

Ecumenical chums: UCC and Disciples

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

It was a shoo-in vote by the coziest of ecumenical partners holding their biennial conventions together for the second time. Delegates from the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), seated in side-by-side sections in a cavernous convention hall, took turns discussing, then approving handily, their denominations' participation in the successor to the Consultation on Church Union. With all nine denominations now in, the Churches Uniting in Christ will be launched formally in January.

In COCU's long, limping quest to bring mainline denominations closer—if not into a giant merger—Episcopalians and Presbyterians eventually balked over the definitions and roles of ordained ministers in COCU, necessitating a looser framework for CUIC. The shoe has always fit, however, for the UCC and the Disciples. “Our relationship anticipates” what Churches Uniting in Christ can become, said CUIC General Secretary Michael Kinnamon, a Disciples minister who teaches at UCC-related Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis.

The two denominations have been chummy church bodies for decades despite some differences in worship traditions, perspectives on gays and lesbians, and geographical spread. After a six-year study, they declared themselves to be “in full communion” in 1985. Their first joint convention—but with business sessions in separate halls—was in 1993. Three years later, the UCC and the Disciples formed a joint board for overseas ministries.

Meeting together again July 13-17 in Kansas City, Missouri, voting representatives and visitors totaling 3,394 for the UCC and 8,108 for the Disciples shared the floor for alternating business sessions, waiting patiently while each group dealt with its own resolutions. “I was concerned initially the groups would be disruptive to each other, but in fact everyone seemed genuinely fascinated,” said Richard Hamm, the Disciples' general minister and president. “I think it went great.”

The blending of business was such that at one point Disciples convention moderator Paul D. Rivera forgot who his chief executive was. After UCC and Disciples delegates

in turn endorsed CUIC participation, Rivera said, “I now call on my general minister John Thomas to lead us in prayer.”

“That’s fine with me,” said Hamm, inviting his counterpart from the Cleveland-based UCC to the microphone. “Does that mean I have to move to Indianapolis?” quipped Thomas, referring to the Disciples headquarters city.

Both church bodies have conservative minorities (stronger in the Disciples) whose dissenting voice was heard—not only on the direction of ecumenism but also on touchy social and sexual questions. “Most of us are grateful,” said Hamm of the CUIC decision. “Yet we acknowledge and pray that the proposal not be an instrument of disunity, but one of unity.”

On homosexuality, the Disciples are taking a go-slow approach. As one Disciples registrant put it, “I have to explain myself to friends back home who think the UCC church is too liberal by ordaining gay people.” The 1.4-million-member United Church of Christ has acknowledged local autonomy on ordination of gay and lesbian clergy for nearly 30 years. But the 831,000-member Disciples of Christ denomination has been divided on gay issues—prompting Hamm and other leaders in 1998 to name a 14-member “discernment committee” to craft a model process that church groups may use to explore the subject.

The seven-stage discernment process was unveiled at Kansas City in a scripted presentation that included music and dramatic touches. A lesbian couple exulted over finding acceptance in a Missouri congregation and a gay Disciples minister from Boston said he is tired “of having my faith questioned.” A woman convinced that homosexuality is a sin condemned by the Bible said she has “friends who left for other churches that do not water down their teachings.” A Texas pastor said these conversations were embarrassing and distressing. A Puerto Rico-born woman wearing a gold face mask said she feared telling her congregation “about me and a woman in my life for 19 years.” And so on.

Two days after the convention, Hamm said feedback was “deeply appreciative” from the right, left and middle on the presentation. “The old parliamentary procedure for 20 minutes and a vote doesn’t serve the church well when you are dealing with terribly complex issues,” he said. “It points up that we are not going to come to consensus in the next year or two. We need to live with one another.”

Nevertheless, Disciples delegates rejected an emergency resolution aimed at overturning a pension fund decision three months ago to offer health insurance to “domestic partners.” Doug Harvey, executive director of the evangelical Disciple Renewal group, argued that the pension board decision was “putting another arrangement on par with marriage.” The term “domestic partners” was not defined, though to many it would mean same-gender couples, conceded Hamm. He interpreted the vote as turning on the pension fund’s right to set policy and a local church’s autonomy.

Another drama—outside the convention center—portrayed one extreme on gay rights. A dozen protesters from Fred Phelps’s Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, carried signs such as “Fag Church,” “God Hates Fags” and “No Tears for Queers.” Westboro’s protests in the same week targeted the American Legion, Bank of America, Campfire Girls and the “LCMS Fag Church State Hdqs,” referring to the Missouri Synod Lutherans.

“My daughters have yet to walk past the signs outdoors without crying,” lamented Disciples pastor J. Dale Suggs of La Jolla, California. But later, while protesters were absent from their police-assigned street corner, some young Disciples and UCC registrants took chalk to write “God loves everyone” and other counter slogans on the sidewalk.

In convention business, the Disciples and UCC delegates adopted several joint resolutions on social issues, including one condemning the sale of diamonds sold by Sierra Leone rebels to finance that country’s brutal civil war. Drawing the most attention was a resolution to study proposals for U.S. reparations for slavery in America—approved in slightly different versions by the two bodies.

Following a formal apology by the Disciples General Board a few months ago, that denomination’s delegates asked the U.S. government “to issue a national apology for participating in and supporting the kidnapping, exporting and enslaving of people of African descent.” Both resolutions noted that reparations have been made in recent years to Nazi Holocaust victims, to Japanese-Americans for their World War II interment and to the Maori people of New Zealand.

The UCC did not call upon government leaders to apologize, but directed that “a study paper with scriptural basis” be developed to equip the church in discussions with schools and elected officials. Anticipating that most church members would be

“skeptical” of such a need, John Thomas, the UCC general minister and president, told a news conference: “First, we need to get the word out to our churches.” After all, he said, “this is the first time two predominantly European-American churches have take up this kind of obligation.”

Neither resolution mentioned monetary reparations. But pastor James I. Demus of Chicago’s Park Manor Christian Church, which submitted the Disciples version, said that for present generations of black Americans, “it is very much about money.” Speaking at the same news conference, Demus said: “We made cotton king. Slave owners were compensated because they lost their laborers, and other ethnic groups have been compensated.”

Among other resolutions, Disciples representatives asked the Japanese government to bring justice to the Korean and Chinese “comfort women” subjected to sexual abuse in World War II. They also expressed support for seasonal farm workers. UCC resolutions included one on stem cell research (see story on p. 11), a call for the end of U.S. Navy bomb training exercises on the Puerto Rico island of Vieques, and support for Micronesian residents still feeling long-term effects of atomic bomb testing.

On the ecumenical front, the UCC’s General Synod rebuffed a resolution submitted by 13 congregations to end relations with the Unitarian Universalist Association in order “to reaffirm the Trinitarian basis of our ecumenism.” One delegate defended the ties by citing the UUA’s historic stances against slavery and ordaining women ministers, and its modern opposition to gun violence. “Because they don’t believe Charlton Heston is Moses, I welcome them at my table,” said Paul Ashby, alluding to the joint UCC-Disciples convention theme “Gather at the Welcome Table.”

Also, UCC delegates voted for changing informal relations with the relatively small Alliance of Baptists, the newest National Council of Churches member, into a covenant relationship by 2003.

UCC and Disciples officials said that their ecumenical cooperation at the local level is often hampered by geography. The UCC strength is in New England with its many steepled Congregational churches—a region with few Disciples congregations. In Texas, the Disciples have more than 400 churches and the UCC has fewer than 25.

Closeness on the national scene is likely to continue. But because convention scheduling is made years in advance, the earliest that the UCC and the Disciples can

hold a joint convention again is 2009, said Hamm. He said he expects to talk next year with the UCC's Thomas to discuss a third joint convention. Regarding their role in the nine-denomination CUIC, Hamm said he thought the partnership mode is more apt for churches today than holding out for mergers—"I think the church ecumenical will emerge rather than merge."