VALERIE RUSSELL

Racism and Sexism

Valerie Russell often said that as a woman and as a layperson she felt called to make sure that marginal voices were heard in church and society. Furthermore, recognizing that many minority sisters carry “bitter” feelings about white standards of beauty and spending years doing white women’s housework and childcare, Russell worked to renew trust among women in the UCC. In 1973, two years after the UCC General Synod established a Task Force on Women in Church and Society, Russell became assistant to the president of the UCC and coordinator of new efforts within the denomination to respond to the changing roles of women. Traditional women’s fellowships and guilds continued to serve the needs of older church women, but younger women, lay and ordained, asked for new resources and structures. Russell’s leadership and consistent concern for the interplay between racism and sexism kept UCC women focused. Her later work with urban issues in New York and as the head of the City Mission Society of Boston, prepared her to return to leadership in the national setting of the UCC as executive director of the Office for Church and Society (OCIS) from 1991-97.

After her ministry ended due to a fatal heart attack in 1997, Valerie Russell was lauded as one of the “saints” of the United Church of Christ. Born in Massachusetts to a family that did not expect her to go to college, she did the unexpected – earning a college degree, doing graduate study and receiving an honorary degree. She valued education, but she also understood why uneducated minority women in the 1970s were skeptical of the enthusiasm of educated white women for the so-called “women’s liberation movement.” “White women,” she wrote in 1979, “must realize that minority women are intrinsically bound to the total struggle of a race.” When society equates manliness with success and minority males cannot make it, the enemy is not men, it’s the “white establishment.”
Battles for justice, she declared, cannot be waged by women alone. Minority women must stand with their men, not to perpetuate chauvinism, but to reshape social priorities. She insisted that while minority men and women needed to develop more supportive and liberating roles between each other, white men and women needed to affirm justice for all in the midst of diversity. Valerie Russell came of age during the heat of the civil rights movement and often said that faith becomes real only in the midst of struggle. Yet, she encouraged UCC women then and now to “believe in the power of healing.” When gaps are diminished, she wrote, “our new consciousness and action toward liberation will empower and bestow dignity [upon all], not oppress and deny it.”

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