

## CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE NEW UNITED CHURCH– ADDRESSING SOCIAL ISSUES

The United Church of Christ came into being at a time of great social change. The Civil Rights Movement, the War in Vietnam, the Feminist Movement, and the movement for Gay Rights all shaped the new denomination.

General Synod in 1963 adopted one resolution on a social issue – racial justice – as did the following synod. In 1967 Synod adopted five resolutions on social issues, in 1969 twenty. From 1973 through 1991, each General Synod adopted an average of 33 social action resolutions, peaking in 1983, at 54.

Did this barrage of resolutions have any impact on the local church? In a survey of persons attending Illinois Conference congregations in 1981,<sup>1</sup> only 7.5% of the people rated “participation in racial justice, civil liberties, etc.” as a “very important” work of the church. A similar survey in Indiana-Kentucky Conference in 1989<sup>2</sup> revealed that 60% of the membership knew little or nothing about the national church. In spite of this ignorance, 45% were pleased with the idea of the national church making pronouncements on social issues, and only 24% opposed.

Whether or not they knew about Synod resolutions, UCC people and congregations did apply the gospel to the world around them. In the 1968 survey, 46% of the respondents participated in community organizations, two-thirds of whom saw this as an expression of their Christian faith. A random survey of UCC church members in 1990<sup>3</sup> reported that 50% had given an hour or more over the past month to help the poor or sick, 17% had given an hour or more to promote social justice, and 27% had participated in a meeting or march in the past year to

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<sup>1</sup>Victor Obenhaus and Ross Blount, *And See the People: A Study of the United Church of Christ* (Chicago: CTS, 1968), 12.

<sup>2</sup>Marjorie A. Royle, “Indiana-Kentucky Conference Survey, 1989.” UCC Papers. UCBHM Research–Findings, 1972-2000 box 1.

<sup>3</sup>Marjorie H. Royle, “Effective Christian Education–1990.” UCC Papers. UCBHM Research–Findings Reports 1972-2000, box 1.

promote social change. A survey of UCC churches in 2000<sup>4</sup> reported that 96% of the congregations responding provided some sort of food assistance to the needy in their community. General Synod, local churches, and members were all moving in the direction of increased social action, although in different ways.

The UCC responded to oppressed and under-represented groups in three ways.

1. advocacy—The church addressed political entities and society at large to make specific changes to grant rights and power to the marginalized.
2. inclusion—The church made changes in its own methods of functioning to assure that the marginalized participated fully in all aspects of church life.
3. theological reflection—The church listened, and lifted up theological insights originating from groups that had been marginalized.

## PART A: CIVIL RIGHTS

Churches forming the United Church of Christ had a long history of advocacy for racial equality, principally through the American Missionary Association (AMA), although they did not always practice what they preached.

### Institute at Fisk

The AMA in 1944 began an Institute of Race Relations at Fisk University. For at least twenty summers, the Institute brought religious, labor and community leaders from across the country to Fisk to study race relations with experts. The Institute created a national network of leaders who would support the Civil Rights Movement when it finally came.

### Civil Rights Movement

Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led the civil rights movement in opposing racial segregation in schools, public accommodations, and wherever else it appeared, supporting full legal equality of persons of all races. From the Supreme Court ruling for desegregation in 1954, to the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, the UCC participated in this movement alongside persons of all churches and religions.

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<sup>4</sup>UCC General Ministries—Research Division. Current materials.

Educated at Howard University and Hartford Theological Seminary, Andrew Young (b. 1932) was ordained into the ministry in the CC church in 1955, then served Evergreen Congregational Church, Beachton, Georgia, and Bethany Congregational Church, Thomasville, Georgia, and worked for the National Council of Churches (NCC)<sup>5</sup> Department of Youth Work. When the state of Tennessee closed Highland Folk School, near Knoxville, in 1961, Young persuaded BHM to allow its Citizen Education Project to locate on BHM property near Savannah, Georgia, and to put Young on the BHM staff to direct the project. Conducted in cooperation with the SCLC, the Project in the next four years trained over a thousand leaders from across the South to teach their neighbors to read and help them register to vote. Working closely with King and the SCLC, Young was often the “negotiator” of the Civil Rights Movement, calmly and directly addressing adversaries and finding allies in the White business community.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Spike (1923-66), a socially concerned Baptist pastor, affiliated with the CC Church in 1955, and worked for BHM (1955-63) as secretary for Evangelism. When the NCC created a Commission on Religion and Race in 1963, they called on Spike to lead it. Spike’s work included mobilizing participation in the Civil Rights Movement, political lobbying for the SCLC agenda, and supporting programs for self-development in the South. Spike was murdered in Columbus, Ohio, on 17 October, 1966.<sup>7</sup>

At General Synod in 1963 President Ben Herbstler called for the creation of a “Racial Justice Now” committee, to address the problem of racial injustice in both church and society. Appointed by the President to serve until the next General Synod, the committee was reconstituted in 1965 and 1967, and made a permanent Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ) in 1969. Charles E. Cobb (1916-98) directed CRJ from 1966 to 1985.

CRJ organized United Church Ministers for Racial and Social Justice

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<sup>5</sup>The Federal Council of Churches united with several smaller inter-church agencies to become the National Council of Churches of Christ in 1951.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Young later served as congressman (1973-77), ambassador to the United Nations (1977-79), mayor of Atlanta (1982-89), and President of the NCC (2000-01).

<sup>7</sup>The crime scene was arranged to make it appear that the murder was related to his sexual orientation (Spike was bisexual). The crime remains unsolved; suspicions that it was a political assassination have been neither proven nor disproved.

(MRSJ)<sup>8</sup> to be a “Black Caucus” within the denomination. At MRSJ’s insistence, African Americans filled a majority of the seats on CRJ beginning in 1969. CRJ pursued a three-fold strategy of empowering African Americans through (1) access to education, (2) economic justice, and (3) political power. Under Cobb’s leadership, CRJ found scholarships for 4,000 African Americans to attend college, initiated a ministry to women in prison, and drew attention to the practice of locating toxic waste dumps in minority communities. Through the work of CRJ, African Americans gained more leadership positions in the UCC.

### Black Power

On Easter Sunday, 1967, Central UCC in Detroit dedicated an eighteen foot mural of Mary and the baby Jesus, both black. Albert Cleage (b. 1911), pastor of the church, soon renamed “Shrine of the Black Madonna,” had received CC ordination in 1943, and had served churches in Lexington, Kentucky, San Francisco and Springfield, Massachusetts, before organizing Central Church in 1953. Cleage advocated “Black Pride” and “Black Power.” Cleage helped found a community organizing group that promoted a “Black Manifesto.” In the Black Manifesto, issued in April, 1969, spokesperson James Foreman called on all White institutions to pay reparations for the exploitation of African Americans in slavery. He delivered to the White churches and synagogues of America a bill for 500 million dollars.

General Synod in 1969 was a turning point. Before this, African Americans and their white allies had called for integration and civil rights. Beginning in 1969 the Black constituency of the church demanded a larger role in church decision-making, and placing on the agenda the economic oppression of African Americans.

Cleage<sup>9</sup> inspired others to develop his thoughts on Black Theology, an endeavor to interpret the Christian faith from the perspective of the Black experience. Cleage argued that Jesus was a Black fighting White oppression. Black Theology emphasized experience, affirmation of self worth, community, and concrete application. The distinction White Theology made between a “spiritual gospel” and a “social gospel” was irrelevant to Black Theology.

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<sup>8</sup>Often called “Mrs. J.”

<sup>9</sup>Cleage moved further in the direction of Black Nationalism, organizing the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church in 1970, and later changing his name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman. The Shrine of the Black Madonna at century’s end had dual standing in the UCC and in Agyeman’s new denomination.

## Wilmington Ten

Racial tensions were high in Wilmington, North Carolina, in February, 1971, when CRJ field worker Benjamin Chavis (b. 1948) and nine others were arrested for allegedly bombing a grocery store. The UCC provided bail, lobbied, petitioned and demonstrated on behalf of the “Wilmington Ten,” throughout their trial, appeals, and incarceration. A federal court overturned their convictions on 4 December 1980.

Chavis was ordained in 1980 and directed CRJ 1985-93. On 23 February 1997 Chavis announced he had joined the Nation of Islam<sup>10</sup> and changed his name to Benjamin Chavis Muhammad. The Eastern North Carolina Association of the UCC rejected Chavis Muhammad’s claim he could belong to the Nation of Islam and the UCC at the same time, recommending termination of his ministerial standing on 24 April 1997.

## African Americans in the UCC Today

African Americans have held leadership positions in the UCC, as denominational officers, beginning with Joseph H. Evans as Secretary in 1967, as instrumentality<sup>11</sup> executives, beginning with Charles Cobb at CRJ and Reuben Sheares at the Office of Church Life and Leadership in 1973, and as Conference Minister, beginning with W. Sterling Cary in Illinois Conference in 1974. From 1957 to 1999 fifty-five new African American churches joined the UCC. From 1979 to 1999 the African American presence in the UCC increased from 3.9% to 4.5% of the congregations, and from 2.8% to 4.2% of the membership. A significant part of the membership increase came from one congregation, Trinity UCC in Chicago. With only 87 adult members when Trinity in 1972 called Jeremiah Wright (b. 1941) to be its pastor, the congregation by end of century had become the largest congregation in the denomination, with over 10,000 members.

## PART B: PEACE AND JUSTICE

The United Church of Christ picked up where its predecessor denominations left off, defending the right of its members to be conscientious objectors and advocating support for the United Nations, Human Rights, arms

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<sup>10</sup>The “Black Muslims” of the Nation of Islam should not be confused with orthodox (Sunni) Muslims, who consider the Nation heretical because of the messianic claims they make for their founder.

<sup>11</sup>An “instrumentality” is a board or agency of the national church.

reduction talks, and test ban treaties.

United States involvement in Vietnam grew gradually through the early 60s and became intense after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. Through General Synod the church supported its conscientious objectors (1961), endorsed the principle of selective conscientious objection against a specific war (1967) and by 1969 was vigorously protesting against the war.

In spite of the strong positions taken by General Synod, the membership of the denomination, like the nation, was deeply divided over the war. General Synod in 1969 tried to address this problem, calling on its agencies to “develop programs of peace education.”

In the UCC the debate over Vietnam evolved into theological reflection on the nature of peace. Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933), a Bible scholar at Eden Seminary, in 1976 published a collection of sermons, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*.<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann examined the concept of peace (shalom) in the Bible and found it to mean much more than the absence of war. Shalom meant the health and well-being of society.

From 1981 to 1985 a Peace Theology Development Team, authorized by General Synod and led by Susan Thistlethwaite, examined the concept of shalom, which it translated “just peace.” The Team prepared a statement adopted by General Synod in 1985, declaring the UCC to be a “Just Peace Church.” It defined just peace as “the presence and inter-relation of friendship, justice, and common security from violence.” The pronouncement repeated the proposition of peace advocates and peace societies of the previous century, “War can and must be eliminated.”

The UCC and its predecessor denominations had been passing peace resolutions for 150 years. But never had it made such a comprehensive and theologically perceptive statement. Christian educators soon prepared curriculum materials centered around shalom, and the Team’s findings were published as *A Just Peace Church*<sup>13</sup> for adult study.

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<sup>12</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections of Shalom* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1976). Republished as *Peace* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2001).

<sup>13</sup>Thistlethwaite, Susan, ed., for the Peace Theology Development Team. *A Just Peace Church*. New York: United Church Press, 1986.

The just peace theology has undergirded other General Synod stands on social and economic justice, boycott of South Africa, responsible investment policies, the environment, and peace in Central America, Southwest Asia and elsewhere.

## PART C: FEMINISM

The feminist movement of the late 1960s grew through the 70s and affected the churches, including the United Church of Christ. At first concerned about equal treatment under the law and equal employment opportunities, the movement grew to include inclusive language, and concern over sexual harassment and domestic violence.

### Women's Organization in the UCC

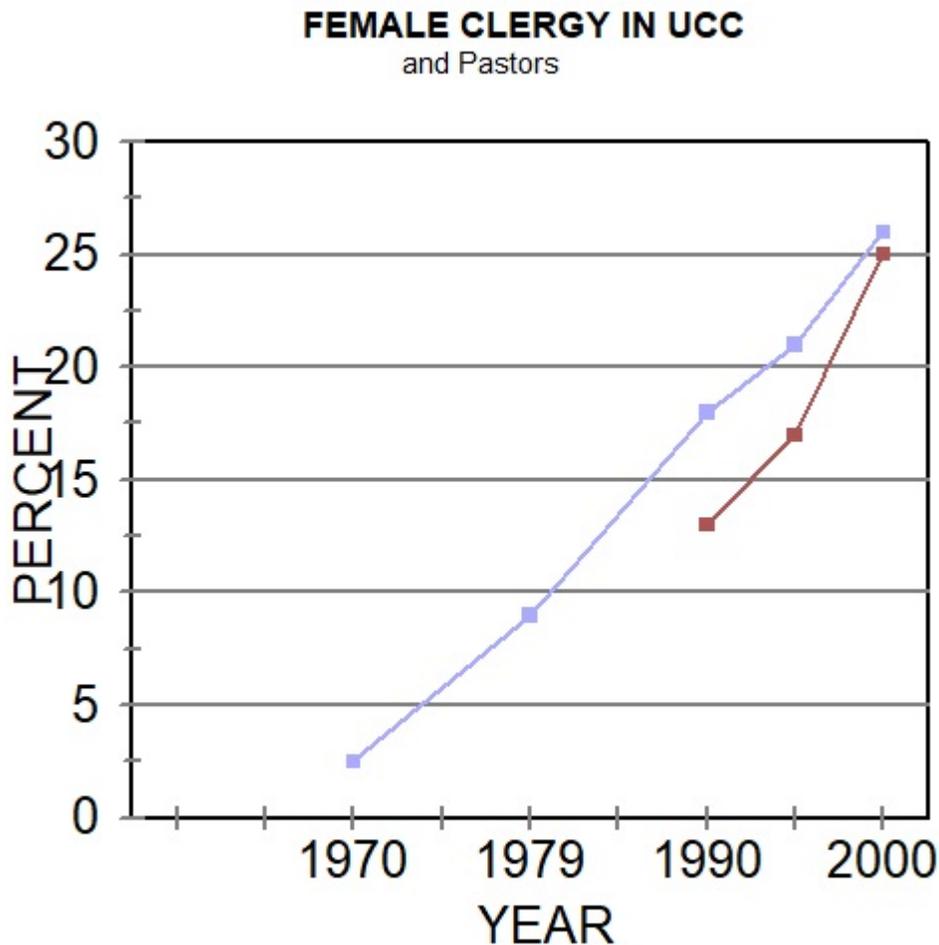
In its desire to be fully integrated, the new United Church of Christ did not provide for separate national women's and men's organizations. It created a Council for Lay Life and Work as a department of the national church, to relate to both groups. In 1974 this council united with the Council for Church and Ministry to form the Office of Church Life and Leadership (OCLL). However, Women's Fellowships persisted in local churches and conferences.

General Synod in 1971 advocated equal rights, equal employment opportunities for women in church and society, and created a Task Force on Women. This evolved into an Advisory Commission (1975), then a Coordinating Center for Women in Church and Society (CCWCS) in 1979. The Center promoted the advancement of women in the denomination, published study materials, organized regional and national meetings of UCC women, produced creative worship resources and promoted an annual "Women's Sunday" in the church. In 1987 Synod constituted the CCWCS a permanent instrumentality of the church.

The Women's Missionary Societies, organized in the Nineteenth Century to advance the cause of missions, also became centers of feminist activity in the church. The new CCWCS, established to promote the feminist agenda, also supported the traditional missionary interest of women's groups. Together, the CCWCS and the conference and local women's organizations unleashed significant creative energy into the church.

## Female Clergy

In 1970 only 2.5% of UCC clergy were female. As figure 3 indicates, the proportion of clergy who were female rose steadily from 1970 until in 2001 it was 26%. In the 1981-2 academic year women outnumbered men for the first time in the Master of Divinity programs at UCC related seminaries. Before 1970, women in ministry often served as assistants to male pastors. The situation slowly changed, and in 2001, 25% of the senior or sole pastors were women. The salary discrepancy has also been narrowed slightly, from the 75% of what men were paid that women received in 1985, to 85% in 2002. Women have also served as conference ministers, beginning with Murdale Leysath in Minnesota in 1980, and as denominational officers, beginning with Carol Joyce Brun as Secretary in 1983.



## Inclusive Language

The church joined the movement of secular feminists in using inclusive language, that is, not using male terms for people in general. General Synod in 1973 revised the UCC Constitution, making it inclusive, and directed that all newly printed materials use inclusive language.<sup>14</sup> Soon conferences and associations were busy revising constitution and by-laws.

In the church the concern for inclusive language extended to God. The use of exclusively masculine language for “God” had contributed to alienation from God and low self esteem among women. Some urged more frequent use of feminine images of God, along with the traditional male images. Others advocated the elimination of all gender-specific pronouns and metaphors for God. Resistance developed to the latter. Critics believed feminists were taking too many liberties with the text of the Bible, changing its meaning. General Synod in 1979 called on all who used Scripture to indicate the version or paraphrase from which they had quoted. General Synod in 1993 directed the committee preparing a new hymnal to not exclude the title “Lord” with reference to Jesus Christ.

The language of worship and study in the UCC became more inclusive, promoted by new worship resources. Resistance was strongest when changes in language appeared to alter theological meaning. Controversy centered around language for the Trinity, and the baptismal formula, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” UCC worship resources retained the traditional trinitarian language for baptism to assure that its baptisms would be recognized by other Christian denominations.

At what point does changing language become changing theology? For some advocates of inclusive language, the changes in words were shaped by new understandings of the sacred, derived from feminist theology. Feminist Theology entailed looking at the Bible and at religion through the experience of women. It was diverse, from evangelical to pagan. Generally, feminist theology lifted up intuitive ways of knowing, sought cooperative rather than authoritarian forms of community, and criticized hierarchical understandings of God. Emphasizing God’s immanence, it diminished or rejected transcendence, thus rejecting the neo-orthodoxy of the previous generation.

Although the most widely know authors of feminist theology came from other denominations, the United Church of Christ led the way in applying the

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Moss, President of the UCC, composed an unofficial inclusive language version of the Statement of Faith. In 1981 the Executive Council authorized an inclusive version of the Statement in the form of a doxology.

movement's language and ideas in worship. Ruth Duck (1947–), who served UCC congregations in Illinois, Wisconsin and Massachusetts before becoming instructor in worship at Garrett Evangelical (United Methodist) Theological Seminary, compiled *Bread for the Journey* in 1981. She followed up this collection of worship resources – inclusive in language and thought – with other collections of prayers and hymns. Using a collaborative style characteristic of feminism, she gave other feminist writers of liturgical material opportunity to circulate their work. Two UCC theologians, Sharon H. Ringe and Susan B. Thistlethwaite, participated actively in a National Council of Churches project begun in 1980 to put the lectionary scriptures into inclusive language, and continued as editors of an inclusive New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

## PART D: HOMOSEXUALITY

Over the first half of the Twentieth Century psychologists advanced the concept that homosexuality was not a sin, but a mental disorder. Alfred Kinsey in a 1948 report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, brought both views into question, as he described homosexuals functioning well in all classes and occupations of society. Gradually views changed. In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. By then the church had begun to re-examine its attitude toward homosexuality.

### Ordination of Homosexuals

On 25 June 1972 Golden Gate Association of the United Church of Christ, in northern California, ordained William Johnson (b. 1951), a professed homosexual, to the Christian ministry. No one doubted that many secretly homosexual persons had been ordained to the ministry in the past. Johnson believed he should be honest about his identity. After thorough examination and scrutiny by conference and association, an ecclesiastical council on 30 April authorized the action, and Johnson became the first openly homosexual person ordained by a major denomination in America.

The debate over homosexual ordination continued the debate over whether homosexuality was a sin, mental disorder, or a natural healthy condition of a portion of humanity. In UCC polity the decision was left to each association when

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<sup>15</sup>*An Inclusive Language Lectionary* (Pilgrim Press), published in three volumes, Year A (1983), Year B (1984) and Year C (1985). *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford, 1995).

examining specific candidates for ordination. The Executive Council<sup>16</sup> on 30 October 1973, recommended that, “homosexuality, per se, not be a bar to ordination but that associations consider a candidate’s total view of human sexuality and its moral expression.”

### The Church Takes a Stand

Johnson’s ordination forced the denomination to address in some way the issue of homosexuality. The UCC’s Council for Christian Social Action in 1969 supported the civil rights of homosexuals, called for decriminalization of private acts by consenting adults, and an end to discrimination in employment. General Synod in 1975 affirmed this concern for civil rights.

Advocating for someone’s civil rights is not the same as accepting them as persons of worth in the church. Recognizing the need first of all to study human sexuality in the light of the Bible, Christian ethics, and the most recent social scientific research, General Synod in 1975 called for “a study concerning the dynamics of human sexuality and the theological basis for a Christian ethic concerning human sexuality.” Although the ordination of a homosexual was the immediate cause for this study, the synod, and the Working Group doing the study, defined its subject as “human sexuality” in general. The church needed to respond in some way to the many-faceted sexual revolution taking place. An ethical approach to homosexuality was expected to develop, as one aspect of that broader study. A working group of Bible scholars, ethicists, social scientists and denominational agency representatives conducted a thorough study and submitted their findings to General Synod in 1977.<sup>17</sup> The *Study* addressed a broad range of sexuality subjects, with thorough Biblical, theological and social analysis, only incidentally making reference to homosexuality. The Executive Council attached 18 recommendations to the *Study*.

Sexuality emerged at General Synod in 1977 as the most divisive and explosive issue in the short history of the United Church of Christ. Opponents argued that (1) the church had not enough time to study the *Study*, and (2) the *Study* was not inclusive of more traditional Biblical interpretations and ethical positions. Although the recommendations did not use the word “homosexual,” both sides perceived that as the basic issue. General Synod approved the Recommendations by a vote of 409-210. Barbara Weller, leader of the

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<sup>16</sup>The Executive Council acts on behalf of General Synod between Synod meetings.

<sup>17</sup>United Church of Christ, Working Group in Human Sexuality, *Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study* (New York: United Church Press, 1977).

opposition, presented a minority report.

The opposition to the *Study* organized a group that later became Biblical Witness Fellowship (BWF).<sup>18</sup> The opposition prepared a collection of essays, *Issues in Sexual Ethics*,<sup>19</sup> about half of which specifically addressed the issue of homosexuality. The *Study* and *Issues* both circulated across the UCC before the 1979 General Synod. That Synod called for a National Task Force to further study the subject of sexuality for the next four years. Unlike the earlier Working Group that was composed of academics, the Task Force was political, with representatives of various interest groups, and could not develop a consensus. General Synod in 1983 adopted the resolutions of the pro-homosexual majority.

James Nelson, ethics professor at United Seminary, expanded and published his report to the Working Group as *Embodiment*<sup>20</sup> in 1979. Through the *Study*, *Embodiment*, and later works by Nelson, the UCC has led the way in the study of sexual ethics.

Biblical Witness became a voluntary society within the denomination, calling the denomination to traditional Biblical faith, and developing a multi-faceted program of church renewal.

### Open and Affirming

General Synod in 1985 called on congregations of the UCC to declare themselves “Open and Affirming.” Such a declaration would publicly assure anyone that the congregation accepted homosexuals nonjudgmentally as persons of worth. Slowly and deliberately congregations have studied the issue, and many have made the commitment. In 2003 the denomination reported 443 congregations and 14 conferences had declared themselves Open and Affirming, along with ten new church development projects and three congregations considering affiliation with the UCC.

General Synod has addressed hundreds of social issues, almost always taking a socially liberal position. The UCC has consistently striven to bring its behavior into congruence with what it understood to be the gospel. A few issues

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<sup>18</sup>From 1978 to 1984 it was called United Church People for Biblical Witness.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Duffy, ed., *Issues in Sexual Ethics* (Souderton, Pa.: United Church People for Biblical Witness, 1979).

<sup>20</sup>James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: an Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

became persistent and generated discussion throughout the church. With these persistent issues, the denomination engaged in serious Bible study and theological reflection, and in the cases of Peace and Sexuality produced pioneering theological statements.