

# A Gathering of the United Church of Christ 'Outsiders' Inside the Church

By Bob Roehm

"The church always needs outsiders. It needs the particular challenge of those who have been 'dispossessed,' the view of those who have *not* been in the center. That's why the lesbian/gay caucus is so crucial for Synod. Because you've never *had* the power, your voice becomes imperative."

Mary Elizabeth Hunt, a feminist theologian, lecturer and writer from Washington, D.C., delivered the keynote address at the Third National Gathering of the United Church Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Concerns (UCCL/GC), held June 21 through 23 in Pittsburgh.

About 35 women and men in the United Church of Christ (UCC), ranging in age from 22 to 79, traveled from as far away as Colorado, Arizona and California to attend this two-day gathering for networking, personal sharing and support, workshops and panel discussions, as well as to plan and organize the work of the Coalition for the coming year. Following the National Gathering, many Coalition members stayed in Pittsburgh to participate in the 14th General Synod of the UCC, held June 24 through 30 in the same city. UCCL/GC is an officially recognized special interest group in the UCC committed to ministry with and justice for lesbians and gay men, their families and friends.

Carlow College, a women's college about two miles from downtown Pittsburgh, hosted the National Gathering. Prior to locating Carlow, the Coalition had been turned down by at least eight different Pittsburgh colleges and other sites because it is a gay group. Carlow provided a very comfortable meeting space and the atmosphere at the college seemed to be very supportive of the gathering.

"We have a very concrete experience of being outsiders," Hunt told the assembled group as she spoke of the importance of the Coalition's participation in the UCC Synod. "We have a concrete experience of being marginalized. One consistent strand in Christianity is that it is always important to have the outside reflecting back

to us something new. The outsider always has a certain priority." The witness that the lesbian/gay coalition can make to the church, she explained, makes it imperative for the group to go to Synod.

Synod began the morning after the National Gathering ended. Over 700 delegates, representing UCC churches and agencies in 50

of Bible quoting.

A man involved with the UCC Task Force on an Inclusive Church and Persons with Disabilities was particularly supportive of the work of the Coalition. He had participated earlier this year in discussions at the National Council of Churches (NCC) about the application by the Universal

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states and Puerto Rico, as well as over 1000 visitors, gathered at the Pittsburgh Convention Center for six days to discuss and vote on over 100 resolutions and to make decisions about the direction of the UCC for the next two years.

UCCL/GC sponsored a booth in the exhibition hall, adjacent to the Synod assembly room. On opening day of Synod, Coalition volunteers distributed to delegates a survey on attitudes towards sexuality. The results of the survey were used later when the resolutions and pronouncements were voted on. The film *Pink Triangles* was shown several evenings and discussion about homophobia and related issues followed.

On another aisle of the exhibition hall was a booth sponsored by the United Church People for Biblical Witness (UCPBW), a conservative evangelical group in the UCC that was originally formed to counter the gay-supportive stands that the UCC had been taking and to support instead heterosexual monogamy or celibacy as the only "Christian" lifestyles.

There was little communication between the UCCL/GC booth and the UCBPW booth, but several times groups of youth delegates and their friends would come to the Coalition booth after having gone first to the UCBPW booth. They had just been given a lot of Bible quotes about homosexuality. "What do we say to those people?" they would ask. Their interest in supporting lesbians and gay men was clear, but they did not know how to respond to that style

triangle, you can help protect lesbian and gay United Church members wishing to actively advocate lesbian/gay concerns at this General Synod from discrimination." By the second day, many at Synod were wearing Pink Triangles.

The mood at Synod was very positive and seemed to be supportive of the Coalition's involvement there. Many there were interested in talking about homophobia and related issues and in supporting the struggles of lesbians and gay men in the church.

The UCCL/GC Fourth National Gathering will be held next year in San Francisco and will coincide with the Gay Pride celebrations in that city. The UCC 15th General Synod will be held in 1985 in Ames, Iowa. The Coalition plans to participate in this Synod as it did this year in Pittsburgh.

The national mailing address of the Coalition is: UCCL/GC, P.O. Box 1926, San Francisco, CA 94101.

Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches for membership in the NCC. The homophobia he heard at that meeting was so intense that he was converted to a gay-supportive position.

The Coalition introduced a number of resolutions at Synod which were approved by the national body. These resolutions focused on such issues as homophobia, inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the life of the church, support for AIDS victims and a call to the federal government for more funding for AIDS research.

A "Pronouncement on Christian Marriage and Family Life" was introduced by UCBPW. This pronouncement would have caused the UCC to adopt as its official policy the position of affirming only heterosexual monogamy or celibacy and rejecting all other lifestyles. This pronouncement was voted down.

Pink Triangle buttons were distributed from the Coalition booth, and supporters were asked to wear them during Synod. A sheet distributed with the buttons stated, "By wearing the pink