

# **Yale University cuts historic ties with United Church of Christ\_50205**

April 28, 2005

Posted: 4/29/05

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**By Chris Herlinger**

*Religion News Service*

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (RNS)—As of July, Yale University no longer will maintain ties with the United Church of Christ, a decision that has earned the university a sharp rebuke by the denomination's president and will end a historic relationship that dates back to the 1700s.

Yale's decision “fails to honor our historic relationships in a meaningful or respectful way,” John Thomas told the United Church News, the denomination's news service.

Thomas was responding to a New York Times report that the university has decided it wants to make Battell Chapel a place of worship for a wider spectrum of religious faiths.

The change is significant because the university's founding and history are closely tied to the denomination.

The New Haven, Conn., university, founded in 1701 by New England

Congregationalists, was established as an institution to train Protestant clergy. The Congregationalists are among the “forebear denominations” of the 1.3 million-member United Church of Christ, which was formed in 1957. The Yale chapel formally affiliated with the United Church of Christ in 1961.

The congregation at the chapel—now called the Church of Christ in Yale—was formed in 1757 and conducts services in a stately, Gothic-style chapel built in the late 1870s. Among its leaders was William Sloane Coffin Jr., the anti-war activist and Yale chaplain during the 1960s.

Thomas, himself a 1975 graduate of Yale Divinity School, said he was puzzled by the decision in part because the United Church of Christ, one of the most liberal denominations in the United States, has long-standing ecumenical and interfaith commitments.

It is difficult, he said, “to understand how disaffiliation from the church will enhance Yale's capacity to minister in a more meaningful way to its increasingly pluralistic constituency.”

The New York Times reported that the university, which has been examining ways to strengthen the campus' spiritual life, determined it was better that the chapel have a broader mission and not be tied to one denomination. As it is, few students attend services there except to sing in the chapel choir.

“The university is actually returning to the founding purpose of the church, which was to meet the religious and spiritual needs of students in particular,” Martha Highsmith, the university's deputy secretary, told the newspaper.

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