

Makiki Christian Church
Denominational Study Team Report:
A response to the General Synod Resolution
“In Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All”

February 2006

In July 2005, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ passed a resolution calling for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. Although the resolution was not binding on local congregations in the denomination, it set off much confusion, anger and distress. Since then, churches have left the UCC, and where churches have remained, many have still lost members and leaders. Here at Makiki Christian Church, after two impromptu congregational gatherings to discuss the resolution in July, the Christian Witness Board formed the Denominational Study Team to examine not only the resolution, but also the context and surrounding questions raised by the controversy.

The resolution in question is “In Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All.” Its justification for this call is that “The message of the Gospel is the lens through which the whole of scripture is to be interpreted. Love and compassion, justice and peace are at the very core of the life and ministry of Jesus...” In the view of its writers, “The biblical call to justice and compassion (to love one’s neighbor as one’s self) provides the mandate for marriage equality.”

Supporters of the resolution see this appeal as a continuation of the UCC’s proud history of advancing justice issues in society. They point to the denomination’s earlier involvement in advancing the rights of women and minority groups. They claim that this resolution continues the denomination’s prophetic witness to society.

Would-be prophets, however, are not free to construct their own reality. Those who appeal to the biblical tradition of the prophetic are bound to deal with the biblical tradition as a whole. While it is true that both women’s rights and racial equality were championed by those who found inspiration in Scripture, it does not necessarily follow that for every perceived injustice similar biblical support can be found.

Makiki Christian Church has long represented a moderate evangelical voice in the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ. In the view of our pastoral leadership, the leadership councils and many others in our congregation, the General Synod resolution is flawed in its conclusion that the Bible sanctions same-sex marriage, and hence, that same-sex marriage rights are justified. The “educational resources” commended by the General Synod to promote discussion on this subject have been examined and fail to make a compelling argument for the resolution. They fail even more in providing anything like a fair-minded presentation of the issue. If anything, the resources

commended by the General Synod confirm the feeling that an extremist political agenda has taken hold in our national setting, and no dissenting views will be tolerated.

Something is askew in our denominational dynamics. While we do not believe that there is a “liberal conspiracy” at work, it does appear to us that the way our denomination functions leaves us very vulnerable to “friendly fire”—to being torn apart on sensitive issues such as same-sex marriage, when instead we might model a different way of dealing with differences.

The fallout since last July has been terribly costly. While the UCC’s own newsletter claims that only 20 or so churches have left or plan to leave the denomination since July, another website list totals 80 churches...and counting (www.faithfulandwelcoming.org). When the UCC newsletter seeks to offset these church losses with the “good” news that other churches are expressing interest and joining the denomination, we wonder why there isn’t instead concern and effort to keep churches from leaving. (See “Dallas’ Cathedral of Hope, amid others, seeks UCC affiliation” in *United Church News*, December/January 2006, p. A3.)

When a political agenda is presented as a “prophetic witness” at the expense of basic pastoral concern for the integrity and welfare of the UCC as the diverse church that it is, there is a serious problem to address. Our society is desperate for alternatives to win-lose ways of working. Our General Synod is not offering any help.

Perceptions such as this have led some members—including prominent leaders—of Makiki Christian Church to the conviction that now is the time for our church also to depart from the United Church of Christ. It is the unanimous recommendation of the Denominational Study Team that we *not* take this step, at least at this time, for the following reasons:

1) We are the United Church of Christ. While the public may think that the entire denomination supports the General Synod resolution, or that the General Synod speaks for the denomination, the reality is that the General Synod does not enjoy overwhelming support and it does not speak for Makiki Christian Church. We have our own voice, and a crisis such as this presents us with a valuable opportunity to demonstrate who we are—not just to say what we are against.

2) A church leaving its denomination, or members splitting off from a church occurs so frequently that it is now considered the normal course of action whenever disagreement or controversy arises. We believe that the biblical description of the church compels us to seek another way to deal with our differences when they arise. We need to be faithful, but we are also called to demonstrate compassion and charity to those with whom we may disagree. We

believe that there is an opportunity for us to model how a church might respect diversity by encouraging open, honest and respectful dialogue.

3) To leave the denomination will only further weaken the evangelical witness that appears to be lacking in the UCC. The evangelical witness is part of the history, diversity and prophetic tradition that the UCC so proudly upholds. Without this witness, the UCC would indeed become unrecognizable.

4) To leave the UCC will not be to leave behind the debate. Any other denomination that we might align with is vulnerable to the same controversy. The issue of same-sex marriage is facing our society and the church. There are no “safe” quarters. We cannot run or hide from it.

The recommendation of the Denominational Study Team, therefore, is that we remain in the United Church of Christ and bear witness to what we believe the Spirit is saying to the church. There is no quick answer or solution to this dilemma. The issue will not be resolved with this report, nor with any plan of action we might take. The diversity and disagreement that are apparent today will be with us for the foreseeable future.

For the present, however, we further recommend the following:

1) Effective immediately, suspend OCWM contributions. These funds, disbursed through our Christian Witness Board, have totaled \$20,000 a year for many years. (This year’s budget was set at \$16,000.) Our Church’s Wider Mission funds are used to support the ministries of the Hawaii Conference and the national settings of the UCC. With regret, we recommend the suspension of our contributions.

It has been said that the General Synod speaks *to* but not *for* the local church, but we find that the details of how our denomination functions contradict this sound bite. While the same-sex marriage rights resolution does not speak for us, it does call for our national, conference and even local church leaders and churches to lobby for these rights wherever possible. The problem is that while General Synod resolutions do not speak for local churches, they do in fact set our national agenda. Where we might disagree with that agenda, we are left with few practical options.

Further, as a recent article in *United Church News* makes clear, the money that we give through OCWM is borrowed and loaned between national ministries to advance particular agendas. In the article “Stillspeaking’s television ad buy postponed until March” in the December/January 2006 issue, the practice of national ministries loaning funds from their budgets (largely consisting of OCWM funds) to advance particular goals is described. What this means is that what we give through OCWM has been and can be used for ends that are neither foreseen nor approved by local churches.

2) The Denominational Study Team also recommends the encouragement of a dialogue and discussion within our congregation about the issue of homosexuality and the church's response to it. We do not believe that the Bible sanctions same-sex unions. But this is not the gospel's last word on the subject. Our faith calls for honest and compassionate engagement with the issue and with those who may differ from us. A positive starting point may be a small group study on the issue, as well as a forum at which differing perspectives may be aired. Contrary to our national rhetoric, what is needed especially on volatile issues is not a group *speaking to*, but people speaking *with* one another.

During the course of the Study Team's work, we invited Pastor Jack Belsom of Iao Congregational Church on Maui to speak with us about his and Iao's experiences which had led that church to declare Open and Affirming status, an act that typically identifies a UCC church as affirming same-sex partnerships. Our dialogue was free, frank and friendly. We believe we experienced a model of mutual ministry that can be life-giving for our congregation as well as our Conference and denomination. Inviting Pastor Belsom back for a forum with our congregation might be the first step in modeling a better way of dealing with this controversial subject than the way our General Synod and national leadership have chosen.

This problem has not developed overnight; it is not going to be resolved quickly or easily. But it is not our task to "resolve" the issue. Our task is to be the church, and we believe that this means being a specific community of faith that strives to discuss and discern God's guidance on these issues, as best we are able. This we have attempted to do as the members of the Denominational Study Team. The work is not complete, but it has begun.

Becky Ashizawa
Jean Fukuji
Yoko Hiltbrand
Pastor Wayne Ibara
Keith Kuboyama
Ikuko Vines
Pastor Howard Yoshida