

Calvin Synod - UCC: The Facts

Calvin Synod is not a "temporary conference" of the United Church of Christ, nor does it exist by "permission," as erroneously suggested in a recent UCC email chatroom. In one General Synod after another, attacks have been made about its continued existence, with some insisting it must die. However, while it is not large, it is very much alive.

Calvin Synod, in fact, never was and is not now an "acting conference" of the UCC, but remains unchanged as a Synod in its own right. Calvin Synod (originally named Magyar Synod) was one of the Synods of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. While it was the only Synod that rejected the merger with the Congregational Christian church, under E&R constitutional polity whenever three-quarters of the Synods ratified the merger all the Synods were automatically included - Magyar also.

At the point of merger, all E&R Synod and CC Conferences retained their identity. The "Basis of Union and the Interpretations" together were the covenanting contract. It provided for merger of the area Synods and Conferences, when mutually agreeable. These were not to be a swallow-up of E&R into CC conferences, but completely new by union. However, there was no parallel structure for merger with the ethnic Magyar (Calvin) Synod. So it has not continued by permission as a temporary structure, but exists as a Synod in continuity - what it was, what it is and potentially can be in perpetuity.

The words "temporary" or "acting conference" are nowhere in the merger documents, in reference to Calvin Synod. However, its name stood out like a sore thumb once the area synods and conferences aligned themselves (they did it, with the lines subsequently approved by the General Synod).

About 1964 there was a strong push in the UCC leadership to squeeze Calvin Synod out of existence, and absorb its churches into the area Associations. It was strongly resisted by The Rt. Rev. Dr. Stephen Szabo and other presidents of the Synod, Synod officers and the weight of the Synod's delegates. They refused to submit - true to their heritage as a freedom loving people: *Nem! Nem! Soha!* Yet, with a conciliatory effort to express covenantal unity the name was changed to "Calvin Synod Conference." Unfortunately, even this was spurned by the denomination, which grudgingly acknowledges only an "acting conference." Despite any other nomenclature, this remains a Synod - in historical continuity and in polity.

But why is it so important for the larger conferences to swallow up the few churches in their areas? There is another more subtle motive underlying this, going back to the early days of immigration. Many efforts were made, well documented in extant books, to assimilate these brute foreigners of a lesser culture and to Americanize them. Obviously not everyone thought this way, although some newcomers also did and failed to teach their children their mother tongue, but significant numbers of the churches' leadership did.

The Hungarian churches were merged into the (German) Reformed Church in the United States following World War I, turned over by the Reformed Church of Hungary in the *Tiffin*

Agreement of 1921. They became members of the area Synods. However, with the 1934 merger of the Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod of North America, most Hungarian churches were aligned into a new Magyar Synod, a few opting to stay in the area Synods.

In the later years of the E&R church, the issue came up again. As many German heritage churches became more Americanized, the denomination dropped its subsidy of the German language magazine, and the Hungarian. They pushed for the extinction of Magyar Synod as well. But the Hungarians had come across the pond 50 to 150 years later, and the language was still significant in singing the songs of Zion.

With the 1956 revolt in Hungary resulting in an influx of new Hungarian émigrés, and with later escapees, the churches became the center of new lives in the New World. Still others came by dribs and drabs, and also a number of ministers fluent in both languages (young and intelligent, they picked up English skills quickly - and who with American accents from the deep South, down East, Harlem or Joisey can fault the Hungarian accent?). Nevertheless the theme is repeated, they must be assimilated!

A number of years ago the possibility of restructuring the Synod to include Biblical Witness Fellowship churches, and perhaps others, was seriously and prayerfully considered. At that time, Calvin Synod refrained as it endeavored to respect the familial ties that bind the UCC churches in covenant. But with insulting disregard, several Calvin Synod churches were lured away and absorbed, without its permission, by other conferences. Increasingly, as the years have passed, Calvin Synod has suffered the onus of disrespect in other ways (even General Synod '97 apologized on the floor for General Synod '95's unkind treatment of Calvin Synod's delegates), and its perspectives have been ignored.

The Synod and BWF are in considerable agreement on important issues addressed by the churches. There are numerous other congregations and members who stand with the Synod on refusal to recognize same-sex unions, or to ordain and install ministers and lay officers who are not celibate singles or faithful in marriage. It is because the UCC persistently funds activities for undesirable programs, in support of such as these, that OCWM support is sent by only one or two congregations on their own initiative. The rest want no part of it, meeting real needs elsewhere.

The most important reason Calvin Synod insists upon its continuation is theological. The UCC has abandoned its confessional heritage in all but name, while the Synod stands firmly on its Reformation heritage. During the years of Counter-Reformation, Muslim rule and massacre, Habsburg persecution, Nazi terror and Communist oppression, the Hungarian Reformed Church throughout Europe drew upon its confessional heritage as a bastion of strength, a source of solace, unity and God's grace. While other walls collapsed, the Church stood strong - and survived the years of chaos. Calvin Synod is unwilling to give up this powerful faith for the whims and fads of the day that have tarnished the United Church of Christ

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