

# *Justice is not impartial*

## **UCC justice ministries respond to domestic and global needs**

**By Theodore A. Braun**

*Editor's note: This is an expanded version of Ted Braun's essay that appears in the commemorative book, UCC @ 50—our history, our future.*

Justice is the main focus of the prophetic trajectory all through the biblical story, from the Burning Bush onward. This justice is not blind and deaf, but sees the misery of people and hears their cries (Gen. 3:7). It is not impartial (a blindfolded woman with scales) but biased in favor of the poor and oppressed, and critical of the rich and powerful.

Jesus' justice ministry consisted of both word and deed: bringing good news to the poor and oppressed, welcoming social outcasts, healing the wounded, reconciling the alienated, overturning tables in sacred places, and welcoming people into a new kind of kingdom/empire—one that acknowledged God's reign. This extravagant hospitality was not looked on kindly by the religious and political powers of his day, and he was put out of the way. Interestingly, this mission part of the story was left out of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds which jumped from Jesus' birth to his death, and which came out of a time when the church was wedded to an empire. (This passion for justice—and compassion—of Jesus was also, many years later, left out of the film "The Passion of Christ.")

But happily for us, this justice ministry of Jesus and his followers was incorporated into the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith in words about sharing and reconciling, serving others, resisting evil, and having courage in the struggle for justice and peace.

This struggle throughout the history of the UCC has led us into arenas of conflict over political, economic, and social issues. It is a matter of pride that we were the first in the U.S. to ordain an African American (Lemuel Hayes in 1785), a woman (Antoinette Brown in 1853), and an openly gay person (William Johnson in 1972). Defending the enslaved Africans of the *Amistad* and establishing educational institutions for African Americans were early progressive justice ministries. And later on, UCC participation in public liturgies such as the Selma and Washington Marches had a significant impact on the church.

### **We've been slow about welcoming people into our churches**

The integration of African Americans, women, and homosexual persons into all the gatherings and structures of our common life, however, has been a slower process. Many times it has taken concerted effort and pressure, often in the face of opposition from those quoting biblical verses from discarded law codes and customs in support of slavery, segregation, patriarchalism, and exclusion.

The formal integrating process in the UCC in these three areas has usually followed the same pattern: first, a resolution is introduced at General Synod (where it is discussed by delegates vulnerable to the Holy Spirit rather than to moneyed interests, as in the U.S. Congress); then it becomes the focus of a task force or committee, and finally an established office, center, or council.

James Russell Lowell had an important insight about this process to share in his poem “Once to Every Man and Nation.” Protesting against the U.S. war with Mexico, he wrote:

*New occasions teach new duties,  
time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still and onward,  
who would keep abreast of truth.  
Though the cause of evil prosper,  
yet the truth alone is strong. . .*

**We’ve also debated, vigorously,  
issues of power and wealth**

In addition to these three major issues, there has been vigorous debate through the years over economic issues (e.g., support for labor in its battles with management), and over political issues (e.g., opposition to violence and war, and how much of a “peace church” we might call ourselves).

New understandings about the reality of structural and systemic sin, and a new awareness of the need for a more equitable distribution of both power and wealth in our society began to influence our church in the 1960s. Prophetic leaders from other parts of the church also had a great impact upon UCC members: three Baptists—Clarence Jordan (Koinonia Farm), Martin Luther King, and Lucius Walker (Pastors for Peace), and a Roman Catholic, Cesar Chavez (National Farm Workers). In the 1980s a growing number of UCC members began traveling to Cuba via the annual UCC study seminars, establishing fellowship with Cuban Christians and learning about their alternative way of organizing society and providing health care, education, and a basic safety net for everyone. Cuban Christians saw these developments as signs of God’s reign.

As the UCC moves ahead into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are four main challenges before us as we strive to participate in justice ministries:

**1. Our authority.**

When the Pilgrims left Europe for the New World, their pastor, John Robinson reminded them that “God has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word.” He could have been referring to the Bible, but the more radical inference is that God’s “holy Word” continues in a “holy Speaking” beyond the Bible, in the context of each new day and era—in ways that a time-bound Bible cannot always address. God is still speaking today. We need to hear what God is saying to us, not only through the Bible and Jesus’ radical ministry of good news and hospitality, but directly in the context of this day and age.

**2. Our baptismal calling.**

Louis H. Gunnemann has challenged us to view baptism as a “sacrament of Christian vocation.” In this perspective it becomes the symbol of our entrance into, and allegiance to, God’s mission and Jesus’ justice ministry. There are some important implications here. Such a perspective may lead churches to emphasize adult baptism, and to develop another liturgy for babies that incorporates celebration, a welcoming by the congregation, a naming, and a speaking of vows by the parents and by all of the witnesses that focus on justice responsibilities and nurturing.

**3. Our current context.**

We can see evidence all around us that we live in a broken nation. Hurricane Katrina provided a spotlight on the plight of the poor. There is a growing gap between the rich and the poor, large tax breaks for the rich and corporations, the widespread loss of health care, jobs, and pensions.

For many years we have witnessed the corrupting impact of money on the political process. In recent years, however, we have seen evidence of manipulated electoral procedures, growing governmental secrecy, and the U.S. media being taken over by several large corporations that in their pursuit of profit, have abandoned their obligation to inform the public.

We have an Administration that considers itself above the Constitution, the Geneva Conventions, and other international treaties. It has claimed the right to spy on its own citizens, hold terrorist subjects forever without court access, torture suspects as part of their interrogation, and transfer them into the custody of other nations that are known for their torturous methods. It is disdainful of the United Nations and international collegiality. It believes in the efficacy of redemptive violence, preemptive war, and global control.

Our Administration has a dualistic Manichaeic theology, dividing the world into good and evil, and all its inhabitants into good guys (us) and bad guys (them)—except for the dissidents, critics, and whistleblowers on our side who are called “unpatriotic” and “treasonous.” But one of the greatest criticisms of our Administration and our nation today is that both live in a bubble—isolated from the rest of the world, in a cocoon of their own hubris and pride.

Empire is the new context for justice ministries today. Revelation 13, rather than Romans 13, becomes one of our main biblical reference points.

#### **4. Our future.**

“Shalom” (peace, wholeness, well-being) is our faith context and goal, as we live out our lives and ministries in a proleptic way (as if God’s future had already come). We believe that a democracy (in society or in a church) should be fully participatory without any Aristotelian exceptions such as women or slaves (or any other kind) and that it should aim for the common good. This common good would include an equitable distribution of power and of our common wealth, with all fellow beings treated with respect, and our whole earthly habitat treated with tenderness. This would go a long ways to turning whatever “utopia” (no place) we might envision into a “eutopia” (good place).

We have several UCC persons representing a prophetic trajectory already in key spots in the public arena: Bill Moyers, Barry Lynn (Americans United for the Separation of Church and Society), and Barack Obama (U.S. senator from Illinois). But we need to help equip our beloved church for its prophetic task in these coming fifty years.

There is a wonderful new book out that would be a perfect choice to serve as a common text of study for the members of the UCC: *A Moral Creed for All Christians* by Daniel C. Maguire, professor of ethics at Marquette University, published by Fortress Press in 2005. It focuses on the radical and prophetic vision of the justice involved in the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus in his (and our) context of empire. Each congregation could order copies for small group study, and our President, John Thomas, could help provide commentary as we journey through it together.

Another challenge for our churches would be to break out of our nation’s bubble and isolation from the rest of the world. Our corporate media have not done a very good job of reporting on the rest of the world—what people in other countries are thinking, what is really going on in war-torn Iraq and other places, as well as key reports and commentary from sources within the U.S. There is a wonderful Internet resource that provides e-mail articles every few days free of charge: Truthout, a non-profit, independent news source. (P.O. Box 231278, Encinitas, CA 92023. To subscribe: <http://truthout.org/subscribe.htm> Although Truthout is free, it would appreciate donations to keep it going.

Members in congregations could be invited to join, or there could be a special person or committee to receive these articles and share pertinent data with the congregation or distribute important articles with others in the congregation.

A very special historical resource that ought to be in each UCC church library is Volume 7 of *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* (The Pilgrim Press, 2005). This gives an excellent summary of what has been going on in the UCC in the field of justice during the past fifty years.

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