

## Conclusion

So there we have it: Unity is a contemporary expression of metaphysical Christianity. If we are entering into a new era of “metaphysical” Christianity, then Unity and other metaphysical expressions of Christianity have a bright future.

### *Who are we?*

But there remains another question beyond “*What are we?*” This other question is, “*Who are we as a denomination or movement?*” How are we showing up in the religious marketplace? How are we expressing our essential nature? What are the name, achievements, capabilities, preferences, and anything else that develops and changes over time in our Unity movement?

For these types of questions, the appropriate way to answer is branding. As said in the *Introduction*, people love to place things in categories. They want to know how we differ from other religious organizations and movements. Once we have established *what* we are, it is the appropriate job of our national organizations to foster a conversation around *who* we are — about branding — to guide people to place Unity in categories that portray our current mode of expression. Let’s look at who we might be.

*First, we are a Center of Practice.* A center of practice is a group that assembles to practice a spiritual or religious faith. Unity was initially known as a school — the Unity

School of Christianity. As such, we are bonded as a movement not only by common belief but also by common religious practice.

*Second, we are a Community of Faith.* A community of faith is what we typically know as a church, a gathering of people with identifiable spiritual needs. Our members’ specific unmet needs and preferences bond us as a faith community.

### *What we are not.*

The Unity brand may become loaded with a few attractive items but irrelevant or unattractive to others. Such items may be appropriate for individual ministers and ministries, but they are unsuitable for the Unity brand. Here are two such things that worry me.

*We are not a variety show of all things spiritual but not religious.* Many congregants of Unity churches today, especially new ones, feel they have been given a “spiritual buffet” of sermons, workshops, classes, and programs. The variety of offerings is sometimes so diverse that they don’t understand what the Unity church is all about. They have typically left mainstream Christianity and are looking for a better way. In Unity, the “way” is the way-shower. There is no need to dilute the teaching with a wide variety of other teachings.

*We are also not a protest movement.* Charles Fillmore was not what we would today call a “social activist.” His focus was not so much on the reform of society; it was the transformation of the individual and of individual consciousness. Charles Fillmore spoke to his readers

about political things all the time, but he never spoke for them. There is a big difference.

Many people strongly desire today to see Unity “stand with others” for this or that cause. Such declarations are examples of *speaking for* people. Unity would be much more effective, in my opinion, by *talking to* people about Unity’s teaching, such as There will not be plenty for everyone until we recognize God as an inexhaustible Source of All-Good; There will never be world peace until we begin treating animals in compassionate ways, or There will be no justice until we relinquish our judgments.

### *How we get into trouble.*

Unity has often been categorized by these four things, two of which I believe are correct (center of practice and community of faith) and two of which I think are mistaken (spiritual smorgasbord and protest movement). Here are three ways we get these mixed up.

1. *We get into trouble when we mix our Center of Practice with the variety show of all things spiritual but not religious.* Unity often refers to itself as Practical Christianity, meaning its members *practice* Christianity. Like any practice, it is easy to become distracted, and we should not, as Emilie Cady cautioned, allow that to happen by reading too many books. These distractions can be exciting, and they may inform our practice. Still, traveling gurus come to our Unity churches because they and their teachings do not typically have the spiritual depth to form their own organizations. The Fillmore teachings

had the depth to shift from publishing to creating centers of practice. We should be cautious about the depth of gurus who find themselves homeless.

2. *We get into trouble when we mix our Community of Faith with a protest movement.* We see this happening in Unity today in two ways. First, we have become a home for many who are alienated from mainstream Christianity. If that is you, then know that you are welcome, but to truly benefit from the new community of faith you have found, you need to let go of any previous experience of alienation. Please do not use Unity as a platform to criticize your former faith community.

Second, we see people asking the church to do what each of us should be doing ourselves. According to Charles Fillmore, the faith community’s role is setting aside judgments<sup>200</sup> and looking for the greater good. In a democratic society, the individual’s role is to use our power of the word to promote social justice. Charles Fillmore repeatedly stressed that judgments must be set aside before we will achieve social justice. There is nothing wrong with our faith community developing our power of the word<sup>201</sup> or exploring social justice issues. But asking the faith community to “stand with” any particular cause or group is almost always a judgment, which weakens the faith community and usurps our role as citizens in a free society.

<sup>200</sup> Unity Tract: *Judgment and Justice*. <https://www.truthunity.net/tracts/arthur-d-hall-judgments-and-justice>

<sup>201</sup> Values Shared by Unity and Bread for the World. <https://www.truthunity.net/bread-for-the-world/values>

3. Finally, we get into trouble when we mix our *Center of Practice with our Community of Faith*. In his book *The Unity Movement: Its Evolution and Spiritual Teachings* (pp. 351-63), Neal Vahle offers an extensive history in a chapter entitled “Unity: A School for Spiritual Education or a Religious Denomination?” These dozen pages describe Charles Fillmore’s declaration of the *Unity Church Universal*, described below, and his concern about Unity becoming a denomination. Vahle quotes Charles Fillmore from September 1943, a time when he could see the fruit of his and Myrtle’s lifelong work:

The Lord came to me in a dream and outlined the ideas for this work. I was told not to form a church, but a school that would teach all people regardless of their religions. I was given the name “Unity” and told plainly that Unity was not a sect, nor a church and that if we wanted to teach persons we must not allow it to become sectarian. These were the principles taught by Jesus Christ. Therefore, we should be careful not to separate ourselves into an exclusive group. If we call ourselves a denomination we immediately cut off the opportunity to serve other organizations. Ours is a spiritual church and our purpose is to establish the true church in the minds and hearts of men.

Having said that, Charles Fillmore continued to ordain ministers, and he did not shun Unity churches in his retirement. He lived with the ambiguity of plural institutions, working side by side — one a school of practical Christianity, the other an association of ministers with field ministries. We must do the same.

### *Who we are: a Sacred Canopy.*

This document has been written as part of the process of becoming an ordained Unity minister. Throughout the process, I have conveyed to my evaluators and mentors my wish to be “inside the tent” as an ordained minister so that I can better collaborate with fellow ministers in serving the movement. It turns out that the tent metaphor is particularly appropriate when speaking about a religious movement because, in 1967, Peter Berger published a groundbreaking book entitled *The Sacred Canopy*. A canopy is a tent, and my desire to be inside the tent reflects my desire to be inside the Sacred Canopy, as described by Berger.

For Berger, the Sacred Canopy is the ability of religion to make sense of a world that is often perceived as without any order. According to Berger, human beings have very weak instincts, and so we must learn our way. You and I perceive the sum total of what we learn as a Sacred Canopy.

The role of religion is garnering confidence and commitment in the Sacred Canopy — the total package of explanations that address the hard things in life. Why are we born, and why do we die? Why does suffering exist? Why do we not always act ethically, and what should we do when we can’t make sense of it anymore?

Our unserved flock is online. We must connect Internet seekers to Unity ministers and teachers who can guide them to the next step in their spiritual journey. TruthUnity can attract seekers, but spiritual growth and finding one’s pathway typically occurs in a group or

individually with a minister or mentor. Ordination is, for me, a way to collaborate with fellows in Unity ministry, connecting people with real needs to ministers and teachers who can help them. By directing visitors of TruthUnity to ministers and teachers who are teaching interactive classes, we have an opportunity to help others in a big way.

### *The Sacred Canopy of Charles Fillmore.*

I bring all this up because it illustrates why we should not see ourselves as only a community of faith nor only as a center of practice. As fellow metaphysical Christians, we need to see ourselves, individually and collectively, for what we are in Truth: *a Sacred Canopy*.

Charles Fillmore declared as much when he wrote in 1924 that Unity, as a movement, is the “Unity Church Universal.”<sup>202</sup> In the mid-1920s, Charles was pressured to form a closer relationship with the Protestant Christian churches. He couldn't do that without becoming, like them, a denomination, which he was resistant to do.

The issue of the era was whether one was aligned with the fundamentalists or the modernists. It may surprise many today, but Charles Fillmore was no modernist. So he did what people have always done to dodge theological difficulties — he spiritualized the church, abstracting it to an ethereal level where denominational issues no longer exist. The church he established was not a center

<sup>202</sup> The Human Side of Unity: *What We Are*. <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/what-we-are>

of practice nor a community of faith but rather a Sacred Canopy.

The Sacred Canopy of Unity Church Universal did two things. First, it sought to bring together a Protestant church, grasping for anything that could heal its divisions. Charles Fillmore wrote in a 1924 article, “Members of the Unity Church Universal will be prepared to show that the Bible teaches both involution and evolution from Genesis to Revelation, thus unifying the fundamentalists and the modernists of the church.”<sup>203</sup>

Second, it established Unity's place in the ecclesiastical order of things. Charles continued,

There is need of a church organization that can interpret and demonstrate the spiritual realities back of the church symbols. All Christians could join such a church without breaking their present religious affiliations. Unity in Spirit and practice is the ideal Christian Church Universal, and it offers to people everywhere a spiritual church membership in which Christ will demonstrate his power to save his people here and now from the ills of mind, body, and affairs.

In other words, Charles Fillmore thought that if the Unity Church Universal was the Sacred Canopy, then the Unity School of Christianity was its primary center of practice, and the Unity field ministries were its faith communities. But he also saw it as the *Christian Church*

<sup>203</sup> Unity Church Universal, Unity, May 1924, p.438 <https://s3.amazonaws.com/truthunity/assets/pubs/monthly-magazine/1924-05-unity/1924-05-unity-church-universal.pdf>

Universal, and he was not hesitant to claim Unity's rightful place in Christianity. We must do the same.

*The Sacred Canopy of Metaphysical Christianity.*

The Sacred Canopy of Metaphysical Christianity continues to exist today in the minds of many people, particularly those who enter a Unity church and declare that they at last "feel at home." We should not confuse them with a spiritual buffet or require them to embrace particular social justice programs. Instead, we must teach them to embrace and internalize the words of Jesus: *I Am, I exist; I live; I am present.*

We are metaphysical Christians, and, quoting Max Ehrmann's *Desiderata* again, we have a right to be here. We must welcome them home with the message that Unity is metaphysical Christianity and that metaphysical Christianity is an authentic and distinct expression of the historic Christian faith.