

CHAPTER IV

UNITY BECOMES A SECT

Unity School of Christianity announces itself an "independent educational institution, teaching the use of the Jesus Christ doctrine in everyday life."¹ It has from the beginning repudiated every suggestion that it was forming a new sect or denomination. "Its purpose is not to found a new church or sect, but to help men and women of every church, and also those who have no church affiliations to use the eternal Truth of God."¹ One of the charges it leveled at Christian Science, as presented by Mrs. Eddy, was its policy of exclusiveness:

Many workers along the line of Truth seem to think it necessary to tear down orthodox Christianity in order to build up Christian Science, and that Christian Science is to establish a new sect, with the usual worldly appurtenances. We do not take this view of it. We think it is the little leaven that will leaven the whole mass.²

Hence, Unity has claimed that it could do its work in and through the churches without establishing a competing organization. Is this claim substantiated by the history of the Unity movement? What has been its expressed attitude toward the organized church? What trends are apparent in its growth-pattern?

First, Unity's attitude toward the organized church has not been that of friendly co-operation but rather of criticism. Its avowed purpose, according to the first editorial in Modern Thought, was to free the human mind from creeds, which it described as "vampires that sucked the blood of spiritual pro-

¹"The Purpose of Unity," Unity, XC (May, 1939), 86.

²Modern Thought, I (Feb., 1890), 8 (editorial).

gress."¹ While refusing to advise any student to break with his local congregation, it has unhesitatingly suggested that he introduce the Unity viewpoint into his church at every opportunity regardless of consequences. The following reply to an inquirer is a fair statement of their position in this respect throughout the fifty years of their history:

We judge from your letter that the Truth as it is in Christ is what you want to teach, and we would say to you that the place to begin is just where you are. Speak the Truth fearlessly and let God take care of the results. You have nothing to do with consequences. Your part is to obey. If it splits the church, well and good; for all the old creeds and dogmas and forms and ceremonies that have been built up in the name of Christianity, during the past ages of ignorance, must be broken² down and swept entirely away, that Christ may be all in all.

This assumption that the organized Christian Church had ignorantly betrayed Christ both in its thought and ritual was given practical expression by the Fillmores at the beginning of their ministry. As soon as they had secured a sufficient following, they organized them into a worshipping group with services at the same time as those of the churches in the community. A Sunday school soon followed. They thus made it impractical for their disciples to continue in the worship life of their local congregations. When the Unity Society of Practical Christianity was incorporated in 1903, provision was made not only for the continuance of worship but for the development of an ordained ministry. Such action seems hardly consistent with their published determination not

¹See "Modern Thought," Modern Thought, I (April, 1889), 8.

²Unity, XXXIX (Oct., 1913), 342.

to establish another organization.

Secondly, Unity in 1890 began to develop a thought-pattern of exclusiveness, which has resulted in the nineteen hundred thirties in an organization more absolute than is found in most Protestant denominations. The Fillmores took the first step when they changed the name of their magazine to Christian Science Thought. At that time they broke with their original purpose to establish an "independent religious journal. . . . liberal enough in its ideas to embrace the good in all sects."¹ In announcing the change Mr. Fillmore said: "As a consistent Christian Science journal we shall necessarily confine ourselves to the essential methods of that school."² This policy of exclusion was carried further when they announced that they would publish only such articles as dealt with "Pure Mind Healing," and eliminated by name all writings in "magnetism, hypnotism, mesmerism, psychometry, palmistry and astrology."³

The Fillmores' desire to be inclusive was expressed during these early years by their co-operation with those groups which finally established the New Thought Alliance. But, when Unity withdrew from that organization in 1906, Mr. Fillmore definitely served notice of a competitive movement.⁴ The first building of Unity Society had just been dedicated, and the time seemed pro-

¹"Our Mission," Modern Thought, I (April, 1889), 10.

²"Where We Now Stand," Modern Thought, I (Jan., 1890), 8.

³Unity, VIII (May, 1897), 393 (editorial).

⁴See p. 37.

tious for leadership. The first "Unity Annual Assembly of Practical Christians" was called in the summer of 1907. The attempt was not a success, and no further move was made by the Fillmores until 1922. Unity's first approach to a creed was made in 1913 in a statement entitled "What Is Practical Christianity."¹ However, no suggestion was made that this statement should become the basis of an organization.

The pattern of a sectarian organization was fixed on Unity in 1918 when it established a Field Department to develop contact and understanding with the various Unity Centers.² Before this time a Center was completely independent but might request Unity of Kansas City to send a lecturer for some special service. Henceforth, Unity School was to develop a group of lecturers whose task was to keep contact with the Centers, making suggestions both as to organization and teaching. Consonant with this, in the following year, a summer school was set up for intensive training of Center leaders. These were called to Kansas City, where they might have direct contact with the founders and come into a more definite understanding of the movement. Although as yet Unity School assumed no jurisdiction over the Centers, Mr. Fillmore announced in 1922 that the Centers usually followed what the School advocated.³

¹See Unity, XXXIX (July, 1913), 1.

²"Center" is Unity's name for a local church group.

³See "Why Unity Withdrew from the I. N. T. A.," Unity, LVII (July, 1922), p. 53.

Unity School published its first "Statement of Faith" in 1921. Some doubt was expressed as to the wisdom of this move, not lest it bind the followers, but lest it restrict the growth of the leaders. Therefore, the statement was accompanied by a notice that it might be changed at any time, but Mr. Fillmore assured his readers that changes would not be radical. This document, with minor changes, has become Unity's official "Statement of Faith" and is given as printed in 1938:

1. We believe in God, the one and only omnipotent, omniscient, and . . . in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!¹

This theological statement came at the time Unity was asking the International New Thought Alliance to recognize the Jesus Christ standard of living. When Unity precipitately withdrew from the Alliance the following year, the Fillmores felt that their organization was strong enough to establish itself on a national basis. In 1923 the "Annual Unity Conference and Healing Revival" was started, with delegates coming from thirty states. This was substituted for their summer school, which had been organized a few years before.

When Unity School announced its second conference, 1924, Mr. Fillmore stated that a feature of the conference would be the ordination of all Unity leaders who had received diplomas from Unity School and that "UNITY CHURCH UNIVERSAL" would be organized. Let Mr. Fillmore explain how this could be co-ordinated with the idea of not being a sect:

¹Unity's Statement of Faith (Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1939).

The time is ripe for the expression in the world of the church of Christ, which has always been recognized as existing eternally in the heavens or realm of spiritual ideals. Unity people the world over are asking for a closer relation and a more definite fellowship with the foundation church. To meet this need it has been decided to form a Unity Church Universal for the Unity people everywhere.

The setting up of this church of Christ in the earth will not mean the organizing of another sect, but a universal recognition of the true Christian principles in all sects. It will greatly strengthen the faith, understanding, and spiritual power of its members by making visible and active the fellowship they feel in Spirit.

The Protestant Christian churches are agitating a church union, but they have so far been unable to agree as to the basis of the combination. The forms and ceremonies in which spiritual truths are taught and symbolized are barriers to a great church coalition. Hence 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.

Members of 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.

The two great rites of the church of Christ are baptism and holy communion, or the Lord's Supper. These rites have not, heretofore, been administered without the aid of material symbols; Unity is a pioneer in formulating into substance and life the flesh and blood of Christ. We proclaim that the body of Christ is a real substance that can be handled by the mind, which will quicken and purify the life stream of one who has faith in it.

Membership in Unity Church Universal will be based upon spiritual understanding. Application blanks will be sent to all who desire to become members.¹

Unity Church Universal was organized June 22, 1924. Several hundred persons received spiritual baptism. No mention is made of it, however, after September, 1924. Mr. Charles Fillmore now suggests that he quickly came to himself and realized that the world was not prepared as yet for such a move and to have gone

¹Charles Fillmore, "Unity Church Universal," Unity, LX (May, 1924), 438.

on would have made Unity into another sect.¹

Unity School was now at the crest of her popularity. The third annual Unity conference announced an attendance of twelve hundred with delegates from England, France, Canada, New Zealand, and the Philippine Islands. Increased effort was made to standardize the Centers. While still emphasizing that local Unity Centers were independent units, Center Leaders were informed that they should not try to teach others until they had successfully completed "Unity Correspondence Course" and the "Course in Methods and Ideals" for conducting Centers. This was strongly expressed by 1931.

Unity feels that more honesty is required in a spiritual ministry than in any other department of human activity, and therefore it cannot accept as sincere any attempt to use the name "Unity," or the name of any other school or organization, without at least a definite attempt to uphold in every respect all the ideals for which the name stands.

In entering upon a spiritual ministry, the Center leaders assume a responsibility that includes not only the spiritual welfare of their students, but likewise their mental, moral, physical, and financial welfare. Therefore, the greatest degree of conscientious endeavor should be exercised. Before any individual teacher attempts to establish himself in a spiritual ministry, especially if that ministry involves the supporting of the ideals of some definite institution, he should set about systematic preparation for an adequate service according to the principles that he professes to represent.²

Unity School, however, did not stop with a mere admonition. This year saw the changing of the annual summer conference into a "Training School," which was organized on a four-term basis,

¹Statement by Charles Fillmore, personal interview.

²"Field Department Notes," Weekly Unity, XXIII (Oct. 17, 1931), 6.

six weeks to a term, running from May to October. Leaders of Centers were expected to attend at least part time. Then, in 1935, "Unity Annual Conference" was established. The Constitution of "Unity Annual Conference" reveals the technique that Unity School of Christianity now uses to completely control its once independent local Centers. I quote its more important articles:

Article 3. MEMBERSHIP. The Membership of Unity Annual Conference shall consist of recognized Unity center leaders and ministers who are working in co-operation with the Field Department of Unity School of Christianity, K.C., Mo. After the close of the 1935 Conference, new applicants can be accepted for membership only if they have been ordained by Unity School of Christianity or if their ordination has been approved by the Field Department and the Unity Training School Board. Officials of Unity School of Christianity who have not been ordained may be elected by the Executive Board to honorary membership in the Conference. Application for membership must be filed with the Board of Directors and approved by nine members of the Board. Membership shall be for one year only. All memberships shall expire at the close of the Annual Conference unless renewed previous to that date.

Article 4. EXECUTIVE BOARD. The Executive Board shall consist of twelve members, ministers of recognized Unity centers.

Article 5. BYLAWS. All bylaws and regulations for the government of themselves and the Annual Conference shall be formulated by the Executive Board.

BYLAWS:

Article 6. A recognized Unity center shall have as its head an accredited member of this Conference and shall teach the principles of practical Christianity, using the textbooks and literature published by Unity School of Christianity, 917 Tracy Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri, and following the course of teaching as prescribed by that School.

Article 7. In order to be accepted as a recognized Unity center, a center shall eliminate all textbooks and teachings that do not conform to the Christ standard as recognized by the Unity School of Christianity.

Article 8. All centers shall make regular annual reports

to the Field Department, on forms supplied by the Field Department, and copies of all announcements and printed matter mailed out by the local centers shall be mailed to the office of the Field Department.

Article 9. Ordination of Unity leaders and ministers shall be performed by the Unity School of Christianity, K. C., Mo. or approved by the Field Department and the Unity Training School Board.

Article 10. The qualifications of a candidate for ordination shall consist of the completion of the Correspondence School Course and the Methods and Ideals Course, and two months attendance at the Unity Training School (eight credits over a period of two years.), and at least one year's independent center ministry that satisfies Unity School and the Unity Annual Conference Executive Board that the candidate's teaching and ethics are of the Christ standard.

Article 11. Licensed Unity teachers are required to be actively engaged in fulfilling prescribed preparation and must have a good record in their present field work. They are authorized teachers but not ordained. Licensed Unity teachers are privileged to have their names listed in the U. A. C. Yearbook as a separate group.¹

The organization of Unity Annual Conference resulted in some reduction in the number of Unity Centers throughout the world. There are at present eighty-nine "recognized Unity Centers" including three in Canada, two in England, and one in Hawaii. There are one hundred and five ordained ministers in the Conference, of whom eighty are women and twenty-five are men. There are also sixty-two licensed teachers training for ordination; fifty-five of these are women and seven are men.

The most difficult problem the Executive Board of the Conference has faced in its five years' history has been that of granting credit for courses taken in the various Centers. Since these, being subject to the direction of Unity School's Field

¹Unity Annual Conference Yearbook (Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1939), pp. 23-30.

Department, can use only Unity literature and must meet Unity's standards, many thought that credit should be allowed by Unity School. Nevertheless, it was finally decided that such courses were only preparatory to Unity's Training School and Correspondence study.¹ And local Centers were told that they had no authority to start a separate ministry. One wonders if Mrs. Eddy's spirit does not sometimes arise to chide Mr. Fillmore concerning his critical article in 1889--"Truth Bows at No Human Shrine."

Summary

Unity School of Christianity must now be classed as a Christian sect, not yet come to have denominational status.² It originated as a critic of the established church, both in its doctrine and ritual, and has continued to express the attitude of dissent. For the most part it does not seek to co-operate with the religious federations of the communities in which it operates and is not invited to membership in such organizations. As an institution it has developed all the functions that belong to the organized church. It has a distinct history, which it is now recognizing as it is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary.

¹Ibid., p. 35.

²Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, Introduction to the Science of Sociology (2nd ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1924), pp. 872 f. These authors define a sect as a "religious organization that is at war with the existing mores." They make a clear distinction between a sect and a denomination on the basis of attitude. A sect tends to become a denomination when it becomes tolerant of rival organizations and is tolerated by them.

Since the World War it has developed and published its own creed, and since 1933 it has required all its ministers and local Centers to conform to that theology. It now has a government more centralized and autocratic than found in most Protestant denominations. Only Unity literature can be used and sold at its various Centers. Its ministers hold their status in the organization for but one year at a time. They are required to make an annual report direct to Unity School of Christianity and to furnish it copies of all programs and publicity. They can invite no one to share their pulpit without the approval of the Field Department of Unity School of Christianity. Unity Annual Conference, through its Executive Board, functions as a judicial body such as the church courts in Protestant denominations.

Unity has developed a system of worship including both church and Sunday school. It supplies its own Sunday school literature and for many years has published a Unity hymnal. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are observed at Unity Centers, the former with a symbolism significant only to its own adherents. Unity School, unlike a school but very like a church, has developed a complete system of propaganda. It has originated and publishes to-day six such magazines. About forty percent of each issue of these periodicals is mailed to non-subscribers. Since 1915 it has kept a strong staff of lecturers in the Field. Its publishing department is printing several books a year. Every Center is an official distributor of books, magazines, and pamphlets. "Silent-70" sends free magazines into twelve hundred libraries scattered over the entire world and into every eleemosynary and penal institution where it can find entrance. One

Center is carried in Unity's directory as "Christ Church," Los Angeles, and some of the Center leaders believe that the Centers should seek membership in the local church federations.

Unity School of Christianity publishes no official record of the number of its adherents. Such statistics as it has released from time to time have been part of its appeal for funds and do not give an accurate picture of its influence in the religious life of to-day. We have already noted that the Field Department directs eighty-nine Centers or churches with a serving group of one hundred sixty-seven, including both ordained ministers and licentiates. The original Center, Unity Society of Practical Christianity in Kansas City, reports an average attendance of six hundred at its Sunday meetings in 1938.¹ South Side Unity Center in Kansas City has a much smaller attendance. The two groups unite each year in a highly advertised Easter service. There were approximately 2,500 at this service in 1939. Three other Unity Centers; located at Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York; have attained considerable size. The average Sunday attendance at all Unity Centers during 1938 was 16,900.² If the ratio of attendance to membership in Unity is comparable to that generally found in Protestant groups, Unity's adherents number approximately fifty thousand.

Unity's influence, however, is much wider than the above

¹Statement by Louis E. Meyer, Minister of Unity Society, personal interview.

²Statement by Celia C. Ayres, Director of Field Department of Unity School of Christianity, personal interview.

figures indicate. An analysis of the increase in the number of subscriptions to Unity's various magazines during the past twenty years gives a better understanding of its place in the religious life of the period. The following table gives the average number of each issue of Unity's magazines for the years 1919, 1923, and 1933:

Magazine	1919 ^a	1923 ^b	1933 ^c
<u>Unity</u>	47,500	146,642	96,000
<u>Weekly Unity</u>	27,000	185,000	170,000
<u>Unity Daily Word</u> ^d	144,366	182,000
<u>Wee Wisdom</u>	4,000	52,605	154,000
<u>Good Business</u> ^e	25,764	17,500
<u>Progress</u> ^f	27,623	50,000

^aUnity, LVI (April, 1922), 376.

^bUnity News, X (Dec. 8, 1923), 1. This was a weekly, now discontinued, published for the benefit of the workers at Unity headquarters

^cStatement by Ralph Tackett, Manager of Publications, personal interview.

^dFirst published in 1924. ^eFirst published in 1922.

^fFirst published in 1927.

Unity magazines are marketed both through individual subscriptions and through news and magazine stands. The following figures show the number of paid subscriptions to the various magazines in 1938¹

¹Statement by Ralph Tackett, personal interview.

exclusive of Weekly Unity, which is distributed largely through Unity Centers:

Magazine	Number of Paid Subscriptions
<u>Unity</u>	75,000
<u>Wee Wisdom</u>	114,000
<u>Unity Daily Word</u> . .	143,000
<u>Progress</u>	46,000
<u>Good Business</u>	15,500
Total	323,500

This does not mean, however, that this number personally subscribed for a Unity monthly in 1938. In 1927 Unity School stated that seventy percent of its subscriptions were gifts.¹ These came through the "Prosperity Banks," "Good Words' Clubs," and "Help-One-a-Month Clubs." The ratio is somewhat reduced at the present time. The following percentages were released by the Accounting Department of Unity School, March 3, 1939:

Magazine	Percentage of Individual Subscriptions	Percentage of Gift Subscriptions
<u>Unity</u>	70	30
<u>Weekly Unity</u>	55	45
<u>Unity Daily Word</u>	65	35
<u>Wee Wisdom</u>	55	45
<u>Progress</u>	50	50
<u>Good Business</u>	60	40

¹Unity, LXVII (July, 1927), 84.

Using the paid-subscription list as the basis of calculation there were approximately 193,000 personal subscribers to Unity periodicals in 1938. No data is available to show the amount of overlapping in the subscription lists. Certainly many homes receive more than one of the magazines.