

***Relationships, not Policies Make Welcoming Churches:  
A Case Study in the United Church of Christ***  
**DELLA FAHNESTOCK**

Della M. Fahnestock is pastor of Emmanuel United Church of Christ in York, Pennsylvania. She is currently engaged in elective studies at Pacific School of Religion with an emphasis on feminist theological perspectives. Her goal is to hold in creative tension the social justice and ethical claims of religion with the challenges of a feminist epistemology.

#### PURPOSE STATEMENT

Using the United Church of Christ as a case study, this paper will explore the root causes and foundations for congregational movement into positions of inclusion: What is it that makes a church welcoming? The means for studying congregational movement toward inclusiveness is found in an examination of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans Concerns. The development of the Coalition will be tracked with available historical data provided by the UCC denominational offices and from the Coalition offices, supported by interviews with key Coalition leaders. The impact of the Coalition will be measured primarily by the emergence and growth of “Open and Affirming” congregations within the UCC.

A secondary focus is to identify any correlation between significant socio-cultural concerns or developments and the associated responses of the Coalition to the number of Open and Affirming congregations within the United Church of Christ. The question underlying this purpose is whether or not popular issues and organized movements or responses have any direct impact upon congregational awareness and willingness to declare a position of inclusion. What is it that makes a church welcoming?

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 through the merger of two denominations: the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the Congregational Christian Churches. This union of willing but not entirely compatible participants was accomplished through the delicate negotiations of church leaders committed to the notion of church growth through consolidation and ecumenical collaboration. The foundational principle of the newly formed denomination would be *covenant*. Thus congregational autonomy would be held in balance with ecclesiastical leadership through the respectful and flexible relationship of mutually chosen covenant.

What has emerged through this denominational structure is a delicately held tension that is both the obstacle to and the vehicle for internal unity. Over its nearly half century of life, the UCC has become identified by the liberal, forward looking pronouncements and resolutions passed by its national setting. (Denominational structure is intentionally referred to as “settings” and not “levels.” There are three functionally identified settings: national, conference and local.)

The structure of covenantal relationship calls upon its members to regard each setting within the denomination with respect and asks for – but does not require – members’ cooperation and participation in given decisions. Within this structure is an inherently great measure of freedom of expression. The progressive standard set by the national setting represents a goal to which some conferences and congregations strive, and others reject by ignoring or denouncing. The foundational principle of covenantal relationship plus congregational autonomy allows for both responses.

## EMERGENCE OF LGBT CONCERNS

In 1998 a pastoral letter to the denomination, UCC President Paul H. Sherry listed the following as one of the church’s marvelous surprises:

*- the gracious perseverance of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns which, for twenty-six years, has been a prophetic presence in our church, clarifying concerns, challenging stereotypes, providing leaders for every setting of the church’s life, gently and persistently changing hearts and minds, providing a refuge for those who have suffered wounds of prejudice and exclusion in the church and society.<sup>1</sup>*

While the perseverance of the Coalition over the decades may have been a marvelous surprise, the context of its birth was certainly not. The work of the Coalition began in the early 1970’s as the growing voice of LGBT people of faith began demanding a place of equality at Christ’s table.

In 1972, within five years of the founding of the Metropolitan Community Church and the riots at Stonewall, the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns was created. It was part of the formative and emerging public voice of the Queer community in American society. A flood of important Queer-related events were emerging upon the landscape and were creating a new level of visibility for the Queer community: Catholic Dignity was founded in 1969, Episcopal Integrity was founded in 1974, the American Psychiatric Association removed the classification of illness from homosexuality in 1973.

The UCC Coalition was on the forward edge of what would become a foundational time for LGBT issues and LGBT people. The ordination of an *out* gay man, Bill Johnson, by the United Church of Christ in 1972 was cathartic. Bill’s embattled journey was not traveled alone. Living through this experience with him was a host of friends whose pride in Bill and in his ordination gave birth to the Coalition. Initially it was little more than a caring support-group devoted to Bill and his historic place in ministry. It lacked structure and strategy. It lacked formal recognition by the denomination. It lacked a mission statement and an office or headquarters. It had, only, the energy and optimism generated by hopeful people who envisioned themselves being freed from the margins.

Almost immediately after Johnson’s ordination, the Coalition established itself in two ways. It planned annual national gatherings and it formed a choir. Annual meetings were “campish” according to UCC National Coordinator, Rebecca Voelkel. There was a lot of music, prayer, story-telling and commiseration during these gatherings, but no strategy setting or formal organizational structuring. The Coalition rallied around Bill Johnson as the only gay minister in the UCC for six years until, finally, the denomination’s second *out* minister, Loey Powell, was ordained in 1978.

Another five years would pass before the next major transformative event in Coalition history took place. In 1983 a Massachusetts Conference minister, Margarita Suarez, presented the concept of “Open and Affirming” congregations to her conference for consideration. It was affirmed within the conference setting, but was not received in time to be presented to General Synod XIV that same year. However, ONA was on its way. Two years later the Massachusetts conference presented the ONA resolution to the General Synod XV gathering and the delegates passed it, calling upon all congregations in the denomination to become Open and Affirming.

At this point the growth and progress of the Coalition within the life of the UCC is revealed best through metaphor. The experiences of the Coalition Choir provide a microcosmic parallel to the experiences of the Coalition as a whole. Rebecca Voelkel states that the choir spent many years singing outside the conference hall during General Synod meetings. They were a visible and audible witness to the delegates who passed by – often with disdain – but they were certainly not invited or welcome guests of the Synod gathering. Over time the choir was acknowledged and invited to sing during mid-week morning worship (the 6:30 a.m. Bible Studies that nearly no one attends). The choir was thrilled to be recognized and given a place to sing even if the audience was pitifully small. Through most of the 1990s the choir enjoyed – or endured – these out-of-the-way nods toward inclusion.

Finally in the year 2000 when the UCC was undergoing denominational reorganization, the Coalition received official recognition as a group within the UCC. With that recognition came representation on the governing Executive Council and Voice Without Vote status at all General Synod business meetings. At the 2001 and 2003 General Synod meetings the Coalition Choir was featured during either the opening or closing ceremonies. No longer any doubt about the presence or the purpose of this choir. The Coalition along with its singing participants would now remain a legitimate and permanent part of the UCC landscape.

Today the Coalition sustains three part time employees and has an annual budget of \$135,000. This level of organization and structure was slow in coming to the Coalition which held its first formal strategic planning meeting in 1996. From that meeting came the Coalition Mission Statement: *Transforming Church and society toward inclusion of LGBT folk and our allies.*

As a matter of raw numbers, the UCC today has more ONA (welcoming/reconciling etc.) congregations than any other denomination – nearly all of which are larger than the UCC. As a matter of percentage, the ratio of ONA congregations to non-ONA congregations is significantly greater in the UCC than any other church group (the Metropolitan Community Church excepted, of course).

The Coalition now dedicates seventy percent of its efforts toward intra-denominational affairs including the promotion of ONA congregations. The remaining thirty percent of its efforts are focused upon societal and ecumenical points of opportunity. Within the denomination, however, the tangible measure of the Coalition’s work and impact remains best viewed by the growing number of ONA congregations. Rebecca Voelkel is hopeful that the UCC will have ten percent of its congregations ONA within the next two years.

The growth of ONA churches in the UCC is charted below. The proposed variable in Figure 1 is the influence of key U.S. and international events related to LGBT concerns. The purpose of this chart is to explore any obvious correlation between the local congregations' response to being ONA and the events of society at large.

**Figure 1:**

	<b>New ONA Churches</b>	<b>Total ONA Churches to Date</b>	<b>LGBT-RELATED EVENTS IN SOCIETY</b>
<b>1987</b>	15		
<b>1988</b>	7	22	
<b>1989</b>	12	34	
<b>1990</b>	14	48	
<b>1991</b>	17	65	
<b>1992</b>	23	88	Colorado passes anti-gay/lesbian "Amendment 2"
<b>1993</b>	26	114	
<b>1994</b>	31	145	U.S. Supreme Court declares Colorado's "Amendment 2" unconstitutional. "Don't ask – don't tell" becomes U.S. military policy toward homosexuals.
<b>1995</b>	28	173	
<b>1996</b>	29	202	U.S. Defense of Marriage Act denies legal marriage to same-sex couples.
<b>1997</b>	26	228	
<b>1998</b>	31	259	Matthew Shepherd murdered in Laramie, WY
<b>1999</b>	45	304	
<b>2000</b>	48	352	
<b>2001</b>	47	399	The Netherlands becomes first country to offer legal marriage to same-sex couples.
<b>2002</b>	36	435	
<b>2003</b>	40	475	Belgium extends legal marriage to same-sex couples. U.S. Supreme Court strikes down Texas "Sodomy" law.
<b>2004 (May)</b>	16	491	Several local judges issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Massachusetts court orders equal rights for same-sex couples. President Bush calls for a constitutional amendment to legally codify nationwide exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage.

What this chart demonstrates is that there is no clear correlation between LGBT-related events in society at large and local church decisions to be ONA. Negative social events have not propelled more congregations to become ONA out of a sense of justice, nor have they frightened churches away from ONA declarations. Conversely, positive social events have not resulted in significant changes in the number of churches becoming ONA.

In Figure 2 we examine the same data about the number of ONA congregations. The proposed variable in this figure relates specifically to UCC positions of support for LGBT people and concerns.

**Figure 2:**

	<b>New ONA Churches</b>	<b>Total ONA Churches to Date</b>	<b>LGBT-RELATED RESOLUTIONS AND PRONOUNCEMENTS IN THE UCC</b>
<b>1985</b>			General Synod XV calls on UCC congregations to declare themselves Open and Affirming
<b>1986</b>			
<b>1987</b>	15	15	General Synod XVI affirms right to privacy for all adults in consensual, sexual relationships. Urges legislation guaranteeing civil rights without regard to sexual orientation.
<b>1988</b>	7	22	
<b>1989</b>	12	34	General Synod XVII calls for education and legislation to end violence against lesbian and gay people
<b>1990</b>	14	48	
<b>1991</b>	17	65	General Synod XVIII calls for the state of Virginia to repeal “Sodomy” laws ... calls upon conferences and congregations to extend welcome and support to openly lesbian, gay and bisexual ministerial students and candidates
<b>1992</b>	23	88	
<b>1993</b>	26	114	General Synod XIX calls for greater church leadership to end discrimination of gays and lesbians
<b>1994</b>	31	145	
<b>1995</b>	28	173	
<b>1996</b>	29	202	
<b>1997</b>	26	228	General Synod XXI establishes “fidelity and integrity” as the standard for marriage and other covenanted relationships, singleness, and all relationships of life.
<b>1998</b>	31	259	
<b>1999</b>	45	304	
<b>2000</b>	48	352	
<b>2001</b>	47	399	
<b>2002</b>	36	435	
<b>2003</b>	40	475	
<b>2004 (May)</b>	16	491	UCC television add campaign runs for two months in six test markets. The television add depicts both a gay and a lesbian couple as being welcome in the UCC.

This chart similarly shows a relatively low correlation between the growth rate of ONA churches and the major UCC resolutions/pronouncements of support for LGBT concerns. The converse is also true. There appears to be no discernable backlash or refusal of congregations to become ONA following a positive statement by the denomination.

## THE MAKING OF INCLUSIVITY:

If we are to understand the impact of Welcoming Christianities we will have to grapple with the question of what makes a person choose to be inclusive or exclusive. If the above charts accurately demonstrate that no policy statement or political decision is sufficient in and of itself to dramatically impact the slow but steady growth of ONA congregations within the UCC, then can we identify the factors that do account for it?

*I believe that this is a time of crisis for Christianity. Many creative, committed and spiritually gifted people have been and are now leaving churches in disgust. When the church becomes a place where it is more comfortable to champion hatred than to speak out for justice, the moral capital of Christianity has seriously decayed. Who can be committed to a religion that mouths love and practices hatred? That proclaims compassion and practices rejection? That teaches inclusivity and practices exclusion?*

*And let's be clear about this, the Bible is not to blame for this state of affairs. If the Bible's meager eleven verses of possible reference to homoeroticism were really the source of the often violent polemic against lesbians and gay men, then the church should also be out there stoning adulterers, condoning slavery, and refusing to tolerate, much less ordain, divorced people, for all these other views are much clearer and much more widely attested in scripture than anything about homoeroticism. No, the source of hatred for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered persons is not biblical authority; it is, instead those twin pillars of violence: ignorance and fear – the ignorance of difference and the profound fear of sexuality.<sup>2</sup>*

- Mary A. Tolbert

Perhaps the emergence of Welcoming Christianities and the growth of ONA congregations have a similar basis: overcoming ignorance and fear. The plea of denominational LGBT organizations has been, "Get to know us." UCC Christians in the Coalition have sought freedom from the invisibility that characterizes the lives of most LGBT people. Being a recognized body within the UCC has granted a glimmer of light to shine into the painful closets of secrecy wherein too many of our LGBT members – especially our LGBT clergy – continue to live. Fear of real and sometimes dangerous repercussions remains the overwhelming threat that holds LGBT people in the shadows of silence and invisibility.

The crucial element for growth of ONA congregations and for the address of LGBT concerns is friendship. Ann B. Day, UCC National Coordinator for ONA Churches stated, "The growth of ONA churches does not come from social issues or policy statements. It comes from people knowing people. As more LGBT people are known and loved by their families, their friends, and their church peers, the natural response of the church is to affirm them. Being ONA happens through relationships and through education."

The Coalition Choir's history of moving from uninvited guest witnessing from outside the conference hall to gradual acknowledgement and eventually to full inclusion reflects the power of being "known." Personally knowing a gay man or a lesbian, a bisexual or trans or questioning person is the beginning of the end of homo-hatred in the church and throughout society. Friendships confront stereotypes and expose bigotry. Friendships deny all those involved the bliss of ignorance. Getting to know one's LGBT neighbor as friend is perhaps the one thing that will break down any barrier that systems or traditions have erected.

“The United Church of Christ has always seen this as a justice issue rather than a morality question. I think this has set us apart from the other denominations” says Rebecca Voelkel. She continues, “Without that vision of doing justice on behalf of others, our denomination would not have provided the context wherein the Coalition could develop and work as well as we have.”

The context of justice and the necessity of knowing our LGBT neighbor as friend touch the heart of sexual ethics. In an essay on Christian Ethics, Sally Purvis challenges the systemic weaknesses of sexual ethics derived from an institutional model. While focusing specifically on marriage as an example, she challenges both the “smokescreening” and the scapegoating that are by-products of an institutionally based ethic. She concludes with the following challenge:

*If and when Christian churches make the shift from an institutional to a relational approach to Christian sexual ethics, if and when persons can agree that the institution of marriage says both too much and too little about sexual activity and intimacy, then it will be clear that the relational criteria that are derived will apply universally – to all relationships. We will discover, I believe, that heterosexuals and homosexuals have much more in common in terms of the morality of their sexual behavior than large segments of either group might currently want to admit. We will be asking a different set of questions from the one that guide so much of our current conversations about Christian sexual behavior. Christian communities will not be concerned with sexual orientation or marital status, but with the health and stability of relationships. The institution of Christian marriage will no longer hide and protect violent and abusive sexual behavior but our communities will identify and condemn it.<sup>3</sup>*

The model for sexual ethics that Purvis proposes is a relational model. Instead of examining the rules and norms established by an institution, a relational model would examine the content of the relationship itself. It would ask the same questions of all relationships regarding non-violence and mutuality. It would expose the abuses within institutionally sanctioned relationships and would offer a level field of evaluation for those who remain outside the institution’s blessing.

The relationship approach to sexual ethics may be a bold idea fraught with opposition, but it is also the basis for what organizations like the UCC Coalition have discovered to be truly beneficial. When our church policies, programs, and position-statements reflect the fact that the issues we are dealing with involve people – real people – some of whom we actually know, they are less institutionally rigid and more open to being loving. The necessary ingredient for the growth of ONA churches is friendship. The essential context is a denominational vision of justice. Together they form the method and the means for extending inclusion and creating welcome.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Paul H. Sherry, "Now, No Condemnation" Pastoral letter to the United Church of Christ. November 1998.
2. Mary A. Tolbert, "Stop Begging and Start Preaching" Address delivered at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary gathering of The United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns on June 26, 2002.
3. Sally B. Purvis, "Doing Violence: Homosexuals, Heterosexuals and Contemporary Christian Ethics" *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* (New Brighton, MN: Prism Publishers, 1992) vol. 7, No. 1, 52-61.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

National Coordinator of UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns, The Reverend Rebecca Voelkel

National Coordinator for ONA Churches, The Reverend Ann B. Day

United Church of Christ website, [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org).

UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns website, [www.ucccoalition.org](http://www.ucccoalition.org)

Religious Tolerance organization's website, [www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)

## ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gunnemann, Louis H. *United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey* (New York: United Church Press, 1987)

Johnson, Daniel L. and Charles Hambrick-Stowe eds. *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1990)

Nelson, James B. "Homosexuality and the Church: A Bibliographic Essay" *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* (New Brighton, MN: Prism Publishers, 1991) vol. 6, No. 1, 74-83.

Purvis, Sally B. "Doing Violence: Homosexuals, Heterosexuals and Contemporary Christian Ethics" *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* (New Brighton, MN: Prism Publishers, 1992) vol. 7, No. 1, 52-61.

Rouner, Arthur A. "Some Issues of Homosexuality for the Church Today" *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* (New Brighton, MN: Prism Publishers, 1993) vol. 8, No. 2, 52-63.

Sands, Kathleen M. *God Forbid Religion and Sex in American Public Life*

Sherry, Paul H. "Now, No Condemnation" available at website <[www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)>

Tigert, Leanne McCall. *Coming Out While Staying in Struggles and Celebrations of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals in the Church* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996).

Tolbert, Mary A. "Stop Begging and Start Preaching" Address delivered at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary gathering of the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns on June 26, 2002.