

John Shelby Spong's Newsletter

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In Praise of the United Church of Christ

Throughout the course of my professional career I have always been impressed by that faith community which calls itself the United Church of Christ or the Congregational Church. It came into being in its present incarnation 1957 with a merger between the Evangelical and Reformed Churches and the Congregational Christian Churches. On the Evangelical and Reformed side, this church is the heir of the German Reformed tradition initiated by Martin Luther but carried even further by Ulrich Zwingli. The Congregational Christian Church goes back even further to the Pilgrims. Some of the greatest theologians of the last century, including Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs, both H. Richard and Reinhold, were part of this tradition.

Today, Barack Obama, a member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago is the first presidential candidate to claim membership in this Church since its 1957 merger. In the past both John Adams and John Quincy Adams were products of New England Congregationalism.

The United Church of Christ has always defined itself as open theologically and progressive on all social issues. This Church, above all other denominations, seems willing to allow its understanding of Christianity to engage contemporary knowledge. That is a remarkably rare reality in church life since for most people religion seems to be more a search for security than a search for truth. In my experience it takes enormous spiritual maturity for religious people to be able to discuss, debate and reformulate their deepest beliefs in the light of new insights, since that involves changes both in the way we understand ourselves and the way we understand God. I, for example, cannot imagine members of this Church joining in with the condemnation of Galileo or in the endless resistance to the breakthrough insights into the origins of life that emerged from the work of Charles Darwin. With so many parts of the Christian Church hiding in anti-

intellectual stands, the United Church of Christ stands out in clear relief.

When we analyze this Church's role in battling public discriminatory practices we discover that it was active in the Abolitionist movement in the 19th century, when slavery was America's defining issue and in the 20th century's Civil Rights movement, when segregation was America's defining issue. In regard to the full equality of women in ministry, this Church opened its ordained ranks to women in 1853! The UCC also ordained its first openly gay pastor in 1972. When I began to wrestle personally with the issues surrounding homosexuality I discovered that the materials developed by this Church for its clergy and people to study were far more competent and bold than those offered by any other ecclesiastical body. These studies dealt with current scientific and medical understandings that successfully challenged the prejudiced definitions of the past. They also dealt with the biblical material that had traditionally been used to undergird cultural homophobia. Finally these materials were designed to give members of the UCC a thorough knowledge of the history of Christian persecution of gay and lesbian people. When I began to engage this issue publicly I found leaders of the UCC to be far more supportive of me than were the leaders of my own Episcopal Church. I was deeply appreciative of their stance and said so on many public occasions.

In the course of my writing and lecturing career, I have received invitations to speak at vital UCC Churches in places as diverse as Ames, Iowa, and Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the Mid-West to Berkeley, California, on the West Coast and Clearwater, Florida, in the South. Every UCC Church I have ever visited seemed to be to be both alive and engaged.

In recent weeks, it has been my pleasure to add two more UCC Churches to that long list, both of which impressed me tremendously. These two churches had a great deal in common. Both of them were carrying out their ministry in very conservative "Bible Belt" communities. Both had faced, or were in the process of facing, the transition that comes when their long term and obviously creative senior pastors reached retirement age. Both had established an endowed annual lectureship, deliberately designed to stimulate creative, challenging theological dialogue in their communities. Both were growing congregations that seemed to me to be a central force in the lives of their members, who seemed to be not just deeply involved but eager to claim responsibility in their church home. Both had attracted to their congregations a number of retired pastors from various denominations, who

wanted to be part of the life these churches were creating. Both churches would attract me as a potential member if I lived in their towns.

The first of these was the Congregational-UCC Church in the heart of Colorado Springs, a city whose religious climate is shaped by the presence of James Dobson and his right wing "Focus on the Family" ministry and is home to the 14,000 member New Life Church, a gay-hating fundamentalist institution, served until recently by The Rev. Ted Haggard. Recall that Haggard resigned after his lengthy liaison with a gay, male prostitute was revealed, but then made a remarkable "recovery" to "heterosexual normalcy" in about five short weeks. The healing "therapy" that brought about this "cure" involved prayers, counseling and a "Pavlovian reformulation" of his sexual orientation. Late night comedians had a field day with that!

In the midst of this bizarre religious atmosphere, the Rev. James White made his UCC Church in downtown Colorado Springs a beacon of light and a place dedicated to both truth and spiritual growth. Building on a relationship with Colorado College, a small outstanding Liberal Arts school with historic roots in the United Church of Christ and headed by a visionary president named Richard Celeste, the former governor of Ohio, Jim White and his congregation refused to let that city be overwhelmed with the kind of religious literalism that seems to mark our time. He attracted to his congregation many of Colorado College's faculty and other professional leaders of the town. It was fitting that this congregation decided to honor him upon his retirement by establishing the James White Annual Lectureship dedicated to scholarly and progressive religious thought. Building on their history this lectureship was to be conducted both at Colorado College and in the First United Church of Christ. I was enormously pleased to have been invited to inaugurate the James White Lectures. This congregation has already chosen James White's successor, a very bright, competent, Harvard-trained pastor named Ben Broadbent, who is building on his predecessor's great foundation and adding the insights that every new generation brings to the unfolding drama of Christianity.

The second of these UCC congregations is located in Hendersonville, in the beautiful mountains near Asheville North Carolina. Historically, the primary religious expression in these mountains was strict fundamentalism. One drives into Hendersonville from the airports in either Asheville or Greenville, South Carolina, only to see large crosses along the road bearing religious messages, urging drivers and pedestrians to remember that Jesus died for

their sins or to be prepared to meet their God. On one church, the sign warned that no one should postpone coming to church until they are carried in by "six strong men."

Fifteen years ago, the Rev. David Kelly, accompanied by his musician wife Jan, arrived in Hendersonville to be the pastor of the 1st UCC-Congregational Church. Since then this quietly competent man has transformed this church. Among the newcomers who joined were two unique people, Walter and Jo Ann Ashley, he a classics scholar from Oxford, she a lawyer from Memphis. Their marriage and successful careers had taken them first to New York City and Tarrytown, New York, and then in retirement to the mountains near Hendersonville, North Carolina. For years Walter taught the adult forum in this church, while David Kelly not only opened his congregation to new ideas and new possibilities but also offered them his sensitive pastoral gifts. The church thrived and grew, making its unique witness and ministry felt in that very conservative region. As a popular retirement community for those whose careers have mostly been lived out in the Deep South from South Carolina through Florida to Mississippi, the area grew and this church offered challenges and opportunities for continued service to these retired people who were, by and large, put off by the rampant, local fundamentalism.

Walter Ashley died a year ago in his mid-eighties as David Kelly was preparing to retire. Walter's widow Jo Ann and David Kelly then decided to create a memorial lectureship dedicated to progressive religious thinking and to invite nationally known figures to this small southern town to deliver "The Walter Ashley Lectures." I was also privileged to be the inaugural lecturer.

The Ashley Lectures was held the weekend after David Kelly's retirement. Every seat in the church was filled. People came from all over that region and even from as far away as Raleigh to attend. This church was now overtly and publicly identifying itself as open and willing to think. Jo Ann Ashley introduced me at each of my four lectures which were based on my recent book, "Jesus for the Non-Religious." The question periods, lasting one hour after each lecture, were animated and exciting. People now asked questions they had been taught were inappropriate to ask in their religious past. Theological issues were faced, doubts were expressed, growth occurred before our eyes and even homophobia and sexism in the church were engaged. I left with enormous admiration for the Rev. David Kelly, now

fully retired. With both excitement and envy I also began to think about that as yet unidentified United Church of Christ pastor living somewhere today who will soon be called to be the senior pastor of this Hendersonville UCC congregation. What a lucky man or woman this person will be. What a privilege it will be to succeed David Kelly and to serve this incredible congregation.

I salute The UCC, a church that can claim among its clergy giants like James White and David Kelly.

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