

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Strategy and Restructure in the United Church of Christ

Emily Barman and Mark Chaves

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

Hartford Institute for Religion Research
Hartford Seminary
hirr@hartsem.edu

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Strategy and Restructure in the United Church of Christ

Emily Barman and Mark Chaves

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is in the midst of a major restructure, one that culminates a decade-long planning process. The new structure was approved in summer 1999, with implementation beginning in 2000. Given the recentness of the implementation, the focus of this case is the structure as approved. Although the primary goal of this chapter is descriptive — simply providing an account of the key features of UCC restructuring and the factors that appear to have prompted it — we also discuss restructuring goals in light of social and organizational realities within the UCC.

The chapter has three sections. The first provides a brief and basic description of UCC organizational structure. A second section — the main body of the chapter — describes the two major goals of restructure. We identify the ways in which particular aspects of restructure are intended to further these goals, and we also place these goals in the context of larger social and organizational realities in the UCC. A third section reviews the factors that seem to us to be producing this restructuring effort. Throughout, we examine documents that were produced as part of the long planning process for this restructure, we employ financial reports, and we draw on interviews with national executives, regional executives, and local clergy within the UCC.¹

1. Most of the documents we use were produced by the UCC during the restructure process. These include policy statements, financial reports, annual reports, internal surveys, and theological writings. We also conducted interviews with twenty-four senior executives at the national setting of the UCC. In these interviews we asked our respondents a variety of questions about their work, as well as about their understanding of restructure and its goals. We also draw on surveys of and interviews with UCC conference executives and on interviews with UCC clergy from other Organizing Religious Work (ORW)-related studies. The former were conducted by Adair Lummis as part of a larger study of regional executives (Adair Lummis, "Sum-

The United Church of Christ

The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 from a merger between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The denomination exists organizationally, to use UCC language, in four manifestations: twelve (before current restructure) instrumentalities located in Cleveland and New York City; thirty-nine regional conferences, in turn composed of 200 more local associations; and approximately six thousand congregations. UCC congregations spent \$684.7 million in 1996, \$18.1 million of which went to the national setting. The national instrumentalities also received \$33 million in income from other sources in 1996, primarily from their endowments.²

The UCC's polity is "congregational" in that, as stated in its constitution, no other parts of the denomination may impair the autonomy of any local church in the management of its own affairs. Neither regional nor national organizations exert any administrative, religious, or financial authority whatsoever on any local operations, and all contributions that flow from congregations to the regional units are voluntary. As one conference executive put it, "There is no hierarchical function between [the national offices] and this conference. Nothing that is done up there is binding [on this conference] and nothing in the conference is binding on the local church."

The conferences and associations of the UCC are bodies organized on a territorial basis, each holding a distinct set of responsibilities. Associations hold some religious authority in the UCC in that they grant congregational and ordained ministerial standing in the denomination and can remove congregations from the denomination.³ Even this authority, however, is less than absolute, since congregations are not obligated to employ clergy with ordained standing in the UCC. Conferences provide counsel, resources, advice, and in-service training for ministers. They also conduct conferences and workshops at the regional and local settings, including preretirement seminars for clergy, evangelism training, and awareness training on mission and justice issues. Conferences serve as a conduit for funds between local churches and the national setting, and they retain a portion of the resources coming from congregations, usually 40 to 60 percent, for their own work.

mary of UCC Results from the ORW Regional Judicatory Survey" [Hartford Seminary, 2000]). The latter were conducted by Nancy Ammerman as part of a larger study of congregations (Nancy Ammerman, "Summary of UCC Results from the ORW Congregational Survey" [Hartford Seminary, 2000]).

2. *Annual Report of the UCC* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1997).

3. Executive Council for the United Church of Christ, *Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1997), p. 5.

The representative national body of the UCC is the General Synod, which meets every two years for seven days. Postrestructure, the General Synod will consist of delegates chosen by the conferences and ex officio delegates. Ex officio delegates include the elected officers of the UCC, members of the Executive Council, and the moderator and assistant moderator of the General Synod. The total number of elected delegates from conferences ranges from 675 to 725 at a General Synod. Each conference sends 3 or more delegates, depending on the number of persons who have membership in their local churches. The criteria for conferences' delegations are clearly specified in the UCC's constitution: each delegation must be made up of at least 50 percent laypersons; must display racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; and should consist of at least 50 percent persons under thirty years of age.⁴

The General Synod possesses various responsibilities within the denomination. It oversees and financially authorizes the work of the UCC, authorizes changes to the constitution and bylaws, calls or nominates and elects General Synod officers and the boards of directors of those ministries whose election is vested in it, determines the relationship of the UCC to other ecumenical and interdenominational bodies,⁵ and pronounces upon social issues of the day.

Although the General Synod sets denominational policy, it has no administrative or other authority over regional bodies — conferences and associations — or congregations, as stated in the constitution. The General Synod possesses more formal authority over the national expressions of the church than over local or regional ones. Even the national instrumentalities, however, enjoy a fair degree of autonomy and are able to exercise considerable control over their own internal operations. This is especially true of the national agencies that are older than the denomination.

The Restructure

The UCC's restructuring was formally approved in the summer of 1999, and began to be implemented in 2000. The restructure planning process formally began in 1987, when the General Synod's Executive Council appointed an Advisory Commission on Structure. This commission evolved into a Committee on Structure, which presented a final report to the 1995 General Synod. This report

4. Constitution and Bylaw Revision Team, "Working Draft #4 of Revised Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ" (February 6, 1997, memo), p. 27.

5. Constitution and Bylaw Revision Team, "Working Draft #4," pp. 8-9.

was accepted as "providing a sufficient basis for restructuring the national setting of the church."⁶ The 1997 General Synod approved the proposed amendments to the constitution, and with two-thirds of the regional conferences approving these changes, the 1999 General Synod ratified a final document. The implementation began in 2000.

Several different outcomes were considered along the road to restructure. The report of the initial Advisory Commission on Structure recommended seven areas for further study: ecclesiology, coordination, ecumenicity, office of the president, funding allocation, relationship between and among conferences and national bodies, and proliferation of structures.⁷ By the 1991 General Synod, the General Synod Committee on Structure had looked at three outlines of possible structure for the UCC. These models shared many features: a strengthened office of the president, a "management team" at the national setting, a reduced number of offices, a significant reconfiguration of the assets of the recognized boards, and conference representation in the management team.⁸ These three models differed in the importance of the president to decision making, that is, the degree to which the national level should be governed by the principle of hierarchy rather than covenant. As an ecclesiology of covenant became articulated, the two outlines of restructure based in hierarchy were abandoned and the third model was formally adopted.

UCC restructuring was intended to achieve multiple goals, but the major goals can be grouped into two broad categories. First, restructure was intended to establish new relationships among the various organizational units of the denomination. Second, restructure was intended to push the UCC further in the direction of emphasizing and valuing diversity of various sorts. These goals are complex. In some ways they represent continuity with the UCC's history and identity; in other ways they mark a departure from the status quo. In this section we take a close look at these goals and how they are addressed by various concrete changes brought about by restructure. We also discuss these goals in light of relevant social and organizational realities within this denomination.

6. *Report on Restructure to the Twenty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1997), p. A-2.

7. *Report of the General Synod Committee on Structure to the Eighteenth General Synod* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1991), p. 1.

8. *Report of the General Synod Committee on Structure to the Eighteenth General Synod*, p. 4.

New Relationships among Parts of the Denomination

One major goal of the restructure is changing the relationships among the various organizational units that constitute the UCC. Three intended changes are key. One is structural and obvious: national setting agencies are to be fundamentally reorganized toward greater simplification and ease of use. The other two key changes are cultural and more subtle: national agencies are to be reoriented toward better serving congregations, and the restructured relationships are to follow a theology of organization — an ecclesiology — rather than the political and functional pragmatism that undergirded the prior structure. We will consider each of these in turn.

National Reorganization

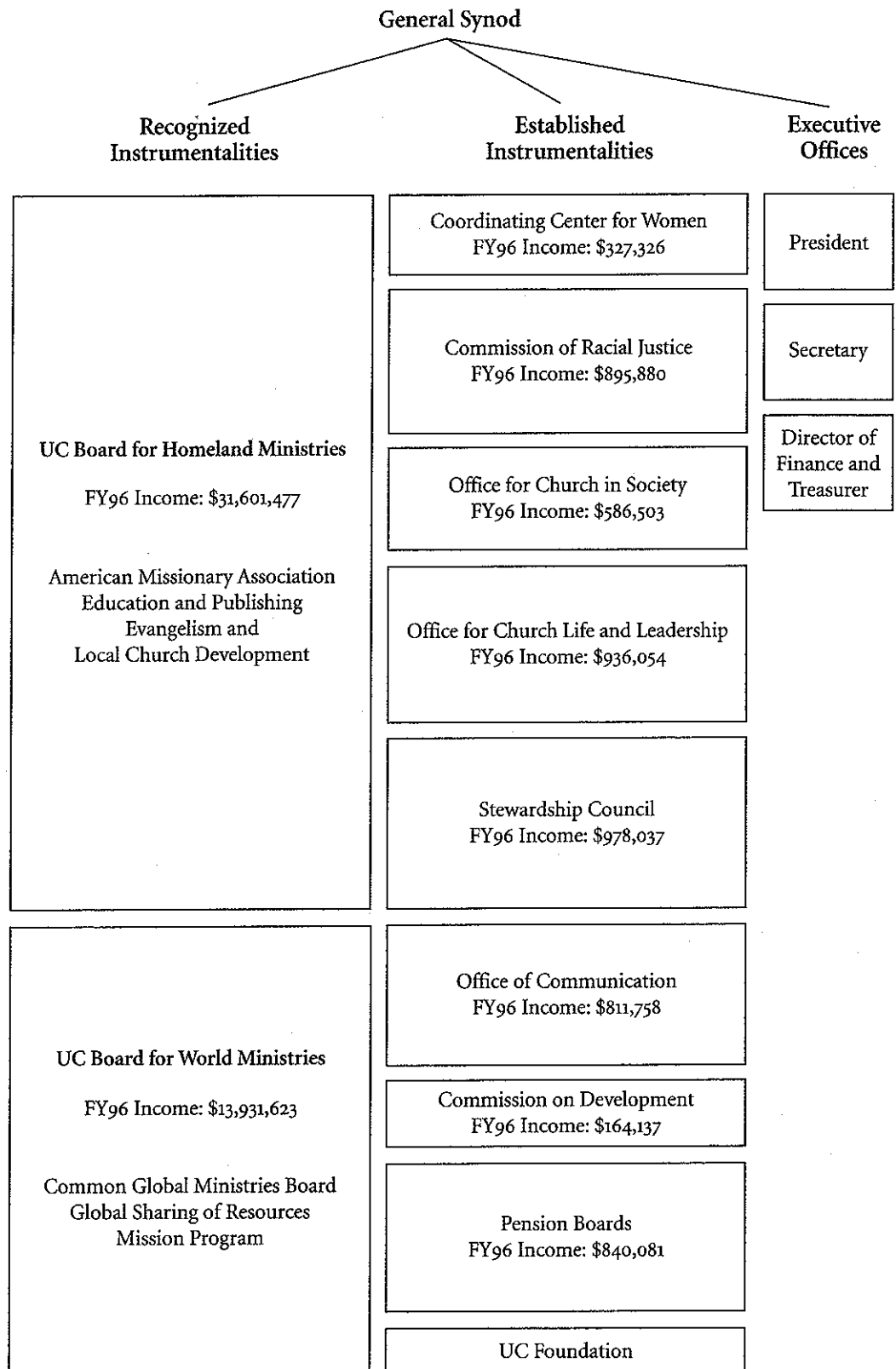
The most dramatic consequence of UCC restructuring was that twelve national instrumentalities became four covenanted ministries. Figure 1 on page 471 shows the prerestructure national agency structure of the UCC. The size of each box in this figure roughly represents the relative income of each national unit in fiscal year 1996. As indicated by the three columns, these units are of three different types: recognized instrumentalities, established instrumentalities, and executive offices. The two recognized instrumentalities predate the UCC itself. The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries is concerned with social ministry and social justice. To that end it provides programs, training, and financial support to other settings of the denomination. The United Church Board for World Ministries focuses on the work of the church abroad, providing evangelism, education, and social services.

Before restructure, although each of these units was formally responsible in some degree to the General Synod, the recognized instrumentalities (colloquially known as the “Big Boards”) had much more autonomy than either the established instrumentalities or the executive offices. Indeed, there have been several occasions when representatives of the Big Boards argued that these boards are completely independent of General Synod directives.⁹ It also is worth emphasizing that the various national units have been autonomous with respect to each other, and even with respect to the president’s office, which had very limited administrative authority.

Established instrumentalities have been formed for a variety of purposes since the UCC’s inception. They were created by and are funded primarily by the General Synod, to which they are also accountable. They consist of agencies

9. R. Shinn, personal correspondence with authors, 1999.

Figure 1. UCC Pre-Restructuring National Bodies



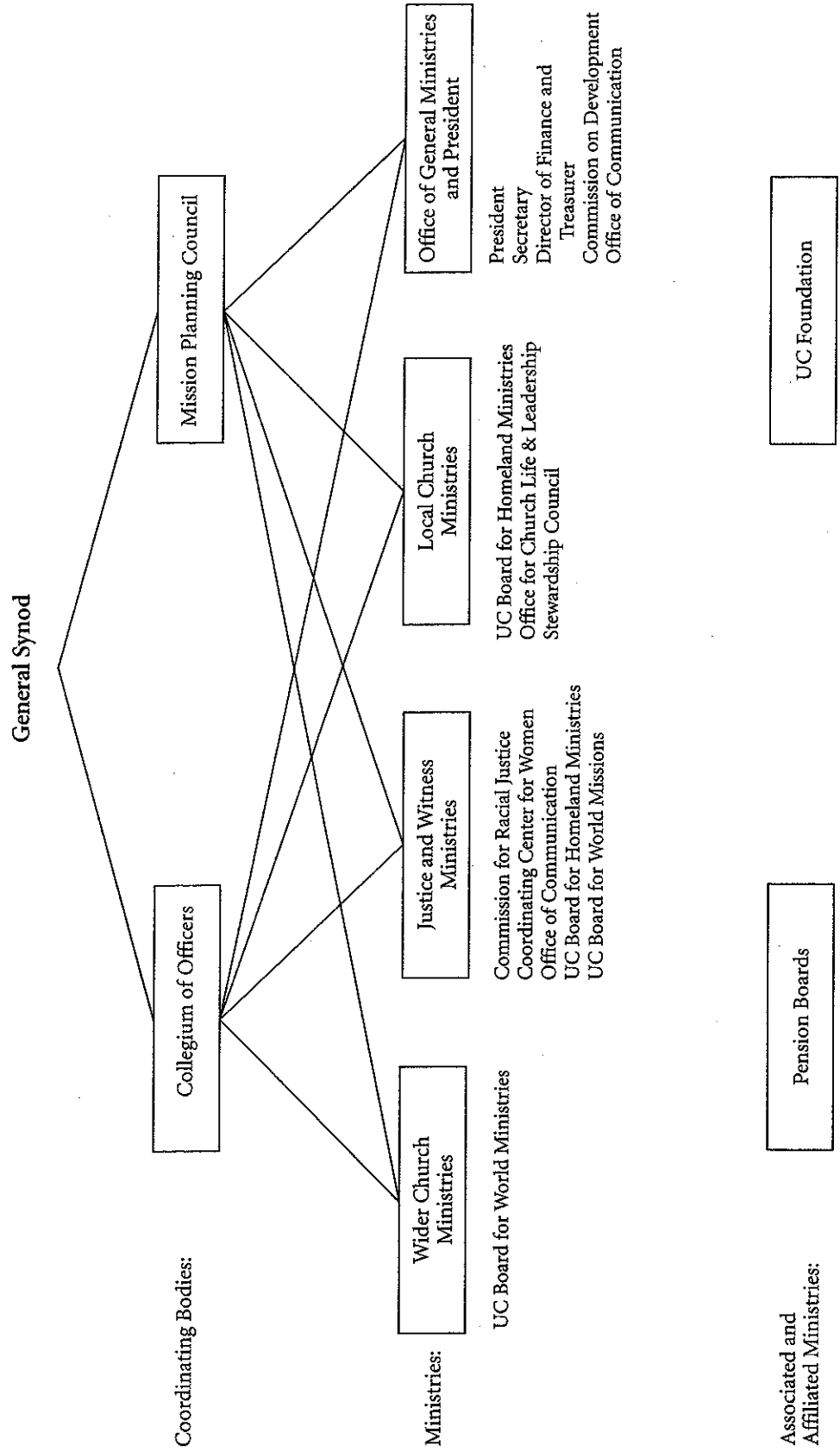
serving constituencies within the UCC, providing financial and administrative assistance for UCC clergy and other staff, as well as those offices pursuing social justice within the denomination and elsewhere. The executive offices provided a measure of financial and administrative oversight, although duplicate administrative offices existed within several of the instrumentalities. These offices also managed ecumenical affairs, but without any formal authority. They also were creations of the General Synod and, again, were accountable to and funded primarily by it.

Restructure was intended to enhance efficiency and coordination at the national level by simplifying this structure. As shown in figure 2 on page 473, it establishes four new ministries that centralize functions previously spread across the numerous prior units. The Wider Church Ministries continues the overseas mission and ecumenical work of the denomination. The Local Church Ministries focuses on the religious and fiscal life of congregations in the United States. The Justice and Witness Ministries gathers together the social justice offices, and the Office of General Ministries will be strengthened to provide spiritual, ecumenical, and financial oversight for the entire national structure of the denomination.

The restructured national church also contains two new structures, the Collegium of Officers (consisting of the executive ministers for each of the three new ministries, the general minister and president, and the associate general minister) and the Mission Planning Council (composed of the above-listed officers and the leaders of the principal subunits of the four new ministries, the Pension Boards United Church of Christ, and the United Church Foundation). These two new entities are meant to coordinate the activities of the new ministries. They, in turn, are responsible to the General Synod. The Pension Boards and the United Church Foundation hold a separate status under the direct supervision of the General Synod.

Restructure thus entails a fairly radical reorganization of the national agencies, one meant to achieve a certain rationalization and simplification of national setting structure. This interpretation of restructuring is evident in the discourse of senior UCC executives. When asked about the purpose of restructuring, these executives talk quite a lot about more efficient allocation of resources, reduced costs, less overlap in functions, more efficient warehousing of products, and so on. One executive said, "What in part [the restructure] is meant to accomplish is a leaner, more transparent, more understandable, programmatic structure for the national setting of the church." Another explained that restructure "should result in less redundancy and therefore less expenditure at the national level for administrative type things."

Figure 2. UCC Post-Restructuring National Bodies



Focus on Congregations

The reorganization of agencies and offices represents an attempt to do more than simplify UCC agency structure. It also is intended to reorient the national setting of the denomination toward servicing and resourcing congregations. It is important to note that the national-setting agencies always have provided services and resources to congregations. The national instrumentalities, however, also possess missions that are unique to their setting, including a commitment to social justice, social witness, and ecumenicity.

Postrestructure, the national agencies will continue to seek to meet congregational needs in areas such as curriculum development and production, clergy certification and placement, fund-raising, endowment management, clergy pension fund administration, building loan funds, and so on. The reorganization of the national church, however, is meant in part to enable the ministries to do all this better by creating a national structure that can be more easily understood and accessed by local congregations. One executive summarized the restructure as "honoring the various parts to become a more accessible partner to the other settings of the church, a more coherent and easily understood partner." Another senior executive put it this way: "As we restructure, the prayer is that the national offices will be more effective in relating to the local churches and better assist the associations and conferences by having single points of contact."

Another aspect of this emphasis on congregations is that the post-restructure national agencies, especially the recognized instrumentalities, will in theory have less autonomy than before relative to bodies representing UCC congregations. It is important to note that while national agencies will be re-oriented toward conferences/associations and congregations by the restructure, they will continue to pursue the missions unique to their settings. They will now do so, however, with enhanced participation from other settings of the church. Prerestructure, the recognized instrumentalities possessed their own endowments, and they were largely independent and unsupervised by any other unit of the denomination. With the restructure two main changes occurred. First, the General Synod gained increased formal authority over the national ministries, with the Collegium of Officers, for example, elected by the General Synod. We return later to why the recognized instrumentalities gave up their power, financial resources, and autonomy. Second, the financial independence historically exercised by the Big Boards has been replaced by the new covenanted ministries. For the new structure the Board for Homeland Ministries divided up its assets and transferred control of all its endowment to the new Local Church Ministries, Justice and Witness Ministries, and Office of

General Ministries. The Board for World Ministries keeps its endowment in the new form of the Wider Church Ministries, but gives up a portion of its income for the other three new ministries.

Restructure also increased the number of conference representatives present on the boards of directors of the four new ministries. In addition, one staff member in the Office of General Ministries is dedicated to working with conferences, a position that did not exist in the old structure. All of this is meant to increase the accountability of the national ministries to the General Synod, to conferences, and ultimately to congregations. Not coincidentally, the commitment to meaningful involvement of conferences in national activity is evident in the day-to-day practice of national executives as well as in the formal changes brought about by restructure. We asked national executives to tell us whose support would be most helpful to secure if they had an idea for a new programming initiative. About half included conference ministers in their lists.

Is this refocusing of the national units on congregations evident to people at the regional and local settings of the UCC? The picture is mixed. On the one hand, it appears that the conference-setting executives interpret this aspect of restructure in ways consistent with the intentions expressed in official documents and by national executives, and it appears that they do in fact perceive heightened integration between the regional and national settings. Interviews with conference ministers across the country suggest that many of them are aware of the restructure and see in it an effort to emphasize the local church and a relationship of covenant. One conference minister summarized the restructure as not "a top-down but more a bottom-up model . . . the old paradigm is gone." Interestingly, some conference ministers see restructure as primarily a matter of "downsizing" the national setting. This downsizing will mean that responsibility, previously filled by national instrumentalities, for providing some resources and services to congregations will devolve to the conferences, and some expect this shift to result in more vital conferences. One conference minister, responding to the ORW (Organizing Religious Work) regional judicatory leader survey, noted that "as the national church reconfigures and goes through major staff and structure changes, the conferences are assuming a more proactive role and the Council of Conferences is becoming stronger."¹⁰ This general perception is quite widespread among UCC conference ministers: 88 percent of surveyed conference executives replied that the "relative importance of conferences compared to our National Church offices and agencies has increased" over the last five years, while only 12 percent believed it had remained the same.¹¹

10. Lummis, "Summary of UCC Results from the ORW Regional Judicatory Survey."

11. Lummis, "Summary of UCC Results from the ORW Regional Judicatory Survey."

If those at the regional setting see things in ways consistent with restructuring objectives, the views expressed by clergy in local churches suggest that it will not be easy for national agencies to break through the widespread indifference among UCC congregations to activities of the national office. One clergyperson summarized the feelings of his laity toward the larger denomination by saying, "The people in this congregation are members of the First Congregational Church, UCC. But the UCC is a parenthesis, a tag on, or punctuation mark, a lengthy punctuation mark . . . their self-perception is that they are part of this particular church, not that they are part of a group of Congregational churches which are in association with a greater body called the UCC." This sentiment is fairly typical. A 1985 survey, for example, asked focus groups from 289 UCC congregations, "What does it mean for you/this church to be part of the UCC?" The modal group response (characterizing almost a third of the groups) was "nothing."¹²

Overall, congregational leaders express an alienation that results from two central issues: the regulatory-sounding nature of the General Synod's pronouncements and a perceived lack of congregational attention from other settings of the denomination. Over the last two decades the General Synod has voted on a number of high-profile issues, including approving the ordination of gay or lesbian people into the ministry, passing a resolution that recognizes abortion as a viable option, and proclaiming the UCC to be against welfare reform. These types of regulatory acts, as Russell Richey has noted, come with certain costs for the overall health of the denomination.¹³ In each case, although UCC polity is clear that the General Synod pronouncements speak to, not for, other church units, and that they are only for the *consideration* of other units, some clergy perceive these actions as attempts to speak for them and their congregations without their consent. One minister offered just such an explanation for his congregation's feelings of alienation: "When the church synod makes a pronouncement like that it comes across as — local congregation you should agree with us, we're your voice. The local church feels like, you took my voice away."

Of the congregations surveyed for the ORW project, a sizable minority of UCC congregations consider themselves to be more politically and theologically conservative than the General Synod, leading to further alienation. Fur-

12. W. M. Newman, "The Meanings of a Merger: Denominational Identity in the United Church of Christ," in *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, ed. J. W. Carroll and W. Clark Roof (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), p. 302.

13. Russell Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, ed. Robert B. Mullin and Russell Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

ther, some congregational leaders believe that the General Synod's pronouncements are not only too progressive, but also oriented at a global setting that has little relevance for the lives of their laity.¹⁴ One minister expressed his sense as follows: "I think people also associate the denomination with global concerns and they can't relate to that. Other than that the denomination doesn't mean much at all."

An apparent majority of ministers interviewed for this project also proclaim that they have little contact with and receive little support from the other settings of the denomination. One minister noted that "we send ten percent of our income to the conference who once a year sends us a form letter that says thank you. The rest of the year we never see a conference person around here." While the regional setting may be aware of and support the UCC's restructure, congregations appear to have little interest in this or any of the denomination's activities. If the larger goal behind the reemphasis on local congregations is to change the perceptions of denominational usefulness among local congregations, it would appear that severe challenges lie ahead.

A Developing Ecclesiology

The Advisory Commission on Structure concluded that there was "a lack of clarity and common understanding about the nature and purpose of the new denomination."¹⁵ Accordingly, part of the planning for restructure involved the development of a theology of organization — an ecclesiology — for the UCC, and the initial General Synod Committee on Structure commissioned two "study papers," one on mission and another on ecclesiology.

Drawing on these papers, the Committee on Structure concluded that the ecclesiology of the UCC is grounded in two central premises: that the purpose and identity of the UCC is mission — at all settings of the church — and that relationships within the church are based in covenant. The notion that UCC ecclesiology is based on covenant is not new with restructuring. UCC historian Louis Gunnemann, writing in 1979, characterized UCC polity as "a covenanted relationship of autonomous units in church life."¹⁶ Covenant, as expressed in the new article III of the UCC constitution, is defined in the following way: "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

14. Ammerman, "Summary of UCC Results from the ORW Congregational Survey."

15. "Advisory Commission on Structure" (report, 1988), p. 32.

16. Louis Gunnemann, "Order and Identity in the United Church of Christ," *New Conversations* 4, no. 2 (fall 1979): 15.

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."¹⁷

In a covenantal relationship no party has formal authority over another, but all parties pledge to respectfully and seriously engage and listen to each other. Covenantal decision making is characterized by communication and shared information. One national executive defined a covenant as "wanting to provide as many modes of connection and participation of persons when decisions are being made as possible." This principle is meant to apply not only to relations among national agencies but also to relations between national units, on the one hand, and conferences, associations, and congregations on the other hand. As another executive put it, covenantal relations are meant to generate the awareness that "we are all members of one church."

Several aspects of restructuring can be seen in light of the intention to generate the understanding that UCC organizational structures and relations in all settings of the church are manifestations of covenant. The simplification of national structures as well as the rededication of national ministries to regional and local concerns are part of the attempt to make the national setting of the denomination live out this ecclesiological commitment to covenant. National executives seem more confident, however, that covenantal relations can be fully lived out within and between the national covenanted ministries than they can between the national and the regional or local settings of the church. One national executive noted that "day to day, I think one of the things that's really a part of who I am and what I've [wanted] this office to be, is that we're in relationship with other people in this building, other officers in this building. And that affects what we do, how we do it, decisions we make. And it's always important to be mindful that we're just one part of the whole within this building."

In discussions of relations between the national and the other settings of the denomination, however, more wariness is evident. A general theme among national executives seems to be that the efforts of the national units to live out covenantal organizational relations are not always matched by efforts at the regional or local settings. One executive put it this way: "I think one of the great weaknesses of our church is that . . . there isn't a general understanding of what it means to be covenantal with one another. . . . Many of our churches believe primarily that what covenantal means is that you leave [us] alone and we do

17. Constitution and Bylaw Revision Team, "Working Draft #4," p. 2.

what we want." Another executive noted, "I see the national church making changes but I don't see the same kind of change occurring at the other levels." Still another questioned how a restructured denomination would address the discrepancy between stated denominational priorities and the priorities of local churches that in the past have not followed and presumably will not follow denominational pronouncements on issues such as the affirmation of gay and lesbian lifestyles. From the perspective of some national executives, the responsibilities of covenant seem a bit one-way: national organizations are bound by covenant to regional conferences and local congregations, but regional conferences and local congregations are not bound by anything. This basic asymmetry in the meaning of covenant and its implications for ecclesiology are rooted, of course, in the UCC's tradition of regional and congregational autonomy. It is difficult to see how restructure could effect much change in this arena.

A Multiracial and Multicultural Church

A second major goal of the restructure is to move further in the direction of becoming a more diverse church. This goal reaffirms a long-standing aspect of UCC corporate identity, but in new ways that represent significant long-term change in the meaning of "diversity" within the UCC. Since its inception the UCC's motto has been "That they may all be one," and the UCC always has been committed to the ideal of unity amidst diversity. Recent years, however, have seen a change in the meaning of this ideal from one that emphasizes religious diversity to one that emphasizes various social diversities, especially those of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Restructure is intended to move the UCC further in the direction of becoming a multiracial and multicultural church.

The UCC has long been engaged with the ecumenical movement, and this engagement has been central to the UCC's history and identity. The denominations that came together to form the UCC, the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, worked together in the ecumenical movement long before they merged to form the UCC. The UCC's first "full communion" agreement with the Evangelical Church of England was made over thirty years ago, and the UCC has committed to special partnerships with a number of other denominations across the globe. A continuing commitment to ecumenicity is apparent in a number of recent developments. The UCC is in full partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); it has established full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Reformed

Church of America; and it is involved in approximately thirty partnerships with other denominations in overseas mission work.

Restructure assures continued emphasis on ecumenicity by carrying over into the new structure a staff position titled Assistant to the President for Ecumenical Concerns. Ecumenical work is mandated for each of the four new covenanted ministries, as proposed in the new constitution of the UCC.

We asked each national executive we interviewed to read three theological statements about ecumenism, all drawn from UCC documents:

We are a church that seeks to portray in its life and witness the unity and koinonia of the Holy Trinity, the Trinity whose diverse persons become an icon for the unity and diversity the ecumenical movement hopes to embody.

We believe that God gives the Church its unity and, by the Holy Spirit, leads and empowers the Church to manifest that unity.

The longing for Christian unity is at the core of our identity. We lose it at our peril.

We asked the executives how these themes inform their day-to-day work, if at all, and how they are reflected in restructuring, if at all. The idea was that executives' interpretations of these passages would provide some insight into how they understood ecumenicity as it currently informs national-setting work in the UCC.

Several interesting patterns emerged in the responses to these texts. First, half the national executives explicitly responded only to the first passage — the one that expresses ecumenicity in terms of the union of “diverse persons.” Second, there were two distinct types of responses to these texts. On the one hand, executives whose jobs included significant interaction with other religious groups discussed ecumenism in the traditional sense of cooperation among such groups. These executives also expressed some dissatisfaction with what they saw as the relatively low priority given to ecumenism in the restructure. One national executive commented, “I think that ecumenism has gotten the shorter shrift. It’s in there, and at times I have said to myself, I think why it has the shorter shrift is [that] it’s assumed by many in a way that the multiracial-multicultural is not, hence more attention is needed [to the latter].” Another claimed that “one of the things that restructure has not addressed is the whole issue of ecumenism.”

The other executives — the majority — related ecumenism to diversity based on gender, race, class, and/or sexual orientation rather than to diversity

based on religious or denominational affiliation, and they did this no matter which of the three texts they were discussing. As one put it, "I look at diversity and talk about the inclusive church in terms of those with different sexual orientation. Those that are physically challenged or handicapped. I think about gender issues. And one issue . . . I feel missing to the unity of the body of Christ and the UCC expression would be the ecumenical poor." Many executives used the same concepts and terms to discuss both the theology of ecumenism and the theology of becoming a multicultural and multiracial church. While these executives considered ecumenism to be important in their day-to-day work, they had in mind an ecumenism different from the traditional ecumenism that cuts across religious divisions. Not coincidentally, the relatively low salience of ecumenism is not unique to the national setting of the UCC. In a 1985 survey that asked focus groups from 289 UCC congregations, "What does it mean for you/this church to be part of the UCC?" only 10 percent listed ecumenism.¹⁸

This changed meaning of ecumenism within the UCC is part of a larger concern that is very important for this denomination at this time: the commitment to become a "true multiracial and multicultural church." The UCC is officially committed to becoming a church that "confesses and acts out its faith in the one sovereign God who through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities and cultures," one that "embodies these diversities as gifts to the human family and rejoices in the variety of God's grace."¹⁹ This goal predates restructure, but it is built into restructure in several concrete ways.

One way this commitment was manifest even before restructure is in the ethnic diversity evident among national staff. This was often mentioned by national executives. One said, for example, "I think there is an almost constant reminder, because our staffs are so inclusive that we often call each other on either a language or decision or style we don't see to be inclusive." Another noted that "this is one of the few places where you see a real diverse group of people coming in and out to work together and they're anywhere from executives to the mailroom."

Relative to the ethnic composition of the denomination's membership (more than 90 percent white), people of color are indeed very substantially overrepresented among the national-setting staff. One executive estimated that only about half the national staff people are white. This is not just a matter of

18. Newman, "Meanings of a Merger," p. 306.

19. *Calling the UCC to Be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church*, General Synod Pronouncement (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1993), p. 1.

filling in the lower ranks of the agencies with minorities. Of the twenty-four senior executives we interviewed, fourteen are European American, six are African American, and four are Hispanic American or Asian American.

The boards of directors of UCC national agencies, elected by the General Synod from nominated ministers and laity, also reflect a serious commitment to diversity. We examined the prerestructure ethnic and racial makeup of the boards of directors for the two Big Boards, and found one-third of the directors to be African American and another third to be Asian American or Hispanic American. To put this in context, consider that a 1996 study of trustees of fifteen types of nonprofits in six U.S. cities found that only 9 percent are African American and only 5 percent are Hispanic American or Asian American.²⁰

It also is relevant to note that even though the UCC is 90 percent Anglo, it does not appear that the substantial minority presence among senior executives has been achieved by hiring outsiders directly to senior positions in the national agency structure. The average length of full-time professional service within the UCC is about twenty years for both white and black senior executives. The average for the few Asian American and Hispanic American senior executives is slightly less, but still substantial: twelve to fourteen years of full-time service to the denomination.

Restructure attempts to further the goal of becoming a true multiracial and multicultural church in several concrete ways, all of which significantly enhance minority group representation in the national church. First, the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries will have a voting member on each of the boards of directors of the three new ministries that had boards of directors. Second, someone from each of eight "historically underrepresented constituencies" will be on the board of directors for each of the three new ministries that had boards. The eight are the Council for American Indian Ministry, Council for Hispanic Ministries, Ministers for Racial and Social Justice, Pacific Island and Asian American Ministries, United Black Christians, United Church Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Concerns, Committee on Persons with Disabilities, and Council for Youth and Young Adults. Third, "More than half of the members of the Board of Directors of Justice and Witness Ministries" — one of only four national ministries in the new structure — "shall be persons of color and more than half shall be women."²¹ Fourth, the new Office of General Ministries will contain "desks" for each of the four "historically underrepresented" ethnic and racial minority constituencies in

20. R. Abzug, "The Evolution of Trusteeship in the United States: A Roundup of Findings from Six Cities," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 7, no. 1 (1996): 101-11.

21. *Report on Restructure*, p. G-13.

the UCC: African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. The first three of these changes are built into the new UCC constitution.

The ongoing effort to become a multiracial and multicultural church extends beyond minority presence in the covenanted ministries and their governance structures. The national ministries also will continue to support the founding of new minority congregations, assist in recruiting minority clergy to the denomination, and conduct diversity briefings in conferences, associations, and congregations. One executive said her main priority is to "work directly with conferences, associations, and local churches as they seek to work for racial justice in their own places. And much of what we do is trying to serve them and to help them to do their work in their own places."

This recently enhanced emphasis on becoming a multiracial and multicultural church seems to have been perceived clearly by regional executives. When a sample of UCC conference ministers was asked whether the denomination has become more or less effective over the past five years in attracting ethnic minority members, almost 60 percent of the UCC regional executives said that effectiveness has increased in this arena. When regional executives in other denominations were asked this question, only about a third (or fewer) responded that their denomination's effectiveness had increased.²² The pattern was similar when the same question was asked about efforts to attract ethnic minority clergy.

These efforts also seem to have met with positive results at the congregational setting. Ninety-one percent of UCC congregations founded before 1986 are predominantly white, but only 57 percent of post-1986 congregations are predominantly white.²³ There also is some indication that the UCC's reputation as a diversity-embracing denomination is attractive to some unaffiliated minority congregations. One national executive observed that "more and more of the different racial/ethnic/immigrant communities come to us . . . because we are a very open kind of church." The pastor of a predominantly Latino congregation confirms this observation when he recounts why his church joined the UCC: "The UCC told me, 'Our church is like a rainbow. A rainbow has different colors. If you become a part of us, you don't have to be like us. You add your own color to our denomination.'" He concludes, "That really impressed me. I've never seen that in working with other denominations."

Minority congregations in the UCC also are growing at a faster rate than are the denomination's European American congregations. Only 15 percent of

22. Lummis, "Summary of UCC Results from the ORW Regional Judicatory Survey."

23. *State of the UCC* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1997), p. 72.

the latter have grown by 10 percent or more from 1991 to 1996, compared to over 25 percent of the former. In all, European American membership in the UCC has declined by almost 15 percent in the last decade, while racial and ethnic minority membership grew by 10 percent.²⁴ Thus, in both rates of founding and growth, ethnic and racial minority congregations are outpacing European American congregations.

Still, some on the national staff are skeptical about the likelihood of many congregations becoming multiracial and multicultural. One national executive stated, "I think we've come a long way [regarding diversity] in the national setting, but in the conference settings and in the local church settings, I've become painfully aware, it's not so." And another executive summarized: "There are, however, times when we find ourselves in a different place than a local church or a conference or association about racial justice and those have tended to be times of tension in the life of the church, where we've had to be prophetic in particular areas." Such pessimism is not baseless. Despite the increased number of congregations that are composed of ethnic minorities, the vast majority of UCC congregations are ethnically homogeneous, and the vast majority remain homogeneously European American. Churches where the largest racial/ethnic group is non-Hispanic white represent 90.8 percent of UCC congregations, followed by African American churches (4.7 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander churches (2.8 percent), and Native American/Other churches (0.4 percent).²⁵ Even if the trend toward more predominantly minority UCC congregations continues, it appears that it will be much more difficult to create diverse congregations than to create diverse national staffs or a diverse General Synod.

Explaining Restructure

Why is the UCC restructuring at this time, and why does the restructure take the form it does? Five factors seem to be driving the restructure.

First, national-setting reorganization can be seen as the late-in-coming culmination of the 1957 merger that created the UCC. Unlike most mergers between Protestant denominations, the UCC merger joined two disparate traditions and organizational structures. It merged two denominations with different social compositions, with the Congregational Churches being composed primarily of long-settled Americans and the Evangelical and Reformed Church made up of

24. *State of the UCC*, p. 73.

25. *State of the UCC*, p. 71.

more recently immigrated German and Swiss populations.²⁶ The two denominations also possessed different polities, congregational versus presbyterian.²⁷ The Congregational Churches had devised a church government in which each church was autonomous from other denominational settings. In contrast, the Evangelical and Reformed Church had a connectional polity system.

As a result of these differences, important issues of organizational coordination were left to be resolved until after the merger. This view is expressed in historical accounts of the merger,²⁸ and it continues to inform both official and informal discourse about organizational issues in this denomination. The Advisory Commission on Structure, for example, concluded to the 1993 General Synod that “the present structure is a result of the compromises reached for the merger.”²⁹ One regional executive recalled that “when we were formed in 1957, they decided it was more important that we come together and work together than to figure out how two structures would work together,” and a national executive explained that “this is the first restructuring, because when the UCC came into being, we weren’t able to organically merge things, the politics weren’t right for it, we had to be forty-five-years-old before we could do this.” In short, the politics of the 1957 merger were such that a governance structure that clearly delineates a division of responsibilities, tasks, and authority among the national units was never established. Further indication of the long-standing organizational issues left unresolved by the original merger is that the current restructure represents the third time the UCC has attempted to reorganize the national setting. Both previous attempts occurred in the 1960s. The first call for reorganization, by a General Synod–appointed Committee on Structure in 1967, was defeated by the organized resistance of the Big Boards. The second attempt, two years later, resulted in the establishment of a new instrumentality, the Office for Church Life and Leadership.

The national organizational scene being further complicated over the years by the ad hoc and unsystematic addition of new national instrumentalities was a second factor driving restructure. As new voices and issues rose to prominence within the UCC, offices representing these identities or addressing these issues were added on to the existing structure, resulting in a multiplication of agencies, greater organizational complexity, and increased demand on

26. Louis Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1977).

27. See this volume’s three pieces on the Reformed Church in America for an elaboration of the difference between congregational and presbyterian polity.

28. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*.

29. *Report of the General Synod Committee on Structure to the Nineteenth General Synod* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1993), p. 6.

resources available to the national structure as a whole. These offices included the Commission on Racial Justice and the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries. This process culminated with the formation of the Coordinating Center for Women in 1987, after which discussions about restructure began. Thus, the fact that the merger left the details of rational organizational consolidation and design for "later," combined with unplanned and unsystematic growth at the national setting, generated a chronic set of perceived organizational inefficiencies. This accounts, in part, for why restructure occurred, and for why it took the form of rationalizing and simplifying functions and offices.

These long-term factors do not explain, however, why restructure occurred when it did. Why did it take forty years from the time of the merger for these underlying structural problems to be addressed? Two additional factors, working in concert, seem particularly relevant. The first is the severely unequal resource bases among national units. The two recognized instrumentalities had charters that predated the denomination, and they had their own endowments and constituencies that gave them a measure of wealth and independence. This financial autonomy was not enjoyed by the other national instrumentalities and the executive offices established by the General Synod and wholly dependent on whatever financial support came to them from the mission benevolence giving of local UCC congregations. Of the \$13.9 million received by the United Church Board for World Ministries in 1996, less than half — \$5.3 million — came from congregations. Even more strikingly, less than 5 percent of the 1996 income for the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries came from congregational donations; the rest — more than \$30 million — came from other gifts, publications, and endowment income. In contrast, the 1996 income of each established instrumentality was, on average, \$692,472, virtually all of which came from congregational donations. This amount constitutes approximately 2 percent of the total income of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, creating vast financial disparities between the various national instrumentalities of the UCC. The Big Boards not only had more resources than the other units; they were far less dependent on congregations for those resources. Furthermore, the salary scales for people doing comparable kinds of work were noticeably different within the Big Boards than within the rest of the national instrumentality staff.

This inequality among the national units was, perhaps, less stressful on the national structure as a whole as long as significant sums continued to come from congregations to support the unendowed instrumentalities. A very important impetus behind restructure, then, is the dramatic decline in monetary resources coming to the national organizations from the congregations. In 1969, \$10.1 million was given by congregations to support the national structure. In 1969 dol-

lars, 1996 annual basic support from congregations to the national structure, not including special collections, was \$2.6 million.³⁰ In real terms, the national agencies of the denomination receive today from congregations only about 25 percent of what they received in 1967. In part, this diminution of funds results from the changed flow of resources through regional conferences. Within the UCC, congregations' donations are immediately sent to conferences, which retain a portion before sending the rest on to national structures. Over the past decade, as reported by one national executive, the proportion of congregations' donations kept by the conferences has increased from approximately 40 percent to approximately 60 percent, resulting in less money for the national setting of the UCC. (This reallocation of resources from national to regional settings apparently is present in other denominations as well.)³¹

It seems plausible to suggest, then, that the monetary dependence of the national instrumentalities — except for the Big Boards — on congregations, coupled with substantially declining support from this source, generated increasing political support among the national leadership for a restructure that reduces the resource dependency of the national organizations on congregations. It is not surprising, in this context, that the privileged position of the Big Boards would seem increasingly unjustifiable, and that an ecclesiology of covenant — including the notion that all denominational organizational manifestations ought to be equal — would emerge. Similarly, it is not surprising in this context of dramatically declining contributions from congregations that restructure would emphasize more than ever before the ways the national organizations can better serve the needs of congregations.

Membership loss is a fifth factor playing a role in UCC restructure. Obviously related to declining resources coming from congregations is the fact that, from a high in the mid-1960s of just over two million members, the UCC had by the time of restructure lost over a third of its members.³² At the same time, the growing minority populations in the United States have not gone unnoticed. As one denominational handbook notes, “by the year 2050, people of color — Native Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Hispanic Americans, African Americans — will be approximately fifty percent of the U.S. population.”³³ The UCC 1997 annual report explicitly connects membership loss with the new emphasis on becoming a multiracial and multicultural church. In

30. *Annual Report of the UCC* (New York: United Church of Christ, 1970); *Annual Report*, 1997.

31. Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism,” p. 89.

32. *State of the UCC*, pp. 17-18.

33. *Case Studies in Becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 1996).

that report the UCC Board for Homeland Ministries stated that its work “is particularly challenging in a time when traditionally mainline denominations continue to experience membership declines.”³⁴ It immediately continues by saying that the UCC’s commitment to becoming a multiracial and multicultural church resulted in a “strategy of new church development among different racial and ethnic communities.” The commitment to multiculturalism and multiracialism, then, in part represents a response to membership loss and a strategy for growth in the face of perceived demographic change.

More generally, the UCC’s commitment to multiracialism and multiculturalism is intended to position the denomination in a new and changing world. This sentiment was voiced by one national executive who said, “[Restructuring] is meant to be a more faithful expression of the UCC for the twenty-first century. It’s trying to address what we think the church ought to do in the twenty-first century.” Another pointed out that “the very basic purpose of restructuring is to seek to more faithfully embody God’s mission in an emerging new time.”

Conclusion

We have described UCC restructure, focusing on two major goals of that restructure and noting five factors that seem important underlying causes of it. Rather than recapitulate this material, we conclude with five additional observations about national-setting organization in the UCC.

First, it is striking that two of the national agencies — the Pension Boards United Church of Christ and the United Church Foundation — remain largely outside the more unified national structure created by this organizational change. There was discussion about whether or not to bring these two agencies under the General Synod umbrella, but this did not come to pass. We think it is worth asking: Why not? Although we have no evidence to draw on here, we venture the speculative hypothesis that national agencies operating in solidly institutionalized secular arenas will be better able to maintain autonomy from other denominational units and will be less vulnerable to efforts aimed at simplifying or rationalizing national structures. The management of pension funds and endowments entails technologies and standards that are well institutionalized in the secular world, and conformity to these technologies and standards is enforced both by regulatory authorities and by legal, accounting, and financial professionals who do the core work of these instrumentalities. We think the

34. *Annual Report*, 1997.

deeper embeddedness of these organizations in secular institutional fields — deeper than any of the other national UCC instrumentalities — accounts for their relative immunity from restructuring agendas. There is an irony here. If one major goal of restructuring has been to rein in national units perceived to have been too autonomous from the rest of the denomination, it is striking that the two agencies that are probably the most autonomous are also the two that remain largely untouched by restructuring. This line of thinking implies that the available options for national denominational organization will, in general, be strongly influenced not just by characteristics internal to the denomination, but also by characteristics of the institutional fields within which the various denominational units operate.

Second, it is interesting to note that the UCC's new form of commitment to diversity is of a piece with recent developments in the corporate world. The professional management literature of the 1990s pays substantially more attention to diversity than did the literature of the 1980s, and today it is relatively common for corporations to endorse diversity in their mission statements, provide diversity training for employees, and develop diversity "action plans."³⁵ Even the explicit attention within the UCC to growth through appeal to minority groups seems similar to corporations that promote developing a more diverse workforce as good business strategy. This corporate logic, as adopted by the UCC, appears to have altered the denomination's historic equation of diversity with justice. Diversity is now pursued not only because it is just but also because it is good organizational strategy. We suggest that denominational organizing or reorganizing often will incorporate prevailing norms and models from the business world, and the study of how religious work is organized ought to focus in part on the perhaps unintentional ways in which religious organizations mimic corporate models of organization.

Third, although we have not systematically assessed the strength of the connections among the three main structural expressions of the UCC — congregations, regional conferences, and national ministries — it seems to us that UCC conferences are fairly closely tied to the national organizations. It also seems that, although the ability of conference offices to maintain a presence with congregations often is constrained by conferences' limited (and often declining) budgets and staffs, congregations are more strongly connected to conferences than to the national agencies. This pattern suggests that denominational organizations, and perhaps federalist structures more generally, are

35. Lauren B. Edelman, Sally Riggs Fuller, and Iona Mara-Drita, "Legal Environments and Managerial Rhetorics: The Construction of Diversity in the Post Civil Rights Era" (School of Law, University of California–Berkeley, 1999).

characterized by what we might call the intransitivity of connectedness. That is, it seems that one can have a national setting that is fairly well connected to the regional setting, and a regional setting that is fairly well connected to the local setting, but this does not mean that the national setting will be well connected to the local setting. If this intransitivity holds, then strengthening connections between the national and the regional settings of denomination organization may not have any effect at all on connections between congregations and the national denomination. The complex connections among local, regional, and national units of denominations warrant more attention.

Fourth, UCC restructuring, to an unprecedented extent within this denomination, has placed real organizational power in the hands of historically underrepresented groups. We wonder what effects, if any, this aspect of restructure will have on identity politics within the UCC. Will new groups or identities emerge to challenge the constitutional privileges granted to the eight historically underrepresented groups? If that occurs, how will those privileged by restructure respond? More generally, will those traditionally on the outside become the entrenched powers and conservative defenders of the organizational status quo? Will promoting diversity come to be associated with defending, rather than challenging, current organizational practices? It will be interesting to see if the UCC's institutionalization of its commitment to becoming a multi-racial and multicultural church has unintended consequences for intradenominational politics.

Fifth, UCC restructure should be understood in part as an expression of loyalty to and confidence in the UCC as a collective identity. Recall that UCC restructure could not have occurred without the cooperation of the Big Boards; indeed, it was opposition from those boards that effectively prevented earlier efforts at restructuring. We have argued that declining resources coming to the national setting from congregations enhanced the inequality between the Big Boards and the other national units, and that this altered the political dynamics in the whole church in ways that made restructure more attractive, but it seems unlikely that this is the whole story. In a sense, the central fact about UCC restructuring is that two more or less autonomous and healthy organizations gave up a considerable degree of autonomy and control over their resources and transformed themselves into subordinate units of a new organization. According to historical and personal accounts of this transition, the heads of both of the recognized instrumentalities voluntarily led their agencies into closer union with the rest of the denomination. Neither of the Big Boards had to do this for any compelling pragmatic reasons, and we close this case study by suggesting that this action should be understood, in part, as an expression of the continuing significance of denominational identity at the national setting.

Denominational identities may be of declining significance in some senses and in some contexts, but UCC collective identity apparently continues to be strong among those most actively involved with the denomination's national organizations. Perhaps it is more generally true that, at this juncture, the primary carriers of denominational identities are the staff, trustees, and other individuals directly associated with national-level denominational organizations. From this perspective, part of the religious work conducted at the national setting is the maintenance of denominational identity itself.

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