



let it shine

Progressive Revelation: H. Richard Niebuhr

One of the significant theologians in the history of the United Church of Christ is H. Richard Niebuhr. Born in 1894, Niebuhr's family was active in the German Evangelical Synod of North America. His father was an Evangelical minister and his mother was the daughter of an Evangelical minister. The family produced three major theologians of the twentieth century: H. Richard, who taught at Yale University Divinity School; Reinhold, who taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York; and Hulda, who taught at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

H. Richard was ordained in the German Evangelical Church in 1913 and served as a pastor in several congregations, as professor and academic dean at Eden Theological Seminary outside St. Louis, and as president of Elmhurst College near Chicago. Both schools were associated with the German Evangelical Synod. In 1931, he was called to Yale University Divinity School as the Sterling Professor of Theology and Ethics, and served there until his death in 1962. He authored more than ten books and numerous articles in his long career and taught countless numbers of seminarians. Much of his work served to influence other seminaries in the United States as well as the churches those seminaries and Yale served. He was a major force in theological and ecclesiastical circles for the middle part of the twentieth century.

Niebuhr's own personal connection as a minister in the Evangelical and Reformed Church; his prominence at an historically-related seminary to the UCC; and his own affinity for the theology of Jonathan Edwards and the Social Gospel, both with deep roots in Congregationalism – all tie Niebuhr to the UCC. But, perhaps his most enduring legacy is the UCC Statement of Faith, written in dialogue with Niebuhr's theology, according to Professor Roger Shinn, one of the members of the committee which drafted the original Statement of Faith.

H. Richard Niebuhr offered a complex account of the Christian faith. His concepts of history and revelation and his concern for faithfulness within the community of faith to God and the transformation of the world through Jesus Christ is a powerful witness to God's work in the world. His emphasis on historical and progressive revelation and faith as grounded in the experience of human persons and in the revelation of Jesus Christ is critical to our call to interpret the Gospel anew in each generation. If we understand who we are in relation to our own history and to the history of God in Christ acting in the world, our current stands and convictions make more sense and empower us to move forward.

Reflection:

- What is my experience with Jesus Christ and God's revelation in my own life?
- What do I think the relationship is between Christ and the world? Christ and the church?
- How does my congregation understand and reflect on the UCC Statement of Faith?

Resources:

- by H. Richard Niebuhr: *Christ and Culture, Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith, The Kingdom of God in America, The Meaning of Revelation, and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture.*
- *H. Richard Niebuhr (Makers of the Theological Mind)*, by Lonnie Kliever; Hendrickson Publishers, reprint edition, 1991

"Progressive Revelation: H. Richard Neibuhr" was written by the Rev. Anita L. Bradshaw, Ph.D. She currently serves as Minister-in-Covenant at Mayflower Community Congregational UCC in Minneapolis. She has taught the UCC's History, Theology and Polity course at Yale Divinity School and at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, and in Synod settings at General Synod 24 in Minneapolis, and will be teaching at General Synod 26 in Hartford.

