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Now is the time to shine.

Whether you are new or are a life-timer to the United Church of Christ, you and your congregation have something vital to celebrate. The UCC is 50 years bold!

God has been doing amazing things through this church. Always seeking to be led by Christ, we have sought to embrace others in our fellowship; to be enlivened by worship, scripture, prayer, and sacraments; and to unite with others in working for God’s reign of justice and love.

Now, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of our founding Synod, it is time to remember and reflect on the gifts and challenges of our past. As we look toward the future, we see that this is also a time to prayerfully, attentively, listen for God’s still-speaking voice. We pray again with our foreparents, “God provide us with your light. Guide us to live faithfully in the demands of this time. Do your work among us.”

This guide invites your congregation to explore and celebrate five distinctive commitments of the UCC. They are known through the phrases: united and uniting, multiracial and multicultural, accessible to all, open and affirming, and a peace with justice church. These commitments have risen from the struggles, prayers, and celebrations of past General Synods. The commitments have taken on flesh, blood, and spirit when lived out in your own church and community. They express how God has been forming us — what kind of people we are becoming.

“Let your light shine!”

— Matthew 5:16

Use this study to not only explore these commitments within the UCC, but also to examine your own congregation. Celebrate the many ways God has worked among you. Also let the national setting of the UCC know what God has done where you live and minister. You will enrich and inspire others. Come on, shine!
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Explore this resource in church school settings, board meetings, special Lenten groups, or at a retreat. Take an hour or so for each of the five commitments. Each session is organized around the following steps. Adapt the ideas for your own group and setting.

LIGHT A CANDLE (a prayerful and reflective beginning)

» Begin with prayer. Start your time by lighting a candle and reading the suggested Bible verse. After a time of silence, lead the group in the suggested prayer or join together in unison.
» Reflect on the initial questions. Invite participants to share their responses to the questions with one other person or with the entire group.

A SHINING MOMENT (imaginatively entering an historic transforming moment)

» Imagine a shining moment. Invite members of the group to close their eyes and imagine the moment portrayed in the text. Or invite a storyteller to prepare ahead and relay the event in her or his own words.
» Identify what seems significant about that moment. Ask participants questions such as these: “What seemed to be at stake in this moment?” “How do you think God was involved in this moment?” “How might this moment have changed things for the United Church of Christ?”

OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT (discovering other times and ways we lived out a commitment)

» Describe our journey. Invite someone to describe how the UCC has continued to live out the commitment. You might invite leaders in your conference, association, or local church who are knowledgeable about the particular commitment. They could lift information from the guide, as well as add their own distinctive experience.
» Identify what seems especially significant. Ask questions as: “Over the years, how well have we expressed our commitment?” “What has changed?” “What has God been doing?”

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE (linking your local church with a commitment and with the wider United Church of Christ.)

» Connect with your local church. Explore the questions in the guide that link with your local congregation.
» Identify responses to the wider UCC. Reflect on the questions in the guide, and record your responses. Set a time to send your response. Then complete the questions online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions>.
» Enter into a prayer of discernment and thanksgiving. Invite the group to offer thanks to God for any discoveries from your time together. Pray, “O God, what are you saying to us now? What would you have us do?”
» Extinguish the candle. As you leave, say something such as, “Now go into the world. Let Christ shine in you! Go in peace.”
Share your discoveries and hopes with others in the United Church of Christ and with the national setting. Go online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions> and complete the questionnaire. You may report after each individual session or after completing all sessions.

For additional in-depth study of six theological emphases of the UCC, see “What Matters” at <www.uccvitality.org>.
DURING A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE, consider ways in which your life has been shaped or touched by Christians from other denominations or traditions.

» How has your life of faith been affected by those people and communities?
» What have you discovered about your own faith and the UCC as you encountered Christians from other churches?
» When did you experience a sense of nurture? When did you experience an uncomfortable challenge?
» What part of the Bible did you begin to hear differently?

A SHINING MOMENT
Imagine yourself at the founding General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1957. The atmosphere is charged as delegates gather for the historic moment. They will witness the birth of this denomination formed across relationships that many believed impossible. Doubts remain. How will these diverse Christians ever come together to form one family? What do we have in common that will hold us together?

The delegation from the Congregational Christian family is seated across the aisle from one of the Evangelical and Reformed families and you’ve never met anyone from the other part of this new denomination. How do they worship? What hymns do they sing? What stories do their preachers tell? And yet amid the doubts and anxiety there is for you also an air of excitement and exuberance.

Finally, this relationship, so long in the making, has come to pass! Many are of a mind to give the entire moment over simply to celebration. Instead, in that moment,

LIGHT A CANDLE
Holy and merciful God,
you call us into the future with hopeful hearts,
with dreams overflowing with expectation.
Remind us of the vision of our forebears,
who sought to live faithfully the prayer of Jesus:
“that they may all be one.”
Strengthen our hands for service, our hearts for nurture,
and our minds for understanding
that our vocations of reconciliation may be gifts
to the faithful ministry
of your whole church. Amen.
you hear bold and prophetic words from the co-moderators of the founding General Synod, Louis W. Goebel and George W. Hastings, in a letter to the delegates:

*At this moment of the joyous new access of life imparted by the union, the United Church of Christ is stricken in conscience at its continuing separation from the rest of the Church, and it prays for the day when the greater Church of Jesus Christ, now hindered and weakened by many divisions, will come to visible reality, one flock, one shepherd, through the influence of One who is alive in every part of [Christ's] Church.*

Our forebears remind us fifty years later that even in the midst of our celebration of a vision fulfilled, we are never quite done with the work of building relationships in the church — beyond our own door and beyond our denomination. That is our vocation as a united and uniting church.

**OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT**

As we celebrate the first fifty-year journey as a united and uniting church, remember with gratitude the vision that our mothers and fathers in the faith held in trust for us. We now hold that vision in trust for our children.

In 1957 and the years immediately following the union, the coming together of our congregations, including those of the Convention of the South, represented an important embrace of diversity in this new family. Today, however, we experience an even greater breadth of tradition as we include in our common life congregations of the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa, of the Church of South India, and so many others. Their faith, commitments, history, and culture enrich the whole of the United Church of Christ.

Christians from other denominations in the United States have also shaped us. The United Church of Christ currently includes almost five hundred federated congregations. These are local churches formed across denominational lines and which share in the lives of two or more traditions.

We have formed many ecumenical partnerships and engage in dozens of ecumenical dialogues here in the United States and around the world. Every day since June 25, 1957, the United Church of Christ has grown and matured through relationship with other Christians. We have not been the same church since that moment. Our formal partners have included the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa, and the Alliance of Baptists.

We know that the unity of the church is always for the sake of the mission and ministry of the church. When Jesus prayed “that they may all be one,” he didn’t finish the sentence by saying “so that their choirs might be bigger,” or “so that they might have enough kids for a youth group,” or “so that they might be able to afford a custodian.” He
prayed “that they may all be one that the world might believe …”

As a united and uniting church we know that difference is to be celebrated and can be sustained in a body committed to relationship. Differences can never be an excuse for division, even when it is difficult.

This possibility of Christian unity is ever before us. Washington Gladden, a minister from the Congregational tradition, told this story in 1904:

*One of my Methodist brethren in Columbus once told me of a little experience of his … in getting a cow into her stall. It was a moonlit evening … when the stable door was opened and the cow had got her head inside she saw, directly across the passage way that led to her stall, what looked to her to be a bar of silver. It was [only] a beam of moonlight … coming through an aperture in the wall.*

*The cow [however] stopped short before this barrier. Doubtless it appeared to her insurmountable. She may even have been impressed … that it was a barrier placed in her path by heaven itself, and that it would be sacrilege to break it down or jump over it. But constrained there to by a little vigorous prodding … she made a desperate lunge and found her way to her stall and was soon rejoicing in her fodder. My friend said that the surprise of the cow in her discovery that a barrier so formidable could be overcome so easily was remarkable.*

We know that our ecumenical vocation must never lose sight of the holy food beyond any barrier, real or imagined. We pray and work for the day when all Christians will be able to come to the table together and know God’s holy presence.

“We know that our ecumenical vocation must never lose sight of the holy food beyond any barrier, real or imagined. We pray and work for the day when all Christians will be able to come to the table together and know God’s holy presence.”

— *John 17:23*

**SHINE INTO THE FUTURE**

Each and every congregation of the United Church of Christ can add its special gift to the unity of the church. Think through the history of your own local church and identify moments when you have contributed to Jesus’ prayer for unity. In what ways have those moments offered both blessing and challenge? What did you learn? How did you grow?

Prayerfully respond to these questions:

» How can your local church make more visible the unity of the church in your community in the days ahead?
What steps might you take to initiate relationships where there have been none before?

Are there specific projects or visions that your congregation can dream that would contribute to Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one”?

Not only is God calling your local congregation to a renewed commitment to be “united and uniting,” God is calling the wider United Church of Christ to greater commitment. Please share your discoveries and hopes also with others in the UCC. Discuss these questions, and then go online at <www.ucc.org/50.questions>. Let us know how God is touching your congregation.

What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a united and uniting church?

What hope would your congregation like to share with the national setting for our denomination’s future in ecumenical and interfaith relations?

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*This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Lydia Veliko, minister for ecumenical relations, Office of General Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland Ohio. For more resources about the UCC commitment to be a united and uniting church, see online resources at <www.ucc.org/ecumenical/> and “What Matters” at <www.uccvitality.org>.
God of all peoples,
   You are our aloha, our wholeness, our love,
   our peace.
You call us into your Church to speak many languages
   in one voice:
Adentro de tú Spiritu Santo nos juntamos.
(Through your Holy Spirit we are gathered.)
Wir sind gesegnet durch den Heiligen Geist.
(Through your Holy Spirit we are blessed.)
Ua tasi i tatou e ala i Lou Agaga Paia.
(Through your Holy Spirit we become one.)

Hear our praise to you — united in the one language of the heart.
Lift our hearts into your shining love.
   Release our fears. Transform our timidity.
   Make us into people of your extravagant hospitality.
   Open our arms.
   Expand our hopes toward your vision for tomorrow.

God of all peoples,
   You are our aloha, our wholeness, our love, our peace.
   In Christ, we are sisters and brothers.

Gloria a Dios!
Ho’omaikalia hoi ke Akua!
Salamat sa Diyos!
Thanks be to God! Amen.
DURING A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE, prayer-fully consider the following questions. If possible, share responses with others.

» What do you know about your ancestors’ homeland?
» Were they immigrants? Were they forced to come here against their will? Have they lived in this country longer than anyone can recall?
» What languages did they speak and which do they currently speak?
» What do you know about their religious tradition? Were they Christians or from another faith?

Reflect on your experiences in the United Church of Christ when you encountered UCC members from different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.

» What did you discover about your own faith through these encounters?
» What values and beliefs do you share in common?
» What values and beliefs have been challenged or have changed?
» How have you grown spiritually?

A SHINING MOMENT

Imagine yourself in a room filled with people of different races and cultures. Imagine those gathered filled with God’s Spirit — ready to worship, ready to celebrate. In May 1998, in Rosemont, Illinois, at an event called “Pentecost ’98,” the UCC celebrated a national encuentro (encounter) on becoming a multiracial and multicultural church. Representative leaders from local UCC churches, associations, conferences, seminaries, and national agencies came together. They shared stories and gifts; developed and supported leadership; and discerned future directions for the multiracial and multicultural church in the twenty-first century. It was an extraordinary gathering of God’s people, rich in worship and witness. We gathered to discover one another anew in Jesus Christ!

The most memorable moment happened in worship. Together, all participants prayed the prayer of Jesus, the Lord’s Prayer, in their own native language and tradition. As each prayed, hearts filled with awe. The gathering experienced Pentecost, a UCC Pentecost, happening right in their midst. All felt the power of the Holy Spirit descending. As Pentecost is described in Acts 2:1, those present were not only “in one place,” but “of one accord” (Philippians 2:1, 2). Tongues were uttered, understanding deepened, and commitment crystallized.

Pentecost ’98 remains a wonderful model for all local churches, associations, and conferences — indeed, for the whole of the United Church of Christ. From its inception, through its planning and implementation, Pentecost ’98 embodied the Spirit and Scripture. We lived who we are: the Church of Jesus Christ in its fullness and brilliance, a church of the extravagant welcome.

OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT

When the founding General Synod of the United Church of Christ met fifty years ago, the overwhelming majority of those present were men from a European heritage. While it did not look diverse, there was a rich diversity of worship
and theological traditions in that merger of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed churches. Yet the Synod reflected little racial or even gender diversity. A handful of the voting delegates might have been African American or Native Hawai’ian or from another racial or ethnic community. A few were women, also from the European heritage. Yet since then, God has been working consistently with the UCC.

Today, a rich fabric of diversity has been added to our common life which can be seen, as well as felt and heard. Many more worship and theological traditions have enriched those of European heritage. Congregations have formed and joined the UCC among Filipino, Samoan, Indian, Hispanic and new immigrant communities. Each offer vital and distinctive ministries of worship, prayer, and justice.

On any given Sunday morning, more than two dozen languages are used to worship God in our churches. Hymns from the Pacific Rim and Africa are enthusiastically sung. Church potluck meals feature chicken pot pies, tortillas, curries, fried chicken, and tempura set around a welcome table, which is expanding every day. Add a new leaf to the table—more guests are here!

Over the years, changes took place within the UCC that paralleled changes in society. Such change was empowered by the civil rights movement, the emergence of liberation theologies from developing countries, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian movement. God worked among us through these voices.

Many members from distinct communities and congregations found solidarity, identity, and power within a predominantly European American denomination. Some of those same members challenged the church to make good on its ministry of justice and love. Significant voices were heard throughout the UCC in the creation of organizations as the United Black Christians; Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice; the Council for Hispanic Ministries; the Council for American Indian Ministries; the Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries; and the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries.

In 1993, the nineteenth General Synod adopted the pronouncement titled “Becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church.” The pronouncement called on the UCC “in all its settings to be a true multiracial and multicultural church.” It reminds us of our vision as a denomination, “that they may all be one,” and names some of the impediments to reaching that vision. The pronouncement identifies the sins of racism, discrimination, and bigotry. It also acknowledges changing economic, cultural, and social realities that impact the church as well as the world. The mission stated in the pronouncement reflects the challenge: “A multiracial and multicultural church is called to participate in God’s mission of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God through Christ in all communities with all peoples in all places.”

Most importantly, what compels us to be multiracial and multicultural in the United Church of Christ is not changing population demographics, but rather biblical and theological imperatives. It is a faithful response to God, Creator of all people. The Spirit and the Word of God—breath and text—call us to be wholly who we are and who we need to be.

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

The question most commonly asked about being a multiracial and multicultural church is, “How can we be multiracial and multicultural if we are all white and the community around us is all white?” Or, “How can we be

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

—Acts 2:17
multiracial and multicultural if we are all Hispanic?” How can we become multiracial or multicultural if we and our community are primarily of one racial or ethnic community?

Being committed to being a multiracial and multicultural church is a journey of ongoing witness and faith. We don’t invent being diverse; we are already diverse, global, beautiful, and manifold. We expand our minds, hearts, and experiences by seeking to be in solidarity with all God’s people. We desire a holy encuentro (encounter) with others. This is our true calling as a people, a world, and a church. But we have to be bold to become multiracial and multicultural. We have to “welcome the world.” Such a welcome is the work of worshiping, the work of learning, the work of trusting, the work of trying, and the work of removing obstacles.

Prayerfully reflect on these questions:

» What kinds of diversity are present within your own congregation? In what way does your congregation represent many races, many cultures?

» What are specific ways your congregation works toward overcoming racism within your community?

» What ways does your congregation nurture a multiracial and multicultural church and world within the hearts of your children, youth, and young adults?

» Through prayer, what is God saying to you about being a multiracial and multicultural church?

Not only is God calling your local congregation to a renewed commitment to be a multiracial and multicultural church. God is calling the United Church of Christ to deeper and deeper commitment. Let others know what you discern for our future together. Please respond to these questions at <www.ucc.org/50/questions>:

» What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a multiracial and multicultural church within your own community?

» What hope does your congregation have for the wider UCC’s future as a multiracial and multicultural church?

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE UCC UNTIL NOW, we have welcomed the gifts of new immigrants and people of many cultures and languages. We are blessed by new members and new congregations from countries and churches where we have partnerships around the world. We are eager to become an even more multiracial and multicultural church!”

— Cally Rogers-Witte, executive minister, UCC Wider Church Ministries

1 See the pronouncement “Calling upon the United Church of Christ to Be a Multiracial and Multicultural Church” online: <www.ucc.org/justice/mrmc/synod.htm>.

This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Felix Carrion, senior pastor at Euclid Avenue Congregational United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio, and the Reverend Loey Powell, minister and team leader, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland. For more resources about the UCC commitment to be a multiracial and multicultural church, see <www.ucc.org/justice/mrmc> and “What Matters” at <www.uccvitality.org>.
SHINE, GOD’S PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY GIFTED IN MIND AND BODY

We are a church accessible to all

“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

— Psalm 139:14

LIGHT A CANDLE

Generous and Loving God,
You created all in your image.
We are grateful you make all your children beautiful.
Thank you.

Generous and Loving God,
You give to all wonderful gifts to share.
Teach us to be both followers and leaders,
innovators and keepers of tradition,
shining stars and quiet reflectors.
Please guide us to be the best
we can be for all your church.

Generous and Loving God,
You show us the way to be whole and holy.
We are grateful and willing to risk everything
to include all your people in your Good News.
Amen.

IN SILENCE, PRAYERFULLY REFLECT on what it means to be made in God’s image.
» What are distinctive gifts that you bring to the church?
» What does it mean to be a “whole and holy person”?
» What is your personal experience with disabilities?
A SHINING MOMENT

The day is July 26, 1990. Imagine joining with a large crowd of disability advocates gathered under the summer’s sun at the Rose Garden of the White House. On this day, you celebrate the signing of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) into law. One of our UCC pastors, Harold Wilke, has been asked to pray at the event. Recognized worldwide for his activism and advocacy for those with disabilities, he was the first to chair the UCC’s Advisory Committee on the Church and the Handicapped in 1977. He was a profound witness to what is best about who we are and what we do.

Now the important day has come — from days of advocacy to a day of action. Wilke prays the following powerful prayer, but what reduces the crowd to laughter and tears of joy is the moment President George H. W. Bush signs the great civil rights act and hands the pen to Harold Wilke. Harold, a strong man — who is armless and ever so comfortable in his own skin — takes the pen with his toes and utters a hearty “God Bless.” These are the words that Wilke offered to God on that momentous day:

The festivals of the religious year
show forth new meanings for access and liberation:
In the glory of Easter – the stone rolled away –
we see the barrier removed.
In the wonder of Pentecost the message is heard
understood, and seen by all.
In the liberation of Passover the message is:
“Let My People Go!” and the parting of the Red Sea.
In the joy of Advent, God embodies divinity in human form.

Yet for many persons today –
who are blind or deaf or have mental retardation
or who are in wheelchairs –
the barriers still remain.
The stone is still in place.
The waters are not parted, the way not opened.

The words cannot be heard.
The flame of the Spirit’s tongues cannot be seen,
the message not understood.

Proclaiming the message in all languages for today
means using technology or larger print
for people with visual disabilities,
signing or special sound systems for persons
with hearing disabilities,
image, color, and drama for
people with cognitive disabilities,
arborctural access for
people with physical disabilities or who are getting older.

Let the stone be rolled away!
Let the glorious message be proclaimed truly, in all languages
So all may hear and understand!
“FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE UCC UNTIL NOW, we have come to know that an extravagant welcome honoring the fullness of God’s image in the lives of those the world sees as limited and handicapped, disturbed, or disturbing also requires a conversion of heart.”

— John H. Thomas, general minister and president, United Church of Christ

OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT

Since the creation of the United Church of Christ, the denomination has engaged in dialogue with the major social issues of the day. By the mid 1970s, persons with disabilities and their allies advocated a commitment for the church to become accessible and inclusive — as Christ envisioned. Wounded soldiers were returning from Vietnam. Good medical care saved lives, but many were now disabled. People with developmental disabilities and mental illness were no longer always removed from society. People who had been born with disabilities refused to be ignored. Increasingly, it was evident that such people were usually not welcome in our churches, unable to enter the buildings, and, if recognized, were seen as objects of ministry rather than as vital members of congregations.

Leadership for becoming “a church accessible to all” emerged from people in the UCC who themselves had a disability. The Reverend Dr. Harold Wilke, the first executive of the Council for Church and Ministry (the predecessor of today’s Local Church Ministries’ Parish Life and Leadership Ministry), developed an inter-faith religious organization called the Caring Community. The organization assisted congregations to welcome those who had been alienated by the church — including, but not exclusively, persons with disabilities. Wilke, who was born without arms, was raised to believe that he would live a full life. He and his family challenged educational systems throughout college, seminary, and graduate school. He served as a local pastor, a chaplain during World War II, and an administrator before heading a UCC national instrumentality.

Another leader is the Reverend Virginia Kreyer who was born with cerebral palsy. She, too, was raised to live to her full potential. A graduate from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, she established a task force for exceptional people in the Metropolitan Association of the New York Conference of the UCC. The task force brought a resolution to the New York Conference and then to the eleventh General Synod in 1977.

The resolution passed and the church committed to: (1) recognize the distinguished contributions persons with disabilities are making to society (2) be aware of the suffering of persons with disabilities due to rejection and insufficient support (3) be aware of the wealth of new understandings about societal attitudes to persons with disabilities (4) observe that a direct result of our high-risk technological society is increasing the number of persons with disabilities, and (5) affirm a positive attitude and behavioral response to persons with disabilities.

Over the years, other General Synods have taken other actions. Resolutions have called for justice for persons with mental illness and brain disorders; affirmed the calling of clergy with disabilities; expressed continuing support for the American Disabilities Act; and, as recently as 2005, renewed the commitment to wholeness in Christ and to becoming a church accessible to all.2
SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

All UCC congregations can become accessible. To become welcoming and inclusive of persons with disabilities is much more than having proper ramps and elevators — although they are really important! Full inclusion is a spiritual attitude as well. It is about education. It is about striving to make church inviting to all people. It is about overcoming fear, and about taking risks. Full inclusion of people with disabilities in a congregation means that all people will share their gifts. Inclusion requires trusting God’s presence in the lives of all God’s people. From person to person, gifts vary — yet all are needed and celebrated.

As a local congregation, reflect on questions as these:

» In what ways does God profoundly speak through the gifts of persons with disabilities?

» If your church was completely accessible to all, what difference would it make?

» What ways is your church already welcoming to people with disabilities?

» What barriers exist to true inclusion of persons with disabilities in your church?

Share with the wider UCC your discoveries and hopes for a church accessible to all. Go online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions> and complete these questions:

» What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a church accessible to all?

» What hope does your congregation have for the wider UCC’s future as a church accessible to all?


2 For texts of General Synod resolutions related to disabilities, visit <www.ucdm.org/menu.html>.

This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Margaret Slater, minister for diversity and inclusion, Parish Life and Leadership Ministry, Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio. For more information on accessibility ministries visit online <www.ucdm.org> and “What Matters” at <www.uccvitality.org>. See also Any Body, Everybody, Christ’s Body. This congregational study guide provides theological background and hands-on tools for all age groups. It can be found at <uccdm.org>. For more information call 866.822.8224, extension 3838.
Holy and loving God,  
with a heart of compassion and arms flung wide,  
you call us to be a people of extravagant welcome.

Creating us in your image,  
you bless us with spiritual, physical, and sexual bodies,  
and call us to live with integrity.

Steadfast in your love for us,  
you call us to faithfulness in our covenants  
with you and one another.

Ever faithful God,  
you strengthen us with the power of your love that casts out fear.  
Clarify our vision that we may see one another as you see us.

Powerful and tender God,  
empower us to live the amazing and inclusive invitation of your Gospel  
with evangelical courage. Amen.

DURING A FEW MOMENTS OF SILENCE, consider ways in which your life has been affected by the open and affirming movement in the United Church of Christ.

» How has your life of faith been affected by people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)?
» When have you experienced the presence of Christ through LGBT people of faith? What has been your anxiety, fear, or questions?
» What is your hope for the church as it relates to LGBT people of faith?
A SHINING MOMENT

You are there. It is the afternoon of June 25, 1972, the fifteenth anniversary of the United Church of Christ. A community of the faithful gathers for the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California/Nevada Conference at Community UCC, San Carlos, for an historic ordination. The words of the Reverend L. William Eichorn to the ordinand ring throughout the sanctuary:

We are in the process of saying our “yes.”
You are in the process of saying your “yes.”
You have learned that to choose life means to choose person.
And so I charge you to remember
that to continue to choose life
means to choose authenticity;
to somehow be authentic to both
the United Church of Christ
and that communion,
and to your gay brothers and sisters,
whom you’ve already been loyal and faithful to.
And so, I charge you to choose life —
to remember what you have learned and to be who you are.¹

With those words, a red ordination stole is placed on the shoulders of William R. Johnson. He becomes the first openly gay person to be ordained into ministry in the United Church of Christ and, in fact, in the history of the Christian church.

The discernment of the Golden Gate Association delegates and local church members — approving Bill Johnson for ordination — was a shining moment in the life of our church. It was not an easy decision to make. It did not make everyone comfortable. But in the end it demonstrated that the candidate exceeded the qualifications. His call to ministry was clear. The church was faithful in recognizing this, and in approving him for ordination.

On the very day that the Golden Gate Association approved Johnson’s ordination, the UCC Council for Church and Ministry recommended to not consider sexual orientation as a determining fact for ordination. Rather, the council asserted that a candidate’s total view of human sexuality, and her or his moral expression of it, should be considered. This decision was not affirmed everywhere in the UCC. There were difficult debates, some which continue to recent times. The overwhelming witness, however, is that the life of the UCC has been enriched through the welcome of LGBT persons into the full life and ministry of this church.

On the heels of numerous sexuality studies in the 1950s, pastors and other people of faith were engaging in critical Bible study concerning the few scripture passages often used for excluding LGBT people from the church. In the 1960s, some pastors began speaking out for gay rights.

As early as 1965, Robert W. Wood, a UCC pastor,
demonstrated in Washington, D.C., at the first gay picket line. He was the only clergyperson present.

In April 1969, the UCC Council for Christian Social Action adopted its first social policy statement regarding homosexuality. They opposed all laws criminalizing private homosexual relations between adults and the exclusion of homosexual citizens from the armed forces. Just more than three years later, Bill Johnson was ordained. That same year, Johnson, along with others, formed the UCC Gay Caucus which evolved into the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns. Later, in 1984 in the Potomac Association of the Central Atlantic Conference, Anne Holmes became the first openly lesbian woman to be ordained.

“So then you are no longer strangers … but members of the household of God.”

— Ephesians 2:19

Over three decades, the UCC General Synod would set a clear course of welcome and inclusion: calling for serious study of human sexuality; supporting the civil rights of LGBT people; and, at the fifteenth General Synod in 1985, adopting the Open and Affirming (ONA) resolution.²

The ONA resolution calls upon congregations to engage in study and discernment and to consider adopting statements of affirmation and policies of non-discrimination — welcoming LGBT into the full life and ministry of the church.

Since 1985, more than 625 UCC congregations have engaged in ONA study programs and voted to be ONA congregations. Each year, new congregations join the movement that has been sustained for more than thirty years. Many are among our most vital and vibrant congregations. Conferences, associations, seminaries, and UCC-related colleges and universities are among other settings and related institutions of the UCC which have declared they are open and affirming.

What has made all the difference in this movement is that the vast majority of congregations who have declared themselves open and affirming have faithfully offered an extravagant welcome. They have become radically inclusive in their full life and ministry. They have courageously offered God’s welcome. Scores of people have been transformed by the ONA witness of the UCC. It is a witness that is changing the world, saving lives, and helping to build God’s community of welcome, justice and peace.

The Reverend Dr. Yvette Flunder, pastor of City of Refuge UCC, San Francisco, describes the impact of this commitment:

We should be grateful to God for the open and affirming witness of the UCC to the world. We are engaged in a worthy struggle to find ways to affirm and celebrate all people and we confirm this embrace with risk taking, justice action. As we shine into our future we know that what is coming is even greater than what has been.

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

The Reverend Rebecca Voelkel is a UCC pastor and program director of the Institute for Welcoming Resources, has also emphasized that “the open and affirming movement in the UCC and ecumenically is such a powerful witness to the concrete ways in which individual churches can make a difference in the lives of individuals and society” What has been your own congregation’s history with the open and affirming movement? What difference has your local congregation made in your own community?
Together, prayerfully, reflect on these questions:

» Has your congregation experienced the presence of God in the faith and witness of LGBT people? If so, how?
» What steps might you take to initiate relationships where previously there were none?
» On what is your congregation’s posture toward LGBT people based?
» How can your local church express a visible welcome and inclusion of LGBT people, their families, and their friends in your community?

People are eager to be part of a church that offers an extravagant welcome and practices a radical inclusiveness in its life and mission. Please let the wider UCC know what you discern for our open and affirming future together.

Visit online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions> and let the denomination hear your responses to these questions:

» What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be an open and affirming church?
» What hope does your congregation have for the wider UCC’s future as an open and affirming church?

"THE UCC HAS A WONDERFUL HISTORY of living out Christ’s example and invitation to boldly embrace God’s people of ‘all tongues and races’ at all times and places. This radical hospitality continues in the way we receive, celebrate, and affirm the spiritual gifts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people of faith."

— José A. Malayang, executive minister, UCC Local Church Ministries

1 From the documentary film, A Position of Faith. Available from United Church of Christ Resources, 800-537-3394, #WCMPOF.

2 For links to United Church of Christ actions and statements on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns, visit online <www.ucc.org/lgbt/statements.htm>.

This chapter was prepared by the Reverend Mike Schuenemeyer, executive minister for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender concerns and HIV/AIDS ministries, Wider Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio. For more information on the commitment to be an open and affirming church, visit <www.ucc.org/lgbt/> and <www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.htm>, or explore “What Matters” at <www.uccvitality.org>.
SHINE, GOD’S PEOPLE STRUGGLING FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Light a Candle

Creator God,
    God of all people,
Lead us from death to life,
    from falsehood to truth.
Lead us from despair to hope,
    from fear to trust.
Lead us from hate to love,
    from war to peace.
Let peace fill our hearts,
    our world,
our universe.¹

Take a Moment to Prayerfully Consider the words of this prayer. Reflect on the following questions:
» What kind of peace do you seek in the world? Where do you see evidence of God’s peace and justice?
» What are the injustices in our world that weigh most on your heart?
» How does your faith shape what you believe and do about peace and justice?
» What are specific situations and places in our nation and world that you often bring to God in prayer?

A Shining Moment

Imagine walking along a road, part of a long line of quiet people moving in the same direction. You are thirsty and hungry. The sun is high in the sky and burning, but you have nothing to cover your head. You can only carry some of your belongings. You know that the walk will be a long one. You do not know where, or how, it will end, nor do you know what may happen along the way. The people around you are generally silent—all moving with a sense of urgency, but resigned to this trip. They know they may never again see the family members who began this trek with them.

You are walking this long road with people forced to flee their homes because of war or threat of injury, because of unrest in their community that would result in their deaths. You are walking away from the extreme poverty in your homeland toward a dream of work in another land.
Throughout our history, the UCC has spoken in ways that offers hope to those who experience such social maladies and challenges the powers that seek their perpetuation. Calls to action as the Just Peace resolution have spoken to both national and international situations challenging us to engage in God’s acts of peace, love, and justice.

We have engaged in this work of God’s peace not on our own, but in vital partnerships with Christians and non-Christians in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Southern and East Asia, and the Middle East. Through the insights and bold witness of these partners, we have access to voices and perspectives not normally available.

For example, when Lebanon was under siege in the summer of 2006, we discovered the extent of the destruction from our Christian partners there who not only called for the war to end, but who also lived out their Christian witness by establishing relief centers and shelters. The Near East School of Theology, a major Lutheran and Reformed seminary located in Beirut, established with the help of our church, became such a center of provision of basic needs in the midst of daily bombing. Mary Mikhael, president of the seminary, states that “Just peace is the will of God for our world. As a church, we are all called to promote just peace in all we do and say.”

Members of the UCC have served as witnesses for peace in places such as Colombia and the Middle East.

“You are trying to find a safe place to live and do not know where that is. In this journey, you could be among refugees and displaced people of the Sudan, the Balkans, East Timor, Iraq, Colombia, Mexico, or people of many other places.

Now imagine yourself in the midst of General Synod in 1985. Quite a different setting, don’t you think? At this Synod, the United Church of Christ has just adopted an historical pronouncement proclaiming it to be a just peace church. What does “Just Peace” mean? In the pronouncement, the church hears God’s call to “work to end the institution of war” and to work to eliminate the root causes of violence and war. We seek to be in solidarity and join in the journey of those are victims of war, violence, and injustice.

Even with war raging today, with falsehoods presented as facts to justify risking precious lives, even with peace ever more elusive, the shining moment that was lit in 1985 remains lit today.

**OUR TRAVEL IN THE LIGHT**

Poverty and hunger, war and violence, racism and sexism, and other “isms” all threaten the human community.

“I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight …”

— Jeremiah 9:24
offering a presence among people suffering as a result of the wars that rage around them. For example, volunteers have served three-month terms with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. This program of the World Council of Churches, initiated at the request of the Jerusalem churches, offers solidarity through presence with Palestinians and Israelis who seek a nonviolent resolution of that enduring conflict. We listen to those who don’t have others to hear their compelling stories of lives challenged by an occupation, nearly forty years old. Such programs and partnerships call us to engage the world intelligently and with a faith that we share with so many.

Throughout our history, God has led us to be keenly aware of the connections between injustice and war, between justice and peace. UCC members have recently advocated against such high levels of military spending in the government’s budget through the Justice and Witness Ministries’ office for public life and social policy in Washington, D.C. Most recently, in 2005, the twenty-fifth General Synod passed the resolution “Another World is Possible: Building a Peace with Justice Movement.” The resolution affirms the many justice commitments of the UCC, including being a Just Peace church and moves us into a more comprehensive vision of peace with justice.

Another world can be realized — one in which our connections to sisters and brothers around the world are bonds of common commitment to ending war and participating in God’s reign of justice and peace.

SHINE INTO THE FUTURE

In your congregation, let God’s light of justice and peace shine! Local action has global impact. Global injustice includes that which is closest to home, as well as situations in faraway places.

Even though you may feel a strong wind threatening to extinguish God’s light, shine. Let your light shine stronger, and be light to all the nations. Shine because people in the world, and in your own community, desperately need to know that there is a light. Often they strain to see it. Shine brightly so God’s vision of peace with justice, of shalom, of salaam, may prevail for God’s people everywhere.

Prayerfully reflect on these questions:

» What connections does your congregation directly have with persons that suffer injustice and violence, locally and globally?

» In what ways have you and your local congregation witnessed for justice and striven for peace? What inspired you to do something?

» How does your congregation nurture children and youth to live out God’s justice and peace?
At this moment in history, what injustices and conflicts, locally and globally, weigh heavy upon the heart of your congregation? What is God saying to you about those concerns?

God is calling the United Church of Christ to a deeper commitment and witness as a peace with justice church. Let the wider church know what your congregation hopes for our future together. Please respond to these questions online at <www.ucc.org/50/questions>:

» What are the ways that your local congregation has lived out the commitment to be a peace with justice church within your own community?
» What hope does your congregation have for the broader UCC’s future as a peace with justice church?

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2 View the 1985 pronouncement of the fifteenth General Synod “on affirming the United Church of Christ as a Just Peace Church” online at <www.ucc.org/justice/jpc.htm>.


This chapter prepared by Peter E. Makari, executive for the Middle East and Europe of Common Global Ministries, United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Cleveland, Ohio, and Mary Mikhael, president of the Near East School of Theology, a partner of the UCC/Global Ministries, Beirut, Lebanon. For more resources about the UCC commitment to be a peace with justice church, see online resources at <ucc.org/justice/jpc.htm> and <www.ucc.org/justice/newresource.htm>. For information about global partnerships and advocacy suggestions on international issues, visit <www.globalministries.org>.