

# The *A-MAZ-ING* UNITED CHURCH OF LOS ALAMOS



by Jay Dee Conrad

This book can be viewed in two ways. It is recommended that the first time through you use the green “NEXT” button and go through the book in a linear fashion. You will encounter the following:

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- HISTORY – *Where We Find Our Roots*
- THEOLOGY – *What We Believe*
- POLITY – *How We Govern Ourselves*
- CONCLUSION – *Why We Belong*

There are questions interspersed throughout the book. Don’t be afraid of wrong answers, the responses are very informative.

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## About the Author



Jay Dee Conrad became pastor of The United Church of Los Alamos in February of 1993. He is a Presbyterian by ordination. A graduate of Arizona State University and San Francisco Theological Seminary, he wrote his Doctor of Ministry dissertation on the theology of humor. His previous pastorates were in Santa Maria, California; San Leandro, California; and Medford, Oregon. He has served overseas on two occasions, with exchanges in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Sydney, Australia.

Jay Dee and his wife, Andrea, have two sons. Steve and his wife, Mary, and granddaughter, Kathy, live in Portland, Oregon. Mike and his wife, Jayne, and grandchild, Ellie, live in Westminster, Colorado.

Now that you know all about the author (or, at least, as much as he is willing to disclose), it's time to get back to work.

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## PREFACE

I am greatly indebted to the congregation of The United Church of Los Alamos! When they called me to serve as their pastor in February of 1993, I never envisioned what an exciting adventure it would be, what wonderful friends my wife, Andrea, and I would make, and what terrific colleagues with whom I would have the privilege of being associated.

In August of 2001 the congregation granted me an exchange-sabbatical opportunity. Andrea and I traveled to Sydney, Australia, where I took up residence as pastor of two small churches in the Eastern suburbs, Vacluse and Rose Bay. It was while there I had both the time and stimulus to write this small book.

Special mention must be made of the one who provided needed information for the chapter on The United Church History. Helen Lindberg is both a friend and author. Her book, *One Body, One Spirit: The Ecumenical Experience at the Church on the Hill*, gives in much greater detail the history of the church. The book was written in 1997 for the fiftieth anniversary of The United Church of Los Alamos. I encourage all who are interested to purchase a copy of the book, which is available through the church office.

Finally, I am indebted to my pastoral colleagues at The United Church of Los Alamos, The Rev. Kathleen Logan and The Rev. Deborah Church Worley. Not only has their competency given me the time to contemplate the theme of this book but their guidance in reviewing and helping edit it has been most appreciated. Kathleen and Deborah are not only my colleagues they are my friends.

Jay Dee Conrad  
November 2002

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Who We Are*

The United Church of Los Alamos is unique! An Ecumenical Shared Ministry comprising six denominations, American Baptist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Moravian, Reformed Church in America, Presbyterian (USA) and the United Church of Christ, there is perhaps no other church anywhere in the United States quite like it. The members and friends of the church come from all these denominations and others. The membership rolls do not list members by denomination. We all are a part of each denomination.

The United Church of Los Alamos is greater than the sum of all its denominations. In this day and age of post-denominationalism, the multi-denominational United Church is alive and healthy. It is testimony to the place of ecumenism in the future of the church. The United Church of Los Alamos was created in a unique time by a unique group of men and women and that special heritage continues to this day as the church ministers in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

However, The United Church is more than just its denominations. It is a church with a distinct history, an accepting theology and an emphasis on the laity in its form of government. United Church members are justifiably proud of their heritage. The purpose of this book is to lead you through the maze of The United Church so you might better understand how we came to be, what we believe and how we operate.

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# HISTORY

## *Where We Find Our Roots*

The history of The United Church begins with the history of Los Alamos, New Mexico. Those same pioneers who carved a town out of mud and timber, strayed to the edges of science and technology, worked fervently to end the war, and maintained the post-war peace . . . those same men and women are the ones who sought the living God on an ancient plateau, taught children the truth of a higher authority, cared and gave for others, shared in laughter and tears, and created a family of God.

In 1943, in the middle of World War II, a military post was established on the Pajarito Plateau in a place soon to be called Los Alamos. The purpose of the military post was highly secretive, but after the war it was revealed that it housed a portion of “The Manhattan Project.” Led by Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, the Manhattan Project was the greatest collection of scientists in history. Their purpose was singular: to win the race with Germany to build an Atomic Bomb and end the war.

Unlike most military posts this one had no chapel. Those who wanted a church were told to go to Santa Fe for services. When permission was given to have a Sunday school and nursery, 100 people came the first week. With that a formal request was made to allow ministers to conduct services. Permission was received and in the spring of 1944 the Ministerial Association of Santa Fe began to schedule Protestant clergymen for services on “the hill.” In August of 1944 a chaplain was sent to Los Alamos. Services, Protestant and Catholic, were held in the post theater buildings.

With the conclusion of the war the decision was made to form a permanent community to replace the temporary army base. In terms of religion, perhaps the first step toward the formation of a congregation took place in 1946 with the establishment of the first formal Sunday school. But the need still existed for a permanent chapel to replace the temporary building arrangements.

An army chapel became available when the Bruns Military Hospital in Santa Fe closed at the end of the war. The chapel was dismantled, brought up the “front hill road” and reassembled on the site where it still stands. Dedicated in May, 1947, the chapel was used by the three major faith groups: Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Today the building is the sanctuary of The United Church of Los Alamos.

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## HISTORY - continued

**Question** - Which of the following statements best describes the beginnings of The United Church of Los Alamos?

- a. The church began when the army sent a chaplain to the military post which housed “The Manhattan Project” . . .
- b. The church began when the earliest residents of Los Alamos gathered for Sunday school and worship . . .
- c. The church began when a chapel building was brought from Santa Fe for worship services . . .

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## HISTORY - continued

You chose, "The church began when the army sent a chaplain to the military post which housed 'The Manhattan Project.'" While a religious leader gives guidance in the development of a church and its people, a "professional" clergy person is not necessary to have a church. As a firm believer in "The Priesthood of All Believers," The United Church did not need a chaplain to gather and worship God.

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## HISTORY - continued

You chose, “The church began when the earliest residents of Los Alamos gathered for Sunday school and worship.” Congratulations, you are correct! This gathering began in the earliest days of Los Alamos, when it was still an army post. Initially it was the women of Los Alamos who called for a church where children and adults could gather for Sunday school and worship.

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## HISTORY - continued

You chose, "The church began when a chapel building was brought from Santa Fe for worship services." While "sacred space" is a Biblical concept not to be taken lightly, the church is a gathering of people, a community of faith. Its existence is not dependent on a building.

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## HISTORY - continued

The United Church of Los Alamos was officially organized and chartered in the fall of 1947. The process that led to this official status was inspiring and arduous. In the summer of 1947 Abram Sangrey, an ordained Methodist minister and former Air Force Chaplain, came to Los Alamos to explore the idea of a permanent church. He came under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches and was salaried by the Atomic Energy Commission.

Sangrey was a man with an ecumenical vision and saw Los Alamos as an opportunity to bring that vision to reality. He was obviously the right man for the job as there was no precedent for what was happening in the organizing of The United Church. The Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) had never sponsored a congregation in the United States and the Atomic Energy Commission had never hired a chaplain. Both were happening on the hill.

The people of Los Alamos, having been served by military chaplains in an ecumenical setting, saw no reason why they should go in separate directions and denominations in forming a church on the hill. At the suggestion of the Federal Council of Churches in October of 1947 Sangrey invited nine denominational executives to Los Alamos to discuss the organizing of a church.

Representatives from the Christian (Disciples of Christ), Congregational, Episcopal, Evangelical and Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Missionary Society and Presbyterian (North and South) denominations came for the conference. Also present was J. Quintin Miller, executive secretary of the Federal Council of Churches. A lay committee was formed to draft a constitution for discussion.

Events moved fast. On Sunday, October 19, 1947, the newly drafted constitution was ratified and during the week of November 2 through 9, men and women of Los Alamos signed the membership book. One hundred and eighty-six residents became the charter members. The United Church of Los Alamos was a reality.

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## HISTORY - continued

**Question** - Which of the following statements best describes the beginnings of The United Church of Los Alamos?

- a. The United Church was organized through the efforts of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and the residents of Los Alamos . . .
- b. The United Church was organized through the efforts of the residents of Los Alamos and the Federal Council of Churches . . .
- c. The United Church was organized through the efforts of residents of Los Alamos, the Federal Council of Churches and the Atomic Energy Commission . . .

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You chose, "The United Church was organized through the efforts of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and the residents of Los Alamos." Most certainly the Atomic Energy Commission had a hand in the formation of The United Church. It is safe to say that Abram Sangrey was the first and only minister ever hired and salaried by the AEC (now the Department of Energy). But as a government agency and with America's established "separation of church and state," it was in no position to do much more than assist in the formation of the church.

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## HISTORY - continued

You chose, "The United Church was organized through the efforts of the residents of Los Alamos and the Federal Council of Churches." The Federal Council of Churches, formed in 1908, was in the late 1940's a consortium of twenty-five denominations. The only churches organized and guided by the Federal (now National) Council of Churches are those in major cities in countries outside the United States. While Abram Sangrey desired a church affiliated with the Council, such was out of its purview.

Among the major contributions of the Federal Council of Churches was its guidance in the development of the church's covenant. A church created from diverse denominations needed a statement to clarify what it believed. A covenant from the Union Church in the Canal Zone (one of those churches outside the United States guided by the Federal Council of Churches) was presented to the congregation and approved.

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## HISTORY - continued

You chose, “The United Church was organized through the efforts of residents of Los Alamos, the Federal Council of Churches and the Atomic Energy Commission.” Now that wasn’t difficult was it? You are, of course, right. It was the unprecedented merging of these three forces that resulted in the official organizing of the church.

But, undoubtedly, it was the efforts of the lay people of Los Alamos that was the crucial factor in forming the church. They saw and lived the vision when Los Alamos was a military post with an ecumenical chapel. They were friends. They shared common ideals. They worked together in what was basically “a company town.” Why not worship together?

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Shortly after the initial conversations in the formation of The United Church, several denominations withdrew . . . including the Episcopal, Methodist and Lutheran. This author has a suggestion as to why and how. The denominations that comprise The United Church have a variety of ways of governing themselves. We will speak more of this later in our chapter on polity.

For now it is enough to recognize that the Episcopal, Methodist and Lutheran are the only churches among the initial denominations that have a hierarchical form of government where much of the power and decision making lies in a Bishop. Could it be that when the multi-denominational United Church was suggested the Bishops of these denominations wanted no part of it and withdrew their denominations? And the other denominations, greatly dependent on a committee structure, found the church already formed before the committees could meet and decide? Perhaps. In any case, it makes a good story and is one of the few times bureaucracy did not win the day.

To truly understand the history of The United Church we must give a brief review of the six denominations that comprise the church.

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## *American Baptists*

In the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century several great traditions emerged. They can be identified as the Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Anabaptist traditions. The American Baptists find their origin in the Anabaptist tradition.

The Anabaptists were the left wing of the Reformation. They opposed ecclesiastical ceremonies, abhorred established churches, believed in separation of church and state and practiced only adult or believers baptism, thus their name, Anabaptists . . . re-baptizers. This was not an age of tolerance and the Anabaptists suffered the fanaticism of fellow reformers. Both Ulrich Zwingli, from the Reformed tradition, and Martin Luther decreed the penalty of drowning for any who went through the ceremony of re-baptizing. But the height of the intolerance was an edict passed by the Lutheran Diet of Spires in 1529. It reads in part:

*By the plenitude of our imperial power and wisdom we ordain, decree, oblige, declare and will that all Anabaptists, men and women who have come to the age of understanding, shall be executed and deprived of their natural life by fire, sword, and the like, according to opportunity and without previous inquisition of the spiritual judges.*

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of the persecutions, the Anabaptist movement grew. Slowly the movement gained in numbers, and by 1624 there were five Anabaptist churches in the south of England. The seeds of the Anabaptist dissent came to America in 1631 with the arrival of Roger Williams in New England. His Anabaptist, Separatist, views were no more welcome here than they had been in England. Cotton Mather once described him as, “a preacher that had less light than fire in him . . .” He was eventually banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and he landed in what is present day Rhode Island.

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## *American Baptists - continued*

Sometimes referred to by other colonists as “Rogues Island,” here Williams insisted on freedom of conscience and a distinct separation of church and state. His legacy is that of an individualistic spirit, strong in personal conviction, but avid in defense of an opponent’s rights. That legacy, in part, is the spirit of The United Church of Los Alamos.

The Baptist movement spread throughout the colonies in the ensuing decades but it wasn’t until 1814, almost 200 years later that these independent, separatist churches came together in the early stages of a denomination. They called themselves, “The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions.” The unity was fragile and less than thirty years later, in 1841, geographical and theological differences centered on the issue of slavery began to erode what little unity existed. In 1845 northern and southern groups reorganized as two separate denominations. To this day we have Northern and Southern Baptists.

In the northern branch, the separatist tradition continued when, in the 1870’s, women of the northern churches formed their own home and foreign missionary societies. But separate appeals for funds brought confusion and dissatisfaction, leading to the formation of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1907. Restructured in 1972 . . . the name was changed to the American Baptist Convention.

The beliefs of the American Baptist Church are difficult to describe due to the continuing spirit of independence and separatism. In matters of faith each Baptist church speaks for itself though certainly primary in all Baptist churches is the Bible as the foundation of one’s belief . . . but always with the individual conscience as the interpreter of the Bible. That, as we will see, is a fundamental principal of the United Church and perhaps the most important contribution to this ecumenical church from the American Baptists.

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### *American Baptists - continued*

**Question** - The American Baptists developed from that strain within the Reformation called the Anabaptists. The name Anabaptist has its roots in anti-baptism, that is one against baptism.

Yes

No

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### ***American Baptists - continued***

The answer to the question, "The name Anabaptist has its roots in anti-baptism, that is one against baptism," is no. The Anabaptists did not believe in baptism of infants or small children and so often re-baptized previously baptized persons when they became adults, thus the name Anabaptists or re-baptizers.

Perhaps the ultimate in re-baptism took place in England, when John Smyth, a minister of the Church of England, set out to convert Anabaptists and, instead, was converted himself. Eventually, to mark his conversion as an Anabaptist, he publicly re-baptized himself.

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### *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a truly unique, American denomination. Its geographical roots are found in the Western frontier of early 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Its theological roots are found in a deep desire to return to the “plain teaching” of the New Testament and the unification of all Protestantism.

Four names are most prominent in the history of the Christian Church: Barton Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott. All four had been Presbyterians. Barton Stone was born in Maryland, spent his boyhood in Virginia, was educated in North Carolina and worked primarily in Kentucky. He believed Christians could and should unite on the basis of simple faith in Christ. The divisive doctrines and practices of denominations should be abolished. “Deeds are more important than creeds” became his motto. For suggesting such abolishment the Presbyterians disciplined him and he and his followers withdrew, reorganizing under the generic name Christian.

Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son, Scots-Irish, both educated at Glasgow, immigrated to this country in the early 1800's. Thomas came in 1807, possessing a deep desire to unify a fragmented Protestantism. Appealing to the Bible as the authority as opposed to Creeds or Confessions, he advocated closer relations with all Christians and called for open communion.

His son Alexander, arriving in 1810, expanded on his father's concepts. He suggested every congregation should be autonomous and that creeds, clerical titles, authority and privilege had no justification in Scripture. Communion was to be served every Sunday and baptism was to be by immersion. The Campbells suggested the term *Disciples* best described those who held these beliefs.

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### *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - continued*

Walter Scott was the evangelist of the group of four, but not the stereotyped wild-eyed, frenzied, revivalist evangelist of the frontier. He related the faith more to the mind than emotions and sought intellectual integrity. He, like his colleagues Barton Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, called for “restoration” of New Testament practices and belief.

It was this call to return to the “plain teaching” of the New Testament that led to problems. Alexander Campbell discovered that when, at a meeting he proposed as a permanent rule of faith and practice: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” At that point a local postmaster, Andrew Munro, rose solemnly and said: “Mr. Campbell, if we adopt this as a rule of faith, then there is an end of infant baptism.”

Campbell answered, “Of course, if infant baptism be not found in Scripture, we can have nothing to do with it.” At this, another believer present, Thomas Acheson, burst into tears saying, “I hope I may never see the day when my heart will renounce that blessed saying of the Scriptures, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me for of such is the kingdom of heaven.’”

Campbell believed that anyone can read and understand the words of Scripture as any other book, but the “truth” of Scripture requires intentional study and the “light of the Holy Spirit.” That understanding has led most clearly in The United Church to the phrase in our Covenant where we say we “heartily believe in the province of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures.”

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### *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - continued*

**Question** - Of the six denominations that comprise The United Church of Los Alamos, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the only one that developed exclusively in the United States.

Yes

No

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### ***Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - continued***

The answer to the question, “The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the only one that developed exclusively in the United States,” is yes. The American frontier in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a seedbed for new religious groupings, factions and beliefs. Self-reliant pioneers sought a brand of Christianity that mirrored their own character: individualistic, uncomplicated, free of corporate authority, and unbound by tradition.

Into that milieu of religious smorgasbord came The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a movement attempting to restore early Christianity in one Protestant Church.

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### *Moravians*

He was the rich, young ruler who said yes. So characterized is Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. Born heir of one of Europe's leading families, he bore the title "Count" as did all males in the Zinzendorf family. Born May 26, 1700, Karl Barth called him "perhaps the only genuine Christocentric of the modern age." He was a pietist in an age of rationality. At the age of fifteen he could read the New Testament in Greek, was fluent in Latin, and French was as natural to him as his native German. He is considered father of Moravians, but was a Lutheran all sixty years of his life. He is, perhaps, the first person to use the term "ecumenism" in speaking of the church.

Count Zinzendorf may be the spiritual father of the Moravians but Moravian thought began long before him. The roots of the Moravian church go back as early as the ninth century and the beginning of Christian work in what is the present day Czech Republic. In the age of the Reformation John Hus was the foremost of Czech reformers. Although Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 and did not live to see the birth of the Protestant Church, from his ashes rose the Moravian Church.

The Moravian Church was almost exterminated in the Thirty Years War (1618 - 1648), but a small remnant survived. One hundred years later, in 1722, the exiled followers found permanent refuge in Saxony at the estate of Nicholas Ludwig, Count of Zinzendorf. The Count called the people Moravians because they had come from northern Moravia.

As much as anything else, the Moravians are characterized by their mission work. It can rightly be said that the Moravians were the first mission-oriented church. Individual Roman Catholic missionaries had been sent out prior to the Moravians, but the Moravians were the first to consider the mission task the duty of the whole church. It was in August of 1732, in a service rich in vision and inspiration, that two men were commissioned to take the Gospel to the Danish West Indies. They were the first missionaries commissioned by a church. It was an unforgettable service where, it is reported, so intense was the feeling a hundred hymns were sung.

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### *Moravians - continued*

Later Count Zinzendorf himself came to Pennsylvania and gave name to the community of Bethlehem. It was his home base for extended work among Native Americans along with an attempt to unite Protestant churches on the American frontier. He argued that since the New World had no history there was no need for denominations. Unfortunately his idealistic efforts failed.

It has been said of the Moravians that “a unified system of doctrine was never developed.” While that is an overstatement, it is true there are no doctrines peculiar to Moravians. They accept the basic creeds of the reformation era. Music, perhaps more than theology, helps define Moravians. Because the people were encouraged to sing the hymns in their own language, the first Protestant hymnbook is traced to the Moravians. It is a collection of eighty-nine hymns published in 1501.

It is only right that the Moravians are a defining and original denomination of The United Church of Los Alamos. Ecumenical cooperation has always been a strong practice in the denomination. The Moravian’s most famed motto (though it has also been attributed to other denominations) well defines their understanding of theology and church. It is also the defining motto of The United Church of Los Alamos:

“In essentials, unity;  
In non-essentials, liberty;  
And in all things, love.”

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### *Moravians - continued*

**Question** – Although the Moravian Church is a Protestant Church, its beginnings are found before Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of 1517.

Yes

No

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### *Moravians - continued*

The answer to the question, “Although the Moravian Church is a Protestant Church its beginnings are found before Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of 1517,” is yes. Known as *Unitas Fratrum* or “Unity of the Brethren,” the church was officially organized in 1457, sixty years before Martin Luther began his reformation.

The prime leader of this early foundational church was John Amos Comenius. He was known for his progressive views on education and, in fact, was offered the first presidency of Harvard . . . but he chose not to come to America.

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## *Presbyterians*

Presbyterian history traces itself back to three key figures. Ulrich Zwingli lived in Switzerland and worked at the same time as Martin Luther. Luther and Zwingli agreed on most theological tenets, but on one item they could not agree. Zwingli understood the Lord's Supper as simply a memorial in the name of Jesus Christ, while for Luther, the real presence of Christ was to be found in the Supper. This difference of opinion regarding the meaning of the Lord's Supper caused a split between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in the Protestant movement that exists to this day.

The great father of the Reformed movement, which includes Presbyterians, was John Calvin. Born in Noyon, France, in 1509, Calvin displayed a remarkable intellectual ability and had completed all his studies in the local schools by the time he was fourteen. He was sent to Paris to study law, but soon thereafter he switched to theological studies. At the age of twenty-six Calvin wrote the book that is considered the theological and intellectual tome of the Reformation, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The book sets forth all the great doctrines of the Reform movement. John Calvin died in Geneva in 1564.

One of Calvin's students was John Knox, the man who established the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. Knox is most directly responsible for a basic principle of Reform churches. Believing the church was to be ruled by elders (as opposed to a church controlled by the clergy), Knox also believed that the established state powers are not always of God, and the Christian has the right and duty to revolt and overthrow such powers when they are corrupt. John Knox's expression of this radical concept played a large part in early American history. "That Presbyterian rebellion" was the way the Revolutionary War was described by one in the British House of Commons.

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## *Presbyterians - continued*

When we look back to the history of the Presbyterian Church in the Colonies during the Revolutionary War, the name of the Reverend John Witherspoon stands out. While at least thirteen Presbyterians can be identified as signers of the Declaration of Independence, John Witherspoon was the only member of the clergy to sign the document.

The growth of Presbyterianism in the new world was slow in taking root. Believing fervently in an intellectual understanding of the gospel and in the need for an educated clergy, Presbyterians found other denominations were better able to send ministers to the American frontier. This educational and intellectual emphasis did serve the church well however, in the founding of several of the great universities in the new nation, including Princeton.

As with all denominations there have been splits and divisions among the Presbyterians, the greatest only recently healed. As the matter of slavery and other related issues brought about the great Civil War, it also brought about a split in almost every major denomination. Dividing at the time of the Civil War into the Northern Church (Presbyterian U.S.A.) and the Southern Church (Presbyterian U.S.), the church was not reunited until 1983 as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At the time of that reconciliation the two Presbyterian factions also became one at The United Church of Los Alamos.

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### *Presbyterians - continued*

**Question** - John Calvin's great volume, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is basically a book of order and regulations for Reform churches that have as one of their principles, "doing things decently and in order."

Yes

No

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### *Presbyterians - continued*

The answer to the question, “John Calvin’s great volume, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is basically a book of order and regulations for Reform churches that have as one of their principles, “doing things decently and in order,” is no. The four-book volume is in reality a comprehensive system of Protestant theological doctrine.

Living in Geneva when he wrote *The Institutes*, John Calvin was hailed as the “Aristotle of the Reformation.” Though best remembered for this momentous work, Calvin wrote commentary books on almost every book of the Bible. Many consider these commentaries his best work.

The next denomination is the Reformed Church in America.

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# HISTORY - continued

## *Reformed Church in America*

The roots of the Reformed Church in America lie primarily in the Netherlands but also extend to Germany, Hungary and, to a smaller degree, France. The Reformed movement originated in Switzerland under John Calvin. The churches from this branch of the Reformation are called Reformed in Switzerland, Holland and Germany, Presbyterian in England and Scotland, and Huguenots in France.

The church came to America with the early Dutch settlers in New York. As early as 1614, what is now known as the Reformed Church in America had an unorganized membership along the upper reaches of the Hudson River near present day Albany, New York. By 1628 the Dutch in New Amsterdam had an organized church, the oldest church in the middle colonies and the oldest church in America with an uninterrupted ministry. By the time the English took possession of New York in 1664, there were already a half dozen Dutch churches thriving in what they called New Amsterdam (New York City).

When immigration from Holland ceased, it became imperative to educate and ordain ministers in the new country. A college and seminary were built in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the first seminary in this country, is now known as Rutgers University.

In 1819 the church was incorporated as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church. In 1867 it became the Reformed Church in America. A second emigration from the Netherlands began in the middle of the nineteenth century. The two largest settlements were in Holland, Michigan and Pella, Iowa. In the 1850's both groups were integrated into the Reformed Church in America.

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# HISTORY - continued

## *Reformed Church in America - continued*

With a stress on sermon and sound doctrine, the Reformed Church in America is more rationalist than pietist. As with all churches in the Reform tradition there is a great stress on education. This naturally stems from John Calvin, the founding father of the Reform tradition. Calvin taught that the church is not just reformed but always reforming and therefore calls us always to learn anew the meaning of God within our individual and church life. This concept remains central in the Reform traditions to this day.

Calvin's legal background gave him a new understanding of law. While most Christians of his day saw law only as a negative needed to reveal human depravity and serve as a restraint on sin, Calvin saw law also as a guide to the will of God. It was a positive view of law and the world, politics and public order. Our members find this emphasis at The United Church in our encouragement of public service.

Calvin is the theological mentor not only of the Reformed Church in America but also of the Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It is unfortunate that today, when one thinks of Calvin, the words that come to mind are words such as legalistic, severe, strict, and cold. These words perhaps better suit the followers of Calvin than Calvin himself. John Calvin's contributions to the Reformation, to Protestant thought and Christianity are momentous.

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## HISTORY - continued

### *Reformed Church in America - continued*

**Question** - Based on John Calvin's understanding of law, The Reformed Church in America champions public service as a means of fulfilling the purposes of God for the human and society.

Yes

No

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## **HISTORY - continued**

### ***Reformed Church in America - continued***

The answer to the question, “Based on John Calvin’s understanding of law, The Reformed Church in America champions public service as a means of fulfilling the purposes of God for the human and society,” is yes. Calvin understood law as a gift from God and thus encouraged public service as a response to God’s grace.

It should come as no surprise that some of the greatest leaders of the American Revolution came from a Reform background. Nor should it come as a surprise that throughout our history many of our political leaders were from a Reform background. It is a natural response to the Reform traditions theological ancestor, John Calvin, and his understanding of law.

The next denomination is the United Church of Christ. [Next](#)

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# HISTORY - continued

## *United Church of Christ*

The UCC (as The United Church of Christ is known) came into being in 1957. It was the ultimate result of the merger of four denominations – The Congregational Church, Christian Church, Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod of North America.

The Congregational Churches were organized when the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation acknowledged their essential unity in 1648.

The Christian Churches sprang up in the late 1700s in reaction to the theological and organizational rigidity of Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists. These two groups, the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches merged in 1931 to become the Congregational Christian Church.

The Reformed Church in the United States traced its beginnings to 1725 and congregations of German settlers in Pennsylvania. Later its ranks were expanded by Reformed folk from Switzerland and other countries. The Evangelical Synod of North America traced its beginnings to 1840 and an association of Evangelical Germans in Missouri. It reflected a union of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany. These two groups, the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Synod of North America merged in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

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# HISTORY - continued

## *United Church of Christ - continued*

It was in 1957 that these two denominations, the Congregational Christian Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, merged to become The United Church of Christ. It is truly a denomination born of ecumenism.

Perhaps the unique identity of the church can best be found in the key words of the four denominations that formed the union: Christian, Reformed, Congregational, and Evangelical. The United Church of Christ is Christian! Its very name declares that it is part of the body of Christ. It is a denomination that continues the witness of the early apostles, a witness to the reality and power of the crucified and resurrected Christ. The United Church of Christ is reformed! All four of its predecessor denominations arose from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. It is a church that affirms the three basic tenants of the Reformation: the primacy of scripture, justification by faith, and the priesthood of all believers.

The United Church of Christ is congregational! Much like The United Church of Los Alamos, the congregation is the basic unit of the denomination. In covenanting with God and one another the members of the congregation form their identity. Such covenanting places the emphasis on trustful relationships rather than legal agreements. The United Church of Christ is evangelical! The primary task of the church is to proclaim the gospel, the evangel, the good news. It is proclaimed not just with words, but with acts and deeds. It is proclaimed not just to individuals, but to the society as a whole.

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## HISTORY - continued

### *United Church of Christ - continued*

**Question** - The adjective “United” in the United Church of Christ has come to mean united in most all matters of theology and Christian witness.

Yes

No

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## **HISTORY - continued**

### ***United Church of Christ - continued***

The answer to the question, “The adjective “United” in the United Church of Christ has come to mean united in most all matters of theology and Christian witness,” is no. The United Church of Christ believes God’s truth is multi-vocal and textured.

God’s truth is not dictated from on high by a cardinal or bishop or minister or moderator. God’s truth comes from the deliberations, the papers, words and ideas of dozens of people; God’s truth comes through gatherings of people in discussion and prayer. It is in the collective soul of the community that truth is to be found.

Now for a little more history of the United Church. [Next](#)

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## HISTORY - continued

The United Church of Los Alamos began in a unique place and under unusual conditions. In the years that followed its birth, the growing and vibrant church added new structures. As early as 1952 the church needed extra space for Sunday school and rented a forty-five room dormitory building from the government. In 1955 a dormitory building was purchased and set on a permanent foundation on the church grounds. That same year the church purchased from the Atomic Energy Commission the chapel in which they had been worshipping. The cost was \$12,500.00.

Less than a decade later plans were being made to build. In 1966 the plans came to fruition when the Christian education building was dedicated. In 1972 Craig Hall was added, having been built on a portion of the old foundation of the dormitory building. In 1978 the manse was added to The United Church campus. In 2002 a columbarium was added on the church grounds. Over the years all of these buildings have been remodeled, but all continue to serve well the needs of the ever-changing church.

Now let's talk about what we believe. [Next](#)

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# THEOLOGY

## *What We Believe*

One can imagine that with a history as checkered and broad as that of The United Church, a description of its theology, of what it believes, might be difficult if not impossible. In a sense that is true. You can be sure that as soon as we say this is what we believe, someone will dissent. Yet there is a document that sets forth the belief system of the church. It is called *The Covenant*.

At the same time the new church in Los Alamos was chartered, a statement of belief was adopted. Dr. Quintin Miller, Executive Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) guided a committee of charter members in finding and adapting a statement. The group took a Covenant written for the multi-denominational Union Church in the Canal Zone, appropriately modified it, and presented it to the congregation.

On October 19, 1947, The United Church of Los Alamos Covenant was adopted. It has never been modified since. Several times during the year, including whenever new members are received, the congregation recites the Covenant. It can rightly be said that the Covenant is the theological glue that holds the church together.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

The Covenant is not lengthy and perhaps what is not said in the Covenant says as much regarding what the church believes as what it does say. The Covenant consists of only three paragraphs, each paragraph a sentence unto itself. Whether it was written that way deliberately or not, it does tend to emphasize that everything in the Covenant is of equal importance.

The concept of covenant is Biblical. In the Hebrew Scriptures God made covenants with his "chosen people." A covenant was made with Noah, its sign being the rainbow. It was a sign and reminder of God's eternal love. A second covenant was made with Abraham, its sign being circumcision. It was a covenant that bonded God and the Hebrew people. A third covenant was made with Moses, its sign being the law tablets. It prescribed how God's people were to live.

A fourth and ultimate covenant is that in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is not coincidental that a synonym for New Testament is New Covenant. The title page of the New Revised Standard Bible simply says, "The New Covenant commonly called The New Testament." In Jesus, God established a new and lasting relationship with humanity. When we receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we quote Jesus' words, "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood."

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## THEOLOGY - continued

**Question** – Which of the following statements best describes The Covenant of The United Church of Los Alamos?

- a. It is a document written to give guidelines or directions for what church members believe and don't believe . . .
- b. It is a document written to protect the beliefs of the church by stating clearly what we believe . . .
- c. It is a document written to protect the beliefs of the church by stating clearly what we do not believe . . .

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## THEOLOGY - continued

You chose, "It is a document written to protect the beliefs of the church by stating clearly what we believe." This is not the correct answer. The covenant is but three paragraphs in length. To put together a document stating all the beliefs of the members of The United Church would probably create a chronicle larger than the Bible itself.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

## THEOLOGY - continued

You chose, "It is a document written to protect the beliefs of the church by stating clearly what we do not believe." This is not the correct answer. In the first place the Covenant is not a negative document. In the second place there is no listing of false doctrine or erroneous dogma in the Covenant. In the third place it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find concurrence among all the United Church members as to what they don't believe.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

## THEOLOGY - continued

You chose, "It is a document written to give guidelines or directions for what church members believe and don't believe." This is the correct answer. Covenant is an important Biblical and theological concept. As the New Covenant is the center of the Christian faith so the Covenant of The United Church is at the very center of the church's life and witness. The church is bound by the covenant as it sets the perimeters of our faith without being specific on details.

No covenant, creed or doctrinal statement is the belief system of an individual or the church as a whole. All creeds or covenants are human words, concepts and images. The creeds and covenants are signs that point us in the direction of our beliefs. They are not the beliefs themselves.

Now let's begin to see what guidelines are found in the Covenant. [Next](#)

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# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph*

The first paragraph of the Covenant sets forth the theme of grace:

*“Thankful for God’s abundant goodness, and for His great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord, I hereby covenant to seek to know and to do His will, and to promote, as far as I can, the interest of Christ’s Kingdom.”*

It is appropriate that the Covenant begins with the theme of grace, and in particular, God’s grace. One of the three great principles of the Protestant Reformation was that a person is “justified” or made right with God through God’s grace or faithfulness. Our salvation is totally dependent on God’s grace. We act or respond in answer to God’s initiative. If a covenant can be understood as an agreement between two parties, then our part of the covenant is to respond to what God has already done for us.

The implication of The United Church Covenant is that our response to God’s grace is an ethical response. We are “. . . to seek to know and to do [God’s] will.” We are “. . . to promote . . . the interest of Christ’s Kingdom.” In other words, we are to live ethically responsible lives. It has been said that all theology boils down to ethics. The first paragraph of The United Church Covenant affirms that notion.

And why do we make such an ethical response? What is the catalyst that challenges us to live our lives in response to God? It is that confession of faith in the opening of this first paragraph, “Jesus Christ, our Lord.” These words are found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

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# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph - continued*

*Therefore God also highly exalted [Christ Jesus] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that **Jesus is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)*

It is both the simplest and most profound of confessions. Jesus is Lord, and in light of that we respond with kindness, love, devotion and fidelity. The Covenant makes it clear that our relationship with God is one of stability, strength and firmness. We confess Jesus is Lord and in response to that live our lives as Jesus would have us live them.

The Covenant is written in the first person singular. It speaks of “I” and not “we.” But when the Covenant is recited it is recited in community. We are called by Christ not to live alone but in fellowship with one another. So it is that we come together as the Body of Christ and it is through this Body that much of Christ’s work is done within our world and lives today. To believe in Christ is to become a part of the fellowship and live as a member of the family of believers.

The local church is to be taken seriously. It is organized for worship, teaching, and enabling Christians to live their everyday lives under the parenthood of God. It is a special company of believers with a unique calling and task. When we gather together in worship, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is supreme. Jesus is Lord! We respond to that absoluteness of God.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph - continued*

**Question** - The opening paragraph of The Covenant of the United Church is set within the framework of grace because . . .

- a. Members of The United Church believe grace is to be said before each and every meal . . .
- b. Members of The United Church believe a gracious attitude is to be shown toward neighbors and friends . . .
- c. Members of The United Church believe the church and those who make up the church only exist because of the grace of God . . .

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that the opening paragraph of the Covenant is set within the framework of grace because, “Members of The United Church believe the church and those who make up the church only exist because of the grace of God.” This is the correct answer. It puts the central emphasis on God and, in particular, the work of God through Jesus Christ. We are to live lives of grace but we do that in response to what God has done and is doing with and for us. We do not live our lives in order to win or earn God’s grace. It is, indeed, a free gift. Our part of the covenant is found in responding to that gift with grateful and ethical lives.

Now let’s look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph. [Next](#)

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## **THEOLOGY - continued**

### ***Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph - continued***

You said that the opening paragraph of the Covenant is set within the framework of grace because, "Members of The United Church believe a gracious attitude is to be shown toward neighbors and friends." This is not the correct answer although such an attitude is certainly not to be discouraged. In actuality our gracious attitude toward neighbors and friends is part of our response to the grace of God, which is foremost and primary. We respond ethically because Jesus is our Lord.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

## **THEOLOGY - continued**

### ***Covenant, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph - continued***

You said that the opening paragraph of the Covenant is set within the framework of grace because, "Members of The United Church firmly believe grace is to be said before each and every meal." This is not the correct answer and you probably know that. But the use of the word "grace" for the prayer said before meals is a reminder to us that it is by God's grace that we receive the gifts of the world. The prayer is also sometimes called the blessing. In this case it is to be understood as a blessing of God for the gifts God has provided, rather than a blessing of the gifts themselves.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph*

The second paragraph of the Covenant sets forth three key theological concepts that guide members of The United Church:

*“Having accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, and the Bible which gives God’s progressive revelation of Himself to mankind as my Supreme Standard of Faith and Practice, and heartily believing in the province of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures, I seek fellowship with all who devoutly love the Lord Jesus Christ and adopt His standards of teaching and conduct as set forth in the New Testament.”*

Perhaps the key element in any and all Christian faith and belief is that of accepting Jesus Christ. After all, it is the *Christian* faith. Such acceptance is spoken of in a variety of ways, all the way from “being born again” (John 3:1-10) to “Jesus as the example” for our living (Colossians 2:6-15). The Covenant states in a rather traditional manner, accepting “Jesus Christ as my personal Savior.” The emphasis of the statement is one’s personal relationship with God through Christ.

But, again, we are reminded that this is more a community covenant, than an individual’s compact with God. So the Covenant goes on, in this same paragraph (and remember it is all one sentence), to speak of seeking “fellowship” within the community that together confesses Jesus. In other words, our relationship with Jesus is not found in a one-on-one, you and me Jesus, attachment. As this is the church’s Covenant our relationship with Jesus is within the context of “wherever two or three are gathered” (Matthew 18:20) there the Christ is to be found and experienced. It is within the church as the Body of Christ that our relationship with Christ is defined.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued*

If “having accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior” is the most traditional statement in the Covenant, then “heartily believing in the province of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures” may well be its most progressive. The breadth of these two statements demonstrates well the range of theological belief in The United Church of Los Alamos.

The statement on the interpretation of Scripture grants great freedom and openness to the individual in his or her approach to the Bible. But, again, we are reminded that the “private judgment” is made within the context of a community of faith. Our understanding of the Bible is tempered by the guidance of the community of faith, the whole church.

The United Church, with all Protestants, considers the Bible the key instrument for hearing God’s Word today. Humans, through the words of the Old and New Testaments, know the Word of God, Jesus Christ. We do not worship the Bible (bibliolotry) but we believe the Bible points to the figure we do worship, God in Jesus Christ. The Bible is the inspired Word of God. As those who wrote the Bible were inspired, so must we be inspired when we read it, for the Bible to be the Word of God for us.

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## **THEOLOGY - continued**

### ***Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued***

Our first two theological articles, the centrality of Christ and the primacy of the Bible, come together in the last words of the second paragraph of the Covenant. We “adopt [Jesus Christ’s] standards of teaching and conduct.” In coming to this conclusion the Covenant reiterates the emphasis on ethics as found in the first paragraph.

There are primarily three kinds of religious belief. The purely intellectual approach is belief that can be proven but basically makes no difference in day-to-day living. The purely spiritual belief is entirely personal and while it makes us “feel good,” it makes little difference in how we relate to the rest of the world. Then there is belief that makes a difference. It is belief that is not only incorporated into our lives, but is lived out in our lives.

This third kind of belief is what the second paragraph of The Covenant of The United Church of Los Alamos is ultimately all about. We accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, the spiritual belief. We read and study the Scriptures, the intellectual belief. The spiritual belief and the intellectual belief then lead us to “adopt [Jesus Christ's] standards of teaching and conduct as set forth in the New Testament.” True religion, religion that is not just an intellectual or emotional experience, results in how we live our lives. At the United Church our belief in Christ is infused into every part of our living.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued*

Question – The second paragraph of the Covenant of the United Church makes it quite clear that . . .

- a. The most important element in my faith is my relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior . . .
- b. The most important element in my faith is how I live that faith out as a member of the church, the community of believers . . .
- c. The most important element in my faith is how the Bible guides my living . . .

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that the second paragraph of the Covenant of The United Church makes it quite clear that, “The most important element in my faith is how the Bible guides my living.” One can understand why you chose this answer. We have consistently stated the integral relationship between faith and ethics. But too much emphasis on the individual (*my faith . . . my living*) detracts from the community nature of our faith.

The Covenant of The United Church is the church’s covenant, not our individual covenant or contract with God. How many times have we heard of someone who did an obvious atrocious act with the defense that the Bible or God told him to do it? The whole faith community, the church, must always temper our Biblical interpretations and understandings of God.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that the second paragraph of the Covenant of The United Church makes it quite clear that, “The most important element in my faith is how I live that faith out as a member of the church, the community of believers.” You have captured the essential relationship between personal faith and the community expression of that faith. It is hard (impossible?) to be a Christian in a vacuum. Our relationship with Christ is confirmed in the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

A phrase that has been popular over time, especially with young people, is “What would Jesus do?” That is a question that ties theology to ethics, but it is not the right question. The more proper question is, “What would Jesus have me do as a believer and a member of the community of faith?” What Jesus might do may be different than what Jesus might want me to do. The question values both my commitment to Christ and to Christ’s body, the church.

Now let’s look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph. [Next](#)

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that the second paragraph of the Covenant makes it quite clear that, “The most important element in my faith is my relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” Certainly one’s relationship with Jesus Christ is very important and while there is a personal aspect in our relationship with Christ, there is also a community aspect to the relationship.

Quite deliberately Paul speaks of the church as the Body of Christ. We take him at this word. Our relationship with Christ today is visible in our relationship with the Church. The Covenant makes that clear when it speaks of accepting “the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour,” but to stop there is to miss the rest of this very important and tightly woven paragraph.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 3<sup>d</sup> paragraph*

The third paragraph of the Covenant of The United Church continues the emphasis of the first two paragraphs in centering on the promises we make in reciting the Covenant;

*“Realizing that the success of the church depends upon the consecration of its individual membership, I covenant to uphold it by my prayers, to attend its services, to contribute to its support, to labor to maintain its peace and harmony, and, as far as possible, in every way to promote its temporal and spiritual welfare.”*

For the first time in the Covenant we come across the word church and we note, significantly, that it is spelled with a lower-case “c” rather than an upper case “C.” It is, in fact, one of the few religious or theological words in the Covenant that is not capitalized. It is a small “c” because it is not speaking of The United Church of Los Alamos. It is speaking of the universal church. That is the church in which we consecrate our membership.

The church is divinely ordained to live in response to Jesus as Lord. We are called by Christ not to live alone but to live in community or fellowship with one another. So it is that we come together as the Body of Christ, and it is through this Body that much of Christ’s work is done within our world and lives today. To believe in Christ is to become a part of the fellowship and to live as a member of the family of believers. The church is important.

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# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

In The Covenant of The United Church of Los Alamos the word “covenant” is used twice, once in the first paragraph and again in the last paragraph. In both cases it is used as a verb and not a noun. That is, “covenant” is an action we promise and take. In the first paragraph we covenant to know Jesus and do his will, to respond to God’s grace. In the third paragraph that promise becomes even more concrete as we covenant to be a part of the church. That promise is spelled out in four specifics.

First, we promise to uphold the church with our prayers. Prayer is a means of speaking with and listening to God. It is a means of opening our innermost selves to God (and consequently to ourselves) and listening for God’s Word to us. Prayer takes the forms of confession (honestly recognizing faults and failures), thanksgiving (praise to God), petition (thoughts for others) and contemplation (resting in God). We pray alone and in fellowship with others; we pray silently and aloud. In such ways our prayers uphold the church, remembering the church is “the people of God.”

Second, we promise to attend the church’s services. We believe that worship is important. The basic emphasis in our worship is seen in the furnishings that dominate the sanctuary: the pulpit and lectern, the communion table and the baptismal font. We wrote earlier of the Bible. The Bible is typically read from the lectern. The sermon, preached from the pulpit, is an exposition or interpretation of the scriptures. The sermon most often is at the center of our worship. The hymns, anthems, prayers and other parts of the service reflect the scripture. It is in the service of worship, gathered as God’s people, that we hear God’s word for us.

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# THEOLOGY - continued

## *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

Also of major importance in the worship services of The United Church are the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion (we use several names for the sacrament) is a time when we reflect upon, and experience, the risen Christ within our lives. The Supper is best understood as a supper shared in the presence of Christ. We celebrate the Lord's Supper monthly and at other appropriate times. We celebrate it in a variety of ways. Typically we share cubed bread and individual cups as they are passed down the pews, but at other times we use a common loaf, dipping the bread in the cup when we come forward; we use matzo as we sit around tables; and other such variations. How it is served and what is served is not as important as receiving Holy Communion in fellowship with God and God's family.

Baptism is a central affirmation of God's love in our lives. The water used in baptism is a sign or seal of God's covenant and the grace of new life as it is given to each of God's children. We believe our salvation is found in the "baptism" of Jesus, which is in his death, burial and rising. Our baptism is a uniting with the Risen Christ. Like the Lord's Supper we believe it can be administered in a variety of ways. We practice both infant and adult baptism. We also practice both sprinkling and immersion. Again, when it is administered and how it is administered is not as important as accepting baptism as God's seal of love upon us.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

Third, we promise to contribute to the church's support. While we usually think of contributions to support the church in terms of money, much more than that is implied in this promise. Yes, certainly, the church needs the monetary gifts of its members and friends to continue. There are missions to support, programs to pursue, buildings to maintain, and salaries to pay, and that is all done through our gifts of money. Members and friends are encouraged to pledge a proportion of their income for the life and work of the church.

But the promise to contribute to the church's support is also a call for time and gifts. When a baby is baptized, the congregation vows to help in the nurturing of the child. It is a promise to support the children and youth ministries of the church. The church structure belongs to all the people of the church and always needs our gifts in gardening and carpentry and painting. Caring for others is an important ministry of the church, one that the lay people share with the clergy. When we promise to contribute to the church's support, the promise is one of active commitment to the life and work of the church.

Lastly, we promise to labor to maintain the church's peace and harmony. One can well imagine the need for this promise given the genesis of The United Church of Los Alamos. When that diverse group of folks from so many different denominations came together, there were bound to be disagreements and conflicts. The promise is basically one of agreeing that we can disagree. It is a promise that our oneness in Christ takes precedence over all the differences that might divide us.

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## **THEOLOGY - continued**

### ***Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued***

Why is there so much strife and conflict in local churches and, in fact, whole denominations? It is because the church deals with that which is most important and basic in our lives: values, commitments, beliefs, the things that are eternal. We don't fight over that which is insignificant. As Jesus prays in the great prayer (John 17), "that we may all be one," so The United Church of Los Alamos says that our oneness in Christ is at the heart of our theology.

The four promises of the last paragraph of the Covenant are summarized in the final words of promise, that we will in every way promote the church's temporal and spiritual welfare -- that is worldly and divine, secular and sacred, profane and holy. The promise is to give our whole lives to God's church in all its dimensions. The church is, after all, the Body of Christ and the people of God.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

**Question** – The promises we make in the third paragraph of the Covenant are to be taken seriously because . . .

- a. The church cannot survive without the commitment of its members and friends. .
- b. God has made a covenant with us and it calls for a response on our part . . .
- c. Our response to Christ is visibly demonstrated in our relationship with the church, the Body of Christ . . .
- d. All of the above . . .

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that, “The promises we make in the third paragraph of the Covenant are to be taken seriously because (1) ‘The church cannot survive without the commitment of its members and friends’ *or* (2) ‘God has made a covenant with us and it calls for a response on our part’ *or* (3) ‘Our response to Christ is visibly demonstrated in our relationship with the church, the Body of Christ.’” Each of these is a reason for taking the promises seriously, but the sum is greater than any of the parts. The promises are of such serious nature that all these reasons are correct.

Return to the question and choose the more inclusive answer.

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## THEOLOGY - continued

### *Covenant, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph - continued*

You said that, “The promises we make in the third paragraph of the Covenant are to be taken seriously because (1) ‘The church cannot survive without the commitment of its members and friends’ **and** (2) ‘God has made a covenant with us and it calls for a response on our part’ **and** (3) ‘Our response to Christ is visibly demonstrated in our relationship with the church, the Body of Christ.’” This is the right response. The United Church Covenant makes it clear that our theology is expressed in the way we respond to God’s grace in and through the church.

Now we move on to our polity. [Next](#)

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# POLITY

## *How We Govern Ourselves*

There are three basic ways in which churches govern themselves. A search of scripture shows there was no single governing principle that applied to all churches in New Testament times. Through the years these varied kinds of church government have synthesized into three basic groups. The three groups find their comparable parallels in secular government.

An old and well-known form of secular government is that found in England's monarchy: a form of government where there is a king or queen who, at least traditionally, is responsible for all basic decisions regarding the nation. This form of government in church circles is that of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist Churches. It is a form of government where basic power resides in the hands of the Bishop who, as an individual (though often following deliberation with a council), makes decisions for the entire church.

A second form of secular government is representative. This type of government, basically seen in the United States, is that where elected representatives make decisions on behalf of all the people. While the people do not have power directly within their hands, they do have the power to remove from office those whom they feel are making poor decisions and to place in office those they feel will make decisions more to their liking. Within church circles this form of government is found within the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions. In these churches elected individuals (called Elders), following prayer, study, and discussion, make decisions they hope represent the will of God.

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## **POLITY - continued**

A third form, and one of the earliest forms of government in the United States, was that of the old New England Town Hall. When a decision was to be made everyone gathered in the town hall, debated, and voted. In church government this kind of independent polity is found in the Baptist, Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ churches. All powers reside within the congregation, and the congregation is responsible for all decision making.

This third form of church government overwhelmingly characterizes the United Church of Los Alamos. The congregation is the basic decision-making unit of the church although, for practical reasons, most of the decision-making resides in the Boards of the Church. The Executive Board, which meets monthly, oversees all the work of the Church and makes major decisions between meetings of the congregation.

The United Church of Los Alamos has very little power residing in any single person. While the President of the Congregation, a layperson, is elected annually, the President's powers are limited to moderating the meetings of the congregation and the Executive Board. This gives certain indirect powers of influence and persuasion, but the President has but one vote, like every other member.

The powers of the ministers are those of preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, conducting weddings and funerals, and serving on the various Boards and Committees of the church. In that capacity the ministers give guidance to much of the program planning of the church. Depending on the denomination to which the minister belongs, he or she may or may not be a member of the congregation and thus may or may not have a vote.

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## POLITY - continued

Question – The government of The United Church of Los Alamos is a unique mixture of the monarchy (Episcopal), representative (Presbyterian) and town hall (Baptist) forms of government.

Yes

No

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## **POLITY - continued**

You said, “Yes, the government of The United Church of Los Alamos is a unique mixture of the monarchy (Episcopal), representative (Presbyterian) and town hall (Baptist) forms of government.” While one might expect such a fusion given the multi-denominational background of the church, it is not the case. The United Church established a means of government that best suited the distinct character of the church and the individualistic mannerisms of its members.

Return to the question and choose a different answer.

[Next](#)

## **POLITY - continued**

You said, “No.” You understand that the government of The United Church of Los Alamos is not a unique mixture of the monarchy (Episcopal), representative (Presbyterian) and town hall (Baptist) forms of government. The government of The United Church has an independent quality about it that is best defined as congregational. The final power lies in the hands of the whole congregation but the boards, whose members are elected by the congregation, make most of the decisions that determine the work of the church. If the government of The United Church were to match that of any of our denominations, it would be closest to the American Baptist Church, Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ.

Now let’s continue and see how The United Church of Los Alamos works and how it is structured.

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## POLITY - continued

The work of The United Church of Los Alamos is done through its various elected Boards and Standing Committees. The functions of each board and committee are detailed in the by-laws of the congregation. Each board submits budget requests and then, upon approval by the congregation, supervises the funds allocated for its use. While each board is autonomous in discharging its responsibilities, the oversight and final authority of the Executive Board and Congregation are always in place.

The *Executive Board* is the administrative board of the church. It is composed of the elected officers of the congregation (President, Vice-President, Past-President, Secretary and Treasurer), a member from each church board, three at-large members, and the pastors. Its function is to oversee and co-ordinate the total program and mission of the church. The *Board of Elders* is responsible for the spiritual life of the church and its members, including worship and the administration of the sacraments. It is also responsible for care of the needy and gives approval for any new church organization within the congregation.

The *Board of Christian Education* is responsible for all the educational activities of the church, children, youth and adults. The *Evangelism and Membership Board* is responsible for extending the gospel into the community and overseeing the reception and assimilation of new members. The *Finance Board* has custody of all the funds of the church. It administers the stewardship program of the church and prepares the annual budget for approval by the congregation.

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## **POLITY - continued**

The *Board of Trustees* has responsibility for the care, management and acquisition of all church property. The *Mission Board* oversees the extensive mission program of the church, approving which missions, agencies and individuals, will receive support. It administers the benevolence budget of the church. The *Music Board* is responsible for all music activities of the church, instrumental and choral. The *Personnel Board* oversees and administers the personnel policies of the church.

Along with the Boards, the membership of which is elected by the congregation, there are nine standing committees. The congregation elects the chairs of the committees. The nine committees are Audit, Endowment, Fellowship, Historical, Long-Range Planning, Memorials, Nominating, Public Relations, and Ushering. Their responsibilities are also spelled out in the by-laws of the congregation.

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## POLITY - continued

**Question** – The basic work of the Boards of The United Church of Los Alamos is to . . .

- a. Give the lay members of the church who have time on their hands something to do . . .
- b. Devise, administer and evaluate the many and varied programs of the church . . .
- c. Make suggestions to the Executive Board who, in turn, carries out the programs and mission of the church . . .

[Return to the background material for this question.](#)

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## **POLITY - continued**

You said the basic work of the Boards of The United Church is to, “Devise, administer and evaluate the many and varied programs of the church.” Now that wasn’t so hard, was it? The answer is tricky, but correct. The Boards and the Committees are made up of hard-working individuals who make the church work. The oversight of the Congregation and Executive Board are in place as the final authority, but the essential work of the church happens in and through its boards and committees.

Now let’s go to the conclusion. [Next](#)

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## **POLITY - continued**

You said the basic work of the Boards of The United Church is to, "Give the lay members of the church who have time on their hands something to do." You've got to be kidding . . . or you're curious . . . why else would you be on this page? Both are good characteristics of members of The United Church, but let's get serious!

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

## **POLITY - continued**

You said the basic work of the Boards of The United Church is to, "Make suggestions to the Executive Board who, in turn, carries out the programs and mission of the church." In actuality it is the reverse. Suggestions for ministry, mission and program may come from the Executive Board or the Congregation or even individual members, but it is the Boards and Committees that actually administer the programs of the church.

Return to the question and choose a different answer. [Next](#)

# CONCLUSION

## *Why We Belong*

One of the common problems of church membership is that it is seen as “easy.” It is sometimes more difficult to join and remain an active member of a local service club than it is a local church. Church membership, however, is to be taken seriously. As the Apostle Paul said, “when one member suffers all suffer together.” (I Corinthians 12:2) When one member does not take the membership vow seriously then, indeed, the entire church suffers.

In the chapter on theology we wrote of how the Covenant demonstrates the importance of church membership. We invite you to become a member of The United Church of Los Alamos. Membership is a public sign of your commitment and a means by which you become an integral part of God’s fellowship. Together we are a sharing and receiving community expressing our Christian faith.

When you join The United Church of Los Alamos you confess or reaffirm your belief in Jesus Christ; you promise to strive to live the life He sets before us; you promise to follow Christ as Lord and make Him your example; you agree He will be central in your life and to be in community with other Christians as you seek deeper faith and understanding. In other words, you accept The Covenant of The United Church.

Congratulations! You have made it through the maze of The United Church of Los Alamos. Now only one final question remains:

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## CONCLUSION – continued

**Question** – Do you wish to further pursue membership in The United Church of Los Alamos?

No

Yes

## CONCLUSION – continued

You have indicated you do not wish to pursue membership in The United Church of Los Alamos. Your decision will be respected. Perhaps there is some aspect of The United Church you would like to discuss further. Please feel free to call on one of the ministers. As one who chooses not to be a member, you are cordially invited to participate in all the activities of the congregation with the exception of serving as an officer or on a board, and voting at meetings of the congregation. We welcome you to The United Church of Los Alamos.

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## CONCLUSION – continued

You have indicated you wish to pursue membership in The United Church of Los Alamos. This is done in three different ways. If you have already belonged to another Christian church we will simply receive a letter of transfer from that church. This is an indication that we respect the membership vows you took in your previous church.

If you do not presently belong to a church, but did belong at one time, we will receive you by reaffirmation of faith. It is a phrase that means exactly what it says, you are reaffirming a faith you once affirmed. If you were baptized as a child, you will join by confession of faith. If you have never joined a church nor been baptized, we will receive you by baptism and confession of faith. This service marks your entrance into Christ's body, the Church.

If a lay person or minister has not contacted you regarding your wish to join The United Church of Los Alamos, please let us know. We welcome you to The *A-maz-ing* United Church of Los Alamos!

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