

Statement of Faith

TESTIMONY, NOT TEST

prepare

What's behind all this?

Sometimes people ask, “What does the UCC believe?”

The answer to the question is a bit messier than you might imagine. While other denominations, like Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, have clear creeds, confessions, catechisms, and books of order that tell people in detail what they should believe to be faithful members, the UCC does not. There is no one place that you can find an authoritative description of UCC theology or doctrine. However, this is not meant to imply that the UCC has no clear beliefs or no doctrine. There are statements about our essential and common theology in a number of places. For example, the Basis of Union names our commitment to unity. The Constitution and Bylaws, even through their many iterations, affirm Jesus as the head of the Church. They also affirm that we name as our own the historical creeds and confessions of the Christian tradition, as well as the wisdom of the Protestant reformers. Our *Book of Worship* asks the following questions of new members and confirmands as they join the Church: Do you believe in God? In Jesus Christ? In the Holy Spirit? Like other historic creeds and confessions, the UCC's Statement of Faith rehearses the story of God, who not only spoke creation into being but continues to speak today.

But the UCC's Statement of Faith is unique in that it serves as a testimony to the faith of the whole Church, not as a test for individual members. It speaks of the promises of God, the teachings of Jesus, the work of the Spirit, and the call of the Church as a joyful act of worship, not as a legal document that would define orthodoxy or create a litmus test for who is in and who is out.

Historically speaking, the first Statement of Faith was written following the formation of the UCC in 1957. Together a committee studied many expressions of faith, including the ancient creeds, the confessions from the Reformation, Congregational covenants, and a variety of statements of other denominations. They looked at New Testament declarations and Hebrew Scripture affirmations. Through many conversations with one another and with local churches and after many drafts, the committee finalized a statement, which was then presented to General Synod. More discussion followed. The committee listened, then met and made revisions, and presented a revised statement to the General Synod.

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 UCC theology through its foundational documents and the Statement of Faith.

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In 1977, Robert V. Moss, then president of the UCC, recommended a revision to the Statement of Faith which used inclusive language, and in 1983 the General Synod affirmed a revision in the form of a doxology. All three versions continue to circulate within the UCC, because after all, the Statement of Faith is a testimony, not a test. It speaks of the story of our faith and offers words to express the experience of faith, but it is not an exclusive or definitive theological statement (its revisions alone testify to that very point). Each person is free to interpret it, disagree, or shout “amen” to its words. As was hoped when the UCC began and as expressed in the Basis of Union, it remains the task of every person, every church, and every generation to express our faith in the words of our time as God inspires.

Participants’ Perspectives

- For participants who are more familiar with creedal traditions, the idea that there is no definitive statement of UCC theology may be a bit uncomfortable. For some, creedal traditions, which provide a clear set of beliefs one should affirm to be a part of the church, create a more clear sense of identity and foster a sense of unity.
- For participants that have struggled with being expected or forced to subscribe to a certain set of beliefs in order to belong to a church, or who have disagreed with what they were “supposed” to believe, understanding the complexity of UCC theology and the Statement of Faith may be a liberating experience.
- For participants of any background, it may feel vulnerable to articulate and voice what it is that they believe. To hear that they are invited, even expected, to ask critical questions of tradition and to articulate their own beliefs, particularly in conversation and collaboration with others in Christian community, may stretch them beyond their usual comfort zone.

encounter

Video

1. Warm Up

Hang four sheets of newsprint around the room with these headings:

- I believe that God...
- I believe that Jesus...
- I believe that the Holy Spirit...
- I believe that the Church...

Ask participants to move between the newsprint and write down how they would finish each sentence. After participants have circulated and had a chance to write, ask them to revisit each sheet and take a look at the diversity of what folks have written down.

Materials:

- Ability to show video
- Newsprint
- Markers

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2. Watch
“The Statement of Faith: A Testimony, Not Test”
3. Unpack
 - Participants wrote “I believe...” statements a little bit ago. The Statement of Faith, however, is a communal statement that says, “We believe...” What does that change in language signify?
 - What does it mean that the Statement of Faith is a testimony, not a test?
 - What stands out to you about the Statement of Faith?
 - How is the UCC the same or different from other traditions you’ve been exposed to when it comes to how it understands and uses creeds?

engage

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

Activity One: Deduction Junction, What’s Your Function?

It is true that there is no one place that UCC theology is exactly written down in some formula, and yet that does not mean that the UCC has no clear beliefs or doctrines. Much of our essential theology and beliefs must be deduced by looking at a number of different documents, writings, and resources.

Run copies of the Basis of Union and the Constitution and Bylaws, and have copies of the *Book of Worship* and the *New Century Hymnal* available. Divide participants into groups and give each group one of the resources. Ask them to look through the resource and make a list of what they can deduce about UCC theology.

If they need some help to get started, ask the following:

What understanding of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit do the documents reflect? Are there certain theological lessons or values that the documents are trying to instill by way of how the Church is organized? Are there words that sound theological in nature that are being used over and over again?

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are you finding?
- How is that similar or different than what other people are finding?
- How does the theology you are finding compare with the beliefs taught or exemplified in your congregation?
- Are there other ways to interpret the deductions you are making from the documents? (Example: “Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church.” Is that a statement about who Jesus was, a statement against having bishops or a pope, or something else?)

Materials:

- Copies of the Basis of Union and the Constitution and Bylaws
- New Century Hymnals
- Book of Worship
- Paper
- Pens or pencils

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- Is it exciting or frustrating to be a part of a tradition that requires so much deduction? Why?
- How does UCC theology and its complexity reflect the UCC's value of "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity!"

Activity Two: Side by Side

Following the merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957, the co-presidents of the united churches appointed a committee of people to work toward writing a Statement of Faith for the new denomination. Together the committee studied many expressions of faith, including the ancient creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon, the confessions from the Reformation, Congregational covenants, the confessions of the United Church of Canada and the Church of South India, and the basis of the World Council of Churches. They looked at New Testament declarations and Hebrew Scripture affirmations. From all of these influences, they compiled, drafted, and edited the Statement of Faith as a modern testimony for the UCC. Help participants connect the influence of ancient creeds, modern understandings, and the various adaptations that the authors made in forming the Statement of Faith.

Gather up a variety of historical creeds and confessions. Be sure to include any that are used by your congregation on a consistent basis. A variety of influential creeds and statements are available on the "UCC History and Polity Resources" page within ucc.org.

Hand out a copy of one or two historic creeds as well as the Statement of Faith. Ask participants to compare and contrast the historic creed with the UCC's current Statement of Faith.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What similarities are you finding?
- What evidence do you see that a historic creed may have influenced the UCC's Statement of Faith? What commonalities do they share?
- What differences in language or tone do you see between the historic creed and the Statement of Faith? What might account for the difference?
- What aspects of the historic creeds were left out or altered significantly? Why might they have been left out or altered?
- How do changes between historic creeds and the UCC's Statement of Faith reflect the idea that it remains the task of every person, every church, and every generation to express our faith in the words of our time as God gives us light, as the Basis of Union once said?

Materials:

- Copies of the current Statement of Faith
- Copies of historic creeds
 - Apostles' Creed
 - Nicene Creed
 - Heidelberg Catechism
 - Evangelical Catechism
 - Augsburg Confession
 - Cambridge Platform
 - Kansas City Statement of Faith

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Activity Three: “We believe...”

The statement of faith was written by a committee of people as a testimony to the church, not a test of individual members. The Statement of Faith was meant to testify to the essence of the Christian story and put the story into words in a way that people of the UCC could celebrate it. It is no small task to formulate such a testimony, especially when the interpretation of scripture and stories vary in beautiful, far ranging ways. In this exercise, participants will get to experience the beauty and challenges of writing a Statement of Faith together.

Divide participants into groups of four or five. Ask them to write together a Statement of Faith that reflects the beliefs and theology of the UCC. Help them note that the Statement of Faith makes “we” statements not “I” statements. The Statement of Faith is not as much a personal testimony as it is testimony for the community.

If participants are having difficulty knowing where to start, help them brainstorm how they could structure it or what major ideas or references to stories they think are vital to include. Help participants think through what essential parts of Christian faith they want to convey.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What essential stories of God’s work in the world were you sure refer to? Why? What about Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Why did you include (or not include) what you did?
- The UCC Statement of Faith includes a section about the Church and what the Church is called to do. Did you include anything about the role of the Church?
- Were there any disagreements about what should be included or not? How do you suppose your disagreements compare with those of the writers of the Statement of Faith?
- What made this exercise challenging?
- Would you feel comfortable writing a Statement of Faith for the entire UCC? Why or why not? How does your answer reflect the UCC’s deductive approach to our theology?

Invite different groups to share their statements aloud. Ask participants what commonalities they see and what differences. Spend some time talking through anything significant that was debated within the group or theological themes in the UCC’s Statement of Faith that were absent from the group’s statement.

Activity Four: Make a Statement

Follow the directions for activity three but instead of having the groups write a statement out in words, ask participants to create a collage from pictures clipped from magazines that depict a Statement of Faith. Give them the instructions that they are creating a work of art to depict a Statement of Faith as a testimony to the whole UCC.

Materials:

- Paper
- Pens or pencils

Materials:

- Poster board or newsprint
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Glue

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Use the questions for conversation while participants work listed in activity three.

When they've finished, invite different groups to show their statements. Ask other groups to interpret the Statement of Faith they are seeing before asking the group to explain their work. Spend some time talking through the differences of what was meant and what was interpreted and how these differences are similar to how members of the UCC interpret the Statement of Faith today. Ask if any of the elements of the statement were debated within the group and express curiosity about why the group didn't include particular theological themes (if any significant themes are missing).

wrap-up

Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you've discovered and learned today. If helpful, sum up the major learnings about UCC theology 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

Gather around the sheets of newsprint. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the rich diversity of beliefs in the UCC; in the essentials we find unity, in non-essentials we have freedom to disagree, but in all things we practice charity with one another.