

“God Is Still Speaking,”

The identity of the United Church of Christ is historically shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit who united and continues to unite the fragmented church; the inclusive love of Christ Jesus; and the strong prophetic concern of God for the poor and vulnerable. Our church and church members are known for many “FIRSTS” in American history and culture.

- 1620: Pilgrims seek spiritual freedom. Seeking spiritual freedom, forebears 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, “hath yet more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word.”
- 1630: An early experiment in democracy. The Congregational churches founded by the Pilgrims and other 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 the U.S. history—the Boston Tea Party.
- 1773: First published African American poet. A young member of the Old South congregation, Phyllis 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. But the Liberty Bell—a symbol of American independence—has disappeared. It is safely hidden under the floorboards of Old Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania.
- 1785: First ordained African American pastor. Lemuel Haynes is the first African American ordained by a Protestant denomination. In 1776, in the midst of the fight for liberty in which he enlists as a soldier, he writes a defense of the liberation of African Americans from slavery: “Liberty, Further Extended.” He became 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.”
- 1817: First school for the deaf. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet introduces sign language to North America and co-founds the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Conn. It’s the beginning of a movement that will transform the lives of millions of hearing-impaired persons.
- 1839: A defining moment for the 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. Congregationalist 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 embraces 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 and sets the stage for the rediscovery of ancient spiritual traditions in many Protestant churches a century later.

- 1846: First integrated anti-slavery society. The Amistad case is a spur to the conscience of Congregationalists and other Christians 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: God 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 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."
- 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 an historic Protestant denomination: the Rev. William R. Johnson. In the following three decades, the UCC's General Synod urges equal rights for homosexual citizens and calls on congregations to welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered members. In 2005 General Synod goes one step further: it

becomes the first leadership body of a large U.S. church to support equal marriage rights for same-sex couples.

- 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 UCC missionary and community organizer. Convinced the charges are false, the UCC's General Synod 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 Evans president of the UCC. He becomes the first African American leader of a racially integrated mainline church in the U.S.
- 1995: Singing a new song. The UCC publishes the New Century Hymnal--the only hymnbook 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 lives within history," writes Thomas Dipko, a UCC executive who played a key role in shaping the new hymnal (www.ucc.org).

Several weeks ago the wider body of the UCC met for General Synod. Every two years church members from conferences all over the United States gather to worship, study, do community service, and prayerfully discern the way in which the Holy Spirit is calling our wider church to continue the earthly ministry of Jesus. Although I was unable to attend, I looked on the internet each day to see what was happening. I am glad to report to you that---God is still speaking unity, inclusive love, and prophetic justice through the body of Christ we call the UCC. Delegates were discussing resolutions on public health care, doing some protesting in the streets, listening to the newly elected UCC President preach on extravagant welcome, working on Habitat for Humanity houses, addressing emergent issues on same sex marriages, debating national war policies, and worshipping God in many languages . . .

God is still speaking---with the grace of Jesus we are still listening--- and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we continue to serve our Lord.