

ANNEX B

UCCP Identity: Its Being and Becoming

A theological exposition on the UCCP Identity approved by the Faith and Order Commission (FOC), February 3-4, 2022, Malate, Manila

While the UCCP declares that it is “an integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” we also have our distinctive identity. While some of these distinctives may also be seen in other churches, it is in the sum of all these identity marks that makes up what the UCCP is. What kind of a church is the United Church of Christ in the Philippines? How would members of UCCP distinguish themselves in relation to others?

“The identity and character of a Church could be defined and made known in many ways. They could be known, for example, through the Church's formal confessions of faith, or through the size of the Church's congregations and membership, or through the work of the Church's various institutions, or through the Church's organizational structure and polity. Perhaps most decisively however, they could be known through the manner in which the Church responds to and interacts with the environment in which it is located, in short, through the manner in which the Church makes its confession and practices its life and mission in relation to the myriad needs, challenges and aspirations that form the world in which it lives and makes its witness.” (Feliciano Cariño, *Several Springs, One Stream: the UCCP*, 1997)

Throughout its journey, the Church endeavors to respond to the call of times through its various ministries and programs; grew and develop its character as an institution and able to withstand different forms of adversities. The United Church of Christ in the Philippines as an institution and a body of Christian believers possesses attributes distinct to its faith, life, and work.

In 1986, the Council of Bishops of the Church released a policy statement on Ecumenical Relations in which a portion of the document describes the character and being of UCCP stating, “Being a united and uniting Church, her character is evangelical and evangelistic, her ministry is wholistic, her concerns are universal and inclusive, her spirit is progressive and her attitude is open-minded.” This was confirmed by the General Assembly of 1986 in Novaliches, Quezon City.

Guided by such declaration, the Church strives to affirm and emulate its identity through its life, work, and various relations.

Being is UNITED AND UNITING

The birth of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines is considered a milestone in the Protestant movement in the Philippines. Being a “united” church has a rich historical past. “For the Philippines, the year 1948 held both hope and challenge for the future. But there was also doubt and anxiety in the face of the tremendous task of reconstruction and nation-building and the post-war crisis, as well as concern and dismay at the rampant graft and corruption in government and the erosion of the traditional ethical values as a result of the evil influences of the war. It was in the midst of this uncertain and yet hopeful time in the immediate postwar period that the United Church of Christ in the Philippines came into being.”(Several Streams, One Spring: UCCP, 1997 p.558).

It would be worth noting that UCCP is preceded by two prior organic unions: the Evangelical Church of the Philippines (1943) and the United Evangelical Church in the Philippine Islands (1929). In fact, these two were the 2 churches plus the Philippine Methodist Church that actually became the UCCP.

The First General Assembly in May 25, 1948 was an assemblage of churches that actively participated in the union efforts and commit to establish a “united” church. The organic union in 1948 was a concrete manifestation of the churches’ commitment to the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer, “that they may be one” (John 17:11). It was the visible result of the Protestant churches’ hopes, aspirations, cooperation, and efforts for church union.

The Basis of Union which was regarded as a contract among uniting churches provided the fundamental framework as to how the Church should run its life and work. This agreement hoped to hold the union last despite the many issues confronting the newly established united Church. It is also important to note that the Basis of Union “did not speak of “three heritages” but only one “heritage” being brought into the union”. This simply means that the respective statement of faith of these constituent churches should be understood as expressions of one and the same faith.

We expressed our unity in terms of the common declaration of faith (Statement of Faith)¹, common book of governance (Constitution and By-Laws), common book of worship, common future direction (Vision, Mission and Goals) and common responses to societal issues and concerns (UCCP Statements and Resolutions)

¹ The Statement of Faith was a later development, approved in 1986; the Basis of Union allowed the creeds and practices of the originating denominations where they come from.

However, the Church recognize the need to continue the effort of “uniting” other faith communities and communions consistent to its commitment to the movement for Christian unity. One distinguishing mark of UCCP since its birth up to the present is its active participation in and openness to wider unions and ecumenical relationships.

The posture of the Church continues to be uniting, despite its changing form from organic union to efforts in partnering with other denominations. Lately, the establishment of sister-church relations became bilateral (i.e., IFI and IUE). There have been some proposals from the discussion of Church leaders looking at making a tripartite (covenant) between IFI, IUE, and UCCP.

The concept of UCCP being a “uniting” Church may be understood in the establishment of relations in three different types (FOC uses the term “layers”); firstly, with non-NCCP members, and relationship with wider church bodies, secondly, with NCCP member-churches; thirdly, with progressive sectoral groupings.

Careful considerations should be taken in establishing relationships with non-NCCP member-churches than with NCCP member churches. Parameters need be provided in relating with non-NCCP member churches and assert UCCP’s active participation in the planning and implementation of such.

True to its nature as an institution and as Christ’s body in the world, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines continues to affirm its being as a “united and a uniting” Church.

Character is EVANGELICAL AND EVANGELISTIC

The character of UCCP is evangelical and evangelistic. Such claim is an assertion of its historical and theological roots. Historically, UCCP evolved from the decision and commitment of evangelical churches in the Philippines (for an organic union) that trace its beginnings to the denomination which calls themselves “Evangelicals”. Our theological construct on the other hand, is rooted in the R(r)eformed tradition, therefore we make our theological interpretations within the bounds of the R(r)eformed definition which is progressive and responsive to the issues of times.²

² Reformed (with a capital R) speaks of the Calvinistic/Presbyterian theological tradition (represented in the World Communion of Reformed Churches) but please do not forget that we also have the WESLEYAN/ARMINIAN theological tradition brought in by the Phil. Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren (represented by the World Methodist Council. In ecumenical lingo, these are COMMUNIONS. There is another one though not within the UCCP, that is the Lutheran World Federation and of course, the Orthodox family. The English

The common creed of the Church (UCCP Statement of Faith) and its concern and response to societal issues through its ministries define its character as evangelical and evangelistic.

The Church's basic understanding of its character is closely related to the perception of its task - the proclamation of the gospel (Greek *euangelion* or evangelion). Jesus started his ministry by declaring his intention (Luke 4:18-19) and ended by commanding his disciples to continue the work (Matthew 28: 19-20). The Church being called to proclaim the gospel embraces and emulate Jesus' life, teachings and message (evangelical) and commits to fulfill the task of mission which Christ has given to his Church (evangelistic).

Evangelism in essence is a life of witness in the world. Presenting Christ to all by way of proclamation may be a primary task of the Church but members of the body are also taught and equipped for their witness and service to the world. "The end goal of our evangelism is the evolvment of true witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ, who loyally and constantly witness in all areas of their lives."(Policy Statement on Evangelism, Executive Committee, June 16-17,1966)

We are evangelicals, called to be true to the evangel and live an evangelistic life.

Ministry is WHOLISTIC

Contrary to the dualistic view of the world which separates the "soul"(spiritual) from the "body" (physical), and that God's salvation only concerns the soul/spiritual, leaving the physical body to suffer and decay due to sin, the Church in adherence to its Reformed (and Wesleyan) faith heritage, holds a different view. Persons being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) consist of both the spiritual and physical self. Both aspects are integral to one's development and growth in life and faith. One cannot separate the self from economic, political, environmental and social concerns since it directly affects our being. The rest of creation which reflects God's creative power suffers the same. When human beings and the rest of God's creation are suffering from the sinfulness of the world, they have to be liberated from all that enslaves them (Romans 8:19-22). As one part of the body is in pain, the whole body suffers. For God's salvific grace does not come in parts, but in whole.

Reformation (from which the Anglican/Episcopal Church and later the Methodist came from was much later, about 200 years from the "original" Reformation movements of Luther and Calvin. So please do not forget us!

As Christ himself exemplified a life and ministry that aim to bring about wholeness and abundance of life (John10:10), the Church should not only address the need for liberation of human beings but also for the restoration of the rest of creation. Its ministries should be designed in a way that it looks into the totality of persons in community for their growth in faith and witness, and find meaningful relations with the rest of God's community.

As Christ's body in the world, we respond to and act on issues affecting all aspects of life to manifest our obedience and to facilitate the consummation of Christ's purpose - "that we may have life and have it in its fullness."

We look at persons and the world in its totality, we act to bring about wholeness of life.

Concerns are UNIVERSAL AND INCLUSIVE

UCCP in its Declaration of Principles affirms that the Church is part of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". This declaration is in line with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed adopted during First Council of Constantinople in 381.

The word "catholic" is derived from the Greek adjective καθολικός (katholikos), meaning "general", "universal". It is associated with the Greek adverb καθόλου (katholou), meaning "according to the whole", "entirely", or "in general", a combination of the preposition κατά meaning "according to" and the adjective ὅλος meaning "whole". Although it is not used in the New Testament, its meaning is expressed in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Jesus Christ." This means that the church transcends human barriers and divisions. The word "catholic" means universal, for all people at all times.

UCCP is universal and inclusive in its concerns because Christ our Lord is universal. Of course, historically Jesus Christ lived at a particular time, place, and culture. But He is universal because God's redemptive act fulfilled in Him is for all. Similarly, a particular local church is universal in the sense that it is open to everyone. The adjective "catholic" means that in the church, the wholeness of the Christian faith, complete, all-embracing, and with nothing lacking, is proclaimed to all people without excluding any part of the faith or any class or group of people. It can also be applied not only to the church as it spread throughout the world, but also to each local manifestation of the church, in each

of which nothing essential is lacking for it to be the genuine Church of Christ. (Sunday School Material, Declaration of Principles, 2021)

The Church being universal and inclusive is open to concerns, discussions and issues affecting the lives of “all” manifesting its belief that all are under the grace of God. We belong to a bigger community. We don’t have the monopoly of faith. Our universality prompts our inclusivity.

Spirit is PROGRESSIVE

Another distinctive character of UCCP is being progressive and dynamic. Its story presents admirable people and significant events; joys and defeats that shaped the Church. Despite the difficulties, conflicts, and misunderstandings, the Church struggled to move forward and geared itself with the necessary tools and capacities to make its life and work relevant, appropriate and responsive to the challenges of the changing times. The Church adapted ways and means to effectively perform its task and accomplish its goals as an institution and organization. Necessary changes and adjustments to its polity and structure were made in order to strengthen the unity within and draw others to the union as well.

At some point of the Church’s life, its efforts and concerns shifted from the individual towards the concerns of society; not just proclamation of the Gospel but also actual daily demonstration by deeds of how the Gospel works. The Church then affirms the teachings from the Scripture about the concern for the poor and oppressed, the strangers, widows and orphans. It has become a Christian imperative to help the impoverished and distressed (1 John 3:17, Acts 11:27ff). As Bishop Enrique Sobrepeña puts it, “The call to us in this our day when social changes are taking place very rapidly and the pressure of population is great for a ministry that is not restricted, but one that is extensive, embracing and full...”

It has become a conviction of the Church that the Christian task is “not merely the verbal proclamation of the Gospel, but also the development of the individual potential and the alleviation of human suffering, to enhance the quality of life. (Dr. Valentino Sito, Several Springs: One Stream Vol.2). The concerns of the Church go beyond the denominational lines to include sectoral concerns that of the farmers, peasants, women, children, and youth. This has led to the formulation of programs and ministries, plans, and direction-setting so that the Church is girded towards its vision of God’s reign.

Attitude is OPEN-MINDED

Being open-minded is a generally considered a positive quality. If one is progressive, inclusive, universal in character and outlook, open-mindedness comes with it. This attitude or quality of a person involves the willingness to listen to and accept ideas, arguments, discussions, and information. It is a necessary ability when engaging in different levels of relationships. An open-minded attitude is needed to think critically and rationally. Being open to new ideas and experiences is not easy since it may cause confusion and cognitive dissonance when new ideas and information conflict with our existing belief system. But it can also be a way to learning and change. The Protestant reformation movement was not just a religious movement. It has impacted nearly all spheres of life and has opened the minds of the Church to the different studies relating to its life-giving flesh to Pauls' challenge for "renewal of the mind" (Colossians 3:11,Romans 12:2). UCCP rooted in its Protestant heritage adheres to this principle.

UCCP has been open-minded in its effort for unity since the beginning. It has open its doors to possibilities and ideas to achieve unity among evangelical churches and other faith communities. The Church employs new ways to address the needs within and to respond to the needs outside its walls. Doors were opened for conversations and partnerships with kindred churches and other sectoral groups.

At times, the Church suffers from bitter misunderstanding and conflicts, questions and debates regarding doctrines and practices but was able to transcend differences. Instead, the Church recognizes the diversities within and sees it not as a dividing factor but a quality that would enhance the unity of the Church. Hence the declaration, "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Open-mindedness is necessary for growth. This is what makes our faith and our Church dynamic and relevant. This attitude has deeply embedded in our beliefs and principles as a Church. It helped us move forward. It keeps us open to new discussions of issues that confront society today. Guided by our faith in Christ, we continue to seek ways to make our witness timely and relevant. +

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