

'Invisible' UCC tries TV ads for exposure: A six-city campaign

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Taking a cue from the United Methodists and other media-savvy denominations, the United Church of Christ will spend \$1.3 million for a trial television ad campaign in six metropolitan areas through Easter in hopes of gaining some visibility.

The UCC's name-recognition has been "negligible at best," says Gotham, Inc., a New York marketing firm that offered its services at cost to the 1.3-million-member mainline denomination. The firm found that only a few people in focus groups said they knew something about the church—and, as it turned out, they really were referring to the solidly conservative Churches of Christ, a decentralized fellowship whose congregations use "Church of Christ" in their names.

Both church traditions honor congregational autonomy, but the resemblance ends there. The Cleveland-based UCC has been an active member in liberal, ecumenical causes and has emphasized racial and gender inclusiveness.

Responding to many focus group participants who spoke bitterly about their church experiences, the test commercial features muscular "bouncers" who stand guard outside a picturesque church, arbitrarily choosing who will get to attend worship services. Written words interrupt the scene, saying: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." A narrator then touts the denomination's welcome to all comers, "no matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey." The narrator carefully identifies the denomination as "the United Church [pause] of Christ," said Ron Buford, coordinator of the UCC's ad initiative.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have been known for their television spots. But UCC officials point particularly to the United Methodists' \$20 million ad campaign launched in 2001. A study released in January by the Barna Research Group showed the Methodists' Igniting Ministry campaign contributed to an overall rise of 6 percent in attendance, with the number of first-time attenders up 14 percent.

Membership numbers have declined steadily in recent years in the United Church of Christ, as in most mainline denominations. Moreover, the UCC budget shortfalls of late prompted John Thomas, general minister and president, to urge the 5,850 UCC congregations “not to succumb to relentless erosion.”

Thomas challenged them to increase giving from \$860 million to \$1 billion by the year 2007. Even as the campaign got rolling, however, year-end statements showed that regional conferences of the denomination were retaining more funds than ever in 2003; the funds sent to national headquarters dipped to \$31.4 million that year, down \$1.5 million from the total in 2002, according to the monthly United Church News.

Besides airing in the greater Cleveland area, where many national staff members live, the 30-second test ads have appeared since March 1 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Raleigh, North Carolina; Springfield, Massachusetts; Tampa, Florida; and Oklahoma City.

A second TV spot, to be released nationally during Advent, shows a young girl reciting the children’s poem, “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple,” with hand motions. At “open the door and see all the people,” the camera segues across a diverse group of people who echo the refrain, “all the people.” The four-year ad initiative has a total budget of \$4 million, Buford said.

The United Church of Christ has a strong Congregationalist heritage dating back to the Pilgrim era, and many UCC churches in New England still keep “Congregational” in their names. The denomination’s present name dates from a 1957 merger that blended Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed traditions.

Although the UCC was the first denomination to ordain an openly gay man (1972) and is in the forefront of gay and lesbian rights, church officials note that many of its strongest congregations are theologically conservative and that local church autonomy requires that any statements adopted at biennial conventions “speak to and not for” the membership.

The campaign’s slogan “God is still speaking,” said to be meaningful for both conservatives and liberals in the UCC, is accompanied in church literature by daring “firsts” credited to its forebears in U.S. history. Among the religiously motivated risks taken by past church members were leadership in the antislavery movement (1700), the revivalist Great Awakening (1730), the first mainline ordination of an

African-American pastor (1785), formation of the first foreign missionary society (1810), and the first ordination of a woman pastor (1853).