



let it shine

Becoming the Multiracial, Multicultural Church

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

Based on the understanding that all of us are created in the image of God and therefore all children of God, the General Synod in 1993 passed a “living” pronouncement calling the United Church of Christ to become the multiracial, multicultural church that we believe God wants us to be. In the years since then, as we have lived into this call for our denomination to be more reflective of our nation’s population, we have experienced the richness of this life as well as the challenges of it. We’ve made progress in becoming that new church, but we’ve got a way to go to be fully inclusive.

History tells us that the UCC has been on the journey to become a multi-racial, multi-cultural church since our very beginnings. Lemuel Haynes, for instance, was ordained into the ministry in 1785, becoming the first African American ordained in the newly formed country. Native Americans had their first contact with the UCC when our Pilgrim ancestors came to Massachusetts and Connecticut. And as settlers moved south and west, native American people in those lands encountered those working as teachers or preachers.

Joseph Hardy Neesima was the first Japanese American ordained in the UCC in 1843; Chinese Americans also became part of the UCC in the 19th century, as did Pacific Islanders when missionaries sailed to Hawaii. During that same century, our UCC ancestors worked with Mexicans, both in Mexico and the U.S.

When the Amistad captives mistakenly came into the waters off Connecticut in 1839, our UCC ancestors, both black and white, embraced their cause and worked diligently for their freedom. When the Amistad children were released from prison, they were taken into the homes of Connecticut church members. After the Amistad captives gained their freedom, the focus of many of the Americans turned to the abolition of slavery. The American Missionary Association was formed, which continued its work even after the end of the Civil War, as it sent teachers and others to assist the newly freed slaves.

Our Mission and Ministry Legacy

Thus, working to include all of God’s children into our church is not a 21st century phenomenon. Yet, it is a call by God to make Dr. Martin Luther King’s Beloved Community not just a dream, but a reality. Indeed, as we have lived into the 1993 pronouncement, we have come to understand that it is a call to expand the vision to becoming a multiracial, multicultural, open and affirming, and accessible to all church.

How can we live out this vision of the Beloved Community? We must do more than say that all are welcome, although that is certainly the beginning. We must find ways to incorporate new languages, new music, and new ways of praying into our worship services. We must find new opportunities to do anti-racism work in our own communities, in our church and our world. We must discern God’s mission for us in this broken world, which desperately needs peace with justice. We must share the power and the resources that God has given us, knowing that when we do all this, we will be richly rewarded. We will grow in faith, in the knowledge of God and of each other and understand in new ways that God is still speaking!

Reflections:

- Use the UCC’s website (www.ucc.org) to learn more about the histories of communities of color in the UCC. Then do some research into the history of your own church and Conference.
- Look at your community and church to see if they embody Dr. King’s vision of the Beloved Community. What would the Beloved Community look like in your church? How can you help achieve this vision?

Resources:

- The General Synod pronouncement on becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church: www.ucc.org/justice/mrmc/synod.htm
- Joyce Hollyday, *On the Heels of Freedom*, Crossroads Publishing Co., 2005
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech can be found at: www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm
- The King Center website: www.thekingcenter.org/prog/bc

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