

## “Fifty Years as the Central Atlantic Conference”

Banquet speech at the Central Atlantic Conference Annual Meeting, June 14, 2014

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In the early years of Christianity, the followers of Jesus Christ viewed themselves as the *ekklesia* – the fellowship of those called out of their personal and family worlds to be together in something bigger (something glimpsed in the life and message of Jesus Christ.) Although many people still think very individualistically about church, this meeting is celebrating our identity as the Central Atlantic Conference. We belong to local congregations because Christian living is inherently communal. However, in the UCC “communal” is bigger than a local congregation—it is an association, a conference, a general synod, a council of churches, even interfaith communities.

When I teach courses about the history of the church I often say that Church is made up of individuals seeking to DO God’s will. However, more than what we DO, it is important to remember who we ARE. We are communities of people open to receive the wonder of God’s blessings. When we see a sunset, or have a wonderful experience we share it. In fact the sunset becomes more beautiful when we see it with others. Profound and important experiences are rarely strictly individual; they become more meaningful in community.

In its most basic form, the primary setting of the church is local—where two or three gather together in the name of Jesus—we call it a church (*ekklesia*). Soon, however, congregations create networks of support with other congregations. From the earliest years Christians knew this. They circulated letters of support. They prayed and lived together. Over time separate communities and congregations established formal links and wider church organizations. We Christians do this, not just because it is a more efficient or practical to get things done, but

because in wider communities we are able to discover, embrace and understand God's love better. Church is not a personal thing, it is a shared gift we accept together. We are able to do more together, but the church of Jesus Christ is more than a collective engine for action.

We are the CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE of the United Church of Christ. The way the UCC organizes itself sometimes surprises people, because our organizational chart is upside down. Power is at the bottom, not at the top. Local settings (congregations) have the most power. Neighborhood settings (we call them Associations), regional settings (like Central Atlantic Conference), and finally the national setting (officers, staff and the General Synod) only have power in relationship to certain spheres of responsibility. These are not "levels" with some above and others below. In the UCC no particular setting can mandate or require compliance from other settings. We need each other, but we have now power over each other. Article III of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ says: "*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 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. . . .*(Article III)"

The autonomy of each expression or setting, however, does not mean that we can all do what we want to do. It does not mean that the church in its various settings is a democracy where the majority rules. Rather (as some documents in the UCC put it), the freedom named as autonomy—that is the freedoms of congregations, associations, conferences and synods—is always freedom under Christ. It is freedom to respond to the demands of Christ. Local autonomy does not mean the rejection of authority in the name of freedom; it means that freedom "in order that the fullest possible  
1969]

I have four things that I want to do in this presentation: We are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Central Atlantic Conference. We know that the UCC was born in 1957.

You may be thinking, so why are we celebrating an anniversary related to the year 1964?

- a) Why is 1964 important? In 1957 a national commitment was made to form the UCC. But we still needed a Constitution. We still needed to bring local congregations into new relationships. It took another 8 years after the 1957 Uniting General Synod to construct and organize a new blended United Church of Christ. Nobody did it for us, we had to do it ourselves.
- b) How can we understand the unique character of the Central Atlantic Conference? We are a blend of incredible diversity—more complex than many Conferences. I will highlight some of the things that we have done and how we have nurtured each other over the past fifty years. We began as a hodgepodge of traditions. Today that diversity remains, but we have learned how we can make a difference for the whole church. Our diversity also requires (or we would say in the UCC) challenges us to take on important responsibilities.
- c) What have we done to enhance the United Church of Christ? Being a part of the Central Atlantic Conference has reshaped every single congregation, but we have learned that we have played a significant role in reshaping the United Church of Christ. Covenant relationships go two ways. We have been molded by fifty-year old covenants within United Church of Christ, and the whole United Church of Christ has been blessed by our work and commitments.

d) What can you take away as you anticipate the future? My hope is that you will all leave this meeting more aware of your beginnings, your character, and your contribution to the UCC. But more than that you will be inspired to continue to keep and enrich your covenants with the entire United Church of Christ. Being a Conference is like being the “middle child” in a family. You are a bridge between local congregations and the national settings of the church. When the bridge breaks the whole church suffers (national, regional and local).

### The Creation of the Central Atlantic Conference

In 1957, two denominations (Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed) came together driven by a passion for Christian unity. They were convinced that it was possible to overcome and blend denominational differences and create a new kind of church—a united church. There would still be differences, but they had faith that their loyalty to Jesus Christ would enable them to move beyond narrow denominational camps. Jesus prayed they “they may all be one.” They wanted to answer that prayer. Both of the denominations that came together to create the UCC knew how to live with differences. In 1931, past distinctions between establishment Congregationalists, and grass roots Christian churches (these Christians were free spirits that rejected all denominational labels), found common cause as a new denomination – the Congregational Christian Churches. Then in 1934 past differences between German Reformed and German Evangelical churches blended with German cultural traditions to create the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Both of these new denominations were looking for additional ways to heal the broken organizational body of Christ. They believed that God was calling all churches to seek unity.

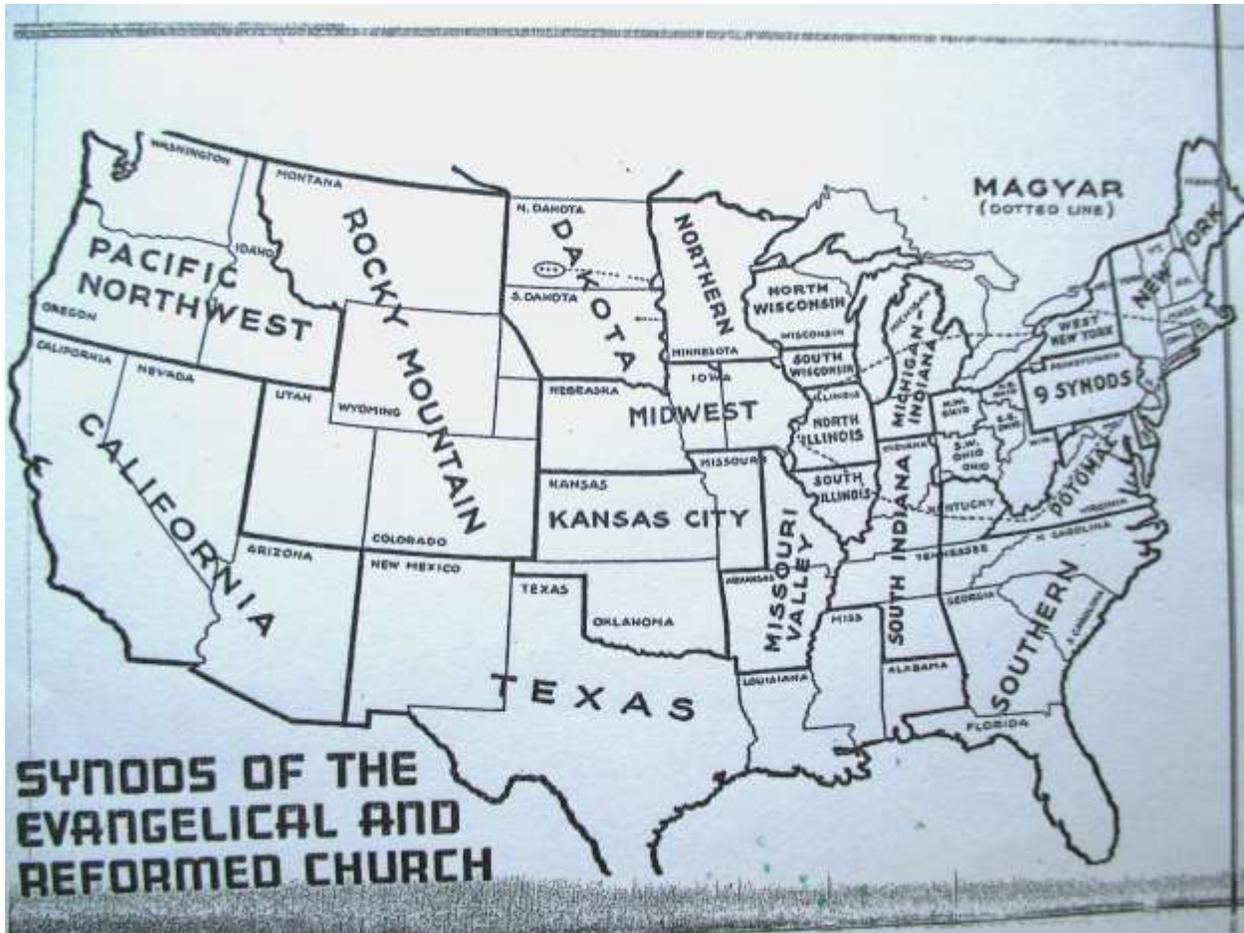
Organizationally the Congregational and Christian churches, and the German Evangelical and German Reformed churches, had different understandings of how churches should be organized (we would say they had different church “polity”). The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches, created in 1931, followed an organizational structure that brought local congregations together into associations and conferences. Conferences grouped churches following the political boundaries of the states—Massachusetts Conference, Connecticut Conference, New York Conference, Michigan Conference.



A few conferences, included several states. Indeed the Congregational Christian Middle Atlantic Conference covered several states (New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, DC and parts of Virginia). As this map shows, Conferences in the West also incorporated several states. The Intermountain Conference, the Northern California Conference and the Southern California Southwest Conference reflect that pattern.

There was one additional Congregational Christian Conference that did not fit inside state boundaries. It was the Convention of the South, (highlighted). It incorporated all African American Congregational and Christian congregations located in the southern part of the country. It was ironic that a denomination deeply involved in the abolitionist cause in American history, had a separate segregated conference for African American churches well into the 1950s. The Southern Convention, Southeast Convention and South Central Conference were made up of white churches, whereas African American churches from Texas to Virginia belonged to a single separate conference, the Convention of the South. It even included a few black Christian churches around New York City.

The Evangelical and Reformed church did not organize itself around state lines as frequently. Its churches were clustered where German Immigrants settled—some had come during the colonial era and others were established after great waves of German immigration saturated the Midwest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. German Evangelicals did not consolidate their churches into a single denomination for decades. They did not have “associations,” but created a variety of societies and supportive bodies for clergy and laity. When the E and the R came together in 1934 they spent a good bit of energy blending their structures.



In the 1930s there were nine E&R synods in the state of Pennsylvania, there were also large E&R synods in the west that covered several states. Many colonial Reformed churches were founded before the revolutionary war in Pennsylvania and Maryland. West of the Appalachian Mountains German Evangelicals had settled in the Mississippi valley. In the far West E&R Synods (like the Congregational Christians) set up Synods that spanned several western states (California, Arizona and New Mexico; Washington, Oregon and north Idaho; and an Intermountain Synod that stretched from the Montana Canada border to the southeastern corner of Colorado).

The Evangelical and Reformed Church also had a non-geographical Synod called the Magyar Synod, made up of Hungarian Churches. When Hungarians fled difficult European situations, the German Reformed Church took them in and supported their Magyar Synod. In the United Church of Christ, the Magyar Synod became the Calvin Synod. Some Hungarian Reformed churches joined conferences in their local areas, but most of them continue today as part of the Calvin Synod (an Acting Conference of the UCC). This non-geographic conference is an exception to the UCC Constitution and Bylaws, but the exception is honored.

The first step towards structuring the UCC, once the commitment to come together around the Basis of Union in 1957 had been made, was to recognize all of the existing conferences and synods of the CC Churches and E&R Church as “Acting Conferences of the United Church of Christ.” This status gave them time to sort out new patterns, partnerships and alliances.

Everyone had to let go of some past friendships and relationships in order to create new UCC Conference structures. Nobody mandated how things ought to blend. It was a grass roots effort to discover and invent new patterns for church unity. The earliest yearbooks of the UCC (those books that come out every year with all the information about each church, Association and Conference) listed all of the existing structures in both denominations as “acting conferences”.

After the new UCC Constitution was endorsed by General Synod in 1961, things began to change: some new UCC conferences were created by simply taking existing Congregational Conferences that had no E&R churches in their boundaries, and renaming them UCC.

In Pennsylvania, where the E&R Church was extremely strong, there were nine E&R Synods and no Congregational Christian churches. In that case the nine Synods were consolidated into four UCC Conferences. The rest of the Conferences and Synods had to devise new patterns. Some

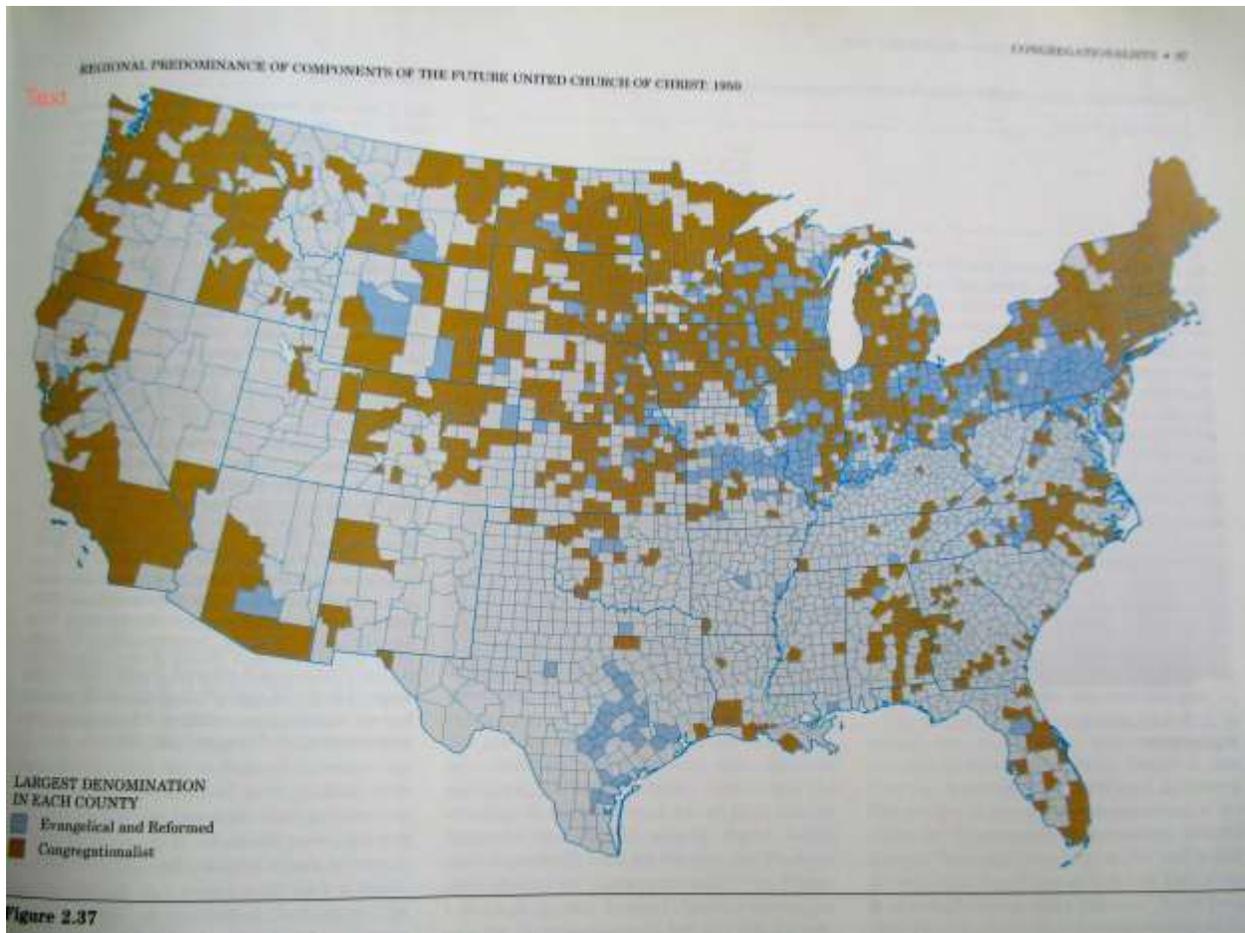
situations were easy to blend, while others were more complicated. By 1962 there were five totally new conferences, and in 1963 there were thirteen new UCC Conferences, in 1964 two more new conferences were formed (we were one of those).

E&R Churches that became part of the CAC were from the E&R Potomac and the E&R New York Synod. The E&R Potomac Synod consisted of churches in Delaware, Maryland, DC and Virginia. It included clusters of historic Reformed churches around Frederick, MD, and many Evangelical churches in and near Baltimore. E&R churches in New Jersey came from the New York Synod, which included all of New England. Churches in E&R Synods were structurally disciplined because of the governance patterns that echoed common patterns in American government and in many Presbyterian and Episcopal denominations. Unlike Congregational Christians, in the E&R Church when a Synod decided something, its actions were binding on each local church.

Congregational Christian decision making worked differently. Congregational churches that became part of the CAC were mostly from the former Middle Atlantic Conference of the Congregational Christian Churches. Not only did each local church have to decide if it wanted to join the UCC, but deciding on Conference boundaries involved everyone. The shaping of the Central Atlantic Conference involved debates about how far to extend the new Conference into Virginia—where white churches had been part of the Southern Convention and black churches had been part of the Convention of the South. There was debate about whether New Jersey should be a separate Conference. It seemed crazy to stretch a single UCC Conference from the New York city suburbs to Richmond and Roanoke, Virginia, but in the end that is what happened. Decisions by and about Congregational Christian Conferences were always tempered

by how local congregational churches understood their covenants with the wider church. Local churches created Conferences. Conferences spoke to local churches. Every local church was challenged to wrestle with its covenantal obligations and its willingness to change in order to sustain wider church relationships.

Building a new viable United Church of Christ culture out of these two very different views of wider church relationships was a challenge. It required some theological soul searching and an ecumenical passion for unity to overcome past habits. When we look at a map (next page) that shows the distribution of both denominations in the 1950s, we can see how geography and the distribution of local CC and E&R churches shaped the denomination and led to the new patterns of UCC Conferences in the early 1960s. The brown counties are where Congregational Christian churches dominated, the blue counties show where Evangelical and Reformed churches prevailed. Neither denomination was evenly distributed over the whole country. Most of the local churches that came together to form the UCC were in the northern part of the United States. Obviously there have been population changes in the past sixty years (esp. growth in Florida and Western states), but the United Church of Christ is still strongest in the colored areas on this 1950 map. Today the center of UCC population is in Ohio (that is half of us live east of Ohio and half of us live west of Ohio). It is logical that the national offices of the United Church of Christ moved to Ohio in the 1990s.



When the new UCC Central Atlantic Conference began functioning in January 1965, (after a crucial vote by the POTOMAC SYNOD of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and a vote by the MIDDLE ATLANTIC CONFERENCE of the Congregational Christian Churches, the CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE was born. There were 103 E&R churches with 25,254 members from the POTOMAC SYNOD. There were 77 CC churches with 33,388 members from the MIDDLE ATLANTIC CONFERENCE. In addition there were 32 other churches from boundary areas where new conferences had been formed, or where individual churches made decisions to join a new UCC Conference. CAC also included 12 northern New Jersey churches that had been part of the New York Synod/Conference, one church from the newly formed Penn

Central Conference, and 19 churches that had been part of the Southern Convention (all from VA and WV). For example, St. John's E&R Church in Richmond, decided to leave the Southern Conference and join the Central Atlantic Conference. The first statistics about the Central Atlantic Conference appeared in the 1966 Yearbook (Dec 1964 data). [pp. 332-33] At its birth the CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONF

## CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE



**UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST**

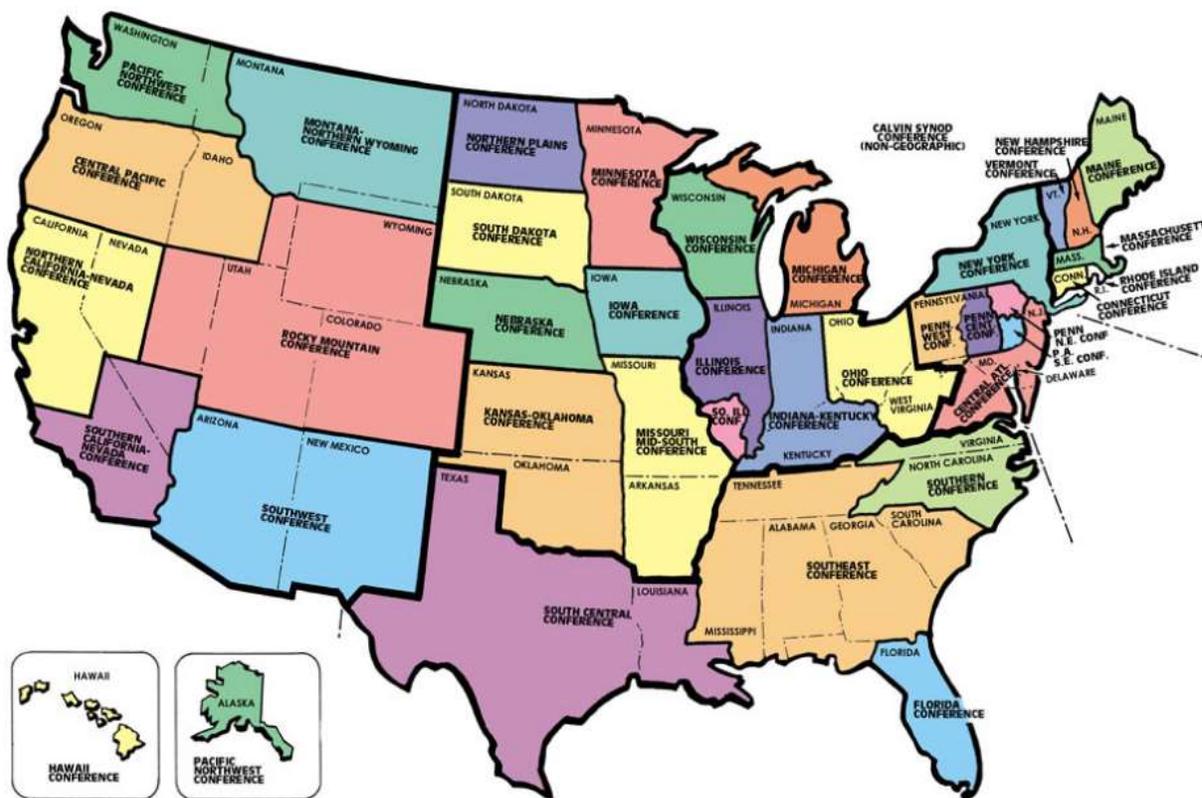


ERENCE had 203 churches with 65,003 members. (Today we have 168 churches with 25,883 members.) There were six Associations in the Central Atlantic Conference in 1965. The boundaries were similar to today, but New Jersey was divided into Northern New Jersey and Southern New Jersey Associations. In 1973 the two associations became one and it has been that way for over 40 years.

Putting old traditions together into new Conferences enriched and challenged the UCC. The story of the formation of the Shenandoah Association is a case in point. The Shenandoah Association was established on October 27, 1964. At its first meeting in May 1965 it included 20 former E&R churches from the Potomac Synod and 18 Congregational Christian churches from the Southern Convention. Those 38 churches had 4,409 members. Without the United Church of Christ those churches probably would never have related to each other. But the creation of the CAC invited them to explore new relationships and participate in wider fellowship.

### Living Together

From the beginning CAC was positioned to be a leading conference. There were only 11 of the 39 conferences that had more churches than CAC. Our location was strategic. During the first thirty years of the UCC, national denominational offices of the UCC were located in New York City and many national church staff and officers lived in New Jersey and were active members in local CAC congregations. Furthermore, because of our social justice work in Washington, DC, CAC congregations in and around Washington, DC have been well informed and involved in many political, legal, environmental and social justice issues. Over and over this Conference has stepped forward to share first hand knowledge of issues facing the nation and the UCC, simply because church members knew people who were involved on Capitol Hill or in progressive reform efforts.



Even before 1964 CAC churches played key roles in the Civil Rights movement, hosting bus loads of church people during the 1963 March on Washington. African American leadership and involvement in the CAC has repeatedly kept the Central Atlantic Conference focused on racial justice issues. The formation of the United Church of Christ was profoundly influenced by the Civil Rights movement. In the 1960s when people said that their church was “open,” that statement was not about human sexuality (as we talk about open and affirming churches today), it was saying that blacks were welcome to attend worship and join their churches. In 1967, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Gray, an African American pastor and member of the Executive Committee, spoke to the CAC Annual meeting. He said, “Although some progress has been made in our efforts to purge our churches and our society of racial prejudice and discrimination, we cannot hide the fact that over half the churches of our denomination still cling to the closed door

membership policy. A few of our churches have even closed their membership roll to avoid the issue.” [Minutes 1967]

The early years of the CAC brought African American churches together in new patterns. The UCC Constitution (completed in 1961) confronted segregation systemically by stipulating in the Constitution that there would be no non-geographic conferences in the new denomination. No Convention of the South, no Magyar Synod. The UCC Constitution was radical, insisting that the new United Church of Christ would not tolerate structural segregation. It was a controversial issue. We sometimes forget that in the 1950s, and well into the 1960s, mainline denominational structures all over the country maintained separate special “conferences, presbyteries, and diocesan organizations” for white folks, and (as they sometimes put it) “colored folks.” At its best it was paternalism, at its worse it was racism.

Insisting that all churches in a given geographical area belong to the same UCC Conference was a theological principle. We are One in the United Church of Christ, but in practice it was a mixed blessing. Although it forced black and white churches in a given geographical area to get to know each other and work together, at the same time it tore apart relationships among predominantly black churches that had been nurtured for decades through independent conferences. When the Convention of the South came to an end, African American congregations were forced to break their long-standing covenants with African American congregations and work in new ways with white congregations in their region. The Afro-Christian churches in the South (that had strong independent Conferences before 1931 when the Christians merged with the Congregationalists) had barely begun to work together with their

black Congregational comrades as part of the Congregational Christian Convention of the South, when they were forced to reorganize yet again.

African American congregations in the UCC initially lost power, because in many settings they found themselves as minorities in Conferences dominated by whites. Yet, at the same time, the new UCC Constitution helped African Americans in the South create new partnerships with African American congregations around DC, Baltimore and New York. There is no question but that the newly integrated Conferences of the UCC stimulated a new racial consciousness. During the 1960s and 1970s the formation of the Commission for Racial Justice, Ministers for Racial and Social Justice (now Racial, Social and Economic Justice), the United Black Christians and UCC support for the unjustly imprisoned Wilmington 10 pushed the whole United Church of Christ to take issues of racial justice seriously. The new Central Atlantic Conference blended Yankee Congregationalism and German immigrant traditions, AND it also reshaped its commitment to justice as it lived into a future aspiring to integrated racial patterns. Few other Conferences in the UCC were positioned to respond to racial issues in quite the same way.

Trying to make it all work was difficult. Within two years, Frank Piarazzi, the first CAC Conference Minister reported to the Annual Meeting “*that the present structuring of this judicatory leaves something to be desired.*” Rather than tinkering with it, however, he proposed that a new blueprint be developed—providing goals and objectives. . . . “*In the meanwhile,*” he said, “*we shall work with what we have. The ineffectiveness of the church is often “due more to lukewarm commitment and half-hearted devotion than it is to inadequate structures.”* [Annual meeting minutes 1967] Not everything can be solved by redesigning structures.

In 1973, Shelby Rooks, then a part of a “structures committee,” lamented that there was still a lack of trust between those who came to CAC from the Potomac Association, and those who had been part of the Mid Atlantic Conference. *“Whatever may become of the Structures Report,”* he said, *“we must learn better to live with and trust each other and work together. We have not done so as we ought! And, until we do, tinkering with Conference structures will not help very much!”*

Yet the diversity of the Central Atlantic Conference was still something to celebrate and much of the time it worked. In 1987 Acting Conference Minister Hugh Appling said in his report:

*The Central Atlantic Conference is unique among all the conferences in its cultural diversity. We have the two strands of the United Church of Christ—the Evangelical and Reformed and the Christian Congregational heavily represented here almost more than in any other conference. We have everything from the blighted areas of Newark, New Jersey to Weir’s Cave in the Shenandoah Valley. We have urban churches and rural churches, rich and poor, white collar and blue collar. The contrast between Baltimore’s and Washington’s churches is striking. They have a different history and a different personality. The wonderful part of it is the joy these people feel in that diversity when they get together in a big annual meeting or in various small groups. The sharing of their experience and their differing outlooks is enriching. It has not led to the conflicts you might expect.*

As the years went by various efforts were made to refine the working structures of the Conference. There were debates about staffing, office locations and new church development

[some things never change]. In 1987 when Curtis Clare became Conference Minister, he saw the problems, but he continued to celebrate the potential of CAC in his inaugural sermon.

*“In the past weeks, I have come to appreciate the tremendous diversity of our Conference. We have churches in urban and in rural settings; we have liberal churches and conservative churches; there are churches of our fellowship who are indifferent to Our Christian World Mission, while others are generous and enthusiastic supporters. Some of our churches are rent by controversy and schism – others warm one’s heart with their example of Christian forbearance and love. Some of our churches seem to be dying – some have died. Others seem to be finding new life; and, in some, numerical growth, burgeoning attendance and expanding programs have become a way of life. We are truly a diverse people of God.”*

This Conference has had only five called Conference ministers in its fifty year history: Frank Parrizzini, Sid Lovett, Curtis Clare, and John Deckenback. There were several interims, but basically Conference leadership has been stable and flexible. John Deckenback is the longest serving Conference Minister in the entire UCC, serving since 1992.

#### The Role of the Central Atlantic Conference in the UCC

I will mention five additional areas of CAC commitment and involvements where the witness of this Conference has had an impact on the whole UCC.

First, the CAC took leadership in 1971 around women’s issues, from small matters to big issues. In 1971 a female delegate, Mrs. John Herman from Christ Church, Silver Spring, MD protested the manner in which her “name tag” had been prepared and indicated her desire to be called by

her given name. Changes were made. In 1971 CAC endorsed the “Pronouncement on the Status of Women in Church and Society.” It was passed at the UCC General Synod and led to the creation of the Task Force on Women in Church and Society. That same year CAC passed “A Proposal for Action Toward Freedom of Choice in the Area of Abortion.”

In addition, by the mid-1970s as more and more women went to seminary and were called to parish ministry, the Central Atlantic Conference (in 1975) invited the Rev. Lois Sundeen, to become the first woman in the UCC serving as an Area Conference Minister. She held that position in New Jersey, along with other responsibilities in the Conference, until 1989. [Lois was an inspiration to me as I explored my role in the church.] In 1983, Lois told the Annual meeting how things had changed because of women, “Eight years ago, at my first Conference Annual Meeting and at Association meetings in New Jersey, nobody even mentioned baby sitting, and now we have to program for the little children.” Later she joked that she was a “female chauvinist,” announcing with pride the fact that in 1983 there were 45 ordained women with ministerial standing in the Central Atlantic Conference and 18 women “in care.” [1983 minutes] Today more and more women active pastors and engaged in various specialized ministries throughout the five associations of the Central Atlantic Conference.

Second, CAC has had a significant impact on the UCC and sexuality issues. Most of us know that the Rev. Bill Johnson was the first openly homosexual person ordained in the UCC in 1972 in Northern California. His ordination is generally considered the first ordination of an openly homosexual person in mainstream Protestantism. Lively discussion around sexuality issues continued during subsequent UCC General Synods. A 200 page book, entitled HUMAN SEXUALITY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY was presented to the General Synod in 1977 and

commended for study to all UCC churches. By the early 1980s the CAC Potomac Association appointed a committee to study the relationship between homosexuality and ordained ministry, and in 1982 the Potomac Association ordained the Rev. Ann Holmes—the first openly lesbian clergy woman in the entire UCC. [And our Moderator for this Annual Meeting.] As I highlight this event, I do not want us to forget that all members of CAC were not of one mind about sexuality issues. After Holmes' ordination, in 1983 another resolution came before the Conference questioning the ordination of homosexual persons and the actions of the Potomac Association. After lively debate, the Annual Meeting finally decided to take no action, indicating that ordination was a matter reserved to associations in the UCC.

Individual local churches, however, have not held back. More and more CAC churches are taking stands around sexuality issues—calling openly homosexual leadership, and welcoming LGBT members. In 1985 the General Synod encouraged local congregations to publically declare themselves “open and affirming,” and 30 years later one third of Central Atlantic Conference churches have declared themselves ONA. What does that mean? It means that a church has made “a public covenant to welcome into its full life and ministry persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions.” In 1987 First Congregational UCC in DC became one of the earliest ONA churches in the denomination. New Ark UCC in Newark, DE became an ONA church in 1990; and Sanctuary UCC in Harrisonburg, VA became an ONA church in 1993. On the chronological list of the 57 churches in the CAC that are Open and Affirming, we can see how the idea expanded: From 1985 to 1989 only four CAC churches were listed, from 1990 to 1999 there were six, from 2000 to 2004 there were 18 and from 2005 to 2009 there were 16. Since 2010 11 more churches have been added to the list.

# 57 Open and Affirming Churches

- First Cong UCC, DC 1987
- New Ark UCC, Newark DE 1990
- Sanctuary UCC, Harrisonburg, VA 1993
- Christ Cong, Silver Spring, MD 1994
- Sojourners UCC, Charlottesville, VA 1996
- Christ Cong, Princeton, NJ 1997
- East Brunswick Cong, E. Brunswick, NJ 1997
- Columbia United Christian, MD 1999
- Westmoreland Cong UCC, MD 1999
- Christ Church, Summit, NJ 1999
- First Cong UCC, Closter, NJ 2000
- Hope UCC, Alexandria, VA 2000
- Wellspring UCC, Centreville, VA 2000
- Rock Spring Cong UCC, Arlington, VA 2000
- Old First Church, Middletown, NJ 2000
- Immanuel UCC, Catonsville, MD 2001
- Union Cong UCC, Upper Montclair, NJ 2001
- Little River UCC, Annandale, VA 2001
- Brookside Community Church, NJ 2002
- First & St. Stephen's UCC, Baltimore, MD 2002
- Bethesda UCC, MD 2002
- First Cong Christian UCC, Chesterfield, VA 2003
- Glade UCC, Blacksburg, VA 2003
- Pilgrim UCC, Wheaton, MD 2003
- Stanley Cong UCC, Chatham, NJ 2004
- First Cong Church of Montclair, NJ 2004
- Rutherford Cong UCC, NJ 2004
- St. Mark's UCC, Baltimore, MD 2004
- Bethel UCC, Arlington, VA 2005
- Cleveland Park Cong UCC, DC 2007
- Rockville United Church, MD 2007
- Grace UCC, Frederick, MD 2007
- Evangelical and Reformed UCC, Frederick, MD 2007
- Emmaus UCC, Vienna, VA 2007
- UCC of Seneca Valley, Germantown, MD 2007
- Grace UCC, Flemington, NJ 2008
- Toms River UCC, NJ 2008
- Maple Shade Cong Church of the UCC, NJ 2008
- Cresskill Cong UCC, NJ 2008
- Holy Trinity UCC, Willingboro, NJ 2008
- St. Paul's UCC, Westminster, NJ 2008
- UCC Congregational, Plainfield, NJ 2009
- Trinity United Church, Warren, NJ 2009
- Holmdel Community UCC, NJ 2009
- The United Church + Die Vereinigte Kirche, DC 2010
- Saint John's UCC, Richmond, VA 2010
- First Cong Church of the UCC, Park Ridge, NJ 2011
- The UCC of Annapolis, MD 2010
- Webster Cong Xn Ch UCC, Havre de Grace, MD 2013
- Greenbelt Community Church, UCC, MD 2013
- Community Church of Washington DC 2013
- Safe Harbor UCC, Milton, DE 2013
- Glade UCC, Walkersville, MD 2013
- First Cong UCC, Haworth, NJ 2013
- Veritas UCC, Hagerstown, 2014

No doubt there are congregations that honestly consider themselves to be “open and affirming,” but for various reasons they choose not to declare themselves. Increasingly, however, ONA congregations are making the point that being counted is important. The CAC is not shy about this issue. No matter who someone is, and where they are on life’s journey, they are welcome—and we say out loud that they are really welcome, not just allowed or tolerated. In 1995 the Central Atlantic Conference itself went on record as an Open and Affirming UCC Conference. Today it is one of 17 Conferences (45%), of the 38 Conferences in the UCC that make such a declaration.

In the past two decades concerns about injustices related to sexuality and marriage have expanded. At its 2004 annual meeting, CAC delegates approved a resolution calling on General Synod to encourage churches to study the issue of marriage equality. The Southern California-Nevada Conference went further and sent a resolution to the 2005 General Synod asking that the General Synod affirm same gender marriage equality. When delegates got to General Synod, they left the CAC resolution on the table and worked closely with Southern-California-Nevada delegates to shape the resolution affirming marriage equality that was finally voted by the General Synod. This is a good example of why the UCC insists that delegates to wider church meetings should not be instructed or legally bound to vote in certain ways. They are always free (guided by the Holy Spirit and respectful of the churches they represent) to act and vote responsibly in the wider church setting. We all know that since the 2005 marriage equality vote the United Church of Christ has lost members and churches. But we have also gained new members. Entire congregations have sought us out seeking to become part of the UCC. The conversation continues, but in the UCC, even when we are divided and troubled, we keep covenant. We remind ourselves that we do not come together in the United Church of Christ because we agree; we come together (and stay together) because God has called us to listen and grow in our faith. God is still speaking.

Third, the CAC has participated in many UCC programs and mission efforts to deal with social and political problems and build bridges where barriers continue to distort and limit freedoms. This Conference has been a team player with national programs. But what is special about this Conference is its willingness to take initiative and do things on its own. Let me lift up several examples: (and I am sure that many of you could come up with others)

Since 1981 the UCC has been in what we call “Full Communion” with the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU), now the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Near the beginning of this relationship in the 1980s CAC indicated its desire to develop a focused relationship with a particular region in Germany (sort of like the “sister city” partnerships that many cities have). John Deckenback tells the whole story in the recent issue of *Newspirit* which arrived in my inbox as I was working on this presentation. My point is that CAC knows how to personalize and localize big issues into personal experiences and commitments. It sends money to support denominational initiatives, but it also gets involved and invested in partnerships and builds face to face friendships that make a difference. This has happened with Columbia, working with the Connecticut Conference to set up trips and actively support the Mennonite peace work in Columbia. This has happened on the Gulf Coast after Katrina, when CAC groups went south to rebuild and support the work of the church in Mississippi. This has happened when local churches have advocated for peace and played a role in the creation of the National Institute of Peace (a government agency in Washington). This happened after Hurricane Sandy when the Conference and local churches found multiple ways to be with and support each other. It happens when local congregations take mission trips and get involved in global issues and mission. Rock Spring UCC in Arlington, VA went to Jerusalem last year. There are many other things you probably know better than I do.

Fourth, I need to say something about Howard University, partly because I am involved with this. Howard University has a long-standing relationship with the UCC. Members at First Congregational Church in Washington, DC played a key role in founding Howard in 1868. During the past decade the CAC has worked with Howard University School of Divinity to raise funds for a faculty chair (what is called the American Missionary Association endowed

professorship). The leadership of this Conference is committed to education for African Americans. With this new professorship Howard University School of Divinity will finally be able to offer a Ph.D. in religious studies. Few people realize that at present there is no graduate doctoral program in “religious studies” in a predominantly African American University anywhere in the country. The United Church of Christ and the Central Atlantic Conference are working to change this situation.

Finally, as the United Church of Christ moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century many in the Conference felt that it was time to find new ways to help the public recognize and remember who we are. Don Ray, a member of Emanuel UCC in Cambridge, MD, was the author a resolution calling for the UCC to develop an identity campaign. The resolution went from the Cambridge church, to the Chesapeake Association, to the CAC Annual Meeting, and on to General Synod. It is appropriate to say that the Central Atlantic Conference played a key role in the development of what we now know as the “Still Speaking” initiative.

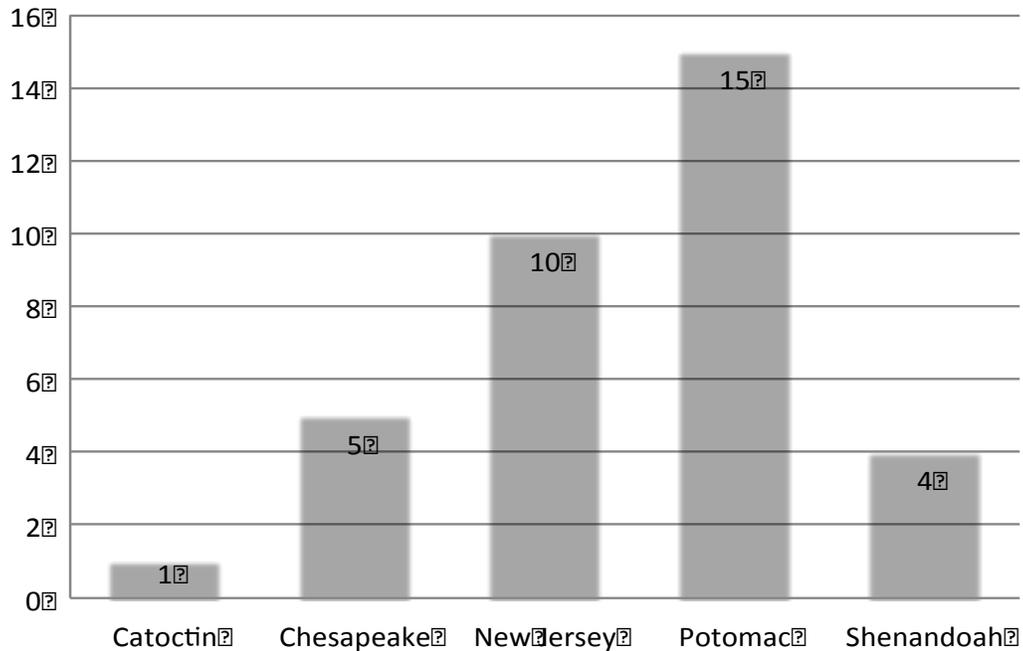
#### The Future of the Central Atlantic Conference

There are other things that some of my research helpers (Sara Fitzgerald and Clara Young) found in the CAC Archives to enrich this presentation, but I have run out of time. I started this speech by talking about the Christian church as a “called out people”—an *ekklesia*. When the Central Atlantic Conference began in 1964 there were 203 churches and 67,000 members. Today there are 168 churches and 25,000 members. Individual churches have closed or left for various reasons.

As I worked on this presentation I got out my UCC yearbooks and did a rough count of how many churches list their founding date after 1964. I know that many churches have closed or

withdrawn since the 1960s. Yet when I add in all of the most recent information about new church development I come up with the number 35. Thirty-five of the 168 churches in this Conference today were founded since 1964—that’s 21% of our churches. The oldest church in the Central Atlantic Conference was founded in 1688. Our youngest is in the process to gain standing.

### CAC New Churches since 1964



Membership statistics are sobering, but relatively speaking the Central Atlantic Conference is typical. Fifty years is a long time. Being part of a local church is not as important as it once was. The Conference is smaller, but in many ways it is more together than it was fifty years ago. So what next? How is God calling this CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE to give back to the rest of the UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST.

The Central Atlantic Conference has a great future. In 2017 the United Church of Christ General Synod will meet in the Central Atlantic Conference for the second time. Some of you remember that General Synod met in Washington, DC in 1977. We are about to do it again. This conference has things to share with the wider church and the UCC has things to share with the Conference. Hosting General Synod in Baltimore in 2017 is an honor that will stretch everyone and enrich our ways of being “church.”

I am a General Synod Junkie. I love going to General Synods. My first Synod was in 1977 and it changed my life. I loved the worship. I loved the people. I fell in love with the United Church of Christ. Today I led a workshop this afternoon on the “spiritual practice of remembering.” My memories are full of church—from Michigan to North Carolina to Philadelphia to Chicago to Berkeley, CA to Hartford, CT to Washington, DC and now back to Michigan. My spiritual practice is going to church: it feeds my soul, it helps me remember who I am. When we gather around the table, when bread is broken and the cup is filled, I know who I am. Sometimes my local church does not help me remember (or the memories are ambiguous), but General Synod ALWAYS helps me remember who I am. As youth today would say, it is “awesome.”

Today the Central Atlantic Conference is made up of people bound together through the power of the Holy Spirit. You are a “called out” people. “Church” is not something Christians accomplish by getting everyone to agree or work together (although that is nice when it happens). No, church is a gift, pushing us to risk, to be prudent, to honor differences, and to sustain each other. Think about it this way, local church members do not always agree with everything their pastor preaches, and not all local congregations agree with what the General

Synod votes or promotes. Those disagreements are not a weakness, they are strengths. In the UCC, because listening and speaking always go together, “diversity” can be recognized and honored—allowing us to say, “Everyone is welcome, no matter!”

Are there boundaries? Of course. We are bound together in covenantal relationships, we are called to be ONE.

The world we live in is very different than it was in 1964. This crazy map shows where religious people live in the United States. It measures the density of religious people. Look where you are. The Central Atlantic Conference is smaller than it was fifty years ago, but it is located in the center of things where religious people live. It has made a difference in local congregations, in the wider church and in the world for fifty years. “God is still speaking.” The future is calling. AMEN.

