let it shine

Public Education: A Justice and Witness Ministry

In the 21st Century, those who cannot competently read, write or self-advocate are at a significant disadvantage. Many kinds of machines can replace what was formerly done by uneducated human labor. Computers have become as important to learning and communicating as books. More than ever, a good education is essential to a productive life and participation in the culture. Therefore, access *for every child* to good, quality education is truly a *justice issue.*

Jesus began his ministry reading from Isaiah 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bring release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

When our New England forefathers and mothers reached these shores they came with the Protestant conviction that everyone should have access to the Bible. Massachusetts and Connecticut passed laws declaring that when there were 50 householders in a town they must appoint someone to teach children to read. When there were 100 families, "they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct youth so they may be fitted for the university."

In 1974, The Connecticut Conference reclaimed this concern for Public Education. The quality and influence of the schooling experienced by some of the young people with whom he worked troubled Deane Hodges, the Conference Minister for Christian Education. Arthur Higgins, as Minister for Church and Society, supported his proposal for a new Conference ministry related to public education, and in 1975, the Conference Annual Meeting launched this new ministry.

A survey sent to local churches found that about half their pastors had some kind of involvement with local schools. The Conference sought ways to help local churches support local school systems, and developed resources for this purpose. Goals included cooperating with statewide educational organizations to identify the critical education issues needing to be addressed by the state's legislators.

In Connecticut we have used the resolutions process at Annual Meetings to ground Conference actions. Since 1970, ten resolutions related to public education have been approved by the delegates.

When the Sheff v. O'Neill decision required Connecticut to revise its segregated, unequal school system in 1996, the Conference Public Education ministry produced "A Guide for Local Church Ministries: Supporting Quality, Integrated Education for All Children in Our Public Schools", a resource to help church leaders better understand the theological and historical background of the UCC commitment to public education.

The Conference has also shown its support for equal and accessible education by opposing proposals for school vouchers and tuition tax credits. Responding to the concern of many educational and children's organizations that a plan for state-funded vouchers for private schooling would be major drain of public school funding, in 1996 our Conference committee joined the Citizens' Alliance for Public Education (CAPE).

An issue of great concern now is the impact of the federal "No Child Left Behind" law on students, teachers, school curricula and testing, and the under-funding of programs and services necessary to comply with its mandates. The Conference has offered workshops at Annual Meeting so delegates and visitors may learn about the requirements of this law.

Reflection:

- Fifty years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court wrote: "Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments." What do you think of that statement?
- In what ways could my church or community better support our public schools?
- What has been the impact of the No Child Left Behind law on my town's public schools?

Resources:

- Connecticut Educational Directory – Published yearly by CT State Dept. of Education
- UCC web site (www.ucc.org) Look for link to Justice and Witness Ministries
- The Public Education Advocacy Team of the CT Conference – New members welcome

"Public Education – A Justice and Witness Ministry" was written by the Rev. Fidelia Lane. She was a member of the Connecticut Conference staff from 1978 to 1991, serving part of that time as Minister to Education and Government. She is the former chair of the statewide Citizens Alliance for Public Education, and a member of the Connecticut Conference's Public Education Advocacy team.

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