

# UCC ROOTS

## *Remembering our History*

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April 2019

### The First President of the United Church of Christ

The United Church of Christ came into existence in 1957. For its first four years, leaders from the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed traditions served as Co-Presidents. Finally, in 1961, guided by a new UCC Constitution, the Third General Synod elected a local Ohio pastor named Ben Mohr Herbster (1904-1984) as the first President of the United Church of Christ.

Some people were surprised. Herbster was not a nationally known religious leader. However, he had been a key member of the General Council of the Evangelical and Reformed Church during the years of union negotiations with the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches. During those difficult years there were moments when it seemed that both sides might withdraw. One time, Herbster was asked to share some reflections. “Remember,” he said, “*the only matter we have to consider is whether the proposed union is according to the mind of Christ.*” His words became a turning point.

Years later, when accepting the Presidency Herbster once again called the Church to focus on the demands of the Gospel. . . , [including] “*an unending effort to guarantee to all men, women and children, here in America and to the ends of the earth, a chance to live in freedom, good will, justice and advantage.*”

Herbster continued to press the United Church of Christ to face new challenges. In 1963, he called the Fourth General Synod to order amid the racial unrest roiling the country. He asked the Synod to set aside its regular business “*in order that we can face the present crisis. . . and agree on action that cries out to God to be undertaken. . . . We shall betray our Lord if we take no action now.*” His theologically grounded reminders led to the establishment of the Commission for Racial Justice, and its work reshaped UCC identity in dramatic ways.

*Contributor: John H. Thomas*

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