

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Belonging to a Community of Faith

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Recently, a member of a county-based citizen's group approached me about working with his group on the important environmental issue of ensuring clean water for consumption and agriculture. He was very worried about the lack of regulations – both state and federal – on the oil and natural gas industries in Ohio. He said to me, “Jim, I’m not a member of a community of faith in my county, but it seems to me that people of faith should be interested in clean water and perhaps we could generate some support from some local congregations.

I immediately agreed with him and offered my help, but his comment “I’m not a member of a community of faith” led me to some soul-searching of my own about what it is to be a person of faith in a community of faith. Do you have to join a church to be a member of a community of faith? Do you have to ascribe to a certain belief system or denomination? And if you do belong to a local congregation, are you automatically a member of a community of faith?

My answers are no, no, and no. My conclusion is that there is a wide “community of faith” in the general population that may or may not include church-going types. Because being a member of a community of faith simply means we live with others into the

future with hope and vision - regardless of any affiliation with an established faith tradition. Sounds like heresy coming from a member of the clergy, doesn't it?

Consider what the President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ (UCC) Geoffrey Black said at the recent General Synod meeting in Tampa:

“The fifth Big Holy Audacious Goal [of the UCC] is this: to become widely known in the United States as the faith-based leader in the preservation and stewardship of God’s creation. The accelerating rate of climate change is in front of us... We need to begin to change our society, to respond to this reality. If we keep using resources, growing the population at the rate we’re growing now, we will need seven earths to accommodate us. And we don’t have seven earths; we’re not likely to get seven earths; so we need to adapt to this reality.”

Perhaps the reality is that we are not invited to become members of a denomination, but rather members of the community of faith – people with hope and vision – and the UCC is invited to host that invitation.

What is possible for us as people of hope and vision? For those of us who are older, what will be our legacy? For those of us who are younger, how will we love and work and play and grow families in a world certain to warm and change? What does the “beloved community” look like and who does it include? For those of us who want to belong to a community of faith, these are the questions we have to answer.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.