

On hot-button issues, UCC is anything but reserved: "Jesus was not about excluding people"

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When it comes to volatile political issues, the United Church of Christ is not often content simply to issue statements.

Its new general minister and president, Geoffrey A. Black, delivered 17,000 petition signatures this fall to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that urged health-care reform—including coverage for all and access regardless of ability to pay.

Black's predecessor as UCC president, John Thomas, was arrested at the White House two years ago, trying to deliver 100,000 petition signatures against the war in Iraq.

"The church has a long tradition of being involved in the large public issues of the day," said Thomas, 59, of Shaker Heights, Ohio. "Going back to the 19th century, we supported women's rights and the abolitionist movement. Today, we've been active in issues ranging from rights for gays and lesbians to ending the war in Iraq."

The 1.1-million-member United Church of Christ, nationally headquartered in downtown Cleveland, is regarded as perhaps the most liberal mainstream Protestant denomination in the country, especially on hot-button social issues.

[After President Obama recently signed the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, UCC officials noted that its legislative synod in 2003 called for adding to such a measure the crime of violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity and decried "the use of scripture to generate hatred and the violation of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender persons."]

Black, who took office in October, is the first elected African-American president of the UCC, which is about 90 percent white. Joseph Evans, who was black, served as president in the 1970s to fill out the term of a white president who died in office.

“This church had a strong interest and investment in the civil rights movement,” said Black, 61, who was raised a Baptist before he was drawn to the United Church of Christ. “I am a product of the success of that movement. I am indebted to it,” he said.

Despite the church’s left-of-center posture, Black elects not to use the term *liberal* when discussing the institution’s political positions.

“I would use the terms *progressive* and *unabashedly Christian*,” he said. “Jesus was not about excluding people. He reached out to those who were marginalized and oppressed. Gay and lesbian people, just as Africans who were enslaved, have been marginalized and oppressed in our society.”

Black, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, acknowledged that the church’s political positions and social actions can be costly. In 2005, the church leadership endorsed same-sex marriage, resulting in the exodus of hundreds of members.

But the UCC—the first mainstream Protestant denomination to ordain blacks, women and openly gay people— is not unfamiliar with controversy.

In 2004, the church made national headlines by airing TV ads showing bouncers at a church door turning away gays and people of color. “That was edgy,” said Black.

During last year’s presidential election, the denomination was on the margin of a huge controversy when Jeremiah Wright, a pastor of a UCC church in Chicago where President Obama used to worship, was accused of spewing anti-American, white-hating rhetoric.

Black defended Wright, saying his words were twisted by the media. “I never felt the whole body of his preaching and his ministry was ever examined thoughtfully, comprehensively, or with an intent to understand the real religious experience of many African-Americans in this country,” he said.

As the UCC’s chief executive, Black is focused on running an organization struggling financially and trying to build its membership. Between now and the spring he will be on a ten-city tour, visiting member churches. “I’ll be preaching, but mostly listening,” he said.

The United Church of Christ traces its roots to the Congregationalist Pilgrims of New England, a region still replete with picturesque white, spired churches linked to the

UCC. It boasts of its 11 forebears who signed the Declaration of Independence and of its role as an agitator in the Boston Tea Party.

Those early American roots are obvious today in the church's governmental structure, which allows congregations to function independently and democratically.

"We're not a church that has a top-down doctrinal set of rules," said Thomas, who will be teaching at Chicago Theological Seminary. "We rely on the consciences of our members and the leadership of our pastors to shape the theological direction of the church."

Added Black: "Democracy is part of our denominational DNA."

Married with one grown daughter, Black has been living with friends in Lakewood, Ohio, until he finds permanent housing.

This marks his second move to the shores of Lake Erie. He worked for six years on the denomination's national staff before moving to the church's New York office. "I'm happy to be back in Cleveland," he said. -*Michael O'Malley, Religion News Service*