

# More than Just Four Traditions

## EXPLORING HIDDEN HISTORIES OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

### prepare

#### What's behind all this?

We have a common story we tend to tell about the beginning of the United Church of Christ. The simple version is this: The United Church of Christ came into being in 1957 with the union of two Protestant denominations: the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. Further back in history, each of these denominations was, in turn, the result of a union of two earlier traditions.

However, a more full story of the United Church of Christ isn't quite as simple as that story sounds. In addition to those four traditions, there are many other churches and other cultures with powerful histories that often go untold. In truth, many of these stories and communities have significantly influenced and shaped the UCC into the Church it is today.

In this lesson, participants are invited to expand upon the four traditions story and learn some of the often untold or hidden histories of the UCC. Together, these histories help to paint a more accurate account of the historical beginnings and development of the denomination.

#### Participants' Perspectives

- Folks who love history will find the stories of the UCC interesting in themselves.
- For others who find learning history for history's sake dull, it will be helpful to make the connections between the historical roots and how they continue to shape the UCC today. Hint: these hidden histories have much experience and wisdom to lend the contemporary Church, and these may be part of your local context.

#### *As you prepare for this session*

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

#### *Where is this going?*

Participants will explore some of the hidden histories and unfolding histories of the UCC.

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# encounter

## Video

1. Warm Up  
Review the common story told about the beginning of the United Church of Christ and how the UCC came into being in 1957 when the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches merged together. Suggest to participants that the story is not nearly as simple as that may seem.
2. Watch  
“More than Just Four Traditions: Exploring Hidden Histories of the United Church of Christ”
3. Unpack
  - Why does Randi Walker call it the “myth of four traditions”?
  - In addition to the four, what other traditions have influenced the UCC?
  - What purpose has the story of the four traditions served?
  - Is it perhaps time for a more complicated or more nuanced story? What story would you tell?

### Materials:

-Ability to show video

# engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session’s themes.

## Activity One: Hidden Histories

As the introduction to the book *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ* explains, “History is not always neat and fair. And the UCC history is more complex than the historical orthodoxy [of the four traditions story] that informs its self-image. The United Church of Christ is an extremely pluralistic and diverse denomination that is nourished by many ‘hidden histories.’ These important stories out of its past do not appear within the traditional fourfold history. Yet, as Louis Gunnemann says, ‘only when churchpeople know the beliefs, movements, and events that make up their history will they be able to accept ownership and be shaped by that history.’”

In this book, the authors explore many of the often unknown, or hidden, histories of the the UCC. It is the authors’ hope that, by preserving these stories and sharing them throughout the UCC, the Church can come to honor these stories and expand knowledge about the diversity of contemporary church life. Reading these stories stretches one’s understanding of the UCC beyond just the four traditions myth.

### Materials:

-Copies of chosen essays from *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ*

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Both volumes of *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ* are available in PDF form on [ucc.org](http://ucc.org). Select one or multiple histories for your group to read through when they are together and discuss what they are learning. Alternatively, a leader could present the information by way of storytelling.

In *Hidden Histories*, you will find essays on Native American Protestantism, black Christian churches, a schism in the German Reformed Church, Armenian congregationalism's missionary beginnings, German congregationalism, blacks and the American Missionary Association, Deaconess ministries, the Schwenkfelders, the Calvin Synod (Hungarian), women's work and women's boards, Japanese-American congregationalists, and many others.

## Activity Two: The American Missionary Association

The stories of the American Missionary Association are not often told. With deep ties to the Congregationalist tradition, the AMA was founded in 1846 by both black and white leaders who were committed to ending slavery. Among their long list of achievements, they established more than 500 schools and colleges for freed slaves, as well as many churches throughout the South.

Learn more about the AMA by watching the video "The American Missionary Association." Alternatively, there is an essay about the AMA in *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ*.

After the video, discuss with participants the history of the AMA.

- Why did it begin?
- What was its purpose?
- How did it evolve?
- What challenges did it face?
- How did it help shape the UCC's predecessor denominations?
- How has its work continued to shape the UCC?
- Why is this history often unknown or untold in the wider UCC?
- Where might you share the story about or your learnings from the AMA?

## Activity Three: Movements for Justice and Equality

While some of the hidden histories of the UCC happened hundreds of years ago, there are more recent histories and stories that are hidden in our midst, just out of sight. The stories of UCC visionaries who have lived and served during historic and pivotal moments provide a powerful testament to the work of God's people in the world and their work in the Church.

### Materials:

-Ability to show video

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-Ability to show video

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With participants, watch “Hidden Histories: Movements for Justice and Equality.”

After the video, ask participants

- What history was familiar to you? What history was new to you?
- Of these stories, which stuck out the most to you? Why?
- How do these stories speak to the core values of the UCC?
- How has this work and the work of those the host collaborated with continued to shape the UCC?
- Why is this history often unknown or untold in the wider UCC?
- Where might you share the stories about or your learnings about these hidden, historical moments in movements for justice and equality?

### Activity Four: The City of Refuge UCC

There are many churches that have joined the United Church of Christ since it was formed in 1957. Some are new church starts, and some have their beginnings in other denominations. However they came to be a part of the UCC, each of these churches adds to the richness of our denomination and each testifies that the UCC is indeed a denomination that strives towards Christian unity, though not uniformity. Listening to the stories of churches that have joined the UCC long after its formation helps us to see how the UCC continues to grow and change and that the UCC is not simply four traditions but many, many diverse traditions.

With participants, watch “Telling the Stories of Our Always Uniting Church: The Story of City of Refuge UCC.”

After the video, ask participants

- Have you heard of City of Refuge UCC before? What do you know about the church or The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries ([radicallyinclusive.com](http://radicallyinclusive.com)) which City of Refuge UCC’s founding pastor, Yvette Flunder, also founded and of which the church is a part?
- What stood out to you as you heard the stories and histories of City of Refuge UCC?
- The UCC is a united and uniting church. What does that mean? How does City of Refuge UCC exemplify the UCC’s hope to always be a united and uniting Church?
- What are the core values of the UCC? (Hint: the core values of the UCC are covered in greater detail in the initial lesson of the curriculum. The core values are continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives.) How do the stories of City of Refuge UCC exemplify the core values of the UCC?
- What’s unique about the governance of this church? How does this type of governance and relationship to other churches compare and contrast to other churches in the UCC?
- Why is it important to know and to listen to the story of City of Refuge UCC in the wider UCC?
- How might you share the stories about or your learnings about this church?

#### *Materials:*

-Ability to show video

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#### Activity Five: The Stories of Native Americans in the UCC: The Dakota Association

Early writings of settlers in North America make clear that the relationship between the Christian church and Native Americans was influenced by attitudes of colonialism and imperialism. This history often goes untold, because churches and missionaries participated in detrimental, concerted efforts to eradicate Native spirituality and culture. They set up boarding schools to remove children from their families of origin for the purpose of teaching Western customs. They insisted on conversion to a conservative and evangelical form of Christian practice and shamed people for retaining any indigenous practices. They neglected to address spiritually devastating events happening to Native Americans. They failed to advocate for Native Americans when their land was being claimed by settlers using the Doctrine of Discovery and instead justified it as assisting in Christianization.

Some people may be surprised to hear that the UCC's predecessor denominations participated in these practices or may shy away from talking about these painful histories. But to do so would also silence the important stories and traditions of many congregations within the UCC.

Here, we listen to the stories of one particular gathering of Native American churches known as the Dakota Association. The Dakota Association and its churches speak to different histories that often remain an unknown part of the UCC.

It is also important to note that the Dakota Association is a part of a larger group known as the Council for American Indian Ministry (CAIM). CAIM connects and supports 22 congregations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota as well as the Eagle Butte Learning Center, an educational center designed to enhance the leadership skills among clergy and lay leaders of their UCC congregations.

CAIM writes, "We are an integral part of the life of the United Church of Christ. We maintain our Indian traditions by employing our Native values and cultures to witness in our communities through authentic and postcolonial Indian expressions of the Christian faith. We are a gathering place for all UCC Indian people who seek such a place."

With participants, watch "Discovered? Or Stolen! Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery" available through the United Church of Christ's YouTube channel.

After the video, ask participants

- What is the Doctrine of Discovery? Who created it? What was its purpose? What was the immediate consequence?
- What was the Indian Removal Act? What did it do? What consequences resulted?

#### *Materials:*

- Ability to show video
- Copies of Synod Resolution

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- How did early missionary work in Native communities prioritize conversion to Christianity and assimilation to Western norms?
- What was the boarding school experiment? How did boarding schools shift Native culture both short term and long term?
- What is the ongoing impact of the Doctrine of Discovery?
- Review the resolution to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery brought before General Synod 29. What action does it call congregations to?

Listen in to a second perspective about congregational life within the Dakota Association. With participants, watch “Unfolding Stories: The Dakota Association.”

After the video, ask participants

- What’s one thing that stood out to you as you listened?
- Describe the tension between missionary work and colonialism. How did you hear it evidenced in the host’s reflections?
- What parallels were drawn between Native American traditions and Christianity? How do they differ? How do they go hand in hand?
- How is the Dakota Association living into the core values of the UCC (continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives)?
- Why is it important to listen to the Dakota Association tell their history and story in the wider UCC? How might you share the stories or your learnings about the Dakota Association and its history?

## wrap-up

### Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you’ve discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do in response?

### Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

### Sending

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the rich and diverse history of the UCC that has shaped the Church today and a blessing for each of the participants as they seek to tell true stories, not just easy stories, about life, faith, and the Spirit’s work in the world.