in serious conversation and theological dialogue exploring the way ahead to full communion and manifesting our unity in Christ. The nine member communions are the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, International Council of Community Churches, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

In 1995 the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at its General Assembly in Pittsburgh approved the document, *Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting*, as the basis for joining with the other participating churches in covenant communion ; declared its willingness to enter into a relationship of covenant communion; and identified specific issues to be addressed by COCU in moving to the formal inauguration of the Church of Christ Uniting.

In January 1999, COCU held its first plenary meeting in ten years to receive and review the official actions of the nine member communions. From discussion of these reports, the 1999 plenary meeting revised the original proposal (which had gone to the churches at the time of the 17<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting of the Consultation on Church Union in December 5-9, 1988) to move from the more formal and organizational model of church union to a recommendation of full communion ; proposing a new relationship among these churches, to be called Churches Uniting in Christ . The inauguration of the new relationship was recommended to take place during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 2002.

Following the 1999 Plenary Session, a theological round table was convened to address an issue that surfaced at the very close of the plenary around the issue of the recognition and reconciliation of our ministries in COCU. As a result of these discussion (which included representation by all COCU member churches) the Executive Committee of COCU passed the following Recommendation to the Churches for a New Relationship, Churches Uniting in Christ .

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## **Recommendation to the Churches for a New Relationship, Churches Uniting in Christ**

The Executive Committee of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), acting on the mandate given by the Consultation's Eighteenth Plenary (St. Louis, January 1999),

- 1) Commends to the member churches the following proposal for a new relationship among them, to be called Churches Uniting in Christ, and
- 2) Requests that they approve this proposal in their appropriate decision-making bodies in order that they together may inaugurate Churches Uniting in Christ through public declaration and liturgical celebration during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the year 2002.

This proposal for inauguration of Churches Uniting in Christ is excerpted from the full report of the Eighteenth Plenary (January, 1999). It is also dependent upon, and intended to be fully consistent with, COCU's other foundational documents: The *COCU Consensus* and *Churches in Covenant Communion*. These texts, in turn, are deeply indebted to work done in other parts of the ecumenical movement, especially the World Council of Churches' text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

Entering into Churches Uniting in Christ means that the participating churches will express their relationship with one another through the following visible marks:

**1. Mutual recognition of each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ.** Specifically this means that the participating churches will publicly recognize the following in one another:

- \* Faith in one God who through Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies;
- \* Commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and as the incarnate and risen Lord,
- \* Faithfulness to the Holy Scripture, which testifies to Tradition and to which Tradition testifies, as containing all things necessary for our salvation as well as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith;
- \* Commitment to faithful participation in the two sacraments ordained by Jesus Christ: Baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- \* Commitment to the evangelical and prophetic mission of God and to God's reign of justice and peace;
- \* Grateful acceptance of the ministry which the Holy Spirit has manifestly given to the churches.

2. **Mutual recognition of members in one Baptism.** This also implies a recognition of the ministry which all believers share in the common priesthood and from which God calls those members who will be ordained.

3. **Mutual recognition that each affirms the apostolic faith of Scripture and Tradition which is expressed in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and that each seeks to give witness to the apostolic faith in its life and mission.**

4. **Provision for celebration of the Eucharist together with intentional regularity.** This recognizes that the sacrament is at the heart of the church's life. Shared celebration of the Lord's Supper is a sign of unity in Christ. As Christians gather in all their diversity at one Table of the Lord, they give evidence that their communion is with Christ, and that they are in communion with one another in Christ. When Christians are unable or unwilling to partake together of the one Eucharist, they witness against themselves and give a visible demonstration of the brokenness of Christ's body and the human community.

5. **Engagement together in Christ's mission on a regular and intentional basis, especially a shared mission to combat racism.** The church engages in Christ's mission through worship, proclamation of the gospel, evangelism, education, and action that embodies God's justice, peace, and love. The commitment made by the members of Churches Uniting in Christ includes all of these, so that hearts and minds may be changed. The participating churches will also recognize, however, a particular and emphatic call to "erase racism" by challenging the system of white privilege that has so distorted life in this society and in the churches themselves. Indeed, this call is a hallmark of the new relationship.

6. **Intentional commitment to promote unity with wholeness and to oppose all marginalization and exclusion in church and society based on such things as race, age, gender, forms of disability, sexual orientation, and class.**

7. **Appropriate structures of accountability and appropriate means for consultation and decision making.** While some provision must be made for effecting the marks of the new relationship and for holding the churches mutually accountable to the commitments they have made, the structures developed for these purposes should be flexible and adapted to local circumstances. Apart from ongoing structures, the members of Churches Uniting in Christ may want to assemble from time to time in order to consider pressing issues and to bear witness together on matters of common concern.

8. **An ongoing process of theological dialogue.** Such dialogue will specifically attempt:

- \* To clarify theological issues identified by the members of Churches Uniting in Christ in order to strengthen their shared witness to the apostolic faith;

- \* To deepen the participating churches' understanding of racism in order to make an even more compelling case against it;

\* To provide a foundation for the mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministry by the members of Churches Uniting in Christ by the year 2007.

As we undertake the dialogue regarding ministerial recognition and reconciliation, the following paragraphs will serve as the framework and starting point for our discussions.

Mutual *recognition* of ordained ministry means that the participating churches will publicly recognize that one another's ordained ministries are given by God as instruments of God's grace, that these ministries seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ, and that these ministries possess not only the inward call of the Spirit but also Christ's commission through this body, the church (St. Louis Plenary Report, par. 43). Mutual *reconciliation*, following and building on such recognition, means additionally that the ordained ministries of each covenanting church become one ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to all such that the ministry of one may function, whenever invited, as a ministry to all (*Churches in Covenant Communion*, ch. 4, par. 21).

Chapter 7 of the *COCU Consensus* makes clear the intention of COCU members to adopt the three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon as part of the process of ministerial reconciliation in ways appropriate to the differing traditions of the uniting churches and to future needs of their common mission (*COCU Consensus*, ch.7, par. 44). The text notes that the churches may use different nomenclature (par. 42), but the three-fold ordering must be sufficiently evident that the ministries of the churches are fully interchangeable.

The *COCU Consensus* and *Churches in Covenant Communion* also affirm that a reconciled ministry shall include bishops who stand in continuity with the historic ministry of bishops as that ministry has been maintained through the ages (*COCU Consensus*, ch. 7, par. 48). This historic succession is understood as one sign of the apostolicity the churches confess. The churches thus seek to be reconciled in such a way that the wider Christian world can understand their relationship to be what is commonly known as full communion.

The documents insist that uniformity among several church polities is not essential to covenant communion (*Churches in Covenant Communion*, ch. 4, par. 19) and that it is the responsibility of each of the participating churches to determine how its present categories of ordained ministry relate to the historic categories [of the three-fold ministry] set forth in the *COCU Consensus*, chapter 7 (par. 28). The purpose of dialogue would be to explore how much diversity is possible consistent with the framework for reconciliation set forth in the COCU documents. This is particularly important since, in an earlier phase of the Consultation, it was anticipated that the ordering of ministry outlined in chapter 7 will first begin to appear concretely in the councils of oversight [later called covenanting councils] (Note on the Function of Chapter 7, first edition). Since covenanting councils per se are not envisioned as part of Churches Uniting in Christ, this will obviously need to be reconsidered.

The reconciled ministry we seek should also

- \* Embody a commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation;
- \* Be a demonstrable renunciation of the sins of racism and sexism;

- \* Provide adequate means for preaching and teaching the gospel, presiding over the liturgical and sacramental life of the congregations, and assembling, equipping, and watching over the community (*COCU Consensus*, ch. 7, par. 31);
- \* Recognize and value the ministry of laypersons, including the full equality of both women and men;
- \* Enable the church to carry out its mission of service and witness.

The relationship expressed through the visible marks of Churches Uniting in Christ will not be structural consolidation, but a unity in diversity among churches that, though many, will understand themselves to be one community in Christ. From the moment of inauguration, the life of these churches will be visibly intertwined as never before. From the moment of inauguration, their relationship, with God's help, will not be one of friendly coexistence and consultation, but of binding community that actively embodies the love of Christ which ties them to one another.

The commitment of the churches to these marks of relationship, and to the ongoing process of theological dialogue, will enable the churches to inaugurate Churches Uniting in Christ while yet confessing that their work is not completed. The Executive Committee is confident that, guided by the Holy Spirit, the churches will be able to respond to God's call

- \* To witness more credibly to the apostolic faith,
- \* To oppose the sin of racism, and
- \* To move toward the day when their ordained ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled in a relationship of full communion.

It is the strong hope of the Executive Committee that the reconciliation of ministry can be accomplished by the time of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2007.

*The Executive Committee of the Consultation on Church Union,  
October 19, 1999*

During 1999–2000, seven of the nine churches have already approved this recommendation which affirms their partnership in the new relationship, *Churches Uniting in Christ* (CUIC), and which commits them to participate in the 2002 inauguration. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are the remaining two communions to take action on the proposal at their General Assembly and General Synod gatherings in July 2001.

At its meeting on April 2-4, 2000, and again on November 7-9, 2000, the Board of the Council on Christian Unity discussed the proposal from the COCU Executive Committee, and voted unanimously to support the next steps in work for Churches Uniting in Christ, (CUIC), and urges approval by the 2001 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of the following resolution:

WHEREAS, our Lord Jesus Christ has prayed that his people may be one; and

WHEREAS, the Scriptures continually call for the unity of the church; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has from its beginning proclaimed that the Church of Jesus Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been a member of the Consultation on Church Union since 1963, affirming through its General Assembly in 1989 *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* and at its General Assembly in 1995, approved *Churches in Covenant Communion* as the basis for entering the relationship of covenant communion; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) recognizes that in the church there is an order of ministry, set apart or ordained, under God, to equip the whole people to fulfill their corporate ministry (*Design #91*); and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is committed to the elimination of racism wherever it appears;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that on July 13-17, 2001 the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, receives with enthusiasm the *Recommendation to the Churches for a New Relationship, Churches Uniting in Christ* ; and commits itself to the inauguration of Churches Uniting in Christ in 2002 and to the expression of this new relationship through the eight visible marks outlined in the proposal of the COCU Executive Committee; and,

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly reiterates its commitment to the process of theological dialogue on the issues leading to the mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministry (see item #8 above) by the members of Churches Uniting in Christ by the year 2007; and,

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly reiterates its commitment to engaging with the members of Churches Uniting in Christ in action and mission together, especially in the area of combating racism within the churches and in society as a hallmark of this new relationship. (See item #5 above).