

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

prepare

What's behind all this?

We have a common story we tend to tell about the beginning of the United Church of Christ. The simple version is this: The United Church of Christ came into being in 1957 with the union of two Protestant denominations: the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. Further back in history, each of these denominations was, in turn, the result of a union of two earlier traditions.

However, a more full story of the United Church of Christ isn't quite as simple as that story sounds. In this lesson, participants will begin learning about the historical roots of four distinctive traditions that would eventually come together by looking at the four traditions: the Congregational Churches, the Christian Churches, the Reformed Church in the United States, and Evangelical Synod of North America.

In the next lesson, participants will expand upon the four traditions story and learn some of the often untold or hidden histories of the United Church of Christ. Together, these lessons paint a more accurate account of the historical beginnings of the denomination.

Participants' Perspectives

- Folks who love history will find the story of how the UCC came to be interesting in itself. For others who find learning history for history's sake dull, it will be helpful to make the connections between historical roots and how they continue to shape the UCC today. Hint: the four traditions gave some amazing and ongoing gifts to the contemporary Church.
- *Unity* is a catchy term that is often misunderstood. Unity is not the same as uniformity. Exploring the impulse of the UCC to be a “united and uniting” church as an ongoing movement may help participants discover and claim part of the central identity of the UCC.

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 each of the four traditions that joined together to form the UCC.

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

encounter

Video

1. Warm Up
Gather in a circle. Distribute 10-15 blank notecards to each participant. Talk briefly about the traditions that came together in 1957. Ask participants to write on each card one historical event, idea, or person they suspect played a role in one of the four traditions, but instruct them not to indicate which tradition. Spread the cards out where participants can see them then work together to hypothesize which cards go with which tradition. It may be the case that participants don't yet know much of the history. Most people will have blank cards remaining. As participants watch the video, encourage them to use any remaining blank cards to add events, ideas, or historical figures to the piles and rearrange the cards as needed.
2. Watch
"The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ: Our Roots in Four Traditions"
3. Unpack
 - What's one piece of this history that was new to you?
 - Revisit the piles of notecards. What are some of the key distinguishing characteristics of each of the traditions?
 - What are some of the commonalities of these four traditions? How did those help or hinder merger?

Materials:

- Ability to show video
- Notecards
- Pens or pencils

engage

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

Activity One: Hunting for History

If your church traces its history back to one of the original four traditions (the Evangelical and Reformed Church, or the Congregational Christian Churches), send participants on a scavenger hunt for evidence of the history.

If they need some help to get started, ask the following:

What pictures are around the building? What hymnals do you use? What covenants do you make when new members join? Is there a recorded history of the congregation? What do your bylaws state? Is there anything interesting in your archives?

Materials:

- Hymnals
- Bylaws
- Covenants
- Histories
- Access to the building
- Access to archives

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are you finding?
- What history is evidenced in the congregation's name, in the hymnals you use, or the covenants made when new members join?
- If there is a recorded history of the congregation, what influence do you see there?
- Are there stories of your own church's history that reflect people, events, or ideas of the predecessor denominations of the UCC?
- How was your congregation influenced by the merger and the formation of the UCC?
- What compelled your congregation to become a part of the UCC?
- How does a history in a predecessor denomination continue to influence your congregation's identity, values, and/or mission and vision?

Activity Two: Super Sleuth

UCC history continues to unfold. Many churches have come to the UCC from other denominations. If your church does not trace its history back to one of its predecessor denominations, send participants on a scavenger hunt for evidence of its history and perhaps evidence of its UCC history in the making. Ask them to consider how the different aspects of their history complement the history, values, or commitments of the UCC, currently and historically.

This exercise is not limited to just investigating the space. Encourage people as they move about to interview people they encounter, particularly those who carry stories of the church's traditions and history.

If they need some help to get started, ask some of the following:

What pictures are around the building? What hymnals or songbooks do you use (or not use)? What covenants do you make when new members join? Is there a recorded history of the congregation? What stories are told by the church and its people? What do your bylaws reveal? Is there anything interesting in your archives?

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are you finding?
- What aspects of your history that complement the history, values, and commitments of the UCC are evidenced in the congregation's name, in the hymnals you use, or the covenants made when new members join?
- If there is a recorded history of the congregation, what influences do you see there?
- How does a history in both a different denomination and now the UCC continue to influence your congregation's identity, values, and/or mission and vision?
- What compelled your congregation to become a part of the UCC?

Materials:

- Hymnals or songbooks
- Bylaws
- Covenants
- Histories
- Access to the building
- Access to archives

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

Activity Three: Building up the Church House

From the notecards you created at the beginning of the gathering, select which of the elements of history, people, ideas, and values are the most essential gifts and influences to the UCC today. Have participants make a case for why they are selecting the ones they are. Using the cards they've selected, build a house of cards as sturdy and tall as possible.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- Which cards did you select for the foundation? Why?
- "House of cards" can be used as an expression to mean a structure or argument that has a shaky foundation, but it also refers to something that will collapse if a necessary (but possibly overlooked or underappreciated) element is removed. What would happen if any of the cards you selected were missing or removed?
- Are there overlooked or underappreciated elements of UCC history? What are they?
- What's at stake when these elements aren't told or appreciated?

Activity Four: Logos

The UCC reflects a commitment to being a "united and uniting" denomination. Whether your congregation was of a predecessor denomination to the UCC, another denomination, or a new church start that was UCC from its beginning, you are part of that movement.

Look at John 17 (esp. v. 21) and Acts 1:1-11 (esp. v. 8). Help put the scripture in context then ask participants to take turns reading both aloud. Form pairs or trios to discuss the common themes in these scriptures and how these scriptures ground a commitment to being a united and uniting church. How is this lived out in your congregation?

Give groups a picture of the UCC logo. With these two scripture readings in mind, what might the symbols of the UCC logo mean? How does the logo also reflect a commitment to being a united and uniting church?

When participants finish exploring the meaning of the UCC logo, ask them to put the copies of the logo out of their sight. Invite them to imagine that they have been tasked with creating a new symbol or logo for the denomination. The Church still wants the new symbol or logo to express its ongoing commitment to being a united and uniting church, and is hoping that whatever design emerges will reflect both its historical roots and its future.

Materials:

-Notecards from the beginning of the session

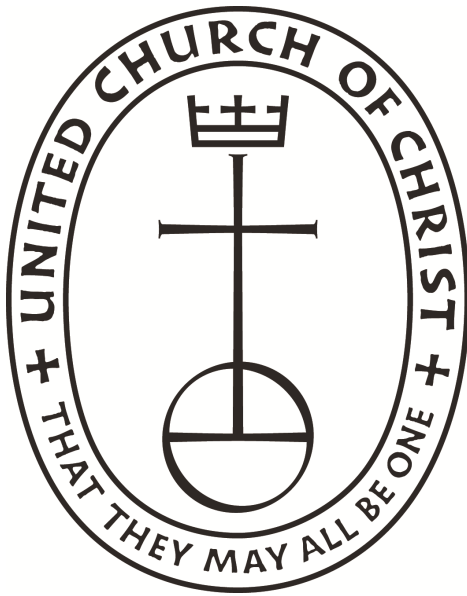
Materials:

-Bibles
-Copies of the UCC logo
-Crayons or markers
-Paper
-A copy of the logo can be found at ucc.org

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

Give participants time to work. Afterward, ask them to share their work with one another. Spend some time asking about the design and its meaning. You may want to ask if there were any symbols did they decide not to use.



Notes about the UCC logo:

The symbol of the United Church of Christ includes a crown, cross and orb enclosed within a double oval bearing the name of the church and the prayer of Jesus, “That they may all be one” (John 17:21). It is based on an ancient Christian symbol called the “Cross of Victory” or the “Cross Triumphant.” The crown symbolizes the sovereignty of Christ. The orb, divided into three parts, symbolizes Jesus’s command to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The scripture reflects the historic commitment to the unity among the separated churches of Jesus.

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?

The Beginnings of the United Church of Christ

OUR ROOTS IN FOUR TRADITIONS

Closing

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

Sending

Gather around wherever the notecards have landed. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the rich history of the UCC that has shaped the church today and a blessing for each of the participants as they seek to be the church in the world.