

Biblical Covenants, Polity, and the United Church of Christ

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## ABSTRACT

### BIBLICAL COVENANTS, POLITY, AND THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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How can a denomination with a polity and structure centered on the belief that the local church is autonomous from other churches, associations, conferences, and the National Office create mutually beneficial covenants that hold all parties together? This is the question at the center of my work. As a UCC minister, I have a front-row seat to the dysfunction, confusion, and lack of connection created by the UCC polity. Without solid and clear covenants, we lack connection, purpose, and meaning as a denomination. How did we get here, and what can we do about it? To understand how we got here, we have to go back to where it all began. I start my paper by looking at the UCC's foundational documents, precisely the 1947 "Basis of Union," to assess how the founders wrestled with this same question. From there, I examine minutes from different General Synods and the works of several prominent UCC scholars to find answers to my questions.

Although my analysis did not yield an answer to my central question, it did reveal a new question: Do we understand John 17: 21? Here, Jesus' vision of unity, "That They May All Be One," functions as the biblical justification for the UCC's aspirational goal of autonomous unity. The UCC founders created this denomination because they believed they lived into Jesus' prayer for unity. Getting to the heart of John 17: 21 could help us find a way to create lasting covenants. In doing a deep dive into biblical scholarship, I uncovered the UCC's misreading of the text, which has led to our current dysfunctional system. Changing our understanding of the text could allow us to create a new polity that

can live authentically into Jesus' prayer for unity and offer the denomination a structure where autonomous bodies can be held together through strong and concise covenants.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the good people at Community Church of Cedar Grove who believed in me and who supported my journey every step of the way. I still pinch myself when I think about how lucky I am to be your pastor.

And to my wife, Bailey Jo Welch-Pomerantz, who pushed me to go back to school and helped me dream big. I love you, and I like you.

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## AUTONOMY, POLITY, AND COVENANTS IN THE UCC

In her book entitled *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brene' Brown offers this assessment of human connection. She writes, "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it, there is suffering."<sup>1</sup> Brown's argument on connection helps us understand the motivation behind creating a covenant. Covenants formalize the connection we want to have with others while also providing a framework to hold each party accountable to that agreement. Connection is the glue that holds a covenant in place:

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is a denomination made up of local churches, associations, conferences, and the National Office. The UCC's organizational structure grants autonomy to local churches, as defined in Article V Local Churches in the Constitution: The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs<sup>2</sup>

Autonomy, as it is defined here, allows for the local church to operate as if it stands alone.

Holding autonomous bodies together in a conventual relationship based on a shared connection requires precise and robust language. Article III in the Constitution defines covenant as this:

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the Church has

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<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012), 10.

<sup>2</sup> The United Church of Christ, "Constitution and Bylaws" [8.14.2019 UCC Bylaws Ratified Final \(uccfiles.com\)](https://www.uccfiles.com/8.14.2019_UCC_Bylaws_Ratified_Final) Accessed on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole Church will seek God's will and be faithful to 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. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.<sup>3</sup>

This covenant attempts to bind the various expressions of the UCC together to achieve a shared goal. Still, it never resolves the tension of how autonomous bodies connect to other autonomous bodies. The word "autonomy" does not appear anywhere in this covenant. There cannot be a shared connection if the local church can always prioritize its needs over the denomination's.

As Brown noted, a lack of connection leads to suffering. There are real-life consequences to the UCC's ambiguity on covenant relationships, the result being a polity that provides no accountability over the Commissions, the pastors, the churches, or denominational leaders. A lack of accountability allows for potential abuse. Those in power keep it because the system will enable them to do so without fear of consequence. Autonomy means no one can abide by the UCC's covenantal relationship.

Lack of accountability and oversight means that an individual seeking ordination can experience emotional and spiritual abuse at the hands of leaders who genuinely believe that they are protecting the sacrament's sanctity.<sup>4</sup>The UCC's ordination process is lengthy and has many requirements that a Member in Discernment (MID) must fulfill if they wish to be ordained. A MID is under the Pre-Ordination Commission's direct

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<sup>3</sup> The United Church of Christ, "Constitution and Bylaws" [8.14.2019\\_UCC\\_Bylaws\\_Ratified\\_Final \(uccfiles.com\)](https://www.uccfiles.com/8.14.2019_UCC_Bylaws_Ratified_Final) Accessed on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> My experience in the ordination process is an example of such abuse at the hands of individuals on the Pre-Ordination Committee and Conference leadership.

supervision, a commission of both laity and pastors. The Pre-Ordination Commission has no direct oversight. If a MID experiences abuse, oppression, or an intentional delay in their process from a member or members of Pre-Ordination, they are left to fight those battles independently. This example reflects the pitfalls of autonomy and lack of covenantal relationship

The UCC's autonomous nature also creates a fractured denominational identity. Every church can choose whether it will align itself with the UCC's professed stance on different social justice issues. A familiar and unfortunate example is the UCC's commitment to LGBTQ+ individuals finding safe spaces to worship. The UCC's designation as an Open and Affirming<sup>5</sup> denomination, combined with the National Office's stance on issues that impact the LGBTQ+ community, leads a person to find a church to reasonably assume that all UCC churches will welcome them with open arms. This is not the case. The autonomous nature of the UCC polity means that local churches do not have to align or agree with where the National Office stands on specific social issues. The expectation is that all local churches will welcome all LGBTQ+ persons looking to worship, but it is not required. This puts the individual seeking to find a church at an enormous risk of being hurt and harmed.

By looking at three specific touchpoints in UCC history, we see how the UCC's polity and autonomous ecumenical structure created confusion and discord at every level. Over time, that confusion grew and increased the disconnect between local churches,

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<sup>5</sup> Open, and Affirming is the designation of a ministry setting that makes a public declaration of welcome of LGBTQ+ individuals. Interestingly, the UCC's updated website does not have an overabundance of affirming imagery (rainbow/progress flag) on the home page. This may be an unintentional oversight, but it does have implications for an individual looking for a safe place to go and worship.

associations, conferences, and the national office, the result being a denomination without a strong identity facing a sharp decline in overall growth. Furthermore, this analysis reveals that genuine autonomy, defined by the UCC, destroys the possibility of a shared goal or dream. There is no way in the UCC structure to hold autonomous bodies together in a covenant.

The journey through UCC history begins with an exploration into the Basis of Union established in 1947. The Basis of Union is the foundational document that created the UCC, and it is here that the issues on covenants began. A Joint Commission made up of representatives from the E&R and CCC denominations met and decided what would become the foundation of the UCC polity. The early leaders did not recognize how difficult it would be to marry a congregational polity with a strong emphasis on the local church's autonomy to a presbyterian polity with a strong focus on hierarchy and governance. The Joint Commission's work revealed no compromise because the UCC polity is primarily congregational. As such, the Basis of Union does not include any covenant agreements between any of the levels of the UCC.

In 1979, the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod asked theologian Walter Brueggemann to address the UCC about covenants, providing a pathway forward that could bring the denomination together during decreased pledging OCWM.<sup>6</sup> Analyzing Brueggemann's address reveals confusion around what covenants are supposed to do and an increased isolation level between all denomination levels. Both Bruggeman and Avery Post,

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<sup>6</sup> Our Church's Wider Mission, (OCWM) is the UCC's largest mission fund. Local churches are expected to budget into their operating budget money to send for OCWM. According to the UCC's website, OCWM Basic Support "funds all the ways we strive together to be the church the world needs." United Church of Christ, "Our Church's Wider Mission" [Basic Support - United Church of Christ \(ucc.org\)](https://www.ucc.org/basic-support) Accessed on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

President and General Minister of the UCC during this period, try to re-engage and educate local churches about the global mission through sermons, speeches, and presentations.

Throughout UCC history, different theologians and pastors understood that the UCC has a covenant problem that bleeds into all aspects of denominational life. These individuals offered their ideas and solutions on how the UCC could solve this issue, but for unknown reasons, those ideas never received traction or momentum. The authors who take up the task of trying to solve these problems write in sorrowful yet hopeful terms about the denomination in which they are deeply entrenched. Yet, there appears to be a line that all will not cross. Those suggestions tiptoe around autonomy, only going so far when suggesting autonomy must be dropped for the denomination to survive. This left me puzzled, wondering, "why only go so far? By adding Marcia Pally's work, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality*, into the conversation and utilizing her ontological arguments on relationality, a picture emerges in full view about the current state of imbalance within the UCC.<sup>7</sup>

As I research and write this inquiry into the UCC's fractured polity, I find myself facing many of the same issues that other UCC pastors faced when they wrote books on this subject. From this body of discourse and my own experience as a church leader, a general sense within the denomination that autonomy cannot be touched, challenged or deleted emerged in my mind. Autonomy is the UCC's sacred calf; it cannot be altered because it is what the founders wanted us to have. There is a sense of pride in the UCC

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<sup>7</sup> Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth, and Covenant: Economics, Politics and Theologies of Relationality* (Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 2016), 1.

that we have the autonomy, that Conference ministers or the National Office do not have any say or control of what a local church does.

As I pursue this research project, I understand that I am in danger of biting the hand that feeds me and having my work fall on deaf ears. There is a real potential for gaslighting from those in positions of power who do not want to hear about the issues I am raising. There is an absolute reality that this paper will be ignored as well. That is a risk I am willing to take because I believe in what the United Church of Christ can be. I also acknowledge a sense of "imposter syndrome" as I write this work. Who am I to offer up solutions to a commonly known problem? I am a local pastor, only a few years in; what could I possibly know that others do not? I live, I minister, and I experience firsthand how autonomy fractured the Body of Christ. This makes me as good an expert as anyone else. My work is for those who have felt left behind or left out because of the inequalities in our polity. For those folks who had their voices silenced, experiences of abuse or neglect pushed to the side. Your story matters. You matter.

My last prayerful hope is that others will read this work, pick up where I left off, write from their perspective, and offer solutions. It will take many voices coming together to push those at the highest levels of leadership in the UCC to acknowledge that we are not one in body.

### In the Beginning: The Basis of Union of 1947

The United Church of Christ began its denominational journey in the 1940s<sup>8</sup> when the leaders of the Evangelical and Reform Church (E&R) and the Congregational

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<sup>8</sup> The Basis of Union went through several revisions starting in March 1943, August 1943, March 1944, September 1945, October 1946, and November 1946. For this paper, I will look at the final revised edition issued on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1947, and the 1949 edition that includes interpretations.

Christian Churches (CCC) formed a joint commission to start preliminary conversations about what it would mean to come together to do Christ's work in the world. The Basis of Union is the foundational agreement that defines the roles and responsibilities of the expressions of the UCC.<sup>9</sup>

The Joint Committee had a formidable task on their hands. The E&R Church's polity closely resembled the presbyterian system, while the Congregational Christian Churches had a congregational system. The leaders of both churches needed to find ways to compromise and draft strong covenantal language that could hold all parties together and avoid potential conflict. The Joint Commission produced a document that heavily favored one polity over the other and failed to make a cohesive covenant that would hold all parties accountable to each other. It is here, in the beginning, that the UCC's problems with autonomous polity began.

The Joint Commission's members understood the task at hand. The Preamble to the Basis of Union describes in full detail the reason why the E & R and CCC churches believe they must unite:

We, the regularly constituted representatives of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, moved by the conviction that we are united in spirit and purpose and agree on the substance of the Christian faith and essential character of the Christian life. Affirming our devotion to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our membership in the holy catholic Church, which is greater than any single Church and than all the Churches together; believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that Church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die; and confronting the divisions and hostilities of our world and hearing a deepened sense of responsibility the prayer of our Lord, "that they all may be one" Do now declare ourselves to be one body, and do set forth the

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<sup>9</sup> National Office, Conferences, Associations and Local Churches.

following articles of agreement as the basis of our life, fellowship, witness and proclamation of the Gospel to all nations.<sup>10</sup>

The gravity of this moment pours out on the page. Each sentence builds upon the last, letting the reader feel the excitement of this moment. As if the Joint Committee members knew that whatever they created, whatever they decided in their meetings, would shape all of Christendom for years to come. The Preamble reads like an attack on the denominational system. The strongly worded language here suggests that the Joint Commission believed that denominations cared only for themselves and their survival instead of confronting the divisions and hardships in the world. The last lines reveal the Joint Committee's belief that uniting together fulfills the promises of John 17:21. The stakes were incredibly high.

The last line of the Preamble stood out, especially when considering what the UCC polity would eventually resemble. "Do now declare ourselves to be one body and do set forth the following articles of the agreement as the basis of our life, fellowship, witness, and proclamation of Gospels to all nations."<sup>11</sup> The Joint Commission declares that the UCC is one body united together to do the work of the church. Yet, the Joint Commission produced in the Basis of Union is less "one body" with a carefully crafted balance between the E&R and CCC's polity and more a "new body" influenced heavily by congregational polity with sprinkles of presbyterian polity mixed in for good measure.

The Basis of Union did not strike a healthy balance between the E&R polity and the CCC polity. Section III of the Basis of Union entitled "Practice" describes the UCC

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<sup>10</sup> Joint Committee, "The Basis of Union of Congregational Churches and the Evangelical and Reform Church 1947," The Basis of Union Collection, The UCC Archives Online, Cleveland, Ohio Accessed on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](https://ucc.org).

<sup>11</sup> Joint Committee, 4.

organizational structure. Overwhelmingly, the Joint Committee relied on congregational polity when creating the UCC's organizational structure, going as far as saying it outright in the first sentence. Subsection A states, "The basic unit of organization of the United Church of Christ is the Congregation, that is, the local church."<sup>12</sup> The local church retains autonomy over itself to govern and exercise its rights with no adjudicatory oversight. Section III, Subsection F reads, "The government of the United Church is exercised through Congregations, Associations, Conferences, and the General Synod. In such wise that the autonomy of each is respected in its sphere, having its rights and responsibilities."<sup>13</sup>

In Subsection F, the Joint Committee created a system with many moving parts that are somehow supposed to govern the entire denomination while also allowing them to retain their independence. Subsection F could be understood as a compromise between the E&R and CCC groups, but upon further review, that argument does not hold up. While the Joint Commission created a denominational system with different levels responsible for the overall governing of the church, the document fails to detail which level is accountable to which and which expression has direct oversight of the whole.

The Joint Commission explicitly gave all bodies autonomy, and nobody can infringe upon another body's autonomy. If a Conference believed that an Association was not acting in the local churches' best interest, there was nothing the Conference could do to hold the Association accountable. If the General Synod passed a resolution that the delegates felt was necessary, the local church could ignore it because the Basis of Union

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<sup>12</sup> Joint Committee, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Committee, 6.



gave them the right. This system could not produce a united denomination because each body retains the right to do whatever it wants.

The Joint Committee's decision to use the congregational polity as the foundation for the UCC's polity was meant to balance out an imbalance of power, but it was not given any teeth. More concise language around covenants needed to be built into the basic governing documents. As noted in the Preamble, the Joint Committee understood what was required of them. The Preamble says it outright, denominations exist to benefit the church and not for themselves. Then, it is a logical assumption that the Joint Committee used concise and robust language that held all parties together in a spirit of mutual accountability and responsibility. Yet, the Joint Commission failed to provide any concrete language on how those iterations relate to each other and hold each other accountable.

It is clear that the Joint Committee created "one body," but that body's foundation is congregational polity. There were attempts to bring both polities together, but the Joint Committee's decision to make all bodies autonomous meant there was no compromise. Finding the balance between two different polities proved to be impossible, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Congregational polity and presbyterian polity are too opposite, and one side had to win out for the UCC to exist. Maybe the CCC members of the Joint Committee had more influence than the E&R members, voicing their insistence that the UCC adopt more of a congregational polity. The decisions made in 1947 resulted in the UCC's creation. However, those decisions negatively impacted the UCC in ways no one on the Joint Committee could have anticipated.

Holy Anxiety: The 12th General Synod

On June 22-26<sup>th</sup>, 1979, the UCC convened their 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod in Indianapolis, Indiana. In those four days, delegates from various associations and conferences gathered together with the officers of the UCC, the moderators, and the executive council to discuss important issues impacting the denomination and vote on different proposals, nominations, and resolutions brought to the floor. These legislative actions ranged from social justice issues to education and passing a budget for 1980 and 1981.<sup>14</sup>

Nothing seems out of the ordinary about the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod's agenda. Resolutions, budgets, nominations, speeches, and worship services are typical for all General Synods. However, the minutes reflect a sense of anxiety over local mission, vision, and covenant, specifically President Avery D. Post's opening address, Dr. Walter Brueggemann's keynote address, and their proposed annual budget. These three specific moments reveal a denomination grappling with a complicated covenantal polity that did not produce widespread success in funding missions globally or within the United States.

President Avery D. Post's opening remarks set the tone, describing this particular moment as "breathless."<sup>15</sup> Breathless is a perfect adjective to describe how fast Post moved through his address, calling for the members to pay attention to too many topics too quickly and does not fully explain what he means by mission work. He describes a broad spectrum of concerns ranging from energy conservation, world peace, global

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<sup>14</sup> General Synod meets every two years.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Hawkings, Martha Jordan, Sherry Marshall, Pat Ostendorf, "Minutes of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod 1979" General Synod Minutes Collection, The UCC Archives Online, Accessed on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#).

responsibility, and responsible citizenship in the US in his address.<sup>16</sup> Post went further in-depth about why these four topics were critically important to the UCC at this moment in time, both in mission responsibility and denominational vitality. Post's words painted a grim yet hopeful picture of the future.

Feeling called to missions also required a call to increase stewardship amounts, which did not escape Post. In 1979, the UCC faced a decline, as evidenced to Post's statements:

I am convinced and I hope you are convinced that the turn-around will come for the United Church of Christ, whether it is membership or financial health or new church development, whether it is in leadership in social justice ministries or true caring about the state of our nation and its peoples."<sup>17</sup>

In late 1970, the UCC seemed to be at a crossroads, caught between an overall decline in membership and finances, seeing its impact slowly decrease, which Post most certainly understood. He named it outright at the very beginning of his address. If a local church could not meet its operational budget, sending money to different mission funds would fall by the wayside. The UCC appeared to be turning inward in this moment of self-preservation and survival, abandoning the call for a united church doing God's work.

Yet, all was not lost. Post used the remainder of his address to refocus and reenergize the General Synod to return to mission work, hearing the call to rise and meet this specific moment in history. Post described this moment as a "new era of mission responsibility," inviting all present to join with him in doing God's work in the world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 120-123.

<sup>17</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 121.

Post did not just remind the General Synod of what God requires of them but also pointed out where the Church has failed:

The word “mission” does not describe what we do but who God is. I call you to be responsible to the mission of God. Here is possibly the Church’s greatest embarrassment; that we witness to the world that our participation in the mission of God is optional, that we can take it or leave it. Not at all! We are called to be worldly with our worldly God...So I call you to not merely to continue the mission but to turn to a new era of mission responsibility.<sup>19</sup>

Post calling this moment a “new era of mission responsibility” reminded the attendees of General Synod that no one can opt out of doing God's work in the world. This renewed focus on missions is reflected in the proposed 1980-1981 budget.

The UCC relies heavily on local churches to fund all UCC missions, seminaries, commissions, and the Executive Council.<sup>20</sup>Data from the years leading up to the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod showed a steady decrease in pledges. In 1977, the UCC missed pledge goals by about \$85, 568.73 and a significant miss in 1978 of \$255,655. 62.<sup>21</sup> It is surprising then that the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod voted on an overly ambitious budget with a pledge goal of \$10,500,000 in 1980 and \$11,000,000 in 1981.<sup>22</sup> The Stewardship council correctly anticipated local churches required more information about where the money

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<sup>19</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes,120.

<sup>20</sup> Noted in the 11<sup>th</sup> General Synod Minutes, the local church contributions make up 85% of the line item "Basic Support." Laura Hawkins, Wayne Henry, Sherry Marshal, Pat Ostendorf, “The Minutes of the Eleventh General Synod” General Synod Collection, The UCC Archives Online, Accessed on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021. | [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#).

<sup>21</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> General Synod voted on a budget of \$9,500,00 for 1977. Joseph H. Evans, “The Minutes of the Tenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ” General Synod Collection, The UCC Archives Online, Accessed on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021. [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#) and the 11<sup>th</sup> General Synod set 1978’s goal at \$10,000 [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#) The report of the Director of Finance and Treasure shows receipts totaling \$9,414, 431.27. 1978’s receipts show income of \$9,755, 655.62.

<sup>22</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes,98.

would go and put together a presentation entitled "Yes, This We Do" as a tool for delegates to take home with them to share with their congregations.<sup>23</sup> The presentation's title was an indication that local churches lacked knowledge of how their money was spent and felt no obligation to give the 10% necessary to support the UCC. Post may not have come right out and said it in his opening remarks, but the connection of missed pledge goals meant a failure of mission responsibility.

Ambitious goals required the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod attendees to be excited about the UCC's missions to the world. Moreover, to achieve a pledge goal with a significant increase after missing the previous years, local churches needed to be reminded about covenants and commitments. This task fell to Dr. Walter Brueggemann, who gave a keynote address entitled "The Risk of Heaven/The Possibility of Earth" on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1979.<sup>24</sup>

Brueggemann told the audience that the program committee asked him to speak about one topic, covenants. He opened his address by defining what this word, covenant, means:

The word means many things. But as a beginning, it means this much; a way of being committed to each other as God is committed to us, a way of being defined by, accountable to and responsible for each other. God has made that deep and abiding commitment to us. And we affirm that our pilgrimage together is marked by such a costly, disciplined, and abiding commitment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Walter Brueggemann is a widely known theologian, scholar, and UCC ordained minister. He notes this by saying, "my roots are very deep; my debts are great to this church." Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 124.

Brueggemann links the concept of a covenant with mutual accountability, which manifests itself in God's commitment to humanity. He acknowledged the fractured nature of humanity's covenant due to conflict and disagreement, saying, "we are hindered in our mission by quarrels, differences of agenda, miscommunication."<sup>26</sup> Within the UCC, those tensions led to the aforementioned decrease in pledges and mission funding.

Brueggemann entitles his address for a reason; he believed that covenant is possible here on earth. However, it requires acknowledging that the work done on earth affects the heavenly realm. He noted that:

...It involves our understanding of God as much as power relations on earth. The slash I have put between the two phrases means that the two are profoundly linked together....In order in which I have placed them means the second completely depends on the first. How it can be on earth depends on how it is with God.<sup>27</sup>

To prove that point, Brueggemann laid out a four-point argument as to why covenants must matter to the Church. Those four points cover what it means when God makes a covenant with humanity; how to be a covenanting church; how to look at the world through the lens of the covenant, and finally, to reflect on the sacrament of the Eucharist brings together a covenant with God, a covenant with the Church and the covenant with the world.<sup>28</sup>

Brueggemann's knowledge of scriptures and theology certainly helped him compose this address and make his claims regarding covenants. For someone with Brueggemann's stature, this would be a relatively easy task to do. Instead of merely returning his audience to scriptures and offering a general biblical exegesis,

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<sup>26</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 125.

Brueggemann centered his argument on his deep connection to the denomination. In doing so, his address becomes more personal and impactful to those delegates who heard it firsthand.

A prime example comes when Brueggemann uses the UCC statements of faith to make his arguments. In speaking about his thinking, he told his audience:

I have been guided especially by the single clause in our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith which uses the word covenant: God bestows upon us his Holy Spirit binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. ‘Binding in covenant’ is the key phrase. We say in our Statement of Faith we become the Church, first of all, because God ‘binds in covenant.’ . . . And we dare say that if God does not give herself away with such risk, there will be no covenant community on earth.<sup>29</sup>

He understood that he was not speaking to a classroom full of students or a conference hall filled with peers. Instead, he speaks to the lay leaders and pastors representing their respective local churches, associations, and conferences. These specific leaders were responsible for bringing back to their regional settings an explanation for an increased pledge goal and inspiring individuals and churches to give more money when there is a reluctance to do so. A pastor could use Brueggemann's exegesis of the Statement of Faith in a sermon during a stewardship campaign to inspire an emotional connection to the mission fund and understand what it means to be in a covenantal relationship. His words are powerful and not overly complicated, translating well to those on the receiving end of this message.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Twelfth General Synod Minutes, 125.

<sup>30</sup> His address must have worked. In 1981, the UCC exceeded its goal of \$11,000,000 by \$238,137.61 Delores M. Thomas and Joseph H. Evans, “Minutes Fourteenth General Synod” General Synod Archives, The UCC Archives Online, Accessed on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021. [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#).

The 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod marks a crucial moment in UCC history where denominational leaders needed to address the impact that the decrease in funding from local churches had on missions. The overall anxiety felt at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod comes through in the opening remarks by President Avery D. Post and the keynote address by Dr. Walter Brueggemann. The organizers' intention to remind the different expressions of the denomination of an expressed covenantal relationship worked. The UCC exceeded pledge expectations in the following year, receiving almost 1% more than budgeted.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the compelling speeches from dynamic speakers, the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod failed to address the problem at hand truly: the lack of a strongly worded covenantal polity binding all autonomous bodies together in a spirit of mutual understanding and responsibility. Brueggemann, Post, and the rest of the organizers placed a band-aid on the issue instead of handling it directly. Their actions did pay off concerning missions, overperforming on a sizable pledge goal. However, those actions failed to address how the disease of disconnectedness and affection caused by the polity led to a lack of connection felt on the local and global levels. Local pastors, seminary professors, and other leaders produced significant research on the polity's effect on denominational health while also offering potential solutions to the problem.

#### A Pathway Forward: How do we fix the polity?

Every individual who wants to be an ordained UCC pastor must take a UCC Polity and History course. The task of explaining and rationalizing the UCC's complex and disjointed polity does not just belong to the individual teaching the course but also to UCC scholars and theologians whose works attempt to resolve issues and offer solutions.

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<sup>31</sup> This is my own calculation based off of the numbers reported in the 1981 minutes.



This secondary literature, assigned in every polity class, reflects the scattered state of UCC over the last twenty years.

Three authors, in particular, Reuben A Shears II, Jane Hoffman, and Clyde W. Steckel represent where the denomination stands today on the issue of the polity. All three authors are UCC pastors, denominational leaders, and scholars who do not hold back when critically looking at the UCC's broken polity. Hoffman and Steckel offer suggestions about addressing the issues at every level. Their unique position as insiders allows Shears II, Hoffman, and Steckel to provide more critical analysis. Still, it also prevents all three of them from identifying the much larger issue. While these suggestions are a good starting point for discussion, the three works fail to diagnose the problem. Using Marcia Pally's thesis and applying it to the issues identified in Hoffman, Shears III, and Steckel's works, an accurate picture of the UCC's lack of connectedness comes into focus.

In his article entitled, "A Covenantal Polity," Reuben A. Shears II tries to clear up for the reader any misconceptions or misunderstandings about the UCC's polity. His argument that the polity is congregational is, as he states:

[w]hile true, is not true enough. That conclusion is a reductionism that obscures as much as it reveals. It is inadequate. It does not do justice to the influence nor the presence of elements from other traditional polities on or within the life and polity of the United Church of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Reuben A. Shears II, "A Covenant Polity" in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, revised edition. ed. By Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, (Cleveland, United Church Press, 2007), 67.

For this thesis to hold water, Sheares II needs to elevate where and how other polities influence the UCC polity to clear up the reader's confusion regarding how autonomous bodies need to relate to one another.

Sheares II argues that confusion centers on a misinterpretation of paragraph seven of the UCC's constitution and bylaws.<sup>33</sup> While the local churches are free to do as they please, they are not free from responsibility to others, arguing that "...There are rights involved but there also responsibilities and accountabilities. There is a need and provision for the founders called "fellowship lest freedom becomes license."<sup>34</sup> Sheares II argues that the UCC constitution and bylaws are a covenantal document binding all parties together with mutual accountability. He says that the UCC's polity is, in reality, "A covenanted relationship of autonomous uniters of church life...a relationship delineated but not regulated by constitution and bylaws."<sup>35</sup>

Sheares II's argument represents how deeply held the belief in autonomy runs in the UCC. Suppose the denomination does not understand how to live into the covenantal relationship that Sheares II believes is very clearly communicated in the UCC constitution and bylaws. Does that not indicate that the language is not clear or strong enough for everyone to understand? If there is confusion at every level about how autonomous bodies must relate to each, is the problem the UCC's foundational documents or the polity itself? Furthermore, Sheares II's argument that the UCC polity is not only congregational polity does not hold up simply because he spends the entirety of

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<sup>33</sup> This section gives full autonomy to the local churches.

<sup>34</sup> Sheares II, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Sheares II, 77.

the chapter explaining the benefits of autonomy which is a central tenet of congregational polity. Nor does he point back to or name how any other polity plays a role in church governance. Sheares II's article makes clear one thing: autonomy is here to stay, even if it creates a complicated polity to work within.

Like Sheares II, Jane Hoffman and Clyde Steckel are also transparent that the denomination does not understand how freedom and covenants work. Hoffman sees her work as a resource to get everyone in the UCC, from local church leadership to the National Office, to think about covenants and their meanings.<sup>36</sup> Hoffman argues that "Covenant is all about freedom-but freedom to be in relationship...this is a crucial point if we discipline ourselves to remember that all of our churchly covenants begin with God's covenant with us."<sup>37</sup> Here again, is this notion of freedom and its implied implication that autonomous bodies will always choose to be covenants. Hoffman, like Sheares II, sees autonomy in the UCC as "[t]he freedom to yield something of ourselves (or our setting), our power to do what we please, to the covenantal partner relationship"<sup>38</sup> Unlike Sheares II, Hoffman does not direct the reader to the place where the covenant is clearly outlined, nor does she take up the issue of what happens when we do not yield our freedom to benefit the covenantal relationship. Both Hoffman and Sheares II assume that at every level of the UCC, from local churches to associations, to church and ministry

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Hoffman, *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ*. (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008),3.

<sup>37</sup> Hoffman, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Hoffman, 36.

commissions, individuals will always make decisions that benefit the whole of the denomination and intentionally limit freedoms guaranteed by autonomy.

Of the three works discussed here, only Clyde Steckel's book goes beyond naming the problem and pinning responsibility for confusion back on the average UCC parishioner. Steckel's introduction argues that the UCC polity and ecclesiology "urgently need to be re-examined and reshaped if the church is to minister faithfully in a postmodern world."<sup>39</sup> Steckel outlines four principles that he believes are a revisioning of the United Church of Christ's ecclesiology: "...the church constituted by those answering the call of Jesus Christ to follow him; the gathered church ordered by Jesus Christ at the font, the pulpit, and the table; the scattered church in the world engaged in Jesus Christ's mission of compassionate love and justice action; and the pastoral oversight of associations and conference ministers."<sup>40</sup> Steckel sees the UCC's complicated structure as part of a much larger problem plaguing mainline denominations, a resistance to change with the world. If the UCC can recognize the need to change, Steckel argues that the UCC can be the model for other denominations to do the same. By transforming the UCC's structure, the denomination meets the social moment head-on instead of being left behind. Like the other authors, Steckel attempts to clean up the misconception about autonomy.

He proposes a new wording of Article III, Covenantal Relations, paragraph 8, clarifying that local churches are not wholly autonomous because of the UCC's history as

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<sup>39</sup> Clyde J. Steckel, *New Ecclesiology & Polity: The United Church of Christ*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009),5.

<sup>40</sup> Steckel, 88.

an ecumenical denomination.<sup>41</sup> From there, Steckel proposes a new understanding of autonomy:

The principle of autonomy means that the local community manages its own affairs, which includes determining its own organizational structures, adopting its own constitution and bylaws, formulating its own covenants and confessions of faith in consultation with the breadth and diversity of faith traditions in the ecumenical church and the United Church of Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Steckel's change in definition allows for local communities to work with associations and conferences when making decisions that would directly impact that community. Steckel also envisions a polity anchored in mutually covenanted relationships with specific oversight given to local communities of ministry who would covenant with associate or conference ministers.<sup>43</sup> Steckel goes into great detail about how this oversight would work but does not include how an associate conference minister would oversee a local community. Local communities should listen to the advice of an associate conference minister but are under no obligation to follow that advice. Steckel may have broadened our understanding of autonomy, but he did not change the basic definition of the word as defined in the UCC Constitution.

Steckel's choice to keep autonomy as part of the UCC polity is baffling when considering how problematic it becomes to live out at every level. Yet, it is not surprising that Steckel chose to keep in his newly formed framework. It affirms just how significant autonomy is to the UCC's polity. While Shears II, Hoffman, and Steckel identify issues around autonomy, all three fail to recognize why the UCC cannot live into the ideal

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<sup>41</sup> Steckel, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Steckel, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Steckel, 85-86.

created in the Basis of Union. Their entrenchment and dependence upon the UCC system make it impossible to see what the problem truly is. To my mind, locating the problem and finding a solution(s) requires outsiders' perspectives, who are not themselves invested in the UCC's current structure.

In her book, *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality*, Marcia Pally makes a provocative and accurate claim regarding how societies function. She describes this as "separability-amid situatedness" or "distinction-amid relation."<sup>44</sup> Although we are individuals, we become transformed into what she defines as "singular selves" through our relationships, responsibilities, and connections to others.<sup>45</sup> Pally argues that this does not mean we cede our ideas or beliefs; instead, "it suggests a process of each reciprocally getting at other's underlying concerns and understanding how both we and others have come to present views."<sup>46</sup> However, individualism threatens to destroy this careful balance, Pally argues, because American society places too much value on separateness. She argues that when "oppressive situatedness provokes excessive separation," it leads to brokenness, distrust, and chaos<sup>47</sup>.

When considering the issue that all three authors identified alongside the anxiety of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod and the 1947 Basis of Union and looking at it through Pally's lens, the state of the UCC as a denomination comes into full view. The Joint Committee of 1947 believed that they had created a separability-amid situatedness denomination and

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<sup>44</sup> Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth, and Covenant: Economics, Politics and Theologies of Relationality* (Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>45</sup> Pally, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Pally, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Pally, 7.

that they were living into the promise of John 17:21. However, by allowing churches to retain autonomy, the Joint Committee set up a system that leads to anxiety, chaos, and overall decline right from the start.

Using Pally's description of covenant seriously as a framing device for polity reform radically redefines the word autonomy. Autonomy becomes about connectivity, seeing the individual self in connection with others. Individual churches become less isolated, seeing themselves defined through relationships and not individual self-interest. Local churches still retain their unique individualism but are tied together with their neighbors. Pally's concepts of polity give the UCC the possibility of having mutually beneficial covenants between all entities of the denomination while still allowing for distinction and separation

At present, the UCC is in a state of extreme separation, the direct result of not composing a covenant that accomplishes holding autonomous bodies together in a mutually beneficial relationship where every entity finds beauty in compromising for the Kingdom of God. There is no sense of relationality because local churches retain their autonomy and can place their self-interest above the denomination as a whole. As long as the UCC holds onto autonomy as defined in the current UCC constitution and bylaws, the denomination runs the risk of continuing to fall further into a state of disarray and decline.

A familiar phrase comes to mind after examining these specific touchpoints in UCC history: you cannot fit a square peg into a round hole. Sure, if you work hard enough and slam that square peg into that hole with enough force, it may fit. However, it will not be a comfortable or tight fit. In hitting that peg into that hole, you damage the

peg and the hole itself, yielding something inherently weak that could break over time. Each touchpoint listed above represents the UCC attempting to fit a square peg into a round hole. The square peg, in this case, is the UCC's autonomous congregational polity, and the round hole is the covenantal relationship necessary for the UCC to have any semblance of growth and long-lasting impact on the world.

The Joint Committee created a contradictory UCC polity where churches remain autonomous but somehow connected. The lack of a strongly worded covenant demonstrates an implied assumption that all churches will always act in the best interest of the whole denomination. This assumption, of course, does not hold up over time. By the 1979 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod, the denomination was already in a state of anxiety over yearly decreases in local churches' pledges. Leadership understood that the UCC needed to refocus itself on covenantal relationships and responsibility if the UCC wanted to meet its mission funding. However, the 12<sup>th</sup> Synod missed the opportunity to re-evaluate the UCC's polity. Like only plugging one hole in a sinking ship, the 12<sup>th</sup> General Synod bought the UCC a bit of time but not enough.

The majority of UCC pastors, scholars, and theologians are upfront about the UCC's messy polity, as exemplified by the scholarship of Shears II, Hoffman, and Steckel, all of whom acknowledge that there is a misunderstanding of how autonomous bodies must operate in relationship to others. Those three authors bring their own experience and knowledge on this matter into their writing. However, none of them are willing to abandon autonomy completely. They return to the Basis of Union in an attempt to clean up and reclaim a covenant that does not exist. Once again, that square peg gets slammed into that round hole.



If it does not work, why keep doing it? That is the question I kept coming back to time and time again. The UCC polity as it stands today is fractured and broken. The refusal to abandon autonomy as a foundational brick in the overall UCC structure led to local churches seeing themselves as singular entities and not part of a more comprehensive denominational system. This dysfunction goes all the way to the top. No direct oversight of commissions, associations, conferences, and national offices means bad actors can rise through the ranks to positions of power. Once there, those bad actors can impose their will and biased agenda against anyone with impunity.

It is hard to make an institutional change, but perhaps naming the problem can help with institutional inertia. Next, I will use Marcia Pally's thesis as a lens to look at where the denomination is right now. Pally offers a path forward, an ontology of theology and relationality with "theologies that see us as distinct creatures sustained by relation and to see this relationality our distinction -amid-relation."<sup>48</sup> This argument is an excellent place to start because it creates UCC polity centered still on distinction and more concrete and well-defined relationality.

"That They May All Be One" is the aspirational tagline for the United Church of Christ. This motto, a reinterpretation of John 17:21 is reflective of the Evangelical and Reform Church (E&R) and the Congregational Christian Churches' (CCC) aspiration to unite in a spirit of ecumenism.<sup>49</sup> The reimagining of John 17:21 demonstrates leadership's

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<sup>48</sup> Pally, 8.

<sup>49</sup> John 17: 21 That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe you have sent me. NSRV Translation. John 17:21 is a commonly used biblical passage for united and uniting movements.

desire that their respective churches could unite together and become something brand new.

John 17:21 is the biblical justification for the denomination's existence; it is what brought everyone together. Reforms to our polity need to help us live into this dream. Pally provides a framework for change, and John 17:21 gives us the result we want to achieve. Using both, I will create a teaching document with those changes for consideration at our next General Synod.

This is what I will take up next. I hope my work inspires those same silent voices to speak up loudly and offer their opinions, views, and solutions to transform the UCC polity. It is time to let go of the past to dream about a brand-new future where everyone can find their place and space in the United Church of Christ

## ARE WE ALL MEANT TO BE ONE? A NEW READING OF JOHN 17:21

When visitors come to the Community Church of Cedar Grove for the first time, they encounter warm smiles, an invitation to go to coffee hour, a bulletin, and a large banner for the United Church of Christ hanging on display in Fraiser Hall. On this red and black banner are many different UCC mottos designed to catch the eye. Large letters read, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." a quote attributed to Gracie Allen, a vaudeville actress and comedienne. Allen's quote became the theme for the 2004 marketing campaign entitled "God Is Still Speaking," made famous by a television ad in which different individuals, ranging from a Black mother nursing her child to a cis-gender gay male couple to a homeless man, ejected from their pews during a church service. The ad ends with, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcomed here."<sup>1</sup>

Nestled at the far-right bottom corner is the UCC's crest, comprised of a crown, Cross, and an orb.<sup>2</sup> encircled with the denomination's name and the phrase, "that they may all be one." John 17:21 is the basis for the UCC's existence as a denomination. Returning to the Preamble of the 1947 Basis of Union, the language of the Joint Committee<sup>3</sup> affirms that uniting the E&R and CCC fulfills the promises of John 17:21 but

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<sup>1</sup> The United Church of Christ 2006. "UCC Bouncer Ad" April 12th, 2006. Television Ad, 0.33 [United Church of Christ BANNED Commercial - YouTube](#).

<sup>2</sup> UCC Resources, "Flag." Accessed on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [Flag - UCC - 4' x 6' - Nylon, Fringed, Indoor | UCC Resources](#).

<sup>3</sup> The Joint Commission was formed in 1947 when the Evangelical and Reform Church (E&R) and the Congregational Christian Churches (CCC) created a commission to start preliminary conversations about what it would mean to join together and create a new denomination.

also reveals something critical to our belief and understanding of the kind of unity Jesus prays for his followers:

Our devotion to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our membership in the holy catholic Church, which is greater than any single Church and than all the Churches together; believing that denominations exist not for themselves but as parts of that Church, within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die; and confronting the divisions and hostilities of our world and hearing a deepened sense of responsibility the prayer of our Lord, "that they all may be one" do now declare ourselves to be one body, and do set forth the following articles of agreement as to the basis of our life, fellowship, witness and proclamation of the Gospel to all nations. <sup>4</sup>

The Joint Committee's argument against denominationalism, naming this as the root of all hostilities in the world, tells us something important about how the UCC interprets Jesus' message and the overall assumptions about the early church. John 17:21 is a prayer for ecumenical unity within a divided church. The UCC's article on ecumenical relationships argues:

The division of the church is a result of human sin, and all Christians have a responsibility to work for the day when, as Jesus prayed, "they may all be one." Ecumenical relations help us to learn from the spiritual traditions of other churches. They help us to serve the world more effectively in God's name. They remind us that while we are proud of the diversity of the Protestant traditions that have joined in our united church, there is an even greater diversity in the Body of Christ that can make us whole.<sup>5</sup>

John 17:21 then is also a reminder of when the church was perfect, an idealized vision of the church's past as a body serving the world. Christians are responsible for hearing the prayer Jesus prays for us and return to one Church. This is what Jesus wants for us, to come together after years of division that we caused.

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<sup>4</sup> Joint Committee, "The Basis of Union of Congregational Churches and the Evangelical and Reform Church 1947," The Basis of Union Collection, The UCC Archives Online, Cleveland, Ohio Accessed on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 [ResCarta-Web - Image Viewer \(ucc.org\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> The United Church of Christ, "Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations." UCC. Org. Accessed on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. [Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations - United Church of Christ \(ucc.org\)](#).

John 17:21 is the UCC's dream for the world, and as an ordained pastor within this denomination, it is my dream. Every person in the denomination, whether lay or ordained, has skin in the game when it comes to fulfilling John 17:21. This verse informs our theology; it brings us into the church, why we seek ordination. John 17: 21 is the glue that holds together the autonomous bodies in our denomination polity and structure. Every local church, association, conference, and the National Office does its part to fulfill this prayer, whether through mission work or overall tithing. Every dollar given gets us closer to achieving the denomination's mission.

Each time I enter Fraizer Hall, I see the crest with John 17:21 and feel a sense of purpose and direction for my local ministry in Cedar Grove, New Jersey. From all the many different individuals who sit in the pews and live out in the community, all of us can become united as one church.

Initially, I believed that if the UCC reformed the autonomous polity, then the denomination could live into the promise of John 17: 21. I thought if we could change the denominational framework, we would achieve the dream of the Joint Committee, that “we all may be one.” Like others who wrote before me, there is a shared sense of responsibility to determine how the UCC lives into John 17:21. While most books are meant for a clergy audience only, one book, in particular, Mary Susan Gast's book *That We May All Finally Be One: Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ*, joins laity and clergy into a conversation about the difficulty of maintaining and living into covenant relationships. Gast presents a unique argument that hospitality and covenant go hand in hand. Because of the limitations caused by the UCC polity<sup>1</sup>, the denomination needs an ethic of hospitality to push us forward and celebrate all dimensions of "we." As Gast sees it, this is the only way to live into the call to follow Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

If we can find a way to be hospitable to everyone, we can finally all be one. According to Gast, this path is the way forward. The necessary adjustment for the UCC to live into John 17: 21 and the responsibility to figure out how we become more hospitable falls on everyone's shoulders, clergy and laity alike. Gast's approach of speaking to everyone who calls themselves a member of the UCC makes the problem not

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<sup>1</sup> The UCC's autonomous polity makes connection impossible because local churches have the option to operate in their best interests, even when those interests contradict policies or statements issued by the National Office. I discussed this at length in my first paper, but it is worth mentioning again.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Susan Gast, *That We May All Finally Be One: Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2016), 4.

just for the clergy to solve. Somehow, lay and clergy need to work together to find a way forward.

Gast's focus on the responsibility of both lay and clergy leaders feels especially important, given the current state of affairs makes the stakes higher. When church attendance dipped due to the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing together unique and diverse groups of people who hold the same commitment to fulfilling John 17:21 became critical to the church's survival<sup>3</sup>. More individuals and families coming through the sanctuary doors means more members, more tithes, and more money in the overall budget. Cash keeps the doors open and pastors employed. Community Church of Cedar Grove weathered the pandemic well due to proper management of a healthy endowment fund and sizeable increases in church giving.

While this feels like a success, I know that an endowment fund does not last forever, large donations are not a given, and pandemics can happen at any time. Reflecting on these last few years, I find myself staring at the banner hanging in Fraiser Hall, zeroing in on John 17: 21, realizing we need to live into John 17:21 if Community Church wants to have a legacy that stretches into the future.

As I started my examination of John 17: 21, I held onto Gast's theory, hoping to find enough evidence to flush out this argument. Of all the UCC scholarship I read on this subject, Gast's work stood out because of how she brought everyone together for a common purpose. In theory, placing this verse back into the larger narrative of John 17

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<sup>3</sup> David Sharp's article "Millions skipped church during the pandemic. Will they return?" gives a brief overview of the COVID-19 pandemic impact on small churches with already dwindling attendance. Although Community Church of Cedar Grove pivoted appropriately during this time, we still have not returned to pre-pandemic numbers. David Sharp, "Millions skipped church during the pandemic: Will they return?" AP News. Accessed on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. [Millions skipped church during a pandemic. Will they return? | AP News.](#)

and the Farewell Discourse should help us find clarity and direction about how we all may be one as Jesus intends us to be. This was my intent as I dug into the text. However, more questions emerged than answers, especially about how the UCC uses John 17:21 as a justification for ecumenical unity.

I start my analysis by asking how and why the UCC arrived at these long-held theological conclusions about John 17: 21. Did John's community exist the way we assume it did? A brief overview of Johannine scholarship answers the "how" part of that question. Until recently, biblical scholars working on the Gospel of John wrote under the assumption that John's community existed as one body.<sup>4</sup> These assumptions shaped how scholars and theologians interpreted the message of John 17: 21 as a message about ecumenical unity. Recently, critics pointed to John's community's lack of physical evidence, challenging these conclusions. The scholarship splits on the issue, but all parties agree that the community exists, whether physical evidence exists.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at an example of biblical scholarship, it is evident that the historical-critical method influenced the UCC's theological understanding of John 17:21. However, these conclusions did not get any closer to finding the secret to fulfilling Jesus' prayer for unity. Holding onto these long-held beliefs does not bring us closer to understanding how we accomplish ecumenical unity. If we stay here, we remain in the same place, trying to put a square peg into a round hole. When we step away from the traditional biblical

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<sup>4</sup> Hugo Mendez, "Did the Johannine Community Exist?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no 3. (2020), 351.

<sup>5</sup> Mendez, 351.



scholarship, which skews heavily male, white, and educated, we disrupt the narrative of John 17:21 and open the door to finding new meaning in the text.

Abandoning the historical-critical method typical of Johannine studies and adopting a different hermeneutic allows us to get more personal and political with the text, more hands-on as we look at the text as a work of literature filled with storytelling rhetoric and imagery. In the article, "Did the Johannine Community exist," Hugo Mendez presents a provocative theory on John's community, disrupting the narrative promoted by biblical scholarship. Instead of a community, what if we are dealing with one author with attachments to multiple communities, synthesizing theological ideas and placing those ideas in the mouth of an invented character, John? Taking that into consideration, we need to look at all the potential influences; gnostic, Jewish, and Qumran ideologies shaped the writer's worldview and help refrain our understanding of key terms, "unity, "oneness," and "community." <sup>6</sup>

Feminist studies and interpretation become critical tools in our exploration as well. Mary Coloe uses this hermeneutic for her approach to the Gospel of John. She writes in her introduction:

"analysis of the text asking questions about the culture of the time, the religious ideas, the meaning of words, the circumstances of the community all these steps are a necessary first step in the process of interpretation. In this commentary, I attempt to understand the particular Jewish context in the first century, the world behind the text, and the dynamics of the evangelist's storytelling, the world within the texts. A feminist hermeneutic then asks for the Scriptures to be a revelation of God now, not simply a record of God's actions in the past." <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hugo Mendez, 350-352.

<sup>7</sup> . Mary L. Coloe, *Wisdom Commentary: Volume 44A John 1-10*, ed. Mary Ann Bevis and Barbara E. Reid (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 52

Coloe's work complements Mendez's theory about John's community while also constantly elevating the female voice in the Gospel.

Additionally, Coloe's work raises the issue of the negative portrayal of the Jews, a problem that does not come up in the historical-critical scholarship surveyed at the very beginning. Coloe emphasizes the importance of how "the Jews" in the Gospel are the creation of the writer and not a reflection of the religious community. The implications of these characterizations have led to the Gospel being used to justify anti-Semitic rhetoric. Coloe's assertions, alongside Mendez's article, should give us pause, asking whether or not we should be using John 17: 21 at all when trying to do ecumenical and interfaith work.

These influences are critical to how we understand John 17: 21. Lastly, I will return this verse to the more extensive section of the Farewell Discourse. Relying on Raymond Brown, George R. Beasley-Murray, Mary L. Coloe, B W de Wet, Royce Gordon Gruenler, and Stanley Winter Theron, we hear Jesus praying about unity among believers that mirrors the Trinity. This changes the scope of how we understand 17:21. Taking this all into consideration means no longer looking at 17: 21 as a standalone statement about ecumenical unity.

These conclusions question using John 17: 21 to justify ecumenical unity. This passage has no covenant language for us to draw upon, nor would it be conceivable for humans to be as unified as the Trinity. Furthermore, if the UCC wants to pursue ecumenical and interfaith relationships, John 17: 21 presents more problems than solutions, especially when considering John's Gospel to justify anti-Semitism. Using 17: 21 in this manner sets the denomination up for failure.

As much as I liked Gast's theory about hospitality, it does not work because it assumes that John 17: 21 speaks to covenants as the UCC understands them. The easiest solution would be finding a passage with solid covenant language that allows for separate bodies to exist, to live alongside each other while also joined together for the shared pursuit of the Kin-dom of God. Unfortunately, finding a new passage does not solve the problem. Every passage comes with a level of complexity and complications. We would end up right back to where we started.

If we cannot abandon John 17:21, we can find a more nuanced way of reading the text, which lets us have it all, community, covenant, and connection. This is what I hope to accomplish in this section of my work.

#### The Church was one, but we broke it: The Traditional Argument.

I could not tell you where I first heard it or who told me, but I thought the early church was of one mind and one body for as long as I can remember. I recall attending a Bible Study at a Plymouth Brethren Church in 2005, where a church leader told us that it was Jesus' desire for the whole church to look just like it used to back before we had denominations. His statement did not elicit questions, only nods of agreement from those in attendance. The early church's perfection is a foregone conclusion, an assumption that shapes a worldview, not just for those attending a bible study in a local church basement but also for theologians interpreting John 17: 21.

When it comes to ecumenicalism, unlocking the mystery of unification and a return to an undivided early church becomes the question that needs to be answered. Finding that answer shapes the conversation and influences how we use biblical texts to prove Jesus' intent for his followers. The UCC's interpretation and application of John

17: 21 aligns with this larger narrative of how human sin broke a unified church.

Returning to the UCC's ecumenical mission statement, we find the division of the church is a result of human sin, and all Christians have a responsibility to work for the day when, as Jesus prayed, "they may all be one."<sup>8</sup> Embedded in this logic is a powerful myth so pervasive it is part of our collective conscious: Jesus wanted his followers to be unified as one church. Because humanity broke it apart through denominational division, we must return to a time when all were united as one church.

How did the UCC arrive at this conclusion about the early church? Pinpointing the exact historical moment proves difficult because the belief in a perfect early church is ubiquitous. Although we cannot find the precise moment when a person or group of people argued about a perfect early church, we can address how trends in Johannine scholarship influence the theological conclusions about what Jesus prays for in John 17: 21. Over time, these conclusions became truths, and these truths color the lens pastors use to preach and teach about John 17: 21 to their faith communities.

Understanding the trends in Johannine scholarship and how those trends impact the conversation frees us to ask this question: Is this really what John 17: 21 is about? Unpacking and answering this question means we need to include other voices into the conversation, adding new hermeneutical approaches to the text. Overall, the theories and opinions about John are overwhelmingly European, male, and educated. As I started my research on John 17:21, I discovered I relied too heavily on these sources to shape my arguments. It can be instinctive to hang your assertions on the claims of conclusions

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<sup>8</sup> The United Church of Christ, "Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations." UCC. Org. Accessed on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. [Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations - United Church of Christ \(ucc.org\)](https://www.ucc.org/interfaith-relations).

made by established scholars. It lends credibility to what you argue. However, doing just that leaves us with the same view of John 17: 21. Disrupting the narrative becomes essential for something new to spring forth.

I bring in two specific voices, Hugo Mendez and Mary L. Coloe, into the larger conversation surrounding John 17: 21. Not only because the authors challenge the historical-critical approach, which disrupts the current narrative about the Gospel of John, but also because their conclusions take the conversation around John 17: 21 in a new direction. Their arguments lead us to reconsider our understanding of unity, oneness, and community, which will change how we understand John 17: 21. Their views also force us to confront an uncomfortable truth. Our reading of John 17:21 is too limited, and we have missed the forest for the trees.

One of the claims made about John's community focuses on this long-held understanding of John's community and how the community functioned. As Hugo Mendez explains, "for over fifty years, scholars have assumed that the Gospel and the Epistles of John were written within a particular kind of social matrix: a single, close-knit network of churches sharing a distinctive theological outlook."<sup>9</sup> Scholars based their theory on the discovery of scrolls found in Qumran. By the 1980s, this theory became the accepted viewpoint for scholarship and studying John's Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, the theory came under fire due to critics making valid claims about the lack of objective evidence proving that the Johannine community lived as we thought.

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<sup>9</sup> Mendez, 350.

<sup>10</sup> Mendez explains that the viewpoint became a "paradigm for Johannine Studies, meaning a knowledge generally received and held to be valid," 351.

Mendez explains how critics focused their critique on the lack of evidence of John's community and the methodology employed by scholars to create the historical narrative. While these criticisms are valid, they did not shake the foundation of this theory.<sup>11</sup>

Scholarship splits on the issue, but all sides agree that John's community existed in some form or another. Mendez states that present-day scholarship claims that the inclusion of the epistles proves there was a cohesive Johannian community.<sup>12</sup> This argument also assumes connected writers who shared "Johannine ideas" composed the texts. The epistles themselves prove a community existed as they are connected through letters. Those not in favor of a cohesive community fall into two groups. Mendez writes:

Currently, critics of the Johannine community hypothesis fall into two camps. The first assumes that a Johannine community existed but insists that its history is strictly conjectural (e.g., Reinhartz 1998, 2008; 2018: 111-57; Kysar 2005; Lieu 2014). The second targets the Johannine community within a broader challenge to the idea that gospels were written primarily or exclusively for specific communities(e.g., Bauckham 1998, 2007; Klink 2007).<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the scope of scholarship helps us see the larger picture and scholars' conversations about John's community. Johannine scholarship and interpretations do not remain stagnant but evolve as new voices enter the conversation. Mendez gives us those trends as a way for us to be active theologians instead of passive recipients of dated arguments about specific biblical passages.

How do the earlier trends play into the UCC's long-held conclusions about John 17: 21? To answer that question, I chose Don Aycock, Pau Minear, and Bruce Marshall's

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<sup>11</sup> Mendez, 350.

<sup>12</sup> Mendez, 351.

<sup>13</sup> Mendez, 351.

works to discuss next; all three works use the historical-critical theory to support their respective hypotheses about John 17: 21. These articles provide us with an example of how ecumenists and scholars using the historical-critical method approach the text from the assumption of a unified early church.

Don M. Aycock's article focuses less on providing a biblical exegesis of John 17:21 and more on the complex reality of how the church lives into Jesus' prayer for his followers. By taking a historical approach rather than a theological approach, Aycock gives us an overview of different historical agendas, from the early ecumenical councils to the modern-day ecumenical movements of the World Council of Churches and the Southern Baptist World Alliance. Since none of these agendas included a theological discussion around John 17: 21, the movements could not bring all parties together. Aycock's analysis reveals how different groups struggled to put John 17: 21 into practice because groups came together not for unity but rather for specific agendas.

Aycock cites a quote from a twentieth-century historian's article on ecumenicalism in the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology as evidence for why ecumenicalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not succeed:

Ecumenism has been predominately a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and Protestantism until recently. It is essentially a spiritual mood or religious commitment rather than a single worked out theological position; and moreover, much of its impulse has always been pragmatic: the declining resources of the smaller church in a country like England; the increasingly 'sect'-like character of all Christian bodies in more plainly secular societies...given even to established churches a greater self-consciousness as they have ceased to occupy a central role in relation to political and cultural life in general.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Aycock, 136.

Modern-day groups' pursuit of ecumenical unity focused on self-preservation during a time of noticeable church decline. Theological discernment about unity in John 17: 21 does not factor into the picture. Without a shared understanding of and commitment to John 17: 21, these movements stood on shaky ground, with no discernible mission statement or purpose other than survival. Furthermore, avoiding the issue of Jesus' prayer for unity meant that this movement did not have systems that handled a diversity of opinion. As such, evangelical movements did not participate in more significant ecumenical movements, choosing to unite amongst themselves.

Paul S. Minear's article dovetails with Aycock's, providing the necessary biblical exegesis on John 17: 21. In his article entitled, "Evangelism, Ecumenism, and John Seventeen," Minear discusses how evangelists and ecumenists use this passage to support theirs without contemplating or considering the author's precise intent for the original audience.<sup>15</sup> Minear breaks down verses 20-23, arguing, "these two sentences are carefully constructed to balance each other in synonymous parallelism, a pattern typical of Semitic thought."<sup>16</sup> His analysis leads the reader to consider the writer's reality, especially when we understand the term "kosmos."

Minear argues evangelists and ecumenicists let specific agendas influence interpretations of John 17:21. Failure to return to the text to figure out what the Gospel writer intended for the original audience leads to two contradictory interpretations of the text.<sup>17</sup> Minear returns 17: 21 back into the larger text of John 17, going through the text

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<sup>15</sup> Minear, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Minear, 6

<sup>17</sup> Paul Sevier Minear, "Evangelism, Ecumenism, and John Seventeen" *Theology Today* (38), no. 1 (1978): 5.



line by line to see if the author's intentions align with arguments made by both parties. Using both Aycock's and Minear's conclusions reveals how much agenda shapes the interpretation and use of this text.

Aycock and Minear offer a more subjective and questioning view of John 17: 21, but what happens when a scholar adopts this agenda? This agenda does not only belong to church councils or ecumenicists. Biblical scholars write articles for publication to utilize and promote the same agenda. In his essay "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel," Bruce D. Marshall shapes his interpretation of John 17: 21 with the following assumptions. He begins his analysis with the next argument "that of the many problems facing Christianity, division of the church is the most pressing of them all. A divided church is the most critical of all theological problems facing the church."<sup>18</sup> From here, Marshall uses this hypothesis to reflect on unity within the scriptures, looking specifically at the relationships between the reality of the unity of God and Christ on the one hand and the church on the other.<sup>19</sup>

Marshall concludes his article with a warning; the credibility of the Gospel depends on the church's unity; we must be one for the world to believe.<sup>20</sup> The church's lack of credibility, the decline in influence and membership, and the decrease in mission and impact directly result from a divided church. The church's inability to figure out how we become unified as Jesus and God will be our downfall.

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel" *Theology Today* 50 (1) 78-79.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, 89.

What a tremendous burden to lay on the reader's shoulders! The church's mission falls apart because we have not found a way to be as close to one another as Jesus and God? Talk about an impossible goal with no possible way forward. Publishing Marshall's article in *Theology Today*, a scholarly journal, provides credibility for his argument and insight into trends in scholarship on this topic. Therefore, it would not be impossible to believe that this article would be part of a seminary syllabus or taught in a classroom. Marshall's arguments then become part of the story of John 17: 21, led to pastors, who then teach it to their parishioners.

What happens to our image of the Gospel of John when we add in other voices who provoke us to expand our understanding, shaking up what we think we know? In my next section, I highlight two different scholars, Mary L. Coloe and Hugo Mendez, who offer us another viewpoint of John's community.

#### The Counter Argument: The Johannine Community Is Not What It Seems

Previously, Hugo Mendez provided a larger view of the division within Johannian scholarship. We return to his argument while also bringing in Mary L Coloe's work on the Gospel of John to help us expand our scope of the Gospel of John. Their conclusions run counter to the ones offered by the historians using the historical-critical method. While Coloe and Mendez approach the text differently, their thought-provoking analysis leads us to question what we think we know about John 17:21.

In the introduction to *John 1-10 (Wisdom Commentary Series Book 44)*, Mary L. Coloe describes how the Aboriginals of Australia have been systematically pushed to the margins, not even counted in a census of Australian people. Why? Because when the Europeans landed in Australia for the first time, they gazed out on the land and decided

not to see the original inhabitants as people, making them invisible.<sup>21</sup> While this may seem like a non-sensical way to begin a book about the Gospel of John, Coloe's introductory paragraph informs the reader that her work will not be about the voices we know in John but the unknown ones, specifically female ones. She states:

Within the limits of an ancient text that emerged from within a patriarchal social context, I wish to invite women to take their place within the Johannine narrative...this Gospel, more than any other New Testament book, requires that all characters, women, men, Jews, Gentiles, all participated equally in the divinization of creation when the "Word became flesh. The fundamental theology of the text is that all creation is open to the tabernacling presence of God. The commentary is written from this presumption."<sup>22</sup>

Already we are on to something new here. Coloe's description of John's community does not lead us to assume anything about uniformity; instead, this is a community rich in diversity, with different voices offering different theological conclusions equally about the Divine.

Unlike Coloe, Mendez does not write from a stated theological stance about John 17: 21. Instead of arguing that, he discusses what is missing from the debate about the Johannine community, including two crucial issues: literary contact and assumed authorship. He outlines his argument as follows:

My argument is simple: if all four Johannine works fall into a single literary lineage and false authorial claims pervade that lineage, it is not safe to reconstruct a Johannine community from the texts. The features of the epistles that would seem to "demand" the existence of such community-their similarities to the Gospel and their references to a network of churches can instead be explained by two devices of pseudepigraphal writing; imitation of style and verisimilitude.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Coloe, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Coloe, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Mendez, 352.

Mendez's arguments are not that farfetched, especially when we consider the scholarship around which of Paul's letters are authentic and which letters are simply written in the style of Paul. Mendez connects the conclusions made by deutor-Paulines should also be true for Johannian texts.

Mendez mentions recent changes in scholarship caution against using the conclusions from Pauline studies to create a historical narrative. Those letters could be fiction too. Still, Mendez reminds us that those letters scholars categorize as deutor-Paulines share linguistic features while bolstering and upholding genuine Pauline expressions. Those letters claim authenticity; they write in the same style and use the same arguments as Paul.<sup>24</sup>

The same cannot be said for the Johannian texts. Mendez provides enough linguistic evidence by comparing all four texts to show a shared contact and disguised authorship; there is insufficient evidence to make the same claim as the deuteropaulines.<sup>25</sup> The four works are not the products of independent writers connected in a single community but instead are works of pseudepigrapha. Mendez concludes this about the Johannine works:

...present themselves as the works of the same invented figure: a nameless eyewitness to the life of Jesus, recognized by his distinctive idiolect. This figure was invented by the author of John as an authenticating device for his Gospel and was later co-opted by the author(s) of the epistles in support of other agendas. In this case, the narrative world built around that figure—a community of house churches linked by emissaries—should be seen for what it is: a literary invention.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mendez, 352.

<sup>25</sup> Mendez, 352.

<sup>26</sup> Mendez, 353.

Since the argument for a cohesive Johannian community rest upon a historical construction from those four texts, assuming a shared community and authorship, Mendez shows how this argument falls apart.

If Paul's literary style could be imitated, could the same thing happen with John's Gospel? Do we have a central figure (John) and a connected group of followers writing the same way as their leader? The answer? Maybe. It isn't straightforward. Like Mendez, Coloe takes up the question of the authorship of John, acknowledging that scholars have no clear explanation of the author's identity. She offers an overview of scholarly opinions but spends the most time discussing the theory proposed by Sandra Schneiders. Schneiders theorizes that the authority behind the Gospel could be a woman. Her argument rings true, especially when we remember women played essential roles in some communities. When looking at the Gospel of John, Coloe summarizes Schneiders conclusions:

"In this Gospel, women such as the Samaritan Woman, Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Mary of Bethany are missionaries, who engage in theological discussion and show theological insight into Jesus' identity. What man would have assigned such prominent apostolically significant roles to women, roles that in the Synoptic Gospels are assigned to the Twelve? Schneiders then proceeds to analyze the function of the Beloved Disciple before arriving at a tentative conclusion about the author's identity.<sup>27</sup>

Schneiders believes the author of the Gospel to be an author and an evangelist, interacting with the text from these two viewpoints. The Beloved Disciple is,

neither a pure literary symbol nor a single historical individual but rather a 'kind of textual paradigm who concretely embodies in the text the corporate authority of the Johannine School. The Beloved Disciple in the text is a kind of prism refracting the ideal of discipleship into a number of characters, including Nathaniel, the Samaritan women, the royal official, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and

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<sup>27</sup> Coloe, 45.

Mary Magdalene. All of these characters are needed to give the reader a fuller picture of the ideal that the Beloved Disciple represents.<sup>28</sup>

For her part, Coloe acknowledges the possibility that Schneider provides essential insight into the Gospel and agrees with Schneider elevating the women characters in the Gospel. She also admits Schneiders's suggestion that we will not know the identity behind the historical author. Still, the writer's "alter ego or literary self-portrait in the text is the Samaritan woman, who receives Jesus' direct self-revelation" is a possibility but not a firm reality Coloe agrees with Mendez's overall critique of the theory of one author, noting that while the inclusion of women in the text may make Schneider's argument a possibility, there is not enough evidence to make that argument stick.<sup>29</sup>

When discussing the hypothesis of the Johannine Community, Coloe engages with the historical-narrative scholarship, notably Raymond Brown and his conclusions about John. In her overview of the Johannine Scholarship, Coloe also works with the same argument as Mendez, writing, "it is important to realize that this is a hypothetical reconstruction of the Johannine community based on the writings found in the Gospel of Epistles attributed to "John."<sup>30</sup> While Mendez uses literary criticism to poke significant holes in the theory proposed by traditional historical-critical scholarship, Coloe does not spend time weighing in on that specific part of the debate. Instead, her focus lies on using feminist hermeneutics to interpret the text.

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<sup>28</sup> Coloe, 45-46.

<sup>29</sup> Coloe, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Coloe, 48.

Mendez ends his article by arguing that the history of John begins when we look at the single author, who knew a variety of sources, including the Synoptic Gospels.

Looking at the single author helps us move forward with our study in this way. From

Mendez's conclusions:

"Although our author was probably attached to a local Christian assembly, we have no way of knowing whether he developed his ideas within that assembly or another. He might have synthesized them through experiences in several contexts and networks; his Gospel reveals a range of influences."<sup>31</sup>

Coloe's methodology produces conclusions similar to Mendez's. Mendez argues for a nameless figure interpreting the text through an invented character for the expressed purpose of spreading their agenda regarding Jesus. Coloe's use of a feminist hermeneutic and a narrative criticism makes a similar conclusion but adds more theological

explanations:

takes seriously that a text emerged from the experience of a person or community and that it is read by another person in their particular social and ethnic location... ....the evangelist does not work in a vacuum but writes for real people and tells the story of Jesus in light of Israel's ancient stories, songs, and prophecies. The writer is biased in his or her presentation, writing with a stated ideological purpose that readers will come to faith in Jesus "and have life in his name" (John 20: 31)<sup>32</sup>

Coloe's arguments allow us to consider what kind of theories influenced our unknown writer or writers while also poking at us to consider the motivations behind the theological conclusions found in the Gospel of John. In and of itself, that argument changes the scope of the discussion and our understanding of John 17:21. Her argument challenges us to examine the impact of our present-day influence on how we read the

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<sup>31</sup> Mendez, 368.

<sup>32</sup> Coloe, 52.

text. Are we too married to the belief that Jesus' prayer is about ecumenicalism that we have missed the boat?

Still, what Coloe says about the Gospel being a literary work and not an instruction manual directly challenges the historical-critical approach to John 17: 21. If Jesus is not telling us what to do when he prays for us before going to the Cross, what does this text mean?

Hope is not lost! Both Coloe and Mendez provide us with much to consider. From their arguments, we construct a new theory about the Johannine community and authorship of the Gospel of John and the Epistles. Instead of using these texts to confirm and build the Johannine community, we turn our attention to a nameless individual synthesizing and interpreting a wide variety of theological beliefs, taking what they wanted, leaving behind what they did not, to craft their specific story of Jesus.

John's Gospel stands out, especially when comparing this text to the Synoptic text. Next, I will explore the possible theological arguments our author interacted with when writing the Gospel. John is typically categorized as a Gnostic work, and while I agree there is evidence to support that conclusion, there are influences at play here. In this next section, I bring the works of George Beasley-Murray, Raymond Brown, De Wet, Royce Gordan Gruenler, and Theron, helping shed light on what influences existed during the writer's lifetime. These scholars provide the evidence we need to support our working thesis created from the works of Coloe and Mendez.

From here, I place John 17: 21 back into the larger narrative of the Farewell Discourse. I take this approach for two reasons. First, I argue that this verse cannot be read as a standalone statement, especially when we consider how past scholarship has



cherry-picked this verse to make an argument for ecumenical unity. This means we need to look at John 17: 21 as part of a much larger story in the Gospel. Second, Coloe's persuasive argument against using the Gospel of John as an instructional manual frees John 17: 21 from the confines of the previously held interpretation and allows us to experience and interact with John 17: 21 more intimately and spiritually.

Applying my argument to the text changes the meaning of the keywords<sup>33</sup> John 17: 21 is used to justify this passage as a command for ecumenical unity. Changing the meaning of those keywords challenges the UCC's understanding of John 17: 21. Jesus does pray for unity, but the agreement described in this passage focuses on the harmony between God and Jesus, two of the three parts of the Trinity. "That they may all be one" becomes a prayer for followers to be one in Christ as Christ is with God.

Unity, Oneness, and Community: What is John 17:21 really about?

"Don't worry; we will straighten you out." I still recall a well-meaning young man saying that when I was a college sophomore at Rutgers University. We both stood in line at the Neilson Dining Hall, and my necklace caught his eye. My mother gave me a pendant with a cross inside a Star of David for my high school graduation. I never took it off because of what it meant to me. I grew up in an interfaith household; my father is Jewish, my mother is Catholic, and my parents allowed their children to decide what path to follow. Growing up, I went to Temple on the high holy days, and I went to our local Catholic church and received the sacrament of baptism, communion, and confirmation. I considered, and still do, myself to be lucky to experience what I did growing up. While I

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<sup>33</sup> I define these keywords as "unity," "oneness," and "community" because of the direct relation to the UCC's ecumenical take on John 17: 21.

may not have always received eight days of presents during Hannukah, my religious upbringing was rich in tradition, beauty, and love.

When this young man spotted my necklace, he asked me the question I have been asked more times than I can count. "So, what are you then? You cannot be Jewish and Catholic at the same time." Now, typically I do not engage in conversations like this lightly. At that point, I was less likely to be friendly and polite to a person who discounted my experience in a dismissive and arrogant tone. As I opened my mouth to explain, he cut me off mid-sentence to invite me to his Bible study and straighten me out. As he turned to exit the dining hall and our conversation, he said over his shoulder, "Remember John 3: 16. For God So Loved the World, He Sent His Only Son."

I tell this story often to my congregation, especially during our Wednesday night Bible studies. I mean it not because I want to shame, mock, or point out the young man's arrogance or even address his hurtful comments. This story is an excellent example of what happens when we cherry-pick from the Bible to make our case. More often than not, we get the whole thing wrong; we misunderstand the text because we removed it from the larger conversation happening in the Bible. We shut down essential discussions and dialogue about the text, preventing us from having meaningful theological discussions. When we toss Biblical passages out to prove our arguments, we inadvertently claim that we have the Bible figured out.

I also open this section with this story to say that it is not just individuals who cherry-pick bible quotes to say at unsuspecting individuals standing in line for their morning cereal. Still, large denominational bodies are guilty of doing the same thing.

Case in point: the UCC and the cherry-picking of John 17: 21.<sup>34</sup> I argued how the UCC arrived at these conclusions through Biblical scholarship in the first section. We picked apart the assumption about how John's Community looked, opening the door to imagining a time when an author sat down and synthesized many theological and religious concepts from different communities. Now, we take this passage and put it back into the larger narrative, holding all of these previous conclusions still in our minds, and see where that takes us.

Placing a verse back into a larger narrative opens the door for us not just to get more information but to make the painful realization that we may have gotten wrong. We must undertake this risk to find out what John 17:21 is all about. We have tools to help us do this-taking with us what we know and what we have learned. Utilizing scholarship from George Beasley-Miller, Raymond Brown, Royce Gruenler, and S. W. Theron's conversation with Coloe, De Wet, and Mendez and his conclusions, we think we know about Jesus' prayer for unity changes. No longer are we talking about the unity of groups but the unity and connectedness found only in the Holy Trinity. Transforming what we know about Jesus' prayer for unity helps us understand other topics, "oneness and "community," both subjects that are part of our ecumenical goals. Laying this all out, we find that not only got it wrong, but John 17:21 sets up an impossible dream. Humanity can never achieve the level of love and trust found in the Trinity, and if that is our standard for ecumenical work, we are doomed to fail.

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<sup>34</sup> The UCC only uses half of John 17: 21. The full verse is "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." NSRV Translation.

I often think about that young man, and I wonder if anyone ever challenged him on his use of John 3:16. Did he ever stop and think about the entire conversation happening not just in chapter three but in the whole Gospel? Cherry-picking gets us small and narrow results. Recognizing biblical texts, even if the text is unpleasant or challenging, produces transformation. This is what I hope to do here.

John 17 begins with Jesus looking towards heaven, saying, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."<sup>35</sup> These first few words leave us with a feeling of urgency that Jesus' time on Earth is coming to an end. It is, of course, not uncommon for Jesus to pray, but John 17 is different and unique than other prayers recorded in the Gospels. George Beasley-Murray notes that John 17 is both the conclusion of the Farewell Discourse and prayer only found in the Gospel of John. Beasley-Murray makes his case for John 17, concluding the Farewell Discourse by likening it to how the Deuteronomy concludes with a prayer and blessing from Moses.<sup>36</sup> S.W. Theron compliments and expands upon Beasley-Murray's argument by adding this "most commentators would agree that John 17 constitutes a majestic high point or summary of the overall structure and thematic development of our Gospel."<sup>37</sup>

John 17 is a unique and distinctive prayer. Theron notes that the repeated petitions for unity become part of the context of the prayer, something we as readers need to

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<sup>35</sup> John 17:1 NSRV

<sup>36</sup> George Beasley-Murray, *John*. (Waco: World Books, 1987),293.

<sup>37</sup> S.W. Theron, 'INA ΩΣΙΝ ΉΝ: A multifaceted approach to an important thrust in the prayer of Jesus in John 17'. *Neotestamentica*, [s. l.], v. 21, n. 1, (1987),77.

consider and keep in the forefront of our minds.<sup>38</sup> Beasley-Murray furthers the claim made by Theron by arguing:

...the distinctiveness of the prayer of John 17, over against other related compositions, lies in the uniqueness of him who prays and the setting of his prayer: Jesus, the Son of God, is about to depart to his father through death and resurrection for the life of the world, in that circumstance he prays for God may be perfectly fulfilled through what he now does and through his followers.<sup>39</sup>

We know the following: John 17 concludes the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is praying this prayer before his death and resurrection and a repeated theme for unity.

Because Jesus repeats the word “unity” often, it stands to reason we need to pay attention to this phrase. To start, our scholars argue that 17: 20-23 is an expansion of the argument laid out in 17: 11b<sup>40</sup>, where Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples. Beasley-Murray says this about what kind of unity Jesus prays for, "for unity is radical and fundamental because it is rooted in being God, revealed in Christ and the redemptive action of God in Christ. That they may be one should read as they may be one in us."<sup>41</sup> Theron makes the case that 17:20-23 is an elaborate development of 17:11b (so they may be one as we are one). In that section of John 17, Jesus is talking about unity with God. 17:20-21 suggests a parallel intimate relation between God and the Son and between the Son and God and the Community. Therefore, Jesus is praying for the solidarity of the

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<sup>38</sup> S.W. Theron, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Beasley-Murray, 293.

<sup>40</sup> And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one-NSRV Translation

<sup>41</sup> Beasley-Murray,302.

Community with God, and the Son will be how the world recognizes God's love for the church as a whole.<sup>42</sup>

This information helps us to see that unity is personal yet communal. In keeping with our developed theory about how the author constructed the text, we should take a step back and think about the theological influences available when the author wrote the Gospel. Examining three sources, in particular, Gnosticism, Jewish, and Qumran theology, helps us consider how the author understood the term "unity." This is especially important because of John 17:21's importance in justifying ecumenical partnerships. How does this help us understand how unity and Community become about ecumenical partnerships and one church body?

Perhaps the most well-known theological argument is that the Gospel of John is a Gnostic text; however, we need to ask ourselves, is that true? Defining Gnosticism can be tricky. However, Raymond Brown provides a solid explanation in his book, *An*

*Introduction to the Gospel of John*:

Scholars can recognize common patterns in developed Gnosticism; for example, a primordial unity in the pleroma surround a supreme being; intermediary beings between God and human beings; the agency of these beings in producing evil, material world, and thus creating a dualism; souls as divine sparks imprisoned in alien matter; the necessity of knowledge gained through revelation in order to free souls and lead them to light and back to their spiritual origins; the numerical limitations of the elite capable of receiving this revelation; the saving reveal who arouses them so that they wish to leave this world.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Theron, 89-90.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. ed. Francis J. Molony (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 116-117.

Based on that explanation, the Gospel of John feels like gnostic writing. The Gospel uses light and dark imagery to describe Jesus as a pre-existent being who became flesh and who came into the world. (John 1: 1-14). While these feels correct, we need to consider how we are dealing with the history of interpretation and how that influences how we interpret John through the lens of another universal belief; the Gospel composed by a primarily gnostic Community in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D.

Brown points out that scholarship is divided on the issue:

Toward the Gnostic end of the spectrum...Schottroff contends that John is a Gnostic work with a radically dualist evaluation of the relationship of the redeemer to the world and a dualism of human choice for or against God. John does not deny the reality of Jesus' flesh, but the world is judged unfriendly to God because it refuses to recognize Jesus' glory-salvation is for those who do not belong to the world. On the anti-Gnostic end of the spectrum, in antiquity, Iraeneus reports the tradition that John wrote the Gospel to refute Cerinthus, a heretic whose views were close to Gnosticism and Docetism, and the Gnostic error of the Nicolaitans.<sup>44</sup>

Brown proposes a middle path between both arguments. His argument works well with Mendez's thesis. He argues, "...the Gospel itself did not draw on a Gnostic background, that its approaches are not distinctively Gnostic, and it was not concerned with correcting Gnostic interpretations because the struggle came only later...therefore, the Gospel's statements could be used to support either (or both) sides in the anti-Gnostic/Gnostic struggle."<sup>45</sup> Recalling that Menendez's argument supposes an author synthesizing different views from different groups, the Gospel is an example of other influences. Gnosticism is in the mix, but it is a Gnosticism through the eyes of different people.

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, 123-124.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, 124.

Jewish and Qumran theology influences John 17: 21 in impactful ways. De Wet notes that the Qumran community relied on covenants as part of the framework for existence and that each person entered into a covenant with God.<sup>46</sup> When looking at John 17, there does not seem to be a covenantal function until we think about how strong the idea of unity existed among members of the Qumran community.

Beasley-Murray tells us that the Qumran Community called themselves "the unity,"<sup>47</sup> implying a personal use of the term rather than a global definition. De Wet elaborates on how an intimate understanding of unity informs concepts of covenant:

At first glance, it seems as if the covenant does not function in John 17 at all... what does, however, figure prominently is that the divine family picture features prominently in the Gospel according to John. What does however figure prominently, is that the divine family picture features prominently in the Gospel according to John. The great number of times the forms of address of *πάτερ* (vv 1,5,11,21,24 and 25) and *υἱός* (v 1) occurs in John 17 alone clearly attest to this. That the believing children of God also form part of this "family of God" is also expressed in John 17 by the central position the idea of unity occupies in this chapter. Within this divine family the believers enjoy a special and intimate relationship with the Father and Son. The family image thereby becomes the framework within which the whole idea of unity can function effectively.<sup>48</sup>

De Wet's argument changes the way we see unity. Unity is much more personal within familial ties than global ties, implying an intimate closeness. Interestingly, De Wet also points out that unity is possible when individuals put the group's goals ahead of their own:

With the Qumran community, this unity could, however, only realise if the individual acknowledged the more lofty status of the group. The individual could, therefore, not really possess an identity on his own; only within the group did he have an identity... In the Gospel according to John the believer also only

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<sup>46</sup> BW De Wet, Unity in John 17 and in 1QS I-IX". *Skrif en Kerk*, 18, no. 1(1997), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Beasley-Murray, 302.

<sup>48</sup> De Wet, 35-36.



possesses identity as child of God...in other words, unity can in this case only realise if the individual belongs to a group of believers/children of God. John 17 Confirms this by creating a very close connection between themes of "unity" and "believers."<sup>49</sup>

Brown and De Wet's assertions challenge the UCC's concepts of autonomy. The individual's needs and concerns matter but are not above the group's needs or values. Autonomy, therefore, runs counter to the unity described in John 17: 21 and to how the author understood Community. Theron's other argument helps us move into our next part: the oneness of the Community can only be understood through the lens of the divine unity of the Trinity.<sup>50</sup>

This transformed notion of unity and Community helps us to re-consider what oneness means when Jesus prays "that they all may be one." Are we referring to oneness among disciples or something else entirely? Brown argues that the unity statements have a horizontal and vertical dimension. The vertical is the relationship between God and Son, and the horizontal is a relationship of believers among themselves.<sup>51</sup> When looking specifically at verse 21, Brown notes that "they also may be one in us" means unity is not just human fellowship or harmony amongst all Christians. Instead, it is about looking at the relationship between God and Jesus and seeing it as the model of unity Christians should aspire to have.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> De Wet, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Theron,93.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1970),776.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, 769.

In his article, "John 17: 20-26", Royce Gordan Gruenler adds more to De Wet's arguments about Community and unity. Gruenler argues that the Community defined in the Gospel of John as the Triune Family has distinct characteristics but is also essentially unified, always for a common goal. The prayer found in John 17 expressed the intimate workings of two of the three members of the Triune Family (God, Christ). Gruenler argues that when the Community of believers (Jesus' disciples, both past, present, and future) bears the image of the Christ, then the result is unity in plurality.<sup>53</sup>

Mary L. Coloe also agrees with these conclusions but adds something else worth considering, especially when we think about why Jesus prays for unity among his disciples. Coloe concludes that "Jesus's desires that they all be one in him, in his father and among themselves is for the mission."<sup>54</sup> Jesus revealed God's nature because he is one with God. If the disciples want to continue Jesus' mission to reveal God's love for the world, they can do that only from a union with Jesus and God. Coloe states that "the revelation of God cannot occur from the outside, only from within the Father-Son-disciple relationship. Being one in God is the only way to reveal God."<sup>55</sup> Jesus' prayer is about missions, but we must be one with God and Christ first to fulfill that mission.

Being one with God means being called into a communion based on love and dependent on that love. Coloe elaborates further in her analysis of 17: 24-26. She writes:

While echoing the earlier verses, these concluding words introduce something new. Jesus desires that the disciples may be with him, caught up in the divine love existing between *logos/Sophia* and *theos* before the foundation of the world (1:1). In this *Sophia-theos* intimacy, they too will know God from the "inside" and

<sup>53</sup> Royce Gordan Gruenler, "John 17: 20-26" Interpretation 43, no 2 (April 1989), 180.

<sup>54</sup> Mary L. Coloe, *Wisdom Commentary: Volume 44B John 11-21*, ed. Mary Ann Bevis and Barbara E. Reid (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 267.

<sup>55</sup> Coloe, 267.

know the divine love for themselves, and only then can they bear witness to God, from their own experience of love.<sup>56</sup>

When we are dependent on that love, we fulfill our purpose. Coloe ends her analysis by quoting from John Painter's article, "Identity in the Fourth Gospel ."She writes,

“As John Painter notes, ‘The success of this mission remains totally dependent on the oneness of those who are sent with the source of divine love, which may yet transform the world from a place of darkness and terror. Only the visible unity and love among believers can witness to and make present the divine love in the world.’”<sup>57</sup>

So, where does this leave us when it comes to John 17: 21? Returning it into a larger context lets us see the beauty of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. Utilizing the theory developed by Mendez and De Wet allows us to reframe our concepts of unity, oneness, and Community, challenging our commonly held, taught, and passed down understanding of John 17:21. Unity is not a cut and dry term; it is complex and intimate, drawing from the Trinity. To succeed in our missions, we must depend on God's love.

The most powerful revelation from this biblical exegesis is the transformed understanding of how unity, individualism, and community intersect, as opposed to the UCC's definition of autonomy and what this means for the polity. In the UCC, autonomy means "autonomous bodies" that hopefully join together in the shared pursuit of a goal. The constitution makes sure to note that autonomy for local churches remains, and the local church can pursue its own individual goals even if those goals do not align with the overall goals of the denomination.

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<sup>56</sup> Coloe, 270.

<sup>57</sup> Coloe, 270.

However, when we look at how the author of John understands unity, we see how we have it wrong. Individuals' identity becomes wrapped up in the larger group. Personal agendas are put to the side for the betterment of a group. Perhaps most importantly, unity only exists when the individual realizes that they belong to a group. John 17:21 points us away from an autonomous polity and towards a more connective unit where the larger goal must matter more than an individual's desires.

Building on our theory, we will see how the theology in John is not so simple; we are not talking about denominationalism but something much more intimate, the oneness of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In the end, we need to come back to something Raymond Brown pointed out to us in his analysis. John 17: 21 focuses on human beings striving to be as close as God and Christ. Each part of God's Self in the Trinity is equal to the other parts and depends on the others to achieve a common goal. We cannot achieve anything close to this with a polity structure that allows for more individualism than connectedness.

Breaking down a narrative of a unified community operating under one belief does a lot for us. We know that the first Christian churches were not what we imagined. We only have scratched the surface of what we understand about them. We must always be aware of what presuppositions we bring to the text and how that influences how we see things. Second, synthesizing opinions means acknowledging different theological concepts is okay! We do not have to be of one mind.

Ramifications and Considerations: The objective reality of John 17:21 in interfaith relationships

Rabbi Laurence Groffman is a dear friend and colleague of mine and has been since I arrived in Cedar Grove. He reached out to me in the first few months of my ministry and asked to meet up for coffee. He and I talked like old friends, sharing our lives and religious journeys. He spoke to me about the other houses of worship in town and his relationship with those leaders. Our two communities have a deep and meaningful connection stretching back generations. Rabbi Groffman's predecessor was close friends with Rev. Dr. Charlie Jenkins, Community Church's beloved former pastor. Rabbi Groffman and I rely on each other for emotional support, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the first stories Rabbi Groffman shared with me over that first cup of coffee had to do with Cedar Grove's Annual Thanksgiving Interfaith Service. He told me that the new person in town preached the sermon. He said to me, "No pressure! It is just a rite of passage!" His demeanor changed as he asked me to do something in my sermon. He said that because this is an interfaith service, could I refrain from being exclusionary in my remarks. I could preach on anything I wanted to, but I had to make sure my sermon included everyone present.

His request felt odd to me at the time. When I pressed him for an explanation, I could see a mixture of discomfort and pain in his eyes. Rabbi Groffman told me that a few years ago, the pastor of one of the other churches in town preached a sermon focused on Jesus being the Messiah and Savior of the World and that no different path led to God. This pastor understood the expectation required of the speaker and that the audience gathered for the service included members from Temple Shalom and the Compassionate

Buddhist Temple. However, the sermon did not welcome or have all the faith traditions gathered together to celebrate Thanksgiving.

I remember sitting back in my chair, silent as I took in his words. He told me his faith community felt hurt and left out for the first time during the Thanksgiving Service. From that point forward, an unsaid understanding became a stated requirement for the individual preaching the service; the sermon must be about giving thanks, including everyone, because this is an interfaith event. Rabbi Groffman then told me that when the pastor heard this, he informed the rest of the religious leaders in town that he and his congregation would no longer participate in the Thanksgiving service because he would not abide by this request.

I assured Rabbi Groffman that I had no intentions of going down the same path. I told him of my interfaith upbringing and how my life experiences shaped my theology and approach to the Bible. He smiled and told me he suspected I had a Jewish background because of my last name. We laughed, and I made a joke about never getting eight days of presents growing up, despite the assumptions of my classmates that I received tons of gifts during the holiday season. The conversation went back to talking about our families and other pleasantries about life and ministry in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, making plans for our communities to gather together.

Rabbi Groffman's words stuck with me long after returning to my office. I reflected on how he must have felt to share this story. How he had to gauge my reaction to the request, wondering if I would respond in the same way as the other pastor had, bracing himself for possible disappointment. Yes, our two communities have a long history together, but past behavior is not an indicator of future behavior.

Rabbi Groffman could not know if I would hold the same convictions as my predecessor, so he had to find out for himself and his community. He had to see if he could count on us how Temple Shalom has always relied on Community Church as an interfaith partner in ministry and as a friend. All of it makes sense, and yet it is still profoundly upsetting.

I am thankful Rabbi Groffman shared with me this story. I place this story in this section as both an example and a warning about the dangers of using John 17: 21 as our blueprint for pursuing ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. When we talk about interfaith partnerships, John 17:21 does more to exclude than include. In the "Ecumenicalism and Interfaith Relations" section, the UCC says about the denomination's commitment to interfaith partnerships:

Our commitment to relationships with all the peoples of the earth has led the United Church of Christ to enter into dialogue with other faith traditions. "What does it mean to profess Christian faith in a world of many faiths?" "How can I be fully Christian and at the same time respect the faith of others?" "What does it mean to be 'saved'?" "How do I interpret in an interfaith society verses the Bible that understands Jesus as 'the way'?" These are questions with which members of our congregations wrestle every day. General Synod's commitment to interfaith dialogue is expressed in part through the Interfaith Relations Commission of the National Council of Churches. Through the NCC, we have been able to connect with leaders of many non-Christian faiths. Other settings of the church are engaged in countless interfaith dialogues, projects, and relationships.<sup>58</sup>

Although the Interfaith Relationship statement does not mention John 17:21, placing both the Ecumenical and Interfaith statements together tell us that individual statements can be read together as a part of a more significant statement. We cannot simply pretend that

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<sup>58</sup> The United Church of Christ, "Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations." UCC. Org. Accessed on February 3rd, 2022. [Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations - United Church of Christ \(ucc.org\)](https://www.ucc.org/ecumenical-and-interfaith-relations).

John 17:21 exists for ecumenicalism and not interfaith relationships because the verse is at the core of the denomination's existence.

Therefore, we must wrestle with the implications of using John 17:21 in our pursuit of interfaith relationships, especially in light of new conclusions about the meaning of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. We must ask ourselves, "How do we use Jesus' prayer for his disciples to be one with him to create meaningful partnerships with faith traditions that do not believe what we believe?"

I will look first at the National Council of Churches (NCC) Interfaith statement and the accompanying theological commentary document titled "Interfaith Relations and the Churches a Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement By Bert F. Breiner. Former Co-Director for Interfaith Relations, NCCCUSA."<sup>59</sup> Starting here becomes an essential first step because the UCC adopted the NCC statement as part of the denomination's commitment to interfaith partnerships. The NCC's policy statement provides biblical exegesis for churches engaging in interfaith work in an increasingly diverse political and religious landscape. However, because the NCC made the deliberate and problematic decision to treat interfaith relationships like ecumenical relationships, the statement is more harmful than helpful. By relying on the NCC's statement, the UCC risks insulting and injuring our interfaith partners.

In her introduction to her book, *Wisdom Commentary: Volume 44A John 1-10*, Mary L. Coloe raises an essential concern about how John's author framed the "Jews" in

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<sup>59</sup> Bert F. Breiner, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement" National Council of Churches.us. Accessed on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [Interfaith Relations and the Churches.pdf \(nationalcouncilofchurches.us\)](https://www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us/interfaith-relations-and-the-churches.pdf).



the Gospel of John. Coloe reminds us that there is an essential difference between the historical Jewish people and the "character of the Jews" in John's Gospel":

We must distinguish between the actual time of Jesus' life and the decades later near the end of the first century when the Gospel is written. These are two markedly different historical times, where the Jewish world has undergone the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans...During the time of Jesus, these were known as the Pharisees, and they were responsible for preserving what is known as rabbinic Judaism, where Torah rather than temple shapes the religious life of Jews."<sup>60</sup>

Coloe tells us Judaism would eventually split into two groups: the "Synagogue and the Christian Church."<sup>61</sup> These two groups eventually develop their own unique identity and, in doing so, label the group as the "other. John's author writes the Gospel as if the separation is already a reality, creating Jewish characters who do not reflect historical Jewish people. Coloe explains why the "Pharisees and the crowds are labeled 'the Jews.' These characters presented as showing the greatest hostility to Jesus and even seeking his death."<sup>62</sup>

Coloe's work provides the background, but Adele Reinhartz's article makes us consider the ramifications of using John 17:21 in our interfaith discussions. Her article "Reflections on My Journey with John: A Retrospective." Reinhartz, a Jewish Woman and Johannian Scholar, addresses her "break up" with the Gospel of John by highlighting an uncomfortable reality about the treatment of Jews in John's Gospel and a long history of Anti-Semitism associated with the text. Reinhartz's reflection is a valuable

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<sup>60</sup> Mary L. Coloe, *Wisdom Commentary: Volume 44A John 1-10*, ed. Mary Ann Bevis and Barbara E. Reid (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 57.

<sup>61</sup> Coloe, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Coloe, 57.

conversation partner in our overall discussion about John 17: 21. Her voice and concerns should pause how we move forward with this verse in the future.

The Preamble to the NCC's policy statement begins with a quote from the Gospel of John. Although it is not John 17: 21, the verse is from the same chapter and is within the same context as the Farewell Discourse:

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). As disciples, we seek to testify to the love of God in [Jesus Christ](#) our Lord, to embody that love in the world, and to respond to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. We seek God's grace in our common effort to understand ever more fully how to live as the body of Christ in this religiously plural and culturally diverse time and place.<sup>63</sup>

Using John 17:18 as the opening statement for an interfaith policy is a problematic, confusing choice because of how strong the language is about evangelism in the name of Jesus. Nothing in this opening statement indicates a commitment to listen and interact with other faith traditions. Instead, it could be read as a way to engage in those relationships with the purpose of evangelism. Our interfaith partners feel less than to us rather than our equals.

Starting the explanation off this way says something else: the NCC policymakers see ecumenicalism and interfaith work as the same. In his commentary on the "Marks of Faithfulness, Bert F. Breiner confirms this argument:

The following section, "Marks of Faithfulness," brings together the insights of the previous theological reflection to provide the elements of a practical approach to men and women of other religions. In a sense, this section prepares the way for the final section of the paper. "Recommendations" (numbered separately at the end) are offered concerning the life and programs of the National Council of Churches, the specific responsibilities of the Interfaith Commission within the Council, and the responsibilities of the churches in service to each other as a

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<sup>63</sup> National Council of Churches, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of NCC USA .National Council of Churches.Us Accessed on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [National Council of Churches - Shared Ministry - Justice & Advocacy - Women's Ministries - Maternal Health.](#)

community of communions. It places the practice of interfaith relations within the context of Christian ecumenism.<sup>64</sup>

Interfaith work is not the same as ecumenical work because our interfaith partners believe differently than we do and bring their own unique experiences with Christianity to the table. Interfaith work has different goals and agendas than ecumenical work. Placing both in the same category makes it okay to ignore those differences, assuming that interfaith partners work the same as our ecumenical partners and share our specific worldview. By not honoring the differences in our interfaith partners and approaching this work with a Christian scope, the NCC statement leaves those groups who do not share our sacred texts to be left out. We also set the terms of conversation to be strictly Christian.

The NCC statement fails to take a stand on any complicated issue that can come up when doing interfaith work, despite having the opportunity to do so. Breiner says as much in his commentary:

It is also important to note what the Policy Statement does not do. As mentioned, it does not attempt to resolve controversial theological issues in the life of the Church. These issues include disagreements about the salvation of non-Christians, Christian mission (both evangelism and diakonia), and the nature and role of interfaith dialogue. It does not seek to provide detailed guidance on the many practical questions of interfaith relations in America today.<sup>65</sup>

Breiner's commentary does not elaborate on why the NCC did not make any policy statements on these critical issues; the policymakers chose instead only to go so far. Their decision is frustrating and challenging to understand, mainly when the policy contains

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<sup>64</sup> Bert F. Breiner, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement" National Council of Churches.us. Accessed on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [Interfaith Relations and the Churches.pdf \(nationalcouncilofchurches.us\)](https://www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Interfaith-Relations-and-the-Churches.pdf)

<sup>65</sup>Bert F. Breiner, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Brief Theological Introduction to the Policy Statement" National Council of Churches.us. Accessed on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [Interfaith Relations and the Churches.pdf \(nationalcouncilofchurches.us\)](https://www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Interfaith-Relations-and-the-Churches.pdf)

sections acknowledging the church's past injustices. An excellent example of this is lines 25, 27, and 29 in the "God and Human Community" section:

In the churches' long history with people of other religions, as we have struggled to make actual God's gift of community, we have acted faithfully and unfaithfully. While Christians have suffered persecution at the hands of other faiths and from each other, we have much to repent. Christians have persecuted Jews and crusaded against Muslims. Christians have enslaved Africans and other peoples, and have participated in subordinating indigenous peoples and erasing their religious traditions. Many Christians have accepted or perpetuated the use of their religion to bless the imposition of Western culture and economic domination. Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim biases, together with racism and ethnic biases have flourished among us.

Our experience, therefore, is a mixture of successes and failures in building loving community and in exercising our stewardship of God's creation in justice and peace. We must struggle to reject or reform all those human actions and systems that destroy or deny the image of God in human beings or that tear down the structures of human community. On the other hand, we must seek to affirm all human impulses which build up true community.

We find ourselves in need of repentance and reconciliation. Again and again we are reminded "of the Christian Church as a sign at once of people's need for fuller and deeper community, and of God's promise of a restored human community in Christ." As we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise, we commit ourselves to work for fuller and deeper community in our own time and place.<sup>66</sup>

When looking at all three statements, we find in line 25 an acknowledgment of past sins and problematic behavior. Line 27 acknowledges the church's history while committing to standing up against oppression. Line 29 draws on 25 and 27 while also admitting the church's current position must be listening and making amends for the past. All three lines could become policy statements but looking at the "Marks of Faithfulness" does not reflect this strong language.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> National Council of Churches, "Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of NCC USA .National Council of Churches.Us Accessed on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. [National Council of Churches - Shared Ministry - Justice & Advocacy - Women's Ministries - Maternal Health](#)

<sup>67</sup> For the "marks of faithfulness" [National Council of Churches - Shared Ministry - Justice & Advocacy - Women's Ministries - Maternal Health](#).

Unfortunately, NCC's policy on interfaith relations does not give us policy. When thinking about John 17:21, the policy statement proves that this is not a verse that creates a strong covenant but one that limits our viewpoints and the scope of our work with our interfaith partners. We also ignore the complicated history of the Gospel of John, specifically a long history of antisemitism. Listening to our interfaith partners' concerns and emotions forces us to confront this text's use to build relationships.

When I read Adele Reinhartz's article, I felt like I sat across from her, like I did when I sat down with Rabbi Groffman. In her work, Reinhartz reflects on her long journey with the Gospel of John, beginning with her doctoral work in the late 1970s and concluding with her most recent book on John, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*. Surprisingly, Reinhartz tells us that the time has come for her to break up with the Gospel of John”

Why break up now after such a long time? Two reasons. First, I do not have anything "big" left to say about John. This is not to say I have solved all the problems posed by the Gospel. On the contrary, the questions remain numerous and serious enough for many more generations of scholars to tackle. It is just that I have exhausted the questions that feel pressing me. Second, I have had enough of John's hostility towards Jews. As my forthcoming book details, I am now convinced that John's well-documented anti-Judaism is not peripheral but central to the Gospel's theology and rhetorical program.<sup>68</sup>

Reinhartz's truth-telling prose aligns with what Coloe asserts about how John's author created the character of the Jews. Reinhartz is gracious in her article, saying she does not believe John's author could have foreseen the consequences of creating literary characters to act as strawmen to Jesus. Still, she does point out, "there is no doubt that they intended

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<sup>68</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Reflections on My Journey with John: A Retrospective" *Ancient Jew Review* April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, 1.

to foster suspicion of, distancing from and even hatred of the *ioudaioi*.<sup>69</sup> Those who did not believe in the Gospel became the "other," easy to hate and distrust. Reinhartz elaborates further by writing:

Yet the fact that there existed and continued to exist, real people, who fit that label-whether we call them Jews or Judeans or by some other name who, by and large, did not go along with the Gospel's views about God, Jesus, and humankind, means that John's Gospel could be, and was, used to build a wall between Christ-confessors and the *ioudaioi* that had real consequences for real Jews.<sup>70</sup>

Reinhartz argument cements how irresponsible it is to use the Gospel of John in our interfaith conversations. To continue to do so means actively choosing to ignore the church's past sins of antisemitism and violence against the Jewish community. Her words are also a warning against the NCC's understanding of interfaith relationships. Treating them like ecumenical relationships permits us to overlook these critical factors. We must start actively thinking about what biblical texts we use instead of relying on what we have always done.

If I have not clarified my point, I will conclude this section with one last quote from Reinhartz found in Coloe's introduction. This quote comes from Reinhart's article, "A Nice Girl Reads the Gospel of John":

For the Jewish reader, the Gospel of John, in which Jews are portrayed as unbelieving descendants of the devil (8:44), blind, sinful, and incapable of understanding their own scriptures, is one of the most disturbing texts in the Christian canon.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Reinhartz, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Reinhartz, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Coloe, 57.

Her words drive home how negligent we have been to use John in our interfaith conversation. The time has come to leave this passage behind, especially if we want to be successful in our pursuits of interfaith work.

Where do we go from here? This is the question I wrestle with as I conclude my work. I began my journey with UCC polity because I believe, and still do that the denomination can find a way to re-structure and re-organize itself in a way that reflects our commitment to ecumenicalism and interfaith work. The Joint Commission's dream of a unified church is well within our reach if we can let go of John 17: 21. However, I do not know if the UCC can exist without John 17:21 being our purpose for existence. This verse is in our denominational DNA, so much so it feels almost impossible to divorce our polity from John 17: 21. Yet, using John 17:21 in the manner we have, means ignoring the complexity of the text.

I find myself returning to Mary Gast and her book and wishing her theory was the magic fix, the missing link, the last piece of the puzzle we need to get right for our polity to make sense. I understand why she and the other UCC scholars understand John 17:21 as a call for denominational unity. Ideas become facts, and they become ubiquitous because it is easy to accept the status quo rather than challenge those conclusions. Pastors, in particular, spend more time wearing the hat of administrator, financial analyst, marketing expert, website designer, and technology expert than the hat of a theologian. When I reflect on my ministry today, I know I spend far more time trying to find new ways to attract new members than I do deep-diving into the Bible. This is especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. Who among us has time to sit with John 17:21 and

think out these things when we had to pivot to online worship while reassuring our congregations that everything would eventually be okay?

It is easy to rely on someone else's conclusions, especially when an entire denomination embraces those conclusions as fact. It is nerve-wracking to go up against settled belief; it stirs up feelings about being an impostor, not smart enough, or seasoned enough to make the claims I made in my paper. When I think back on my past experiences as a Member in Discernment (MID) and my current situation as a pastor, I know we can do better. John 17: 21 is a beautiful verse, but it is not the right verse for what we want to accomplish as a denomination. The unity in Jesus' prayer does not align with the UCC's autonomous polity. Trying to make John 17:21 fit into the UCC polity structure is like taking your foot and trying to jam it into a half-size shoe too small. You may be trying to accomplish this impossible feat because you love the shoe, but, in the end, you end up frustrated with hurt feet.



## CONCLUSION: WE MAY NEVER BE ONE, AND THAT IS OKAY!

What do we do with John 17:21? Do we abandon this passage altogether and go back to the drawing board, looking for a biblical passage that fits into UCC polity? Initially, I believed that if the UCC found a new biblical verse to re-organize itself around, the problematic nature of our polity would resolve itself. However, after spending time in John 17:21, I realize that cherry-picking another verse leads us back to where we are now. Every verse is multilayered, complex, and open for interpretation. Swapping John 17:21 for another verse does not solve our problems; instead, it just kicks the can down the road. Our polity will be problematic no matter what verse we use. Furthermore, we should ask ourselves, is it appropriate to use the Bible to make our argument for denominational existence? This is the result of using biblical texts for marketing campaigns; we end up repeating the same mistakes repeatedly.

If removing John 17:21 from our foundation is not reasonable, we can use the text differently. Now, asking the UCC to re-consider how we use this text seems like a big ask because of all the work that will need to happen going forward. Yet, I wonder how the structure would look if we embraced a more authentic and nuanced way of reading John 17: 21. We could envision denominationalism ecumenical and interfaith relationships in a whole new and accurate manner, opening up the possibility of actually achieving the dream of the Joint Commission.

When I think about answering that question, I start with a quote from Don Aycock's article, "John 17 and Jesus' Prayer for Unity". His words help us face unity and set realistic expectations for ourselves moving forward:

No one can force his view on this matter of unity on another or make him see beyond his present horizon. In any case, unity of purpose and witness among

churches can be achieved without necessarily fusing structures and meshing the rich colors of one's history into the dull hues of homogenized polity. In this area, each Christian must choose his own path. Some of these paths will converge while others will run parallel, but all, I hope, head in the same direction.<sup>1</sup>

Aycock's words break apart the engrained narrative about John 17:21 that shaped how the UCC interpreted the text. Understanding that John 17:21 is not a direct ask by Jesus that all Christians unify into one polity removes the guilt over denominationalism and drives towards the unification of the Church at all costs.

I think we forget how vital denominationalism is for the church. Divisions within the larger church are not always bad, and divisions have been present from the very beginning. The church split for many good reasons, abolitionism, affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community, and women's ordination. Groups broke away; denominations formed to reflect an embrace of marginalized people.

When we do this, when we separate and affirm those traditionally left out, we reflect God's love for the world. Denominationalism becomes necessary for the church because each parallel path splits from another course and includes more people. Perhaps the best we can hope for is that our paths cross, and if they do not, we can take comfort in the fact that our ways are running parallel to one another.

Our new reading of John 17: 21 changes our polity for the better, giving us more structure and less ambiguity. We can take this new reading of John 17:21 and use it to redo the UCC's constitution and bylaws, finally give much-needed definition and clarity about how autonomous bodies relate and are responsible to each other, the Associations, the Conferences, and the National Office. Local churches can retain their own individual

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<sup>1</sup> Don M. Aycock, "John 17 and Jesus' Prayer for Unity." *The Theological Educator*, 39 (Fall 1988), 142.

goals but not at the expense of the overall goal of the denomination. Marcia Pally's book gives us a way to conceptualize what this new structure could look like:

I am proposing theologies of relationality as one such ontology. Theologies that see us as distinct creatures sustained by relation and that *see to* this relationality, our distinction-amid-relation. The relationship or covenantality of our bond with God constitutes humanity in such a way as to make us distinct yet covenantally interdependent, and this covenant interdependence among persons (in part) constitutes our relationship with God.<sup>2</sup>

Her proposal aligns with our new reading of John 17:21. Here, we still have individuals with their distinctive nature connected. What I find particularly compelling about Pally's theory is the idea that humans are sustained by our relationships with one another and God. Our covenant with each other connects with our relationship with God. Her proposed theory connects us while allowing for us to be still unique, speaking to an intimate relationship with God as well as with each other.

If we take Pally's theory and apply it to the UCC, we no longer elevate autonomy above connection, and we can create real covenants between all the levels. Autonomy keeps us from connecting and finding the unity Jesus prays for us. Autonomy increases our isolationism and our instincts for self-preservation. Autonomy keeps us from asking for help, keeps us suspicious of our neighbor's motivations, and allows unhealthy competition to rise between colleagues. Autonomy does not give us a strong foundation but leaves us with a fractured denominational identity and confusion about how the UCC functions. Most importantly, autonomy provides us with a structure that permits abuse, elevates bad actors, and eliminates accountability to each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia Pally, *Commonwealth, and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 8.

Relying on a more authentic reading of John 17:21 means we cannot have autonomy as we do now. However, if we choose to embrace an authentic reading of John 17:21, we take an essential step in defining who we are as the United Church of Christ. If we want to be an authentic Progressive, Welcome and Affirming, Social Justice denomination, then every church called UCC will uphold and promote those same core values. Those churches who do not want to embrace this identity can decide for themselves if they want to participate in the UCC's overall mission or not. If they decide not to, they are free to find their path. Being authentic in mission and identity has to matter more than unity at all costs.

While I find this freeing, others will push against my arguments because the system allows local churches to exert independence if the National Office passes an unfavorable resolution. I think this pushback speaks to something more significant, a fear about who will decide the denomination's mission and a reluctance to give power to those in powerful positions. I understand this concern. Institutions tend to run amok when given a chance to do so. Yet, people rise to the occasion and push the institution back into its place when this happens. History tells us that when people feel that the institution does not reflect their values, they will break away and find a new path forward. We cannot be afraid of creating institutions because problematic people could run those systems. If we are honest with ourselves, that is a real possibility. We need a new polity with accountability and a clearly defined mission.

Autonomy does not let us have a mission or a denominational identity that everyone can claim as their own. However, our new reading of John 17:21 helps us find our common goal. Mission and purpose often feel like buzzwords or tag lines, marketing

tools that lack definition. When I think about defining our mission, I refer to Mary L. Coloe's exegesis of John 17: 21. She hits the nail on the head when she talks about the church's mission. She tells us that "Jesus's desires that they all be one in him, in his father and among themselves is for the mission."<sup>3</sup> Our mission is not denominational unity or increased membership, or sustainable giving. Our mission is to reveal God's love to the world.

The mission is always love. This is where we can begin, defining how we reveal God's love to the world. We create polity and structure around the true nature of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. We shape our identity around revealing God's love because we know we are one with Jesus, taking a firm stand supporting social justice issues. We become a genuinely progressive and unified voice, bringing an authentic witness to a world that needs genuine discipleship. Those who cannot align with new ideas are not demonized but allowed to go their way. We are all heading in the same direction, and if our paths never cross, we know we still are one in Christ, even if we are not all one. I love the UCC, and I hope others pick up where I left off. There are voices out there. May my work inspire you to share your story, thoughts, and opinions on this topic. We are all in this together.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary L. Coloe, *Wisdom Commentary: Volume 44B John 11-21*, ed. Mary Ann Bevis and Barbara E. Reid (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021). 267.

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