

“The Denomination that Gets There First”
Galatians 3.19–29 The Rev. Hal Chorpensing
Plymouth Congregational UCC, Ft. Collins, 4 May 2003

This is indeed an auspicious day in the history of Plymouth Congregational UCC: it is our first (hopefully annual) celebration of being a church that is deliberately and unabashedly open and affirming. That’s not always an easy place to be. I understand that not everyone is exactly in the same place on this issue, especially when we leave the hallowed halls of Plymouth Church. In fact, I have been told that there are pastors in the more conservative churches in Ft. Collins who refuse to be in the same room with me, because of the stance we’ve taken on this issue of inclusion.

And that’s okay! We’ve always been a bit *avant garde* as a denomination, even going back to the founding of the Congregational tradition in sixteenth-century England. Our forbears were the rebels, the radical edge of the Church of England. In fact Jesus was considered a bit *avant garde* in his day, wasn’t he? It’s not always easy to be there, but that’s who we are!

A friend of mine, Ron Buford, who will be the keynote speaker at our Centennial banquet in October, made a wonderful observation: the UCC is the denomination that gets there first. And if you look at our history, you’ll see what Ron means.

We’re going to do a bit of time travel this morning, so I’ll need you to strap on your imagination, as we journey together from 1620 to 1785 to 1853 to 1985 to 2000.

Obviously, the Pilgrims and Puritans weren’t the first people in New England: the Pequots and Wampanoags beat them by several thousand years. But come the Pilgrims and Puritans did, and soon they would develop a system of church governance they called the New England or Congregational Way. Having been germinated in the fertile soil of the University of Cambridge in England, the seeds of Congregational education sprouted again in 1636 with the founding of Harvard College to train our clergy, under the leadership of its first president, the Rev. Increase Mather.

Imagine this: you’re a part of the Massachusetts Bay settlement; you’ve been there for seven years, and what do you do? You start a college to train your clergy!

And eleven years after your arrival, you print the first book ever published in the Western hemisphere: the Bay Psalm Book...sort of the predecessor to our New Century Hymnal! And you found the first publishing company: the Pilgrim Press, which is still around and part of the United Church of Christ!

Now, I want you to imagine that you’re in the year 1661, and you are the Rev. John Eliot, who wants to help Indians learn about Christianity. But, being a good Congregationalist, you know that they need to be intellectually engaged in their faith. So, what do you do? You translate the Bible, for the first time, into a native American language and publish it.

Imagine now that the American Revolution is over. It’s 1785 and you are a mixed-race intellectual named Lemuel Haynes, but as far as most people are concerned, you are black. You sense a call to ministry, and you approach the Congregational Church in Torrington, CT, which ordains you: the first time a person of African-American descent is ordained by a mainline church in the United States. You go on to have a distinguished ministerial career, serving white congregations in Vermont and New York.

Do you see a record of risk-taking, of radicalism, of never being satisfied with the status quo? What risks is God calling you to today?

The year now is 1817. You are a divinity student at Yale College, also founded by Congregational clergymen to train new ministers, and you sense a call to work in ministry

with deaf persons. You are the Rev. Thomas Gallaudet (anyone heard of Gallaudet College in Washington, DC?) and you are being ordained to by the First Church in Hartford to a special ministry with the deaf. And you found the first school for deaf persons in the United States. The American School for the Deaf in West Hartford is still one of the premier academies for deaf education in the world, and it's where American Sign Language was developed.

Think about the way God is working through people to open up the world, to liberate those whom society viewed as cast-off, worthless people! Who are the church's untouchables today?

You are a brilliant woman in the year 1853. You know in your heart that you have a vocation to ordained ministry, but you know that women have never been ordained, at least since the early church. But that's not going to stop you, because you are Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman to be ordained in the modern world, and you are a Congregationalist in New York.

How much talent has the church lost over the millennia by saying that women were not fit for ministry? How much will the Southern Baptists lose now that they've closed the doors on 51 percent of the human race? And how much of the humanity of those women has been or will be taken away?

Fast forward through the twentieth century, and stop at the year 1972. You are a young man who has been brought up in the German Evangelical and Reformed tradition of the UCC, and all you've ever wanted to do was to be ordained. But, you're also a young man who realizes that you're gay. You are the Rev. Bill Johnson, and you are the first openly gay person ever ordained by the church universal.

Imagine that you are a delegate to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in 1985, and you have been asked to consider a controversial resolution, declaring that your denomination is open and affirming of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons. You, like a majority of other delegates, vote affirmatively, and your denomination become the first to declare that it welcomes gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons into the full life of the church.

Now, it's 2001 at the Annual Meeting of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, and you're being asked to consider whether your congregation should declare that it is Open and Affirming, and what do you say? You have charted a course for the second century of Plymouth Congregational UCC by declaring that people of all colors, ethnicities, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations are welcome in this place. That we are **all** the children of God.

That's not the end of the story! We've just taken the first step at Plymouth. Voting is only the beginning, now we've got to live into being open and affirming in every way possible. Another thing that sets us apart is our welcome for GLBT folks. Virtually every church has a sign out in front that says, "All are welcome." Are all **really** welcome? Most churches do welcome people who have a disability, but there are some who don't. Even some of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters welcome people of color, and some of them even let women speak and teach in the church!

But, how many of them welcome people who aren't straight? I can count on one hand the Christian congregations in Ft. Collins that fit into that category: MCC, St. Paul's, the Mennonite Fellowship, and us. That leaves an immense number of congregations that are willing to continue to damage the lives and the souls of our brothers and sisters, and it's time for a change.

But, until that time comes, let's take advantage of the fact that we've gotten here first! Let's witness our welcome to the GLBT community in this city! To put it in commercial terms, we've got a great market niche! Being ONA is one of the things that sets

us apart, and it's something we should celebrate! And we need to be *intentional* about our invitation and our welcome.

When the apostle Paul, 19 centuries ago, wrote, in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” he is issuing a challenge to the church not to discriminate.

What a radical statement! It's an assertion that turns the conventional wisdom of Paul's day on its head. It's saying something that will get you stoned or crucified by the powers that be.

Paul takes those who are one-up and says that there is no longer a distinction between them and those who are oppressed. And that is just what our Open and Affirming statement says: that we aim for a community in which all persons are equal in the eyes of God and each other.

And, we still have some work to do here at Plymouth. We're working on plans for an accessible bathroom. But, what about our sanctuary? Jean and I belonged to a historic New England church with a meetinghouse built in 1795, and it had cut-outs in the pews for wheelchairs, not just in the back, not just in the front, but in the middle as well. If they could alter their aesthetic, I'm sure we can, too. Have you ever noticed that our chancel is also not wheelchair accessible? It may never have occurred to you, but we must be intentional in welcoming all persons *extravagantly!* Just as God welcomes each of us extravagantly!

I've told you that during our Centennial year, I'm going to continue to ask you a question, which I will pose to you again, and I'd like you to think of it in terms of our openness and affirmation: “What is your dream for Plymouth?”

We have a long and proud history as people of faith, as people in the Congregational stream of the United Church of Christ. It's not easy, and it's not comfortable, but that's where God has called us to be!

We have to keep working continually to be the people who lead the way: who get there first. Amen.