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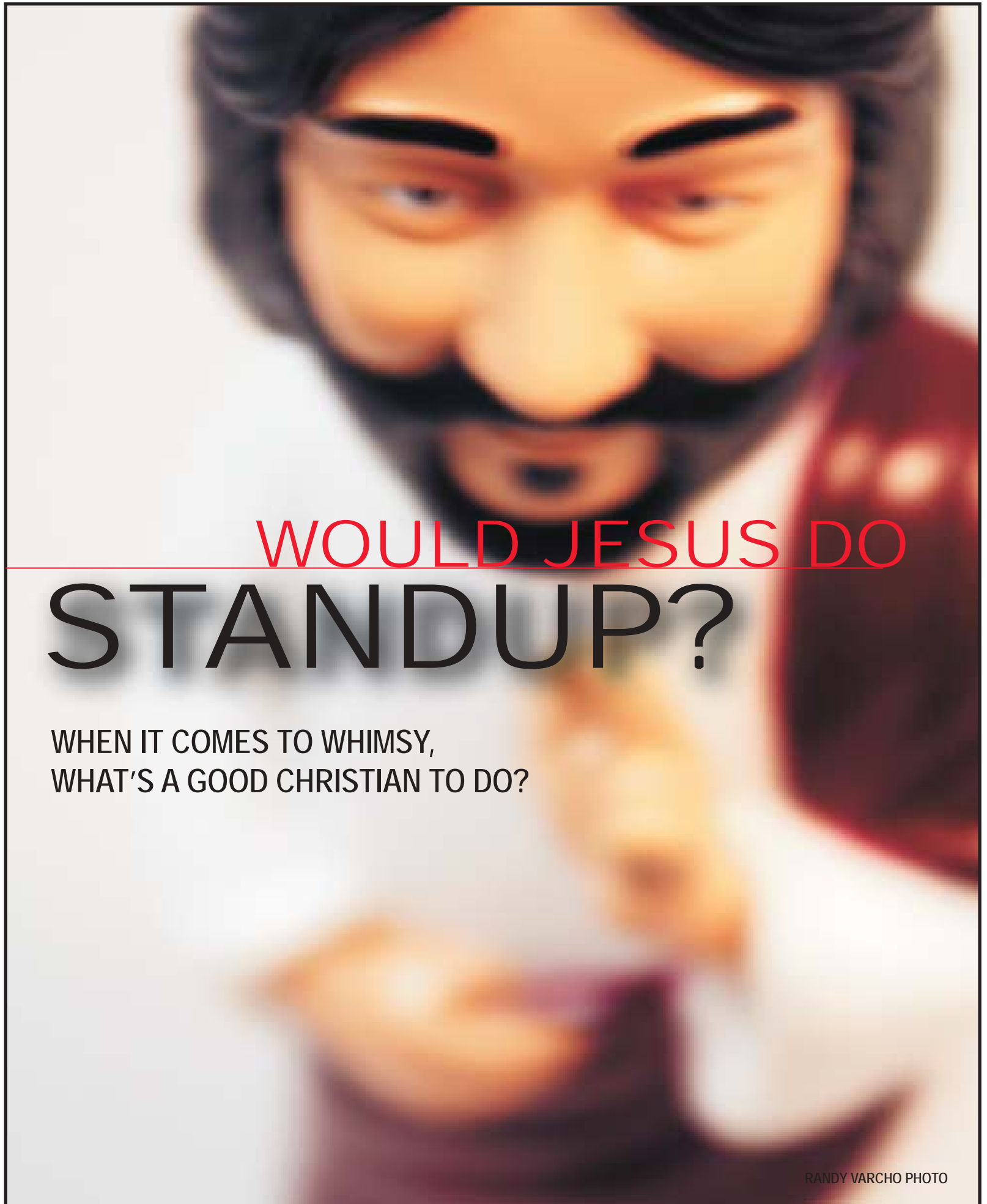
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# WOULD JESUS DO STANDUP?

WHEN IT COMES TO WHIMSY,  
WHAT'S A GOOD CHRISTIAN TO DO?

RANDY VARCHO PHOTO

## UCC members' generosity record-breaking in 2005

FROM THE COLLEGIUM



Cally Rogers-Witte

“In the past year, you donated much, much more in response to special appeals than in any previous year.”

**M**y heart is overflowing with gratitude for your generosity! It has been an incredible privilege to come on board during a year of such amazing response by UCC members to the natural disasters that plagued the globe in 2005.

In the past year, you donated much, much more in response to special appeals than in any previous year. After September 11, 2001, our members gave a record-breaking \$2.1 million over a two-year period. But, in 2005 alone, combined giving in response to the devastating Asian/East African tsunami, the terrible hurricanes in the southeastern U.S., drought and starvation in the Sudan, and the horrific earthquake in Pakistan/Kashmir, totaled nearly \$9 million!

This outpouring of gifts means that we are working with partners around the world in an amazing number of projects — helping people from fishing villages in India to rebuild houses, churches and schools and to recover their livelihoods, building 150 new houses in the Aceh province of Indonesia, and rebuilding churches on the island of Nias. Our work with partners in southern Asia will continue for many years.

Whether in Asia or in this country, our partnerships run deep. Our knowledge of those with whom we work is personal and historical, enhancing our ability to get resources to places most in need. Trust is a great gift at a time like this, and you can feel confident that your donations are being put to excellent use.

Because of congregations' on-going support of Our Church's Wider Mission basic support — which funds the everyday infrastructure of our global mission work — 100 percent of money given to special appeals directly helps those in need.

But “basic support” is absolutely crucial. Without it, we could not nurture our partnerships around the world, nor would we have missionaries in 35 countries. Without it, we would not even have the ability to open your envelope, record the gift, or deposit it in the bank! (Or maintain the website where more and more of you are now giving electronically.) So, please encourage your congregation to support OCWM even more generously in 2006.

UCC members responded graciously to special appeals in 2005, but there were a number of other, smaller disasters which did not receive mass media attention. But because of your donations to the One Great Hour of Sharing special offering each March, we were able to respond to those lesser-known calamities. OGHs receipts in 2005 were less than in recent years, but we hope and pray the total will be much greater in 2006 so that we will have the ability to respond immediately and continuously the next time a village is washed away by flood or an environmental nightmare destroys a community — even if you don't read about it in the paper!

Thank you for being a caring church that responds generously to the call of our Stillspeaking God.

*The Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte is executive minister of Wider Church Ministries and a member of the UCC's five-person Collegium of Officers.*

### ► Grab the popcorn

A new arts and culture section has made its debut at <still speaking.com/arts>, with enough clips, quips and motifs to call forth the *artiste* in each of us.

Stillspeaking's up-tempo tango with popular culture is being choreographed by Heather Iriye, 22, a dancer and aerialist, who is giving the culture section some new energy — and loads of creative content.

“I hope it's going to reach the young adult community,” says Iriye, 22, a recent graduate of the University of Arizona, who is now working as Stillspeaking's web content coordinator in Cleveland. “I hope to show that there is a connection between our generation, spirituality and the church.”

The ever-growing, interactive site include previews and reviews of music, movies, books, theatre and dance, along with blogs for 20-somethings, sports enthusiasts and music fans.

“The whole Stillspeaking campaign is intended to be ‘non-churchy,’ to make an accessible path into church, to make church not boring,” says Iriye, who grew up at **Sierra Vista (Ariz.) UCC**. “What we're about is showing that God is present everywhere.”

### ► Mister Rogers would be proud

The UCC, along with its partners in the Children's Media Policy Coalition, is celebrating a positive outcome of a legal showdown to preserve children's TV guidelines. Children's advocates and broadcast/cable executives reached an agreement in mid-December that the FCC's children's television rules should be modified for the good of the kids.

In October, the UCC went to federal court in a bid to strengthen the FCC's television guidelines that support educational programming. The effort was the focus of a United Church News' cover story, “Innocence Lost,” in the Dec.-Jan. issue.

“This is a great victory for America's kids,” said the Rev. Robert Chase, the UCC's director of communications.

The two once-opposing parties have now recommended agreed-upon modifications to the FCC and have further said they will withdraw their respective legal challenges to the rules, if the FCC abides the recommendations.

The agreement achieves one of the Coalition's central goals, that is, to ensure that digital broadcasters meet their public interest obligations to children by providing them with additional educational programming. The agreement leaves in place the FCC's “multicasting” guideline which says broadcasters must air at least three hours of children's educational programming per week on each of their channels.

“The agreement ensures that children will benefit from the multiple digital channels that broadcasters will be airing,” said



UNITED CHURCH NEWS



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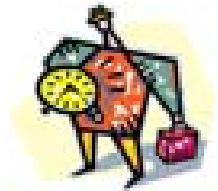
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## SHORTHAND



Gloria Tristani, a former FCC Commissioner who now serves as the managing director of UCC's OC Inc. “At the same time, children will be protected from excessive advertising.”

### ► Big-time youth events

Six regional sites will play host to the UCC's 2006 Regional Youth Events. Check out the lineup and start making plans — and raising the bucks — to attend the summer blast nearest you.

► Great Lakes, June 29-July 2, at UCC-related Olivet College (Illinois, Illinois South, Indiana-Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin Conferences)

► Middle Atlantic, July 13-16, Univ. of Delaware (Central Atlantic, New York, Penn Central, Penn Northeast, Pennsylvania Southeast, Penn West and Puerto Rico Conferences)

► New England, July 6-9, Univ. of Maine (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont Conferences)

► Southern, June 22-25, at UCC-related Elon Univ. (Florida, South Central, Southeast and Southern Conferences)

► Western, June 22-26, Univ. of Colorado at Colorado Springs (California Nevada Northern, California Nevada Southern, Central Pacific, Hawaii, Montana-Northern Wyoming, Pacific Northwest, Rocky Mountain and Southwest Conferences)

► West Central, July 11-14, St. Olaf College, Minn. (Iowa, Kansas-Oklahoma, Minnesota, Missouri Mid-South, Nebraska, Northern Plains and South Dakota Conferences)

Youth from the UCC's non-geographic Calvin Synod can attend the RYE of their choice. Learn more at <ucc.org/youth>.

### ► Who cares if you're sick?

“The face of inadequate health care may look like yours or mine,” says Barbara Baylor, the UCC minister for health care advocacy. “The UCC's ‘Health Care for All’ campaign is still a priority.”

That's why, Baylor says, the UCC's Collegium of Officers is encouraging churches to participate in a national dialogue to urge Congress to shape a health care system that provides adequately for all.

A packet of information, along with a cover letter from the Collegium, was included in January's all-church mailing. An all-church health care questionnaire is also included, with return requested by April.

Learn more at <ucc.org/justice>.

### ► Habitual giving

“Seven Ways to Increase Giving in Your Congregation” is a new resource available from the UCC's stewardship and church finances ministry. The number one suggestion? Preach about money.

The brochure is available online at <ucc.org/steward/7ways.pdf> or by calling United Church of Christ Resources at 800/325-7061.

## CALENDAR

UCC Council for Health and Human Service Ministries Annual Meeting  
 March 2-5 in Albuquerque, N.M.  
 <chhsm.org>

UCC Disabilities Ministries Annual Meeting  
 March 16-18 in Cleveland  
 <uccdisabilitiesministries.org>

UCC Office Support Staff Network  
 April 27-30 in Cleveland  
 <uccosn.org>

UCC/Disciples National Women's Event  
 June 21-25 in Indianapolis  
 <dreamonsisters.com>

Pacific Islander Asian American Ministries' National Convocation  
 July 25-28 in Berkeley, Calif.  
 E-mail: <paamnc@aol.com>

## LEADERSHIP MUM ON AD CONTENT

## New TV spot likely to debut in late March

The UCC's newest television ad appears heading for a late March premiere, according to General Minister and President John H. Thomas.

"The expectation is that we will run the ad at Eastertime, in plenty of time to invite prospective visitors to our Palm Sunday and Easter services," Thomas told United Church News on Jan. 17.

Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, falls on April 9 this year.

As of press time, specific air dates and times had not been finalized. But, as Thomas indicated, "The leadership of the church is fully expecting that this will happen."

The content of the commercial is still under wraps, but Ron Buford, coordinator of the UCC's Stillspeaking Initiative, describes the newest 30-second spot as "funny and whimsical, while still being able to drive home our consistent message of extravagant welcome." (See related story on page 10.)

In late 2005, contributors gave \$1.5 million to support the airing of a new TV commercial, expecting it to air in Advent. However, church leaders deferred that ad buy for at least three months until some complicated financial issues could be resolved. Now, Thomas says, the ad will get its much-anticipated launch.

"This has given us time to complete the necessary fundraising and prepare our churches for the launch of the new ad," Thomas said.

A \$2 million ad buy is planned, with the commercial running prominently on more than 20 cable networks and "reaching 60 to 70 percent of the population," Buford said.

While Buford conceded that it "doesn't look promising" that broadcast networks will agree to run the ad, he still believes the UCC's message will get a broad hearing.

## 'Virtual community' to receive UCC newcomers

Those drawn to the UCC's websites during the next round of national television ads will find a new "virtual community" offering online worship experiences, Bible study, pastoral care and instruction in UCC basics.

The new community <i.ucc.org> is not a congregation, says the Rev. David Schoen of the UCC's Evangelism Ministry, but it will help seekers "test" the UCC if they're not quite ready to visit a local church. Also, it will serve as a community-building place for those who live in areas where UCC churches are not yet established.

"What happens if the nearest UCC church is 50 miles away, as some seekers have told us?" Schoen says. "Rather than lose contact with them, a virtual community helps us create relationships that offer at least some of the experience of church — the chance to pray with others, to share and learn faith, to learn about the UCC and its rich history and traditions."

Schoen says the online community could serve as an incubator for new church starts around the country. And in time, he says, it could provide a good model for how local congregations can approach evangelism, outreach and relationship-building over the internet.

"Naturally, through the Stillspeaking campaign, our first priority is to encourage seekers to consider membership in a local congregation," says Schoen. "A virtual community is no substitute for active participation in a local church, but it can serve as a gateway, a transition

"With most people watching cable so much these days, it's possible to do a major ad buy on cable networks only," Buford said, noting that Gotham Inc., the UCC's advertising agency,

“” The leadership of the church is fully expecting that this will happen.”

— The Rev. John H. Thomas  
General Minister and President

has consistently urged the church to proceed with a cable-only run, arguing it's just as effective and more cost-efficient. But church leaders have long maintained that access to traditional networks is a justice issue, because broadcast channels reach those who cannot afford cable.

"We're going to focus this time on some Spanish-speaking channels," Buford added. The new commercial is being produced in English and Spanish versions, and the Stillspeaking website <stillspeaking.com> is translating critical pieces of its web content into Spanish, he said.

Buford said still-outstanding pledges of \$115,000 from individuals and commitments of \$114,000 from churches need to be honored before the ad airs.

"Now is the time to come forward to fulfill those commitments so we can be successful," said Buford, who fears that some may have withheld or diverted contributions when the ad didn't run in December, as previously expected.

“” that leads to membership in a congregation.”

One feature of the virtual community will be an online prayer chapel that encourages newcomers to join the church in intercessory prayer. Local congregations will be invited to download online prayer requests every week and incorporate them into their Sunday prayers.

“” What happens if the nearest UCC church is 50 miles away, as some seekers have told us?”

— The Rev. David Schoen  
UCC Evangelism Ministry

"In this way, we hope the virtual community in time will become an outreach of many UCC congregations towards a growing community of seekers who will find the UCC as their spiritual home," Schoen says.

The virtual community project is being sponsored by the Congregational Vitality Initiative of the UCC's Local Church Ministries.

## Since General Synod, UCC reports both positive, negative fallout

By J. Bennett Guess  
Editor, United Church News

Church leaders are reporting mixed statistical and financial outcomes — both positive and negative — during the six-month period that followed General Synod's controversial decision to affirm support for same-gender marriage equality.

Since July, about 49 churches — or less than one percent of the UCC's 5,725 churches — have voted to disaffiliate, according to the denomination's research office. Most, but not all, of the departures appear related to disagreement with the marriage-equality resolution.

The withdrawals, however, also come amid a resurgence of interest in the UCC by new or existing churches, with 23 congregations affiliating with the UCC during 2005 and an additional 42 churches expressing a "firm interest" in joining. The year also ended with some hopeful financial indicators, including significant increases for some national offerings and special appeals.

'We grieve the loss'

"The number of departing churches is far fewer than some had earlier projected," said General Minister and President John H. Thomas, who nonetheless described the last half of 2005 as a period marked by "conversation," "education," and at times, "exhaustion." "We grieve the loss of any and every congregation that decides to leave — not only because of the loss of members but also for the loss of shared history, ministry and fellowship."

Based on 2004 financial data, the withdrawing churches — with a combined membership of 10,535 — contributed about \$89,000 annually to support Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM), the denomination's shared purse that funds ministries at the Association, Conference, national and international settings. Those receipts represent less than three-tenths of 1 percent of the \$32 million contributed to OCWM each year.

Most of the departing churches appear to have been distancing themselves financially from the denomination for many years, said William Morgan, the UCC's chief financial officer.

Morgan also acknowledged that an undertermined number of disgruntled churches have decided to remain with the UCC but have indicated they will consider reducing financial support for OCWM in 2006. That effort, he said, could be offset by supportive congregations that intend to increase OCWM contributions.

"While some fluctuations in OCWM can surely be attributed to Synod-related issues," Morgan said, "we're also hearing from many churches that have other budgetary concerns, such as rising heating costs, insurance premiums and other expenses that impact their OCWM giving. There are other factors to consider."

The UCC is unique among many of the historical mainline denominations because individual congregations retain legal ownership of their buildings and property, making it easier for UCC congregations to decide their own futures. An often underreported fact is that not all churches that vote to leave the UCC will necessarily stay away forever. In the past two

years, five once-departed churches have voted to return.

'Great new enthusiasm'

Church officials also reported a sharp increase in inquiries about UCC affiliation. The Rev. David Schoen of the UCC's Evangelism Ministry, said that, in addition to discussions with 42 existing non-UCC churches, his office has had conversations with more than 20 pastors or lay persons interested in starting new congregations where none currently exists.

"We've seen great new enthusiasm for new church development," Schoen said.

In October, the 4,300-member Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, voted overwhelmingly to pursue UCC affiliation and cited the General Synod's marriage resolution as a motivating factor behind its decision. At least two more large-membership churches with an eye toward joining the UCC have planned congregational votes in 2006.

The process by which local Associations grant formal standing to incoming churches can sometimes take months to complete, Schoen said.

In addition to the inquiries, 10 churches were granted standing during the year and 13 congregations were recognized as newly planted churches.

'Record-breaking generosity'

The UCC also marked a record-setting year for financial support of special offerings and appeals, global disaster response and the Stillspeaking Initiative.

"While every setting of the church has fretted over finances this year, members of the United Church of Christ have demonstrated amazing, record-breaking generosity," Thomas announced in late December.

UCC members contributed a record-shattering \$9 million through national church offices to support national and international relief — fueled by churchwide concern for victims of the tsunami in Asia and East Africa, the hurricanes in the southeastern U.S., violence in Darfur and the Sudan, the earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir, as well as global hunger and the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. The 2005 financial total is more than four times the \$2.1 million given over a two-year period in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Web-based giving through <ucc.org> quadrupled in 2005, with nearly \$500,000 coming from 2,800 givers, a three-fold increase in online donors.

Although year-end remittances were not due until the end of January (thus, after press time), Morgan projects the church will come close to its \$32 million goal for national and Conference basic support, which funds the church's mission infrastructure. Plus, he said, it looks like the church will realize a 3-to-5 percent overall increase in receipts for the UCC's four national special-mission offerings, which are received annually and earmarked for global development, justice advocacy, evangelism and church renewal, and support for church retirees.

Also, more than \$1.5 million in second-mile giving was received to support the Stillspeaking Initiative, the UCC's national advertising campaign.

LEARN MORE @

<stillspeaking.com/campaign>

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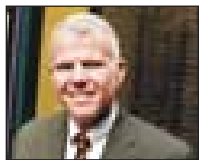
<i.ucc.org>

## MIGHT THE 'STILLSPEAKING' CHURCH BE READY TO SPEAK EVEN LOUDER?

## Could a new 'southern strategy' serve to unite, excite us?

“There are more Southern Baptist churches in Georgia alone than there are UCC churches nationally. Yet some are actively promoting a plan to boost our southern exposure.”

## NEVER OURSELVES ALONE

J. Bennett Guess  
Editor

“I keep saying it — give us 10 more years, I think we can shift this around,” the Rev. Timothy C. Downs told me last year, speaking about his hunch that the UCC’s numerically small presence in the conservative South is on the verge of taking a turn for the better.

Downs, the UCC’s Southeast Conference Minister, has been arguing for years that changing demographics all-but-require that the UCC look

south — to focus more intently on a burgeoning region where the UCC’s numbers have been the weakest, but where many would-be members are crying out for a refreshing, authentic Christian alternative to religious fundamentalism.

“The UCC provides a dimension that is distinctive and has the power to connect with people here,” Downs told me. “I think we have that potential.”

Downs has good stats to back up his assumptions. The Southeast Conference has more that doubled its membership during the past six years, the result of both new members and new churches. The UCC’s Stillspeaking Initiative has sparked big-time interest from many who live in

southern communities — places where, for the most part, no UCC church yet exists.

Ya’ll should be saddened by our present state of invisibility, especially since our church was a leader in the abolitionist and civil rights movements and we helped found numerous schools and colleges throughout the South.

But the frustrating fact remains: there are more Southern Baptist churches in Georgia alone than there are UCC churches nationally. Yet some are actively promoting a plan to boost our southern exposure.

The UCC’s Local Church Ministries has announced its intent to raise at least \$200,000 in 2006 to assist new church development in the Southeast. The hope of this so-called “southern strategy” is to plant at least 10 new churches by 2010 in places where the UCC’s presence has been sparse.

In December, a year-end fundraising letter from the Rev. José A. Malayang, LCM’s executive minister, called on potential contributors to seize the moment.

“We have arrived at a time of opportunity in the South for church growth and to start churches that are truly open and affirming, fully accessible, multi-racial and multi-cultural, boldly proclaiming the liberating gospel of Christ,” Malayang wrote.

As a native southerner myself, and one who found a home in the UCC (after feeling as if I’d been orphaned by the less-welcoming church tradition of my childhood), the prospect of a

“southern strategy” encourages me. It’s high time we take our message of extravagant welcome and evangelical courage into communities where, for the most part, we’ve abdicated the Christian faith to other, narrower perspectives.

Not long ago, I was semi-astonished to hear that Radio Shack — your neighborhood electronics retailer — has about 6,000 stores nationally, or about the same number of “outlets” we’ve got. How is it then, I found myself wondering, that everybody’s heard of Radio Shack but so few have heard of us?

For starters, they’ve got a huge advertising budget — that helps. But, more importantly, each individual store operates under the same shared, corporate identity — that helps, too. But most importantly, they’ve seen the need — and devoted the resources — to opening countless new outlets over the years, something we haven’t done well during the past 50 years. They, unlike we, have located (and relocated) to where the people are.

Since General Synod, and perhaps even before it, I’ve been feeling the need for a new missional emphasis, something energizing that draws us together — not apart — as we prepare to celebrate our 50th anniversary in 2007 and make our way beyond.

So I wonder, could the dawning of dozens or even hundreds of new churches in the South be a way to honor our evangelical forebears? Could that be the legacy that we leave to our descendants 100 years from now?



## LETTERS

“The Bible belongs to nobody’s team. As William Sloan Coffin deftly put it, it doesn’t stop at answering our questions: it goes on to question our answers.”

Not a ‘responsible’ newspaper

Editors of church papers should try to be “honest to Bible.” At the present time, United Church News is not showing the inclusion/exclusion balance such honesty requires.

In the Dec.-Jan. issue, Walter Brueggemann rightly says “the deepest impulse of the Bible is toward inclusion.” I would adduce 2 Peter 3:9 at the deepest-widest level, God wants everybody “to come to repentance” and not “perish” (an inclusion/exclusion statement). But at less depth, there is decreasing width, until all are excluded except a “few” (Matthew 22:14; 1 Peter 3:20).

In my father’s day, the football rules did not stop you from hiding the ball under your jersey as though it belonged to your team. The Bible belongs to nobody’s team. As William Sloan Coffin deftly put it, it doesn’t stop at answering our questions: it goes on to question our answers.

United Church News is to be congratulated when it includes material such as the advertisement for the Lexington Confession. If you publish only such biblical material as is supportive, you are promotional material, not a responsible denominational newspaper.

Willis Elliott  
Craigville, Mass.

‘Personally insulted, demeaned’

I am as ashamed and disappointed to see the ad [for the Lexington Confession, Dec./Jan.] in our denomination’s national newspaper as I would be to see an advertisement advocating slavery for

African-American people. The Bible, as some folk would interpret it, was also pushed as evidence of God’s approval for that.

The ad personally insults and demeans my 30 years of ministry in the church of Jesus Christ and the 15 years of marriage that my partner and I have celebrated before God. In the course of this marriage that you see as insignificant, we have reared two children to adulthood, and are now enjoying nurturing our 3-year-old grandson. It is very presumptuous of you to judge my marriage as unworthy, whatever theoretical basis you use for your assault. Obviously, your idea of being “renewed” in Christ includes diminishing my family and me.

My spouse and I came into UCC to escape the condemnation and turmoil caused by people like you who equate holiness with narrowness. Long ago I stopped trying to change closed minds by argument. It is my intention here merely to be a witness that your “renewal” is painful, insulting and destructive to my family — my children and grandchild, my spouse and me — as well as undermining the expression of the love of Christ in the church that bears that holy name.

The Rev. Bruce Roller  
Member, Plymouth Congregational UCC  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Did not sign Lexington Confession

It was with great dismay that I saw my name in the advertisement for those signing the Lexington Confession [Dec.-Jan.]. I did not sign the document.

I do not support the Lexington Confession, or any document that restricts (or claims total insight) in the possibility of God’s power or love in the world. Rather than defending or protecting God’s good name we should be extending our ministerial energy in doing God’s work in all the world.

The Rev. Gerald W. Metzger  
Redeemer UCC of Zuehl  
Marion, Texas

More-nuanced, less-strident

The full-page statement by the Lexington Confession declared something like, “We, the undersigned congregations, recognize marriage as a union between a man and a woman only, and the Bible as the ultimate authority on matters of faith.”

My question to the authors of that declaration is “who in the UCC doesn’t?” I object to the presupposition that “they do” and those with more-nuanced opinions “don’t.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

There is a growing literalist and reactionary style of Christianity that is sweeping America, making claims that their particular interpretation of scripture is the only accurate or genuine reading of sacred text. UCC members should be careful not to make the mistake of accepting their claims without reexamining the faithful insights of the great Protestant reformers and theologians. Stridency and literalism are not synonymous with Christian faith.

Christianity is not a “simple faith” that arrives at sensationalized or simplistic conclusions. Such “Foxnewsification” of our faith will lead to a raucous, divisive polemic that will turn the church into a side show.

Scott A. Callaghan  
Fort Wayne, Ind.

Hesitant to recommend paper

I always anticipate receiving each issue of the United Church News. However, this time I read with dismay the full-page “Lexington Confession” advertisement in the Dec.-Jan. edition. This makes me a bit hesitant to recommend to newcomers to UCC that they subscribe to the paper.

Philip W. Pletcher  
Co-chair, Open and Affirming Committee  
Plymouth Congregational UCC  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

## INTELLIGENT DEBATE

Faith — ‘the conviction of things not seen’ — never meant to be ‘easy’

### COMMENTARY



Stan Duncan

**B**ack in October 2004, when the school board in Dover, Pa., voted to require a statement be read before ninth grade biology classes — “The theory [of evolution] is not a fact. Gaps in the theory exist for which there is no evidence.” — a drama began unfolding that has the potential to alter the future direction of the United States in ways not seen in generations.

The statement went on to recommend that students consult a book by a Christian publisher challenging evolution. According to school board member Alan Bonsell, the statement was the result of months of discussion on how “to bring prayer and faith back into the school.”

Not long after the statement was introduced in the classrooms, six parents — including a couple of UCC members — filed suit against the school system claiming that it was promoting a religious belief and was violating the establishment clause of the Constitution. Finally, just before Christmas, U.S. District Judge John E. Jones III of Harrisburg, Pa., released his decision. Intelligent Design, the judge said, promoted religion and therefore had no real place in a science course.

This whole debate is deeply troubling to me. Raised in a southern “fundamentalist,” (now-“evangelical”) Christian church, we went to church twice on Sundays and prayer meetings on Wednesdays. I sang in the choir and in a Christian singing group. I also organized, led and preached at revivals. And, for what it is worth, I still believe that God lives and moves and changes things on this planet and in our lives.

However, in spite of all of that and in spite of my love of Jesus Christ as my savior today, I could not back then and cannot today, understand why anyone would ever want religion to go to battle against science to prove that the world was created by God instead of through evolution.

The Dover case is just one attempt by a much-larger and more-influential campaign to insist that the religious theory of Intelligent Design be accepted as equal to science. If that happened, it would ultimately do tremendous damage to the concept of faith.

Faith is the “assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith comes about

through a leap beyond the stability of knowable facts into the riskiness of trust in God. It is drawn forth from us by a love that cannot be measured or quantified. It brings about in us a sense of conviction, a sense of being pulled toward trust in and loyalty to the God who is beyond the limits of knowledge and facts.

The idea of a public school teaching my kids that a paleontologist can prove the existence of that deep, vast and mysterious God — by studying fossil forms in the rock record — is very unsettling. It would undermine the basic task of churches to help people find an intangible inner strength with which to cope with the growing madness and chaos of modern life.

“The idea of a public school teaching my kids that a paleontologist can prove the existence of that deep, vast and mysterious God — by studying fossil forms in the rock record — is very unsettling.”

The philosophy behind Intelligent Design implies that evidence of the mysterious ground of our being, that called God, can be discovered by studying such things as the amino acid sequences of key proteins. That desire to demonstrate God concretely is an ancient idolatry that was panned by the prophets and condemned by the church. It removes the gray areas of religion and denies us the soul-strengthening struggle with doubt that is a necessary forerunner for faithful conviction.

When I was in high school, a summer camp counselor once helped me out when I was trying to make sense of the resurrection. I told him I didn’t understand it and that it was hard to believe. He told me that was just the point. It wasn’t supposed to be easy. Part of our job as Christians, he said, was to reach and stretch and wrestle. If it was easy then we’d all be comfortable and stay in the same place developmentally all of our lives, and never grow in our faith or in the complexity of our beliefs.

If Intelligent Design is accepted in our school systems and in our culture, we may well create a whole generation of Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and Jewish children who will grow up thinking that belief in God is easy.

*The Rev. Stan Duncan is pastor of Abingdon UCC in Massachusetts.*

## LETTERS (cont.)

### Reaching into taxpayers’ pockets

Legalization of same-sex marriage will, for some, make the same difference that my mother’s second marriage has made. My father was a modest earner. After he died, she married an old family friend whose wife had died. The second husband had been a more-substantial earner, but did not long survive. Mother has been collecting \$5,000 more in social security benefits annually by virtue of her second marriage for close to 20 years now. The average worker from whom this money comes is not as well-off as is my mother.

The financial consequences of extending unearned entitlements to same-sex partners is missing from media discussion of the topic because the media are corrupt and recognize a significant counter argument when they see one. Asserting moral equivalence and demanding an end to discriminatory laws also covers for a reach into the taxpayers’ and the workers’ pockets. The existing entitlements assume legal financial responsibilities of families with children, which still matches heterosexual couples far better than it matches same-sex couples.

Raymond R. White  
Palo Alto, Calif.

### Lynn is ‘right on point’

It is rare when I am riveted to radio talk shows, but the Rev. Barry Lynn’s speech in a luncheon at the City Club of Cleveland — recently broadcast on National Public Radio in Maine — was fascinating.

To my relief, Lynn’s arguments about separation of church and state were not only right on point, but also incredibly practical. I thank NPR for broadcasting this speech, and I thank Lynn, a UCC

minister, for his courage against those who are not at all interested at dissecting the problem and understanding it, but rather just winning institutionalization of their own dogma regardless of the larger consequences.

Tom Myette  
Southport, Maine

### ‘Perhaps both are correct’

I was intrigued by the strange arguments about Intelligent Design by the Rev. James D. Edwards in the Dec.-Jan. issue [Letters]. Personally, I do not see any way of making a logically defensible choice between Intelligent Design and Evolution.

Even though the latter has a multitude of supporting factors such as the fossil record, the Stanley Miller synthesis of aliphatic acids, hydroxy acids, urea, carbohydrate-like compounds and eight of the 20 amino acids found in living entities — all from a mixture of hydrogen, water, methane and ammonia — and most significant of all, further similar experiments by others that produced nucleic acids, the basic units of DNA and RNA, none of which produces an absolute scientific proof, however Intelligent Design by a Divine Creator produces no proof of any kind.

Perhaps both are correct in certain features.

Frank L. Pilar  
Durham (N.H.) Community UCC

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

## OVERHEARD



### “Can you hear King now?”

— The rhetorical refrain of the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., pastor of **Chicago’s Trinity UCC**, speaking to an estimated 4,000 attendees at a Martin Luther King Day service in Lexington, Ky. “The problem that I now wrestle with, as his message becomes even more distorted,” said Wright, “is that the vast majority of Americans didn’t hear him, and on some days, it seems to me that nobody heard him.” (Herald-Leader, Jan. 16)

### “For me, it’s church and state, not church in state.”

— The Rev. Eric Williams, senior pastor of **North Congregational UCC in Columbus, Ohio**, who joined 31 religious leaders across the state who petitioned the Internal Revenue Service to look into the political activities of two large conservative churches allegedly involved in actively promoting the candidacy of a Republican candidate for governor. (Associated Press, Jan. 16)

### “Vermont is abundant in colorful foliage and lacking colorful folk.”

— The Rev. Arnold Isidore Thomas, former Vermont Conference Minister, recounting his response to a persistent parishioner’s question concerning why Thomas — an African American — chose to live in “the whitest state in the union.” (<iberkshires.com>, Jan. 16)

### “I do think that there’s a strain of the Democratic Party — it’s not uniform — that is somewhat patronizing towards people who go to church.”

— U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.), an active member of **Trinity UCC in Chicago**, in *The American Prospect’s* February issue.

### “I wish that all of us would be more outraged by the poverty of our brothers and sisters in this country than by issues of human sexuality.”

— The Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC general minister and president, speaking in Burlington, N.C., in mid-January. (Greensboro News-Record)



## TABULATIONS

## FOR GOD AND COUNTRY

More than 80\*

\*The number of UCC clergy serving as chaplains in the U.S. military, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The UCC currently has four chaplains serving in Iraq and one in Qatar.

Source: UCC Parish Life and Leadership’s government chaplaincy office

## SOAPBOX

### ARMENIANS AND TURKS: CAN THEY RECONCILE?

A full-page story written by Editor Emeritus W. Evan Golder appeared in the December-January issue and received quite a bit of reaction. Here are some of the responses we received.



#### 'Depth of betrayal'

The gasping sound you cannot or do not hear is the sound of my halted breath as I read W. Evan Golder's article, "Armenians and Turks: Can they reconcile?" The depth of betrayal is only matched by my sense of shock. To disguise a pitch for Turkish absolution around the gift of reconciliation and lay the responsibility for future discussion at the feet of the very people who were violated is unconscionable.

The article uses as sources a Western European missionary, a Turkish journalist and a nameless Armenian. How is that a tactic of a just peace church, of a church with noted Armenian clergy and lay people and a church that embraced the Armenian Evangelical Union as member churches? There are many Armenians who could have spoken wisely, with credibility and who would have been unafraid to use their names.

I was raised in a UCC family, and I am grateful my mother died this year before she could read this article. Everything she nurtured us to believe and that we held onto in the

UCC has been assaulted. However, cleverly or mindlessly, you have succeeded in becoming an advocate for Job's friends.

As an Armenian-American, a Christian educator and UCC clergywoman, I am struck that you missed a very significant image. You used a photo of Istanbul and emphasized the people of Turkey. This seems ironic to me. If I were going to offer a visual image of the situation that exists in Armenian and Turkish relations, it would have been Mount Ararat, the mountain referred to in the Noah story and the mountain upon which the Turks killed 1.5 million of our people and sent the majority of the rest into Diaspora.

For years, we have worked diligently to offer to the church whatever we could, putting all justice issues of each community alongside, and sometimes ahead of, our own. Today, I experience betrayal beyond words. My heart aches for our church. God was silenced on page 21 of United Church News, grace and truth were compromised.

The Rev. Ginna Minasian Dalton  
Fairfax, Va.

Turkey must admit Genocide

I am one of those people born into the UCC after my parents found a home within its inclusivity. They were two Armenians

born in the United States, and there could not have been two more dedicated people to God through the UCC than my parents. I am glad that both of them did not live long enough to see the article published in the December-January issue of United Church News.

It isn't that we are not a people desiring reconciliation. That goes without saying. We are Christians, and reconciliation is at the center of how we were raised. What is so disturbing is how people expect reconciliation before a country like Turkey has even admitted to the genocide of the Armenian people.

I have dedicated my life to God through this church, and I have yet to hear or read an article in United Church News about the Genocide in and of itself, even though this church prides itself on being the voice for the oppressed.

I have witnessed UCC presidents apologize for atrocities that have affected most of the people of this planet, but when it comes to the Armenians, you seem to want us to be quiet, polite and play by your rules.

I understand how people in Turkey may express concern about issues they face now. I understand how talking about the past may seem like an avoidance of what is needed now. But the reality is that the oppression, the issues they face now, are part of that past story.

In South Africa, the peace and reconciliation conversation happened only after its government admitted wrongdoing. Then, the Truth Commission could move forward. I would love to be a part of such a healing experience [be-

tween Armenians and Turks], as painful as it would be. But unless there is an admission to the Genocide you will not get many of us at the table.

You ask us to put history into context, but whose context? I think it is clear that this church has decided that they have found one group they don't really want to reach out to — the Armenians.

The Rev. Susan A. Minasian  
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Learn of Genocide, denial

W. Evan Golder's article "Armenians and Turks: Can they Reconcile?" is informative and helpful.

Readers might be interested to know that the film "Ararat" deals with the 1915 Armenian Genocide and the official Turkish denial. Directed by Atom Egoyan, a leading Canadian filmmaker of Armenian descent, the film raises consciousness about this event and sets it in historical context — the two prerequisites for reconciliation identified in Golder's article.

By telling a story of the making of a film about the Genocide, Egoyan is able to offer us multiple perspectives on the universal significance of this particular event.

When the next Armenian Martyrs Day comes in the UCC calendar (April 24), pastors might want to promote reconciliation by organizing a screening and discussion of "Ararat."

Harold Hatt  
St. John's UCC, Okeene, Okla.

The W. Evan Golder-penned article also prompted three national UCC leaders to release the following historical piece called "Armenian Christianity, the Genocide, and the UCC."

Armenian Christianity is over 1700 years old, making it one of the most ancient expressions of Christianity in the world. The relationship of the UCC to Armenian Christians began in the 19th century as missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions went to Turkey and Armenia, establishing an extensive network of churches, hospitals and schools serving hundreds of thousands of Armenians. That missionary endeavor often reflected an ignorance among American Protestants of the enduring presence of Christianity among Orthodox Armenians and, as a result, displayed an insensitivity to Armenian Orthodox Christians who had preserved their faith and their church for centuries. During this period the Armenian Evangelical community was born.

Today, the UCC continues to be enriched by its relationship to Armenian Christians. Descendants of the Evangelical community who migrated to the United States in the 20th century have been part of the UCC as members of congregations of Armenian heritage. While the number of these congregations has declined significantly in recent years, Armenian Americans remain a vital part of our church, serving in local churches, Conferences, seminary settings and as active lay leaders witnessing for justice in our society.

Through the UCC/Disciples' Common Global Ministries Board, the UCC is a partner of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, based in Beirut, and supports their educational work. This relationship was affirmed by General Synod 21 in 1997.



Reconciliation can only occur when the horror of the past is owned and acknowledged as a basis for concrete acts of repentance, reparation, and restoration."

Global Ministries also works closely with the Armenian Missionary Association of America to provide support for education and health projects in Armenia and elsewhere. Through the World and National Councils of Churches, the UCC also enjoys warm relationships with the Armenian Apostolic Church centered in Holy Etszmiadzen in Armenia, with centers as well in Istanbul, Jerusalem, Beirut and the United States. Through these relationships we continue to address the wounds to the Orthodox communities caused by the Protestant missionary experience.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Armenians became the objects of a horrific policy of religious and ethnic cleansing by the Ottoman Turks. This policy, forged in the volatile international colonial politics of Europe, the Middle East and the Balkans preceding World War I, ebbed and flowed in intensity until coming to a climax in 1915 in the Genocide in which 1.5 million people were killed and thousands of others were displaced. During the Genocide many missionaries of the American Board courageously stood with their Armenian

sisters and brothers, attempting to protect them as best they could; some lost their lives. In the United States, New England Congregationalists attempted to rally public opinion to force the United States government to come to the Armenians' aid. The Genocide of 1915 is observed in the UCC Desk Calendar every April 24, designated as Armenian Martyrs Day.

The genocide resulted in the near destruction of the vibrant Armenian community in Turkey and the creation of a world-wide Diaspora of Armenian Christians, many of whom found their way to other parts of the Middle East and to the United States. The suffering of Armenian Christians was to continue, however, with the Soviet domination of Armenia during much of the rest of the 20th century, a domination that led to the oppression of the Armenian Apostolic Church and to its own internal divisions. Our partners in Beirut suffered themselves during the civil war that so devastated Lebanon in the 1980s.

The Genocide, the first of a series of historical atrocities in the 20th century which included the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans and Rwanda, has never been formally and publicly acknowledged by the Turkish government. Indeed, a policy of denial has persistently attempted to rewrite history to minimize the suffering and victimization of Armenians as well as the culpability both of the Turks and of the international community which largely failed to protect this vulnerable population.

Apology is not revenge by victims against their oppressors. Apology is a recognition that the healing of memories can only take place where truth is acknowledged and where sin — individual and corporate — is confessed. As in South Africa, reconciliation can only be founded in truth telling. The call for Turkish apology by Armenians, whether they live in Turkey or Armenia or the Diaspora, is not the preoccupa-

tion of victims with their own victimization.

Those of us who have had the privilege of relationships with Armenian Christians understand that their preoccupation is sustaining vital ministries among their people, preserving precious theological and liturgical traditions, education their youth, fostering the global ecumenical movement, and creatively engaging the challenging interfaith realities of their contexts. The call for apology is, rather, the yearning for reconciliation that can only occur when the horror of the past is owned and acknowledged as a basis for concrete acts of repentance, reparation, and restoration.

The UCC, because of our missionary legacy in Turkey and in the context of our current ecumenical relationships, has a high responsibility to help our own members learn about the richness of the Armenian Christian tradition, teach the truth about the genocide, recognize our own role in the division of Armenian Christians into Orthodox and Evangelical communities and work to overcome that division, and to labor for a healing of historical memories, a reconciliation based in truth. Of particular importance is on-going support for the Armenian minority in Turkey, for the people of Armenia who struggle today to rebuild their nation following the decades of Communist rule, and for the Armenians of the Diaspora, especially in the Middle East, both Orthodox and Evangelical, who bear witness to peace and justice in that troubled part of the world.

The Rev. John H. Thomas  
UCC General Minister and President

The Rev. Lydia Veliko  
UCC Ecumenical Officer

Peter Makari  
Global Ministries' European/Middle East Executive

## Merci Beaucoup! Gracias! Thank You!

... for your gifts, your concern, your work, and your support following the devastation brought by Katrina and Rita. We were so blessed by your care for us. Thank You!

—The People and Churches of South Central Conference UCC (Texas, Louisiana and Back Bay Mission)

Recovery efforts continue. To help, contact the Rev. Alan Coe <revacoe@yahoo.com>, the Rev. Bill Royster <bgroyster@earthlink.net>, or phone the South Central Conference Office at 512.459.7607.



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## GOOD TIDINGS

“The outside unbelieving world will be skeptical of the possibility of thus bridging the historical abyss between two traditions apparently so divided on basic theory.

Some of our sister communions, still bound by the weight of their own traditions of polity and vocabulary, may share that skepticism.

Ours will be, therefore, all the more, the wondrous opportunity to demonstrate in our time, and in this country for the first time, that this ‘impossible dream’ can be done, and that, further, in church governance as if life:

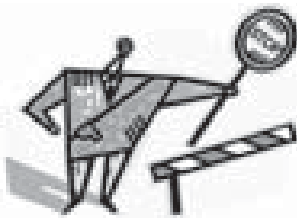
Our little systems have their day,  
They have their day and cease to be,  
They are but broken lights of Thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.”

— From the speech, “Each brings its best,” by the Rev. James E. Wagner (1900-1985), an Evangelical and Reformed / Church of God minister, to a 1956 meeting of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches gathered in Omaha, Neb. Wagner spoke to reassure apprehensive Congregational Christian leaders that the Evangelical and Reformed Church has “never even remotely assumed that its ‘way of life’ could be or should be imposed upon the United Church of Christ.” (*The Living Theological Heritage*, Vol. 7)

## WORSHIP WAYS

Prepared by the UCC’s worship and education ministry, “Worship Ways” is a periodic compilation of creative worship resources mailed to each UCC congregation and published online at <ucc.org/worship/ways>. The newest installment includes:

- ▶ An overview of the church calendar from Ash Wednesday (March 1) through Pentecost Sunday (June 4).
- ▶ Innovative ideas for weekly Lenten fellowship meals and cross-generational learning events.
- ▶ Helps for exploring and understanding “confession and assurance.”
- ▶ New prayers for Holy Communion.
- ▶ Insert for World Day of Prayer (March 3).



## ROADWORK

Inspired by the Stillspeaking Initiative, the Rev. Cain Hope Felder invites your reflection on the following questions:

1. How can we devise feasible strategies for a church that is relatively homogeneous to partner with churches that are more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity or sexuality?
2. How can the church provide stronger leadership in analyzing the politics of difference and through what kinds of church-sponsored programs can we engage each other in conversations about traditionally ignored subjects, such as race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality?
3. How might the church use role reversal to highlight the pain and damage to those who are victims of race, ethnic or sexual bias?

## ARE YOU THE FORGIVING TYPE?

‘Resentment is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other guy to die’

## COMMENTARY



Lillian Daniel

Each year my in-laws give us the magazine *Cooking Light* as a Christmas present. If you saw how much pasta our family consumes, you would see why. While I can’t claim that the magazine has turned me into much of an expert in the “cooking” part, or the “light” part, I do enjoy reading the magazine each month and an article in the health section caught my eye with some enlightening news indeed.

Apparently, a 2003 study at the University of Tennessee looked at 107 students to see if they had forgiving personalities, and fitted them all with blood pressure monitors. Then they asked the students to think about times when another person had betrayed them. Can you guess what happened? The forgiving types experienced a short spike in blood pressure but then it returned to normal quickly. But those who held grudges also held onto that high blood pressure for longer. The researcher also determined that people who hold onto grudges suffer more illnesses, fatigue, depression and sleep problems.

Remember the old saying: “Resentment is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other guy to die.” When we don’t forgive, we generally end up hurting ourselves more than the person from whom we are withholding forgiveness. But when we do forgive, we can experience a feeling of release and freedom.

Christians should not need a medical research study to remind us that the practice of forgiveness is central to the life of faith. Each week in the Lord’s Prayer, we say “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Being forgiven by other people is connected to our own ability to forgive oth-

ers. When we forgive, we are reminded that at some point, given that no one is perfect, we have needed the forgiveness of someone else.

“As a disciple of Jesus, I don’t have to keep carrying around my own dead weight.”

Furthermore, for Christians, forgiveness is not all about us. It’s not just a human problem with a human solution. In our tradition we understand that Christ died to save us from sin. Christ did not die for those imaginary perfect people but for all humanity, as flawed as our behavior may be. There may be things that other human beings will not forgive, but when we make our prayer of confession to Christ, we receive release from our debts from the one who took them upon himself in love. Given that divine generosity, our lives can be transformed into something more beautiful and gracious than we human beings could ever construct on our own.

I may not be much good at cooking light, but living light is within my reach. As a disciple of Jesus, I don’t have to keep carrying around my own dead weight. When my yoke is heavy, there is one who will make it light. Forgiving others is a way to lighten our loads and walk in God’s light. So pass the pasta. I’m feeling lighter already.

The Rev. Lillian Daniel, *United Church News*’ 2006 contributing spirituality columnist, is senior minister of **First Congregational UCC in Glen Ellyn, Ill.**, and the author of the new book “*Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*.”

## REFLECTING ON THE ‘STILLSPEAKING’ GOD

Tolerance, affirmation, celebration — these are the gifts we share

## COMMENTARY



Cain Hope Felder

Too frequently, Christian creeds that affirm only Jesus’ birth or that he suffered under Pontius Pilate suggest that the only significant reference points in his life were that he was born and suffered a cruel death. Such creeds of “civil religion” unwittingly blur the depth and content of Jesus’ ministry to the poor, the outcast, the down trodden and ethnically marginalized. Unfortunately, often today, persons who have a different sexual orientation are treated as outcasts, within

society in general and within our own assemblies specifically.

Jesus spoke truth to power and became the incarnation of a redemptive, inclusive love for everyone, no matter what. Many persons, who are otherwise quite spiritual, are quick to forget that it was our Lord who could find enough goodness in a condemned man to forgive him on the cross!

Our nation and our church share a great legacy of appreciation for the ideals and rhetoric of freedom and “justice for all,” but we miss so many opportunities to put these into actual practice. Instead, harmful intolerance, fully attested within the Old and New Testaments, is an ancient evil that still bedevils us today.

We have such a painful history of using religion to brand, burn, persecute, hate and condemn others without either theological or philosophical justification. Jesus was indeed rejected by the authorities, as were many of his unfortunate contemporaries. Yet, today many church-goers virtually eject those who do not look, dress, talk, or act like them. Jesus reminds us that “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.” (Mark 11:17)

Making room at the table is never difficult for us if we make the same room for others as Jesus made for us. There simply are too many today who want to preempt God’s own prerogative to judge, forgetting Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount mandate: “Judge

not, lest ye not be judged” (Read Matt. 7:1-3).

The new millennium provides us with an opportunity to associate Christian faith more consistently with a jubilee of love. The hallmark of Jesus’ ministry was openness, inclusion and compassion for those frequently shunned and despised by the world. As the incarnation of justice, Jesus was engaged in a ministry that sought to end domination, senseless violence, economic class distinctions, and all types of exclusive behavior.

“The new millennium provides us with an opportunity to associate Christian faith more consistently with a jubilee of love.”

Both society and the church are at their best when they become a home for the homeless and a fortress of tolerance in a world of bias, prejudice and hate. Christ’s church is always a stronger witness when all believers affirm, heal, and accept the mosaic of difference among God’s people. Jesus Christ inspires the church not just to tolerate difference, but actually to affirm the talents and gifts of each human being and to then celebrate the rich diversity among God’s people — no exceptions.

The gospels consistently remind us that Jesus of Nazareth listened when God spoke. The 21st-century witnessing church should rejoice in welcoming all, because the God who spoke so eloquently to Elizabeth, Mary, Jesus, Paul and James is still speaking the gospel of inclusion and affirmation.

The Rev. Cain Hope Felder is professor of New Testament language and literature at Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. His first book, “*Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*,” (Orbis Books, 1989) is considered a contemporary classic in the study of African American biblical interpretation.



**Jesus wandered alone for 40 days.**

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# WOULD JESUS DO STANDUP?

By J. Bennett Guess, Editor

‘Humor is a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer,’ the late Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent UCC theologian, once wrote.

Thanks in part to the Stillspeaking Initiative, the UCC is rediscovering its ‘whimsy’ and touting itself as ‘religion with relevance.’

Our once-furrowed brows have given way to ‘bouncer’ TV commercials and pithy print ads — ‘If you think getting up on Sunday mornings is hard, try rising from the dead.’

But the church’s newest television commercial, scheduled to debut in late March, will beg the question all the more: Is it okay with God if we lighten up?

iStock | Billy Lobo photo

**M**ore than 50 years ago, when the Rev. Fred Craddock started preaching in his native eastern Tennessee, his saintly mother offered some serious advice.

“Humor is beneath the dignity of the pulpit,” she told him.

So Craddock — the now-legendary Disciples of Christ preacher who is regarded as much for use of wit as for his choice of words — says he tried earnestly, at least initially, to heed his mother’s somber advice.

“I just wore my camel’s hair and leather girdle,” Craddock quips, conjuring up the biblical image of the never-too-funny John the Baptist. “I was always serious.”

But Craddock, regarded even by childhood friends as one blessed with a good sense of humor, believes he wasn’t being true to his comedic nature. So, in time, he started to lighten up. And along the way, he not only took advantage of humor in his sermons, he also began to study, research and teach about the artful use of humor in preaching.

“The organic changes within the body in response to humor and tragedy are the same,” Craddock says. “The serious and the humorous, there’s no wall between them.”

That’s why, Craddock says, when one either laughs or tears up, these emotional responses have much more in common than many realize, because the serious and the comedic aren’t that far removed.

“Humor is a twist or disjuncture of the serious,” Craddock told United Church News. “There’s no humor unless you’re dealing with something important. Even a dirty joke is about something important.”

The dog walking down the church aisle, the wasp flying in and landing on the preacher’s nose, or even the finding of a flaw in a priceless piece of fabric — what makes something “funny,” Craddock says, is that it shouldn’t be.

Saint Ignatius walks into a bar

Craddock, the now-retired distinguished professor of preaching and New Testament at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, recalls how, once during a lecture, he made an off-handed quip about Ignatius of Antioch, the martyred first-century saint. It was something silly that garnered chuckles from most in the class, but one rather-stuffy graduate student was offended by the laughter. He thought Craddock was making fun of the ancient patriarch.

“Just the mention of it — ‘Ignatius of Antioch’ — it’s already funny,” Craddock muses. But the theology student didn’t think so.

“There are some who are afraid that their religion isn’t working if they’re laughing,” he says. “They’re afraid it’s not dignified, as if humor and faith were a contradiction.”

Craddock, as one might suspect, believes just the opposite.

“Humor is a sign of freedom,” he says. “From God’s sight of it, it’s a sign of grace ... because, when you think of it, it’s kind of funny that we’re doing what we’re doing — speaking intelligently about God, as if any of us were qualified to do so.”

Laughter, he believes, is an indicator that we can recognize what is significant and important in life, “but we don’t feel as if we have to somehow be protectors of it, that we have to *be* God.”

Pastors, he thinks, should attempt to “sit on their own shoulders” and take a look around at what their calling asks of them.

“Humor is a sign of freedom. From God’s sight of it, it’s a sign of grace ... because, when you think of it, it’s kind of funny that we’re doing what we’re doing — speaking intelligently about God, as if any of us were qualified to do so.”

— The Rev. Fred Craddock

“Here you are,” he says, “trying to *preach*, for goodness sake.”

Craddock says that some scholars have conjectured that Jesus taught with humor, as evidenced by his use of exaggerated speech — “the speck in your neighbor’s eye, the log in your own eye” or “a camel passing through the eye of a needle.” But, while interesting, Craddock really doesn’t put much stock in those suppositions.

What’s important to Craddock, he says, is not unearthing Jesus’ funny streak, but realizing that Jesus wasn’t boring.

“All the usual qualities of normality were with him, but still he stood out,” Craddock says.

The UCC’s newest, ‘whimsical’ ad

While UCC leaders are still short on specifics about the content of the church’s newest television commercial — expected to make its national debut in late March — they have acknowledged that it uses humor to get its point across — quite a departure from the traditional use of “sentimentality” employed by most churches on TV.

General Minister and President John H. Thomas describes the new ad as “whimsical,” but says it still conveys the church’s consistent mantra: “extravagant welcome.”

“The ad is a modern parable,” says Ron Buford, coordinator of the Stillspeaking Initiative. “It’s like good preaching. It comes alive, and people become engaged in the story — and they remember the point of it.”

Ted Pulton, chief marketing officer at Gotham Inc., the UCC’s New York-based advertising firm, says the ad is rich with humor, but that approach only serves to strengthen, not weaken, the message.

“Here at Gotham, when people [see the new UCC ad], they do have an immediate, humorous response,” Pulton says, “but then they go on to talk about how it’s no less able to penetrate the intended message of alienation.”

When it comes to advertising, Pulton says, humor not only gets the “stickiness” of the message to stay with people, but humor also provokes a willingness in people to pass the message along — like a good joke that people yearn to share with friends or co-workers.

Just think: “Aflac!” or “I just saved a whole bunch of money on my car insurance.”

“It’s very easy to create advertising that people expect,” Pulton says. “Traditionally, religious ads produce a feel-good feeling that lasts for the 30 seconds that it’s running. So the place to start is to remember the purpose of advertising, which is to persuade and convey a message, to get people’s attention and then be memorable.”

An invitation to joy

With any serious subject, such as religion, the tendency is to make it heavy, Buford says. But non-churchgoers are looking for an experience of church that doesn’t weigh them down, but lifts them up. Therefore, a church’s willingness to embrace “levity,” he says, speaks to that often-unspoken spiritual need.

“At its core, this is a branding campaign, and clearly we are a Christian church and that’s supreme for us,” Buford says. “But everywhere I

go in the UCC, I find this general sense of friendliness, of lightness, of humor; that many people [outside the UCC] just don’t expect to find in a church. And when they do find it, it’s a joy.”

The Rev. Robert Chase, the UCC’s director of communications, says a great example of a memorable, light-yet-serious approach to religion was Thomas’ highly-visible “unequivocal welcome” of SpongeBob SquarePants last year. Thomas’ pastoral invitation came in response to James Dobson’s harsh criticism of the popular cartoon character for appearing in a children’s video promoting tolerance.

A snapshot photo of SpongeBob’s “visit” with Thomas in his Cleveland office spread like wildfire through the internet and, soon, national news programs publicized the stunt as the light-hearted antithesis to Dobson’s heavy-handed attack. UCC folk, meanwhile, soaked up the silliness of it all.

“The response was overwhelming,” recalls Chase. “Our web site had more traffic than during the [bouncer] ad controversy, perhaps demonstrating how we all need a bit of whimsy in our lives.”

“John’s statement was both pastoral and prophetic, shattering the perception that for church people, the rib God borrowed from Adam was his funny bone,” Chase says.

Pulton believes humor not only helps defuse serious situations, but also prepares us to receive more-serious messages.

“The heart of the UCC’s message [alienation] is one that strikes a nerve,” Pulton says, “and the metaphors we use, both in the ‘bouncer’ ad and in the newest ad — absurd as they are — act as metaphors, as doorways, that diffuse the seriousness while penetrating the message.”

The Rev. David Schoen, who leads the UCC’s Evangelism Ministry in Cleveland, says too many people associate evangelism with frightening experiences — “trying to scare people into faith” — but evangelism should be an invitation to joy.

“People are dying to laugh,” Schoen says. “There’s not enough honest laughter in our lives, and evangelism suffers from a lack of laughter.”

Thankfully, he says, the whole Stillspeaking Initiative has awakened the church to creative engagement with mainstream culture, including the wit and wisdom it can offer.

“Conservative churches have historically used the tools of culture without embracing it, while progressive Christians have embraced culture without using its tools,” Schoen says. “I think we have to embrace culture by using its tools, including humor.”

Craddock, too, agrees that the UCC’s best moment to converse with popular culture is now. “This is an extraordinary time for the UCC,” he says. “I think you’re on the front of the stage right now.”

God is still laughing,

The Rev. F. Christian Anderson, pastor of **Heidelberg UCC in York, Pa.**, has published his own testament to the power of laughter — UCC style.

Touted as the kind of book that Rodney



Ward Sutton, creator of Sutton Impact cartoons, is a member of **Judson Memorial Church (UCC/American Baptist) in New York**. His cartoons have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Entertainment Weekly*, among others. *The Village Voice* has used his artistic commentaries regularly since 1998, including the above cartoon from January 2005 where Sutton poked fun at the religious right, the UCC ‘bouncer’ ad controversy, and the no-carbohydrate craze.

Courtesy of Sutton Impact

Dangerfield and Karl Barth would have written together, “God is Still Laughing, *The Revised Heidelberg Catechism Joke Book*” pokes fun at just about everything UCC:

**Q:** *What should a UCC candidate for ordination answer when asked: “Are you willing to go to hell for the glory of God?”*

**A:** *Go even farther with your devotion: “This whole Association ‘can go to hell’ for the glory of God.”*

The Rev. Gabriel Fackre, now-retired professor of theology at UCC-related Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, says he “almost split his hernia stitches” chuckling at the book’s final pages.

“We smile at the pompous fool who slips on a banana peel,” Fackre wrote in the book’s forward. “And God ‘sits in the heaven and laughs’ [Psalm 2:4] at the proud who pretend to be more than they are.”

Too often, Fackre acknowledges, UCC pastors are “remembered only for their grim reformist ways and our furrowed brows.” But laughing, he says, can lead us into holy places. The “ultimate human quandaries” can take us through laughter to faith.

Quoting the wisdom of Reinhold Niebuhr, Fackre writes: “There is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer ... in the holy of holies.”

LEARN MORE@

“God is Still Laughing, *The Revised Heidelberg Catechism Joke Book*” is available from the Rev. F. Christian Anderson for \$8 each (or \$1 million in Canada — “I only need one sale”), plus \$1 shipping and handling. Contact Anderson at 717/846-9146 or <fca@suscom.net>.

## A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON MY WAY TO THE PULPIT

Funny-man Fred Craddock, dubbed by *Newsweek* as one of the nation’s 12 best living preachers, offers a few observations and tips on humor:

**When you see the flaws in life, it’s funny.** “Things will happen,” Craddock says. “If the congregation feels free, you can laugh about it.”

**Manufactured humor will be dead.** If you work too hard on it, it’ll fall flat, Craddock believes. Personal stories work best.

**What makes it funny is that it’s serious.** All weighty topics have funny dimensions, because humor is the contradiction between the gravity and the levity. “The fact that ‘Mary had a little lamb’ and brought it to the school yard is funny, because school is supposed to be a place that’s serious,” Craddock says.

**Humor is more than telling jokes.** “I never recommend a joke,” says Craddock, “because many jokes are not funny and it’s easy to be cruel with jokes. Besides, a joke is its own unified material. It has its own beginning, middle and end, and it’s hard to make the transition in and out of a joke [within a sermon].”

**Humor is a means, not an end.** “I don’t invest too much in my humor,” Craddock insists, saying he doesn’t critique the success of his sermons based on whether or not people laughed at his stories.

source: interview with Craddock

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# Scholarship fund established for Hispanic UCC seminarians

He didn't realize it at the time, but when the Rev. Héctor López was ordained in 1966 at Plymouth UCC in Oakland, Calif., he became the first Hispanic in the United States (excluding Puerto Rico) to be ordained in the UCC, formed in 1957.

In 1996, when López — a Mexican American — accepted the call to be Conference Minister in the Central Pacific Conference, he became the UCC's first Hispanic Conference Minister in the United States.

Today, although Latinos/as are the largest ethnic minority in the United States, the UCC's Hispanic membership remains less than one percent of total UCC membership.

In order to meet the pastoral challenge of this burgeoning Hispanic population, the UCC's Council for Hispanic Ministries has announced a new scholarship fund for

Latinos and Latinas to attend UCC seminaries.

The fund, first announced at López's retirement festivities, is named The Rev. Héctor López Scholarship Fund.

"We couldn't think of a more appropriate way to honor Héctor than a scholarship fund to develop future Hispanic leaders for the UCC," says the Rev. Linda Jaramillo, executive minister of the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries. "Héctor has already been a mentor and leader to many persons, Hispanics and others alike. He's shown a visible and courageous commitment to the UCC and to our identity as a church of liberation theologies."

Indeed, rather than hold a typical retirement party, López's last official act was to convene a four-day national convocation: "God Is Still Seeking Racial Justice."

More than 175 persons gathered

in Portland, Ore., for the event, held Nov. 10-13, 2005.

Keynote speaker the Rev. Paul H. Sherry, former UCC president, challenged participants to exercise a transforming and courageous love as they work toward racial justice.

Other speakers represented every racial/ethnic group within the UCC and every aspect of López's ministry across 40 years.



The Rev. Héctor López addresses a racial justice convocation in Portland, Ore.

W. Evan Golder photo

LEARN MORE@

Speeches and sermons from the Convocation on Racial Justice are posted at <cpucc.org>.

For more information or to contribute to "The Rev. Héctor López Scholarship Fund for Latino and Latina UCC Seminarians," contact CHM Scholarship Initiative, c/o Peter Barbosa, P.O. Box 14010, San Francisco, CA 94114-0010; 415/509-7049; CHMScholarship@aol.com.

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*When was it that we saw you... thirsty?*  
— Matthew 25:37

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# UCC and German partner celebrate 25th anniversary of *Kirchengemeinschaft*

By Andy Lang  
Special to United Church News

When the UCC and the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) declared *Kirchengemeinschaft* — full communion — 25 years ago, Germany was a divided country.

The EKU was divided, too. The ancestral church of the German immigrants who founded one of the UCC's antecedent denominations, the EKU was split into "East" and "West" synods, each corresponding to the territory of the two German states.

So *Kirchengemeinschaft* was a breakthrough not only in ecumenical but also in East-West relations. For East German Protestants, few of whom could travel outside the orbit of the Soviet Union, the new relationship eased their sense of isolation.

Twenty-five years later, Germany's Protestant churches are reunited and fragments of the Berlin Wall are for sale on eBay. The EKU has joined with other Protestants in Germany to form an expanded "Union of Evangelical Churches" (UEK). The world is no longer divided into East and West, but the UCC and UEK still face the world's other great divide — between haves and have-nots in their own countries, and globally between North and South.

The two churches share a ministry of reconciliation, said Bishop Ulrich Fischer of Baden during the opening service of the 25th-anniversary conference in November in Berlin. "What has begun on the cross at Golgotha has meaning for living together peacefully among denominations and churches in the world, as well as for political actions by the church to achieve a world order of

peace based on justice.

"Unity of the church and peace in the world — they are closely connected with each other," Fischer said. "By Christ's reconciling action, lines between churches will be torn down first of all, then fences and then walls. The peace which has been achieved by Christ does not stop at church walls. This peace wants to enter into the entire world."

Advocacy for global justice is at the heart of *Kirchengemeinschaft*, said Vicar Elga Zachau, a young theologian at the Ruhr University and keynote speaker at the conference.

"*Kirchengemeinschaft* understands itself as a community of witnesses for God's mission to the world," she said. "*Kirchengemeinschaft* means to live this community in word and deed, and wants to address the people in the churches and the world community. I think the strength of *Kirchengemeinschaft* lies in our ability to connect word and deed and in a growing awareness of global contexts among our church members. If we can manage that, we have achieved very much."

The Berlin conference brought together more than 100 bishops and Conference ministers, pastors, theologians and laypeople from the partner churches. The UCC delegation was headed by General Minister and President John H. Thomas; UEK delegates were led by President Wilhem Hueffmeier. The conference honored the two former EKU ecumenical officers who negotiated *Kirchengemeinschaft* with the UCC: Christa Gregel of the EKU (East) and Reinhard Groscurth of the EKU (West).

"Those were urgent days," Thomas preached at the conference's closing eucharist in the historic Huguenot parish in Berlin. "They were

days of crisis when the Wall through this city symbolized the ominous divide between East and West, when Germany played host to foreign armies and when very real weapons of mass destruction were poised to unleash a fury that would end life on this planet.

"*Kirchengemeinschaft* was an act that recognized the urgency, the crisis of our times, a bold and courageous refusal to allow the Wall with its nuclear weapons to define the church or the creation. The border crossings of Christa Gregel and Reinhard Groscurth may have seemed pitiful in the face of the armed might massed on both sides of the Wall. But in the end they helped undermine the apparatus of destruction and fear. As Luke puts it in the parable, 'whoever is faithful in a very little, is faithful also in much.'"

After the service, delegates were guests at the Berlin office of the Evangelical Church of Germany — the nationwide federation of United, Lutheran and Reformed churches — by the chair of the federation's governing council, Bishop Wolfgang Huber.

The exchange of gifts between guests and hosts is an honored tradition in Germany. Particular care went into the choice of the UCC's gift to its UEK partners: a clay sculpture of a man and woman beating a sword into a plowshare by UCC artist Charles McCollough. The image from Isaiah was a symbol of East Germany's underground Christian peace movement during the 1980s.

Today, 11 UCC Conferences have bilateral partnerships with regional churches in the UEK.

## GLOBAL CHURCH MARKS BONHOEFFER'S 100TH

Dieterich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the German Evangelical pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and hanged for his opposition to the Nazis, is being remembered around the world on Feb. 4, the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Bonhoeffer openly challenged the church to stand with the Jews, and eventually joined in a family plot to kill Adolf Hitler. His books are now considered classics in the study of religion, philosophy and ethics.

"The service of the church," Bonhoeffer once said, "has to be given to those who suffer violence and injustice."

Commemorating his birth, PBS will air the award-winning

documentary "Bonhoeffer," directed by Martin Doblmeier, on Monday, Feb. 6 at 10 p.m. (ET). The UCC's Wisconsin Conference contributed financially to the making of the film.

"Bonhoeffer's distinction between 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace' remains of critical importance as the church attempts to make its way into the future," says the Rev. Fred Trost, retired Wisconsin Conference Minister and a member of the UCC's Confessing Christ movement. "Cheap grace is, for Bonhoeffer, faith without discipleship, confession without substance, where everything can remain as it was before, where the world can go on in the same old way."

## BIORELATABLE: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



Bonhoeffer

**Born:** February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Germany, along with his twin sister, Sabine.

**Educated:** University of Berlin (doctorate, 1927); United Theological Seminary in New York City (post-graduate, 1930-31).

**Ordained:** St. Matthias Church in Berlin (1931)

**Ministry:** Lecturer in theology, University of Berlin; pastor, German Evangelical Church in Sydenham, Germany, and the Reformed Church of St. Paul in London. He returned to Germany in 1935 to head the seminary of Germany's anti-Nazi "Confessing Church."

**Close friend:** Paul Lehmann, son of Timothy Lehmann, then-president of UCC-related Elmhurst College. Both tried to persuade Bonhoeffer to teach at Elmhurst rather than return to Nazi Germany, after he completed a post-graduate year at Union Theological Seminary in 1931.

**Favorite passage of scripture:** "Open your mouth for the voiceless." (Proverbs 31)

**Famous quote:** "The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live." (1942)

**Famous question:** "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

**The Bonhoeffer Library:** "Christ as Culture," from his final lecture course at University of Berlin (1933); "Act and Being," "Christ the Center," "The Communion of Saints," "The Cost of Discipleship," "Ethics," "Letters & Papers from Prison," "Life Together."

**Challenged:** Germany's Nazi party; anti-Semitism, status-quo Christology.

**Arrested:** Spring 1943, for helping Jews escape to Switzerland.

**Hanged:** April 9, 1945, at the concentration camp at Flossenbürg; one of four members of his immediate family to die for participation in the anti-Nazi resistance.

**His love:** Maria von Wedermeyer, his fiancée, to whom he wrote from prison. His letters were subsequently published as "Love Letters from Cell 92."

**Remembered:** A courageous pastor, brilliant theologian and prolific writer of the 1930s who comprehensively grasped both German- and English-language theology; a leader — along with Martin Niemöller and Karl Barth — in Germany's Confessing Church movement.

Religion News Service photo

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# Online course to offer 'biblical self-defense' for UCC members

So, there you are, minding your own business, just rummaging through your grocer's produce section, when someone recognizes you as a member of "that church" and accosts you for "not believing in the Bible" — whaddaya do?

The Rev. Susan Thistlethwaite, president of UCC-related Chicago Theological Seminary, has a suggestion: You should sign up for her new, six-week online class called "Biblical and Theological Self-Defense for the United Church of Christ."

"I often attend Conference and Association events and, all around the country, I hear people saying that they feel as if they are under attack," she says, "and they feel ill-equipped when someone says 'Why do you go to that gay church?' or claims that the

UCC's social and theological positions are 'against the Bible.'"

Thistlethwaite says she's seen the need for a long time, but she only started developing the course in earnest after a colleague alerted her to the availability of online-curriculum software.

The web-based classroom allows for password-protected interchanges between teacher and students; downloadable reading materials; and student-to-student interaction. It's the next-best thing to being there, she says, especially for UCC members eager to muster more courage to stand up for themselves and their church.

The syllabus, she says, will range from the theoretical, including basic introductions to theology, Christology and ethics, to the ultra-practical,

such as how best to respond to verbal attacks against your church or your personal beliefs.

"We'll take it on the road and examine some possible scenarios," she says. "We need to help our people come to their own defense. There are many who feel like they don't know how to respond when attacked from a place of biblical literalism."

Beginning the week of March 27, the online not-for-credit course will cost only \$45 per person, and congregations can enroll multiple church members for the single \$45 audit fee.

(Course credit, however, is available for those who desire it, even though full tuition is required and students will need to make arrangements to also attend a five-day, on-campus class, May 15-19.)

Registration is required before March 24 and enrollment will be limited to 100 students. Interested participants can preview the course's first module by emailing <webcourse@ctsichicago.edu>, and you'll be sent a temporary password and information on how to preview the materials.

"The key to the UCC is laity

education," she believes. "Our polity doesn't work if our people don't feel prepared or comfortable defending what they know to be true."

LEARN MORE @

Not-for-credit registration for "Biblical and Theological Self-Defense for the United Church of Christ" is required before March 24 at <ctsichicago.edu>. The cost is \$45. Select "webcourse registration" from the blue section of the homepage. To register for academic credit, contact the registrar at <cmiller@ctsichicago.edu> for more information.

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## FAITH AND HIP-HOP

### 'Curiosity killed the catechism'

#### FINDING RELIGION IN THE CHURCH OF HIP-HOP ARTISTRY

By Pablo "Paul" Pitcher  
Special to United Church News

I'm sure that I am not the first person to write about the connection between hip-hop and faith. Of course, I'd like to think I'm the first Southside Chicago-bred white boy who has connected the dots and found the roots of my faith written into the rhythmically crafted lyrics, but I'm almost positive that I'm not. Whatever the case, hip-hop has affected my faith.

Faith and spirituality are two elements that can be found in all nooks and crannies of life. But as I see it, quite a few people have struggled for so long with or against religion that they have given up. And who am I to tell them anything different?

I live and work in a land where faith and life go hand in hand. In Guatemala, my friends, my family and my co-workers have the faith that each day will move them forward, that each day will bring a new light, and that each day will come to a close. This has led me to a whole new realm of realizations.

Popular mainstream music — of every sort — always has been sprinkled with hints and allusions to religion and faith, but most of the time it comes in veiled references. Now and then, it's an off-hand thanking of God. Occasionally, it relates to some form of belief.

But on the whole, mainstream music is a barren wasteland in relation to lyrics specifically targeted at faith, belief and God.

Kanye West, a hip-hop artist from Chicago who won three Grammys last year with his song "Jesus Walks," writes, quite accurately, that: "They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus / That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes / But if I talk about God my record won't get played Huh?"

But for years now, it has been hip-hop music that has brought me a message about faith. So my question is how the church can look to hip-hop — to mainstream culture — to help us examine our faith?

#### 'My church'

I spend many hours in a place I call "my church." It's my own personal sanctuary. My church's pews are the torn leather seats found on a Guatemalan bus. Along with the 70 other members of the "congregation" who try to find a small piece of leather on which to park their tired bodies, we gallop down the two-lane roads of Guatemala, along with other buses, weaving and battling with the montage of pickups full of egg flats, enormous bull cows with their skin flapping off their scrawny bodies, emaciated dogs who decided to take a nap on the road. We are mad tubs of metal screeching through the countryside.

At times in my "church," I look for a lesson, frequently I just meditate, and on occasion I write. More often than not you will find me with my headphones on and some muddled blend of folk, rock, pop, jazz, Latin, or hip-hop music infiltrating my head through one ear — since only one side of my earpiece works.

On one of my various trips I got much more than I bargained for. My eyes were focused out

the grimy pane of glass that could have used a few squirts of Windex and a rag. But still, through that smudged portal, I was watching the countryside fly by. Suddenly, I realized that a message was streaming through my one ear; a sermon speaking to me by way of music and setting.

I was listening to Common, another hip-hop artist from Chicago's Southside. The song is called "G.O.D." (Gaining One's Definition.), and I started paying close attention to the lyrics. So, let me now invite you to join me in my church:

"Please rise for the reading."

I fight, with myself in the ring of doubt and fear  
The rain ain't gone, but I can still see clear  
As a child, given religion with no answer to why  
Just told believe in Jesus cuz for me he did die  
Curiosity killed the catechism  
Understanding and wisdom became the rhythm that I played to  
And became a slave to master self  
A rich man is one with knowledge, happiness and his health  
My mind had dealt with the books of Zen, Tao the lessons  
Koran and the Bible, to me they all vital  
And got truth within 'em, gotta read them boys  
You just can't skim 'em, different branches of belief  
But one root that stem 'em, but people of the venom try to trim 'em  
And use religion as an emblem  
When it should be a natural way of life  
Who am I or they to say to whom you pray ain't right  
That's who got you doin' right and got you this far  
Whether you say, "in Jesus name" or "Alhum du'Allah"  
Long as you know it's a bein' that's supreme to you  
You let that show towards others in the things you do

"The word of G.O.D."

Common's rap represents a huge part of what I have struggled through with religion and what I continue to question every day. In these lines, the complexity of my faith journey is dissected like a frog in eighth-grade science lab. It's taken apart piece by piece, it's examined from every angle, and I learn from it. It's given a beat, wrapped into the soul, and spit back out again with incredible clarity.

Look, see what can be found

I still fight religion in many ways. I still have so many doubts, so many fears about taking down the barrier that I set up years and year ago. I see that many people my age have that same issue. We were given religion as children, but not told why we needed to believe just that we had to believe. All we were told was to wear



Geffen Records hip-hop artist Common incorporates many elements of his faith journey into his lyrics.

Geffen Records | Christian Lantry photo

our Sunday best and sit still for two hours.

But over the last few years I have really looked into religion, and there has always one underlying principle in my search: I was going to do it my way. I was going to figure out my own religion and spirituality without letting anyone tell me what to believe. Yet, all the while, I would do this allowing people, books, music, a walk in the woods, etc., to guide me. I would see what I found along the way.

I continue to explore my own sense of spirituality, my relationship with the figure of Christ and what that represents, the fact that religion is a way of life practiced in many different forms, and that faith is a driving force, something that can rip people apart or bring them close together.

I have listened to so many different perspectives. I have watched people of diverse faiths united in common prayer in languages as varied as the dishes at a potluck dinner. On the other end, I have been told that there is only one way to worship God.

But in Common's lyrics, encased in a song, is exactly how I feel: "Who am I or they to say to whom you pray ain't right." And the beat goes on.

Faith is a journey that never ends, an adventure that we continually add to piece by piece. From what I have seen while living here in Central America and traveling around its countryside, the presence of faith, of any sort, guides and drives peoples' lives.

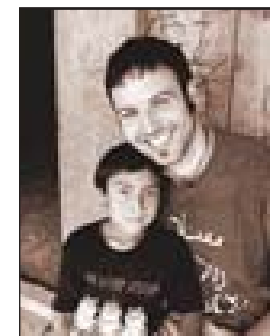
In the face of extreme depression, poverty, sadness and challenges, faith can act as a catalyst, a channel by which people can keep taking two steps forward even after that one step back.

I don't say that people have to believe in God or believe as I do, I would never say that. That's not my style. But what I hope to provide here is another approach to finding faith in every day life, on the streets of whatever town you live in, in the eyes of the people around you, in the most unlikely of places, even in hip hop. And to utilize that faith, that spirituality, that religion, that "anything you want to call it" that is found in everyday life. You can take it or leave it.

As Common says, "Long as you know it's a bein' that's supreme to you /

You let that show towards others in the things you do."

And let the people say, "Amen."



Pablo "Paul" Pitcher, 27, is a UCC/Disciples missionary in Guatemala, where he has served as a communications and youth worker with Christian Action of Guatemala since 2004. He is pictured here with his eight-year-old friend, Hector.

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Regional gatherings of "Faithful and Welcoming Churches" will be held in North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, New England, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Kansas during March 2006.



## Bravo-bomb survivors testify before U.S. Department of Energy High cancer rates, inadequate medical care for children cited as continuing problem for survivors

Special to United Church News

Officials from the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) met in Honolulu on Dec. 8, where survivors of U.S. nuclear tests from 1946 to 1958 continued to call for more-adequate restitution and medical treatment.

At least 67 different tests were conducted by the United States in the Marshall Islands, including the dropping of the hydrogen-bomb "Bravo" on March 1, 1954, which was 1,000 times the size of the bomb dropped in Hiroshima, Japan.

Led by RMI Minister of Foreign Affairs Gerald Zackios, senators, mayors and lawyers representing the four atolls affected by nuclear radiation — Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik, and Bikini (ERUB) — spoke about the need for the U.S. government

to provide adequate restitution. Also present were Deputy Assistant Secretary Steve Cary of the U.S. Department of Energy and U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) Greta Morris, as well as RMI President Kesai Note, who visited the proceedings.

"Give medical treatment to our children!" urged members of an organization of survivors, known as ERUB, including the group's president Naiki Ribuca; Maza Attari, former mayor of Utrik; and Chiyoko Tamayose of Rongelap. Elma Coleman assisted with translation.

Tamayose told of how, during the tests, U.S. boats came only to evacuate adults, but that many children and grandchildren were not evacuated. Tamayose and others insisted that adequate medical care for survivors' descendants was paramount, given that high cancer rates

still plague survivors' families.

In his opening statement, Foreign Minister Zackios insisted that a meeting with a deputy assistant secretary was not sufficient. He asserted that the highest levels of the DOE should be negotiating with the RMI.

Only a flat \$150 million was granted 15 years ago by the U.S. government for clean up, an amount that survivors have called "absurd."

After studying 60 boxes of material released under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, the RMI government submitted a changed "circumstances petition" to the U.S. Congress in 2000 asking for \$3 billion more to compensate for additional medical costs, land and displacement claims.

However, in January 2005, the Bush Administration released a 66-page document saying that the U.S.

government does not legally owe the RMI government or its people any further funds. And given the ever-escalating costs associated with the U.S. war in Iraq, congressional approval for the RMI looks unlikely without greater grassroots support from supporters in the U.S., survivors acknowledge.

Members of the Hawaii chapter of the UCC's Pacific Islander — Asian American Ministries were present to hear survivors' testimonies. The UCC's General Synod, as well as other settings of the church, have long called for justice for the Marshallese people and their descendants.

For more information about joining survivors' campaign for justice, contact Elma Coleman at 808/422-4690 or <lmacoleman@hotmail.com>; or Julia Estrella at 808/941-0317 or <tristar@hula.net>.

in the news

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Testifying before U.S. federal officials, Elma Coleman (l.), a member of the UCC's Pacific Islander Asian American Ministries, translates for Chiyoko Tamayose, a survivor of U.S. nuclear testing at the Rongelap atoll, Marshall Islands.

Ronald Fujiyoshi photo

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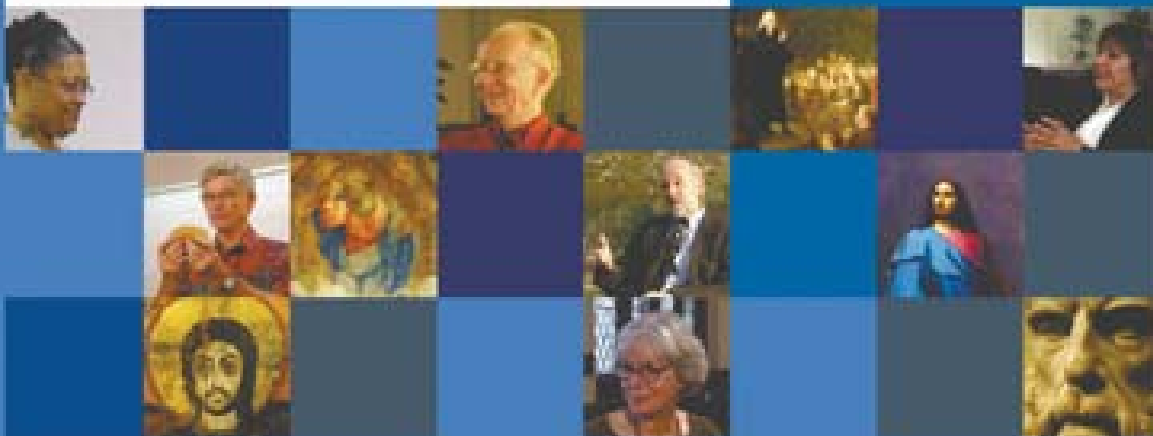


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The UCC's search and call process requires that ministerial profiles be submitted to the proper Association or Conference office, not directly to a local church. Therefore, the use of a personal reply address in a ministerial search ad is not accepted. If you have questions, call the UCC's Parish, Life and Leadership Ministry at 866/822-8224, ext. 3849.

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### REMEMBERED

► **The Rev. Mineo Katagiri**, 86, a former Northern California Conference Minister and a trustee emeritus at UCC-related Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, who died on Nov. 15, 2005. Katagiri, who once served as the UCC's national director of mission priorities, also served churches in Hawaii, Ohio, Washington and New York. A civil rights and social justice leader, he taught at Doshisha University in Japan, ministered to University of Washington students and served as a Washington State college system regent. Survived by his wife of nearly 61 years, Nobu, and two daughters, he was preceded in death by one daughter. Condolences may be sent to: Nobu Katagiri, 1550 Sutter Street, # 522, San Francisco, CA 94109.



Katagiri

► **Aruko Bobo**, 67, one of few long-term survivors after the nuclear tests by the U.S. military in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958, who died on Oct. 25, 2005. Bobo and her older sister, Almira Matayoshi, who died last May, had dedicated their lives to telling survivors' stories and advocating for an apology, restitution and proper medical care, from the U.S. federal government because of the atrocities. In 1956, two years after severe radiation exposure, the sisters' mother and father developed inoperable thyroid cancer and died.

### HONORED

► **The Rev. Barbara Gerlach**, a pastor at **First Congregational UCC in Washington, D.C.**, and **the Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree**, Connecticut Conference Minister, after two farms or *fincas* outside Catagena, Colombia, were named in their honor. *Finca Barbara* and *Finca Davida* are being developed to provide internally displaced Colombians a place to live, work, produce food and find support. Gerlach and Crabtree are longtime advocates in support of UCC-Colombia partnerships. War-torn Colombia is second only to Darfur in the number of persons internally displaced by violence.

### LAUDED

► **The Rev. Yvette Flunder**, pastor of **City of Refuge UCC in San Francisco**, by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force on Jan. 13 as one of seven African-American lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community leaders "whose work embodies the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s expansive vision of social justice." In November, Flunder was a keynote speaker at NGLTF's annual Creating Change conference, where she said, "We've got to make this circle ever wider; we've got to make the table ever longer; we've got to print some more invitations until everybody can have a seat. You see it's not dinner till everybody sits down."

### RESIGNED

► **The Rev. R. Scott Colglazier**, on Dec. 13, as president of UCC-related United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. A local church pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for more than 20 years, Colglazier resigned after just three months on the job, saying that he missed parish ministry and had "undergone a period of personal unhappiness" as he tried to adjust to his new role. "It became clear almost from the beginning that what the school needed and what I consider my best gifts was just not a good match," Colglazier told DisciplesWorld. Kita McVay, a former chair of the board of trustees and current chair of the seminary's development committee, has been named interim president.

### RETIRING

► **The Rev. Otis Young**, after 34 years as senior minister of **First Plymouth Congregational UCC in Lincoln, Neb.**, the UCC's fourth-largest congregation. The Rev. James Keck, pastor of **The Congregational UCC of San Mateo, Calif.**, has been named "senior minister elect" and will assume the Nebraska pastorate this summer.

### APPOINTED

► **The Rev. Verlee A. Copeland**, senior minister of **Union UCC in Hinsdale, Ill.**, to the Fund for Theological Education's national board of directors. FTE advocates for excellence and diversity in Christian ministry.

### VISITED

► **Lynn Lejeune**, mayor of Eunice, La. (population: 11,500), to **Zion UCC in Henderson, Ky.**, to express her community's appreciation for goods contributed by Zion UCC and the UCC's Evansville/Tri-State Association after Hurricane Katrina. When asked if Eunice, La., had a UCC church, the mayor responded, "No, but you should come down there and start one."

### RUNNING

► The Rev. Scott MacLean, an ordained UCC minister, as a "reform Republican" for Connecticut's first district congressional seat. "I am concerned that the incivility and highly partisan atmosphere in Washington does a disservice to our country," he said.

### CLERGY DEATHS

- Bachelder, Stephen**, 88, 11/10/2005
- Cole, Robert P.**, 72, 12/20/2005
- Edwards, Sandra V.**, 65, 12/6/2005
- Fiebiger, Judson E.**, 100, 11/10/2005
- Grant, Alexander J.**, 95, 12/22/2005
- Hanser, Carl F.**, 71, 12/9/2005
- Johnson, Julian B.**, 89, 11/2/2005
- Katagiri, Mineo**, 86, 11/27/2005
- Kreps, Carl C.**, 73, 12/11/2005
- Paulson, Peter H.**, 84, 12/11/2005
- Robinson, Gordon E.**, 92, 11/27/2005
- Sova, Laverne A.**, 73, 11/9/2005
- Stevens, W. Millard**, 94, 12/5/2005
- Woodward, Arthur C.**, 83, 12/16/2005

Information on clergy deaths is provided by The Pension Boards.

### PASTORAL CHANGES

- Anderson, W. Brian** Citrus Springs, FL to Braintree UCC, Weymouth, MA
- Bair, Laura** to Starview (PA) UCC
- Baker, Gregory N.** Braintree, MA to Cong. UCC, Somerset, MA
- Baughcum, Marshal A.** McLean, VA to Plymouth Cong. UCC, Belmont, MA
- Burt, Steven E.** Norwich, CT to interim, Waitsfield (VT) UCC
- Carlson, Gloria D.** South UCC Weymouth, MA to First UCC, Weymouth, MA
- Carter, Diane** to Northfield Cong. UCC, Weston, CT
- Chomiak, Gary** Irvine, CA to Cong. UCC, Fullerton, CA
- Clark-Jones, Denise** to Faith UCC, New Cumberland, PA
- Danneberger, David** to Shiloh UCC, York, PA
- D'Heedene, Susan B.** Danville, PA to Trinity UCC, Waynesboro, PA
- Downs, Denise J.** to interim, Bethel UCC, White Salmon, WA
- Frey, Tyson S.** Telford, PA to Church of the Apostles UCC, Lancaster, PA
- Fries, Emily G.** Albany, CA to Urbandale (IA) UCC
- Gaetani, Elaine S.** Norfolk, MA to Westborough, MA
- Gerstenlauer, Thomas** Canal Fulton, OH to Miller Ave. UCC, Akron, OH
- Gottwald, James T.** Somonauk, IL to St. John's UCC, Laurys Station, PA
- Hackman, Heidi** Union, MO to First UCC, Belleville, WI
- Havelka, Nicole** to chaplain, Lake Villa, IL
- Hawken, Jane** Portland, CT to Second Cong. UCC, Middle Haddam, CT
- Hayes, Patricia** Newark, DE to Christ Cong. UCC, Brockton, MA
- Hibshman, Herbert** Richland, PA to Tupehocken Trinity UCC, Richland, PA
- Hickson, Del** to Federated Church, Willington, CT
- Hollinger, Bonnie** to St. Peter's UCC, Lancaster, PA
- Johnson, Peggy A.** Downers Grove, IL to interim, St. Paul UCC, Monee, IL
- Kapp, William** Darlington, WI to First UCC, Sauk City, WI
- Knighon, Leonard S.** to Lebanon, PA
- Kruse, Earl J.** Random Lake, WI to retirement
- Lewis, Jeffrey M.** Harvard, MA to First Cong. UCC, Montague, MA
- Lipinczyk, Karen** Euclid, OH to St. Peter UCC, Wadesville, IN
- Little, Jennifer A.** Champaign, IL to Park St. Cong. UCC, Mazon, IL
- Mabry, Steven** Tehachapi, CA to Plymouth UCC, Paso Robles, CA
- McCausland, Faith** to St. John's-St. Peter's-Salem UCC, Aaronsburg, PA
- Partington, Neil** Mountaintop, PA to First UCC, Lake Mills, WI
- Paterik, Marie S.** Ashland, NE to First Cong. UCC, Glasgow, MT
- Pomeroy, David** to First Cong. UCC, Las Vegas, NV
- Rosenberger, Dale B.** Ridgefield, CT to Union UCC, Dennis, MA
- Roundy, Anne A.** Rangeley, ME to Federated, Thomaston, ME
- Ryder, Diane** to Sierra Vista (AZ) UCC
- Schroeder, Lori K.** to First Presbyterian, St. Anne, IL
- Shank, Holly M.** to Grace UCC, Lebanon, PA
- Silliman, John W.** Lock Haven, PA to St. John's UCC, Shamokin, PA
- Simmons, Reba J.** Lebanon, PA to St. Stephens, Lebanon, PA
- Stork-Whitson, Karin** College Station, TX to interim, St. Paul's UCC, Mechanicsburg, PA
- Tabloff, Bonita N.** Chewelah, WA to First Cong. UCC, Big Timber, MT
- Thiessen, Sara** Darmstadt, IL to Zwingli UCC, Paoli, WI
- Wohlhuter, Brian** to Minden (IA) UCC
- Young, Terri L.** Westminster, MD to interim Kent (OH) UCC

Information for pastoral changes is provided by the UCC's Parish Life and Leadership Ministry.

Edited by Carol L. Pavlik

# STAYING CONNECTED

## BUILDING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES



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## Media ministry in Nebraska reaches thousands

The imposing carillon tower of First-Plymouth UCC gives a distinctive look to the Lincoln, Neb., skyline. The church building, dedicated 75 years ago, houses the fourth-largest congregation in the UCC and features striking architectural elements. Inside, it also houses a state-of-the-art sound booth, television lighting and five digital television cameras. But you'd never know it.

"First-Plymouth is a beautiful, historic church," says Tammy Alvis, director of First-Plymouth's Media Ministry. Years ago, Alvis remembers when the local television station came in to broadcast Christmas services. The scaffolding, lights, cameras and their operators were an intrusive presence on the worship service. So, while Alvis believed the weekly radio and television broadcasts were an integral part of their church's ministry, continuing them would require ways to minimize distraction from the main message.

"We respect the worship service and we don't intrude," says Alvis. "The camera is our guest."

Over 20,000 people tune in weekly to First-Plymouth's Sunday morning radio broadcast on the local AM station, and the television broadcast, "Reach Out and Live," on three commercial television sta-

tions and a local access channel. But Alvis and her crew of volunteers are forging ahead. Keeping up with the ever-changing technology of the 21st century, Alvis was surprised when members of the congregation and viewers all over the state started asking her about podcasts.

"I was like, what's a podcast?" laughs Alvis.

Podcasts, a term inspired by Apple's "iPod" (a small, handheld device that plays digital sound files) and the word "broadcast," refers to sound files that can be published on the internet. Users can download the files onto their computer or their iPod or other MP3 player to listen to the program when they choose.

"I knew I had to do it," says Alvis, "when people asked me, 'When are you going to start podcasting so I can download the sermon and

listen to it when I exercise?'"

Besides podcasts of the weekly sermons, First-Plymouth's website provides other timely information about the church, including its weekly e-newsletters and special events, printed sermons and even a page for online prayer requests.

Soon, users will be able to go online to give donations, using a credit card. Alvis is especially proud of the website, which gets roughly 10,000 hits from web users each month. "For me, one of the most important things is keeping the website as up-to-date as possible," explains Alvis. "If you don't keep it up to date, then it's like reading an old newspaper from a year ago. You wouldn't do that."

Alvis sees her work as a way to keep the UCC in the forefront of a technology-driven society. "It's another way to reach out to the community with the good news," she says, "an alternative to what some people might be hearing from other ministers. It gives the UCC a voice within the community."

LEARN MORE @  
<firstplymouth.org>

## Bloggers share good thoughts, broaden church 'community'

Somehow, the word "blog" snuck into our vernacular. The Rev. Katy Hawker, now a blogger herself and pastor of Evangelical UCC in Webster Groves, Mo., jokes, "I think the whole blog thing came when I was asleep!"

So what is a blog? Short for weblog, blogs are online journals, frequently updated, and are usually posted on the internet for public consumption. Now that most UCC churches use websites as a way to inform the general public of their presence and activities, blogs are gradually finding their niche on church websites as well — as a way to share ideas and, sometimes, to start conversations with the community.

Readers of the blog operated by Congregational UCC of Manhasset, N.Y. — CongoBlog, as it's called — can keep up with Associate Pastor Chase Peoples' avid reading and his love of discussing religion and politics.

The First Congregational UCC of Woodstock, Conn., features a blog on their website entitled, "Across Borders." In it, Debbie Pallatto-Fontaine, a commissioned minister for spiritual formation, recently contributed frequent entries from South Korea as her mission trip unfolded. Pal-

latto-Fontaine spent 3 months there on behalf of the Korean Partnership Committee of the UCC's Connecticut Conference.

### BLOG

n : a shared on-line journal where people can post diary entries about their personal experiences and hobbies [syn: web log]

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"I got in the habit of starting that with something kind of devotional and then it just made sense to turn that into a blog so that people who are on the email list can get it directly, but people who aren't can get it from the website," says Hawker from her office in suburban St. Louis.

Since Hawker enjoys writing devotionally, she uses her blog to reflect on current events. "I think if you're going to have a successful blog," says Hawker, "it has to be reflective of the person who's writing it."

## Minister leads one of nation's oldest religious broadcasts

If he tries not to think about it too much, it doesn't unnerve the Rev. Peter Panagore that he has a congregation of 96,000. But unlike most pastors, Panagore's ministry rarely puts him face to face with any of his congregants.

His church, the First Radio Parish Church of America of Portland, Maine exists mainly on the television screen, broadcasting 2-minute "Daily Devotions" during the top-rated local morning news program in Maine at 6:12 in the morning, just before the weather.

First Radio Parish Church of America — don't let the name fool you, says Panagore. The non-profit organization started back in 1926 — predating television — is the oldest and longest continuously running non-sectarian broadcast in the U.S.

"It started on the radio, then went to television in 1954, uninterrupted. It's still on radio," says Panagore, "but our main thing has been television for quite some time."

Panagore, a UCC minister, is deeply aware of the legacy that preceded him. He is the fifth pastor ever to hold this post, replacing the Rev. David R. Glusker, a Meth-

odist, in 2003, following Glusker's 18-year tenure as the voice of Daily Devotions.

"I think of [Daily Devotions] as brief stories of faith, hope and inspiration. They're not sermons," says Panagore, who good-humoredly refers to himself as a "reductionist" because of the mere 270-some words he's allowed in his two-minute spot. "They're generally narratives, and they can be on absolutely any subject whatsoever, provided they land on a thought for the day and a prayer."

Since his viewers aren't necessarily UCC, and don't necessarily belong to a faith community, Panagore's message attempts to bridge all faith communities, using everyday images, humor, and the notion of God's boundless love encapsulated in an uplifting message.

"We ask people to attend worship ... to find a family of faith of some sort," he says.

"We reach out to everybody," says Panagore of his viewers. "Ironworkers, lawyers in downtown Portland, loggers in western Maine. It's the ski lift operator, waitresses, teachers ..."

While Panagore estimates that the TV station donates approxi-

mately \$800,000 per year in production costs and on-air time, the FRCPA's budget still relies heavily on donations from viewers and supporters. A steady stream of emails and letters of gratitude attest to the fact that Panagore's ministry is reaching viewers and touching hearts. "What we are," explains Panagore, "is a moderate voice of rational faith."

### DONATIONS MAY BE MADE

#### ON THE MINISTRY'S

#### SECURE WEBSITE:

<dailydevotions.org>

or by sending checks to The First Radio Parish Church of America, One Congress Square, Portland, ME 04101

For interested persons, log on to the FRCPA website <dailydevotions.org> and sign up for a free subscription. Subscribers will receive a daily devotional in their in-box every day. Panagore encourages pastors to use the searchable database and use his devotionals as deemed fit, asking only to be cited as the source.