

The United Church of Christ

OUR FAITH IS 2,000 YEARS OLD.

OUR THINKING IS NOT.

prepare

What's behind all this?

Understanding the denomination of which you are a part--its theological commitments, its orientation for reading scripture and understanding God in the world, its history, its structures, its values, its work with the wider world--deeply matters. If someone is going to invest their time and talent, gifts and service, prayers and presence, it is important that they understand the purpose and vision of that community.

In the United Church of Christ, we explain who we are by way of speaking of our core values. There are three of them at the heart of the UCC: continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives.

Though they sound simple, they are deeply theological claims and reflective of our rich history. Together they create a unique clarity about what it is to be a part of the United Church of Christ. This clarity about who we are and how we are as part of the body of Christ allows us to form a solid foundation for the building up of the Church. The UCC affirms the following as its core values:

Continuing Testament

Our faith is 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not.

We believe in God's continuing testament. This is why we are committed to hearing God's ancient story anew and afresh in our lives and in the world today. We try to remain attentive to God's creative movement in the world. Religion and science are not mutually exclusive, and your head and heart are both welcomed into our places of worship. We prepare our members and leaders to be engaged in ministry in the present and future Church, and we embrace all kinds of communities and new modes of thinking. Why? Because God is still speaking,

Extravagant Welcome

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

We believe in extravagant welcome. This is why we insist that God's communion table is open, not closed, and God's gifts and claims in baptism

As you prepare for this session

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

Where is this going?

By looking at the denomination's core values, participants will be introduced or have a chance to deepen their understanding of what it is to be a part of the UCC.

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are irrevocable. We advocate justice for all. Our congregations extend hospitality as a sign of God's inclusive love. Our perspective is global, not provincial. We work alongside people of other faiths. Why? Because God is still speaking,

Changing Lives

Never place a period where God has placed a comma.

We believe the Church's mission is to change lives—individually, systemically, and globally. We work to make transformation possible, but trust in God's grace. This is why we strive to be churches with vitality in worship, learning, and advocacy. We are committed to working for justice, and we believe that lives are changed through experiences and friendships. Why? Because God is still speaking,

With these core values at its foundation, the UCC has come to articulate its purpose, mission, and vision:

- The UCC purpose statement comes from the Gospel of Matthew: To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.
- Mission statement: United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.
- And the vision: United in Christ's love, a just world for all.

Participants' Perspectives

- If participants have been a part of the UCC for a bit, they have likely heard the taglines "Our faith is 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not," "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," and "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." These have been popular and used for quite some time, but participants may not have connected them to the core values of the UCC or realized that these are more than marketing statements. Help them to see the theological significance as well as the impact they make in forming the identity of the United Church of Christ.
- If participants are new to the UCC or if the taglines have not been used in their congregations, the more concise version of the core commitments may be the more helpful way to remember what is at the core of UCC identity. Whether you use the shorter form or the longer taglines to help teach about the core values should be determined by the needs of your group.

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encounter

Video

1. Warm Up

The video below is a short introduction to both the core values of the UCC and its mission as a Church. The core values are not explicitly labeled here, but they are each spoken aloud.

Begin by asking participants what they think the core values of the UCC are. List them out as a group before watching the video then invite participants to listen closely and add to or modify their list.

2. Watch

“A Place Like This” available on the UCC’s YouTube channel.

3. Unpack

- What are the three core values of the UCC?
- How would you explain each of the core values to someone who had no idea what the UCC is? How could you put the explanations of each into your own words?
- Practically speaking, how do you see these core values reflected in the UCC? In your local church?
- Given these core values, what’s the mission and vision of the UCC now and moving into the future?

Materials

-Ability to show video

engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session’s themes.

Activity One: Continuing Testament

Though scriptures and the ancient stories of our faith do not change, our understandings and interpretations of scripture often do as experience and reason change the lens through which we see it. Exposure to new traditions and worldviews, scientific discoveries and new research, as well as the stories of others continue to invite us to look at scripture with a discerning eye and an open mind. Our faith is 2000 years old, but our thinking and understanding, well, that’s constantly growing and evolving.

As a leader, be ready to speak about a scripture that you’ve interpreted quite differently throughout your life. Tell a story of how you used to read and

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understand it, what experience shifted your understanding, perhaps how you wrestled with it in the midst of coming to a new understanding, and how you interpret it now.

Ask participants about their own stories of coming to different understandings of scripture. How have they embraced or been resistant to new ways of interpreting their faith? Why is having a value for continuing testament so integral to the UCC?

Activity Two: Extravagant Welcome

When we say, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” we mean it. The UCC demonstrates this through public professions of our identity as a Church that is extravagantly welcoming of all people.

In 2004 and then again in 2006, the UCC took its message of being a Church of extravagant welcome (very) public with two 30-second commercials. They have come to be known as the “bouncer ad” and the “ejector ad.” Both commercials were set to be aired on major networks like NBC, CBS, and ABC, but all three networks and several others deemed them to be too edgy or to advocate one side of a controversial issue affecting the public. The UCC ads eventually reached viewers via the internet, social media, and a few television stations who were willing to air them.

The result was increased web traffic, increased searches for local UCC churches, and anecdotal accounts of many folks who had either never been to church or who identified as nones (no religious affiliation) or dones (done with religious affiliation) starting to check out just exactly what these UCC churches were all about.

The goal of these ads was to speak to people who had been alienated from churches and those seeking a spiritual home, to let the world know that the UCC may be unlike any denomination they have known, and to invite people to come. The desire was to make the UCC instantly recognizable as a place of extravagant welcome.

Watch the “Bouncer” commercial and the “Ejector” commercial with participants. They are both available on the United Church of Christ’s YouTube channel.

Afterwards ask participants about their reaction to the commercials. What do the commercials communicate? How was and/or is that message relevant today? How do these commercials reflect or challenge our polity?

Knowing that the UCC continues to have extravagant welcome as a core value, suggest to participants it’s time to update the commercials. Choose one of the following:

- Divide participants into groups to create a pitch for a new commercial that could be used to convey our extravagant welcome. Give them art supplies and some general directions on how to sketch out a storyboard. After some time to work, have the groups present their ideas.

Materials:

-Ability to show video

Option 1: Posterboard or large paper, markers, crayons

Option 2: Camera or other device to record movies

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- Divide participants into groups to go create a new commercial that speaks to the extravagant welcome of the UCC. Use phones or other cameras to record the commercial. When participants regather, play the commercials and celebrate their work. Consider how you might actually use these videos to spread the word about the UCC and your congregation.

Activity Three: Changing Lives

Never place a period where God has placed a comma. In the UCC, we boldly say that God's work is not a relic of the past. God's transformative work continues today, inspiring minds, touching our hearts, and moving our spirits to be people who live after the example of Jesus, loving God and loving neighbor in all that we do. Called to live after the example of Jesus--practicing justice, love, peace, compassion, and service--has the power to transform not only our own lives, but the lives of others as well.

Watch the "Language of God" video with participants. It is available on the United Church of Christ's YouTube channel. It may be important to note that it was originally designed for social media where it gained popularity, particularly because it deliberately depicted and celebrated LGBTQ couples. Though today the depiction of the LGBTQ couples is rightly critiqued as not giving equal treatment as compared to the depictions of heterosexual couples, it was a significant stride forward when it was produced.

Afterwards, ask participants about their reaction to the video. What did they notice? What did the video make them feel? How do the depictions of justice, compassion, love, community, equality, and praise reflect the core value of changing lives?

Next, listen firsthand to people's life-changing experiences within the UCC. Their stories are recorded and available on the UCC's YouTube Channel under the playlist, "God is still speaking: Testimonies." Choose a video or two that will speak to the hearts of participants in your context.

Debrief about the video and what participants noticed, then invite them to divide into pairs or trios and interview one another. Have the interviewer ask about if and how the other person relates to the idea that people should never place a period where God has placed a comma. Has that been wise advice for their own lives? When? How?

Alternatively, approach this exercise in a more journalistic fashion. Have the interviewer ask the other person what evidence of transformation (be that transformation individually, systemically, or globally) is happening in the UCC and in wider communities because of the people and spirit of the UCC.

Materials:

-Ability to show video

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Activity Four: Put it All Together and File It

Imagine you have a whole drawer full of files on different religions and denominations so that at any moment you could pull a folder out of the cabinet and jog your memory about it.

Hand out real file folders. Have participants make a UCC folder by writing, drawing, collaging, or attaching things to the inside.

If they need some help to get started, ask these questions:

How would you define the UCC to a friend from a different tradition? What symbols are used? What stories do you associate with the UCC? What is central to the UCC? What bits of its history have shaped the denomination? How do they continue to influence it?

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What images or words are you putting in the folder? How are you deciding what to put in?
- Are the images or words you are choosing unique to the UCC, or do they have something in common with other traditions?
- Do all the folders look alike? Why do you suppose they differ?

wrap-up

Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you've discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do in response?

Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

Sending

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the UCC and its discernment about who it is and what it is called to do in the world. Offer blessing for participants and communities of faith as they seek to live into being followers of Jesus alongside others in the United Church of Christ.

Materials:

- File folders
- Crayons
- Magazines with images for collaging
- Scissors
- Glue or tape