

**A WELCOMING WORD FOR  
CHURCHES UNITING IN CHRIST**  
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Last summer the Disciples voted in General Assembly to partner with eight other denominations\* to become *Churches Uniting In Christ*. All nine denominations have now officially voted to be in the partnership. January 18-21, 2002 leaders from the nine denominations will convene in Memphis, Tennessee for the covenanting service. I will gladly be present for this historic gathering of worship and witness.

As I anticipate this event I've been doing some reflecting on what it does and does not mean.

It does **not** mean that any partner denomination is relinquishing its present local practice or polity. Those matters are secure. The present patterns of congregational worship and governance in the Disciples of Christ will remain as they are. Each congregation will decide in prayer about the level of its participation and involvement in *Churches Uniting In Christ*. Each of the nine denominations enters the partnership with the assurance that its present life-form will be respected. That's why the name of this new body is not *The Church Uniting In Christ ...* but the plural designation is an indication that we are still an association of nine different *Churches*.

So there is nothing to fear, but much to welcome.

It does **not** mean that there will be a top-down (hierarchical) governance of the Church .... other than that which currently exists - known in God's reconciling purpose from on high, to break down the dividing walls of hostility across the life of the human community. Disciples of Christ churches will remain lay-governed and congregational in their administration and practice.

So there is nothing to fear, but much to welcome.

But it probably **does** mean a bottom-up (grass-roots originated) effort - made known to us in the wisdom of those men and women of the frontier, who passed on to us such historic slogans as:

- We are not the **ONLY** Christians, but Christians only
- Unity IS our polar star.
- The Church is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally **ONE!**

So, within the ecumenical context and tradition of our pioneer ancestors, every congregation will continue to decide for itself which ecumenical events and activities it can best take part in and support.

And it **does** mean that the churches of these nine denominations will be trying to discern opportunities for periodic acts of mission (especially those occasions when they can actively and jointly oppose racism), and regular moments during the year when they can assemble for worship and the Lord's Supper together. And what could be more Disciples of Christ than that?

So there is nothing to fear, but much to welcome.

Now, some would have you **oppose** this new venture because they've **maximized your fears**. But I want to assure you that there is no reason to fear this new direction.

And some would have you **disregard** this new venture because they've sought to **minimize its importance**. But I want to reaffirm how significant the Disciple *Plea* for ecumenism really is.

Since September 11<sup>th</sup> we have all observed the instantaneous blooming of national unity. It has burst forth in a manner that is readily evident and obvious to our senses. We have experienced a *patriotism* that has lifted us above our lesser differences .... (and you'll recall that previous to September 11<sup>th</sup> there were many, many of those lesser differences). But none of them seem all that important anymore!

This phenomenon highlights for us something that has been sadly missing from the Church. Shouldn't the church, the representative of Christ on earth, likewise, espouse such a visible and evident unity - an *ecumenism*, which like the phenomenon of patriotism, can lift us above our lesser denominational differences? I think the answer is a resounding "Yes!" And if that be so, then about what can we be SO unified? Perhaps the answer is in the name.

There is real significance to the name - *Churches Uniting in Christ*. It is our being "in Christ" that makes the "uniting" both possible and desired. It is not in our understanding of **theology** that we nine denominations are uniting. It is not in our understanding of **polity** that we nine denominations are uniting. It is not in our understanding of **church government** that we nine denominations are uniting. And it is certainly not in our **agreements** on denominational positions (tradition, role of laity, the creeds, the way the sacraments of baptism and communion are administered, or even the way we address issues of sexual orientation) that we nine are uniting.

It is "in Christ," and in Christ alone that we find the reason, the justification, and the motivation for this new relationship. God **wants** the church reconciled (II Cor. 5:18-20; Eph 2:13-22). Christ **prayed** for the unity of the church (John 17). The Spirit's **work** in the church is dedicated to creating in us a recognition of and a desire for Christian unity (Ephesians 4:1-6).

So there is nothing to fear, but much to welcome.

It is also significant that the name includes not the word *United*, but the word *Uniting*. *United* would mean we've arrived at God's final desire for our life together. That would connote a sort of "concludedness" ... as though we had "arrived." But such is clearly not the case. The new entity uses the term *Uniting*, instead, to connote that we are on a pilgrimage together, an adventure, a journey of common discovery and discernment .... one which is certainly not concluded ... and one that clearly leaves the destination open to God's leading along the way.

So I hope you will conclude with me that there is nothing to fear, but much to welcome. I invite you to create a welcoming place in your heart and in your spirit for what God may be doing in our midst. And I covet your prayers for myself and for all the leaders and laity of the church who will contribute form, substance, and shape to the newly emerging *Churches Uniting In Christ*.

- \* The African Methodist Episcopal Church
- The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
- The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- The Episcopal Church
- The International Council of Community Churches
- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- The United Church of Christ
- The United Methodist Church