

# **The Basis of Union for The Keystone Conference of the United Church of Christ**

January 19, 2024

## **Introduction**

The United Church of Christ is a bold experiment in Christian unity. The risk inherent in the merger that created the new denomination was balanced by the certainty of the Holy Spirit's movement through it. To maintain that balance, the leaders from the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian churches drafted a *Basis of Union* that clarified shared values and convictions and served as the theological framework the two denominations used to become one.

While the finished creation of the UCC did not happen for another 10 years, the Basis of Union guided and grounded the process. This was important for people inside and outside the merger process who wondered how the two could dissolve into unity and how the new body would stand solidly in theology and practice.

By using the UCC's Basis of Union as a template, the four Pennsylvania Conferences offer our own Basis of Union document to do the same-- stand solid in theology and practice.

## **Preamble**

We the Penn West, Pennsylvania Southeast, Penn Northeast, and Penn Central Conferences of the United Church of Christ,

Moved by the conviction that *Together We are Stronger*; do

**Affirm** devotion to our Creator God, to Jesus Christ our savior, teacher, and friend, and to the Holy Spirit who binds us together in one body and lights the way into the future;

**Recognize** that division and change surround and strain the Christian church, challenging faithful people of good will to create novel communities of faith, action, and love for a new age;

**Believe** a Conference must model unity and healing in response to theological and ideological shifts in the Body of Christ as a whole and in the United Church of Christ in particular; as well as to serve, nurture, and empower authorized ministers and all settings of the church within its boundaries; and

**Desire** to live into Jesus' hope for his followers "that they all may be one" [John 17], reflecting the desire for unity in our predecessor denominations and in the entire United Church of Christ.

Thus, we do now declare ourselves to be one body, affirming our commitment to unity centered in Christ Jesus, and promising to work diligently to maintain a large tent<sup>i</sup> wherein our members may experience authentic welcome, mercy, empowerment, and hope. We set forth these articles of agreement as the basis of our renewed life, fellowship, witness, and gospel proclamation:

## **I. Name**

The name of the Conference formed from the four Pennsylvania Conferences shall be The Keystone Conference of the United Church of Christ.

The name expresses a fact: Pennsylvania came to be called the “Keystone state” for its critical role in the formation of the infant United States. The churches of the Pennsylvania region likewise played a keystone role in the formation of the United Church of Christ, bringing in the largest number of churches with a particular devotion to Reformed theology and practice.

## **II. Faith**

Our comfort in life and death is our relationship with God through Christ, which sets us free for a new life of inclusion in God’s kingdom. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth we know liberation from sin and find healing in body, mind, and spirit. The good news we share speaks of both the closeness and transcendence of our God, known through Jesus, who draws us into a holy embrace for the wellness of our souls. The faith that unites us also transforms us so we may witness with our words and demonstrate with our actions the call to proclaim liberation to the oppressed, feed the hungry, tend the sick, visit those in prison, and diligently practice forgiveness and reconciliation. The Christian Way is built on Jesus Christ who is the head of the church and our teacher of how to live lives of compassion, justice, mercy, and love.

## **III. Church**

Our Conference identity is rooted in the history and experience of the United Church of Christ, a church of “people who share one diverse household of faith that makes [us]... a humble microcosm of the church throughout the world.”<sup>ii</sup> (BOW, p.6) The UCC was born from a desire to demonstrate unity and a faith that working together would advance justice and peace. In similar fashion, The Keystone Conference aspires to act in parallel with the original UCC Basis of Union (1947) by proclaiming that the church is established by the Holy Spirit for calling persons to repentance and faith, celebrating the sacraments of table and font, living in covenant reciprocity, joining with the Holy Spirit in worship, witnessing to the saving grace of God in Christ, upbuilding disciples, and for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ through our words and deeds. In solidarity with Jesus Christ and one another we “labor for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace,”<sup>iii</sup> and the realization of human unity as we move toward God’s future with joy and hope.

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<sup>i</sup> A “Big Tent” or “Large Tent” is a phrase used in religious and civic life to describe the broad spectrum of beliefs and practices of an organization’s members. The contrast is a group with a determined ideology to which members are expected to adhere.

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We affirm the phrase “Large Tent” when describing the Keystone Conference. This is who we are as part of the United Church of Christ, founded during the ecumenical movement to model the dream born at Pentecost of people of many backgrounds and perspectives living together as one in Christ. The Keystone Conference promotes Unity in Christ and welcomes all who seek to be disciples of Jesus; who create and live in radically inclusive, countercultural, Christian communities. To that end, we commit to love one another, even and especially in the places where we have the sharpest disagreements. We affirm the dignity of every person and make space for each one to encounter the restorative, redemptive life in the resurrected Christ.

<sup>ii</sup> *United Church of Christ Book of Worship*, p.6

<sup>iii</sup> *UCC Basis of Union* (1947)