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That They Shall All Be One

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“Next week is Pentecost, don’t forget to wear red.” For some of us growing up, this was as welcome and familiar a part of our church-going experience as receiving palms on Palm Sunday. Others in our church family never encountered the Pentecost traditions. It is just a tiny reminder that Christianity is a very large and inclusive tent. And our congregation draws members from the full spectrum of Christian experience as well as individuals who had little or no church experience of any kind before walking through our doors.

We are reminded of our great diversity with almost every hymn we sing. For some of us, just the first few notes of a hymn will trigger a lifetime of memories, while for the person sitting in the pew next to them, the words and music of the hymn are a fresh discovery.

Our diversity is not a cliché, but is truly one of the great joys and tremendous strengths of our congregation. We come from so many different faith traditions as well as no tradition at all. Some of us are the product of literally thousands of hours of Sunday School while others of us come from traditions in which we have not, personally, ever engaged with the Bible. The fact that we are staunchly and proudly Christian but do not demand that anyone must pass a test of orthodoxy is at the very heart of what defines the United Church of Christ. This freedom of conscience is the reason that many of us are here today.

And God has brought us all together into this church — member and non-member, long-term member and first time visitor. We come from Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Congregational, Evangelical, Reformed, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and no church background at all. Many — perhaps the majority of us — have been members of several different denominations over the years and may, at some time in the future, move on to other churches. Indeed, we know that more than half the readers of *The Spire* are scattered around the country and no longer worship regularly with us or even

in the United Church of Christ. At some time in the future, many of us will join their ranks.

But we are together right here and right now. Our faith journeys intersect right here. And we celebrate this coming together from so many different places and thank God that we have been given this treasury of experiences and perspectives to enrich all of our worship, fellowship, deepening, and outreach. The reality of this is that this church invests a great deal of effort in everything from deciding how we will spend our Christmas offering, to what priority we give to Vacation Bible School, to how we feel about our discussion of Open and Affirming. Certainly our rich diversity means that our decision may require more effort, more respectful listening to each, and more compromise than in many other churches. At the same time we know that the wonderful feeling that each and every one of us feels on Sunday after sharing worship as children of God is vastly more important than the issues of man-made church traditions and practices that might separate us.

It is one of the blessings stemming from our diversity that we don’t all see things the same way. We don’t all have the same expectations, understandings, and expectations. Within our church family — perhaps more than almost any other church any of us have ever known — we hold an exceptionally wide range of positions on social, political, and theological issues. Within our family-size church, we are at different points in the cycle of life, vastly different financial situations, and living in quite a range of different family situations. And yet God has brought us here. Together. To teach one another from the depth of each of unique life journeys. To learn from each other. To affirm each other’s hard-learned life lessons. The God who created us, the God who redeems us, and the God who sustains us has brought us all together to love one another, to teach one another, and to help one another along our faith journeys. We are indeed blessed with our God, with this unique congregation, and with each other.