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A SENATOR'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

UCC'S BARACK OBAMA TALKS FAITH, POLITICS

'I heard God's spirit beckoning me.'

Ryan Beiler photo

It's time to distinguish between 'loving critics' and hurtful ones

FROM THE
COLLEGIUM



John H. Thomas

There are many loving critics who care deeply for this church, seek ways to support it and yearn for its growth and vitality."

Reading reports in June from the General Convention of the Episcopal Church or the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reminds us that the struggle for unity amid sharp differences in the church is not a challenge for the UCC alone. No matter what a national church body may say about any of today's hot button issues, the threat of schism, of a break in communion, is very real for all denominations.

Since our General Synod in 2005 about 100 congregations have left the UCC and, most recently, our Puerto Rico Conference voted to disaffiliate. The reasons for these departures are many, but each is a painful diminishment in our life. The fact that there are also 65 other congregations in development or in conversation with us about membership is good news, but news that does nothing to offset the sadness of saying goodbye to churches and members who have been an important part of our life.

Conflict has marked the church since New Testament times. Conflict was part of the story of the journey leading to the creation of the UCC almost 50 years ago. Conflict has been a part of the life of the UCC whenever we have tried to stand for Gospel commitments of justice and love. Faithfulness is not about avoiding conflict; it's about how we respond to inevitable conflict. For leaders in the church, whether here in Cleveland, or in the life of Conferences and congregations, a large part of that means learning how to respond to the critics in our midst and beyond.

It is clear that we face two kinds of critics today. There are many loving critics who care deeply for this church, seek ways to support it, and yearn for its growth and vitality. They find themselves in dissent from some of the positions of the General Synod and its leaders, finding in the Bible and the church's tradition differing understandings of how we are to view contemporary social and moral issues. We need to listen with care, humility and deep respect to these loving critics, assuring them of their honored place within the diverse life of this church, finding ways for them to support those aspects of our national and global ministries that they can fully embrace. We need to be open to the truth that they have spiritual insights to nurture, even challenge us toward greater faithfulness.

It's also the case that there are critics who do not love this church, who seek to disrupt, distract, diminish, even destroy our life. These critics, within and beyond, encourage local churches to withhold financial support of our wider ministries, offer advice and counsel on how to leave the denomination, establish parallel structures for the placement of clergy and the sending of mission personnel, and regularly disseminate deliberately misleading or false information about the denomination and its leaders. Those who love this church, and cherish its legacy, need to be clear in saying no to this form of critique which falls outside the bounds of acceptable Christian behavior.

Discerning between these two types of critics is one of the great challenges of leadership today. It requires a deep humility to embrace the loving critics, no matter how uncomfortable their critique may be, never saying, "I have no need of you." But it also requires the courage to name those whose actions are out of bounds, saying to those who would disrupt, distract, even destroy, "I will not let you damage what is precious or diminish a vocation that is a critical dimension of the Gospel witness." Such discernment is not easy. May God grant us the wisdom required for it, and the discipline to do it.

The Rev. John H. Thomas is UCC general minister and president.

► Ecumenically departed

"He was there every Sunday."
That's how the Rev. Alvin Smith, pastor of **Seward UCC in Nebraska**, characterized Paul Schmidt, a retired farmer who died in January.

So the fact that Schmidt left some money to support his home church was not all that surprising. But what's inspiring to many is the ecumenical nature of his Last Will and Testament: He left behind \$1.5 million to the benefit of 12 different churches in Seward, not just his own.

Schmidt's generosity aided Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian and non-denominational churches, as well as the local hospital and children's home.

A World War II veteran, Schmidt and his wife, Anna May — who died in 1997 — had no children.

"Some of us knew him," the Rev. Jim Miller of Faith Lutheran Church said, "but I don't think any of us knew he was going to share such a gracious and generous gift with the community."

The UCC church, however, did edge out a slight advantage. It received a nine percent share of Schmidt's wealth, while the other churches received seven percent. (Seward County Independent, July 19)

► Curb appeal

Church of the Open Door UCC in Miami is restoring a house for its founding pastor — on the other side of the world.

The house in Angola, Africa, actually, is where the Rev. Henry C. McDowell lived and served as a missionary for 40 years. Now, the church and the UCC's United Black Christians are raising \$30,000 to make the house useable again — following the cessation of civil war in Angola — and to honor McDowell's justice legacy.

And they're a third of the way there.

On June 25, the church presented a \$10,000 check to William E. Clark III, a board member of the UCC/Disciples' Global Ministries. The missionary agency's Africa office is working with the church on the project. (Miami Herald, July 13)

► Calling all Christians

New York City's Riverside Church (UCC/American Baptist) will host its fifth annual Harry Emerson Fosdick Convocation, Oct. 23-26. The event will gather 16 dynamic preachers who will call America's Christians to a renewed commitment to justice and peace.

Speakers will include the Revs. Joan Brown Campbell,



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SHORTHAND



Tony Campolo, Minerva Carcaño, the late William Sloane Coffin, Jr. (recorded), James A. Forbes, Jr., Barbara Harris, Hans Küng (recorded), Barbara Lundblad, Otis Moss III, Bill Moyers (moderator), Donna Schaper, Barbara Brown Taylor, Gardner Taylor, Cornel West, Sam Wells and Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

Sponsors include Auburn Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, Drew University Theological School, General Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary, Yale University Divinity School and Cathedral College in Washington, D.C.

Learn more and register at <fosdickconvocation.org>.

► Imagery, meter and rhyme

Macalester United Church (UCC/Presbyterian) in St. Paul, Minn., and the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area are calling for entries for their 10th annual international contest for English language hymn writers. The search is for new inclusive-language texts set to common meters and familiar tunes. The winning entry will receive a \$500 cash prize. This year's contest invites hymn texts focused on themes of "forgiveness of enemies," political cooperation and world peace.

Send four copies of each single entry, along with a \$3 entrance fee, postmarked by Dec. 31 to Hymn Contest, Macalester Plymouth United Church, 1658 Lincoln Ave., St. Paul, MN 55101-1949. More information is available by emailing <office@macalester-plymouth.org> or by calling 651/698-8871.

► 'Kyrie Eleison'

On July 19, UCC General Minister and President John H. Thomas released the following churchwide prayer in response to escalating war in the Middle East:

You did not make us, O God, to die in bomb craters or to huddle through the night in basement shelters. You made us to play under olive trees and cedars and to sleep soundly with animal toys and gentle lovers. Lord, have mercy.

You did not make us, O God, to hold hostages for barter or to rain deadly fury on innocent children and beautiful coast lands. You made us, O God, to welcome strangers and to cherish all creation. Christ, have mercy.

You did not make us, O God, to oppress in the name of security or to kill in the name of justice. You made us, O God, to find security in justice and to risk life in the name of peace. Lord, have mercy.

While leaders in Tel Aviv and Damascus, Tehran, Washington, and southern Lebanon pander to ancient fears, claim the mantle of righteous victim, and pursue their little empires in the name of gods of their own devising, the people of Lebanon and northern Israel are made captive to fear, true victims whose only advocate is You.

Save us from self-justifying histories and from moral equations that excuse our folly. Search our hearts for our own complicity. Spare us from pious prayers that neglect the prophet's angry cry. Let us speak a resounding "no" to this warring madness and thus unmake our ways of death, so that we may be made more and more into your image. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.

CALENDAR

UCC African-American Clergy

"Black Church in Crisis: Agenda for Covenant"
Oct. 30-Nov. 1 in Washington, D.C.

UCC 50th Anniversary Celebration begins

Nov. 1, 2006 thru Nov. 1, 2007

Churchwide real-time web event at <ucc.org>

All Saints Sunday, Nov. 5, at 6 p.m. (ET)

SOME CHURCHES MAY STAY IN COMMUNION

Puerto Rico Conference disaffiliation vote is 'deeply painful,' says UCC leader

By Barb Powell
For United Church News

Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico (United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico), whose partnership with the UCC goes back more than 40 years, voted on June 10, during its annual Assembly, to disaffiliate with the UCC. The vote was 75 percent in favor of the resolution.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC general minister and president, called the action "deeply painful and profoundly disappointing," but said that the denomination "respectfully, though regretfully, honors the decision of the Assembly."

"The action will draw to a close the formal partnership between the United Church of Christ and the IEUPR, a partnership with roots in the work of the American Missionary Association beginning late in the 19th century," said Thomas.

Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico was formed in 1931, and was recognized by the Congregational Christian Churches — a UCC forebear — as a regional Conference of the denomination. In 1961, the IEUPR became a Conference of the then newly-formed UCC.

The churches that voted to disaffiliate did so because of discomfort over the UCC's stance on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues.

"Leaders of the UCC have known for several years that actions by UCC's General Synod regarding the membership and ministry of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians have been troubling to many in the Puerto Rico Conference," said Thomas. "Attempts on the part of UCC leaders to open formal dialogue and conversation with the leadership of the IEUPR were not successful. I regret this very much."

UCC missionary intern safely evacuates Lebanon; others offer reports from Beirut

A UCC/Disciples' Global Ministries missionary intern in Beirut was able to flee war-torn Lebanon, with the help of church staff at home and partners abroad.

Ruth Edens and about 30 other evacuated young adults initially were taken to a hotel in Amman, Jordan, where members of the UCC's partner churches there have been caring for them. Ruth, daughter of the Revs. Rick and Jill Edens, pastors of **United Church of Chapel Hill in North Carolina**, flew on to Istanbul, Turkey, where she stayed with missionaries Ken and Betty Frank until the Edens were able to meet her there and accompany her home to the United States.

The Edens say they have been blessed with an outpouring of love and concern from across the church, including phone calls from the UCC's Collegium of Officers, assuring prayers and support.

Meanwhile, Mary Mikhael, president of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, who was in the United States attending the UCC/Disciples' National Women's Event, was able to make it safely back into Lebanon just as others were scrambling to leave.

Her against-the-grain route took her from

Despite the vote, some congregations, pastors and members of the IEUPR may want to remain in communion with the United Church of Christ. In the coming weeks, the UCC will consider a means by which those relationships can be retained or restored. The Conference includes 66 churches.

Because of *Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico's* unique standing within the UCC, as an historically independent denomination that is a Conference of the UCC, many issues need to be addressed or clarified, including assisting pastors and layworkers participating in the annuity and health insurance programs of the UCC Pension Boards. Since some clergy's UCC ministerial standing could be affected by the Assembly's action, some may need assistance transitioning to other health and retirement plans. Other concerns include UCC church loans and mortgages.

The UCC also has long-term relationships with Ryder Memorial Hospital, which is part of the UCC's Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, and the *Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico* (Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico). Thomas said the UCC is committed to finding the mechanisms for retaining these important relationships, if desired by them.

In addition to significant financial support of Ryder Memorial and the seminary, other UCC efforts to deepen the relationship with the IEUPR have included solidarity by the UCC's General Synod and its officers in the struggle to return the island of Vieques to civilian control, support for the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners, new-church start programs, the placement of Common Global Ministries personnel in Puerto Rico, a recent major gathering of Puerto Rican pastors and lay leaders, and participation of IEUPR members on UCC national boards.

Indianapolis to Louisville, Ky., to Detroit, to Amsterdam, then Damascus, Syria. From there, a driver took her into a bombed-out Beirut — "despite the fear of my mother and the disagreement of my sisters."

"I am still in a state of shock. What Lebanon has built in 15 years Israel destroyed in six days," Mikhael wrote by e-mail on July 18. "The suburb of Beirut has been flattened by daily fighter attacks, some children are still under the rubble. Thirty thousand people are now displaced with new Israeli promises of more destruction of villages. A systematic and relentless destruction of the entire country — the human tragedy is enlarged day by day."

Also, on July 17, the Revs. Martin and Betty Bailey alerted UCC leaders that their daughter, Sue, who works for the World Bank in Beirut, was able to evacuate safely from Lebanon into the Jordanian frontier.

"The plan is that all the Beirut United Nations/World Bank evacuees will spend the night at a resort hotel on the Dead Sea, where the U.N. and World Bank frequently hold meetings in more secure surroundings, and have a debriefing in the morning," Martin Bailey wrote.

Buford, architect of Stillspeaking campaign, to assume new role



Shown here in 2003, Buford helped create the look of the Stillspeaking campaign. W. Evan Golder photo

By J. Bennett Guess

Ron Buford, the architect of the UCC's successful and "controversial" identity campaign, has resigned as director of the Stillspeaking Initiative, effective June 30.

He has accepted a position as consultant with the Congregational Vitality Initiative (CVI) of the UCC's Local Church Ministries to assist trainers who will incorporate the best of The Stillspeaking Initiative into CVI.

The announcement comes as the UCC is preparing to scale back the campaign's budget and staffing, and to integrate more fully its objectives within the UCC's national structure. The changes gradually will take place before the campaign's scheduled close in 2007, the denomination's 50th anniversary year.

Marilyn Dubasak, who worked with Buford as Stillspeaking's program coordinator, is serving as acting director.

"Now is the time in the life of The Stillspeaking Initiative for the UCC to embrace the entrepreneurial ideas generated during the campaign and to make them its own. Others may be better suited to this task than I," Buford said.

"Ron leaves a permanent legacy on the UCC for which the church will always be grateful," said the Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC general minister and president. "The Stillspeaking Initiative will continue to be a transforming movement within the life of our church and Ron's creativity and devotion have been a driving force behind it."

The "God is still speaking," genius was born in 2001 while Buford was traveling in southern California. There, he glimpsed a postcard quote attributed to comedienne Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

Allen's sentiment, thought Buford, offered a more-contemporary spin on the UCC's diverse theological commitment to a "still speaking" God. It resonated, he thought, with a similar-sounding refrain from long ago, a church-cherished historical quote attributed to Pastor John Robinson who, in 1620, urged the UCC's Pilgrim forebears to remember that "God still has more truth and light to break forth from God's Holy Word."

Ron leaves a permanent legacy on the UCC for which the church will always be grateful."

— The Rev. John H. Thomas, general minister and president

Buford, who enjoyed a distinguished career in corporate marketing before joining the UCC's national staff in 2000, felt that the 1.3-million-member UCC suffered from a decades-old identity crisis tied to the church's dynamic-yet-confusing heritage as the 1957 union of four rather-distinct church traditions. The UCC lacked a "brand," Buford argued, and church members' pride in their denomination was being held back by an ineffective articulation of the church's history and cultural contributions.

Soon, Buford parlayed the comma emblem and the "God is still speaking," phrase into a full-fledged marketing effort for the church, bringing the UCC's message onto everything from luncheon napkins to billboards, from T-shirts to radio and TV commercials. The UCC quickly emerged, alongside the United Methodist Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as a leading, visible force in church advertising.

A 1977 graduate of the University of Rochester in New York, Buford first served as the denomination's public relations and marketing manager. However, it only took a few years for the identity campaign to become Buford's full-time job — and his lasting contribution.

"Ron has helped the UCC reclaim its sense of self, to recall its many historical 'firsts' and to celebrate not only what it has been, but what it can become," said the Rev. Robert Chase, the UCC's communication director.

The Stillspeaking Initiative enjoys the following of more than 2,300 UCC churches, which individually have elected to endorse the campaign and participate in marketing and hospitality training. In addition to a full complement of Stillspeaking merchandise, the initiative developed three award-winning TV commercials that ran nationally in December 2004, March 2005 and April 2006.

'HAYSTACK' OBSERVES 200TH ANNIVERSARY

'Foreign missions' invites us to reconsider home-grown Christianity

“To this day, various denominations — including the UCC, United Methodists, American Baptists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians — trace their involvement in foreign missions back to this unlikely haystack moment.”

NEVER
OURSELVES
ALONE



J. Bennett Guess
Editor

Next time you're talking up the UCC, mention the fact that it was Congregationalists who were the first to support foreign missions.

It all happened on an August afternoon in 1806, when five Williams College students — all Congregationalists — met in a north-west Massachusetts field to talk and pray about issues of the day. On this occasion, the topic was the spiritual needs of those in Asian countries.

A sudden thunderstorm sent the students scurrying for cover near a haystack where, as the story goes, the students made promises to God and one another that they would carry their Christian faith “into all the world.”

This “Haystack Prayer Meeting,” as it became known, inspired the first baby steps of the American Foreign Missions Movement, a grassroots effort strengthened by its “informal ties with the Congregationalists,” according to Williams’ own historical account, because the movement was spared the “sometimes stifling stranglehold” of denominationalism.

To this day, however, various denomina-

tions — including the UCC, United Methodists, American Baptists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians — trace their involvement in foreign missions back to this unlikely haystack moment. The UCC’s Global Ministries, in particular, traces its founding directly to 1810 when the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission — the first foreign missionary society in the United States — was born.

On Sept. 22-24, 2006, in **Williamstown, Mass.**, an ecumenical group of Christians will gather at Williams College and **First Congregational UCC** to gain inspiration from that old “haystack” story, even as they lament the often-imperialistic consequences of that colonialist era of U.S. Christianity — when exporting American culture was often synonymous with sharing the Good News.

Still, faith-based work around the world is something to celebrate. In a world where building walls, maintaining fences and defending borders is often mistaken for absolute necessity, global partnerships engender abiding trust, build cross-cultural friendships and promote lasting security. For me, it was during mission trips to Mexico and Colombia where I first glimpsed — in its fullness — that God’s love is something much bigger, broader and better than mere familiarity with my native land.

The “Haystack” reality invites us, once again, to consider the importance and value of mission. To whom — thanks be to God — does this “mission” belong? And how shall we, as

global Christians, continue to be about God’s work in the world?

As a teenager, I vividly remember how a woman named Neel Whitledge — a high school art teacher and an intelligent, worldly and witty family friend — would react to narrow-minded, prejudicial attitudes by shaking her head in disbelief and muttering to herself, “provincial, provincial.”

To this Kentucky boy, Mrs. Whitledge’s more-proper, Missouri accent seemed practically British. “Provincial,” she’d say, almost as I imagined Queen Elizabeth might say it.

Not yet understanding the meaning of the word “provincial,” I looked it up. And, because of Mrs. Whitledge, I can actually remember when I first learned that it meant “limited in perspective, narrow, self-centered.”

“Provincial” — I knew I didn’t want to be that, especially since Mrs. Whitledge thought it such a nasty thing to be.

So think what you will about foreign missions, but — as for me — here’s a hat off to five college students who, in 1806, bucked conventional wisdom and dreamed of a world far beyond them. People who, in the spirit of global solidarity, wanted to share love across the continents.

Provincial, they were not.

LEARN MORE @

<haystack.williams.edu>

<globalministries.org>

LETTERS



Violence follows fundamentalism

With the violence escalating between Israel and Lebanon, we in the Christian West are reaping the seeds of our abiding nationalist hatreds on both sides. In my view, the appropriate witness for those of us who seek peace and reconciliation is a frank denunciation of the idolatry of land.

Nothing better speaks to that than this clause from the Barmen Declaration of 1934: “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation.” Certain “evangelical” churches have in fact opposed this point by proclaiming that the Bible necessitates the dominance of Israel in Palestine in order for Jesus to come again, an inherently violent belief and one incompatible with a Christ-centered reading of Scripture that respects the freedom of God.

The present turmoil all but proves to me that fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic, cannot be reconciled with the peace, love, and hope of the Reign of God known only through faith. We must choose, and choose now.

Michael T. Stroud
United Church of Huntsville, Ala.

U.S. must lead in Darfur

President Bush has urged the world community to increase humanitarian assistance and provide an effective peacekeeping operation to end the genocide in Darfur.

Since 2003, over 400,000 civilians have died from violence, disease and hunger and 2.5 million have been uprooted from their homes. We must act courageously and decisively to end the genocide in Darfur.

The government of Sudan is unwilling to stop killing its own people, either by its military

or proxy militias. We are faced with a choice between courageous action to end the genocide or shameful and immoral capitulation to cowards who hide their crimes behind lies, deception and delaying tactics. America has the courage and strength to bring a timely end to the genocide in Darfur by supporting a multinational civilian protection force.

Every day we wait is another victory for genocide and another defeat for peace. America must lead the world in defending the defenseless in Darfur by ending the Sudanese government’s reign of terror and bringing the perpetrators of genocide to justice.

The Rev. Tim Nonn
Founder/director, Dear Sudan Campaign
Member, Petaluma (Calif.) UCC

Another lost opportunity

It’s no surprise we need to do a much better job identifying our denomination to the outside world. I was reminded of this while reading about First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs, Colo., in a recent issue of The Advocate magazine. Several members of this congregation had done something very positive within the gay community, but in the article the church is cited by its “Congregational” name without UCC even being mentioned. To 95 percent of those reading the article the fact that “Congregational” is generally synonymous with “UCC” is totally lost, and there goes another golden opportunity for people to learn who we are.

If UCC is not a part of your church’s common name, when you identify it to someone make sure you stick “United Church of Christ” in there, regardless. And don’t just use the acronym; otherwise, we’ll be forever wandering in the identity wilderness.

Rick Carson
St. Petersburg, Fla.

Judgment criteria

Will the UCC ultimately be judged by the size of its membership and the amount of money in its treasury? Or, will the UCC be judged by how it treats the “least” of these?

Have we really welcomed the stranger?

I hope we consider these things — which may be difficult for some of us — when we complain about decisions to be an Open and Affirming church.

Jan Kinnaman
Janesville, Wis.

Sisterly love

As an active member of an Open and Affirming UCC church, I’d like to offer an answer to the question, “What is the motivation of the ‘progressive’ wing of the UCC?” from a letter in the June/July issue.

My motivation is to try to discern and carry out God’s will in this time and place, and to follow Jesus’ example of inclusive love. Jesus challenged his followers to see the old rules in new ways. (Those adhering literally to the list of Leviticus abominations, sadly, must be unable to enjoy lobster and crabcakes. See Lev. 11:10-12).

Jesus consistently referred to the two great commandments: love for God and love for one’s neighbor. I believe we “progressives” try to follow Jesus’ lead.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am that June/July letter writer’s sister. Perhaps we can demonstrate that it is possible to disagree on deeply held beliefs, and still love each other!

Marian Parsons
Longmont, Colo.

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.

Deplore all inhumanity

All Christians should applaud the sentiments so well stated by Rev. William Daniels in his commentary: “How earnestly are we teaching love, non-violence?” [June/July]. Unfortunately, the assertion that Christians should only fight in a “just war” leaves several questions unanswered.

How should Christians respond when adherents to other faiths believe that their God commands them to behead their enemies? How should Christians respond when suicide bombers deliberately and consistently target innocent civilians? How should Christians respond when governments forbid and punish with death the practice of any other faiths (including Christianity)? Should we simply stand by?

All thinking persons should look hopefully to the worldwide fulfillment of American Friends “bedrock principles.” It should be noted, however, that Quakers practice freely only in a society which tolerates (even celebrates) differences in beliefs.

Certainly we should question the justification for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These discussions are healthy in a free society. But I hear few Christians (or Muslims for that matter) deploping the inhumanity of our enemies. In other words, why are we not publicly and consistently holding terrorists to the same standards?

The Rev. Jerry S. Clausen
South Bridge, Mass.

'FAITHFUL AND WELCOMING' PRESIDENT:

'We will be constructive with criticism, dissent'

COMMENTARY



Bob Thompson

Editor's note: United Church News invited the Rev. Bob Thompson, president of Faithful and Welcoming Churches, to submit an op-ed column about the FWC movement. In so doing, this newspaper indicated that it would offer space for a response, which has been written by the Rev. Nancy S. Taylor, pastor of Old South UCC, an Open and Affirming Church in Boston. FWC is hosting a national gathering, Aug. 4-5, in Bechtelsville, Pa.

The 50th anniversary of the UCC celebrates the crowning achievement of the 20th-century ecumenical movement, which passionately advocated for the visible unity of the church. Since General Synod 25, however, innumerable members, more than 100 local churches, and even an entire Conference [Puerto Rico] have formally separated from this "united and uniting" church.

At the same time, numerous individuals — along with entire congregations — have expressed interest in joining the UCC because of its bold pronouncements and extravagant welcome. More important than the numbers lost and gained, whatever they turn out to be, is this dual reality: those leaving the UCC more than likely consider themselves evangelical, conservative, orthodox, or traditional (ECOT) and those finding the UCC are likely liberal or progressive.

Tony Campolo's 1995 book, "Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?" advocated the "realignment" of denominations based on ideological lines. But realignment has its problems. Most Christians resist an exclusive identification with a label — thus our difficulty as ECOTs to choose only one. Local churches and even families are often internally divided along the fault lines of the day. To force a church to go either direction intensifies the schism.

Most importantly, realignment's flaw is biblical and theological, especially from a UCC perspective. Visionaries who created the UCC believed that Jesus' prayer, "That they all may be one," should trump sectarian, socio-economic, racial and ecclesiastical differences. Across the theological spectrum of UCC member-

ship there are those who believe that we can and should resist the rush toward separation.

Faithful and Welcoming Churches (FWC) emerged early in 2006 to provide frustrated ECOT members and churches a reason to stay. FWC is committed to advocacy and networking so that these congregations will not feel isolated.

We do not seek to divide or disrupt. We are not a cover for an exit strategy. We are simply asking that our presence be recognized and valued. How? Here are specific suggestions:

- ▶ Provide space for our views in official publications — like this article.

- ▶ Ask Associations and Conferences to help us communicate to churches that we are a positive alternative to separation.

- ▶ Give formal representation to ECOT members at every level of the church's life, as the UCC has done with other under-represented groups.

- ▶ Help us uncover and address theological discrimination against ECOT clergy and laity.

- ▶ Recognize FWC churches along with Open and Affirming churches on the UCC's website.

- ▶ Refrain from painting a single broad-brush picture of our denomination that belies our true diversity.

FWC will make every effort to be constructive in our criticism and dissent. We will continue to encourage churches and individuals to be active and supportive in the UCC. We will look for areas of agreement and partnership rather than focusing exclusive attention on areas of difference and disagreement.

If it is true that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey" you are embraced in the UCC, we just want to be welcome like everyone else.

The Rev. Bob Thompson, president of Faithful and Welcoming Churches, is pastor of Corinth Reformed Church, a UCC congregation in Hickory, N.C., that owns a proud heritage of denominational involvement. The church was home to the late Rev. Robert V. Moss Jr., who served as president of the UCC from 1969 to 1976.

LEARN MORE @

<faithfulandwelcoming.org>

DENOMINATION IS 'WORK IN PROGRESS'

UCC has plenty room 'for those who want to be here'

COMMENTARY



Nancy S. Taylor

Bob Thompson's Faithful and Welcoming website identifies the equal marriage resolution vote of General Synod 25 as the decisive event for Faithful and Welcoming Churches' dissatisfaction with the UCC.

That's fair. There is not a person in the UCC who does not recognize wide theological disagreement over same-gender marriage. It is a contentious, utterly immediate theological question.

It is a question to which the church is responding with Bible study, prayer,

reading theology, preparing and hearing sermons, talking to family and friends, holding congregational meetings and, yes, by voting on resolutions for and against equal marriage.

As a non-hierarchical, congregationally-based tradition, this is how we live out our covenant together. As we do not recognize bishops or a pope, we engage in this difficult, sometimes divisive, profoundly important theological work from the ground up. If and when contentious matters are brought to a vote at General Synod — as equal marriage was last summer — we trust our delegates (faithful Christians all) to bring their level-best to the work of discernment.

Thompson's response to all this, however, has been to charge delegates with a "declaration of independence from the Bible, the historic faith, and the teachings of Jesus concerning marriage," an incendiary claim he has made on his website and at regional FWC meetings.

I submit that in making such a charge, Thompson has gone beyond the pale. After all, our delegates did their work. The fact that their discernment led them to a conclusion with which he differs should not be grounds for challenging their faith or integrity.

In addition, while Thompson writes that his Faithful and Wel-

coming Churches "are not a cover for an exit strategy" from the UCC, his activities tell a different story:

- ▶ Thompson's own church, Corinth Reformed Church in Hickory, N.C., has dropped UCC from its name and the FWC website encourages other UCC congregations to drop UCC from their names. Moreover, his church has scheduled a congregational vote in November regarding its continued UCC affiliation.

- ▶ A full two years before the equal marriage vote, his church decided to significantly defer gifts from the wider church, including support for Our Church's Wider Mission in the Western North Carolina Association, the Southern Conference and the UCC's national and international settings. Although his organization expresses a desire that churches remain part of the UCC, FWC does not encourage its churches to remain engaged in OCWM, which is the most visible, concrete sign of our unity in global mission.

- ▶ The FWC website lists those churches that have left the UCC, but it ignores altogether those that are seeking UCC affiliation.

Thompson believes the UCC is forcing him out. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There is plenty of room in the UCC for everyone who wants to be here. Rather, it is he who is leaving us, by wishing to remain engaged politically in a denomination with which he will no longer associate by name nor support financially. Further, he charges his brothers and sisters who served as delegates with being unfaithful. Thompson is not a loving critic.

For these past 50 years the UCC has been a work in progress, an experiment, a movement, a flawed, messy, crowded tent of Christians. What makes us different from other churches, however, is our claim that the Holy Spirit speaks not only through the Bible — and not only through the past — but also today, through ordinary and faithful Christians who gather together to discern the mind of Christ.

The Rev. Nancy S. Taylor is senior minister of Old South UCC in Boston. Learn more about the Open and Affirming movement at <ucoalition.org>.



OVERHEARD

"While I don't agree with everything that comes out of the national setting of the UCC, I don't agree with everything my wife says either and I have no intention of divorcing either one."

— The Rev. Scott MacLean, UCC minister and a Republican candidate for Connecticut's first district congressional seat, after his Republican primary opponent, Miriam Masullo, issued a five-page letter on July 5 criticizing the UCC and MacLean's church affiliation.

"We have slowly, incrementally accepted the unacceptable. Who would have thought we would have a discussion about whether we should torture people?"

— The Rev. Robin Meyers, pastor of *Mayflower Congregational UCC in Oklahoma City*, discussing his new book, "Why the Christian Right is Wrong." (Bellingham, Wash., Herald, July 13)

"We're willing to wrestle with ethically questionable issues, rather than just naysaying the research."

— The Rev. David Popham, Rocky Mountain Associate Conference Minister, speaking to Denver's Rocky Mountain News, explaining how UCC members generally view medical breakthroughs, such as stem cell research, as part of God's handiwork. (July 18)

"There's a huge need for any church to be involved in something larger than itself. The thing that impressed us about the UCC is they are issuing an extravagant welcome."

— The Rev. Cynthia Andrews-Looper, pastor of *Holy Trinity Community Church (now UCC) in Nashville*, speaking to The Tennessean on why her 250-member church was drawn to affiliate with the UCC. Holy Trinity was formally welcomed into the UCC's Southeast Conference on June 25.



TABULATIONS

MY PASTOR, MY FRIEND

There are more than 300,000 senior pastors serving U.S. Protestant churches. A new survey examines the "unusual relational dynamics" of spiritual leaders.

61%	Pastors who have "few close friends."
24%	"Introverted" pastors serving "extroverted" ministries.
20%	Pastors "dealing with a very difficult family situation."
17%	Pastors who feel underappreciated.

Source: Barna Research Group, 2006



CHECKLIST

101,501 rotations

Let's peer into the UCC's revolving door during 2005:

ENTER

Confessions of faith =	8,301
Confirmations =	11,074
Reaffirmations & Transfers =	21,345
TOTAL =	40,720

EXIT

Deaths =	16,360
Transfer out =	8,679
Other (e.g. churches leaving, cleaning up rolls) =	35,742
TOTAL =	60,781

Source: 2006 Yearbook



SOAPBOX

Got gratitude?

It's time to get on your soapbox. United Church News wants to hear from you.

Let's take a momentary pause from our well-demonstrated "culture of critique" — as the UCC's Ron Buford has dubbed it — and practice the art of thanks. It's time to dig deep and uncover some heartfelt appreciation.

In 75 words or less, tell what you love about being UCC. Offer a word of gratitude to a helpful mentor. Share how a UCC person, a General Synod stance or a meaningful worship experience touched you. Remind us how "covenant" aided you or your church during a time of crisis.

We'll need your short, succinct responses just after Labor Day, September 4, in order to be considered for the next issue. Send to <newsroom@ucc.org> with "Soapbox" in the subject line. Or mail to "Soapbox" at United Church News, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115-1100. Remember to include your name, local church and city/state.

"Soapbox" is a periodic compilation of reader responses to specific topics or questions. As always, United Church News reserves the right to edit your submissions for brevity and clarity.

ASSESSING PUERTO RICO

New covenantal relationships will emerge

COMMENTARY



Barbara Brown
Zikmund

The UCC Constitution states that "various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner" and that "each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others." Together, in covenant, all "seek to be faithful to God's mission."

On June 10, 2006, the *Iglesia Evangelical Unida de Puerto Rico* (United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico) voted to disaffiliate with the UCC, bringing a covenant deeply rooted in UCC history to an end. The Rev. John Thomas, UCC General Minister and President, called it a painful and profoundly disappointing development.

Yet, even as relationships change and covenants are recast it is good to remember and celebrate the work of the UCC in Puerto Rico. That work cannot be undone and it continues.

It began with the outreach of the American Missionary Association, founded by Congregational abolitionists who rallied in 1839 to support the African Mendi captives on the slave ship *Amistad*. The AMA went on to establish over 500 schools for African and Native Americans and planted 200 new local congregations. In Puerto Rico, AMA mission work led to the founding of Ryder Memorial Hospital.

After 1898, when Spanish control over Puerto Rico ended, several Protestant denominations sent missionaries to Puerto Rico. In 1919 they founded the *Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico* (Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico) to train Protestant clergy for churches throughout the Caribbean. In 1931 Congregationalists, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Evangelical United Brethren formed a new denomination, the

Iglesia Evangelical Unida de Puerto Rico (United Evangelical Church of Puerto Rico).

This young denomination was independent and ecumenical. In 1931, it became a regional conference of the Congregational Christian Churches, and in 1961, although it was already a denomination itself, it became a UCC Conference. Ryder Memorial Hospital joined the UCC Council for Health and Human Service Ministries.

Within all covenants, as within marriage, painful disagreements arise — sometimes leading to division and divorce."

Covenantal relationships are not driven by legalistic rules and regulations. They are not based on creeds, but grounded in common loyalty to Jesus Christ. And within all covenants, as within marriage, painful disagreements arise — sometimes leading to division and divorce. In recent years, as members of the IEUPR found the UCC stance on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues increasingly troublesome, the covenant was stretched. Some IEUPR members tried to keep covenant with the UCC, but its recent annual Assembly voted for separation.

Yet, God is still at work in Puerto Rico. New covenantal relationships will emerge to preserve historic ties with those institutions, congregations and clergy who want to remain connected to the UCC. Covenant theology is never neat and tidy, yet it is the way UCC Christians seek to remain "faithful to God's mission."

The Rev. Barbara Brown Zikmund, editor of *The UCC's Living Theological Heritage*, writes a monthly online column on UCC history. It appears at <news.ucc.org>.

OUR CHURCH'S WIDER MISSION

If you love this church, 'it's time to say thanks'

COMMENTARY



Dee Lundberg

It is hard to read the United Church News and not feel a twinge of anxiety. The financial picture is bleak.

Despite reports that the economy is growing, I do not seem to run into too many people who are benefiting. But then I comfort myself by thinking, "Oh it's going to turn around any day now," and I go about my busy life, full of plenty of other demands.

But for months now it keeps coming back to me and I have to wonder, "If we are all sitting around waiting for the

magical day when it gets better, when giving to Our Church's Wider Mission [OCWM] actually rises, then who is doing anything about making it happen?"

I write this piece as a challenge to myself and to all out there that claim the UCC as your own. For all who are so proud of the stances we take, the prophetic witness we bear in a hungry and hurting world, for all that have found an Open and Affirming word of hope, it is time to say thanks.

For my lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning brothers and sisters, and our allies, who hungered for an inclusive church, well, we got it and, sometimes, at a cost to the denomination. The UCC has been there for us. Now I think the question is, "What are we willing to do for them?"

There are many issues, many causes vying for our attention and I know many of us feel overwhelmed by the demand for aid bombarding us each week. I am not suggesting that we stop giving to our five special mission offerings, or the tsunamis and hurricanes, but I am suggesting that we not neglect our basic support.

It is our OCWM offerings that keep the engine running. We have all felt the consequences of a church with strained resources and increasing demands. Many take different attitude of, "Who are these people? What have they done for us? Do we really need them? What is the point? Where is the pay off?"

Who are these people? These are the ones throughout history

who gave us our identity in the first place. They are the ones who have committed their lives to us, not for the fame or money, but because they love the church and believed in it. God has called them to us.

What have they done for us? The wider church has provided us clergy and lay leader training. It has given us voice on issues of education, health care, poverty, racism and more. It has given us the loans and grants that kept our little ships afloat. It has given us Sunday school curriculums and worship resources.

The UCC has been there for us. Now I think the question is, "What are we willing to do for them?"

Do we really need them? Only if covenant is important to us: belonging and caring for something beyond our own narrow walls. Only if we recognize that we can do — and have done — so much more together than we could ever do alone.

It is "covenant" that is the point. It is "covenant" that is the pay off. We have made covenantal statements — promises to and from all of us, whether clergy or lay — to support the ministry of our wider church. And now is the time!

Yes, ministries of the Conference and the denomination have sometimes fallen short of our expectations. But I ask you: What church, institution or family has not fallen short? And when have you not fallen short? Maybe that is when they need us most. Maybe it's time to ask the question, "What can we do for them?"

When the young man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus turned the question around and showed him how to be a neighbor to others. Today, if we ask Jesus, "What has the wider church done for us?" perhaps he'll suggest that a better question is, "What have you done for it?"

Let's each take that question to Jesus, and see how he replies.

The Rev. Dee Lundberg is interim pastor at *Montevideo UCC and Granite Falls UCC in Minnesota*.

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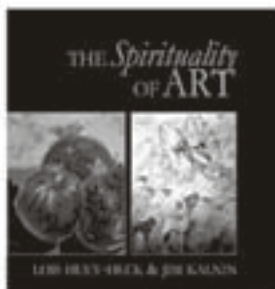
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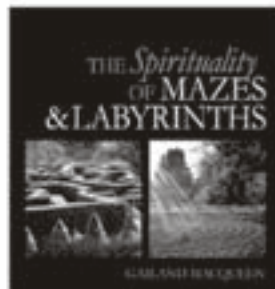
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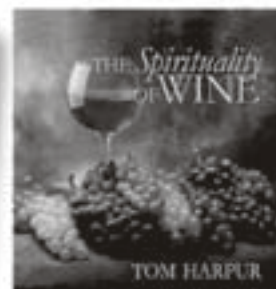
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GOOD TIDINGS

“Almighty God, whose will it is that all people dwell in unity, we thank you for our diversity and for all signs of oneness in the midst of our fragmented world: for neighborhood among nations; for understanding among races; for dialogue among faiths; for sisterhood and brotherhood among persons; for all steps in the way of unity with love, we praise you, O God.

Yet, at the same time, we need your forgiveness for our lack of oneness: for strife among nations that means destruction and death to many; for false pride and narrow patriotism that block paths to peace; for divisions between people of different races, classes and religions; for ungodly dissension among those who claim the name of Christ; for the brokenness within our own lives that stifles growth.

From all such unnecessary and false barriers between persons, good Lord, deliver us.

Put us in a right and good relationship with you, with one another and within our very selves, as we live Jesus' vision of inclusive love. Amen.

— “Called to be one” is a prayer by the Rev. Dennis W. Haas from the Aug. 6 cover from the UCC Sunday Bulletin Service. Haas is a retired chaplain of UCC-related Grinnell College in Iowa.

Learn more about the Bulletin Service, including ordering information, at <ucc.org/steward/bulletin>.

WORSHIP WAYS

Looking for unique liturgies for the blessing of animals, for lifting up the youth, for celebrating a retirement or recognizing a painful job loss? Searching for melodic, easy-to-sing praise music that utilizes inclusive language?

“Worshiping in God’s Future,” a 2005 denominational initiative, provides new worship resources for UCC congregations.

Download without cost at <ucc.org/worship/witgf>.



ROADWORK

Strengthen your prayer life by exploring different ways to pray:

- ▶ Intercessory prayer. Bring your concerns to God’s threshold. It doesn’t matter how or what.
- ▶ Body prayer. Use movement, along with words, to express yourself.
- ▶ Arrow prayers. Informal prayers, spoken aloud or silently, as situations arise. Most fall into two categories: “Help!” or “Thank you!”
- ▶ Musical prayer. “The person who sings prays twice,” the old adage goes.
- ▶ Centering prayer. Simply rest in the presence of God.
- ▶ Lectio Divina. Use “sacred readings” to educate, illumine and transform.
- ▶ Practice gratitude. “Gratitude is the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God,” wrote Karl Barth.
- ▶ Pray out loud. Overcome your hesitancy to pray in front of others. Create and rehearse forms that work for you.

Based on suggestions from “A praying congregation: The art of teaching spiritual practice” (Alban, 2005) by the Rev. Jane E. Vennard, a UCC minister.

TRUE CONFESSIONS

Why I never graduated from church camp

COMMENTARY



Lillian Daniel

Last weekend, about 60 of our church members made a weekend getaway to Tower Hill, a UCC camp facility in Michigan. After living in the Chicago area for two years, I finally got to see the dunes on Lake Michigan. Why did I wait two years?

People had told me about the “beaches” out here, but to be frank, coming from the East Coast, I was highly skeptical. How can you have a beach without an ocean? Yet last weekend, walking in that soft sand and watching

a sunset of exotic pinks and grays, I became a believer. All this beauty without salt water or the smell of fish. Call me a convert and mark July 9 as my conversion date, when I was struck down on the road to Tower Hill.

Later this summer, I will visit another church family camp, on the shores of Lake Winnepesaukee, in New Hampshire. We have attended the Northern New England School of Religious Education for six years. The campers, once drawn mostly from UCC congregations in New England, now make the pilgrimage to UCC-related Geneva Point Center from all over the country.

What is it about staying in rustic cabins with showers of varying dependability that draws us? What is it that makes normally discriminating adults eat cold grilled cheese sandwiches in hot dining halls at chipped Formica tables stained with that mysterious camp beverage, “bug juice?” Why is it so much fun to journey for hours in a cramped van with church members you see every week to go stay in a tent and roast marshmallows together? I don’t know why we do it, but every year I’m along for the ride, as people are from so many of our churches, venturing out with bug spray, sandals and perhaps some Pepto Bismol.

These church camps are treasures. Even as they may fall

victim to deferred maintenance and financial woes, they remain holy places. While the old cabins may not meet the standards that most Americans would expect on a vacation, church people know that they’ve been patched up with love, the bunk beds blanketed in the conversations of children who from generation to generation have refused to go to bed in a natural setting that allows the stars to shine so brightly.

My own children continue the tradition, having been nurtured in their faith amidst the ‘Smore fires of the UCC’s Silver Lake in Connecticut, and now UCC-related Pilgrim Park in Illinois. As I write, I can imagine that somewhere a child is preparing to attend a church camp for the very first time, packing up her flash light and Bible; wondering if she will be homesick, make a new best friend, or both.

I imagine an adult driving down a dirt road to the September committee retreat at a Conference camp, wondering if getting away from the church building and into nature will allow God’s creativity to infuse the congregation. Both of these characters are journeying, as others have before them, to a place that may appear modest, but where souls have been shaped.

Our Christian forebears started these camps for the spiritual formation of God’s people. Now we are stewards of this gift, even as we receive.

So, if you can name one of those holy places of your own, say a prayer of blessing for the trees, the picnic tables, the swimming holes and the ropes courses, that somehow God continues to use for shaping our people. Personally, I give thanks that it was at one of these holy places that I finally got to see those Michigan dunes, and a sunset that reminded me that, even as an adult, I still have a lot to learn at church camp.

The Rev. Lillian Daniel is senior minister of **First Congregational UCC in Glen Ellyn, Ill.**, and author of “Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony” (Alban Institute, 2006).

COMFORT AS AN ILLUSION

Inside the church, the war seems very far away

COMMENTARY



Barbara Brown Taylor

There is no better place to forget that the United States is at war than in church. Three years after the invasion of Iraq, stories of bloody bombings and mounting casualties still top each day’s news, but remain conspicuously absent from the discourse of most neighborhood churches.

For many of these congregations, the war in Iraq hits home only when they bury a soldier whom they last knew as a pimply member of the youth group with big dreams for the future. Until

then, they may close their eyes and pray for peace, asking God to protect those in harm’s way.

Few, however, will ask with eyes wide open how people of faith are called to respond to this particular war. As a member of the clergy for more than 20 years now, I have some idea why this is so.

People of faith are divided over the war — as they are divided over abortion, gun control, homosexuality and many other things. While that’s not unusual, people of faith also hold a vision of the undivided life, in which they dwell in unity with God and neighbor. Church becomes the safe house where they may dream this dream on a regular basis, finding sanctuary from the divided lives that dog them every other day of the week. If they cannot say something nice in church, then they say nothing at all, saving their more pungent convictions for the parking lot.

Like it or not, clergy are the arbiters of this uneasy peace. Called to be shepherds of the whole flock, we must think at least twice before taking stands that church members may hear as choosing sides. If we want to tell the truth, then we had better hide it inside a story, or else save room on our calendars to mend fences wrecked by bolting sheep.

From a more pastoral point of view, clergy are often the only people in a congregation who regularly visit the sick, bury the dead and comfort those who mourn. Most of us have held enough

broken hearts in our hands to wonder if this is not the division that matters most, beside which all other human rifts pale in comparison.

Yet at the same time, churches do not exist exclusively for the comfort of their own members. From earliest times, churches have also existed to stand with the poor, feed the hungry, visit those in prison and care for the widows and orphans, while challenging the authority of those in power who are not using their power to do these things. For clergy mindful of this ministry as well, there can come a time when keeping the flock together rubs hard against reminding the flock why it exists.

The last time I visited the Memorial Church at Harvard University, I noticed a khaki-colored booklet in the pews. Expecting a new hymnal or order of service, I was surprised to pick up a volume of “Prayers for Private Devotions in War-Time.” The surprise was sufficient to sit me down in that house of prayer — built as a memorial to the Harvard dead of World War I — and read prayers written over the past 17 centuries.

In them, I found language that I was not hearing anywhere else in the world. I found prayers for justice instead of victory. I found laments for the fathomless sorrow of war, which kills the souls of the living along with the bodies of the dead.

Among the prayers for soldiers, civilians, children and enemies, I found words to confess the sins of my own nation and to ask that we be made equal to our high trusts, reverent in our use of freedom, just in our exercise of power and generous in our protection of weakness.

Such prayers are neither anti-war nor pro-war; they do not choose sides. Set in the pews by clergy who may or may never address the war in Iraq from the pulpit, they suggest a different vision of unity. It’s the kind of unity in which people of faith who do not agree on many things may still bring their deepest concerns to church — instead of leaving them in the parking lot.

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, teaches religion at UCC-related Piedmont College in Demorest, Ga. Her newest book is “Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith,” published by HarperSanFrancisco.

First-ever UCC, Disciples women's event brings 3,000 to Indy

By Rebecca Bowman Woods
For United Church News

As "Mix in '06" concluded on June 25 in Indianapolis, the women of the UCC and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were encouraged by speakers and leaders from both denominations to keep on dreamin' on.

The five-day joint event — a first for the UCC and Disciples together — drew around 3,000 registrants. Inspired by the theme "Dream On, Sisters!" they worshiped and worked; played and prayed; met new friends and hugged old ones, and were challenged and inspired by speakers, preachers and workshop leaders.

Asked what they enjoyed most, several attendees mentioned speaker

Renee Bondi. In 1988, at age 29, Bondi was a singer and high school vocal teacher looking forward to her wedding, just two months away. Then a freak accident left her paralyzed from the neck down and unable to speak above a whisper.

Family, friends and a devoted fiancé supported Bondi as she learned to cope with paralysis and found her voice again — not only to sing, but to share the story of God's transforming power in her life.

"She was so inspiring," said Maurine Dalluge of Central Christian Church in Marshalltown, Iowa. "You could really feel the spirit move in her. It brought tears to my eyes."

The Rev. Sharon Watkins, Disciples' general minister and president, reminded attendees that "well-be-

haved women rarely make history." The saying became an instant hit, overheard during lunchtime conversations and incorporated into other speakers' presentations. UCC General Minister and President John H. Thomas also addressed the gathering.

Many participated in hands-on mission, working in a community garden, packing 2,330 boxes of food and nine tons of extra items at a local food bank and assembling 2,528 Church World Service health kits from items brought by attendees. Another 655 health kits were partially assembled and will be completed by Southport Christian Church in Indianapolis.

More than 30 musicians contributed to the Mix, including 17 singer-songwriters who contributed songs

to the "Dream On Sisters! A Musical Mix" CD.

Saturday evening's concert featured acclaimed recording artists Holly Near, Carrie Newcomer and Bernice Johnson Reagon. Each artist, well known for her support of social justice causes, brought her own style of music to the concert.

Discovery group workshops gave women a chance to stretch themselves. Topics ran the gamut from gospel aerobics to guided meditation.

Debbie Long, a member of **First Trinity UCC in New Stanton, Pa.**, attended a session led by Global Ministries missionaries, where she learned more about what UCC/Disciples missionaries do and how much it means to the people in other coun-

tries to have them there, she said.

Julie J. Kilmer is an associate professor of women's studies at UCC-related Olivet College in Michigan. Kilmer's session, "Feminist Theology and the Call to Ministry," included lively discussion.

"I especially appreciated the diverse perspectives shared in the discovery groups," Kilmer said.

Two young leaders shared the pulpit — UCC seminarian Claudia De la Cruz and Disciples minister the Rev. Sandhya Jha. Each challenged the audience to step outside their comfort zones.

The two concluded: "And if anyone tries to tell us, 'You're just dreaming,' we'll tell them, 'Our God is a dreamer too. And her dreams are wondrous to behold.'"


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'Without a vessel for my beliefs, I'd always remain apart, alone'



It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity UCC on 95th Street in the Southside of Chicago one day and affirm my Christian faith."

Editor's note: This is the second installment in United Church News' continuing series on the silencing of historic mainline churches and newfound attempts to intensify the public conversation about more-moderate religious issues and concerns.



Ryan Beiler photos

By Barack Obama
Special to United Church News

For some time now, there has been talk among pundits and pollsters that the political divide in this country falls sharply along religious lines. Indeed, the single biggest gap in party affiliation among white Americans today is not between men and women, between red and blue states, but between those who attend church regularly and those who don't.

This gap has long been exploited by conservative leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who tell evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their church, while suggesting that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage.

It's a gap that has also been kept open by some liberals, who may try to avoid the conversation about their religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that constitutional principles tie our hands.

Some may even dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, thinking that the very word "Christian" describes one's political opponents, not people of faith.

And yet, despite all this division, we are united by the fact that Americans are a deeply religious people. Ninety percent of us believe in God, 70 percent affiliate themselves with an organized religion and 38 percent call themselves committed Christians.

This is why, if political leaders truly hope to communicate their hopes and values to Americans in a way that's relevant to their own, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.

I've fallen into this trap myself. During my 2004 Senate race, my opponent said, "Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama."

I answered with what has come to be the typically liberal response: that we live in a pluralistic society, and I can't impose my own religious views on another. I said that I was running to be the U.S. Senator of Illinois, and not the minister of Illinois.

But my opponent's accusations nagged at me, and I knew that my answer didn't address the role my faith has in guiding my values.

I, like other progressives, should have realized that when we ignore what it means to be a good Christian or Muslim or Jew; when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, when we shy away from religious venues because we think we'll be unwelcome — others will fill the vacuum, those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.

'Drawn to be in church'

I was not raised in a particularly religious household. My father, who returned to Kenya when I was just two, was born Muslim but as an adult became an atheist. My mother, whose parents were non-practicing Baptists and Methodists, was probably one of the most spiritual and kindest people I've ever known, but grew up with a healthy

skepticism of organized religion herself. As a consequence, so did I.

It wasn't until after college, when I went to Chicago to work as a community organizer for a group of Christian churches, that I confronted my own spiritual dilemma.

I was working with churches, and the Christians who I worked with recognized themselves in me. They saw that I knew their Book and that I shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed that a part of me that remained removed, detached, that I was an observer in their midst.

And in time, I came to realize that something was missing as well — that without a vessel for my beliefs, without a commitment to a particular community of faith, at some level, I would always remain apart — and alone. But as the months passed in Chicago, I found myself drawn — not just to work with the church, but to be in the church.

For one thing, I believed and still believe in the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change. Because of its past, the Black church understands in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. And in its historical struggles for freedom and the rights of man, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world. As a source of hope.

And perhaps it was out of this intimate knowledge of hardship — the grounding of faith in struggle — that the church offered me a second insight, one that I think is important to emphasize: Faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts.

You come to church — in the first place — precisely because you are of this world, not apart from it. You need to embrace Christ precisely because you have sins to wash away, because you are human and need an ally in this difficult journey.

It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity UCC on 95th Street in the Southside of Chicago one day and affirm my

Christian faith. It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross, I felt that I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.

That's a path that has been shared by millions upon millions of Americans — evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims alike; some since birth, others at certain turning points in their lives. It is not something they set apart from the rest of their beliefs and values. In fact, it is often what drives their beliefs and their values.

'Motivated by faith'

It's wrong to ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant, Martin Luther King — indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history — were not only motivated by faith, but used religious language to argue for their cause. To say that men and women should not inject their "personal morality" into policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality.

If progressives shed some of these biases, we might recognize the overlapping values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the direction of our country. We might recognize that the call to sacrifice, the need to think in terms of "thou" and not just "I," resonates with all Americans. And we might realize that we have the ability to reach out to the evangelical community and engage millions of religious Americans in the larger project of America's renewal.

Still, leaders of the Religious Right will need to acknowledge a few truths about religion as well.

For one, the separation of church and state in America has not only preserved our democracy, but the robustness of our religious practice. After all, during our founding, it was not the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions

of this separation; it was the persecuted religious minorities concerned that any state-sponsored religion might hinder their ability to practice their faith.

This separation is critical to our form of government, because in the end, democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. If I am opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

This may be difficult for those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, but in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics involves the compromise, the art of the possible. But religion does not allow for compromise. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime;

to base our policy making on them would be dangerous.

In the months and years to come, I am hopeful that we can bridge these gaps and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate. And I believe that Americans want this. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool to attack and divide.

Americans are looking for a deeper, fuller conversation about religion in this country. They may not change their positions on certain issues, but they are willing to listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in reasonable terms — those who know of the central and awesome place that God holds in the lives of so many, and who refuse to treat faith as simply another political issue with which to score points.

U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) is an active member of Trinity UCC in Chicago. A longer version of Obama's sentiments served as the basis for his Pentecost 2006 address in Washington, D.C.

OBAMA: AMERICA NEEDS TO HEAR MORE-MODERATE, MORE-INCLUSIVE RELIGIOUS VOICES

By Barb Powell
For United Church News

More-moderate religious perspectives “do not have voice” within the media, says U.S. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), and it's something he's working to change.

“I think it is unfortunate any time the media does not accurately portray the true beliefs of the American people,” Obama, a member of Trinity UCC in Chicago, told United Church News. “There are millions of religious Americans who are offended when their faith is used as a tool to attack and divide, and who see a positive role for the church in solving both social and moral problems.

“To the extent that media programmers do not give voice to these Americans, I am disappointed and hopeful of change.”

Interviewed on June 28 on the heels of a major address on the connection between religion and politics at the “Pentecost 2006: Building a Covenant for a New America” gathering in Washington, D.C., Obama cited the welcome he received by his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and the teachings of the UCC as an important underlying factor in his public service.

“Just as my pastor welcomed me as a young man years ago, UCC churches across the country open their doors to millions of Americans each Sunday, and they accept, love and counsel all who enter,” Obama said. “This spirit of inclusiveness has served as a model for me in my time in the Senate, and the love for one's fellow man that the UCC stands for is the foundation of my work.”

Reconciling faith and pluralism

Obama used his speech at the Pentecost 2006 event — sponsored by Sojourners / Call to Renewal — to call for continued dialogue and bridge-building between religious conservatives and progressives, reminding his audience that each had work to do to achieve meaningful discourse.

Obama spoke of his own faith story, and

likened his path to becoming a member of Trinity UCC to that trod by “millions upon millions of Americans.”

“It is not something they set apart from the rest of their beliefs and values. In fact, it is often what drives their beliefs and their values,” Obama said. “And that is why, if we truly hope to speak to people where they're at — to communicate our hopes and values in a way that's relevant to their own ... we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.”

“I think it's time that we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy,” said Obama. “... If we don't reach out to evangelical Christians and other religious Americans and tell them what we stand for, then the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons and Alan Keyeses will continue to hold sway.”

After Obama's speech, the crowd of about 500 gave Obama a standing ovation.

Jim Wallis, Sojourner's editor-in-chief and host of the event, took the stage following Obama's speech. “I hope you realize what you've heard here,” Wallis told the audience. “This will be an address that will be quoted for years to come.”

Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund and a speaker at the conference, described Obama's address as “very, very, very thoughtful.”

Respectful, fair-minded dialogue

Obama told United Church News that religious principles can be drawn upon to help shape both national security and social justice concerns.

“I believe that democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal values,” Obama said. “Social justice and national security are both universal values, values that may originate for some in their religious beliefs, but are shared by us all.”

“I think it is up to individual pastors and faith leaders to help guide religious Americans in prioritizing what is in their own holy books,” he added. “But when these priorities



I'm always open to engage with others, even those who disagree with my positions, as long as the dialogue remains fair-minded and respectful.”

— U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, UCC member

COVENANT FOR A NEW AMERICA

Believing poverty is a concern that Christians on the Left and Right can agree upon, this bipartisan contract was launched during Sojourners/Call to Renewal's Pentecost 2006 gathering, June 26-28, in Washington, D.C. Learn more online at <sojo.net>.

In a time when political and social issues threaten to divide the church, religious leaders from across the theological and political spectrum are building new common ground around a fundamental commitment to the most vulnerable who were such a special concern of Jesus. Our vision is:

- ▶ **Work must work and provide for family economic success and security.** Those who work responsibly should have a living family income in which a combination of a family's earnings — and supports for transportation, health care, nutrition, child care, education, housing and other basic needs — provide a decent standard of living. Those unable to work should be supported with dignity.
- ▶ **Children should not be poor.** We also need specific and concrete commitments to brighter futures for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. We will never end the cycle of poverty if we continue to allow lack of opportunity to be the formative aspect of a child's life. Our nation should develop and commit to a plan that reduces child poverty by half over 10 years.
- ▶ **Extreme global poverty must end.** The U.S. should support effective aid, good governance, just trade policies and debt cancellation in order to lift billions of people out of extreme poverty. U.S. international development assistance should be increased by an additional one percent of the federal budget to honor our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, designed to cut global poverty in half by the year 2015.

We commit to recognize the valid concerns of both sides in the political debate, and then move to higher ground by working together to make overcoming poverty a moral priority. We embrace this covenant — in the spirit of shared responsibility.

come to the Senate floor, I can tell you that the universal values of both security and justice for all motivate my work.”

During his speech, Obama said dialogue must continue between all people of faith, but United Church News later asked Obama how one knows when dialogue is no longer fruitful and when we must — as Jesus said — “shake the dust from our feet.”

“In the political arena, there is almost

always time for dialogue,” Obama replied. “Even if you've lost on a given issue, it will likely come up again in the future. So I'm always open to engage with others, even those who disagree with my positions, as long as the dialogue remains fair-minded and respectful.”

“When it strays from those principles,” he concluded, “there may have to be a little ‘dust-shaking.’”

in the news people | places | things

UCC members have contributed \$5.6 million for Gulf Coast rebuilding

One year after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita pounded the Gulf Coast, UCC members and churches continue to make significant financial contributions and personal investments into rebuilding efforts. To date, more than \$5.6 million has been donated to support the church's redevelopment work, and hundreds of work camps are underway or have been organized.

"The major role of the church in this disaster continues to be the rebuilding and repairing of homes for persons identified with un-met needs,

for people who have no insurance or who are under-insured," says Florence Coppola, the UCC's disaster response coordinator.

One hundred percent of UCC donor-directed relief dollars are being used to help those impacted by the disasters, Coppola says, thanks to churches' ongoing basic support for Our Church's Wider Mission, which undergirds all operational costs.

A four-page, comprehensive look at the UCC's hurricane response is scheduled for the next issue of United Church News. Meanwhile, here's a

partial look at some of the ways your dollars are making a difference:

► Through the South Central Conference, the UCC is providing grants to displaced clergy families; purchasing building materials; organizing and sponsoring work camps; and assisting uninsured and underinsured residents.

► Through partnerships with Church World Service and community responders, the UCC is supporting long-term recovery throughout the Gulf Coast as well as helping those who evacuated to Houston, Texas; Atlanta, Ga.; New York City; St. Louis, Mo.; and elsewhere.

► The UCC is funding creation of church-based lodging facilities at **Good Shepherd UCC in**

Metairie, La., and St. Matthew UCC in New Orleans, to accommodate volunteer work camps coming into the region for months and years to come.

► The UCC is offering significant support for the Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Miss., as it rebuilds and readies itself to aid impoverished residents, both now and in the years ahead. Creating affordable housing opportunities has emerged as a new priority for the UCC-related agency.

► The denomination continues to find ways for those affected to tell their stories, such as assisting 25 women impacted by the hurricanes to attend the national UCC/Disciples' women's event in June, where they shared their experi-

ences with those gathered from across the two churches.

► The **Community of Faith Church of Houston (UCC/Disciples)** and its Amistad Resettlement Project is receiving financial help from the UCC to aid 82 evacuated families with resettlement assistance, including job re-training, housing, food, clothing and medical assistance.

► The UCC is supporting UCC-related Dillard University in New Orleans with extensive repairs to its campus and restoration of campus life.

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SETTING WORKABLE GOALS

Pastor inspires youth-organizing tradition for California students

By Jan Resseger

When pastor and community organizer Don Stahlhut retired on July 15, he left a legacy for public school students in Contra Costa County, Calif., and for the schools themselves.

At Contra Costa Interfaith Community Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), Stahlhut leaves in place a best-practice community organizing program that trains, pays and provides weekly support for adolescent community organizers. Through Stahlhut's efforts, youth organizers have made it possible for the problems of adolescents and their schools to attract far more attention in Contra Costa County than in most other places.

Stahlhut, who became CCISCO's executive director in 1996 after spending eight years as director of the San Francisco Organizing Project, launched the successful youth program in 1999.

He has continued active UCC ministry through a covenant with his local church, **First Congregational UCC in Berkeley, Calif.** His Christian vocation has been distinctive: empowering adolescents to force their school districts to address racial, ethnic and educational injustice.

By youth, for youth

Thanks to Stahlhut's influence, German Medina, who recently completed his junior year at Concord (Calif.) High School, has been organizing for three years with students of his own Bay Point community, about 15 miles from his high school and an equal distance from Mt. Diablo, the other high school where students from Bay Point are bused.

As evidence of the project's influence, Medina and his organizing committee secured an after-school homework center for youth bused to Mt. Diablo and Concord high schools. And because the bus for Bay Point leaves at the end of the classroom day and before after-school activities begin, Medina's group created their own after-school services and recreational opportunities — right in their own community — for those students shut out of these experiences at school.

A wall-sized mural decorates the exterior of the homework center that houses a teacher-staffed tutoring program, a computer lab and recreation facilities including a soccer league. The school district now pays a professional coordinator with whom Medina dreams of establishing a pilot summer program where students could "shadow" adult mentors whose jobs might interest them.

Medina's committee also successfully won a \$500,000 investment by the Bay Point school district to rebuild the playing field at Riverside

Middle School. The students' long range goal is to make Riverside the site of a new Bay Point High School, one that will serve the community's youth.

Another priority, says Medina, is to help English-language learners.

At Mt. Diablo High School, Medina's committee has asked the school to develop paths back to the academic-track for students who have mastered English but continue to be trapped in language-learning classes that count neither towards full graduation nor the requirements for admission to state colleges.

In contrast, at Concord — a high school that has not yet developed a comprehensive English Language Development program — Medina recently organized a group of 40 Latino, Filipino and Middle Eastern students along with teachers concerned about the need for a program to meet students' linguistic needs.

Mentored by an adult organizer each week, and trained by Stahlhut and others, Medina has deliberately and strategically used the CCISCO organizing method to push for reforms that he and his peers have identified.

Medina and other youth organizers develop their contacts into ongoing local organizing committees, where at least every two weeks they train their peers to research local issues and become effective student leaders. Stahlhut adds that these students also learn how to involve their parents and sympathetic teachers and administrators as their allies.

Each summer CCISCO expects Medina to engage his peers in structured one-to-one listening sessions, ten per week during each of the ten weeks of summer — a total of a hundred interviews per summer — to gather data about the concerns of the students at the high school.

'Challenging their peers'

Maria Reyes, one of Stahlhut's two original youth organizers in 1999, now supervises youth organizers for CCISCO. She meets — at Starbucks, a church or McDonalds — with three youth organizers each week. They often need help with the discipline of scheduling and recording their one-to-one interviews and establishing and supporting local organizing committees, Reyes says.

The key challenges for youth organizers, Reyes believes, are staying focused, setting deadlines and realistically evaluating their accomplishments.

"I try to help them approach things on a weekly basis," she says, pointing to how Stahlhut also guides and supports her work. "Don and I meet on a regular basis, so I'm not completely alone."

There are special challenges in youth organizing, Stahlhut acknowl-

edges. Turnover is high, especially as students struggle to balance school, activities and other jobs.

But adolescents need support as they develop new skills and greater confidence, he says. The payoff is seeing his student organizers grow up and successfully move on to college or other jobs.

"One of our paramount themes is that no organizer can use his/her work time with CCISCO as an excuse for getting low grades in school," Stahlhut says. "This means that the time they put in with CCISCO throughout the year is directly related to their own academic demands."

Stahlhut believes that organizing adolescents is worth the special effort.

"Youth organizers can tap into their own networks, effectively challenge their peers and engender more trust than older organizers," he says.

A lasting legacy

During one recent training session, Stahlhut provided popcorn and Chinese takeout for seven adolescents who came to learn how a local organizing committee can help ensure that their schools are in compliance with a recently settled school eq-

uity court case, *Williams v. California* — a decision that guarantees quality textbooks and instructional materials, well-maintained school facilities and qualified teachers.

Barbara Berman, enforcement coordinator for the Contra Costa County Office of Education, distributed a 57-page booklet from the American Civil Liberties Union, which she used to explain the "uniform complaint process" under state court's decree.

The student organizers questioned Berman about the details of how one files a complaint. Then they strategized about how they and their committees could monitor school services and file complaints when there are violations.

Through the students' newfound passion, one can't help but spy Stahlhut's justice-doing fingerprints.



The Rev. Don Stahlhut (r.) with organizer German Medina.



Youth organizers can tap into their own networks, effectively challenge their peers and engender more trust than older organizers."

— The Rev. Don Stahlhut, UCC minister and community organizer

Perhaps unwittingly, these young advocates are continuing the legwork of his ministry — a people-powered campaign for equitable public schools and better government services for California's young people.

Jan Resseger is the UCC's minister for public education and witness.

With UCC's help, San Antonio's public access TV is restored

By Abby J. Heckler
For United Church News

San Antonio's Channel 20 is back on the air, thanks in part to the Media Empowerment Project of the UCC's Office of Communication, Inc.

In January, TimeWarner Cable pulled the plug on San Antonio's public access station, due to a new loophole that no longer requires sole service providers to offer the programming.

When Texas Senate Bill 5 passed in the fall of 2005 — opening up the market for cable competition throughout the state — TimeWarner no longer felt obliged to provide public access in San Antonio. And Channel 20 was no more. Yet, even while new companies entered the San Antonio market, none felt obliged to offer public access broadcasting. The new state law was allowing media companies to skirt a service once required by the FCC.

Enter a cadre of concerned citizens, public access producers and the San Antonio office of the UCC-related Texas Media Empowerment Project (TMEP). Together, they started to educate and mobilize the community to respond.

"It was really heartbreaking to see over 180 producers losing their channel and this channel just going black," said DeAnne Cueller, TMEP's project director.

The UCC's Media Empower-

ment Project works to hold local media accountable to the needs of diverse communities. Besides San Antonio, it also is working on projects in Michigan and North Carolina.

In San Antonio, part of the project's role was to investigate the impact of Senate Bill 5 on the community. After TMEP gathered the information and took residents' concerns to city officials and TimeWarner, the corporation agreed on July 3 to put Channel 20 back on the air.

"It was awesome to have a faith-based entity like the UCC providing us with the encouragement and support we needed to get through a really difficult process," Cuellar said. "And also just to have that large constituency base of really great people that believe in the work of local community."

Although the law only affects cities in Texas, similar legislation is being considered at the federal level, and media advocates say the proposals use similar language that could potentially cut off local access media across the country. The legislation would clear the way for so-called "cherry picking," where media companies can choose whether or not to provide services, such as public access stations, in certain neighborhoods.

Low-income households are most affected by unfair media practices, advocates contend. Cable

providers would no longer be required to offer equal service. In other words, if the media company doesn't want to connect cable in low-income neighborhoods, they won't have to — denying these low-income neighborhoods access to information.

Such "redlining" also was used by telephone conglomerates in the 1960s until the UCC's OC, Inc. stepped in. As a result, it is now illegal to exclude neighborhoods from telephone coverage.

Cuellar hopes that by sharing the story of San Antonio's media access struggle, other communities affected by proposed legislation will see that they can work together.

"Texas MEP is an outstanding example of community organizing from the inside out," said the Rev. Robert Chase, executive director of the UCC's OC, Inc. "Students, activists, artists and producers from the community itself recognized the local impact caused by Senate Bill Five and did something about it."

"It is easy to forget that the airwaves belong to the public," Chase said. "DeAnne and her colleagues made a clear and compelling case that the public interest was not served by this policy change. The city responded and returned Channel 20 to the air. It is a great victory."

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RELIGION AND FILM: What would Jesus direct?



“Whatever’s good, whatever’s true, whatever’s praiseworthy, this is where you need to be putting your focus, this is where you need to be putting your minds.”

— Michael Flaherty, Walden Media

By David E. Anderson
Religion News Service

There is a lot of buzz these days in both religious and Hollywood circles that a new relationship is being forged between faith and film. Is it for real? Or is it just a lot of hype?

Michael Flaherty, president of Walden Media, a partner with Walt Disney Studios in bringing C.S. Lewis’ “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe” to the silver screen, comes down on the side of the optimists.

“I think there’s definitely an interest” in Hollywood in religious themes, he said, but added: “One of the mistakes that people make is they think they can just throw in a church scene here, throw in a bit of Scripture here. They’re missing the point that it’s (film-making) all about a great story. And so if it [religion] doesn’t exist in the DNA of the story, you can’t just dab it on like makeup.”

Flaherty made his comments during a panel discussion — “What Would Jesus Direct” — at the recent Tribeca Film Festival in New York. The panel was moderated by Kim Lawton, managing editor of the PBS television program “Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly.”

Other members of the panel included Jonathan Bock, president of Grace Hill Media, founded in 2000 to “bridge the chasm” by marketing films to people of faith; Ralph Winter, producer of “X-Men: The Last Stand,” released May 26; and Academy Award-winning actor Cuba Gooding Jr.

Asked whether the new interest in faith on film is about putting Bible stories on the screen, or films that may not be explicitly religious but tackle themes with religious and moral overtones, Flaherty opted for the latter.

“And you know, it’s like the Apostle Paul said to the church of Philippi: Look, whatever’s good, whatever’s true, whatever’s praiseworthy, this is where you need to be putting your focus, this is where you need to be putting your minds,” he said.

“I think that there’s a lot of people in the faith community who are looking for those films that are really inspirational and uplifting and might not necessarily be considered deliberately religious per se,” he added.



But it was an explicitly religious film — Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which earned at least \$370 million in the United States — that panelists pointed to as the breakthrough movie creating an awareness in Hollywood of the Christian market.

"The Passion of the Christ" kicked the door open for these kinds of [religious] projects," Winter said. "But I think they have to be entertaining. No one wants to be preached to in a movie theater."

There's a fine line, Bock said, between the kinds of movies filmmakers want to make, the kinds of films audiences want to see, and most importantly, the kinds of films studios are willing to bank-roll.

"I think the question just can't be what would Jesus direct," Bock said. "I think it's got to be what would Jesus direct and would Paramount distribute because, look, film is a collaborative process. It requires a lot of money."

Gooding, who won Best Supporting Actor in 1996 for his role in "Jerry Maguire," said he laughs at Hollywood's timing.

"It's funny," he said. "They go where the money is. OK, 'The Passion of the Christ' made a helluva lot of money, no pun intended, and now everybody's scurrying to have the next faith-based project that goes through the roof. The audience has been there for years."

Bock said Hollywood is just discovering the audience.

"The statistics are overwhelming," he said. "For example, on Sunday, 43 percent of America was in church. Forty-three percent. And for studios not to recognize that that's an audience now, it's like a studio saying we're not making movies for men."

"What you are starting to see," he added, "is studios are starting to



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put their toes in the water." A number of studios, he said, are making small-budget films — \$2 million movies — aimed at the Christian market. He said he hopes Grace Hill will play a role in reaching "the relatively untapped market of religious America."

But he said the process is going to be evolutionary.

"I actually think it's not all that different than what African-Americans went through with seeing them come from, you know ... these Blaxploitation films that were made for very small dollars, and then that kind of grew into 'maybe we can make a buddy comedy' kind of thing.

"I think that's what we're going to see here too: low-budget Christian films that ... let's call them 'Godsploitation' films."

Gooding said that if filmmakers are going to reach a Christian audience, they need to have a certain passion for their work.

"If it's something that the faith-based audience feels is a statement that would inspire us as Christians, or as Catholics, or whatever, then they'll rally behind it," he said. "That's why, when you have copycat movies, when people are trying

to capitalize on money, people see through that."

The panelists agreed that most religious leaders now believe faith and pop culture need to be connected.

"Movies for many denominations were a sin," Bock noted, "and I think what most Christian leaders have seen happen is that pop culture has moved on without them. And you can't stop it."

"And so instead of being at the back end of the curve, I think they are interested in getting to the front end of the curve and engaging in that discussion and being at the front end of culture."

Winter noted a study that found people can't remember the theme of a sermon two hours after hearing it but can recite film dialogue months after seeing a movie.

And I think the church is beginning to understand that we are a story-based culture, and now visual — all that stuff that's coming at us in various forms in advertising and movies (and) television, is the way we engage, and sermons are the new movies," he said. "That's what I think the Christian group has to understand."

Adult themes and spirituality are not mutually exclusive

At a recent conference of religious communicators, keynoter Michael Landon, Jr., director of made-for-TV movies ("Love Comes Softly," "Loves Enduring Promise") repeatedly referred — in disparaging terms — to those hypocrites who went to church on Sundays and then went to R-rated movies during the week.

In the Q&A that followed, I outed myself as one who fits that demographic, stating my belief that I often found positive lessons, inspirational moments and moral aspects of many R-rated films. I saw no contradiction between being a faithful Christian and an avid filmgoer, even if some of those films were rated R.

Upon reading David Anderson's story [opposite], I find a similar disconnect between what he describes as a religious film and my own experience. While there is much in the article with which I agree, the author misses the point in limiting his references to religious films to those that deal with subject matter that is explicitly religious, films like "The Passion of the Christ" or "Bonhoeffer" or films with obvious symbolic religious references like "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe."

Jesus engaged first century Palestinian society through parables that were most often about agriculture or economics, reflecting the concerns of people eking out a living in an agrarian society. Religious (read *Christian*) films today should do no less than encounter our culture in those places where we are most in ferment.

I wish Mr. Anderson's article had pointed us to a film like "Crash," last year's Academy Award winner for Best Picture that traces a 36-hour period in Los Angeles as the lives of people of many races collide. This film juxtaposes expectation and actuality in our society — a central concern of scripture. Things are not what they seem to be. Racial stereotypes are shattered, predictable outcomes are left in ruins on the cutting room floor, death and miracle intercede in equal measure.

After all — as that ubiquitous commercial says — life comes at you fast, and in our day it is important for people of faith to live in the nexus of our conflicting and rapidly changing reality. Jesus, it seems to me, would get that. Just like reading the Bible leaves the burden of interpretation to the reader, truly religious filmmaking prods the viewer to reconsider what it means to be faithful, devoid of simplistic answers or superficial assumptions.

So what would Jesus direct? Films that deal realistically with life and death, where ruthlessness and grace are found in equal measure, where the worst of us can rise to heroic standards and our very best are cut down by sheer happenstance. Read the Gospels. Let's not fool ourselves that Jesus' films would only feature overt allusions to religious iconography or blatant symbolism. Instead, he would seek out the crosscurrents of life and death, help us see God's enduring love in that mix despite apparent evidence to the contrary, and respond in bold and imaginative ways.

Oh, and by the way, "Crash," of course, is rated R.

FROM
THE
PUBLISHER



Robert Chase

So what would Jesus direct?
Films that deal realistically
with life and death, where ruth-
lessness and grace are found
in equal measure."

WHAT'S IN A RATING?



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The movie ratings process, while necessary, is largely subjective. Regardless of rating, consider what's food for your soul — and what's not?

► RATED 'R'

Crash (2005) A racially and economically diverse group of people pursue lives that collide in unexpected ways.

The Passion of the Christ (2004) Jesus' final hours and crucifixion.

Billy Elliott (2000) Inside every one of us is a special talent waiting to come out. A young boy is torn between his love of dance and the disintegration of his family.

Shawshank Redemption (1994) Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free. The life of Andy Dufresne changes when he is wrongly convicted and jailed for the murder of his wife.

Schindler's List (1993) Oskar Schindler uses Jews to start a factory in Poland during the war. He witnesses the horrors endured by the Jews, and starts to save them.

► RATED 'PG-13'

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (2006) Jack owes an unpaid debt — his soul — to an army of sea-phantoms.

The Da Vinci Code (2006) A murder and hidden clues lead to the discovery of a religious mystery protected by a secret society for 2000 years, threatening Christianity's foundations.

The Sixth Sense (1999) "I see dead people."

Forrest Gump (1994) The world will never be the same once you've seen it through Forrest's eyes.

► RATED 'PG'

Facing the Giants (2006) A losing coach and his team face giants on and off the field. (Some lawmakers are expressing outrage that this "Christian film" received a PG rating, instead of G.)

Poltergeist (1982) "They're here." A family's home is haunted.

Jaws (1975) Amity Island has everything, and it's the perfect feeding ground — for a great white shark.

► RATED 'G'

Bambi (1942) Animated Disney classic about a young deer growing up in the wild after his mother is shot by hunters. (Many critics panned the film as too disturbing for young children.)

The Rev. Robert Chase has written, directed or produced more than 200 films and videos, including numerous award-winning productions. He also directs the UCC's Proclamation, Identity and Communication team and serves as executive director of OC, Inc., the UCC's storied media-advocacy arm.

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MILITARY CHAPLAINS GATHER IN CLEVELAND



Randy Varcho photo

Eleven UCC military chaplains gathered at the UCC's Church House in late May to meet with church leaders and receive continuing training in post-traumatic stress.

Pictured above, from left, are: Chaplain Captain James Janecek (U.S. Air Force); Chaplain Lt. Colonel Grant Speece (Army National Guard); Second Lt. Matthew Kolesnik (Army Chaplain Candidate); the Rev. John Gundlach (retired chaplain, UCC minister for government chaplaincies); Chaplain Lt. Colonel David Pillsbury (Army Reserve); Chaplain Lt. Commander P.J. Anderson (Naval Reserve); Chaplain Lt. Beth Stallings (Navy); Chaplain Lt. Col William Stone (Civil Air Patrol); Chaplain Captain Heather Bodwell (Air Force Reserve); and Chaplain Major Eva Buthy (Army).

"All of the national staff who were involved made the chaplains feel very welcome," said the Rev. John F. Gundlach, minister for government chaplaincies. "Joe Malayang [executive minister of Local Church Ministries] hosted a luncheon for the chaplains and key members of the staff and, afterward, we had a dialogue period to allow the chaplains and staff to interact with one another."

A worship service at the UCC's Amistad Chapel included prayers of intercession sent in from chaplains deployed around the world.

The Rev. William Mark, a retired Army chaplain and combat veteran who now serves as post-traumatic stress coordinator at a Veterans Hospital in Bedford, Mass., led training in coping with post-traumatic stress.

"The topic is very timely, considering that a number of our chaplains have been deployed or will deploy to combat areas or will be ministering to those who have," Gundlach said.

UCC General Minister and President John H. Thomas spoke at the gathering's opening dinner, where he shared that his son, David, had recently joined the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. UCC Chaplain Dan Parker, stationed at Missouri's Fort Leonard Wood, was one of the chaplains where David completed basic training and "was a wonderful resource to us," Thomas said.

"Having our military chaplains here at the Church House was an important way of reminding them of the gratitude of the church for their important ministry, often carried out in challenging circumstances," Thomas told United Church News.

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Pentagon display honors 'unsung' chaplains

By Steven Donald Smith

A new display commemorating military chaplains was dedicated June 23 in a ceremony at the Pentagon.

The display — the first in the Pentagon to specifically honor chaplains — consists of four backlit panels that highlight the accomplishments and service of military chaplains since the American Revolution.

More than 7,500 chaplains, chaplains' assistants and religious program specialists are currently serving around the world, representing more than 200 religious organizations.

"This ceremony commemorates the unselfish ministry of a group of unsung heroes in the Department of Defense — our military chaplains and assistant chaplains," said David S.C. Chu, undersecretary of defense. "We are thankful to the extraordinary partnership that exists between the churches of our land and Department of Defense to make the chaplaincy work."

One of the exhibit's display panels includes an excerpt from a letter

written by George Washington that includes observations about the importance of chaplains.

Eight chaplains and one chaplains' assistant have received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor. Four were chaplains who died aboard an Army ship during World War II, when it was struck by a German torpedo in waters south of Greenland. As the ship sank, four chaplains — two protestant ministers, a Jewish rabbi, and a Roman Catholic priest — gave up their life jackets to save others.

Chu said present-day chaplains are just as selfless as those of past generations.

"Religious chaplains of today are making history on 21st-century battlefields, at remote outposts, on ships at sea, in dangerous operations overseas and here at home," he said. "In a world in which religious differences and tensions often leads to bloodshed, the chaplains of our armed forces demonstrate remarkable cooperation and willingness to serve in the pluralistic setting of our military."

VOLUNTEERS REAP REWARDS — IN SMILES

Salvadoran vision clinic serves thousands, founded by UCC ophthalmologist

By W. Evan Golder

When the eye care volunteers arrived at their stations about 7:30 a.m., the line of persons waiting to register for eye exams already stretched halfway around the village public square. Some of the men shaded their eyes from the rising sun with sombreros. Many of the older women wore short, frilly aprons over their dresses.

Once people registered, they crossed the square to the first station, under an awning in the parish church's basketball court. Here a Lutheran volunteer blocked one eye at a time on each patient, while a Methodist flipped the eye chart and a Church of God member recorded the results. Charts in hand, the patients moved inside the church to the next station, where a member of the Evangelical Free Church, an optometrist, determined the best care they could give that patient. After that came near vision testing by a Jewish volunteer.

At that point, patients would be sent to different stations: some to be fitted for reading glasses by a Southern Baptist, some to refractions where a Missionary Alliance volunteer determined the best strength of eyeglass for each patient, some to have prescription glasses dispensed by a Presbyterian, some to have a glass eye fitted by a UCC member, and some for a consultation by an Episcopalian physician. A few would be slated for surgery by a Roman Catholic.

Altogether 57 U.S. and Canadian volunteers, including 10 eye care professionals, three other physicians and three nurses, participated in this year's February mission trip by Eye Care International. The destination was Perquin, a small village situated at 4,000 feet in the north-eastern mountains of El Salvador. This non-denominational ministry was founded 18 years ago by Bill Brinker, a member of **Kent (Ohio) UCC** and an ophthalmologist; his wife, Grace; and a few friends.

During the two-week stint, 4,123 patients registered for assistance. The majority were farmers, domestics, day laborers, students and old-age pensioners. Most received help of some kind: reading glasses, sun glasses, prescription glasses, cataract surgery or even a false eye. Many of these persons can now see something they haven't seen in years — such as the blossoms on a bougainvillea bush or the smile on a grandchild's face.

Why would people volunteer to give up two weeks of vacation and pay \$550 and air fare to a foreign country to work for nothing? For three primary reasons: gratitude, enjoyment and service.

The volunteers were amazed at how appreciative these peasant people were. Some had walked for two hours in the dark to catch an early morning bus before transferring to an open truck. Then they stood or sat with great dignity in long lines and waited to be tested.

"It's instant gratification when you put a pair of glasses on someone and they see something they haven't seen in a long time," says Mary Lou Riegel of First Presbyterian Church in Ridgway, Pa.

"We first saw them with frowns on their faces," says Chris Kaufman, an Episcopalian and professor emeritus at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. "After surgery, they came back with broad grins."

Despite the long hours, volunteers enjoy

I have a skill that meets a need. I enjoy this much more than I would spending my vacation sitting on a beach somewhere."

— Dr. Bill Brinker, ophthalmologist and UCC member

what they do, whether it's testing vision, fitting glasses or assisting in surgery.

"I get far more out of it than I put into it," says Bob Means, an optician and member of First United Methodist Church of Sharon, Pa. "I go back much more revived than when I arrived."

"It's a real lift for me," says Bill Brinker. "I have a skill that meets a need. I enjoy this much more than I would spending my vacation sitting on a beach somewhere."



Retired Conference Minister Roger Knight of Pleasant Hill, Tenn. gets information from a young patient while a Peace Corps volunteer translates.

This sense of social obligation was not uncommon among the volunteers.

"I feel I have to give back for all the blessings I've received," says Tom Cliffler, a member of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Parish in Cleveland, who performed 91 eye surgeries in nine days.

"There's a giving back that's owed by business people," says Bill Hoos, an optician for 30 years and a member of Waynesboro (Pa.) United Presbyterian Church. "It's better to give than to receive."

Eye Care International's annual February two-week trips go to the poorest areas of El Salvador, and only if they are invited and have wide-spread community support. Thirteen groups welcomed the volunteers to Perquin. Here they contributed around \$828,000 in medical services — 33 times the dollars the volunteers paid to go on the trip. Pharmaceutical companies, hospitals and individuals contributed drugs, money and equipment.

"These mission trips are important because people here don't have access to even simple health care," says Darrell Holland, a retired UCC minister from Cleveland. "And even if it were available, people probably couldn't afford it anyway."

"I feel Christ would have done this," says Dave Brinker, an ophthalmologist and member of **Mayflower Congregational UCC in Oklahoma City**, "and I try to follow Christ."

The Rev. W. Evan Golder is editor emeritus of United Church News. He and his wife, Deborah, a registered nurse, volunteered in this year's eye care mission trip.



The line of eye clinic patients forms early in the town square.

W. Evan Golder photos

TO VOLUNTEER FOR EYE CARE INTERNATIONAL'S 2007 TRIP, contact Norm and Esther Burton at 552 Greenbriar Drive, Ravenna, OH 44266-8735; phone 330/296-8026; or by e-mail at <nrburt431@aol.com>. Eye care and medical professionals are especially welcome.

UCC delegation visits Philippines' Muslim Moro

By Tim Johnson

At first glance there is no apparent connection between a small wooden footbridge and the price of natural gas. But, as my traveling companions and I were to discover, getting to the other side involved a lot more than carefully watching your step. It also required an openness of heart and mind, and a willingness to wonder why the vast majority of the world's people live in poverty.

Crossing that footbridge was taking us over into a side of the world where hopes and aspirations are as simple as survival and dreams as basic as having a voice in one's own destiny. We were there by invitation of the Moro people in the Philippines. The Moro are Muslims who early on resisted the coerced conversion to Christianity imposed by Colonial Spain. Today the Moro's resistance is against the intrusion of the Philippine government's efforts to exploit the natural resources of what is known as their "ancestral domain."

Natural gas recently was discovered in a large marshland area of the Moro's ancestral domain. In order to get at the gas, the Philippine government dammed the river feeding the marshland. This in turn causes severe flooding of Moro cropland, adding to their impoverishment. The stronger river current and resulting erosion of the embankment greatly diminished fishing as a mainstay.

The footbridge now crosses a small river, which was once an easily crossed, mostly dry creek bed. The dam has turned the creek into a river with its embankments also steadily eroding. The small bridge is the only avenue for getting produce to market.

By simply crossing that small foot bridge we had stepped over into some of the largest issues the world faces today and which ulti-



The Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte, executive minister for UCC's Wider Church Ministries, crosses a footbridge on way to meet the Philippines' Muslim Moro.

Tim Johnson photo

mately effect us all, ecological destruction, our continued dependence on non-renewable resources, the linkage between the two thirds world poverty and the seemingly unquenchable appetite of the rest.

My traveling companions and I were guests of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, a denomination that takes as an article of faith a commitment to seeing the Muslim Moro people as brothers and sisters. Before leaving, the UCCP pastor who was our guide offered a prayer for peace, justice and the well being of the Moro. We, in turn, received a prayer of blessing by our Muslim brother.

You never know for sure what you will find on the other side of a bridge. But, as people of faith, we are bound to build them and bound to cross them knowing that there is a presence, greater than any bridge, that joins us as one body with each other and all creation.

The Rev. Tim Johnson is pastor of **Cherokee Park United Church in St. Paul, Minn.** He was a delegate to the 8th Quadrennial Assembly of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. The Minnesota Conference has a partner relationship with the UCCP's South East Jurisdiction.



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BORN: New Haven, Conn., in 1928. "I'm 77, but not a young 77," he told the Wall Street Journal.

EDUCATED: Harvard College, 1951. Oxford University, 1953.

HOME: "Eagle Pond Farm," built by his great-grandfather in 1865, in Wilmont, N.H., for the past 30 years. It's the same house where his grandmother and mother were born and the namesake of several of his works, including, "Seasons at Eagle Pond" (1987) and "Here at Eagle Pond" (2000). A third volume, "Eagle Pond," is scheduled for publication next year.

MEMBER: South Danbury Christian UCC in New Hampshire, which he attends regularly. He admits to having doubts about heaven, he told the Wall Street Journal. "I'm really pretty well convinced it doesn't exist, but I don't have any proof handy."

FAMILY: Two grown children and five grandchildren. Jane Kenyon, his second wife, died in 1995 of leukemia at age 47. "Her Long Illness" and "Letter With No Address" are two of his most-notable, powerful poems on bereavement. Hall and Kenyon were the subject of a Bill Moyers' documentary in 1993, "A Life Together," which won an Emmy.

APPOINTED: Poet Laureate of the United States for 2006-2007, which pays an annual stipend of \$35,000, plus \$5,000 for travel. He learned the news in June — by fax.

RESPONSIBILITIES: "Serves as the nation's official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of Americans. During his or her term, the Poet Laureate seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry," according to Library of Congress, which makes and oversees the appointment.

WORKS: Fifteen books of poetry, including his latest, "White Apples and the Taste of Stone: Selected Poems 1946-2006." He's also written 20 books of prose, children's books and plays.

REPUTATION: Spontaneous, a lack of calculation. Known for viewing life through lens of death. Outspoken, particularly on First Amendment issues. "He may get into a political dust-up or two," Librarian of Congress James Billington has said, "but I'm guessing he won't do it just to make a statement."

AWARDS: The National Book Critics Circle Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Award for his poetry book "The One Day" (1988), and the Lily Prize for Poetry in 1994.

NOTABLE PREDECESSORS: Robert Penn Warren was poet laureate twice, in 1944-45 and 86-87. Robert Frost served his term in 1958-59.

Sources: Library of Congress, Wall Street Journal, Nashua (N.H.) Telegraph.

"For a hundred and fifty years, in the pasture of dead horses, roots of pine trees pushed through the pale curves of your ribs, yellow blossoms flourished above you in autumn, and in winter frost heaved your bones in the ground — old toilers, soil makers:

O Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost."

— From the poem "Names of Horses"

ELECTED

► The Rev. Jim Antal, pastor of **Plymouth UCC in Shaker Heights, Ohio**, as Massachusetts Conference Minister, on June 9. He will begin his new ministry in September. "I am humbled by your call, and overjoyed by the opportunity to be in covenant with you as we walk together in all of God's ways, recognizing that there is still more light and truth to be revealed from God's holy word," Antal told delegates gathered at Mount Holyoke College. The Massachusetts Conference includes 407 local churches, the most of any UCC Conference.

DIED

► Evelyn Handy Broadbent, 91, a choreographer and pioneer in liturgical dance, on July 1 at UCC-related Pilgrim Place in Claremont,

Calif. In 1943, when Broadbent received her Masters in Christian Education from UCC-related Chicago Theological Seminary, her dissertation on sacred dance was an early celebration of what has now become a more-accepted UCC worship practice.

NAMED

► Karen Kulm and her daughter, Leslie Wu, 12, both members of **First Congregational UCC in Vancouver, Wash.**, as the Stillspeaking Initiatives "comma momma" essay contest winners. At the culmination of the spring ad run, Mother's Day became an occasion for local church celebrations, as congregations playfully recognized "comma mommas" in keeping with the church identity campaign's tag line, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." Kulm and

Wu each submitted an essay stating why their nominee should be chosen as the "comma momma" of the year. Wu was chosen as the under-18 entry winner and her mother was chosen in the over-18 category.

TRANSFERRING

The Rev. Howard Hanger, founder and spiritual leader of the Jubilee! Community in Asheville, N.C., who is giving up his United Methodist ministerial credentials as a stand against his denomination's opposition to same-sex unions. Hanger says he will remain as spiritual leader of Jubilee! Community, but is exploring a transfer of his ordination to the UCC. "I have realized I can't operate under the banner of a church that is blatantly discriminatory in this regard," Hanger told The Asheville Citizen-Times.

CLERGY DEATHS

Berry, William Raymond, 80, 6/17/06
Clapp, Edward S., 71, 6/13/06
Conover, J. Stanton, 81, 6/4/2006
Durland, W. Westley, 84, 5/21/06
Eitzen, Lando, 97, 5/27/06
Grauberger, Daniel W., 62, 6/13/06
Hampton, William Russell, 86, 6/6/06
Hayes, Victor C., 79, 6/9/06
Kolsti, Arthur H., 80, 6/2/06
McPeck, Donald A., 69, 5/10/06
Meineker, Edwin C., 78, 6/18/06
Sheppard, David W., 78, 6/4/06
Sherman, Willard, 97, 6/12/06
Turner, Dale E., 88, 6/6/06
Wisegarver, Harald J., 87, 6/14/06

Information on clergy deaths is provided by The Pension Boards.

PASTORAL CHANGES

Allen, Brian to St. Mark UCC, Valrico, FL
Arens, John M. Litchfield, CT to First Cong. UCC, Watertown, CT
Avise-Rouse, Kristofer K. Webster Grove, WI to Immanuel UCC, Darlington, WI
Barnes, Linda U. North Franklin, CT to Federated Church, Colchester, CT
Basile, Jonathan T. Leighton, PA to Zion Evangelical
Baumann, Donald E. Wausau, WI to St. John's UCC, Clack Creek, WI
Beckwith, Ivy to Cong. UCC, New Canaan, CT
Blossom, Sarah to Friedens UCC, Indianapolis, IN
Boorsma, Steven J. Yorkville, IL to St. Peter UCC, Lake Zurich, IL
Bradshaw, Ruth W. Shoreham VT to Pilgrim Cong. UCC, Wichita, KS
Brass, Wayne H. Toledo, OH to MetroHealth Medical Center, Cleveland, OH
Calderon, Daniel West Covina, CA to Community UCC, Fontana, CA
Chandler, Paul to First Cong. UCC, East Hardwick, VT
Close, Marilyn W. Powhatan, OH to Hope UCC, Fremont, VT
Cooper, Richard Underhill, VT to retirement
Crocker, Richard Williston, VT to retirement
Diquattro, James A. Winstead CT to Cong. UCC, Columbia, CT
Dunfee, Michael Lynnfield, MA to First Trinitarian Cong. UCC, Scituate, MA
Easterday, Pamela to First Cong. UCC, Claridon, OH
Edmonds, Fred Brattleboro, VT to retirement
Erwin, Jr., Michael Owensboro, KY to Bethel UCC, Evansville, IN
Gage, John M. to United Church, New Haven, CT
Garrison, Philip Eagle River, WI to St. Andrew UCC, Sarasota, FL
Gerth, David P. St. Louis, MO to Zion UCC, South Bend, IN
Glover, Jennifer S. to Pass-A-Grille Beach Community UCC, St. Pete Beach, FL
Goetz, Mary A. to St. Paul UCC, Columbus, OH
Griebler, Denise to St. Michael UCC, West Chicago, IL
Hardee, Brian C. Pottstown, PA to West Avon Cong. UCC, Avon, CT
Howell, David A. to First Cong. UCC, Palo Alto, CA
Lane, David L. Sandusky, OH to Church by the Sear, Bal Harbour, FL
Medeiros, Judith C. West Newton, MA to Second Church Plymouth UCC, Manomet, MA
Minnick, Patricia St. Marys, OH to St. John's UCC, Bucyrus, OH
Moore, Robert Wooster, OH to St. John UCC, Massillon, OH
Murtha-Smith, Susan Manchester, CT to First Cong. UCC, Guilford, CT
New, Jonathan to interim, Williston, VT
Noble, Holly R. East Corinth, VT to United, Benson, VT
Oberle, Scott to UCC, Portage, MI
Penn-Strah, Sara E. Lowell, MA to First Church of Christ UCC, Woodbridge, CT
Pulawski, Elizabeth to Family Hospice, Fort Wayne, IN
Sens, Amy Columbia, MD to Lutheran Volunteer Corps, Baltimore, MD
Sheneman, Rocky to Bethlehem UCC, Evansville, IN
Terry, John A. Hollis, NH to Federated, Hyannis, MA
Thompson, Jeannie Baker, MT to UCC, Kapaa, HI
Titus, Larry A. Medford, MA to Nahant Village UCC, Nahant, MA
Vincent, Joan Lyndonville, VT to retirement
Wartgow, Jeffrey Schofield, WI to First Cong. UCC, Waukesha, WI
Washington, Wanda J. Chicago, IL to Grace UCC, Milwaukee, WI

Information provided by the UCC's Parish Life and Leadership Ministry.

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Edited by Carol L. Pavlik

GOD'S GREAT OUTDOORS — UCC STYLE



Youth participate in St. Joe River float trip, hosted by Camp N-Sid-Sen, a UCC camp ministry in northern Idaho. Duane Nightingale photo

In Idaho, campers experience 'life-changing' outdoor ministry

Randy Crowe and his wife, the Rev. Linda Crowe, know how profound family camp can be. Twenty-four years ago, they took a break from their hectic life—he was the vice president of a grocery company in Seattle, she was a graphic designer—to revisit Camp N-Sid-Sen, a UCC camp they both attended as youths.

N-Sid-Sen, perched on the shore of Lake Coeur d'Alene in northern Idaho quickly took hold of the Crowes' hearts. It led to both of them deciding to change careers and leave their jobs to focus on ministry.

Linda is the pastor of **Veradale UCC in Spokane Valley, Wash.**, some 55 miles from N-Sid-Sen, where Randy lives year-round as the camp's managing director. The happily married couple endures the long-distance relationship spanning two states because both are doing ministry that they love.

"Outdoor ministry is one of the unsung strengths of the church," says Crowe. "Folks that experience God in the out-of-doors for a week at camp ... it really is transforming. Whether it's a youth camp, family camp or a junior high aqua camp, it's just life-changing," he says.

And not just for the kids. "If structured properly, the experience for the adults is every bit as important or more so as they share their faith with the kids," says Crowe. "When lay folk and pastors spend a week sharing their faith with kids, having an opportunity to really articulate their faith, it makes a huge difference in people's lives."

The setting of N-Sid-Sen offers opportunities for many different forms of camp to take place: For instance, Crowe dreams of resurrecting the HIV-AIDS patient Family camp that N-Sid-Sen hosted for 10 years, before much of its critical federal funding got cut. "I still remember when [the patients] came, they were very tentative the first time or two," he says. "At that time, they weren't welcome very many places. We likened it to modern-day leprosy. That was a very powerful camp."

Crowe sees incredible potential in a new camping experience that N-Sid-Sen hosted this year, called Camp To Belong. The camp is for foster children, reuniting siblings for a week at camp who have been placed in separate foster care facilities.

"It fits in so well with what I feel like our ministry is," says Crowe.

"These kids are deeply wounded," he says. "It's powerful to be together in this kind of environment where everything is taken care of: good food, good shelter, and nurturing adults."

But family camp remains at the center of N-Sid-Sen's incredible ministry.

"In today's society, when we're pulled in so many directions, I think it's incredibly important to have this kind of experience for families to spend a week together, just recreating in God's creation," says Crowe. "And really, really being together."

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<n-sid-sen.org>

New Hampshire camp offers 'mountain-top experience'

Sometimes people visit The Horton Center on Pine Mountain, N.H., a UCC camp owned by the New Hampshire Conference and say, "Where's the water?"

Yes, admits program director Mike Simons, most camps do have a beach or a lake. But Horton Center offers something completely different: a mountain-top experience.

Horton Center sets on 100 acres, saddled by the northern and southern peak of Pine Mountain, with an altitude of 2440 feet.

"Our outdoor chapel's cross is perched on a cliff, about 200 feet tall. Beyond that is the [Mt. Washington] Valley and nothing else. It's one of the most dramatic and breathtaking places that I've ever experienced."

Besides rock climbing on real rocks ("No fiberglass, plywood or bolts here," Simons says), and one night of sleeping under the stars on one of the overlook ledges, he says the camp's model of education, called Unit Camping, is something that really lends itself to making a

If we'd just go camping, 'we could come together as a church'

The Rev. C.L. (Curly) Stumb finally gets a chance to sit down.

In the midst of the busy summer months at the UCC's Johns River Valley Camp, nestled in the foothills of North Carolina's Blue Ridge, the executive director of the camp has just completed a rigorous day that includes hosting officials from the American Camping Association. Every three years, a delegation visits the camp as part of its accreditation process.

Taking out a few moments, Stumb retraces his ministry, which started in local parishes.

"Even in general ministry, I was involved in the camp," he says, mentioning his stints on the Outdoor Ministry Task Force and the Johns River Valley Camp Board. "There was a red thread that led me here, going back to my first year in ministry when a neighboring pastor invited me to come as a counselor at the camp."

In the past 20 years as the camp's director, Stumb has seen church camp become more competitive, since there are so many opportunities available now in the summer months.

"We offer more outdoor ministry experiences than we were doing 20 years ago," he says. "We have a canoe program, and we do a number of offsite trips and experiences."

"Just yesterday, we had a group bicycle down the Virginia Creeper

week at camp quite an experience.

Simons says a majority of their groups of campers derive from a single local church.

"They come together, register together, and experience the week and the growth and the forming and storming that goes on in group development in a Christian camping context," explains Simons. "Then they're able to return at the end of the week and take those lessons and experiences back to the local church."

"It's been really interesting for me to see how this place molds future church leaders," says Debbie Gline Allen, commissioned minister of Christian Education at **First Parish Congregational UCC in East Derry, N.H.**

Allen first came to Horton Center as a backpacker in 1974. Since then, she's remained involved in outdoor ministry by serving on Horton Center's staff, or being a unit leader with her local church. This summer, she's at the camp with

her two children.

Allen's been working diligently on compiling the camp's oral history, collecting stories from people who were around at the camp's inception in the 1950s.

It's been really interesting for me to see how this place molds future church leaders."

—Debbie Gline Allen, church educator

"When I was here as a college student, I was going to be a music teacher in public schools," says Allen. "But things happen. Life happens! And I decided that really wasn't going to work for me."

That's when Allen said things started falling into place. "It was a natural thing for me to focus on becoming a minister of Christian Education. I literally have to say that the reason why I am where I am now is because of this place."

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<hortoncenter.org>



UCC General Minister and President John Thomas raises his hands in triumph and relief after he and his canoeing partner navigate some challenging rapids at Wilson Creek in North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest.

Thomas attended the UCC's Johns River Valley Camp after he urged the UCC's national staff at the Church House, at 700 Prospect Ave. in Cleveland, to take part in his initiative, "700 Goes to Camp."

"[Thomas] wanted to encourage the national staff to encounter youth by engaging them in an opportunity in one of our camps," remembers Stumb.

Stumb admits to being a bit worried as Thomas and the camper took a turn into more-treacherous waters and disappeared behind a large rock.

"I remember thinking, 'What are people going to say if something terrible happens to the General Minister of the UCC under my watch?'" Stumb says.

Trail," he says. The trail, on a former rail bed alongside a stream in a serene forest setting is a 17-mile trek that is suitable for most any cyclist, since it is all downhill.

Stumb says that Outdoor Ministry is so unique because it engages people in community the way that no other type of ministry can offer.

"Just last summer," Stumb comments, "I had a staff person talk to me about some of the con-

flict going on in the church right now. She made the comment, 'If we could get everybody to come and spend some time at camp this summer, I think we could truly come together as a church.' I think that was so profound," says Stumb. "That conversation has stuck with me."

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