

INTERFAITH Message

A Salute to the United Church of Christ by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong
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Sometimes, as one goes about the normal duties of one's professional life, a pattern of activity slowly becomes visible until one wonders why this had not been seen before. When that happens, it is good to stop, to notice, to put the pieces together, to seek to understand and then to formulate the new insight so that it can become common knowledge.

This was my experience in the first part of this year when I was invited to a number of churches in what might be called the heartland of America. In every incidence, the church to which I was asked to deliver lectures stood out in its community like a beacon of light. It was always the church in that community that engaged the issues of the day. It was the congregation in that community that encouraged people to think and to study. It was a church more interested in genuine education than it was in ecclesiastical propaganda. It was a congregation willing to be controversial, willing to stand up for truth in the public marketplace. It was a church that did not require that the brains of its people be checked at the door prior to worship. It was a congregation whose members cared about their world, their community, themselves and their pastor. These churches also projected vitality and they were all growing. The revelation that ultimately emerged, however, was that each one of these congregations was a part the United Church of Christ-Congregational denomination. This fact was so consistent that I concluded it could not be just a coincidence and that something about the United Church of Christ must be at least in part responsible and so my appreciation for this denomination soared.

Perhaps, I thought, this church can be the one Christian denomination that will inspire, bring about and participate in the necessary reformation required to break the Christian faith out of its dying patterns, its no longer believable theological understandings and its medieval worship practices. Maybe this can be the church that will break the traditional Christian paradigm based on human depravity and transform it to a paradigm based on human wholeness. Until these aspects of Christianity are faced, engaged and changed, there is, I believe, little realistic hope for a Christian future.

Let me briefly tell you, my readers, the story of these four individual UCC congregations:

The first one was the Plymouth United Church of Christ in Wichita, Kansas. Under the enlightened and competent leadership of its senior pastor, Donald Olsen, and his able staff, Plymouth Church has gathered to itself a group of members who are individually and corporately stepping beyond traditional religious formulas to build a church for tomorrow. Gifted young adults, well-educated and in positions of local and national authority, are finding the integrity of a new religious dimension for themselves by their participation in this church's life. No one is fighting yesterday's wars against Darwin, the equality of women or the oppression of gay and lesbian people. The Bible is not seen as a cudgel to be used in debate to shore up the conclusions of a long dead past. They appear to enjoy their life together and, during the time I was there to deliver these lectures, they also brought in a spectacular a Capella male singing group named Cantu for the joy and entertainment of those attending the lecture series. Cantu was magnificent and the combination of lectures and entertainment was a memorable experience for me and for that congregation.

The second one was the First Congregational-United Church of Christ in Greeley, Colorado. This small Colorado city, founded by Horace Greeley in the 19th century, is the home of a community college that has grown into being the University of Northern Colorado and is now the third or fourth largest university in the state of Colorado. In a state where Colorado Springs has become the

national headquarters for many right wing fundamentalist groups such as James Dobson's "Focus on the Family," this church in Greeley has accepted the vocation of speaking to this university with an understanding of the Christian faith that is well informed and not dedicated to the perpetuation of biblical ignorance. Its senior pastor, Nathan Miller, is respected as a leader in the entire community and one of this church's most active members is the recently retired president of the University of Northern Colorado.

The third church was in Norman, Oklahoma, the location of the University of Oklahoma, where former Democratic Governor and Senator, David Boren, is now the highly-regarded president. A small group of people led by an urologist formed a new Congregational Church to fill a vacuum in Norman, where fundamentalists and evangelical Protestants are the overwhelming majority. They were assisted in this birth by the UCC pastor at the Mayflower Church in Oklahoma City, Robin Meyers, who is one of America's brilliant new religious leaders. They contracted with a retired UCC minister on a part time basis to lead this new congregation, which has no more than twenty-five members. Undaunted by their newness and their smallness, they organized a public lecture on progressive Christianity to be held in the University of Oklahoma's Museum of Natural History. This was their way of announcing their presence in the city. I was invited to deliver that lecture and also to speak to the members of this congregation at their regular meeting place on Saturday morning. The public lecture attracted over 400 people. It was also the first time I have ever spoken with a mastodon on display immediately behind me! In their own worship space on Saturday, which seated less than seventy people, the two lecture seminar was sold out and every available chair was filled. This new congregation is dedicated to finding ways to serve the larger community and even the world. One program, organized by the urologist and including his two sons, both of whom are planning careers in medicine, has them volunteering for medical missionary duty in some of the deprived parts of the world. Vitality and the hope of good things to come mark this congregation.

Finally, there was the First Congregational-UCC Church of Hendersonville, North Carolina, served so ably by its senior pastor, Richard Weidler. Hendersonville is a small town in the mountains of Western North Carolina, about 30 minutes south of Asheville. Calls to repent, invitations to be saved and warnings to prepare to meet your God are painted on signs on almost every nearby highway. Three crosses adorn the countryside in more than one field. A visit on the radio dial will reveal a steady diet of evangelical preaching, punctuated only by the ranting of Rush Limbaugh. Yet because of Hendersonville's wonderful summer climate, it has attracted many retirees to that area who are left looking mostly in vain for a church if they do not want fundamentalism. Into that vacuum, this church has moved led by its former, now retired, pastor, David Kelly. About a decade ago a layman, named Walter Ashley, taught an adult Bible class in that church and it had been an erudite and transformative experience for many. A "Classics Scholar" with a degree from Oxford University in the UK, he had opened that congregation to a whole new way of being a Christian. They became the one church in town that was a haven for thinking Christians. When Walter died, his widow Jo Ann, an attorney well into her eighties, endowed a lectureship in memory of her husband. Twice each year, a well-known Christian scholar is invited to do the Ashley Lectures in this church in Western North Carolina. John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Amy-Jill Levine and I have all been among those visiting lecturers. The event attracts people from miles away and has helped to identify this church as something quite different.

Recently in North Carolina, there was a statewide referendum to ban gay marriage by a constitutional amendment. It seemed like every preacher in the state from Billy Graham on down came out in support of this amendment, identifying it with the Bible and the will of God. This was not true, however, of the First Congregational-United Church of Christ in Hendersonville. Instead they bought and ran a large advertisement in the local newspaper every other day for a period of time prior to that vote stating their opposition to North Carolina's "Marriage Amendment." In this

ad they stated first the historical tradition of the United Church of Christ as a supporter of social justice and civil rights. They reminded readers that their forebears were Pilgrims who came to this country in 1620 seeking freedom from restrictions imposed in Europe. They recalled the history of their denomination, telling the newspaper's readers that in 1785 the UCC ordained Lemuel Haynes, America's first African-American pastor; in 1853 the UCC ordained Antoinette Brown, America's first female pastor; in 1972 the UCC ordained Bill Johnson, America's first openly-gay pastor. Now this church, representing this denomination, called on all to reject this prejudiced marriage amendment. This ad dramatically lifted this church into public awareness causing them to be attacked and ridiculed by almost every other church in the area, but it also caused the religiously disenfranchised to discover a new possibility for their religious lives. So, new people began to show up at their doors on Sunday Mornings.

These four churches I have described so briefly had several things in common. They each had a well-trained and well-educated senior pastor. Each was linked to a national denomination that encouraged them to press the edges. Each had drunk deeply of that denomination's courage in the public arena on the right side of the cultural issues of our day.

If the United Church of Christ is represented locally by the churches I have encountered in Wichita, Greeley, Norman and Hendersonville, they must be doing something right.

So to these churches and to the leadership of the National United Church of Christ, I first raise my hand in salute for your courage and your dedication. Second, I stand before you in awe for what you have meant in my life and in the life of Christianity itself. Third, I bow my head and my heart in thanksgiving for your witness to the Truth.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong