

Lecture at Theology Sunday Forum (Taipei)

Date: Sunday, February 2, 2020

Time: 7:00 to 9:00 pm

Location: Chi-Nan Presbyterian Church (PCT)

(Address: No. 3, Zhongshan South Road, Zhongzheng District, Taipei City, Taiwan 100)

Cohost: Research and Development Center (General Assembly Office, PCT)

Topic: Covenant of Rainbow: UCC's LGBTQ ministry and its inspiration to Presbyterian Church in Taiwan

Lecture (Rev. Mike Schuenemeyer) (60 Minutes)

1. Introduction

Grace and peace to you. It is my great joy to be with you tonight and I am very grateful for the invitation to share with you tonight about a movement in the life of the United Church of Christ that began more than 50 years ago, a movement grounded in the radical love of the Gospel and evangelical courage.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the United Church of Christ in the U.S.,

- from the General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. John C. Dorhauer,
- Associate General Minister and Co-Executive of Global Ministries, Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, and
- my executive, the Associate General Minister for Justice and Local Church Ministries, Rev. Dr. Traci Blackmon.

Tonight I want to share with the story of the United Church of Christ's journey of becoming an Open and Affirming church. This is a journey that has taken shape over more than 50 years. It didn't happen overnight, but in terms of how change typically happens in the church, it may seem like it. There is more to this story than I could ever share in one evening, so I will try to highlight what I think are some of the key moments and their impact. What I hope is conveyed, is that this has been a faith and deliberate journey, grounded in the radical, inclusive love of the Gospel frequently offered with evangelical courage. What I mean by that is, the leadership and witness that has been engaged in this work has consistently done so, even when doing so has

been costly to them. These leaders, lay and ordained, have taken risks to stand up for what they believe and to stand in solidarity with those who experience marginalization, knowing that they too could become marginalized, as well.

I will begin speaking about the LGBTQI+ rights movement in the U.S., which is an important context for understanding this movement in the UCC and other communities of faith. I share the story of ordination, the move to become Open and Affirming, and the support for marriage equality, along with a few other things. So lets begin.

2. The impact of the LGBT equal rights movement in the US

Although the LGBTQ+ equal rights movement in the US can be traced back to at least 1924, in terms of efforts to create organizations advocating for gay and lesbian rights, it isn't until 1950, and the formation of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, that we begin to see organizations able to sustain efforts. It took court decisions and public policy changes to provide some basic civic protections for this to occur. I don't think we can underestimate the significant influence the Mattachine Society had on inspiring organizing across the United States. Their mission statement called for two things:

- a grassroots movement of gay people to challenge anti-gay discrimination
- the importance of building a gay community

This was happening post World War II, as the UN was forming and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being developed and the U.S. civil rights movement is gaining steam to address the Jim Crow laws, the separate but equal laws in relation to race. The values of worth and dignity of every person, at the heart of human rights, were being discussed and promoted. There were also new reports from the social sciences about human sexuality. The Kinsey Report is published, sharing evidence of the diversity of human sexuality and experience.

All of this gains some momentum through the 60s, as cities across the country see organizations begin to form, especially in the larger cities, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco,

to name a few. During this period you also see some academic work happening, some of it building on the significant body of work on human sexuality done by Magnus Hirschfeld and the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee he led in Germany before Hitler came to power. Hitler subsequently destroyed/burned the extensive library of research Hirschfeld had amassed. But some of it survived and was a catalyst for some of the early articles, such as Henry Gerber's Society for Human Rights. Gerber had spent time with Hirschfeld in Germany and started the Society for Human Rights in Chicago in the early 20s. By the way, the President of the organization was an African American preacher, the Rev. John T. Graves. But Gerber, Graves and the leaders of the organization were arrested and the Society quickly shut down, almost as soon as it started. All of this is to say, that these conversations about different sexual orientations and gender identities are not new. They have been fomenting for at least a century.

In 1957, when the merger creating the United Church of Christ takes place, issues of human sexuality are part of the cultural/societal context into which the United Church of Christ was born. In 1957 it wasn't anywhere near the forefront. As with most church bodies, these issues were not, and in many ways still are not easy things for the church to address. However, these issues were becoming more public and there were some clergy, such as Rev. Robert Wood in the UCC, who were writing and beginning to engage in public witness, calling the society and the church to be safe places for gay and lesbian people, and supporting our civil rights. Rev. Wood authored *Christ and the Homosexual* which was published by Vantage in 1960. In the major U.S. cities, there was organized picketing to protest discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian people in employment, housing, and other public accommodations, as well as, against laws that criminalized consensual sexual behavior between same-sex couples. Through the 60s, in some corners of the church, these conversations were happening more and more, albeit in mostly informal ways. And they were setting the stage for what was to come.

In April of 1969, two and half months before the Stonewall uprising in New York, for the first time a national ministry of the United Church of Christ adopted a social policy resolution supportive of people who are gay and lesbian. The Council for Christian Social Action, a

predecessor body to what is now Justice and Witness Ministries (the ministry I work under in the UCC national setting) adopted the "Resolution on Homosexuals and the Law". The resolution declared its opposition to and called for the repeal of laws that criminalized private same-sex relations between consenting adults; declared its opposition to policies that banned military service, opposed police harassment and entrapment, and it called on the various settings of the United Church of Christ, that is, local churches, Associations, and Conferences to "to hold seminars, consultations, conferences, etc. for honest and open discussion of the nature of homosexuality in our society." The preface to the resolution affirmed heterosexual marriage as the "Christian ideal" but said, "worthy as it is, [it] should not blind us to variations and limitations which may preclude that ideal for many." It declared, "...while homosexuality is condemned in the Old and New Testaments, its seriousness has been exaggerated by wrenching scriptural verses out of context." It went on to say,

"The Council for Christian Social Action believes that the time is long overdue for our churches to be enlisted in the cause of justice and compassion for homosexual persons as well as for other socially rejected minorities. Clearly there are profound pastoral responsibilities unmet by most churches for homosexual persons in their own midst. Yet our particular concern as a Council is for the legal establishment of civil liberties—for whose denial we in the church bear substantial blame." -April 12, 1969

I think it is important to understand this history because it helps us to understand the context from which the United Church of Christ has been able to move forward on issues of justice, welcome and inclusion in relation to people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. There are key elements happening within and outside the church following World War II, support for human rights, the civil rights movement in the U.S., the Kinsey Report on human sexuality, and the growing visibility of public witness for justice and civil rights for gay and lesbian people that included people of faith and clergy.

It is also significant to note that in the DNA of this new denomination, formed by a merger of

two denominations in 1957, is the tendency to be early to such issues of justice and inclusion.

- This list of firsts includes:
 - Among the firsts to America (Pilgrims) “Still light and truth to break forth from God’s Word.”
 - Opposition to slavery
 - Civil disobedience (protest against King George, England, Boston Tea Party)
 - First published African American poet in the U.S. (Phyllis Wheatley)
 - First ordained African American pastor
 - First foreign mission society in the U.S.
 - First missionaries from the U.S. to India
 - First school for the deaf
 - First integrated anti-slavery society
 - First woman pastor, Antoinette Brown (1853)
 - First predominantly white denomination to elect an African American head of communion

Being early to take a stand on justice concerns has been facilitated by the way our polity is practiced. The United Church of Christ has a congregational polity, which means there is a great deal of autonomy at every setting of the church, both the local church and the geographical settings of the church. No one setting of the church can speak for another setting of the church. For example, the national setting cannot speak for the local setting and vice versa. Generally speaking, the policy positions of the national setting are not binding on any other setting of the church. We understand that what binds us together as a denomination is our covenantal relationship. This has allowed the denomination to embrace more progressive positions on social justice concerns before there is a broad consensus among the local settings. This is especially the case in relation to those who experience marginalization and oppression. When delegates come to the UCC General Synod, the national meeting of the denomination which takes place every two years, they are charged to discern the issue and vote their own conscience.

When the denomination has faced issues concerning people who experience exclusion, discrimination and various form of marginalization, the church has provided spaces of grace in which the lived experiences of people can be shared and various perspectives can be heard. Through these deliberative processes, authentic encounters have occurred which have been transformative, as the church has sought to live the values expressed in our statement of faith, “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.” And to trust the promises from God, including the promise of “courage in the struggle for justice and peace.”

2.1. Gay and lesbian ordination (1972, 1975)

In the Spring of 1972, the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ gathered for an ecclesiastical council to consider the candidacy of William R. Johnson for the ordained Christian ministry of word and sacrament. In the polity of the UCC, authorization for ministry is decided and held at the setting of the church closest to the local church, called an association. Bill Johnson, as he is called, had completed all of the education and other process requirements for ordination. His gifts for ministry were not in doubt, however, Bill is an openly gay man, and this was an obstacle for some of the delegates in the Golden Gate Association. There is a short documentary film on his ecclesiastical council, including segments of the actual meeting. The film is called, “A Position of Faith” and it is available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYPvIS9EtzU>).

The debate in the Golden Gate Association is one that would be repeated time and time again as local churches and other settings have grappled with the welcome and full inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in the life and ministry of the UCC.

The arguments challenging his ordination included,

- Homosexuality is an abnormality outside the created order of God, using Mark 10:6-8 as a proof text. Some expressed the belief that that which is against nature is against the church and should be rejected.
- Some used Karl Barth's notion that sexuality is inherent to the created nature of men and women and their destiny; that men and women both only know each other in relation to the other sex. Homosexuality is a rejection of creatureliness and therefore is a form of idolatry.
- Some bought into the idea prevalent at the time that homosexuals are not well mentally, that they are disoriented.
- Others expressed concern about their influence on young people and that approving Bill for ordination would promote an "anything goes" attitude.
- There was also concern expressed that this would be a church-dividing issue.

Bill

- In response, Bill spoke about the moral question saying that there is an assumption that homosexuality is categorically immoral, and that heterosexuality is assumed to be moral, but it is more important to focus on the morality of what it means to be human.
- There are many orientations in life and we are called to be orientated to the responsible use of sexuality which is a part of our personhood. It is a question of repression or expression.
- Matter of integrity and people will find themselves taking a position of faith or taking a position of fear.
- This is a struggle the church must go through to receive all people into the body of Christ.
- Each person must discern for themselves, according to their relationship with God.
- In terms of our relationship to those we encounter, the style of ministry of Jesus gives us the answer to that.

Bill was asked a number of other very pointed questions and when the votes were cast, he was

approved for ordination with 62 votes and 34 against and was ordained on June 25, 1972, the 15th Anniversary of the United Church of Christ. He was the first openly gay person in the modern era to be ordained by a predominantly heterosexual Christian denomination.

Bill's ordination was a pivotal moment in the life of the United Church of Christ. It was a catalyst that created tension and sparked debates across the church. The Executive Council of the UCC supported the decision of the Association and in a statement said that in discerning a candidate for ordination, "the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather, the candidate's total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its use (expression)." The ordination of Bill Johnson did not lead to a sudden influx of openly gay clergy in the UCC. It took time, information, lots of conversations and difficult debates. It was 1977 when the first out lesbian was ordained, the Rev. Anne Holmes.

There were intense debates in some local churches and while sadly, some churches left the UCC, the vast majority did not. Over the next few decades, there were organized efforts in opposition and support of the ordination of openly gay or lesbian clergy. A group formed called The Biblical Witness Fellowship that published a newsletter and spoke out at meetings of local churches, Associations, Conferences to make their case against gays and lesbians in the church. They published articles that said the church had lost its way, distorted biblical orthodoxy and undermined traditional family values. They submitted actions to the General Synod calling for the church to affirm what it called the "traditional moral ethics" of the church and reverse course from the welcome and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life and ministry of the church.

At the same time, gays and lesbians became organized. The UCC Gay Caucus was organized in 1972, led by the newly ordained Rev. Bill Johnson and it followed a course similar to the gay rights movement. It focused on building a community of gays and lesbians in the UCC and organizing a movement to challenge discrimination against gays and lesbians, encouraging our welcome and inclusion in the full life and ministry of the church.

The Gay Caucus began to hold an annual gathering of gays and lesbians in the UCC, they also began to organize to promote supportive policy positions at the General Synod. This included a pronouncement in 1975. A pronouncement is the strongest statement of the UCC's General Synod, A Pronouncement: Civil Liberties without Discrimination Related to Affectional or Sexual Preference, which like the earlier statement by the UCC Council for Christian Social Action in 1969, focused against discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment and public accommodation, grounded in the value that every person as a child of God is bestowed by God with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside. Over time it became increasingly possible for persons of different sexual orientations and gender identities to become ordained. Today, that process may be easier in some Associations than it is in others, but it is possible.

The mission of the Gay Caucus was not just about the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. It was about making the church a safe and welcoming place for gays and lesbians, which is open to and nurturing of gifts of gays and lesbians in the full life and ministry of the church; and, it was about advocating for justice and equality in society.

Over this period, the Gay Caucus also evolved and as it evolved it changed its name to express broader inclusion. It began as the Gay Caucus, and then became the Gay and Lesbian Caucus, then the Gay and Lesbian Coalition, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Coalition and today is known as Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ. Most just called the organization the Coalition. It remains a separate, fully self-supported organization, independent from the denominational structure, however it has become a recognized, affiliated organization.

Without question, the work of the Coalition is key to why the UCC has been able to move forward to embrace open and affirming values both in the community of the church and as an advocate in the public square. There are key areas of work that have been particularly important.

1. Building the community of LGBTQI+ people and allies

The Coalition developed a mailing list, published a newsletter and developed a network of gays and lesbians and allies. They began a tradition of holding an Annual Gathering which in the early days was for many, the only safe space where they could be with other gays and lesbians. At General Synod meetings, they provided a witness of spirituality and grace. They frequently gathered at the entry doors to sing delegates into the General Synod sessions. They built skills among themselves and organized to share their stories, and they encouraged the same activities in the other settings of the church.

I cannot overstate how important this community building has been to this movement in the life of the church. People who once felt they were alone, found community and support, if only once a year. It empowered people to share their stories, to come out and to challenge the church to live the radically inclusive values of the Gospel.

More and more people in the church encountered and came to know personally and authentically a person who identified as gay or lesbian, bisexual, transgender. Those experiences were and are transformational. People who know someone who is LGBTQI+ personally are much more likely to support their welcome, inclusion, justice and equality in the church and in society. The Coalition focused its energy on nurturing these relationships across the life of the church.

2. Advocating for church policies and public policies that support welcome, inclusion, justice and equality.

Since 1975, every General Synod meeting has received at least one resolution addressing an area of LGBTQI+ justice, welcome, and inclusion, from recognizing the gifts of ministry, to opposing sodomy laws, to supporting LGBTQI+ human rights globally, the ability to serve in the military service, the adoption of children, and the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender

identity in hate crimes legislation. It is a fairly comprehensive body of pro-LGBTQI+ policy positions.

After the 1975 pronouncement on civil liberties, there are 3 particular actions of the General Synod that I think have made a significant impact.

2.2. Studies on Human Sexuality (1975-85)

The ordination of Bill Johnson stirred a great deal of conversation and debate in the life of the church. In 1977 the General Synod received the recommendations from a report on human sexuality that the General Synod commended be considered by all settings of the church. They then created a Task Force to engage in further study and to bring recommendations. This included the development of educational resources on human sexuality. This resolution was the basis on which the UCC would begin to develop comprehensive sexuality education resources for our local churches. I will talk more about that in a minute.

A Task Force on Human Sexuality was then established to look at sexual orientation, and in 1983 received their report. In receiving the report the General Synod recognized “a person’s sexual orientation is not a moral issue, but that sexual behavior does have moral significance.” It also declared, “in considering a candidate’s qualifications for ministry, the candidate’s sexual orientation should not be grounds for denying the request for ordination” and, “sexual orientation not be a basis for discrimination within the United Church of Christ in the employment of staff or use of volunteers.”

2.3. Open and Affirming Resolution(1985)

One of the most impactful resolutions in the life of the UCC is the "Resolution Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming”
Open and Affirming.

The resolution

- Lifted the witness of the Apostle Paul who said that, as Christians, we are many members, but we are one body in Christ (Rom. 12:4), and that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:31) without being judgmental (Mt. 7:1-2) nor disparaging of others (Lk. 18:9-14);
- Recognized that many persons of lesbian, gay and bisexual orientation are already members of the church through baptism and confirmation and that these people have talents and gifts to offer the United Church of Christ, and that the UCC has historically affirmed a rich diversity in its theological and biblical perspectives;
- Asserted that many parts of the church have remained conspicuously silent despite the continuing injustice of institutionalized discrimination, instances of senseless violence and setbacks in civil rights and that the church has often perpetuated discriminatory practices and has been unwilling to affirm the full humanness of clergy, laity and staff with lesbian, gay and bisexual orientation, who experience isolation, ostracism, and fear of (or actual) loss of employment; and
- Declared that we are called by Christ's example, to proclaim release to the captives and set at liberty the oppressed (Lk. 4:18).

The resolution had just one action clause which declared:

Therefore, the Fifteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages a policy of nondiscrimination in employment, volunteer service and membership policies with regard to sexual orientation; encourages Associations, Conferences and all related organizations to adopt a similar policy; and encourages the congregations of the United Church of Christ to adopt a nondiscrimination policy and a Covenant of Openness and Affirmation of persons of lesbian, gay and bisexual orientation within the community of faith.

It provided two examples of covenants or policies suggesting they could be used as models for local churches and other settings of the church to develop their own covenants or policies which clearly name welcome and inclusion of persons of gay, lesbian or bisexual orientation in the full life and ministry of the church.

The resolution was adopted with 98% of the vote.

A few key things happened that helped to advance the resolution after its adoption.

- The denominational offices began working on a resource to support an educational process for developing Open and Affirming covenants and policies. In 1987, it hired Rev. Bill Johnson as Minister for LGBT and HIV Ministries.
- The Coalition recognized that while the denominational offices were working on this, the pace of the institution was too slow to meet the need for resources. It was able to organize an Open and Affirming Program office of the Coalition, which
 - developed resources, including a toolkit that supported educational processes,
 - shared liturgies and sermons,
 - provided leadership to consult with pastors and local church leaders
 - established and published a list of Open and Affirming churches and other settings, following the criteria set forth by the General Synod
 - they recognized and celebrated those churches and other settings that become Open and Affirming at their Annual Gatherings

Yes, the UCC denominational offices were engaged, but the work of the Coalition is credited with developing the lions share of the resources and leadership that provided the support and leadership needed to establish Open and Affirming as a movement in the life of the United Church of Christ.

I also want to acknowledge the important contributions that groups similar to the Coalition were doing in other denominations in the U.S. The leaders of these organizations also consulted with and supported each other through some very difficult times. The Presbyterian Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodists, Episcopalians, Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Baptists, Church of the Brethren, and the Reformed Church of America all had advocacy groups to support welcome and inclusion in the life of their communions, working

for policy change. They formed a collaboration called the Welcoming Church Program Leaders, which published a monthly journal of articles and resources. The Coalition relied on and benefitted greatly from these relationships and their collaborative efforts. One of the resources they jointly published was a Bible Study on sexual orientation called, "Claiming the Promises." It offered a process for critical Bible study, not only dealing with those passages which have been used against same-gender loving people, but also the values that undergird a healthy, holy ethic for discernment.

The Welcoming Church Program Leaders would later work together on a toolkit, based on what they learned about the best practices for an educational process called, "Building an Inclusive Church." It recommended around 14 steps that would help a local church move to become a welcoming and inclusive setting. It recognized the process as a journey, emphasized the importance of assessing the current climate of the church for welcome and inclusion and starting from there to discern the next steps, as well as the pace of the process.

While all of this was developing in the 70s and 80s, the gay rights movement was also gaining momentum in the U.S. The American Medical Association removed homosexuality as a mental disorder, LGBT rights leaders, like Harvey Milk, were emerging, but so were leaders opposed to gay rights, like Anita Bryant and her "Save the Children" campaign, which successfully fought or worked to overturned civil rights protections for gays and lesbians. But although the "Save the Children" campaign was successful in the short term, it was bringing attention to the lives of gay and lesbian people as never before. More people were coming out, sharing their story and advocating for fairness, inclusion, justice and equal rights.

In the early 80s HIV also emerged, and although it was not/is not a gay disease, it had a devastating impact on the gay community in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, as well as many other cities across the country. Before effective anti-retroviral treatment came online, HIV forced many people out of the closet. So many died alone rejected by their families, friends and loved ones, including their gay friends and lovers. But there are also many inspirational stories

of love, acceptance, compassion and reconciliation. Celebrities, such as Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor, brought hi-profile attention to the epidemic. Elizabeth Taylor especially provided compassionate, non-judgemental leadership and advocacy. Activists grew impatient with the pace of the response, especially under the Reagan administration, and they began to organize public witness protests, staging what they called “die-ins” that disrupted traffic, legislative hallways, and church services, in efforts to draw attention to HIV and the need for services and increased efforts to respond to the epidemic. The silver lining of this horrible epidemic is that so many people discovered they knew someone gay and joined the movement to demand justice and equal rights.

What was happening in society fed conversations in the churches, not in every church to be sure, but certainly in an increasing number of churches. The number of UCC churches going through the Open and Affirming process begins to increase, the number of openly gay clergy also began to increase and there was a growing sense of momentum. Open and Affirming became more and more embraced as integral to the identity of the United Church of Christ. Although the efforts of the Biblical Witness Fellowship to organize against the Open and Affirming movement continued and they were able to foment conflict in some places, their efforts did not gain significant support.

A significant development in the 90s was a partnership between the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association to publish and implement a life-span, comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. The curricula published in 1996 is called *Our Whole Lives and Sexuality and Our Faith*. It is not an LGBT curriculum, nor is it an HIV prevention curriculum. It is an inclusive curriculum, so it contains non-judgmental information about different sexual orientations and gender identities. It is also a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum and so it includes information about sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and how to prevent transmission. The materials take a holistic, positive view of human sexuality, and is based on the value that developmentally appropriate, medically accurate, evidence-informed information about human sexuality is helpful, not harmful. When information is provided in the

context of healthy values persons are empowered to make informed, healthy and responsible decisions. The curriculum uses an experiential learning model that provides experiences and reflection in ways that enable learners to engage what they are learning in practical ways. The core values of the curriculum are

- sexual worth,
- sexual health,
- responsibility,
- justice and inclusivity

When a church calls to ask about the Open and Affirming, I often ask them what work they've done on human sexuality. If they haven't done much in this area, I think it is a great place to start. This curriculum provides the values and information that will build a good bridge to a healthy and meaningful Open and Affirming process. We have around 600 congregations that are using the curriculum and we hope to increase that to 20% of congregations over the next 3-5 years. This means we will grow to have 950 churches using the curriculum.

In the 90s, the question of same-sex marriage also begins to unfold. The nation was surprised by a ruling of Hawaii's Supreme Court saying that under the Hawaii constitution, same-sex couples could not be denied the right to marry. Then the Hawaii state legislature quickly passed a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to one man and one woman. What happened in Hawaii created a backlash. The US Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and President Clinton signed it into law in 1996. Many states followed suit either by submitting a ballot measure to a vote of the people or the state legislature passed laws. Once again the lives and relationships of LGBT people were on the line which served as a catalyst for organizing. Although the vast majority of these measures were adopted, efforts to defeat them meant that more and more people came out to friends and family and shared their stories which means more and more people know someone personally who is LGBTQI+. Although we were losing at the ballot box, the support for LGBT rights, including marriage equality was growing. Members of Open and Affirming churches were frequently involved in these campaigns, providing

leadership and support.

By the end of the millennium, nearly 10% of the churches of the UCC had adopted an Open and Affirming covenant, just 15 years after the Open and Affirming resolution was adopted by the General Synod. Some of these churches have begun to provide rituals of blessing and covenanting or holy union rituals for same-sex couples. These rituals did not have legal standing, but they were occasions where couples could be surrounded by the community of faith, share vows of love and faithfulness, and receive the blessing of the church. Liturgies began to be shared, as well, setting the stage for the next major issue to be addressed by the General Synod, marriage equality.

2.4. Resolution in Support equal marriage rights(2005)

I joined the national staff of the UCC in Sept of 2002, when my predecessor, the Rev. Bill Johnson, moved to another position in the national setting of the UCC. The following summer, at our General Synod meeting we celebrated the Supreme Court decision that had just overturned the Sodomy laws in the U.S. We also work to adopt resolutions that supported adding people who identify as transgender to hate crimes legislation, added transgender to our non-discrimination policies and encourage all settings of the church to do the same, adding transgender persons to their Open and Affirming policies and covenants. This was not the only thing the denomination addressed at the meeting, but it was the focus of my work at the meeting. I remember continuously checking in on a pending court decision in Massachusetts which was expected to rule at any time on a marriage equality case. It became evident to me that it was not an issue we could avoid, it was coming to us whether we wanted it to our not.

When I returned from the General Synod meeting and I gathered a group of my national staff colleagues and asked what we should do to help the church engage the issue of marriage equality. We decided to develop a study resource and started to reach out to the Conference Ministers to help them anticipate that this was coming. By the end of the year, the Massachusetts court ruled and it became the first state with marriage equality. In the spring of

2004, the Executive Council and Boards of the Covenanted Ministries of the UCC issued a Call to Action called on all settings of the church to study the issues of marriage and equal marriage rites. In the summer of 2004, the Southern California Nevada Conference adopted a resolution supporting marriage equality and called for it to be sent to the next General Synod meeting.

There was about one year from the time the resolution was adopted by the Southern California Nevada Conference and the next General Synod meeting. The Coalition and my office worked to raise the visibility of the resolution so that it would not come as a surprise to the churches. Since it was a matter that would be before the delegates of the General Synod, my office could not take a position on the resolution. But the Coalition, as an independent organization could. But it wasn't something the Coalition community was very passionate about. Many were conflicted about the institution of marriage and its patriarchal heritage. They also understood the myriad rights and obligations that come with legal marriage and the deeply meaningful experience of sharing vows surrounded by a supportive, nurturing, affirming community of faith.

In 2005, the day before the General Synod began in Atlanta, Georgia, the General Minister and President, Rev. John Thomas, addressed the members of the Coalition at their gathering and announced his support for the resolution. The Coalition recruited about 100 people and provided training to prepare them to share their stories about marriage. The General Synod program committee provided a small group, community dialogue process so that people could share their stories and views without debating the resolution itself. This enabled people to hear a variety of voices and perspectives.

A UCC pastor who had also served the U.S. United Nations Ambassador under President Jimmy Carter, the Rev. Andrew Young, spoke to the General Synod in advance of the vote and encouraged support for the resolution. He asked to speak because it was a moment that had come full circle for him. He had served as one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s right hand people and was the person who visited King in the Birmingham jail. Rev. Young recalled the times when

Bayard Rustin, who many credited with being the organizing genius behind the civil rights movement in the U.S., would say to let others take the lead on this today, you are too passionate and it is too close to home for you in this moment. There will come a time when you can speak for me. The inner circle of King's leaders knew Bayard Rustin to be a gay man, and in a very emotional moment, Rev. Young spoke of how this was his moment to speak.

While many of us were hopeful when the resolution came to the floor, we were not certain how the vote would go. The debate was civil with voices supporting and opposing the resolution. and finally, the vote was called. It wasn't close. The media said 80% voted in favor of the resolution, but many of us who were in the room estimated it closer to 90%.

On the whole, the denomination responded well to the resolution, but there were some churches and members who were not happy about it. Some churches left the UCC, which we hated to see, but there has been significant support for the resolution and the UCC has been a leader in support of marriage equality in the U.S. There were resolutions submitted to the next General Synod asking the denomination to rescind its support for marriage equality, but they were not supported. In fact, a new conservative group called "Faithful and Welcoming" emerged following the marriage equality vote and they expressed their opposition to marriage equality. However, they also expressed that they recognized that people who are LGBT are very much a part of this church. They were clear that they didn't support ordaining LGBT leaders or marriage equality, but they were also clear that they didn't want to do harm. They felt anti-gay resolutions would do harm and so they encouraged the delegates to vote against the resolution. I felt this was as remarkable as the vote for marriage equality was. Since that time, there has not been a group working to undo the Open and Affirming work of the UCC. They have sought to engage in constructive dialogue and are working to see what place more conservative, traditional, orthodox churches have in the UCC.

The resolution supporting marriage equality propelled the UCC into leadership in the struggle. Our clergy were emboldened to speak out in their communities when these issues were on the

ballot or being considered in their legislatures. The General Synod offered its voice on court briefs alongside other faith communities and leaders. In 2014, the General Synod filed suit and won a case against the State of North Carolina who passed legislation that tried to prevent clergy from performing marriages without a state marriage license. Under the separation of Church and State, clergy were performing marriages that did not have legal standing. They did this for same-sex couples and also for older heterosexual couples who did want to have a legal marriage because it would affect their social security benefits. The U.S. Supreme Court referenced this case when they ruled for marriage equality in 2015.

Marriage equality was a good thing, but it wasn't and isn't the only thing or even the main thing. People in the United States and people throughout the world experience stigma and discrimination because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The church and its leaders have been and, in many places, continue to be a source of this stigma and discrimination. Everyone, as a child of God, is endowed by God with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside. It is vital, that we, as followers of Jesus, live the radically inclusive love he taught and revealed in his own life and ministry. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said that none of us free until all of us are free.

This work, this holy work, of supporting the work of our local church to engage the Open and Affirming process and live the values of welcome, inclusion and justice for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities has been transformative for the United Church of Christ, and I believe the communities we serve. Our witness which covers nearly 50 years, is that it has been a blessing. We have been blessed with amazing leadership in every setting of the church. Our churches have been enriched by the full participation of LGBTQI+ people in the life and ministry of the church. We are eager to engage with and learn from others, to provide accompaniment and share in partnership in this mission, this journey of becoming the loving, welcoming, justice community of God. Praise be to God.