

CONSULTATION ON  
CHURCH UNION

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re COCU/UCC "A Call for Study and Action"

Dear Paul,

The study guide asks me to address this response to you, otherwise I'd've addressed it directly to Jn. Thomas in response to his gracious letter to me, accompanying the guide & CHURCHES IN COVENANT COMMUNION: THE CHURCH OF CHRIST UNITING (COCU/89).

Before following the guide numbers I've a story to tell, a story that will show why I'm so enthusiastic about the present COCU goal, its new definition of church union as fundamentally organic rather than organizational, as "covenant communion" (& somewhat also why I was so against the original merger pipedream).

In preparation for WCC N.America "The Nature of the Unity We Seek" (Oberlin '57), I wrote the feature article--"Unity Through Community"--in the 8 May 57 CHRISTIAN CENTURY. As the representative of the International Council of Community Churches, I was preaching the **local ecumene**, "the local church" as meaning all God's Christian folk "in one place" (to use the WCC, & now the COCU, phrase). At Oberlin, I had a plenary confrontation with Eugene Carson Blake as to how the Church should body itself forth in local Christian fellowship & mission. He & that flaky bp. Jas. Pike, the other father of COCU, were dreaming of denominational merger, & that seemed to me both utopian & impoverishing. After my speech, Gene Blake called my local-ecumene suggestion a "monstrosity." But when I confronted him after the meeting, he scaled down his statement: "I meant," he said, "an administrative monstrosity"--meaning that denominational execs would have trouble with the emerging local forms of unity.

The essence of my argument was that we can more easily & more fruitfully act our way, than think our way, into unity: when we are together in local mission & come together to pray that the Spirit purify & empower our vision, theology & ministry will take form from, & help shape, the local mission. (At the time, as acting president of the Ill. Council of Churches, I was pushing this conviction in our annual study conference & across the state.)

No wonder I'm enthusiastic about the new shape of COCU: "to live and act as one covenant communion in that place" (CCC.31). Too, COCU's new goal is not anticonciliar: synergism, rather ("cooperative, complementary, and mutually enriching" [CCC.32]). Truman Douglass, for one, hailed what I was about, & brought me into UCBHM not long after the formation of the UCC.

CSA is an excellent studyguide! I'm so much in agreement that I needn't comment on all the questions.

### Response Section I

1. Yes....2. Our work with the Disciples is in some ways a vanguard for the new COCU program....3. Yes....4. Yes! My story (above) could spell this out. Eg, a 6am weekly clergy breakfast strictly for prayer & the reading of devotional classics prepared us for action together....6. Yes!....7. Good.

### RESPONSE SECTION II

1. Yes....2. I would not go further than the Consultation on "inclusiveness" formally; but the gospel has a preferential option for spirit over institution, even for wildness over custom & heart over mind, for the mood of cruciform vulnerability over calculating self-protection (personal & organizational). I am for "truly catholic, truly evangelical, truly reformed"; but the thought of excluding anybody makes me squirm in my chair. I'm more comfortable with the principle of self-exclusion (1Jn. 2.19) than with the principle of ejection (1Cor.5.5, even with salvific intent). While God is "Judge of all the earth," in the gospel he models magnanimous benevolence; we have Mt.7.1 as cautionary logion; & "Who do you think you are to judge your

fellow?" (Jas.4.12). We must, however, exclude the excluders, refuse to tolerate the intolerant. These narrow-spirited folk inhabit the far left/right extremes of the UCC & plot to capture the middle so as to squeeze out, exclude, what they abominate. Eg, we are in some danger that the radical-feminist spirit will capture the new hymnal, excluding all or most masculine references to God (Father/Son/Lord/King/he-his-him et al), using this as the selective principle to exclude hymn classics not easily bowdlerizable to rad.-fem. PC. Not much chance of Biblical Witness Fellowship types taking over: our danger is mainly from the left..

..4. The Trinity is liturgically-theologically unsustainable without Father-Son-Spirit. The six affirmations drop the first two of these essential words. Unless these elisions are repaired, I would lose interest in COCU & try to help others lose interest....5. Good....6. Yes....8. I fear creeping bureaucracy here. Yes, to local covenanting councils, but go light on the regional & national levels.

### Response Section III

5. Splendid work!....In the middle of p.28 of CALL, a comma is necessary: "...presence,...." ....Because the regional & local services are derivatives of the national, I'll let my comments on the last (pp.43-46) suffice:

47, 4 lines from bottom: add "who," to read "who, through...."

5 " " " : "God our Father" is preferable. (CALL.58, CCC.50.) "Trinity" (cap) appears on pp.54 & 56: the persons should appear in the (p.47) "Prayer of Confession," as should "Savior" & "Lord" (both, 49).

I suggest: "...God our Father, who..., who, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, in the power of the HS,...." 49: Be consistent in capitalization: either "Holy Scriptures" here or "holy Scriptures" on p.53....Bottom of p.49: "The Word of the Lord" (twice) is preferable.

50, top: Note 3rd place for deciding on capitalization of "Holy Scriptures"; but I prefer, here, "The Bible is brought..." The liturgical "the Holy Scriptures" is high-falutin in a rubric.

50: Of the N.-C. Creed, neither the Greek nor the Latin can sustain the inclusive-language revisionism, "truly human." (On p.55, in free composition, "fully human" is not only acceptable but excellent.) The English language is more flexible than any other, but will not tolerate eliding the two basic instances of generic "man," viz in the "God/man" dyad & in the "nature/man" dyad. (As to the latter, "inclusive language" hasn't made a dent in science writing either technical or [as on TV] popular.) Further, "truly human" is a quality note: the Creed here point not to quality but only to identity, viz our species, "man." The revisionism here is not only (1) in violation of a classic text & (2) clumsy, but also inaccurate.

52, near top: Punctuation error; should read "...Union, that...."

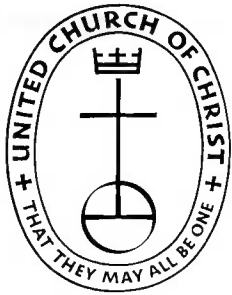
50, mid-p.: Change to "men and women." The reverse is polite-political, like "Ladies and gentlemen." Further, females-first sets up questionable vibes here. Is the implication the there'll be more female than male ordinands? Or has the superiority of the female been confused with the hormonal priority of the male? We feminized children in our Sunday schools: are we in the doleful process of feminizing adults in our churches? Use "women and men" only in contexts requiring that gender-order. (NB: I'm strongly FOR the ordination of women!)

52, near bottom: Doctrinal problems here: (1) I see Is.61/L.4, but where's Mt.28 (Christ's mission, lit. "sending forth")? In the '68-'69 UCC denominational emphasis, the book "The Local Church in God's Mission" put Christ's mission within God's & the local church's mission within the larger church's mission.....(2) "God's mission: to preach good news to the poor" (a phrase beloved of liberation theology) is to be <sup>not</sup> contrasted with (p.55) "preaching good news" to everybody (& it won't do to metaphorize "poor" in Is.61/L.4, though it's done in Mt.5: L.6 agrees with L.4)....The ¶ needs to be recast; & drop "and" before "to set at liberty...."

53: Why capitalize "Holy Communion" but not "baptism"? The failure to cap the latter makes it appear that it's the lesser of the two sacraments of the gospel. Make the capitalization of the two sacraments consistent throughout this liturgy.

54: "or some other suitable hymn" is redundant: "such as" means the mentioned hymn is only one possibility.

55: Should read "our Helper. As...."....Read "preaching the good news of salvation...."....59: Do not cap "Presbyters."....61: Read "A Bishop."



United Church of Christ

September 15, 1992

Dr. Willis Elliott  
309 Lake Elizabeth Dr.  
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Dear Willis:

I am looking forward to hearing your response to the proposals of the Consultation on Church Union in Churches in Covenant Communion. While the Study Guide is written primarily for groups, we are also very interested in the response of individuals from the United Church of Christ, particularly those with the breadth of experience and depth of insight you bring. (While the reminder that you are UCC clergy was appreciated, it was hardly necessary! Doesn't everyone know who you are?)

Let me know if you need any of the other resource materials. All the best for a glorious autumn on the Cape.

Sincerely,

John H. Thomas  
Assistant to the President  
for Ecumenical Concerns

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