



A Legacy of Safe Spaces and Solidarity

Michael Schuenemeyer

On June 25, the United Church of Christ (UCC) not only celebrated its 65th birthday, but also the 50th anniversary of the ordination of the Rev. Dr. William R. “Bill” Johnson*, the first openly gay person to be ordained to Christian ministry by a predominantly heterosexual denomination. Rev. Johnson’s ordination was a pivotal moment in the life of the UCC. Yes, it created significant tension and sparked intense debate in the church. But ultimately, it was a source of hope for many—especially many queer people of faith—that the household of faith could learn, grow, and embrace the fresh movement of the Spirit.

Of course, this didn’t happen out of the blue. In 1957, when the merger creating the United Church of Christ occurred, issues of human sexuality were part of the cultural/societal context into which the United Church of Christ was born. In 1957, the UCC wasn’t anywhere near the forefront of gay rights, but the issues were becoming more public and there were UCC clergy calling on the society and the church to be safe places and supporting civil rights for gay and lesbian people.

In April of 1969, two and half months before the Stonewall uprising in New York, for the first time a national ministry of the UCC adopted a supportive social policy resolution. The Council for Christian Social Action—a predecessor body to what is now Justice and Witness—declared its opposition to and called for the repeal of laws that criminalized private consensual same-sex relations between adults, declared its opposition to policies that banned military service, opposed police harassment and entrapment, and called the various settings of the UCC to have “honest and open discussion of the nature of homosexuality in our society.”

The honest and open conversations that happened helped to lay the foundation for the ordinations of the Rev. Dr. Bill Johnson and the Rev. Anne Holmes, and the hundreds of other openly

queer clergy in the UCC. Over the years, these conversations have become more inclusive, more expansive, and more intersectional, and are still vitally needed. The acronym of queer LGBTQIA+** inclusion continues to grow, calling us to be ever more expansive in how we understand the different identities we carry and encounter, as well as challenging us to embrace the intersectional truth that none of us are free until all of us are free.

In the wake of the Roe v. Wade decision, history could repeat itself, as future cases are likely to challenge and potentially reverse previous court decisions, removing rights recently gained. In the midst of such turbulent times, may we trust the UCC's legacy of creating safe spaces to engage and offer public witness, working in solidarity with others, and being open to learn, grow, and embrace the fresh movement of the Spirit for a just world for all.

* [*A Position of Faith*](#) is a short documentary film with key moments leading to the ordination of the Rev. Dr. William R. "Bill" Johnson.

** LGBTQIA+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Plus (and others who experience marginalization).

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The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.