

What's Your Story?

By Herman C. Ahrens Jr.

Editor's note: The following is an expanded version of an essay that appeared in the commemorative book, UCC @ 50—our history, our future.

Each of us has stories about growing up—especially in those formative teen years. The same is true of those of us who grew up with the United Church of Christ in those formative years.

What's your story?

Janice's story about the beginnings

"I was 18. I had just finished my freshman year in college," recalls Janice K. Higgins of the summer of 1948. "Because I was on the National Youth Cabinet of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, I was asked to be one of the fraternal E&R delegates to the sixth biennial National Council meeting of the Pilgrim Fellowship of the Congregational Christian Churches, gathered at Defiance College in Ohio. So I was off to the new world of the Congregational Christians and their youth movement

"What a wonderful adventure. The PFers were a lively group from every state and Hawaii (not yet a state) and Puerto Rico. They debated great issues with clarity and ease, using parliamentary procedure. They were well organized. I learned how youth came up through their PF organization. Today I still meet people my age who were at Defiance in 1948. Many became pastors, Conference ministers, editors, missionaries and active lay persons.

"During that week at Defiance, several of our 'senior' E&R delegates left early to go to Amsterdam, The Netherlands, for the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches. I remember this because it fell to me to make the official YF response when the PF voted to adopt the three-commission plan (Faith, Action and Fellowship) on which our national YF already had voted approval. They and we also voted to work together on National Youth Caravans and other youth programs. This was nine years before the actual formation of the United Church of Christ took place in 1957.

The pioneering Caravans

During the 20 years (1948-68) of the National Youth Caravans, more than 700 high school and college volunteers were trained and then traveled nationwide in four-person teams during the summer months doing youth work and service projects in local churches, in summer camps and in community centers.

Ethel A. Shellenberger was the director and "mother" of caravanning. Each team of four volunteers was co-ed, interracial, ecumenical and when possible international. They were trained to lead, to teach and to serve wherever they went. Their early

interracial experiences at public swimming pools and at restaurants preceded later sit-ins and racial demonstrations.

Caravaning became a training ground for future adult leaders in the church. And for finding future life mates.

Ralph's story about an E&R / CC "wedding"

While caravaning in 1957, Ralph Quellhorst, now a retired Conference minister of Ohio, met, fell in love with, and later married another caravaner, Sue Beggs.

That summer of 1957, the year of the union of our church, Ralph then an E&R youth, remembers, "I had just returned from six weeks on a National Youth Caravan team, when I was invited to a PF training and planning conference in Ohio. I was 'Mr. E&R' to be 'married' to a 'Miss CC' in a mock wedding. It was my first encounter with the Congregational Christians. Both the caravaning and the PF conference helped to shape my life in the United Church of Christ."

Key to working with young people has always been adult leadership. Nationally, adults who were most remembered by UCC youth, at different times and in different ways, included, Oliver Powell, Wilson Cheek, Henry Tani, Ethel Schellenberger, Ed Schlingman, Ed Powers, Scott Libbey and Herman Ahrens. Also Reuben Sheares, George Otto and Norman Jackson, Randall Furishima, Gorton Swaboda, Rip Noble, and Mary Grant. There were others, too. Whose name would you add?

"Those early national adult leaders inspired young people to see the church as a positive force in society," Ralph remembers. "It was effective ministry that helped to generate future leaders in the church. Many former and present national and Conference leaders captured their vision of the ministry of the church from those persons and those types of youth experiences."

Volunteering for a year

In January 1955, the Voluntary Service Program was launched. Volunteers were trained and served for a year in a variety of service assignments across the country. The program grew in numbers of participants until 1972 when budget cuts caused a decline in volunteers. In 1981, a fulltime staff person was named, given a budget, and a charge to rebuild the program. By 1990 the program was recruiting 100 volunteers a year. It continues today enabling youth and young adults to express their faith in service to others for a year.

Martha talks about the quality of adult leadership

Martha Baumer also remembers growing up as a young person in those early days of the UCC. She is now a retired pastor, a former Conference minister, and former staff at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. In her retirement, Martha continues as a member of the Pension Boards.

About those early years, she says: “It’s hard for me to think beyond the folk I knew best who led us through joint E&R and CC ventures, when we planned the future of the UCC youth movement, especially the caravanning and voluntary service programs. I remember them to this day. Why?

“First, their profound effect upon my own life as role models and teachers.

“Second, their understanding that we ‘youth’ were Christians NOW, with lives to live now in response to God’s love in Jesus.

“Third, their intentional and careful teaching concerning faith and life and all that relates. We simply learned so much.

“Fourth, their acceptance of each kid with all his or her differences and warts, along with the dreams that they had for us which were often so much more than we had for ourselves. Suddenly there were new possibilities.

“Fifth, the modeling of a life style of belonging to Christ which carried through every aspect.

“Sixth, the gifts of practical skills, as well as insights into relationships of all kinds.

“Seventh, the expectation that we could and would be trusted and that we would learn.

“Need I say more? Those leaders and youth experiences in caravanning and voluntary service have had an effect far beyond their days. Their leadership gifts to the whole church are countless.”

Should we expect anything less from the church today in its ministry with and for young people?

David reflects on youth ministry today

“Today we need to be grateful for the countless number of pastors and lay folks who reach out to minister with and for young people by listening, teaching, caring and taking the risk to be involved,” says David Schoen, national UCC leader with the Evangelism Ministry Team. “Unlike the previous young generations (baby boomers) who left the church, the current generations are seeking spiritual participation. We need to gear ourselves, our worship, our outreach to these younger seekers.”

David continues, “The greatest shift for our ministries with youth is to realize that the majority of young people today are not in the church. Eighty percent of young people under 29 years of age have never been in a church. More than 60 percent of all baby boomers left the church never to return. Their children were reared outside the church and now their grandchildren are being reared outside the faith community.

“Youth ministry must go beyond the doors of the local church to reach out to the whole generation outside the church who are looking for spiritual values and foundation. All ministries, including youth ministries, must live into a missional focus of reaching to the spiritually homeless in an unchurched world.”

Barbara speaks of youth in the local church

Barbara Kershner Daniel was active as a young person growing up in the United Church of Christ. Now, as a parent and as a pastor, she is active with youth locally. Speaking of her recent experience as senior pastor of St. Paul's UCC in Fleetwood, PA, Barbara says, "What I looked for and needed as a growing young person is similar to what my two teenagers and the teens I work with today are seeking. They want to be respected, honored, affirmed for the gifts God has given them, and have a safe place where their personal questions can be explored with honesty and in confidence.

"I also remember, as a teenager, wanting 'depth.'

"Youth have lots of choices for social activities," she continues, "but no place other than the church provides the opportunity to wrestle with the issues troubling their hearts. In the church, teens learn together and work together in ways that no other group in their lives challenges them to do.

"I believe our youth group is strong at St. Paul's because the members of the congregation are trying to be the church—not a social group, not a clique, not a club—but the church. Part of what it means to be the church is to welcome, to learn, to worship together, and to live in an accepting community with all its challenges."

Barbara has now become the pastor of Evangelical and Reformed UCC in Frederick, MD.

Rob puts emphasis on a vibrant church

The church's ministry is primarily to help each person grow in faith, to find meaning in life, to know the power of compassion, to be sensitive to the humanity in all people and to mature in personal relationships.

"From my experience working with youth," says Robert Hatfield, pastor of First Church, UCC, in Lombard, IL., "I have learned the importance of simultaneously building a community of trust, 'demythologizing,' and making accessible the resources and promise of the Gospel, and empowering personal engagement with diverse groups of people.

"Such ministry involves articulating the Christian faith in language that lacks the *imprimatur* of the academy but leaves no doubt about the passion, compassion and source of its fire.

"Ministry with and for youth is the most critical, the most fertile, and the most potentially life-changing work the church can do. I have been fortunate to work with congregations whose primary focus was not survival, and who were populated with enough of a 'critical mass' of young people to let us do some pretty wonderful things.

"All of us, youth and adults, need a place and a people to belong to, so that we might feel safe and secure enough to venture out and build relationships with others. Youth ministry at its core is less about 'training up' the church of the future, as it is empowering and being challenged today by the energy and the 'unencumberedness' of the young people at its core. In my limited experience, congregations who focus most intentionally on ministries with and for youth also have the most vibrant congregational life."

Spreading the Word

Spreading the word among its young people has always been key to youth movements. In the late 1940s, the Pilgrim Fellowship (CC) had its own *Pilgrim Youth* magazine and the Youth Fellowship (E&R) had its *Youth* magazine.

In January 1950, the two fellowships, anticipating the union of their parent bodies, discontinued the two magazines and formed a joint biweekly newspaper called *United Church Youth*. Five issues were published. It looked promising. Then, a Brooklyn court challenged the union. As a result, the union did not happen until 1957. Plans were put on hold for a joint national fellowship of young people.

Meanwhile, the Evangelical and Reformed Church continued publishing the newspaper, whose name was changed to *Youth*. In April 1954, *Youth* newspaper became a pocket-sized magazine. In 1957, *Youth* magazine began officially serving all young people of the new United Church of Christ. The magazine continued until 1982.

Youth magazine helped to shape the thinking of a whole generation of young people, myself included, as well as giving voice to the thinking of the young people of my generation,” David Schoen recalls.

A voice for and by young people

During my years as editor of *Youth* magazine, my major concern was for the spiritual and personal welfare of the individual teen readers.

The monthly issues of *Youth* included a wide variety of content, including Bible study, prayers, discussion of how faith is relevant to everyday life, personal counseling, interviews with persons who had something worth sharing with teens, stories of teen activities and personalities, teen opinions on contemporary issues, social and political commentary by informed authors, church news, humor in cartoons and satiric articles, human interest stories, critique of movies, music and TV, and puzzles, crafts and the like.

Once or twice a year the magazine produced a special theme issue. These included: Inside D.C., The Racial Crisis and You., Life after High School, Appalachia, Possibilities of Peace, We Are What We Eat (on hunger), Morality, Images of Christ, Make a Joyful Noise (on worship), Youth and the Draft, The New Japan, Profile of India, How Your Money Works, Happily Ever After?, High on Life (on teens, drugs and alcohol), Asian Americans, Native Americans, Black History, and an annual Arts issue featuring the best in teen art and writing.

By 1981, eleven Protestant denominations in the U.S. and Canada had joined in sending representatives to the magazine's Editorial Advisory Board and in recommending *Youth* to their own young people. These included Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Disciples, Lutherans, American Baptists, Moravians, and the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada. In addition, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops sent official youth representatives to the advisory meetings and TeleKETICS (the Franciscan Communication Center) recommended *Youth* magazine to Roman Catholic youth.

This ecumenical participation in the UCC magazine for young people was a tribute to the UCC's openness to diversity, and the editorial freedom we enjoyed as its

editors, as well as the church's contemporary exploration for biblical truths and its candor in dealing with current issues.

Barbara Daniel recently reflected, "With the passing of *Youth* magazine we lost an incredibly valuable resource that linked youth across the United Church of Christ. Today when I talk with church leaders who were teenagers in the 1970s, it was THE resource we turned to most."

After the Union, a new youth ministry

In 1958, the year following the Uniting General Synod, the Pilgrim Fellowship (CC) and the Youth Fellowship (E&R) sent a combined 330 delegates to the first joint National Council, meeting at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In 1962, at the third joint meeting, the PF and the YF voted to set aside their fellowship organization under a new Plan of Youth Ministry.

There followed in the 1960s and 1970s a variety of national expressions of the UCC youth movement. There were the annual National Youth Forums, dealing with such issues as race relations (1963), faith and government (1964), ethics and morality (1965), peace in the world (1966). In 1967, tight budgets began limiting national youth activities and trimming staff.

There were efforts at "youth empowerment." Youth participation at General Synods eventually resulted in the Synod's passage of the "Youth Priorities," leading to the formation in 1987 of the Council for Youth and Young Adult Ministries, still active nationally. Membership in this council includes representatives from all six regions of the UCC and from four ethnic/racial constituencies of the UCC.

Council members serve as advocates for their peers throughout the denomination. The council encourages youth involvement in all levels of the church and participation in projects for social and racial justice and witness. The council maintains a youth liaison with denominational and ecumenical groups. The council has a network of communication via e-mail and a newsletter.

To empower young people of color in the UCC, a national program has been active for more than ten years for non-European young people.

A popular youth gathering

In recent years, the most popular national gathering of young people in the UCC has been the National Youth Event.

In June 1980, the initial NYE was held at Carlton College, Northfield, MN. It was the first national meeting of young people "born and raised" in the UCC. Ever since, the NYE happens every four years. In between, follow-up regional meetings are often planned.

The National Youth Event welcomes all who wish to come, limited only by the available housing. Increasingly local churches have taken part.

In 1996, the site of the NYE shifted from the smaller church-related colleges to the larger campus of the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC. "Y'all come!" was

the open invitation. The 2,400 who responded more than doubled the 1,000 who had attended the 1992 NYE at Beloit College in Wisconsin.

In 2004, at the University of Tennessee, 3,600 youth and adults traveled to Knoxville for the seventh NYE.

“The National Youth Event has been a gift to the church,” says Homer Royer, who has been on most of the NYE planning committees. “It is an inspirational setting in which youth and adults from local congregations experience the tradition of which we are a part, plus the faith that has inspired generations. Little of what happens at NYE can be replicated in the local setting. More important than some generational movement is the crucial personal value NYE has had in changing the lives of so many in attendance and in the gathered lives of the congregations to which they return.”

“At these NYE meetings, we experience great worship and preachers,” says Barbara Daniel, “but, most of all, we get to see the wonderful colors and diversity of the UCC. There is no other place, except General Synod, where I can take youth from our hometown for them to experience the richness of the UCC. The kids are already asking about the next one.”

“National Youth Events have been rallying points for reaching several generations of young people,” comments David Schoen. “I know leaders from all settings in the church today who as youth attended the first NYE in 1980. I’m sure the same will be true from the most recent NYE in 2004 as well.”

Evaluating UCC youth programming

Some feel that something vital was lost when we discarded a national fellowship of all UCC young people in 1962.

The late Scott Libbey, who grew up in the Pilgrim Fellowship in Iowa and was a Conference minister and a national executive in educational and world ministries, once said, “The heritage of Youth Fellowship and Pilgrim Fellowship, preceding the UCC Youth Ministry, brought a rich history, high expectations and a core of talented and experienced youth and resource traditions. These included Voluntary Service, National Youth Caravans, Outdoor Ministry and leadership development.

“The concept of ‘Youth Ministry’ as a replacement for YF and PF always seemed to me to be the product of young adult professional leadership struggling with a sense of youth structures almost functioning as separate ‘church structures’ and seeking a strategy by which youth might find themselves drawn into the overall life of the institutional church rather than alongside it.

“The theory of ‘Youth Ministry’ was basically not the product of the current generation of youth. And, although the concept of ‘Youth Ministry’ did not preclude the existence of a distinct ‘fellowship organization,’ the reality and ownership of the fellowship structure seemed to disappear, and, on the national level, was lost.”

Scott continued, “Although the initial development of the National Youth Forums (1963-1966) provided rich experiences addressing key issues of the day, they did not provide an experience of fellowship and structures broadly owned by youth and youth leaders. I would gather that that is still true in the current pattern of the quadrennial National Youth Event.

“Youth leadership was and is still nurtured richly by Youth Ministry programming, primarily rooted in the program of the Conferences.

Scott concluded, “Mission service trips, voluntary service, and international interaction continues to invite young people into the whole ministry of the church universal.”

Are we preparing today’s youth for tomorrow’s leadership in our churches?

“I am saddened to see the national settings and Conferences lessen their staffs and their ministry with and to youth,” says Ralph Quellhorst. “Despite budget cuts, the young people seem to find a way to push the church to accountability for paying attention to their specific needs. Thank God for their spirit and commitment.

“Today,” Ralph continues, “the UCC sponsors national church youth events to generate enthusiasm among the young people for the ministry of the church. But the sustained, year-by-year leadership training for youth is primarily sponsored by Conferences and local congregations. With such local and Conference efforts, I believe that the church will be well served into the second half of our first century as the UCC.”

How youth minister to others

“Mission trips, work camps and service/learning experiences continue to be pivotal experiences in shaping and nurturing the lives and the faith of young people, observes Barbara Daniel.

“I often used to say that the best thing we did for our youth at St. Paul’s is to get them out of Fleetwood,” Barbara said. “Such activities broaden youth’s understanding of the United Church of Christ, its missions, and the hospitality of local churches across the country. Other benefits include living together in community, learning wskills of painting, carpentry, cooking, cleaning and landscaping, and opportunities to deal with questions of life in depth.”

She concluded: “I believe the church, as much as ever, needs to be sharing our gifts of faith with the community and the world in ways that integrate the heart and the mind.”

Ralph Quellhorst feels that “helping youth become involved in the local and wider church is critical for the witness of the church as a whole.... Youth raise the ‘Why?’ questions: Why do we believe what we do? Why do we support what we do? In every generation the church needs youth to raise the ‘Why?’ questions so that reformation takes place.

“When we lack younger clergy entering the ministry, the church becomes involved in institutional maintenance rather than confronting the critical moral and social issues of our time. When concentrating on institutional formation, the church loses its edge. We must continue to generate enthusiasm and to encourage young people to consider the ministry so that we do not lose our edge as a vital church for justice in our world.”

Seminaries reach out to high school youth

Concerned about fewer young people studying for the ordained ministry, seminaries are reaching out directly to high school youth. For example, at Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, MO, the outreach program is called “Start Something! God’s Calling You!” From 2000 to 2004, more than 2,000 high schoolers attended 24 YouthFest Retreats in 32 UCC Conferences.

At each retreat, youth were invited and challenged to consider God’s call to them as they engaged in Bible study, theological conversation, worship, quiet time, journaling, music and acting, thereby engaging both heart and mind.

Doni Driemeier-Showers, leader of the Eden program, says, “Young people today are craving theological conversation, wanting to be engaged in and challenged—not simply told the right answers. Kids and adults often lack the language of faith and the abiblical literacy needed to converse at levels they very much want to be able to do.

“What is important is to be engaged as individual persons, seeing that *they* matter, that issues of faith are *their* issues, that all this connects to *me now*. And ‘being there’ matters. Adults are crucial! Parents and other key adults matter tremendously to kids in every way.”

Eden’s program planted seeds of the possibility and variety of God’s call to each Christian. Now it is up to each young person to respond.

As for the future...

“Future issues for young people will need to include pilgrimages into new forms of spirituality sensitivity,” the Scott Libbey said not long before his death in 2005. He called for “engagement with a variety of faith communities—and a quality of discrete Christian understanding and experience which can root young people firmly within the Christian traditions which will not be narrowly exclusive.”

Martha Baumer wonders “how Christians will be faithful to the Gospel in a world where the ‘village’ includes persons of such diverse commitments and cultures—every faith and no faith, and everything in between? Where and how do we learn how to articulate our faith and learn to live in the multiple communities—including the church—in which we find ourselves?

She believes that “this is a challenge to all generations and is crucial for young people who find themselves amid such change and confusing demands.

“How do they know who they are?” she asks. “Where do they fit in? What do their relationships mean?”

Martha is “looking and praying for articulate, open, loving and committed Christians. That’s a big challenge for young people in the church and for the adults who love them.”

The stories continue.... What is your story?

Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. served as editor of Youth magazine for nearly three decades. He is a member of St. John’s UCC in Lansdale, PA.