

UCC seeks faith-politics energy: Moyers and Obama speak

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With fiery speeches on faith and politics, the United Church of Christ's biennial General Synod seemed at times as much a revival or political rally as a mainline church meeting.

The nearly 10,000 church members gathered in Hartford, Connecticut, last month heard speeches from journalist Bill Moyers and presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama (D., Ill.). The Democrat exhorted his 1.2-million-member denomination to continue its support for progressive causes.

"They say your church is dying," said Moyers on June 23. "And lame, and limp. But it is a small, committed community of people of conscience who can turn this country around."

UCC President and General Minister John Thomas said before the Synod that he hoped the focus on faith in the public square would lead to a sense of renewed energy in his flagging church. "There's always been a strong public face to the United Church of Christ, and we're reclaiming that," Thomas said.

But after the crowds disperse and UCC members return to their heartland churches, how will they use the Synod's momentum to revive the denomination, which has seen deep drops in membership and donations in recent years?

As one Synod attendee muttered, "Yeah, this is inspiring. But now we go home to an empty church."

Some of those gathered in Hartford said they must bottle the passion of Moyers and Obama to build up the church "member by member." Others said the church's witness in the wider world will bring seekers to its pews. And still others said the UCC must take a step back from progressive politics to heal divisions caused by the church's 2005 endorsement of gay marriage.

In his speech, Obama spoke of his journey from being a community organizer in Chicago to becoming a UCC member. He also cited the UCC's history as "troublemakers," from the Boston Tea Party to the civil rights movement.

Obama was quoted widely in the secular press when he declared that some on the religious right had "hijacked" faith and divided the country by exploiting such issues as abortion, same-sex marriage and school prayer.

Obama listed alternate "matters of conscience," including raising the minimum wage, adopting universal health care, stopping genocide in Darfur, ending the Iraq war and enacting immigration reform.

"My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won't be fulfilling God's will unless I go out and do the Lord's work," Obama told UCC delegates.

His only overt political appeal came when speaking of health care. "I have made a solemn pledge that I will sign a universal health-care bill into law by the end of my first term as president of the United States," he said to a standing ovation.

James Fouthner, pastor of the United Church of Montebello in Denver, said Obama's "struggle to express his faith and use his faith in the public square" was inspiring. "Pastors have to use that same kind of passion he used in grassroots organizing to build up the church one by one, member by member, until we build up that groundswell," Fouthner said.

Not everyone was happy with the gathering's political tone. Koloman Ludwig, pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Whiting, Indiana, said he "doesn't do politics in church" because it would divide liberals and conservatives in his congregation.

"To me the problem is, with so many political overtones to the church, you begin to lose people who don't have the same political orientation," Ludwig said, "and to me that's a great sadness."

But Ann Plumley, an interim pastor in Keene, New Hampshire, said the UCC's advocacy for progressive causes is essential. "We need the mix of politics and religion to live in the freedom God intends for us," she said. *-Religion News Service*