

United Church of Christ Firsts

The United Church of Christ is a blend of four principal traditions—Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reformed. Each of these traditions has left a mark on U.S. religious and political history.

1620: Pilgrims seek spiritual freedom

Seeking spiritual freedom, forbears of the United Church of Christ prepare to leave Europe for the New World. Later generations know them as the Pilgrims. Their pastor, John Robinson, urges them as they depart to keep their minds and hearts open to new ways. God, he says, "has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word."

1630: An early experiment in democracy

The Congregational churches founded by the Pilgrims and other spiritual reformers spread rapidly through New England. In an early experiment in democracy, each congregation is self-governing and elects its own ministers. The Congregationalists aim to create a model for a just society lived in the presence of God. Their leader, John Winthrop, prays that "we shall be as a city upon a hill ... the eyes of all people upon us."

1700: An early stand against slavery

Congregationalists are among the first Americans to take a stand against slavery. The Rev. Samuel Sewall writes the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, "The Selling of Joseph." Sewall lays the foundation for the abolitionist movement that comes more than a century later.

1730s: The Great Awakening

The first Great Awakening sweeps through Congregational and Presbyterian churches. One of the great thinkers of the movement, Jonathan Edwards, says the church should recover the passion of a transforming faith that changes "the course of [our] lives."

1773: First act of civil disobedience

Five thousand angry colonists gather in the Old South Meeting House to demand repeal of an unjust tax on tea. Their protest inspires the first act of civil disobedience in U.S. history—the "Boston Tea Party."

1773: First published African American poet

A young member of the Old South congregation, Phillis Wheatley, becomes the first published African American author. "Poems on Various Subjects" is a sensation, and Wheatley gains her freedom from slavery soon after. Modern African American poet Alice Walker says of her: "[She] kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song."

1777: Reformed congregation saves the Liberty Bell

The British occupy Philadelphia—seat of the rebellious Continental Congress—and plan to melt down the Liberty Bell to manufacture cannons. But the Bell has disappeared. It is safely hidden under the floorboards of Old Zion Reformed Church in Allentown.

1785: First ordained African American pastor

Lemuel Haynes is the first African American ordained by a Protestant denomination. He becomes a world-renowned preacher and writer.

1798: 'Christians' seek liberty of conscience

Dissident preacher James O'Kelly is one of the early founders of a religious movement called simply the "Christians." His aim is to restore the simplicity of the original Christian community. The Christians seek liberty of conscience and oppose authoritarian church government. O'Kelly writes that "any number of Christians united in love, having Christ for their head, ... constitutes a church."

1810: First Missionaries Commissioned

In the aftermath of the "Haystack Meeting" when several Williams College students sought protection from a thunder storm the newly formed Board of Commissioners for World Ministries commissioned the first group of missionaries. Many of the "Haystack" students who committed themselves to spreading the gospel during the thunderstorm were among those who were commissioned.

1839: A defining moment for abolitionist movement

Enslaved Africans break their chains and seize control of the schooner Amistad. Their freedom is short-lived, and they are held in a Connecticut jail while the ship's owners sue to have them returned as property. The case becomes a defining moment for the movement to abolish slavery. Congregationalists and other Christians organize a campaign to free the captives. The Supreme Court rules the captives are not property, and the Africans regain their freedom.

1840: First united church in U.S. history

A meeting of pastors in Missouri forms the first united church in U.S. history—the Evangelical Synod. It unites two Protestant traditions that have been separated for centuries: Lutheran and Reformed. The Evangelicals believe in the power of tradition, but also in spiritual freedom. "Rigid ceremony and strong condemnation of others are terrible things to me," one of them writes.

1845: 'Protestant Catholicism'

Theologian Philip Schaff scandalizes the Reformed churches in Pennsylvania when he argues for a "Protestant Catholicism" centered in the person of Jesus Christ. The movement founded by Schaff and his friend, John Nevin, revives sacramental worship in the Reformed church and sets the stage for the 20th-century liturgical movement.

1846: First integrated anti-slavery society

The Amistad case is a spur to the conscience of Congregationalists who believe no human being should be a slave. In 1846 Lewis Tappan, one of the Amistad organizers, organizes the American Missionary Association—the first anti-slavery society in the U.S. with multiracial leadership.

1853: First woman pastor

Antoinette Brown is the first woman since New Testament times ordained as a Christian minister, and perhaps the first woman in history elected to serve a Christian congregation as pastor. At her ordination a friend, Methodist minister Luther Lee, defends "a woman's right to preach the Gospel." He quotes the New Testament: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

1897: Social Gospel movement denounces economic oppression

Congregationalist Washington Gladden is one of the first leaders of the Social Gospel movement—which takes literally the commandment of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself." Social Gospel preachers denounce injustice and the exploitation of the poor. He writes a hymn that summarizes his creed: "Light up your Word: the fettered page from killing bondage free."

1943: The 'Serenity Prayer'

Evangelical and Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr preaches a sermon that introduces the world to the now famous Serenity Prayer: "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

1952: 'The Courage to Be'

Evangelical and Reformed theologian Paul Tillich publishes "The Courage to Be"—later named by the New York Public Library as one of the "Books of the Century." "Life demands again and again," he writes, "the courage to surrender some or even all security for the sake of full self-affirmation."

1957: Spiritual and ethnic traditions unite

The United Church of Christ is born when the Evangelical and Reformed Church unites with the Congregational Christian Churches. The new community embraces a rich variety of spiritual traditions and embraces believers of African, Asian, Pacific, Latin American, Native American and European descent.

1959: Historic ruling that airwaves are public property

Southern television stations impose a news blackout on the growing civil rights movement, and Martin Luther King Jr. asks the UCC to intervene. Everett Parker of the UCC's Office of Communication organizes churches and wins in Federal court a ruling that the airwaves are public, not private property. The decision leads to a proliferation of people of color in television studios and newsrooms.

1972: Ordination of first openly gay minister

The UCC's Golden Gate Association ordains the first openly gay person as a minister in a mainline Protestant denomination: the Rev. William R. Johnson. In the following three decades, General Synod urges equal rights for homosexual citizens and calls on congregations to welcome gay, lesbian and bisexual members.

1973: Civil rights activists freed

The Wilmington Ten—ten civil rights activists—are charged with the arson of a white-owned grocery store in Wilmington, N.C. One of them is Benjamin Chavis, a social justice worker sent by the UCC to Wilmington to help the African American community overcome racial intolerance and intimidation. Convinced that the charges are false, the UCC's General Synod and raises more than \$1 million to pay for bail. Chavis spends four and a half years in prison but is freed when his conviction is overturned. The UCC recovers its bail—with interest.

1976: First African American leader of an integrated denomination

General Synod elects the Rev. Joseph H. Evans president of the United Church of Christ. He becomes the first African American leader of a racially integrated mainline church in the United States.

1995: Singing a new song

The United Church of Christ publishes The New Century Hymnal—the only hymnal released by a Christian church that honors in equal measure both male and female images of God. Although its poetry is contemporary, its theology is traditional. "We acknowledge the limitations of our words while we confess that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh and lived within history," writes Thomas Dipko, a UCC executive who played a key role in shaping the new hymnal.