

***“How the Evangelical Tradition is  
Speaking Still  
Through The Stillspeaking Initiative of  
the United Church of Christ”***  
**An Address on the  
Continuing Contributions of the  
Evangelical Tradition  
In the Life of the United Church of Christ  
(Presented to the Evangelical and Reformed  
Historical Society 2005  
Annual Meeting )**  
**David C. Schoen, Minister and Team Leader  
Evangelism Ministry Team  
Local Church Ministries**

**Greetings and Introduction**

Greetings of evangelical grace, peace, and unity in the God, who is still speaking, Jesus Christ, who is still living, and the Holy Spirit, still teaching.

It's a joy to be here today with the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society to reflect on the continuing gifts of the wonderful traditions that have nurtured and shaped the United Church of Christ.

Thank you for your invitation to address the continuing contributions of the evangelical tradition. It has been a treat for me to reflect on the contributions of this cherished tradition that has been formative to the core culture of our United and Uniting Church.

While preparing for this presentation, I appreciated the great treasure of The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ series edited by Barbara Brown Zikmund that has collected a wonderful wealth of resources and writings, along with helpful commentary.

It has been refreshing personally to be reminded once again of the very evangelical ethos that has shaped the lives of so many, including myself.

The experience of German evangelical immigrants to America in the 1850's to 1880's is my family story. My great-grandfather, Anton Schoen, left Prussia as a draft dodger, skipping out of the Prussian Army to settle in Michigan as a farmer and be part of Bethel United Church of Christ outside Manchester in 1852. My great-grandparents, Gottlieb and Albertina Eisen, came

to America from Switzerland to serve Zion UCC, a tiny little new church in Oakfield, Missouri in 1883.

I grew up in Evangelical United Church of Christ in the Swiss heritage community of Highland, Illinois. I graduated from Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary.

We may laugh about the three 'E's, Elmhurst, Eden and Eternity, (to which I would add a fourth, Evangelism) but as I thought about the care of generations in my family, I realized just how the evangelical church and institutions cared for people from birth to death, and God willing to eternity.

My great-grandfather, Gottlieb Eisen, was raised in an orphanage associated with the Basel Mission, Beuggen am Rhine in Germany, where he was trained in the evangelical movement before coming here to teach and preach with the recommendation of the Basel Mission Society. In his ministry, my great-grandfather served as Superintendent of Altenheim and Orphanage in Detroit, Michigan, where my grandmother lived as a young girl.

When my grandmother gave up her home, she went to live in the Detroit Altenheim where she had lived as a young girl. After which, my grandmother and then more recently my father and mother lived their final years cared for by the Altenheim in Indianapolis, part of the United Church Homes.

My grandfather, Albert Schoen and I both graduated from Elmhurst College. Albert, I and my father, Victor, all graduated from Eden Theological Seminary.

I give personal thanksgiving for the continuing contributions of the evangelical heritage, for the great cloud of evangelical hosts and institutions that cared for body, soul and mind throughout my family generations.

**Evangelical Contributions to the United Church of Christ**

As I prepared for this presentation, I considered a long list of contributions that the evangelical tradition has made to the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the United Church of Christ and the whole Church. That list includes:

- The Deaconess women’s movement,
- The evangelical mission and institutions of compassionate service,
- Significant theologians in our nation and church,
- Leadership formation through the Evangelical Leadership Training School,
- Evangelical courage in justice and peace,
- The Evangelical Catechism, Hymnal and Worshipbook,
- The Bekenntnisparagraph Confessional Statement of 1848,  
And most important,
- The establishment of a religious movement and denomination based on finding unity in the freedom of Christian conscience and creating an organization founded on mission and non-hierarchical association.

That would have been just some of the list of contributions had I done a top ten list, but that’s not what I want to focus on in this address.

Instead, I will focus on the evangelical tradition in a very current and practical way as it relates to evangelism in the United Church of Christ and our missional outreach to the world.

I will particularly discuss how I see the ethos of the evangelical spirit, theology and experience alive today in the United Church of Christ through The Stillspeaking Initiative. My paper is titled “How the Evangelical Tradition is Speaking Still through The Stillspeaking Initiative of the United Church of Christ” or to put it another way, “God is still speaking through the evangelical tradition to the United Church of Christ and the world.”

### **The Evangelical Problem**

My discussion begins on a negative note. I believe that one of the unfortunate contributions of the evangelical tradition is the continuing problem the United Church of Christ has had with evangelism.

Professor Carl Schneider of Eden Theological Seminary and author of the history of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in America wrote a rather remarkable article in 1921 called the “Evangelical Problem”.<sup>1</sup> In the

“Evangelical Problem,” Carl Schneider argued that preserving the heritage of the German Evangelical Synod required changing to meet the needs of the times. Professor Schneider was writing at a time after World War I when the second and third generations of the Evangelical Synod were moving from ethnic isolation to an engagement with North American society. His article called for the Evangelical Church to shift from primarily serving the German community to expand its horizons.

“At one time, we were a German Evangelical Synod. We have long since realized our opportunities and obligations as a German Evangelical Synod, and are on the verge of accepting the challenge and enlarged opportunities of being the Evangelical Church in America. . . . It is a readjustment called for by the change in time and conditions.”<sup>2</sup> As the great hymn sings, “New occasions teach new duties.”

In order to expand its’ embrace and encounter with American society, Carl Schneider called for a “greater expressional activity than could be expected in any previous age.”<sup>3</sup> And therein lay the evangelical problem with evangelism and outreach.

“We are averse to pushing ourselves into the foreground and very cautious about participating in any aggressive movements which indicate too much the spirit of human assertiveness and initiative. The world is to be saved by the grace of God working in the hearts of man, and not by the religious movements of the day, nor by any methods of organization and devices. It thus became a characteristic mark of Evangelical piety to resign oneself to the grace of God and to be content, in our own quiet, unobtrusive way...”<sup>4</sup>

The evangelical piety shaped by an adverse reaction to the great doctrinal debates and violence of the European church, was also adverse, I believe, to expressive articulation of personal faith out of fear of being too aggressive. The evangelical piety preferred to witness to its’ faith in deeds of compassionate service. The bumper sticker slogan of the United Church of Christ in the 1970’s and 1980’s “To believe is to care, to care is to do” certainly expressed that core value of the evangelical tradition.

The evangelical problem was not one of action but of articulation. To Professor Schneider, the

evangelical problem was “a matter of method not theological.”<sup>5</sup> The evangelical purpose remained the same “to seek and save that which is lost.”<sup>6</sup> But the needs and conditions of the modern day would require reinterpretation of the evangelical purpose and method, from quiet piety to expressive evangelism.

He writes, “More urgent, however, is the consideration that the modern world conditions call for a greater expressional activity than could be expected in any previous age....Have we not ourselves experienced definite blessings as a result of modern methods in mission life enlistment?.... The new Evangelical world-view must be marked by this tendency to discard the mantle of resignation in order to work out the purpose of God in a more self-assertive and aggressive manner. Let us do this with fear and trembling under the tutelage of the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> “The Modern Evangelical world view would place a greater emphasis on the well grounded psychological maxim, ‘No impression without expression.’”<sup>8</sup>

In order to express the faith to a new world and generation Carl Schneider called on the Evangelical Synod and its congregations to introduce the English language in its newspapers, journals, and services of worship. He wrote, “There has developed a serious temptation, in these last years especially, to retain the German Language and German customs as a matter of policy or practical expediency; and the impression has gained ground that an undue emphasis has been laid on the retention of the German language where the best interests and welfare of the rising generation and the Church of tomorrow would advise a different procedure.”<sup>9</sup>

He writes a warning that, “Instances could be cited where, thru unjustified retention of the German language, our young people have been practically driven out of our churches to find welcome homes in American churches.”<sup>10</sup> “It can hardly be justified to let the language question develop into a serious Synodical problem, when its solution lies in the adoption of a simple principle. From the view-point of the consecrated Christian, possessed with the burning passion for saving souls for the Christ, it is almost inconceivable that this question could develop into a problem....”<sup>11</sup>

Schneider ends his article by saying, “Have we the courage to loosen the fetters of our traditions which bind us to a dead past! Fortunate is the church with a rich tradition. We can well be proud of ours. Yet the traditions of a church should be her inspiration and not her limitation, in the effort to achieve God’s ordained purposes. We fail in our purpose if we adjust our activities to our traditions, supposing that it is the purpose of the church to be the preserver of her past historical heritages. Tradition will not save the world; inherited doctrines and beliefs will not save the world; established organization, tested and tried tho it may be, will not save the world. May the Holy Spirit enlighten the church that considers it her purpose to preserve that which may only be the remnant of a past day.

Standing in the midst of this struggle the Evangelical church has been instructed with only one controlling purpose and motive, namely: to seek and to save that which is lost. Shall we, Samson-like, continue to sleep securely in the false satisfaction derived from the triumphs and strength of the past, or shall we justify our existence in the world today by rising to the prophetic height of the New Testament principle of doing ‘all things for the gospel’s sake’ and becoming ‘all things to all men’ in order ‘by all means to save some’?”<sup>12</sup>

Carl Schneider’s remarkable article the “Evangelical Problem” which ended with an evangelical challenge for more assertive and aggressive expression could well have been written in 2001, instead of 1921. I am afraid that one of the enduring contributions of the evangelical tradition in the United Church of Christ has been a continued quiet when it comes to articulating, witnessing and inviting others to faith. In the lives of so many United Church of Christ members and congregations, expressive evangelism has continued to be resisted and dismissed. Indeed, the quiet piety of the evangelical tradition turned simply to silence.

Professor Schneider was right. The evangelical tradition was and has continued to be part of our evangelism problem. I often hear this quote about evangelism in the United Church of Christ: “Proclaim the gospel, if necessary use words.” The ethos of the Evangelical Synod and the United Church of Christ has stressed works over words and created congregations with members who have lost the ability to be conversational about faith.

Certainly, good works are a necessary and needed witness. A witness just of good words without good works is a witness that is hypocritical, insincere and unconvincing. But likewise a witness of good works without the words that can articulate one's faith as the source of why and what we do is a witness that is unedifying and unclear to today's spiritual seekers. In today's unchurched world, Professor Schneider's maxim "No impression without expression" is more applicable than ever. The witness of good works and good words are needed for each other, especially in an unchurched world where the majority of culture does not know the message of faith as the reason we do what we do. Surprisingly, spiritual seekers in today's world want to talk about faith and spirituality. We in the church are the ones who are not talking. The expression of faith is even more important in the United Church of Christ since we often witness to a voice of faith that is not heard in a culture where the religious market place is dominated by more conservative and dogmatic voices.

Carl Schneider's challenge and call to a more expressive evangelism was right for 1921 and continues to be right for today. His words concerning the loss of generations to other churches continue to resonate today. Our congregation's desire to hang on to traditional language, music and worship practice has seen generations leave to find welcome in churches that embrace and use the language, music and media of contemporary culture.

### **An Evangelical Answer**

Unfortunately the evangelical problem has continued in the United Church of Christ, but the evangelical tradition also models an answer for living into a new day through adaptive change. Although we may struggle with our tradition's and congregations' resistance to change, the truth is that in the short span of its history the Evangelical Synod and its congregations did make the change from being a denomination that primarily served the German immigrant community, to being congregations and a denomination that widened their horizons and reached out to engage the American community. That adaptive challenge and change included the transition from using the German language to speaking and singing English. The struggles we have today with introduction of new forms of music and new language in beloved hymns can

hardly equal the seismic challenge of changing the whole language of what the church said and sang. The Evangelical Synod and then the Evangelical and Reformed Church of America are a story of parochial denominations that made the transformation into the mainstream of American Protestantism and culture.

The shift from serving a German culture to reaching out to the wider American culture and community is quite comparable to the situation that the church finds itself in today, as we make the 21<sup>st</sup> Century change from serving a predominantly 'churched' society to reaching out to an unchurched culture. Unfortunately, becoming part of the mainstream of American Protestantism and culture also meant that we became comfortable, as did other mainstream denominations, in a 'churched' world that now no longer exists.

Carl Schneider's call for a more aggressive and expressive evangelism speaks once again to the time of change and challenge for the United Church of Christ. "More urgent, however, is the consideration that the modern world conditions call for a greater expressional activity than could be expected in any previous age.....The new Evangelical world-view must be marked by this tendency to discard the mantle of resignation in order to work out the purpose of God in a more self-assertive and aggressive manner."

Schneider's call and vision for "a more aggressive and expressive evangelism" certainly jumps off the page as a prophetic premonition of The Stillspeaking Initiative and the United Church of Christ Bouncer Commercial with the message, "Jesus didn't turn people away, neither do we. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome! The United Church of Christ". Thanks to the networks' rejection of the commercial (who would imagine that a statement of biblical welcome would be so objectionable or radical!) we received more free publicity than we dared to imagine.

In the weeks and months since the commercial was first played, The Stillspeaking Initiative has become much more than a commercial, or an identity campaign, or even a program to enrich our congregational welcome. Throughout the church, The Stillspeaking Initiative is now seen as an agent and tool for adaptive change, transforming our denomination and congregations, especially reshaping our

understanding of how the church functions in, and reaches out to, an alienated unchurched world desperately seeking spiritual strength. It is here that I see the ethos, new and old, of our evangelical tradition of missional outreach, witness and welcome.

### **The Evangelical Tradition Speaking Still**

The Stillspeaking Initiative is driven by the missional outreach and purpose of evangelical tradition, classically stated by Carl Schneider, “To seek and to save that which is lost”. Today, we say that The Stillspeaking Initiative is bridging the gap to reach out to those alienated and distanced from God and God’s community. Not only in the commercial, but also in the print ads the evangelical outreach and spirit is clear:

*We don’t say, Come some of ye faithful.  
If Jesus welcomed lepers, prostitutes  
and convicts, shouldn’t we?  
Our Doors open extra wide, after all  
Jesus was a carpenter.  
If you accept Christ, you accept  
everyone else, too.*

The evangelical tradition is *speaking still* through The Stillspeaking Initiative.

It does so with a bold and cultural statement, that I think Carl Schneider would appreciate for its ability to make an impression. The genius of The Stillspeaking Initiative is its cultural savvy-ness; it’s expressive, or some would say edgy and aggressive engagement with today’s unchurched society that feels un-welcomed in “The Church.” God is still speaking and making an impression in the language and media of culture.

When some church folks question the aggressive edginess of the commercial, we remind them that the commercial is not for folks already inside our congregations, but those outside the church. And the spiritual seekers outside the church have responded with great appreciation and enthusiasm for a church that boldly welcomes all people.

Ron Buford, the creator of *God is Still Speaking* likes to joke that the Stillspeaking Initiative has tricked the United Church of Christ and its congregations into evangelism. Through the experience of The Stillspeaking Initiative, our churches have begun to make that adaptive

change necessary for evangelism in an unchurched world; moving the focus of evangelism from the folks inside the church and our institutional needs to the folks outside the church and their needs.

In so doing the United Church of Christ has risen to the evangelical purpose, vision and challenge expressed by Carl Schneider when he wrote of “rising to the prophetic height of the New Testament principle of doing “all things for the gospel’s sake” and becoming “all things to all people [men]” in order “by all means to save some”.<sup>13</sup>

The evangelical tradition is speaking still in The Stillspeaking Initiative. “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome.”

### **An Evangelical Church for All People, the United Church of Christ.**

When I hear the God is Still Speaking message of welcome, I think of my home church, Evangelical United Church of Christ in Highland, Illinois, founded by Swiss pioneers on the frontier of southern Illinois in 1850. In the second year of the congregation’s existence, it chose as its name the *Allgemeine Christliche Kirche*, the Christian Church for All.

What a wonderful name, a prophetic name—a Christian Church for all-all people. It certainly was a bold name and welcoming message for its time that we continue to grow into today.

At the time of the evangelical pioneers, the frontier of our nation was filled with three groups of immigrants from Germany. One group was the free thinkers, people who came to America to get away from the autocratic nature of the church in Germany and Switzerland.

The frontier was also filled with a second group of folks who wanted to bring the autocratic dogma, divisions and structure of European church here

Our evangelical pioneers came to start churches that offered an alternative to the autocratic dogma and rational humanists of the times.

A church that said it was not your doctrine that mattered, but what was in your heart. The evangelical movement preached personal

devotion and faith, but also allowed for freedom and diversity of thought. The evangelical movement placed itself between dogma and rationalism. A church that sought to reach out to all people, to believers as well as to those who had been turned off by or who had rejected the church.

The church not only welcomed all people, but sought to serve all people. The hallmark of the evangelical movement was its ecumenism, its embrace and outreach to all, overcoming religious, national, economic and racial barriers. With evangelical courage Pastor Rieger, the first pastor in Highland, aided the abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, and was the first secretary of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. Throughout the years, the evangelicals sought to reach out on the frontiers of mission with an extraordinary network of ministries and institutions of compassion, to the old, the young, the sick, the poor, the new immigrants-those of the inner city workers, and those in rural areas.

An evangelical church for all people, welcoming and reaching out to all, embracing differences, turning faith into compassion and action on the frontier of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. That evangelical tradition, passion, and mission is very much at the heart of the Still Speaking Initiative and the United Church of Christ today.

The terrain of the frontier of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is much like that of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of our pioneer forebears who started this evangelical church movement for all people. There are many today who wish to divide and judge believers by doctrine and dogma; by determining right belief, which usually means believing what they believe.

And there are many free thinkers today, people who reject the church for the unwelcoming and narrow thinking of what they see and hear from dominant American church cultures, people who have been hurt by the rigid dogma and doctrine of the church, or people who have grown up completely outside the church without any faith background at all.

The “still speaking mission” is to reach out and over the alienation that so many feel between themselves and God, between themselves and the community of God’s people. The Stillspeaking Initiative reaches over alienation to say “You are welcome.”

The evangelical tradition, despite being part of the “Evangelical Problem”, is still speaking today by being a model of a church that through the adaptive struggle of changing times expanded its horizon as it sought to be a church for all people. Changing from a serving the next boat of German immigrants to reaching out to the new American society in which it was placed. As Carl Schneider said, “Let us become all things to all [people]: prepared, if need be, to sacrifice our racial, historical, and national pride so that some may be saved.”

May we in the United Church of Christ be so bold today, as we live through the adaptive change of having served a “churched” world to reaching out to an unchurched society.

God is still speaking through the evangelical tradition, welcoming the world that God loves and the people Christ died for, boldly proclaiming a church for all people: the United Church of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ Series, Vol. 6, Barbara Brown Zikmund, Series Editor, Pilgrim Press, 2001

<sup>2</sup> p. 401

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 410

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 409

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 408

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 403

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 409

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 408

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 409

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 410

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 412

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*