

## My Church Signed the Unity Proposal. What Does That Mean?



by Mike Taliaferro -- San Antonio, Texas - Friday, 30 May 2008

**Leadership >> Cooperation Churches**



Opinion Piece

If your congregation has "signed on" to the Unity Proposal, you may be wondering what that means exactly. Mike Taliaferro gives his personal opinion on some of the most frequently asked questions...

**Did we really have to sign something?** No, your church doesn't actually sign anything. You simply informed the churches that are participating that you were 'in'.

**How did this thing come about?** After the turmoil of 2002-2004, leaders from many churches began to sense that it was time to pull ourselves back together and be more unified. There was much discussion going on about who we were and what direction we would go. Some predicted that we were going to break apart. A few churches began to wander doctrinally. The Unity Proposal was an encouragement to put the turmoil behind us and move on. At that time, no one really knew if ICOC churches would still want to work together.

**Did the proposal help?** Most definitely, in my opinion. First of all, it gave churches around the world a chance to raise their hands and say to everyone that, yes, our congregation is still here, and yes, we still believe in the Bible and want to win the world for Christ. Well over 300 churches, or roughly 70% of the membership at the time, were eager to raise their hands and join in the coop. Second, it also encouraged the churches worldwide that indeed we still believed in our core doctrines like baptism, discipleship, and the need to evangelize our world. Seeing so many churches affirm the proposal encouraged disciples in our movement that yes, we are still alive, and that yes, most churches wanted to be unified. Thirdly, the proposal itself helped to unite our churches because the document itself was read by well over 250 evangelists, elders, deacons, board types, and members of ICOC churches around the world.

**Did the name change?** Yes, the Unity Proposal is now called the Unified Plan for Cooperation or UPC.

**What does the UPC do exactly?** Today our churches are calm and growing, for the most part. So today the UPC's most important contribution to our churches is to provide a framework so that certain jobs can be accomplished that concern all our churches worldwide. For instance, do we want a website like Disciples Today? Do we want to have a conference for campus and teen leaders? Do we want to have a worldwide leadership conference? Where will these be hosted? Who will decide? What can we do collectively to train ministers (higher education)? Those who joined the UPC were the churches that felt comfortable with the proposal and wanted to participate in making these collective decisions. It is not a form of church government, and it carries no authority.



**Does the document say who's a Christian and who is not?** Of course not. The Bible tells us that.

**Does it draw lines between churches?** No. While various churches decided not to participate for a variety of reasons, it does not influence our fellowship patterns here in San Antonio. We invite speakers here from 'signer churches' and 'non-signer' churches. I have been invited to visit 'signer' and 'non-signer' churches. It does not, nor should it ever determine with whom we fellowship. The Bible does that.

**Is the UPC our only cooperation organization?** No. The truth is that we have several cooperative organizations going on right now. Many churches participate in HOPEww work. Disciples serve on its board. We have several mission societies, and also Disciples Today. Most of our churches cooperate regionally with neighboring churches. Truth is, most everyone is a part of a cooperative arrangement of some kind.

Is the UPC the only cooperative group with a written statement of beliefs? Good question. I can't speak for all the groups. At the time the UPC was written, we were in a turbulent period for our churches. It seemed wise to include some of our basic doctrines in the document.

**Are the churches who haven't signed on still considered part of us?** Of course. The UPC doesn't decide who is "with us." It provides a framework for our churches to get certain jobs done. To me, it is like a Saturday morning 'work party' at the local church building to cut the grass or paint the building. Many members come. Some can't come for various reasons. It doesn't mean they aren't members any more. Those who can come pitch in. Others can't make it. It is that simple to me. San Antonio, by the way, is not a member of every cooperative organization either. We don't have a member on the HOPEww board, but we support HOPEww as we can. We aren't in a mission society, but we still give to Africa Missions. etc.

**But isn't the UPC just an attempt by the 'old boys' to retake control of the movement?** No. It's just the opposite. For instance, we here in Texas called the first worldwide conference back in 2003. About 400 attended. At the end of the conference, it was awkward as to who would host it the following year. So, lacking a mechanism for making a decision, all the old timers pulled off into a room and decided on Chicago. The next year the same guys decided on Seattle. But it was awkward. Couldn't we find a way to open up the decision to a wider group of churches, or representatives of churches?

This is what attracted me personally to the proposal initially. It took certain decisions that were always made behind closed doors in the past, and brought them out into the open for more churches to participate. The UPC is actually designed to help churches serve the common good, without elevating one man or one church to preeminence. I like that.

**Do the non-signing churches believe in cooperation?** Honestly, it is hard to generalize the “non-signing” churches (or the signers, either). Over the last few years, our movement has had several churches struggle spiritually. A few closed their doors. We have had others that wandered into false doctrine. Some don’t believe in discipling. Some don’t support missions. Others have pulled up the draw bridge and don’t want to be connected to other churches. These types of churches are not interested in “signing on.” And in my opinion, many of these are not strong churches. They need help.

On the other hand, there are other churches that have not joined the UPC that I think are very strong churches. They do cooperate. They cooperate with HOPEww. They cooperate regionally. They give to missions. They have regional conferences. They are generally strong churches, and whether or not they join in the UPC will not in any way affect my fellowship patterns with them.

**So then how are we to know what a church believes and practices anymore if they are not a part of the Cooperation Plan?** You will need to do your own research of the particular congregation you have questions about.

**So you don’t like the terms, “cooperating churches” and “non-cooperating churches?”** Those terms can be misleading and inappropriate. Many churches are cooperating on a regional basis that are not yet a part of the UPC.

**Do the non-signers participate? Are we open to including them?** Yes. The UPC created 10 service teams. These teams help coordinate things like conferences, web communication, and mission support where needed, etc. (For a list of the teams, go to the ICOC coop site) Many disciples from “non-signing” churches now serve on these committees. They are an important part of the process. The teams have in fact thrown us all together organizing and serving in various ways.

**What if the “non-signers” don’t join?** In my opinion, we have enough participation right now that all the work has been effectively spread out among the many participants. If more churches decide to pitch up and help with the specific jobs we are doing, then great. If they feel they cannot help right now, that is also just fine. Sure, I wish everyone would join in. And yes, I think being a part of the larger organization helps your church. But not everyone agrees. And I am fine with that.

**What will happen in the next few years with the UPC?** I think that some churches will see what is going on with the committees and decide to join. Other churches won’t. It is simply not a hot button issue for most folks right now. We’ve all got a lot of other things in our lives to be concerned about. Let me also say that I have been friends with some of the non-signers for three decades. We were friends during the Crossroads era. We were friends during the Boston era. We were friends during the LA and movement era. We were friends during the turmoil era. Now that our churches are for the most part happy and growing again, we are going to be friends in this new era that is beginning right now. It is that simple.

**What is the UPC accomplishing?** A lot of great things are happening because of the UPC. Service teams have formed that are volunteering help in many areas. Communication, the web, international conferences, HOPEww issues, women’s issues, and mission support and coordination are some of the committee tasks. It is a service coop. No church is under the authority of any committee. No church pays fees or is forced to do anything. Still, much good is accomplished. Web sites are going up. Conferences are taking place, and larger and larger numbers of people are attending. Last October we saw over 1500 registered for the Int’l Leadership Conference in Anaheim. The campus and teen conferences have grown from 400 here in San Antonio in 2005 to 1500 attendees in Boston last year. Let me state the obvious: the UPC allows us to hold legitimate conferences without fear that any one church is taking over. That has calmed a lot of fears, and allows us all to move forward.

**What are these “regional families of churches” we hear about?** The UPC calls churches to participate in fellowship with other churches in their vicinity. For instance, I live in Texas. The Texas churches fellowship with each other, and the leaders meet regularly to be in each other’s lives, as well as to plan regional events. We are close to one another. (And yes, I know that some of the non-signing churches do the exact same thing. More power to them.)

Back at the time the UPC was written, many churches were distant from others. Honestly, in my opinion, our movement needed a nudge for us to draw close to neighboring congregations. Today, we are much more united.

**What are the “delegates” all about?** Every year at the Leadership Conference each regional family of churches sends delegates to a meeting before the conference begins. It’s about 75 people total. The meeting lasts two to four hours, and the agenda includes service matters from the committees. Various committees ask the delegates to make decisions (i.e. “Who will host the next Campus Conference?”). Other committees ask the delegates to please communicate with all their churches certain matters (i.e. “Please send some money to Disciples Today before they go broke”). It is all voluntary. The delegates have no authority over any churches. Nor are there any fancy titles like “Kingdom Delegate” or “Regional Super-delegate.” We come together, and the committee heads bring out any agenda items. It is that simple.

**What is the spirit of these meetings?** Very humble, with excellent give and take. There is a genuine spirit of trust and cooperation. It’s a beautiful thing to see. We welcome observers from the non-signing churches as observers. (The meetings were closed at first, which was a mistake.)

**How long will the UPC last?** I have no idea. For decades our movement was centered around a few individual churches. Crossroads, Boston, and LA were very prominent. Things changed. We repented in certain areas. We grew up in others. We are now a movement of many strong churches, and not a movement led by one individual. There was, obviously, a certain period of disarray in 2002-2005 as we rethought our fellowship patterns. My opinion: the UPC helped us as churches to come together and cooperate. It strengthens our relationships, and gives us a fair mechanism for making simple collective decisions. It is not perfect. Nor must every church participate for it to be effective. But it is helpful.

Make no mistake; unity comes from the Holy Spirit. The UPC will only be helpful for a certain time. Then we will probably move on to the next era. I don't have any idea what our next era will be. But now that our churches are growing again, I cannot wait to see what God has in store for us.

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