

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST:

A CHURCH OF MANY *FIRSTS*

Inspired by the principle of religious freedom, the Pilgrims and Puritans traveled to this land to establish their own churches. They also founded the nation's **first** public schools. The **oldest continuously operated public school in America was founded** in 1635.

Prevented by King James from publishing their materials, the Pilgrims brought their press to the new world and published the **FIRST** book on the North American continent, *The Bay Psalms Book*, in 1640. Today, the UCC's Pilgrim Press is the oldest continuously operating press on the continent and freedom of the press is a hallmark of US democracy.

Early New England Congregationalists began forming colleges – the **FIRST** was Harvard in 1636, which was founded out of a desire to provide training for ministerial candidates on the same level as that received by immigrant ministers from England.

Today, The United Church of Christ continues its emphasis on education. In 2001, General Synod called on people at all settings of the church to advocate for and support excellent, universal public education, calling it “one of the foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century.” Today, the UCC is the only Christian church in the U.S. with a national staff member devoted full-time to public education.

Congregationalist opposition to slavery began in 1700 when Puritan Samuel Sewall, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court, wrote the **FIRST** anti-slavery tract published in America. Throughout the north, many future UCC churches were active in the abolitionist movement, and some served as stops on the Underground Railroad.

"No tax on tea!" was **FIRST** heard in the Old South Meeting House (a Congregational church) which became the staging area for the Boston Tea Party, led by Old South deacon (and brew master!) Sam Adams.

In 1773, Congregationalist Phillis Wheatley was the **FIRST** Black woman whose writings (poetry) were published.

The all-white Congregational church in Granville, Massachusetts called the Rev. Lemuel Haynes as minister. He was the **FIRST** African-American ordained to Christian ministry in a mainline tradition (1785).

And in 1839, Congregationalist John Quincy Adams argued before the Supreme Court for the freedom of the *Amistad* captives – Africans who mutinied aboard the schooner *Amistad* after having been kidnapped and illegally sold into slavery. This was the **FIRST** human rights case that was successfully argued before the US Supreme Court. Congregationalists also led the effort to form the *Amistad* Committee to educate and care for the captives – a committee that later evolved into the American Missionary Association. After the Civil War, the AMA worked with freed African-Americans to found hundreds of schools and churches all over the south to educate freed slaves and their children. These became the **FIRST** inter-racial schools in the country, as white New Englanders traveled to the south to teach in the schools attended by both the children of freed slaves and the teacher's own children.

Continuing the legacy begun in the 1700s, the United Church of Christ was in 1989 the **FIRST** Christian denomination to name racism as a sin.

Oberlin College , founded by Congregationalists in 1833 in Ohio , was the **FIRST** U.S. college to award four-year college degrees to women.

In 1853 Antoinette Brown was ordained as minister of a Congregational Church in New York, making her the **FIRST** American woman ordained into Christian ministry.

In 1806, five Williams College undergraduates felt a calling to dedicate their lives to foreign mission. This resulted in the establishment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1812, the Board sent out America's **FIRST** foreign missionaries to Bombay. Today, the United Church of Christ has 100 missionaries around the world.

In a Congregational church in Massachusetts in 1943, Reinhold Niebuhr introduced and **FIRST** prayed the Serenity Prayer: "God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

In the early 1960s the UCC Office of Communications brought suit against the Federal Communications Commission for systemic racial discrimination. The landmark decision **FIRST** opened our federal airwaves to people of color.

A United Church of Christ ordained minister, Benjamin Chavis, working in the UCC Office of Racial and Justice Ministries, **FIRST** coined the phrase, "environmental racism" to describe the practice of placing toxic and waste facilities near poor, ethnic communities, targeting Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics.

The United Church of Christ was the **FIRST** denomination to ordain an openly gay person. The San Francisco Association ordained Bill Johnson in 1972.

Massachusetts Conference Annual Meeting delegates led the way in the Open and Affirming movement which invites congregations to pray and study whether they are called to fully welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into their lives and ministries. The 185th Annual Meeting adopted the **FIRST** ONA resolution within the UCC in 1984, and General Synod followed the next year.

On May 17, 2004 it became legal in Massachusetts for same-gender couples to marry. United Church of Christ clergy were probably the **FIRST** Christian clergy to officiate at these legal unions. Not all UCC clergy and churches are in favor of same-gender marriage. UCC clergy are not required to officiate at these unions; neither are they prevented from doing so by bishops or church doctrine.