

UCC has been progressive pacesetter

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue

Two days after the U.S. Supreme Court issued two rulings favoring marital rights for same-sex couples, the largely liberal United Church of Christ was in a celebratory mood as its biennial national convention opened June 28 in Long Beach, California.

Only hours after a U.S. district court permitted a quick resumption of same-gender marriages in California, a UCC pastor from nearby Torrance and his partner of ten years were married June 30 at the Long Beach Convention Center in a ceremony witnessed by many delegates.

The UCC was the first mainline denomination to ordain an openly gay person in 1972, and in 2005 the UCC General Synod voted overwhelmingly to endorse civil same-gender marriage, encouraging local churches to celebrate and bless those marriages.

The United Church of Christ is proud of setting the pace on gay rights in the church and taking a lead on establishing women's, racial and ethnic issues in church life. The UCC has often advocated societal changes well before a public consensus, much less a religious one, has emerged.

"We're not RADICAL. We're just EARLY," states a motto of the UCC-affiliated Chicago Theological Seminary.

Does the United Church of Christ attract progressives who believe that abortion rights, gun control, immigration reform and protecting the environment are in keeping with Christian faith and practice?

Perhaps. But the UCC has also seen annual declines in membership and congregations that differ little from those in other mainline denominations since the late 1960s. (In recent years, even conservative church bodies such as the Southern Baptists and Missouri Synod Lutherans have shown declining numbers, indicating that the decline is not related only to liberal theology.)

Researchers attribute the membership decline in traditional denominations to the growing percentage of older members, the rising numbers of couples delaying marriages and the number of young people lacking interest in church affiliation, among other factors.

The fallout cannot be blamed simply on taking controversial stances. The United Methodist Church has steadfastly refused to open its ministry to openly gay and lesbian candidates based on its view that homosexual intimacy is incompatible with Christian scripture. Yet U.S. Methodist membership falls as steadily as the average age of congregants climbs—a factor many say leads to budget constraints and lack of church vitality.

To be sure, when the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opened their doors to gay clergy, the decision led to waves of defecting churches and members.

The equivalent controversy for the United Church of Christ was its 2005 vote to back same-gender marriage equality. Then president John Thomas said the General Synod “acted courageously.” Over the next three years 373 churches cut their ties and UCC’s Puerto Rico Conference pulled out.

Yet Thomas and other officials remain upbeat in recent interviews. For the most part, individual congregations, regional associations and the national synods are autonomous. The UCC keeps a relative “calm” because policy statements can’t be imposed on other groupings, said Thomas,

“There is dissent,” he conceded. Theological disagreement has been part of UCC history with its mixture of Congregational, Reformed and other Protestant traditions. He said the first woman ordained by a Protestant church in North America, Antoinette Brown, wrote to a friend before the ceremony in 1853: “People are beginning to stop laughing and get mad.”

Prior to this year’s General Synod, the UCC described itself as a church of more than 1 million people. But the UCC’s yearbook this summer notes that by the end of 2012 membership slipped to just under a million (998,906 members), according to researcher Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi.

“The reality is that, yes, the UCC has suffered some stinging membership losses over the past ten years,” said J. Bennett Guess, executive director of local church

ministries, based at UCC's Cleveland headquarters. He sees the downward trend continuing but at a "significantly slowing pace."

The loss of 73 congregations in 2011 and 2012 resulted largely from church closures or mergers, Guess said. The number of churches leaving out of disagreement with UCC social policy has slowed to single digits, he added.

Some congregations have returned to the fold or are considering it, Guess said in an e-mail interview. "Since 2007, we have welcomed 220 new churches . . . with half of these affiliating from other traditions, including Southern Baptists and Pentecostals," said Guess. "This [represents] more new churches within the UCC than in any comparable period over the past four decades."

Other mainline denominations have become active in starting new churches. The United Methodist Church reported in February that 684 new congregations were planted from 2008 to 2012, exceeding its goal by 34 churches. In June, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) announced that 115 "new worshipping communities" had been established in a grassroots initiative called "1001 New Worshipping Communities."

"Oldline Protestant churches are right in the perception that for growth you are probably better off to start new churches, if you can, rather than to revitalize old ones," said David A. Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. "But they've got a dismal record of starting new churches."

Like advertisers and television executives, church growth experts seek out younger adults, he said. "The segment of young liberal adults who are predisposed to religion, particularly young liberals, is a real small market niche," said Roozen, a prominent sociologist of religion, in a telephone interview.

"I don't think that the liberal theologians and church leaders have made the case for why religion adds anything to a liberal lifestyle," said Roozen. "Why do you need the church to do Habitat for Humanity? Why do you need the church to tell you that gays are equal to any other kind of person?"

Some anecdotal evidence indicates that the United Church of Christ's 2005 marriage equality vote "got a little bounce in conservative parts of the country," said Roozen. "All of a sudden the UCC churches appeared as an alternative they weren't aware of and brought them some publicity," he said.

The denomination created a stir in 2004 with provocative TV commercials about UCC's welcome to all comers. One depicted two burly bouncers outside church doors deciding who could be admitted for worship. The theme for those commercials—and a mantra still popular in the UCC—is “God is still speaking.” That was inspired by a quote from onetime radio and TV comedienne Gracie Allen: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

Such was the hope in late March when two UCC officials traveled from Cleveland to Washington, D.C., to take part in pro-marriage equality rallies as the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on two cases involving gay marriage.

One was Guess, part of the four-member UCC Collegium of Officers, who became in 2011 the first openly gay person elected as a national officer of the UCC. The second one was Michael Schuenemeyer, the church's spokesman on marriage equality and HIV/AIDS. Both he and Guess married their male partners in ceremonies in states where same-sex marriage is legal. As residents of Ohio, however, where same-sex marriage is not legal, the two couples lack the rights enjoyed by heterosexual couples.