



a publication of the
United Church of Christ
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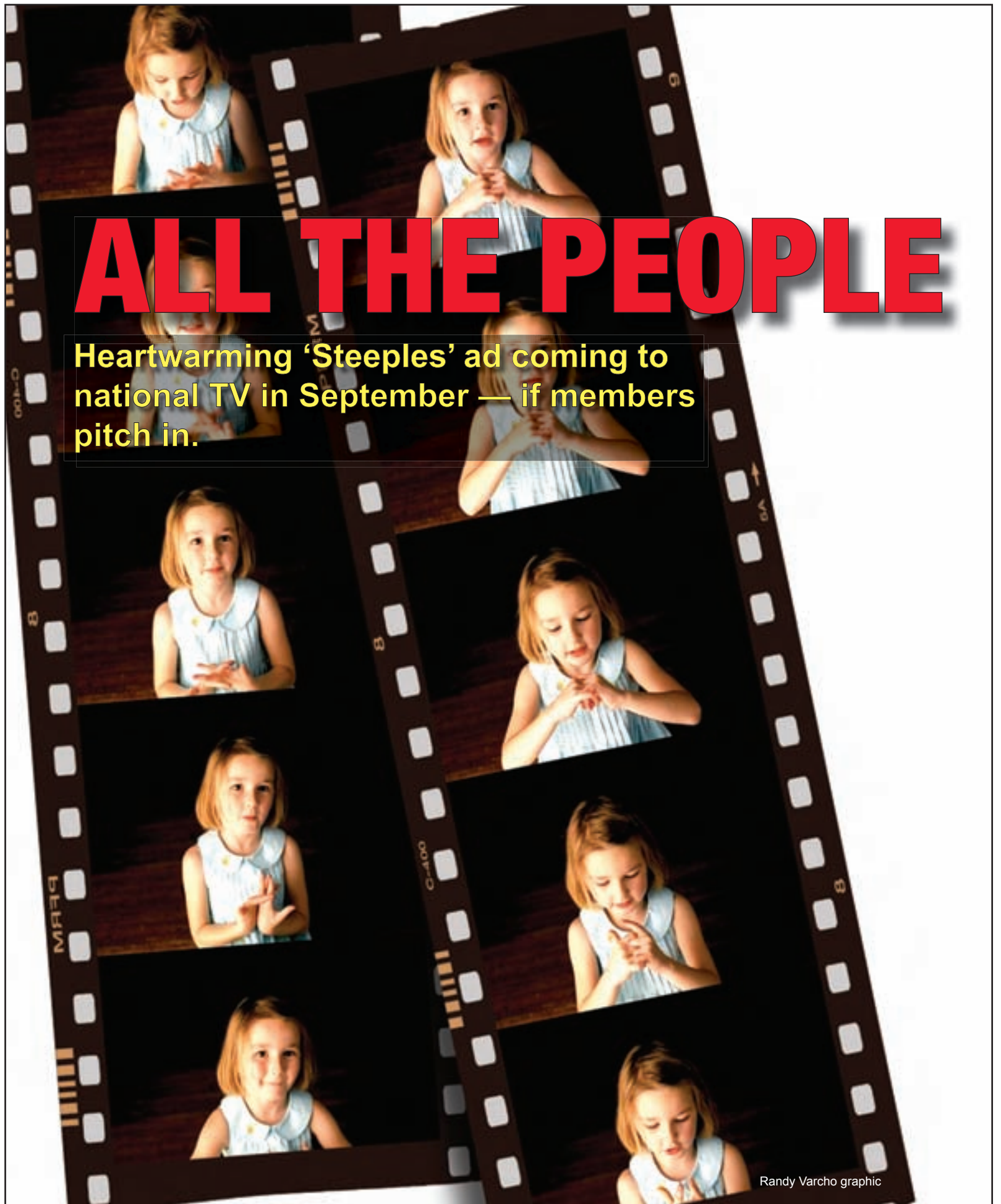
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Are you called to lead?

FROM THE
COLLEGIUM



Linda Jaramillo

Taking on the role of leader is not an easy task. It requires self-confidence, skills in listening and negotiation, but most of all it requires a strong spiritual core.

Nothing builds one's confidence more than appreciation and respect, regardless of whether there is agreement or argument about issues. Differences of opinion are to be expected, so a leader must open the space for all within the group to be heard. Because we are from varied cultural backgrounds, we also offer our perspectives with

distinct styles that may or may not be understood by others. However, negotiation is the key to achieving any agreed upon decision, but it is the responsibility of the whole group, not only the leader.

Unfortunately, leaders are sometimes not appreciated or respected no matter who they are. An aspiring leader is met with suspicion that he or she is simply seeking power and control over others. It is confusing because on the one hand people expect the leader to take charge, but on the other hand they are criticized for doing so.

So it is not unusual for many to avoid being a leader. But many among us are blessed with the gifts required for leadership that should be shared with others. Many among us are called to assume leadership in the UCC.

Exercising leadership in the church is similar in many ways to other non-religious settings. The unique nature of church leadership is that our spiritual core relies on a deep and abiding faith in God. As Christians, Jesus Christ must always be present in our minds, hearts and souls in our interactions and decision making.

I am reminded of Margaret Benefiel's book, "Soul at Work." Benefiel reminds us that awareness of our soul (or spirituality) plays a crucial role in leadership and organizational life. She defines spirituality as awareness of the "human spirit, fully engaged."

The UCC is now called to be fully engaged by welcoming the Stillspeaking God into our midst as we make the decision about who we call to lead us as General Minister and President. Leadership transitions are healthy in every setting of the church — in the local church, the Conference or at the national setting. However, it is normal to be nervous about change.

Many are very worried because our faithful and extraordinary GMP, the Rev. John H. Thomas, completes his service in this role at next year's General Synod.

The search committee, of which I am a part, takes its responsibility very seriously. While we acknowledge this anxious time for the church, we are convinced that a faithful and spirit-filled leader will emerge. We invite every member of this beloved church into discernment with those who may consider this call. We are comforted by knowing that God's Holy Spirit will be with us during this important leadership transition.

Self-confidence and particular skills are certainly important to effective leadership. A supportive community is truly a blessing, but the faithful leader is sustained by God's ever present grace.

The Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo, a member of the General Minister and President Search Committee, is executive minister for the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries and a member of the five-person Collegium of Officers.

Learn more about the GMP search process at ucc.org/gmp.

Many among us are called to assume leadership in the UCC.

SKIP A MONTH

In June, the UCC Pension Boards announced a one-month "premium holiday" for many participants in the UCC Medical Benefits Plan. The first round of health premium credits for participants in the UCC (Non-Medicare) Health Plan was reflected in the third-quarter 2008 invoices sent to UCC employers and self-paying employees on May 30. Participants in the UCC Medicare Supplement Plan, who normally pay for their own health coverage, were to receive a check reimbursing them for one month's premium near the end of June.

"We are glad to be able to share this good experience with the church," said Michael A. Downs, CEO and President. "This is a one-time opportunity, which reflects the benefits of being part of a self-insured plan, and of our working together to control and reduce costs. We are grateful for the church's support of the UCC Medical Plan and of the Pension Boards' many initiatives to improve service."

The total amount credited back to employers and employees is \$4.4 million, and is the result of better-than-anticipated claims experience, Downs said.

OUR NEWSPAPER FOREBEARS

September 1 marks the 200-year anniversary of the founding of the "Herald of Gospel Liberty," a forebear publication of United Church News.

Founded by two Congregationalist pastors, one in Vermont and one in New Hampshire, it is remembered by many historians as the first general-interest religious periodical in the United States.

"This is widely regarded as the first religious newspaper," said the Rev. Richard Taylor, chair of the UCC Historical Council. "Some say there were earlier periodicals. However, this was unique in trying to be like a secular newspaper to carry news as well as opinion."

The Rev. Barbara Brown Zikmund, church historian, said that, in 1908, the Herald of Gospel Liberty celebrated its 100th Anniversary by publishing a 656-page book called "The Centennial of Religious Journalism."

"Let's not let the 'bicentennial of religious journalism' go unnoticed," Zikmund said.

Other remembrances from the Herald of Gospel Liberty are being planned during the coming months. Look for more at ucc.org.

THE 'BINDING' OF BALAAM'S

"Balaam's Courier," a widely-distributed General Synod digest known for its witty and independent commentary, has just published a book — "unofficially," of course.

Hot off the presses is "Balaam's Unofficial Handbook of the United Church of Christ" (ironically published by the very "official" Pilgrim Press, \$16).



UNITED CHURCH NEWS



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Written by the same bright and bodacious writers that staff their "underground" GS operations, the book is filled with "pithy insights and historical information" that translates into a "well-organized and compelling resource," says the Rev. Dale A. Hempen, an associate conference minister in Massachusetts.

In its ever-unique way, the handbook takes its own look at UCC history; Jesus; the Bible; UCC structure, worship and witness; and the denomination's future.

"It's all here, narrated with the humor and light touch we've eagerly awaited at General Synods," says the Rev. Clyde J. Steckel, emeritus professor of theology at UCC-related United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

Order at thepilgrimpress.com or by calling 800/537-3394

ENERGY RELIEF

With the average price of gasoline anticipated to reach \$5 a gallon by the end of summer, the UCC's Pension Boards is providing some extra assistance to its low-income annuitants.

"Low-income annuitants have been hit especially hard," said the Rev. M. Douglas Borko, director for ministerial assistance. "The ripple effect of soaring energy costs affects what consumers pay for food, utilities and other necessities as well."

In an effort to provide some relief for those in greatest need, the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance — one of the corporations that comprises the UCC Pension Boards — will provide \$200 one-time energy assistance grants to 1,000 low-income retirees selected by the board.

Checks were to be issued in July.

"These grants represent one form of the assistance provided to clergy and lay employees throughout their careers," Borko said.

The grants are made possible by the income generated by contributions to the "Reserve Fund for Ministerial Assistance," which is the endowment fund of the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance.

Contributions to the annual Christmas Fund special mission offering — in addition to the income from the Reserve Fund for Ministerial Assistance — support an annual assistance budget of nearly \$5 million.

CALL TO GENERAL SYNOD 27

General Synod 27 will convene Friday, June 26, 2009, in Grand Rapids, Mich., and will adjourn at the close of business on Tuesday evening, June 30.

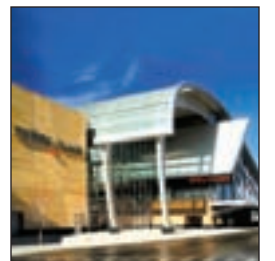
With the Grand River flowing beside the DeVos Convention Center, the theme for this year's Synod will be "Immerse Yourself!" We will be reminded of the waters of baptism that signify the grace of God and that welcomed each of us into the community of Christ's people.

We will consider the important significance of water for life on this planet, and our responsibility to care for and share the water that covers our earth in a time of accelerating climate change and environmental crisis. We will reflect on how our church will immerse itself in the mission of God for justice and peace.

Once again, we will join in learning, sharing, worship and education, as well as the business of General Synod. Already, speaking invitations have gone out to prominent leaders in mission, theology, Biblical studies, public life, science and technology, and arts and culture. Stay tuned to ucc.org for announcements about our featured presenters.

This year, we will combine the traditional General Synod experience with elements of a mission trip — with extended service opportunities for youth in the community of Grand Rapids.

Guest registration opens in December at ucc.org/synod. Make plans to join us for General Synod 27, and be prepared to "immerse yourself" in the worship and celebration.



The Rev. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President

'DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING'

'Sacred conversations on race' continue across the church

By J. Bennett Guess

At First Congregational Church of Minnesota, UCC, in Minneapolis, the congregation began its "sacred conversation on race" on May 18, just as many UCC congregations did.

The date, which coincided with Trinity Sunday, was urged by the UCC's Collegium of Officers as an occasion for pastors to preach on race and for congregations to begin a broader discussion.

But the Minnesota church knew it needed to devote more than one Sunday to the conversation. So, instead of naively limiting the discussion, it decided to hold at least three more forums in the fall and winter, and a group within the church has organized to sustain the conversation.

The Rev. Eric Marinus Nelson, principal minister, says church members are discovering that conversations about race can be transforming.

"Through the sharing of stories and experiences, some members of the congregation who have known each other for some time came to realize that they have had similar experiences that they didn't know about," Nelson says. "Others also learned that some of our members' families are more racially diverse than we knew."

At its initial meeting, Nelson says, the congregation emphasized five points: First, they recognized the political turmoil of the past six months presented a "*kairos* moment" that necessitated such a conversation. Second, they recognized that this would not be the church's first nor its last conversation on race, and underscored the fact that the church's membership was not all white. Third, members were encouraged to deeply engage the conversation on race. They drew strength from knowing that, as an Open and Affirming congregation, they had a history of tackling difficult conversations. Fourth, members articulated barriers to sustaining the conversation, such as white privilege. Fifth, members were asked for ideas for how best to keep the conversation going.

'Concrete next steps'

At the UCC's Franklinton Center at Bricks in Whitakers, N.C., about 50 clergy from the Southern Conference gathered on May 29-30, where a group conversation was led by the Rev. Henry Simmons, pastor of St. Albans Congregational UCC in Queens, N.Y., the Rev. Steve Camp, Southern Conference Minister, the Rev. Linda Jaramillo, executive minister for Justice and Witness Ministries, and the Rev. Stephen Sterner, acting executive minister for Local Church Ministries.

"The group left committed to taking concrete next steps to continue this critical conversation," says Jaramillo, who is leading the national setting's effort to provide resources to churches and other settings com-

mitted to ongoing dialogue.

The late May event was the first of several conversations planned at Franklinton Center. On Aug. 10-13, the North Carolina campus will conduct "a sacred conversation on race for youth" for young people ages 6 to 12.

'Fabric of church life'

Mountain View UCC in Aurora, Colo., is working to embed its sacred conversation on race into the existing fabric of church life.

"Instead of taking a programmatic approach, we are striving to take an organic approach," explains the Rev. Craig Peterson. "Instead of trying to map out a series of activities, we are instead looking for opportunities that develop within the day-to-day life of the church to weave awareness-raising experiences around race into those moments."

"All of our endeavors will be rooted and grounded within the context of personal relationships," he says. "Thankfully, for a small congregation of 110 members, we have been blessed with people who come from a variety of locations: places such as China, Ghana, Ireland, Kenya, and Mexico. This prevents us from having conversations rooted simply in the abstract."

The congregation, which regularly recites the liturgy of Holy Communion in languages other than English, is also utilizing its periodic fifth-Sunday "faith sharing" time as an opportunity for individuals to share how race has shaped their faith journeys.

"Usually we just have one person share their faith journey on the fifth Sunday of the month," Peterson says. "This month, however, we decided to involve three people in the faith sharing: an African-American man, an African woman and a European-American man."

The scriptural passage for the day included well-known words from Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

"Each of our speakers talked

candidly, and at times painfully, about the first time they became aware of their racial location and how this sense of identity informed their experience of what it meant to be 'one in Christ Jesus,'" Peterson says. "The congregational response was positive as they had to wrestle with the painful stories of those times when a sense of otherness prevailed over a sense of oneness."

For Peterson, the bedrock principle is to keep it real. "We seek to root all of our conversations in the concrete."

'Learn and grow'

Coral Gables (Fla.) Congregational UCC, a racially diverse congregation, and the Church of the Open Door UCC in Miami, an African-American congregation, decided to begin their sacred conversation on race together.

On June 1, the two UCC churches gathered on "neutral ground" at an Episcopal church that was centrally located.

"We were fortunate enough to have Edith Guffey [the UCC's associate general minister] come in to lead the two-hour opening session which included worship, small group sharing, individual reflections, and then fellowship at the end," says the Rev. Laurinda Hafner, senior minister of the Coral Gables church. "It's such a difficult and challenging conversation but the good news is we started."

In July, Coral Gables Congregational UCC met on its own to view the documentary, "What Makes Me White," one of the denomination's recommended video resources.

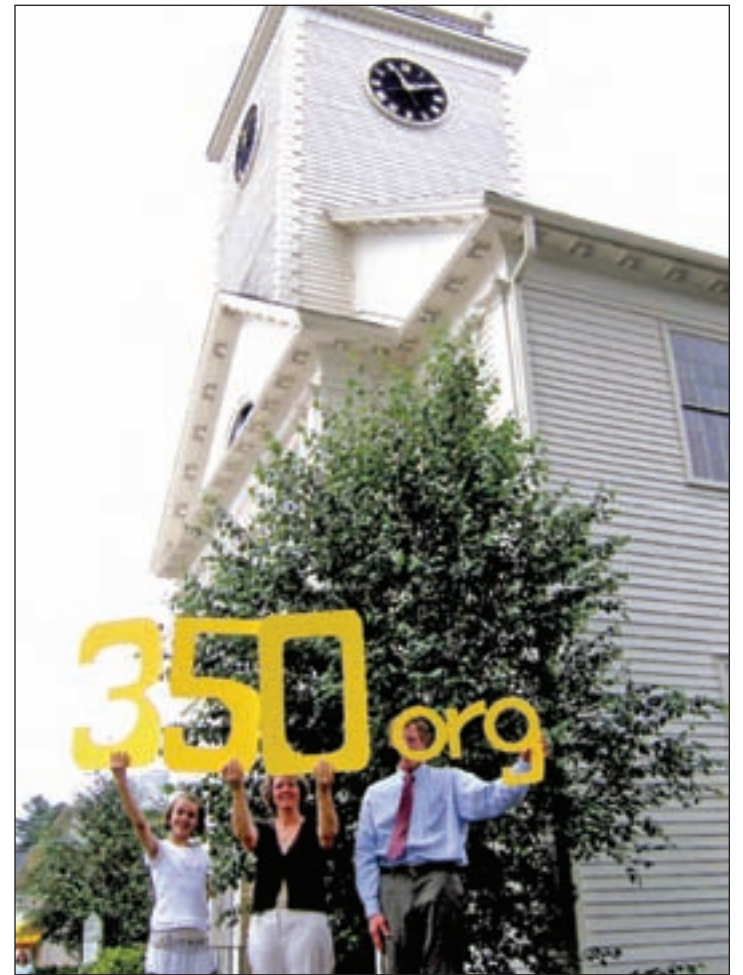
"We had a really profound experience as most of us there were white but one of our members, an African-American man, challenged us on many of our presumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes," Hafner says. "It was a remarkable evening."

"The really interesting thing for me about this was that many of our young families who would normally be a part of such a gathering were gone for the summer," she says, "and many of the folks that were there were in their 70s and 80s. I found it so moving that they really wanted to learn and grow from this experience."

Hafner says her congregation and Church of the Open Door UCC are planning to meet again and continue the conversation.

"Each time it feels like we only scratch the surface," she says, "but we are doing it and growing from it and I believe changing for the better because of it."

Multiple resources and suggestions for sustaining a Sacred Conversation on Race are available at ucc.org/sacred-conversation.

ON BEHALF OF THE EARTH

Roxanne Germain (c.), daughter Marina (l.) and Jim Kelly (r.) tout <350.org> in front of First Congregational UCC in Sheffield, Mass., on July 6 as the church prepares to ring the steeple bell, along with parishioners' cow bells, to draw attention to global warming. UCC churches across Massachusetts participated. Scientists say 350 is the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide measured in "partners per million" in the atmosphere.

Photo furnished

United Church News names new editor

The Rev. Gregg Brekke has been named editor of United Church News and the denomination's news director, succeeding the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, who was appointed the UCC's national director of communications last December.

Brekke, 39, will begin the position Sept. 2.

Brekke, currently pastor of Nexus UCC in Hamilton, Ohio, has been a free-lance writer for United Church News for the past two years. He also has written extensively for DisciplesWorld, the monthly magazine of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Brekke's journalistic portfolio is broad and includes attention to global understanding, justice issues, evangelism and church vitality, and faith-journey feature stories.

As editor, Brekke will oversee the day-to-day operations of United Church News, both online and in print. In his role as news director, he will work closely with secular journalists who are reporting on the UCC.



Brekke

Guess, 42, will continue to provide administrative leadership for the newspaper as its publisher.

"I have every confidence in Gregg's journalistic abilities and his knowledge of and commitment to this church," says Guess. "I look forward to working with him as we continue to improve the quality and delivery of the church's news in innovative ways."

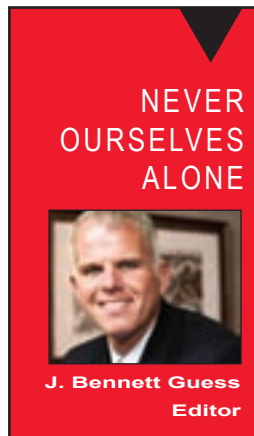
Brekke received a B.A. in history from Bethel University in St. Paul, Minn., and an M.Div. degree from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He is an accomplished photographer and brings experience and interest in emerging forms of media.

Under Guess' five-year stint as editor, United Church News received more than 60 awards for excellence in religion journalism. With 206,000 subscribers, United Church News is the largest religion newspaper in the country. In 2007, it was named the nation's best religion newspaper by the interfaith Religion Communicators Council.

"It is an honor to continue in the tradition of innovative religious journalism for which United Church News is known," Brekke says.

CIRCLING BACK ON THE JOURNEY

'Never Ourselves Alone' — it's still worth emphasizing



“No movement can ill-afford the defeating luxury of self-interest, especially one that is rooted in the life and love of Jesus Christ.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: In September, I will turn over this newspaper's editorial leadership to the Rev. Gregg Brekke (see story on page 3). Although I will continue to have a hands-on role as the newspaper's publisher, you'll probably hear a little less from me as reporter and editor.

Five years ago, when I became editor of United Church News, my first editorial explained the rationale for the name of my recurring column, "Never Ourselves Alone," which I plan to continue, but only on occasion.

So, as I continue to serve this newspaper and the denomination in new ways, I have decided to end this part of my journey just where I started it. Enjoy the reprint.

At the first National Woman's Suffrage Convention held in 1869 in Washington, D.C., there was heated debate over the heart and soul of the emerging women's movement. Would it be a campaign for women's suffrage only? Or would it support universal voting rights for both men and women, black and white?

At the end of the Civil War, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony — arguably the founders of the U.S. women's movement — refused to support black male suffrage exclusively. Instead, they insisted that black women, as well as white, had an inalienable right to the vote, along with their male counterparts. In her newspaper "Revo-

lution," Stanton wrote an editorial column about the controversy.

"When we contrast the condition of the most fortunate women at the north with the living death colored men endure everywhere, there seems to be a selfishness in our present position," she wrote. "But remember we speak not for ourselves alone, but for all womankind, in poverty, ignorance and hopeless dependence, for the women of this oppressed race too, who in slavery have known a depth of misery and degradation that no man can ever appreciate."

"Not for ourselves alone." It did not take long for Stanton's words to become a mantra for those who insisted on "both/and" rather than "either/or."

Almost 100 years later, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would echo Stanton's sentiment, saying he dreamed "of a nation where all our gifts and resources are not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity." Likewise, centuries earlier, the Apostle Paul said it his own way, "How can the head say to the foot, 'I have no need of you?'"

Never ourselves alone — It's not only a political statement; it's a theological one. It underscores the best of who we hope to be as the UCC — a multiracial, multicultural, open and affirming, accessible to all church. It's about widening our gaze so that the joys

and concerns of our neighbors become our own.

When I was named editor of United Church News, I considered a thousand possible titles for my new column. But my mind eventually fixed on Stanton's editorial catch phrase of generations ago. How right she was: No movement can ill-afford the defeating luxury of self-interest, especially one that is rooted in the life and love of Jesus Christ.

That's why I can't envision a single column I would want to write that would not fit well under this three-word heading: Never ourselves alone. Whether writing about what it's like for someone to live with a chronic illness, or how U.S. policies are affecting the poor at home or abroad, or why it's so difficult to stay focused as a Christian in this age of distraction, every issue worth our while as Christians consistently invites us to stretch our worldview and widen our embrace, so that more and more of God's love will flow among us.

Jokingly or otherwise, the mantra of our age has become "It's all about me." That's why, when asked what I want this editor's column to say to our readers, I will reply, "We are never alone." I believe this affirmation includes pastoral and prophetic dimensions, and I'm betting there will be hundreds of stories, both comforting and challenging, to prove my point.



LETTERS

'Great surprise'

I just want to thank the Pension Boards for the wonderful refund of one month's premium for the health plan. In this time of tight money for retirees it was a great surprise to receive this check.

It was much better for the Pension Boards to send a refund midyear than to have lowered premiums based on projections at the beginning of the year and find that you would have to raise them in the following year.

The Pension Boards is an organization that members always could count on to do the right thing.

Frank Patti
via e-mail

Obama's 'political expediency'

In June 2007, Senator Barack Obama spoke to the 50th anniversary General Synod on how his personal life intersected with his public life. Did he suggest that when the going got tough at UCC Trinity, that he would simply drop out for political expediency?

He missed a golden opportunity to demonstrate — as the UCC's recent New York Times ad stated — that we support liberty in our pulpits, just as we affirm the individual conscience for our 1.2 million members to agree, disagree and wrestle with the biggest questions

in a spirit of love. Further, we don't have to check our brains at the door.

Senator Obama found it easier to quit. Is this the way he would handle the challenges he may face as the future leader of our country. He received my vote in the primary, but I may be the one making a change in the general election.

Lloyd Bettis
Glenview (Ill.) Community UCC

UCC 'assisting Obama's opponents'

The intemperate remarks of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright caused considerable damage to the presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama. In the months ahead we can expect supporters of Sen. Obama's opponent to try not to let this problem go away by reminding American voters of Rev. Wright's controversial remarks and connecting them to Sen. Obama.

So, the United Church of Christ chooses this moment in history to put its muscle behind a campaign to assist Obama's opponents as much as possible by focusing on a so-called sacred conversation on race. Such a conversation is needed, but choosing to do it now, with so much fanfare, is right out of the Republicans' playbook. The McCain folks will love us for it. As an Obama supporter, I wish the UCC had thought first.

Raleigh C. Mann
United Church of Chapel Hill (N.C.)

SEND LETTERS of fewer than 150 words to United Church News, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115; e-mail <guessb@ucc.org>. Please note that letters may be edited for brevity and clarity.

MAKING THE APPEAL

Older subscriber: 'Don't forget about me'

After concluding a workshop at the South Dakota Conference annual meeting in June, a woman in her 80s approached with a sincere request, "Don't forget about me."

Her concern was that United Church News — in its printed format — would disappear, due to new-placed emphasis on electronic communications.

Each month, United Church News reaches 206,000 homes. It's the largest denominational newspaper in the nation, and remains one of the UCC's most effective and reliable means of communication. It's delivered, without charge, to any church member who requests it, and nearly one-third of our households receive it.

But it's also expensive.

To the extent that United Church News will thrive in the future depends on our readers' regular contributions. It really is those \$10, \$25 and \$100 contributions that keep this newspaper afloat.

There's a reply envelope tucked inside this and every issue. Or contribute online at <ucc.org/ucnews>. Have we received your voluntary gift in 2008?

— The Rev. J. Bennett Guess, publisher-editor

UNITED CHURCH NEWS BY THE NUMBERS

\$90,000 =	cost of printing and mailing a single issue of United Church News to 206,000 households.
\$540,000 =	cost of printing and mailing six issues annually.
\$125,000 =	support from "Our Church's Wider Mission," the UCC's shared fund for congregational ministries.
\$235,000 =	advertising revenue
\$180,000 =	goal in 2008 for readers' contributions in order to offset cost of two issues per year.
\$40,801 =	amount readers have contributed through June 15.
\$139,299 =	amount needed from readers before year's end.

SCIENCE IS 'GOD'S NATIVE TONGUE'

Evolutionary evangelist embraces Jesus — and Darwin



COMMENTARY

Michael Dowd

July 1 marked the 150th anniversary of the theory of evolution. For years, I believed that Darwin was of the devil. Now, I deeply honor his contribution to religion and my walk with God.

Indeed, other than Jesus, no one has had a more positive impact on my faith and my ministry than has Charles Darwin.

For the last six years as an itinerant evolutionary evangelist, I have preached the good news of evolution from the pulpits of hundreds of churches. Faith can

be strengthened and difficulties in life surmounted — all by bringing a mainstream scientific understanding of evolution into our religious lives.

The response has been phenomenal. People of all ages and across the theological spectrum light up when they see new possibilities open for them. Often tearfully, always excitedly, they share their testimonials. Here is mine.

Jesus and a nurturing church community gave me a lifeline in my struggles to find sobriety as a young man. A corollary of being born again, however, was that the preachers I listened to and the authors I read told me that accepting evolution would seduce me away from godly living. At first I believed them. But then I met professors, ministers, priests, nuns, rabbis and chaplains who not only accepted an evolutionary view of cosmos and culture but found it religiously inspiring. Soon I too came to embrace the history of everyone and everything as our common Creation story.

Today, thanks to Charles Darwin and the countless evolutionary scientists and writers he inspired — in fields as diverse as astrophysics, geology, genetics, primatology, sociobiol-

ogy and brain science — I interpret my Christian faith in far broader and more this-world realistic ways than ever before.

It is obvious to me now that God didn't stop revealing truth vital to human well-being back when people believed the world was flat and religious insights were recorded on animal skins. God is still communicating faithfully today, publicly, through the worldwide, self-correcting scientific enterprise. I now see science as revelatory and facts as God's native tongue.

From this perspective, divine grace and guidance extend back billions, not just thousands, of years. Looking at the history of the universe through sacred eyes, my faith is strengthened.

For me, the ethics of evolution are not only consistent with the teachings of religion, they advance it. An evolutionary understanding urges me to grow in morality and to expand my circles of compassion — even to include those who see the world in very different ways. My worship of God now includes doing everything I can to ensure a just and thriving future for planet Earth, for our children's children, and for as many species as possible. As an ordained Christian minister, I cannot imagine a higher calling for myself.

Of course, Darwin's legacy has not been entirely positive. Just as atrocities have been committed in the name of Jesus and Christianity, so have evils been perpetrated in the name of Darwin and evolution. There will always be those who distort the work of great men and women to advance their own short-sighted and self-centered ends. But when I look back over my life and reflect on the significant people who have blessed me, my relationships, and my world, Jesus and Darwin are at the top of my list.

The Rev. Michael Dowd, a UCC minister, is author of "Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World." Learn more at <thankgodforevolution.org>.

'IT IS NO SMALL THING TO STAND IN AN HISTORIC MOMENT'

California clergy couple say 'I do' — again



COMMENTARY

Heather Dillashaw Spencer

I had said "I do" before, standing in the front of a church sanctuary, wearing a white dress and looking into her beautiful eyes. She wore a white dress, too.

In good and bad, joy and challenge, we'd promised before God and community to stay by one another's side and share it all. We had already said "I do" to all of it.

And so I didn't think about what it might be like to say it again, standing in the Santa Cruz County building. I had no idea what it would feel like for us to walk into a clerk's of-

fice and actually receive a marriage license.

It didn't occur to me that I would be so happy to write a check to the county for anything. Truth is, saying "I do" in front of the county clerk meant more than I could have ever imagined.

It is no small thing to stand in an historic moment, to participate in the righting of an injustice you haven't dared dream would come true for you.

Does having a civil marriage license make our Christian marriage any more valid? Absolutely not. The promises we made to God and each other are not subject to any civil authority. We are blessed beyond measure to serve and participate in a Christian community that already believes our growing family is equal to any other, a community that has been working for many years to move the state to practice the equality of citizens stated so clearly in the Constitution.

I learned the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag almost 30 years ago. As an adult, I've discovered my allegiance is first to God and that primary allegiance sometimes comes into conflict with the laws of the United States.

I've also learned that these conflicts between my core

Christian convictions and certain laws, policies and decisions by the government can be held in a creative tension. This tension is possible because of the innate freedom given to me in my creation as a child of God, and because of the freedom of choice and expression promised in the U.S. Constitution.

|| It didn't occur to me that I would be so happy to write a check to the county."

What I also learned as an adult, though, is that there were limits to the freedom under the law for me. My sister and her husband could be married under the law. They had that choice in every state. But, because I was oriented differently and knew that a woman was the life partner for me, the choice of legal marriage was denied me.

"With liberty and justice for all" didn't mean me, not wholly.

But then came an ordinary Tuesday morning in June. I said "I do" — again. This time, in a courthouse. This time, surrounded by another community of people we love and who love us. This time, with a simple dress for me and maternity clothes for Shannon.

And the room erupted in joy, tears and applause. The state had made good on its promise to us, as citizens. Our family was finally recognized as equal under the law.

We are deeply and profoundly grateful to God for the loving and inclusive Christian community that surrounds us every day. And we are proud to be citizens of California, where "liberty and justice for all" rings ever closer to being true for all its people.

The Rev. Heather Dillashaw Spencer is an associate minister at First Congregational UCC in Santa Cruz, CA. She and her wife, the Rev. Shannon Spencer, are expecting their first child this fall.

OVERHEARD



“We're not all stamped out with a cookie cutter.”

— The Rev. Craig Cowing, pastor of the **Blooming Grove UCC in New York**, speaking about the diversity of opinion of UCC members and churches in a feature story about the denomination in the *Times Herald-Record*. (July 7)

“Women have made inroads to make changes ... There are a lot of female pastors, but it is sometimes hard to break down barriers.”

— The Rev. Donna Cassity, interim pastor of **Center Congregational UCC in Meriden, Conn.**, in a story about three local UCC clergywomen. In the Connecticut Conference, among its 624 active and retired clergy, 236 are women, including the Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree, Connecticut Conference Minister. (*Record-Journal*, July 6)

“We felt it important to say that the will of God was that people be engaged in this struggle against the powers and principalities that were oppressing them. Racial injustice is a legacy of the slave period and continues until this day.”

— The Rev. Sterling Cary, retired UCC pastor, and the first African-American president of the National Council of Churches (1972 to 1975), in an interview with National Public Radio.

“One of the words that is part of our mission statement, and has been a central work for us, is the word 'sanctuary.' We want our church to be a safe place for all people.”

— The Rev. Susie B. Smith, pastor of the seven-month-old **Peace Congregational UCC in Clemson, S.C.**, where 100 worshippers are regularly attending services. "Church on the Fringe" was the headline of the local news story. The congregation is the UCC's first church in the upstate South Carolina region. (*Daily Journal-Messenger*, July 5)



TABULATIONS

DAILY DOSE

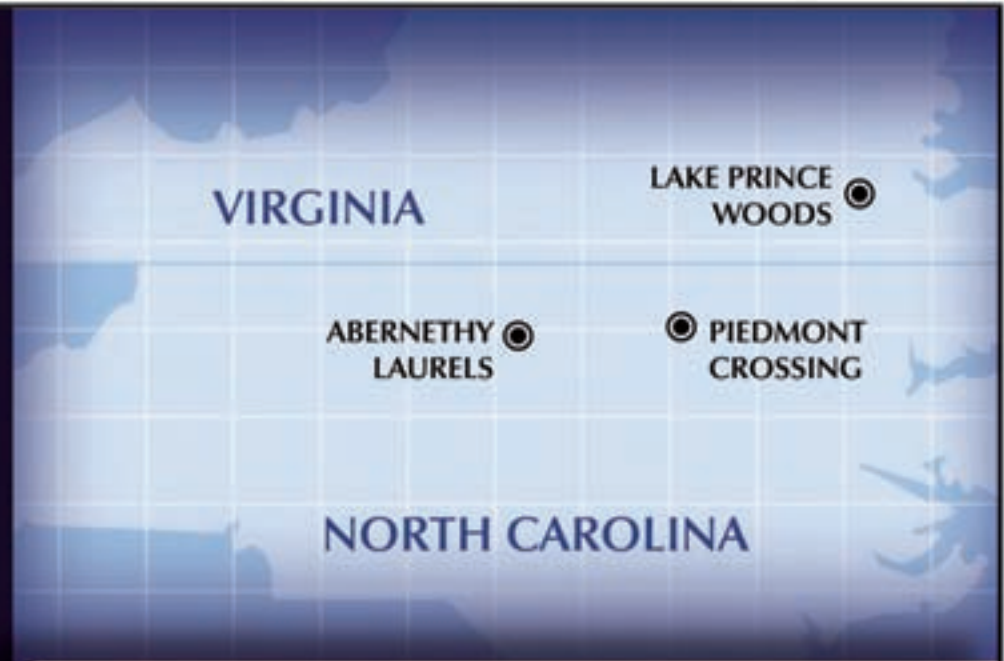
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DAY-LONG EVENT TO ENCOURAGE FELLOWSHIP

Multicultural festival being planned as pre-Synod family event

Envision a multiracial, multicultural festival of families that offers a wide array of crafts, cultural presentations and performances — in a multitude of languages, with a wide array of foods and a variety of ethnic dress and custom.

That's the vision behind a multicultural festival being planned for children and families as a pre-Synod event in Grand Rapids, Mich.

On Thursday, June 25, 2009 — just before General Synod 27 kicks off on Friday, June 26 — the UCC's Worship and Education Ministry, in partnership with **St. John's UCC in Grand Rapids**, will host a one-day, family-friendly event with multicultural performances, games, storytelling and music.

"Our hope is that there will be

commingling of faith communities of multicultural churches in the festival in a fun, educational and non-threatening setting," says Lutie O. Lee, the UCC's minister for children and families. "Before the festival is over, strangers will have become friends."

Diverse racial-ethnic UCC congregations will be invited to create booths that will provide at-

tendees with a taste of different traditional cultures and evolving faith practices, Lee says. Performance groups will be invited to share their arts at a center stage at regular intervals during the day.

Lee says the festival has two primary purposes.

"First, we want to begin to build a network of community and friendship across congregations and among families with different cultural backgrounds by sharing faith traditions and customs," she explains. "Second, we want to begin grass-roots information gathering about needs and desires of diverse families in the area of faith formation which

may be used for future program development."

Lee says the concept grew from a faith formation group that

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact Lutie O. Lee, the UCC's minister for children and families, at <leel@ucc.org> or toll-free at 866/822-8224, ext. 3863.

"Rather than first pulling together a conference of family experts from academia, the faith formation group seeks first to learn directly from youth, children, families and Christian Educators about their needs and wants," Lee explains. "Out of this grass-roots information educational practices, programs and activities will grow."

St. John's UCC, where the Rev. William M. Lyons is pastor, is located about two miles from the downtown Convention Center. The congregation is hoping the multicultural festival will extend General Synod's reach into the local community, Lee says.


has been meeting since last October and discussing ways to build community and enrich educational experiences across diverse constituencies.

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In January 2008, a week-long delegation sponsored by the UCC and Equal Exchange joined Witness for Peace on a visit to two of these co-operatives in Chiapas, Mexico.

For information about joining next January's delegation, visit www.equalexchange.coop/interfaith-delegations

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BRINGING 'STEEPLES' TO THE PEOPLES

Heartwarming TV ad will air this fall, if donors make it happen

By J. Bennett Guess

“K eep the ads coming.” That’s the message that the Rev. Felix Carrion has heard loud and clear over the past seven months since he became national coordinator of the UCC’s Stillspeaking Ministry.

The latest occurrence happened on June 29, when Carrion was worshipping at **Cathedral of Hope UCC in Dallas**.

“During the passing of the peace of Christ, this young man turned around and greeted me. He concluded our brief conversation by saying, ‘Keep the ads coming,’” Carrion recalls. “For me, that sentiment struck a deep chord, because the message of our TV commercials resonates with people. Our people identify, personally, with the message of extravagant welcome and they want to be identified — as a church and as a denomination — with that message.”

Carrion has learned about the impact of the UCC’s TV advertising firsthand, because he’s been conducting “still listening” conversations in local churches as a way to gather feedback from UCC members about the successes and growing edges of the “God is Still Speaking” campaign.

He acknowledges that when he began with the Stillspeaking Ministry in January, he wasn’t convinced that national TV advertising was still do-able, given the significant price tag associated with it. But as he has traveled the church and heard the testimonies of how churches have been energized by the commercials, he became a convert.

“We keep hearing from local churches that the TV advertising was very helpful to their outreach efforts,” Carrion says. “They help our people feel good about the UCC, to identify with the UCC and to tell the story of the UCC to their friends and neighbors.”

On July 10, the Stillspeaking Ministry, with the support of the UCC’s five-person Collegium of Officers, announced a plan to return to the airwaves in September — this time with the heartwarming “Steeple” ad — if church members will rally and raise the necessary funds.

The 30-second “Steeple” ad begins with a young girl reciting the children’s poem, “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple,” with hand motions. At “open the door and see all the people,” the camera segues across a diverse group of people who echo the refrain, “all the people.”

Airing ads depends on fundraising

The pay-as-you-go plan calls for every dollar donated to be used to buy air time on prominent cable networks.

Unlike past ad buys, the UCC’s national

setting is not in a position to draw sizeable amounts from its cash reserves to cover the bulk of the cost. So, this time around, the scope and size of the ad buy will depend wholly on contributions gathered from across the denomination.

The UCC’s advertising agency — Gotham, Inc. — will tailor the UCC’s ad buy to the amount raised. In short, a \$50,000 fundraising response will net a \$50,000 ad

“We’ve been through some pretty intense controversies during the past few months which have posed some challenges for us and for our identity. This is a way for us to take charge of our message.”

buy, while a million-dollar response will produce a million-dollar campaign.

Church leaders — encouraged by the overwhelming response from church members earlier this year to purchase full-page ads in *The New York Times* and *USA Today* — tested the “raise-it-to-do-it” fundraising format at several Conference meetings this summer. The response was enthusiastic, with many saying the “Steeple” ad is the per-

fect message to counter the distortions that the UCC has endured by the media in recent months.

“We’ve been through some pretty intense controversies during the past few months which have posed some challenges for us and for our identity,” Carrion says. “Our people feel like there is much more to the story of the UCC than the one the media has portrayed. This is a way for us to take charge of our communication, of our message, and to say that the UCC is about all the people, all the time.”

“Steeple,” beloved by many UCC members, has received little national air time. It ran for only four days in December 2004, but was replaced by the edgier “Bouncer” ad, which ran more extensively in 2004 and 2005. In 2006, the humorous, but equally edgy, “Ejector” ad debuted on more than 20 networks.

Both “Bouncer” and “Ejector” were banned by the major broadcast networks (such as CBS and NBC), as well as the network-owned cable channels. However, “Steeple” was deemed acceptable.

The goal is to raise at least \$350,000 — but hopefully more — to air “Steeple.” The plan calls for a two-to-three-week run, but the saturation of spots will hinge on fundraising response.

‘Steeple’ has arrived

Gwen Thomas, Stillspeaking’s assistant coordinator, believes that the moment has arrived for “Steeple.”

“It’s an ad that never got its due,” she says. “In the wave of the ‘Bouncer’ controversy, it never took center stage — and understandably so. But it’s the right ad for us at this moment because it demonstrates that we are

both-and, not either-or. We are both pastoral and prophetic.”

Thomas, who leads Stillspeaking’s merchandising efforts, says “Steeple” resonates strongly with UCC members.

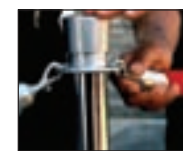
“For years now, churches have been running this ad locally, but it has never gotten the national exposure that many of our people



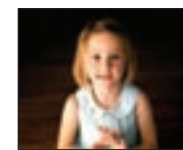
Stills from the ‘Steeple’ commercial, which originally aired over a four-day period in 2004.

Randy Varcho graphic

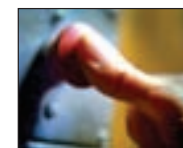
UCC TV ADS: A CHRONOLOGY



‘BOUNCER’
Produced: 2004
Aired: Dec. 2004, March 2005
Notes: Rejection by networks touches off media firestorm; millions see the ad.



‘STEEPLES’
Produced: 2004
Aired: Four days, Dec. 2004
Notes: Popular among UCC members. Sweet ad deemed not edgy enough.



‘EJECTOR’
Produced: 2005
Aired: March-April 2006
Notes: Edgy, with humor.

VIEW THE ADS AT:
ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking

would have preferred,” she said. “Several years ago, we needed to define ourselves to the wider world in ways that would distinguish us. Now that more people understand us — or think they do — it’s important that we broaden that representation beyond the limited and often distorted portrayals we’ve witnessed in recent months.” | cont.

HEARTWARMING TV | **cont.**

It's also important to underscore the importance of energizing our own members, Thomas says, because when our membership is proud of their church affiliation, they reach out to others in bolder, more-convincing ways.

"Yes, this is about reaching out to others, but it's also about reaching out to our own people, so that they can affirm to their friends and neighbors who we are and what their church stands for," Thomas says.

Thomas says it's significant that "Steeple" will air right in the middle of a national presidential election, and that the timing is a plus. Often, she says, political campaigns take on a negative, ugly discourse. "We can offer another way," she says.

"This is a time of national discernment, and people are anxious," Thomas says. "Pollsters are telling us that people are very depressed about the economy, about the war, about the foreclosure crisis. And in the midst of this, we can give people a sense of hope."

THANKS TO STILL SPEAKING ADS

Up-and-coming dancer is UCC

Years before Matt Dorame became familiar to millions through his success as a finalist on Fox-TV's "So You Think You Can Dance," he was looking for a church.

And thanks to the UCC's Still-speaking TV commercials, Dorame first learned about the extravagant welcome of **First Congregational UCC in Phoenix**.

Dorame, 22, who has been dancing since he was 7 years old, studied with the Arizona Ballet Theater while attending the Arizona School for the Performing Arts at Arizona State University. It was there that he first discovered the UCC.

"Having attended the Arizona School for the Performing Arts, Matt was familiar with the little church on the corner," said his mother, Colleen. "While watching a commercial on TV one night, Matt saw an advertisement for the UCC church. He realized the two were one and the same. He first began attending in 2006 and has been there ever since."

"He had attended various churches searching for a place where he could feel comfortable and welcomed," she said.

Now, Dorame's family — mother, father and brother — also attend the Phoenix church, where his mother has assumed leadership for the congregation's Christian

GEAR UP

Eight things to do in preparation for the 'Steeple' ad run

HEADS UP. Is your congregation in the know? Promote the "Steeple to the Peoples" campaign. Show the ad to church members and enlist their support for the ad buy. View the ad online at <ucc.org/allthepeople>.

ANTE UP. Put your money where your enthusiasm is. It's going to take thousands of contributors to get the ad on the air this fall.

STEP UP. Take your church's Stillspeaking commitment to new heights with your church's own fundraising webpage, which can be created quickly and easily at <ucc.org/allthepeople>. Playfully compete with other churches and groups to see who can raise the most money to make the ad buy a reality.

BANNER UP. Is your church's Stillspeaking identity still visible? Maybe it's time for a messaging makeover with a new, improved banner. By Aug. 15, new vertical and horizontal varieties will be available at <stillspeakingstore.com> or by calling 800/537-3394.

BRUSH UP on your hospitality skills. Are you prepared to capitalize on the TV ads and warmly receive visitors? Are the greeters and ushers up to the task? Is your website current? Are your information packets updated? Vitality resources are available at <stillspeaking.com>.

DRESS UP. Two new Stillspeaking t-shirts and two new "comma" necklaces, along with other wardrobe options, are available at <stillspeakingstore.com> or by calling 800/537-3394.

DREAM UP creative ways to make the most of this Stillspeaking moment. Promote an "All the People" sermon series. Create an "All the People" mural. Place the commercial on your church's website. Run print ads in your local newspaper. How about utilizing the playful "Here's the church, here's the steeple" poem and motions on Sunday mornings?

BUTTER UP your local media. Your hometown press needs to understand the connection between the UCC church on the airwaves and your UCC church on the corner. A customizable press release is available at <stillspeaking.com>.

This is right moment to bring 'Steeple' ad to millions



When the UCC embarked on its Still-speaking campaign, little did we know where it would lead us.

But, four years later, we know that our national ads have reached millions of people, reenergized the leadership and membership of many of our local churches, created a buzz about the UCC's extravagant welcome, empowered us to tell the story of our many historical firsts, rooted us in a common identity that pulls from the past and invites into the present, and declared a future open to the Stillspeaking God.

We did not shy away from getting our message out across the airwaves, because we knew that our message was newsworthy. We knew that we had something edgy, bold and creative to say. We knew that we were stewards of the church's story and that it was an imperative of the UCC to draw outside of the box — with bright and beautiful colors. We knew that we could be as bold and daring as any other in the history of the church who challenged the confines of exclusive identities.

|| We will not die on the vine, but thrive and grow like never before.

As the Stillspeaking Coordinator, whenever I hear or think upon the question, "Why us?" my response is always, "Why *not* us!"

When the Apostle Paul declared that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer female and male, for all of you are one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28), he was radically altering everything he had been taught and everything he had defended.

Where did he get such an idea? Jesus!

When Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matthew 10:40), he gave his followers the only dictum by which to live and measure their faithfulness to God.

The UCC is a steward and storyteller of this welcome. The UCC is responsible to make good on this universal welcome that is played out on the local fields of our hearts, homes, neighborhoods, churches, beliefs, theologies, convictions, stories, poetry and art. Never is there a time for pulling back or holding back this most extravagant of welcomes.

In my heart of hearts, I believe the UCC has come upon another moment to declare that "all the people" belong to God and that all are welcome in our churches.

This is our moment to take the beloved "Steeple" TV ad to the masses. Already produced and primed for airing, we can do this together if we will open our hearts and treasure troves. If we dig deep into our pockets, we can make a national ad run possible that will reach millions more with a message of radical inclusion.

Every dollar we raise will go to airing "Steeple." Not one penny will go to production. Not one penny will go to overhead. Every time this ad airs, you will be the storyteller, the messenger, the witness. You will be the one giving expression to the UCC in this unique moment.

Last year, we celebrated the wonderful history of the first 50 years of life as a denomination. As the UCC historian Luis Gunnemann said, "The UCC was a venture of faith in the context of new responsibilities."

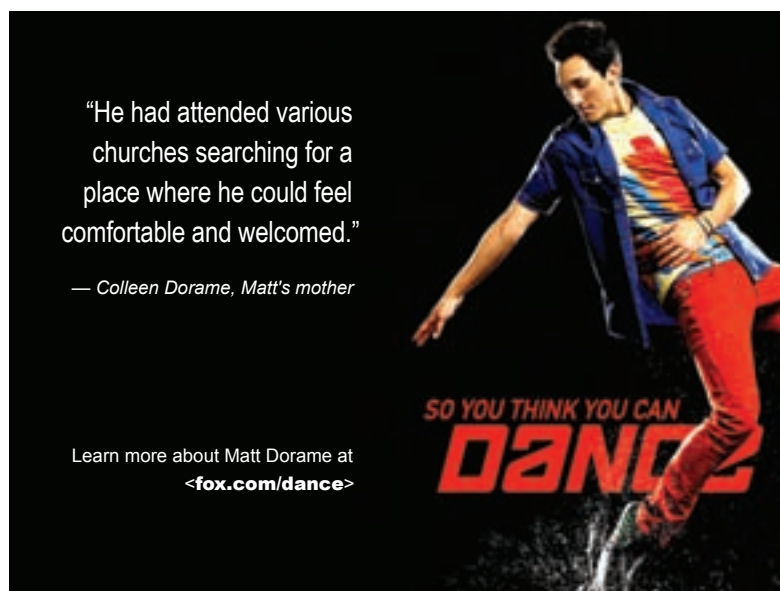
Well, we have come upon a new context of new responsibilities today. Now is the time to move into the next chapter of our history by acting on the belief that we will not die on the vine, but thrive and grow like never before.

The future belongs to those who are not fearful or faint-hearted; it belongs to those who dare to say, "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, and see *all the people*."

As our ad proclaims, "God accepts all the people. So do we. The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Imagine this message reaching millions. Let's make it happen now.

The Rev. Felix Carrion is coordinator of the UCC's Stillspeaking Ministry.



Matt Dorame "So You Think You Can Dance" graphic courtesy of FOX-TV

Nurturing and Education Ministry Team.

Dorame has participated in several intensive dance programs, including courses with the American Ballet Theater in New York. During the past two years, he has been performing with the Odyssey Dance Theater in Salt Lake City.

First Congregational UCC has been excited by Dorame's success, says Jeffrey Dirrim, the church's minister to the young adult community.

"So You Think You Can Dance" airs on Wednesday nights on Fox TV, where each contestant performs and viewers are given the opportunity to vote for their

favorite dancer. On Thursdays, the results are announced and the most popular performers advance to the next week's competition. Dorame was among the final 14 contestants.

"Matt's parents have been flying back and forth from Phoenix to Los Angeles each week to support Matt at each taping," Dirrim said. "Colleen was recently surprised to be called on during our Sunday morning worship announcements to give the congregation an update on how Matt was doing. When Colleen announced he was a finalist on the show, there were immediate cheers and applause throughout the congregation."



'BEST EXPERIENCE IN MY LIFE'

Interfaith understanding propels innovative 'Hands of Peace' program

Special to United Church News

Each summer **Glenview Community UCC in Illinois**, under the pastoral leadership of the Rev. Howard Roberts, hosts Israeli and Palestinian teenagers in an attempt to break down barriers of hate. "Hands of Peace" began in 2002 when a Jewish mom and a Christian mom from Glenview, seeing how well their children played together despite their differences, wanted to do something about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That led Gretchen Grad, a UCC member in Glenview, and Deanna Jacobson, a member of *Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim* — together with Nuha Debusseh of the Islamic Cultural Center in Northbrook, Ill. — to begin working to bring Israelis and Palestinians together with Chicago teens for facilitated discussion and activities for two weeks in the summer. The conversations were led by professional facilitators from the United States and from the Middle East.

This summer, Hands of Peace once again brought students from the Middle East to meet and dialogue with each other and with American teens. New participants, host families, volunteers and staff joined old "hands" for two weeks in July in the northern Chicago suburbs.

"Hands of Peace changed me," says Itamar, a Jewish student from Israel. "I feel like it showed me that it isn't 'we' versus 'them.' They are humans on the other side, and we should want peace."

Palestinians (both Christians and Muslims), Jewish Israelis and Arab citizens of Israel stay in local homes. American teens join Middle Eastern teens at daily dialogue sessions, team-building exercises and cultural activities. During the rest of the year, Middle East teens and U.S. participants gather for follow-up meetings and projects.

Hands of Peace is supported by donations from individuals and from generous gifts from churches, synagogues and mosques. The UCC provides annual support through the One Great Hour of Sharing special mission offering.

Several UCC congregations have become involved as well — from as far away as **First UCC of Wenham, Mass.**, to **University Congregational UCC in Seattle, Wash.**

Diane, an American Christian participant, says, "Hands of Peace opened my eyes to what is really occurring in the Israeli-Palestinian

"Hands of Peace changed me."

Learn more, get involved: <hands-of-peace.org>



Hands of Peace teenagers gather daily for dialogue, team-building and cultural activities.

conflict.

"At times it was hard to hear about how both sides are struggling and suffering, but by the end of our two weeks together we made a lot of progress and lifelong friendships," she says. "I learned so much, not only about the conflict and these two groups, but also about myself."

Says Yaseen, a West Bank Pal-

estinian, "The most important thing is that Hands of Peace allowed me to meet new people from a different nation, and to explain to them how we struggle in the situation that we live in. In addition to that, I made such wonderful friends there in Chicago. That is why it was the best experience I had in my life that I will never forget."

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GROUP ENCOURAGES 'HEALTH, WHOLENESS AND HUMAN DIGNITY'

With UCC's support, interfaith advocates insist universal health care is critical

By staff and wire reports

Nine UCC representatives joined a group of 70 national health care advocates in Cleveland in early June to focus attention on the religious community's insistence that the U.S. medical system be transformed.

The interfaith conversation included Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Unitarian-Universalist participants representing 23 states and the District of Columbia.

"The group worked collaboratively to explore opportunities for common voice and action in support of universal health care," said Barbara Baylor, the UCC's minister for health care justice.

In addition to Baylor, UCC participants included Judith Andrews of the UCC's Council for American Indian Ministries; Poppy Arford, a student at UCC-related Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine; the Rev. Edwin Ayala of the Christian Activities Council in the Connecticut Conference; Charles Carpenter of United Black Christians; Eppie Encabo and Ula Sao, representing the UCC's Pacific Islander Asian American Ministries; Linda Morgan of the UCC's Faith Community Nurse Network; and the Rev. Jerry

Paul of the Deaconess Foundation in St. Louis.

Known as "Faithful Reform in Health Care," the group is not advocating for any particular presidential candidate or health care proposal. Instead, the goal is to encourage greater public conversations about this nation's moral imperative to improve its health care system, Baylor said.

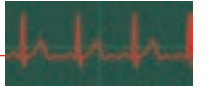
"We, as people of faith, envision an American society where each person is afforded health, wholeness, and human dignity," the group

said in a statement. "We commit ourselves to transform the health care conversation so this vision is a reality. We do this through our shared beliefs about human dignity, the common good, justice, compassion, hope and stewardship."

I The kind of change we're talking about takes minds and hearts and imagination."

Participants said the role of religious groups in the universal health care debate is similar to the role they played during the Civil Rights Movement, when people of faith insisted on justice over narrow economic and political interests.

"The kind of change we're talking about takes minds and hearts and imagination," said participant Diane Lardie, founding director of the Universal Health Care Action, to the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper. "The hearts and imagination are what we're good at."

CHECKING HEALTH CARE'S 'PULSE'

Through Aug. 15, the UCC-supported Faithful Reform in Health Care is conducting an online survey — "Pulse" — to gather your first-hand experiences with the U.S. health care system. What do you need and value in health care? What would make most sense to you?

"Thousands of responses are needed to demonstrate our concern for a health care future that works for all of us," according to the group's website. Take the 'Pulse' test at faithfulreform.org.

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO 'THE BOSS'

New book is latest to examine the spiritual in popular culture

By Ron Csillag
Religion News Service

To millions of fans, he's "the Boss," the blue-jeaned troubadour of the American heartland who finds nobility in the grind of daily life.

Across 35 years in dozens of rock anthems, from "Born to Run" to "Glory Days" to "Born in the U.S.A.," Bruce Springsteen has chronicled lost souls, haunted war veterans, gritty factory workers, and highways jammed with broken heroes — but also advanced themes of redemption, hope and keeping the faith.

It's been a rich vein of spiritual motifs, and the politically progressive 58-year-old singer/songwriter has given voice to society's dispossessed. His work of late has been bleak, brooding and introspective, even grieving.

But the Boss as spiritual guidepost?

The Rev. Jeffrey Symynkywicz, a Unitarian Universalist minister on Boston's South Shore and dedicated Springsteen fan, has pored over the singer's rich, multi-layered lyrics and viewed them through a theological lens.

The result is the new "The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen," the latest addition to a crowded genre that mines the spiritual in pop culture.

A Harvard Divinity School graduate, Symynkywicz stresses that he's not out to peddle the First Church of Bruce. His admiration for Springsteen is rooted more in the inspirational and empathetic than the theological.

"What's inspiring about him is that he has so much to say about different life stages that we all go through," Symynkywicz said from his church in suburban Stoughton, Mass. "The thing I really like about his music as I've gotten older is that he gets older, too. His music deepens and matures and he sings like a grown-up."

It's been a frenzied, often frightening time — one Springsteen has faced unflinchingly — and he's brought the rest of us along for the ride.

"When we discern that Springsteen is 'there' for us — when we feel as though he is addressing us directly and personally in his songs," Symynkywicz writes, "his work seems to put down strong roots in our own experience. His music helps us to make sense of the sometimes tangled, often disparate threads of our lives."

At its foundation, Symynkywicz adds, it's a religious undertaking, a ministry of healing — a task that gets to the very meaning of the word religion. But Spring-

steen's canon is neither sufficiently creedal nor doctrinaire to stand up as theology, Symynkywicz emphasizes.

"What he does for me is help me discern my own traditions, my own personal theology and faith — but more deeply."

So it's more like good news — "the affirmation that no principality or power, no forces seen or unseen, no terror-mad souls or devilish plots can ever separate us from the love

People don't just want to consume popular culture — though some people do — they want to discern what's deeper in there and what meaning it gives their lives."

— The Rev. Jeffrey Symynkywicz

that is in our souls."

The Boss himself does not shy away from overt religious imagery.

"Jesus was an only son as he walked up Calvary Hill," he sang on 2005's "Devils & Dust." Springsteen was raised a Roman Catholic in New Jersey and attended a parochial school where, according to one biography, he clashed with both the nuns and other students.

He told the New York Times a couple of years ago that he isn't a churchgoer, but "as I got older, I got less defensive about it. I thought, 'I've inherited this particular landscape, and I can build it into something of my own.'"

It's not so much Springsteen's personal faith in which Symynkywicz finds comfort, but in the singer's working-class roots.

"It was very much like the working class family I grew up in



Rock icon Bruce Springsteen, seen here in a 2007 concert in Hartford, Conn., is the subject of a new book, "The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen."

RNS | David Molnar, Star-Ledger photo

... the same kinds of fights with my father," the author says. "That's why I recognize in him the reality of when he sings about working people and [their] limited horizons, but also the palpable reality of real life. It's authentic."

Symynkywicz, 53, chuckles when asked whether his congregants are accustomed to Springsteen-infused sermons. "They're probably sick of hearing it," he says. He's seen the Boss in concert seven times, which makes him a far cry from being a "Tramp" — the diehards who follow the singer around everywhere.

Still, the author does what few fans have: dissect Springsteen's 250-song catalogue over 14 studio albums, starting with 1973's "Greetings from Asbury Park,

N.J." to last year's "Magic." He unearths a treasure trove of hard-knock life lessons, analogues to biblical passages and other spiritual writings, and examples of redemption, courage, hope and love.

Symynkywicz's book is the latest in a niche that looks for, and sometimes finds, the spiritual in the

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: ROCK AND REDEMPTION, FROM ASBURY PARK TO MAGIC

Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz, author
Westminster John Knox Press, 2008

Paperback, \$16.95

pop landscape, ranging from "Peanuts" to "The Simpsons," "Harry Potter," "Seinfeld" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

"Writers, singers, filmmakers

and TV producers are the myth-makers for our times," the author explains. "People don't just want to consume popular culture — though some people do — they want to discern what's deeper in there and what meaning it gives their lives."

Ultimately, Symynkywicz sees a kind of rough, defiant hope in Springsteen's songs.

"He's hopeful rather than optimistic. 'Everybody has a reason to begin again,' he sings in 'Long Walk Home.' There's always a reason to go on.

"But it's a tough hope in a tough world — a world that isn't, on the surface, getting better. There is a hopefulness there — that we can turn things around and move in a more progressive direction."

REMEMBERING 'PF/YF'

Milestone: 'Pilgrim' and 'Youth' fellowships came together 50 years ago

By J. Bennett Guess

Just as thousands of UCC youth were gathering this summer in Knoxville for National Youth Event, many UCC elders are remembering that 2008 also marks the 50-year union of our predecessor bodies' youth organizations.

On June 20-27, 1958 — one year after the founding the UCC — the Pilgrim Fellowship of the Congregational Christian Churches in America and the Youth Fellowship of the Evangelical and Reformed Church held its first "joint national council" at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

"Many of today's generation of UCC leaders trace the origins of their global justice commitments to seeds sown in Pilgrim and Youth Fellowships," says the Rev. John Thomas, general minister and president. "As a product of Pilgrim Fellowship in the 1960s, I have much to be thankful for as we mark this milestone of the union of the youth movements of our predecessor churches.

"Rooted in the life of congregations, these local fellowships nevertheless saw themselves as part of statewide and national movements of United Church of Christ young people that helped us see beyond our local communities to the reality of a global church and to the pressing needs of the world," Thomas says.

Bridgette Kelly, the UCC's ar-

chivist in Cleveland, says the anniversary is a testament to how young people can make a difference in this denomination and in society.

"It is significant to know that the Pilgrim and Youth Fellowships were already working together before the UCC union," Kelly says.

About 330 delegates attended the uniting meeting in June 1958, where they worked to hammer out programmatic details as a joint body moving forward.

"I had never seen an E&R young person before," admitted an unnamed Congregationalist teenager, as quoted in the joint council's 1958 program book.

The June 1958 meeting was followed up later that year with a much-larger gathering of 3,000 UCC

participants at the National Conference on Christian Education, held at Purdue University, where teens were given an opportunity to interview the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"To a great extent, we will have to depend on the youth of this generation to solve the problem [of racism]," King told the UCC audience.

The Rev. Stephen Sterner, acting executive minister for the UCC's Local Church Ministries, says the 50-year milestone for "PF/YF" is an occasion to look back and move forward.

"The many youth fellowship programs in local UCC congregations in 1958 reflected a time of strong institutional participation, the wave of baby boomer children, and the time when Sundays were still relatively free of shopping, organized youth sports and the many other Sunday options families now experience," Sterner says. "A significant number of the current leadership in our churches and our denomination found their faith and their call to serve in these highly organized and mostly full youth fellowship activities."

But Sterner says today's youth movement is different — but still vital — pointing to the more-than 3,000 youth who attended NYE this



In 1958, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. met with UCC youth at Purdue University.

UCC Archives | George Conklin photo

summer.

"As we look back on this historical moment, we are not given only to

LEARN MORE @ <UCC.ORG/YOUTH>

a wistful nostalgia for what used to be," Sterner insists. "We have a great base from which to grow."

Local Church Ministries and Justice and Witness Ministries are working with the Council for Youth and Young Adult Ministries, Conferenc-

es, and local church youth and leaders to develop and implement a plan for youth and young adult ministry in the years ahead, Sterner says.

"By the summer of 2009, we will be prepared to begin a renewed emphasis on youth and young adult ministry in the UCC," Sterner says. "We hope that 50 years from now, the church will look back on this moment with as much joy and fondness as we now remember the union of the Pilgrim Fellowship and the E&R youth fellowship."

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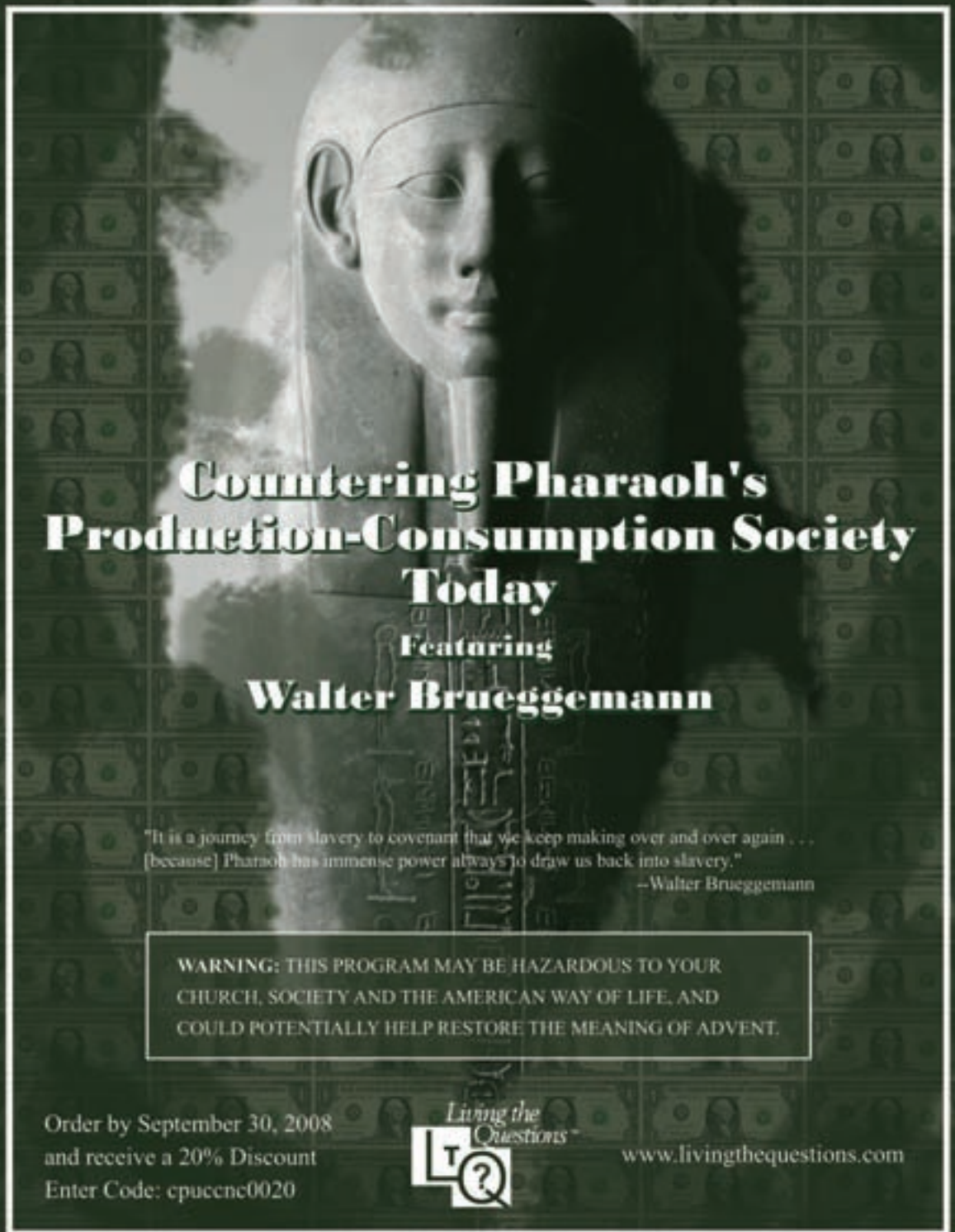
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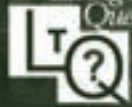
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REMEMBERED

The Rev. Clifton H. Johnson, 86, who served as race relations director with the former United Church Board of Homeland Ministries, died May 26 in Eugene, Ore., where he was a member of **First Congregational UCC**.

Johnson founded the Amistad Research Center at UCC-related Fisk University, where he had once served as archivist. He was later named the Amistad Research Center's Executive Director Emeritus by Tulane University, where the Center relocated in 1970.

Johnson distinguished himself as both an academic historian and pioneering justice advocate.

ORDINATION BECOMES 'SACRED CONVERSATION'

A multiracial, multicultural assembly gathered on May 18 for the ordination of the Rev. Lizette Merchán Pinilla in the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference, as Pinilla was authorized for ministry by the Oklahoma Association and **Community of Hope UCC in Tulsa, Okla.**

The multicultural celebration took place on the same day that UCC pastors across the country were calling their members to a "sacred conversation on race." (see story on page 3)

"One hundred people came from many races, genders, abilities, disabilities and faiths to celebrate Lizette's ordination," said the Rev. Rosemary McCombs Maxey, a citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and interim pastor of Community of Hope UCC.

Pinella, who is Colombian by birth, is in the United States on a worker visa. In addition to working in the ecumenical church relations office of Disciples-related Phillips Theological Seminary, she will serve Community of Hope UCC as its justice and witness minister.

"Complex as her immigration and visa statuses have been, her life testifies to the struggle and strength of her people and her determination to stand faithful," Maxey said. "She credits her companions at the Community of Hope for bringing her 'from the pew to the pulpit.'"

PASTORAL CHANGES

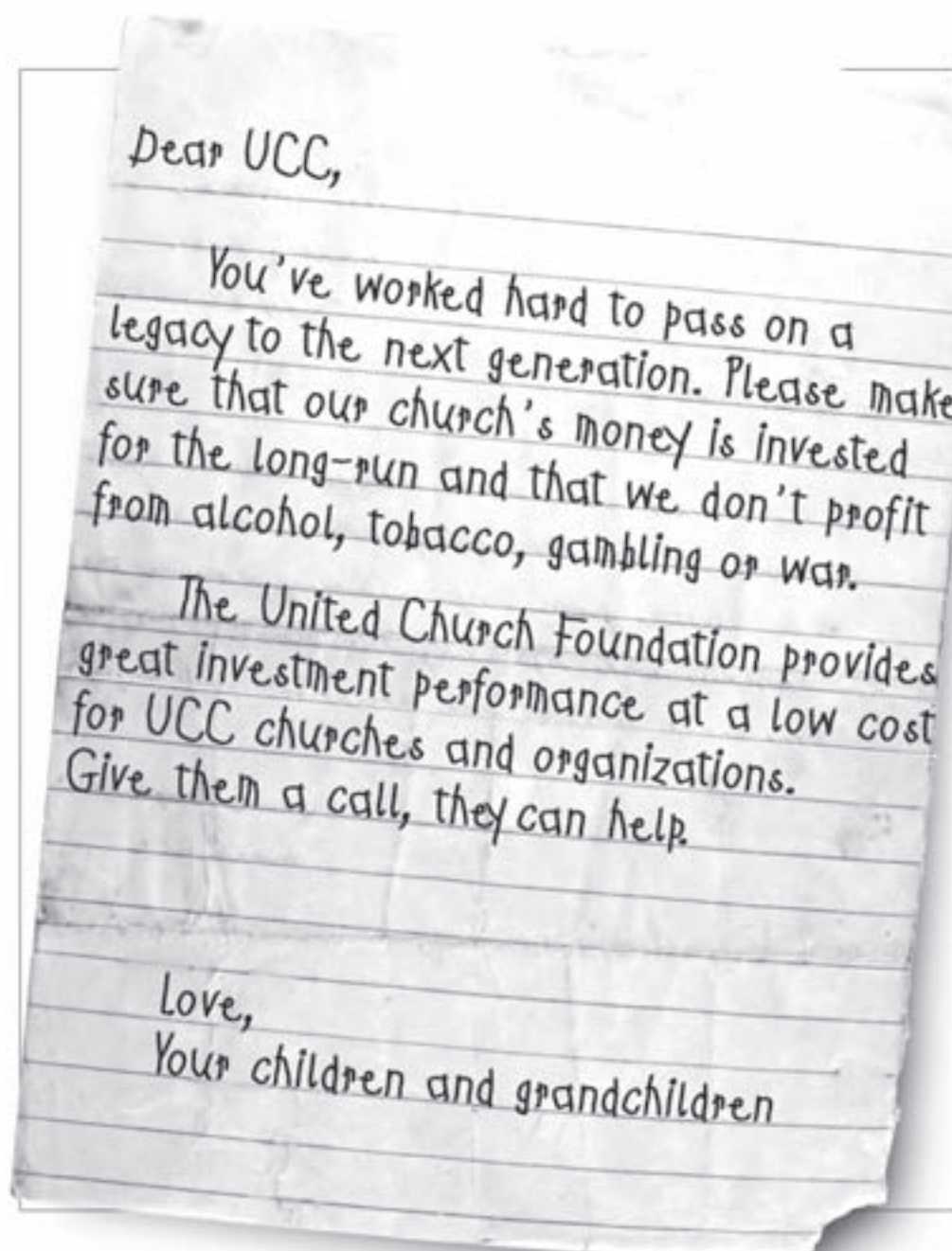
- Baker, Cathlin S.** New York, NY to West Tisbury UCC, MA
- Beauchard, Fredericka** to Weatherly Charge, PA
- Bishop, Linda** to First Cong. UCC, Orange City, FL
- Bower, Thomas R.** to Cong. UCC, Leslie, MI
- Brekke, Gregg D.** to Cleveland, OH
- Cipolletti, Debbie L.** to First Cong. UCC, West Brattleboro, VT
- Ciupek-Reed, Rachel** Antioch, CA to Mt. Hollywood UCC, Los Angeles, CA
- Clark-Killam, Ann** Williamstown, MA to Cong. UCC, Richmond, MA
- Cope, Brian E.** Danville, PA to Cong. UCC, Algonquin, IL
- Diters, Mark E.** Granby, CT to Flagg Road UCC, West Hartford, CT
- Dutoit, Francois J.** to First Cong. UCC, Des Plaines, IL
- Feyen, Margaret W.** to Union Cong. UCC, Green Bay, WI
- Forer, Kate S.** to First Cong. UCC, Old Greenwich, CT
- Freese, Edward** Hartford, WI to retirement
- Gregory, Mark S.** Barrington, IL to Cong. UCC, Yorkville, IL
- Hadley, Lynda J.** to Dummerston, VT to retirement
- Helgeson, Carlan D.** Sugarcreek, OH to UCC, Spring Hill, FL
- Heintzelman, Ken** Sandusky, OH to Shadow Rock UCC, Phoenix, AZ
- Hills, Phil** Weldon Springs, MO to First Cong. UCC, Escondido, CA
- Hindmarsh, Dale N.**, to First Cong. UCC, Cornwall, VT
- Hochhalter, Cara B.** Minneapolis, MN to Federated, Charlemont, MA
- Latimer, James H.** Toledo, OH to Community UCC, Reading, PA
- Leahy, Martha R.** Newbury, MA to First UCC, Saugus, MA
- McCusker, Jean M.** to Cong. UCC, Central Village, CT
- McSherley, Lon J.** Mansfield, OH to Trinity Reformed UCC, Conover, NC
- Moerdyk, Ruth A.** Dayton, OH to interim, UCC, Osage, IA
- Montgomery, Mark** Norwalk, CT to First Cong. UCC, Old Greenwich, CT
- Morgan, Donald W.** Biloxi, MS to St. John UCC, Elkhart, IN
- Nalesnik, Thomas A.** W. Yarmouth, MA to Union, Maynard, MA
- Nye, Margaret R.** Haddam, CT to First Cong. UCC, Andover, CT
- Patton, Robert C.** Sandusky, OH to Cong. UCC, Claremont, CA
- Pych, Virginia** to interim, St. John's UCC, Hartford, WI
- Schwartz, Detlef** to First Cong. UCC, Geneva, NE
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- Staats, Cory** to Cong. UCC, Needham, MA
- Stenzel, Richard S.** Milwaukee, WI to retirement
- Stout, David F.** Bedford, OH to Riverview Park, St. Joseph, MI
- Traxler, Debra K.** to First Cong. UCC, Anthony, KS
- Vetter, Todd C.** Cos Cob, CT to Pilgrim UCC, Duxbury, MA
- Wall, Shannon R.** to First Cong. UCC, Darien, CT
- Wright, Frank V.** Helena, MT to Second Cong. UCC, Attleboro, MA

Pastoral changes are provided by the UCC's Parish Life and Leadership Ministry.

CLERGY DEATHS

- | | |
|---|--|
| Aisenbrey, Donald R. , 70, 5/2/2008 | Dillenberger, John , 89, 2/7/2008 |
| Anderson, Richard M. , 67, 5/19/2008 | Ebersole, Eleanor S. , 83, 4/29/2008 |
| Auler, Harold N. , 88, 5/1/2008 | Heath, Doris L. , 102, 5/14/2008 |
| Barndt, William G. , 93, 4/28/2008 | Kimball, Ralph H. , 93, 5/9/2008 |
| Barnes, Charles W. , 76, 4/29/2008 | Kruse, Earl J. , 73, 5/13/2008 |
| Blair, William C. , 83, 4/26/2008 | McArthur, Harvey K. , 95, 1/12/2008 |
| Bonner, Harold W. , 91, 4/28/2008 | McQuiston, James Elliott , 87, 5/2/2008 |
| Brewer, Alvin C. , 77, 4/24/2008 | Reader, Maxwell , 89, 5/16/2008 |
| Brown, George W. , 84, 5/11/2008 | Seeber, Gregory L. , 61, 4/23/2008 |
| Campbell, W. Fred , 97, 5/9/2008 | Smith, Carl T. , 90, 4/7/2008 |
| Cassiday, Donald M. , 89, 5/6/2008 | Smith, Gregory D. , 59, 5/26/2008 |
| Chang, Kwai Sing , 86, 4/12/2008 | Sperry, Gordon H. , 86, 4/19/2008 |
| Childs, Henry M. , 90, 4/20/2008 | Van Camp, Arthur , 89, 5/18/2008 |
| Correll, Harlan G. , 81, 5/19/2008 | Yamamoto, Haruo , 81, 4/18/2008 |

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Written by Carol L. Pavlik

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Randy Varcho graphic

IN PENNSYLVANIA:

Churches team up on ad buys

By going in with three other congregations in Central Pennsylvania, **St. Paul's UCC in Mechanicsburg, Pa.**, got more bang for their advertising buck.

During their pre-Easter advertising blitz, consistory member Shirley Keith-Knox says money they received from the Stillspeaking Ministry's Media with a Mission grant allowed

Since St. Paul UCC's pastor recently retired after 35 years at the church, the Media with a Mission dollars came at an opportune time, when the congregation was looking to invigorate the vitality of the church during the interim process as they searched for a permanent pastor.

Keith-Knox says several visitors have cit-

IN NORTH CAROLINA:

Stillspeaking takes to the buses

United Church of Chapel Hill in North Carolina was one of the test markets for the "God is Still Speaking" advertising campaign before its launch in 2004, so the congregation has a close and ongoing relationship with the comma.

The first year, says the Rev. Rick Edens, the church strictly used the materials provided by the denomination. But over time, struck by inspiration, United Church found a way to put a unique twist on their advertisement, using the talents of their own church members.

"We have been very fortunate that we have people in marketing or graphic design in our congregation," says Edens.

In a series of print ads featuring the Christian fish symbol, graphic designer and church member Dick Hill plays with the notion of feeling marginalized or lost.

"We took the iconic fish symbol and found ways to be playful with it," Edens says. One sign features a school of fish swimming to the right, except for one lonely fish, who is swimming to the left. The caption reads, "Left out?"

In Chapel Hill, a free bus system has been underwritten by the city council to ease traffic and parking congestion, providing an excellent opportunity for advertising. United Church's posters have found a home on the overhead section inside the bus.

"It's been very fortuitous," says Edens, who frequently meets visitors who came because of the bus posters. "In the last several years, we've seen a tremendous increase in ridership of the buses."

This fall, United Church is part of a 12-congregation consortium that has received a "Media with a Mission" grant from the UCC's Stillspeaking Ministry.

IN MONTANA:

Customized radio spots on the airwaves

University Congregational UCC in Missoula, Mont., was a recipient of "Media with a Mission" grant funding this year. With the financial support, the congregation was able to purchase radio advertising time with two radio stations for three weeks before Easter.

Using the 30-second radio spots produced by the UCC couldn't have been easier, said the Rev. Amy Carter, associate pastor. By being able to add a local tag at the end of the spot, the customized ad allowed the church to advertise both for their Missoula congregation as well as their satellite church that is growing in the town of Hamilton, Mont., just 45 miles south of Missoula.

"The Hamilton area is quite conservative," says Carter. "So our desire to start a new church out there is an attempt to provide a clear alternative to what is predominantly available there now. To be bold in that proclamation — but also to be able to do it with a sense of humor — is helpful in getting the message across."

"We took the iconic fish symbol and found ways to be playful with it."



With the funds they will be receiving, the churches will be able to beef up their own marketing budget to get the word out through TV ads and radio spots. But Edens feels confident that inspiration will strike again; his graphic designer friends are already working to create their own unique posters.

"We'll play off that back-to-school time. This is a time when a number of people are looking to find a new church," he says. "It's a time to start again."

ON THE AIR

Thirty churches received support from the Stillspeaking Ministry's "Media with a Mission" grants in 2008. Here's the list of this year's participating churches.

Cathedral of Hope UCC, Dallas, Texas
Cedar Hills UCC, Portland, Ore.
Church of the Redeemer UCC, Hershey, Pa.
Colonial Park UCC, Harrisburg, Pa.
Community of Hope UCC, Tulsa, Okla.
Coral Gables (Fla.) Congregational UCC
Edgewood United Church, East Lansing, Mich.
First and St. Stephen's UCC, Baltimore, Md.
First Congregational UCC, Jackson, Mich.
First Congregational UCC, Newark Valley, N.Y.
First Congregational UCC, Hillsboro, Ore.
First Congregational UCC, Watertown, S.D.
Forest Grove (Ore.) UCC
Friends Congregational UCC, College Station, Texas
Miami Beach (Fla.) Community UCC

Paramus (N.J.) Congregational UCC
Penbrook UCC, Harrisburg, Pa.
Peace Congregational UCC, Clemson, S.C.
Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Lansing, Mich.
Pilgrim - St. Luke's UCC, Buffalo, N.Y.
Pleasant Hill (Tenn.) Community UCC
Riverside Community UCC, Hood River, Ore.
St. Stephens-Bethlehem UCC, Buffalo, N.Y.
St. Paul's UCC, Mechanicsburg, Pa.
St. Paul UCC, Lincoln, Neb.
UCC Congregational, Plainfield, N.J.
United Christian Church, Miles City, Mont.
United Church of Paducah (Ky.)
University Congregational, UCC, Missoula, Mont.
Williston-West UCC, Portland, Maine

Learn more@ ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/media-with-a-mission

their church to increase the number of times their radio spot was aired.

"It is always important to share the good news of the UCC church and the welcoming attitude of our congregations," she says.

Other Pennsylvania churches participating in the cluster ad buy were **Penbrook UCC and Colonial Park UCC both in Harrisburg, Pa., and Church of the Redeemer UCC in Hershey, Pa.**

ed the radio spots for the reason they came to check out the church and learn more about the UCC.

"I love it, and people recognize it," says Keith-Knox about the Stillspeaking campaign. "You automatically know who you are. It gives you a lot of pride that you're part of a congregation that is very progressive, in the process of making a difference."

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