

# The Question of Authority

## EXPLORING WHERE AUTHORITY RESIDES IN THE UCC

### prepare

#### What's behind all this?

Our covenantal polity often raises questions about authority within the UCC and, in particular, what settings or what bodies of the Church have the authority to decide what. A question that naturally follows: in what ways are those decisions binding for other settings of the church? These questions result from our covenantal polity.

When the UCC began in 1957, there was much discussion about what kind of governance would be best to organize this new Church. It was decided that our governance structure would be *covenantal*. This was a compromise between the Congregational and Christian tradition, which valued congregational autonomy, and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, where synods and a General Synod made decisions on behalf of the whole denomination. To balance these two different governance structures, the first UCC constitution affirmed autonomy for local churches while also calling upon all the settings of the Church--the local church, the associations, the conferences, and the General Synod--to listen to one another and respect each other's actions and to give them thoughtful and prayerful response.

In the revision to the Constitution and Bylaws in 2000, our covenantal polity was explained, "Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways" (Constitution, Article III).

Though balance of autonomy and covenant is always a work in progress, the Constitution and Bylaws as well as other organizational structures of the UCC grant authority to different settings of the Church to make certain decisions and to handle certain kinds of oversight of ministry. They exercise this authority in collaboration with and in relationship to other settings of the Church.

#### 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?

Participants will explore how our polity balances how, where, and what decisions are made across multiple settings of the Church.

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### Participants' Perspectives

- The question of authority in the UCC is sometimes a complex one. Congregational autonomy and the autonomy of other settings of the Church must be understood not as complete freedom from authority. In accordance with our covenantal polity, different kinds of authority and decision making are assigned to different settings of the Church, and the whole of the Church is invited to listen, collaborate, and respond.
- Many folks don't know much about the UCC's structure beyond the local church. This unit will help them understand how authority and decision making is spread through different settings of the Church.

## encounter

### Video

#### 1. Warm Up

Participants may realize that in our polity, local churches have autonomy. What they may not know is that while churches are autonomous, they are also called to be covenantal, meaning that they are to be in mutual relationship with all settings of the Church. It may be helpful to review or teach what covenantal polity is and why the UCC decided on this form of governance.

In our polity, different settings of the Church are entrusted with different authority and different decisions to make. Ask participants to define *authority*. Invite them to reflect on or hypothesize what different kinds of authority reside in different parts of the UCC. If they get stuck, ask first about what kinds of decisions get made throughout the Church and then who they suppose has the authority to make those decisions.

#### 2. Watch

"The Question of Authority: Exploring Where Authority Resides in the UCC"

#### 3. Unpack

- What are the various settings of the UCC?
- How are they related and connected to one another?
- How is the practice of authority theologically grounded in the UCC?
- How is authority balanced across settings of the Church?
- What settings have what authority?

### Materials:

- Ability to show video

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### engage

Use the activity below to explore the session's themes.

### Activity One: Match It Up

This activity is similar in premise to the game Memory. Before the lesson, create a set of playing cards (you may want to create additional sets depending on the number of participants you have and allow them to play in small groups or pairs). Make a card for each of the words or phrases from list A and B.

Before playing, have participants review the cards (either in large group or in small groups, each with a set of cards) and discuss what settings have what authority. Now, let the game commence.

1. Mix up the cards.
2. Lay them in four rows, face down.
3. Invite one player to begin by turning over any two cards.
4. If the two cards match, keep them.
5. If they don't match, turn them back over.
6. It is now the next person's turn flip over any two cards, etc.

The key is to remember what was on each card and where it was. Be sure to watch and remember the cards during the other player's turn. The game is over when all the cards have been matched.

Let these lists serve as a beginning point, editing these lists as needed for your group.

### *Materials:*

-Make a set of cards (or multiple sets) to play a game like Memory



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<b>Jesus</b>	Authority as the head of the Church
<b>Local Congregation</b>	Authority to determine its own worship style, organization, pastoral leadership, constitution and bylaws
<b>Association</b>	Authority to create Committees on Ministry and support local churches as it determines best for its context
<b>Conference</b>	Authority to select representatives to General Synod, to collect the monies for Our Church's Wider Mission, and to support local churches as it determines best for its context
<b>General Synod</b>	Authority to approve pronouncements, resolutions, and statements of witness; to set a budget; and to elect officers and the General Minister and President
<b>Committee on Ministry</b>	Authority to recognize new churches, provide ministerial oversight of clergy, to determine ministerial standing, and to authorize new persons to serve in ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ
<b>Ecclesiastical Council</b>	Authority to affirm the work of Committee on Ministry as a final act of ministerial authorization for new clergy
<b>Holy Spirit</b>	Authority to inspire people to live into the calling to BE the Church

## Activity Two: Types of Authority

"Authority" can be a rather elusive term to define and describe, but sociologist Max Weber proposed a theory of authority that categorized it into three types: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority.

Traditional authority is legitimated by the sanctity of tradition. It is passed down, often through heredity. It does not change overtime, does not facilitate social change, and perpetuates the status quo.

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By contrast, charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others. This kind of authority is based upon the perceived extraordinary characteristics of an individual. Examples of this kind of authority include a leader of a new social movement, or one instilled with divine powers, such as a religious prophet.

Finally, legal-rational authority is supported by a formalistic belief in the content of the law (legal) or natural law (rationality). Obedience is not given to a specific individual leader but rather a set of uniform principles. This form of authority is found in the governments, corporations, and various voluntary associations.

At the risk of oversimplifying his theory, for Weber, these three kinds of authority do not exist just for the sake of labeling and classifying. Rather, they are embedded in a larger network of concepts and in an understanding of how they function in different times, places, and circumstances.

Think for a moment about how you see authority exemplified in your local church. Which of the three types are most prominent? What is the benefit of that type of authority? What limitations does it have for the church? In what ways are the other kinds of authority present in your local congregation? How does that impact the church?

Ask similar questions with regards to the wider Church. How are the different kinds of authority represented in the UCC? Which of the three types of authority are most prominent within the UCC? Historically, how did that type of authority come to prominence? What is beneficial or limiting about that kind of authority? In what ways are the other kinds of authority present and experienced in the life of the UCC?

Compare and contrast the kinds of authority most prominent in your congregation or the wider UCC with the Jesus's kind of authority. What stories in scripture reveal Jesus's authority? What do the similarities or differences between these various practices of authority reveal?

### Activity Three: By What Authority?

Connect these conversations about authority with scripture. Have participants turn to Mark 1:21-28 and read it aloud.

Draw their attention to verse 22, "The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts." Why did people sense authority in Jesus's presence? How did they spot his authority? What was so captivating about his authority?

Walk through the text with participants, helping them to nuance their understanding of authority. The way authority is defined, practiced, and understood in the corporate world may be a bit different than how it is understood by followers of Jesus.

#### *Materials:*

-Bibles

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Points you may want to consider with your group:

- It is a strange remark to say that Jesus had authority unlike the legal experts. For authority is precisely what the scribes had. They could claim authority of the written words passed down through many generations. They had the authority of tradition. They had the authority of clerical position and power. But somehow Jesus taught with authority that surpassed all of these claims. What sort of authority was Jesus teaching with?
- Later on in the story, the crowd asks, “What is this? A new teaching with authority?” Looking throughout the gospel of Mark, what is the new teaching that Jesus is conveying? How is Jesus’s teaching radically different from that of tradition?
- Jesus uses his authority to value persons over rules or traditions. How do you see that use of authority extended throughout the gospels?

As followers in the tradition of Jesus, what does Jesus’s authority have to teach us today? How does this relate to authority in your church? In the wider UCC? In the relationship between the church and the public sphere?

## 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 those who make decisions in and on behalf of the UCC. Offer blessing upon participants as they seek to be followers of Jesus in faith-filled ways.