

Introduction

What are you, Unity?

Many years ago, Imelda Shanklin asked, “what are you?” Her question asked you and me to identify our most basic understanding of ourselves — what is essentially true of our nature and being rather than who we have become by effort, training, and habit. Have we asked the same question about us as a Unity movement? If someone were to ask, “What is Unity?” would we be able to give an answer which provides an accurate description of our essential nature as a church, denomination, and movement?

As we ponder what we are, we must distinguish *what* we are from *who* we are. What we are is what Shanklin would call “permanent, unalterable, and eternal.” Who we are is a question of personality or, in organizational terms, a brand. Brands change and evolve. Brands are important because people like to place things in categories, and branding is one way to guide them to select the categories we hope they choose for us. Branding is about personality. However, we as a movement will rise and flourish or descend and struggle according to how we answer the question, “What are we?”

Let me say right now that I don’t think we in Unity know what we are. Further, I believe that differing opinions about what we are causes a fair amount of

disagreement about *who we should be* and *how we should act*. Further still, without an understanding of who we are, who we should be, and how we should act, our efforts in branding will be no more than an adoption of the preferences of those who control our national organizations at any time.

This document, *Credo of a Metaphysical Christian*, is my attempt to answer the most-often-asked question in our movement today, “What is Unity?”

We are metaphysical Christians.

The overarching claim of this document is that Unity is a current expression of metaphysical Christianity. What is metaphysical Christianity? How can we recognize metaphysical Christianity in Christian history? Where do we see metaphysical Christianity today? I answer those questions in the 25 chapters of this book, which I refer to as “insights.”

Each insight compares how metaphysical Christians differ from catholic Christians and evangelical Christians. But for now, let me say that metaphysical Christianity is not new. Metaphysical Christianity has run through the entire 2000 years of Christian history, predating Catholicism and Evangelicalism.

There has always been a significant number of those in the Christian faith who are metaphysical in belief and practice. Further, their number has been approximately one-third of those who are Christian. Metaphysically oriented counterparts are evident in Judaism as Kabbala and Islam as Sufism.

They are evident each time you walk into a Barnes & Noble, where the market for metaphysical books is easily compared to mainstream Christian books. The ratio of shelving for Christian books and Bibles to Metaphysical books is about 5 to 3. This tells me that the demand for metaphysical material is not new but is now easily observed.

Barnes & Noble places metaphysical books on separate shelving. That is because of branding. Don't let separate brands imply that the people who buy them aren't looking for the same essential Truth as mainstream Christians. *Who* they are might be branded as New Age, but *what* they are is essentially Christian — mystical Christians with metaphysical views. This brings us to a crucial point. Please read the following closely.

What metaphysical Christians share with Catholics and Evangelicals is Christian mysticism. When friends and family ask, "What is Unity?" we must stress that, while our beliefs differ, our experiences are much alike. We, too, seek awareness of the presence of God, we, too, seek forgiveness and fellowship with our neighbor, we, too, seek inspiration and encouragement at church services and gatherings, and during the four Sundays of Advent, we, too, seek hope, love, peace, and joy. We seek Christian fellowship with all who desire these things.

There have been earlier expressions of metaphysical Christianity such as Flemish Beguines, Byzantine Hesychasts, German Mystics, Christian Humanists, English Quakers, American Shakers, and New England Transcendentalists. There have also been many metaphysical Christian theologians, such as Clement of

Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and Erasmus. More recently, there have been a few mainline Christian organizations with ties to metaphysical Christianity, such as Glenn Clark's Camps Farthest Out and the Order of St. Luke, a healing group that once promoted the healing practices of Emma Curtis Hopkins.

By categorizing Unity as a contemporary expression of metaphysical Christianity, we can place Myrtle and Charles Fillmore and other Unity leaders where they rightfully belong — among the great leaders of the historic Christian faith.

Where we are in Christian history.

Let me make a prediction that I have made several times on TruthUnity: Christianity is entering into an entirely new era, which will likely be known as the metaphysical Christian era. Christianity's first era, the catholic era, ran through the first 1,000 years. The catholic era grew out of the Roman Empire and eventually overran the 1,000-year Roman rule of power and oppression with a Christian rule of oneness and order.

The second era, the era of evangelical Christianity, began to form with the expansion of trade, the revival of classical philosophy, and, especially, the widespread use of the controlled experiment to discover new knowledge. It may be difficult for some to associate the term evangelical with such progressive trends, but what we know today as modernity would never have come about without the

rebellion of Luther and Calvin against the suffocation of the catholic order.

The third era, that of metaphysical Christianity, is emerging from the limitations that modernity has placed on the evangelical era. The emergence of metaphysical Christianity provides solutions to problems that modernity (and evangelicalism) has not been able to overcome: profound social and cultural divisions, uncontrolled destruction of the environment, and persistent alienation and meaninglessness in life. Metaphysical Christianity is based on a new sense of the providence of God, not on the order of the catholic era nor the discovery and intellectualism of the evangelical era, but rather on the pervasive sense of human divinity experienced by many in our time. As I will say in the *Conclusion*, it is a sacred canopy.

Where are we today? Christianity seems to shift into a new era approximately every 250 years — Jesus (30 CE), Constantine (300 CE), the low (500 CE) and high middle ages (800 CE), the Friars (1050), the Renaissance (1250 CE), the Reformation (1500 CE), the Enlightenment (1650 CE), and modernity (1900 CE). If so, we may be in the middle of a 250-year pattern. That we are in the midst of a historical shift today is obvious. My crude historical summary indicates that it has taken about 250 years for new eras in Christian history to emerge fully.

Unity, a current expression of metaphysical Christianity, emerged in the mid-1890s and is about 125 years old. So I predict we may see metaphysical Christianity emerge as a new Christian era at the end of

this century. That is, of course, only if Unity remains authentic to what they are, metaphysical Christianity.

A Metaphysical Christian Manifesto.

The structure of this document is based on what is known in Unity circles as “credo.”¹ Credo, as implemented in Unity, consists of four sections on beliefs followed by four sections on the practice of ministry. As I have implemented this credo, each section begins with a short introduction followed by three or four “insights” about the belief or practice of ministry. Some of the material is based on content published on TruthUnity over the past twelve years, but most of it is new. It is organized in a credo structure to convey one person’s understanding of where we are in Christian history and how we might carry on ministry in our digital age.

I did not intend to write a manifesto about metaphysical Christianity, nor Unity as an expression of metaphysical Christianity. But it turns out that the term “metaphysical Christian” surfaced in nearly every one of the 25 insights in this document. Taken together, they paint a picture of what is meant by metaphysical Christianity. And, since most of them discuss current themes in Unity, they offer a consistent case that Unity is metaphysically Christian. Here is a summary of each insight.

¹ From *The Unity Field Program Manual*: You have within you the organizational structure for your credo that best fits you and that will help you say what you most want to say. In the same way, the content of your credo will have an emphasis that is yours alone. It is this uniqueness that will ultimately give a focus and power to your ministry that will be recognizably yours.

Insights about metaphysical Christian beliefs.

Insight 1: *Three Tenets of Metaphysical Christianity*, provides you with three things you can say to your friends and family when they ask, What is Unity?

Insight 2: *Four Bible Foundations, Metaphysically Interpreted*, gives a metaphysical Christian understanding of the four themes most often found in the writings of St. Paul.

Insight 3: *Why Truth Transcends Culture*, explains how to recognize someone as a traditionalist, modern or post-modern, providing insight into what they are probably asking and what they are looking for.

Insight 4: *The Problem with Revelation*, exposes a Unity blindspot: an unhealthy psychological state where we create a private world of our own and close it off with a feel-good outlook on life. Unless we can see this vulnerability, we will never be able to understand how others see us.

Insight 5, *The Problem with Reason*, exposes another blind spot: our propensity to stereotype. Categorizing things is helpful, but to borrow a current cliché, we need to name, claim and tame our propensity for spiritual elitism.

Insight 6: *Experience: Transforming Evil into a Greater Good*, explains how metaphysical Christianity is best suited as a religious movement to answer the most challenging question: why does evil exist? If there is a case to be made for why mainstream Christians should welcome metaphysical Christians into their fellowship, then we will likely find it in this insight.

Insight 7: *God as Meta-Narrative: Mind, Idea, Expression*, introduces a new framework for understanding how the cosmos works and offers a healthy replacement for the worn-out mainstream Christian meta-narrative of creation, sin, judgment, and redemption.

Insight 8: *From the Early Church to New Thought*, explains how metaphysical Christianity got to the Fillmores (it wasn't through Quimby). The history of metaphysical Christianity has not been adequately researched, and no scholarly study has been made about how we have received our metaphysical teachings. But this insight is a start.

Insight 9: *From New Theology to New Thought*, explains how metaphysical Christianity inherited theological understandings from liberal theology and how its attachment to metaphysics has tethered it to scientific accountability.

Insight 10: *Benevolent and Engaged or Distant and Benign?*, shifts the discussion from our understanding of God to our experience of God. The testimonies of four people describe four different ways we experience God.

Insight 11: *From Metaphysics to Mysticism*, explains how metaphysical Christian understandings can lead to a deep form of Christian experience which we know as mysticism.

Insight 12: *Join Me In Becoming God*, describes the discovery of an essential metaphysical Christian teaching in the Grande Chartreuse monastery near Grenoble, France.

Insight 13: *Knowing Our Christ Within*, explains why the metaphysical Christian is more likely to experience Jesus as a living presence and to follow Jesus than to worship him.

Insights about metaphysical Christian ministry.

Insight 14: *Rational Choice in the Religious Marketplace*, begins the second half of the credo. This insight is the first of two on how religion achieves its mission and vision. This insight addresses how to be effective in garnering confidence and commitment.

Insight 15: *Disruption in the Religious Marketplace*, continues the discussion on mission and vision, but from a perspective of how to be *efficient* as well as effective. Five characteristics of an efficient ministry explain how Unity, as an upstart movement with no money, no scholarship, and no social status was able to upend many mainstream Christian churches in its first 40 years and how it can do so again today.

Insight 16: *A Metaphysical Model for Ministry*, begins with a reflection on why ministers who pioneer churches using the existing model of congregational ministry may get frustrated and abandon their ministry. It then gives concrete examples of how metaphysical movements like Unity are uniquely suited to flourish in a disrupted religious marketplace.

Insight 17: *Confidence Rests on Understanding*, opens the section on education as ministry consciousness and skills. It discusses what people are looking for when they visit a church.

Insight 18: *Good Explanations*, is about how a ministry's teachings can drive confidence and commitment.

Insight 19: *Good Disciples*, explains why visitors to a church listen more to congregants and lay ministers than they do to the minister.

Insight 20: *Spiritual Baptism and Spiritual Communion*, is the first of three insights about ministry as worship consciousness and skills. In this insight, I explain how we misunderstand baptism and communion.

Insight 21: *Prayer Services*, explains how prayer has changed in Unity in recent years, mainly due to criticism around the use of traditional language in prayer. This insight challenges those who are critical about praying to God.

Insight 22: *Healing Services*, takes a look at when Unity was making inroads into the theological conversations in mainline Christianity and how mainline Christianity might be different today if it had been open to the spiritual healing practices of Unity.

The following three insights are about Ministry as Pastoral Consciousness and Skills. The introduction to these insights reveals something about Charles Fillmore's method of pastoral ministry that isn't found in any other source I have seen.

Insight 23: *Seeing the Christ in Others*, explains why how we see others is more important than how we see ourselves. It also defends Unity and other forms of metaphysical religion from accusations of spiritual bypassing.

Insight 24: *Positive Emotions That Turn On the Twelve Powers*, applies lessons from Positive Psychology to Unity's classic teaching on the internal process of the human soul. I sense that what will pave the road for the emergence of metaphysical Christianity in the 21st century will be discoveries made in neuroscience.

Insight 25: *Healing the Body*, introduces Charles Fillmore's *Statement of Faith* and explains its power to heal the body, engage mainstream Christianity and draw metaphysical Christians together in Fillmore Fellowships. It is, in essence, a manifesto for spiritual healing of both body and mind as well as nature and culture.

Who are you, Unity?

What I draw out in these 25 insights is gathered in the *Conclusion*. If you have read this far and wish to see the big picture, skip to the end and read the *Conclusion*. You can always go back and select topics of interest to you.

There, I shift from describing *what* we are to *who* we are. It is there that I discuss branding. I offer four different ways people have described Unity, and I suggest what our branding should be, given our essential nature as metaphysical Christians.

Which one we choose will not determine *what* will emerge after evangelical Christianity because, as I predict, that will be metaphysical Christianity. However, our choice will determine *who* we will find flourishing in Christianity's new era. Will it be Unity? The choice is ours.