

June 10, 2007  
John 17: 1-23  
First Parish Church  
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## *United in Christ*

I've been to two high school graduations this week. One was at Medomak Valley high school in Waldoboro, where my mother was presenting a scholarship in honor of my father, who taught there for about forty years. The other was at the Civic Center in Augusta for my niece who graduated from Messalonskee High School. The ceremonies were the usual amalgamation of festivities and speeches about how "we are now going to enter the real world." I always want to respond, "but you are already in the real world. School is a part of the world and a very real part of it. Don't think this time is a prelude to your life. It is your life."

"Marker" events like graduations, and birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, funerals, and baptisms, give us an opportunity to pause – to consider the past and ponder the future. They set aside time for us to look at these lives that we are living, of the lives of those who have gone before us, and those who will come after us.

One of the marker events this month for us as a congregation is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Church of Christ, which was formed when the Congregational Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed denominations joined together in 1957.

Some of us in the United Church of Christ will have the opportunity to gather in Hartford, Conn. at the end of the month to celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a denomination. At present count there are over 7,000 people registered. They are expecting there will be 10,000 or more at some of the events. It will be quite a festival.

Barack Obama (who some of you may know is a member of a UCC church in Chicago), Bill Moyers, and Marian Wright Edelman are some of those who are expected to be with us.

Even if you can't be there in person I want to encourage you to check in on the festivities through your computer, if you have one. If not, maybe a friend would share theirs with you. The whole event will be on web stream at [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org). During the last synod in Atlanta, I decided to check in, thinking I would watch for just a few minutes and that would be it. I was surprised. I ended up watching quite a bit of the speeches and the worship, and some of the business sessions. The reception and the coverage were very good.

The most memorable speaker for me at that synod was Andrew Young. You probably know Andrew Young as an ambassador to the United Nations and as mayor of Atlanta. What you may not know is that he is also an ordained UCC pastor. At the synod in Atlanta he was honored for his ministry. He got up and with a catch in his throat began by saying, "I owe my life to this church." He spoke about how his parents had received an education through schools that were started and sponsored by congregational churches for African Americans.

He also reminded us that when he went to work with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s, he was sent by the Board for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ to be our representative in the civil

rights work of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In addition, he told about how, when Jimmy Carter was a candidate for the presidency of the United States, Jimmy asked Andrew for information about matters concerning Africa. Andrew gathered together pronouncements from General Synod meetings of the UCC and sent them to him. Andrew Young may feel he owes his life to the UCC, but we also owe our life to him and many others who have served the church faithfully in congregations and in the wider world.

Today I want to mention four characteristics of our denomination. In doing so, I want to mention four people in our own congregation who have been involved in UCC ministries that reflect those characteristics. I chose these four people because they are celebrating 50 or more years of ordained (or professional) ministry in the life of the United Church of Christ.

Before continuing I want to note that there are other clergy in our midst who have been serving the wider church for more than 50 years through other denominations. As you can see in the bulletin this includes Dick Tappan, Robert Perless, Ralph Hagopain, Ed Couch, and Bill Goeghegan (62 years!). We are very thankful for their ministries, as well.

Until preparing for this service I didn't realize how many years of service to professional ministry resided in our midst. Out of curiosity, I added up all the years of service from all the clergy (26) in our congregation and came up with 941 years. WOW!

I first started on this journey of identifying clergy in our midst and recognizing years of service, when Ron Kurtz and I were talking about the UCC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. He shared with me that he could always remember what anniversary the UCC was celebrating because he was ordained in the same year that the

denomination was formed. So that led me on an exploration to find out about the ordination anniversaries of the other UCC clergy in our congregation, and then to all the clergy in our midst. For UCC clergy, I discovered that Richard Gelwick is also celebrating his 50<sup>th</sup> ordination anniversary this year. And that Ken Wentzel and Bill Inderstrod are celebrating 58 and 54 years respectively. Each of these people embodies all the characteristics I will mention, but I'll connect each person with one in particular.

Four characteristics of the UCC:

- United and uniting
- Social action
- Educational ministry
- Covenantal

### **United and Uniting**

The UCC was formed during the ecumenical fervor of the 1950s, when many other denominations were joining or rejoining with others who had similar polities and practices. The UCC saw itself as a "united and uniting" church. It didn't want the merger of the Congregational Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed churches to be the end product. The UCC understood its formation to be in response to Jesus' prayer in today's scripture, "That they may all be One." Although there have not been any more official mergers the UCC continues to be in conversation with other denominations and to be actively engaged in interfaith dialogue. Bill Inderstrod embodies this characteristic in his very person. Bill, by heritage is a Quaker, and his "gifts of ministry" were first recognized by the Quakers. (As a side note, Bill and Jane -who is a Christian Educator- both were in seminary with Andrew Young.) Very early in his ministry Bill united with the UCC and has served our denomination for many years. Through his ongoing involvement with Hartford Seminary Bill keeps his eye and ear on interfaith dialogue.

## **Social Action**

The UCC has always been concerned not only with ministries within the church but also ministries in the world. As Rueben Shears, a former CC church leader, used to say, “There is ‘church work’ – the work which makes the church function as an organization – and there is the ‘work of the church’ in the world.” That is why we as a congregation belong to Bread for the World and seek to care for our neighbors through systemic changes as well as bringing food on Sundays to be given to Mid Coast Hunger. Ken Wentzel, in his ministry, worked in local churches, but he also helped to start two hospice ministries. Through this ministry of compassion so many people’s lives have been touched. It is my understanding that Ken continues to raise up the concerns of the world through his involvement with the Around the Table group here at First Parish.

## **Educational Ministry**

It’s hard to count how many educational institutions were started first in New England and then around the country by Congregationalists. The UCC and its forebears have always had a commitment to education within the church and in the community. As Pastor John Robinson told those early pilgrims who were heading out for the new world, “There is more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word.” Richard Gelwick has spent most of his ministry in educational settings as a campus minister, as a professor, and as an author. He continues to teach at Bangor Theological Seminary here in Maine.

## **Covenantal**

Our denominational polity – our way of governing ourselves – is not hierarchical. We don’t have a pope. We don’t have bishops. Our conviction is that Christ is the head of the church, and that each local church must, prayerfully, govern itself. At the same time, we believe we are in covenant with one another in our associations – in our case, the Cumberland Association – in our conferences

– in our case, the Maine Conference – and in our denomination – through General Synod. Through these covenantal relationships we support and challenge one another to grow in faith. I first met Ron Kurtz over twenty years ago when he was working for the New York Conference. Ron has spent much of his ministry working at the denominational level helping us to live faithfully in our covenants with one another. Ron has continued in this commitment by being a delegate from our congregation to the Maine Conference.

We are united and uniting, engaged in social action, committed to educational ministry, and covenantal in our life together. These comments just scratch the surface of our heritage in the UCC and of the stories of ministry of some of our members.

So what of the future? What do we hope? The leadership of the church here at First Parish has been spending considerable time recently pondering the future of our congregation. Similar conversations have been happening at the conference and national levels.

As we engage in such ponderings and conversations, I think we would be wise to note Jesus’ perspective in today’s scripture reading. His hope for unity offers commentary on all our activities. But we would also be wise to note that the words in John 17 are not an exhortation to Jesus’ followers, rather they are a prayer to God. Ultimately, Jesus entrusts his followers to God in prayer.

At both the congregational and denominational level, it is important for us to study societal trends, to survey our constituencies, to dialogue with other service and church organizations. But undergirding all this activity, may we hold our congregation and our denomination in prayer and hope before God.