



National Religious Leadership Roundtable members respond to increase in gifts to the United Church of Christ after controversial support of same-sex marriage

March 20, 2008

National Religious Leadership Roundtable members responded today to the announcement by the United Church of Christ (UCC) that gifts to its denomination have increased by more than \$1.2 million in 2007 since its controversial resolution in support of same-sex marriage.

Statement by the Rev. Ruth Garwood National Religious Leadership Roundtable

"Prophets abound. Every church that extends a welcome to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities speaks prophetically to the community inside and outside the church, sending a clear message that God's inclusive love is for everyone.

"Prophecy brings development. The discernment process about becoming welcoming involves Bible study, education about sexual orientation and gender identity, storytelling and theological examination. They translate their beliefs about God's love into the actions of welcoming God's people into their churches.

"Prophecy brings blessings. Prospective church members look for welcoming churches and connect that welcome to progressive positions on other issues. Welcoming LGBT people is often a signal to prospective members that the church is progressive in other ways as well. These churches attract not only LGBT people, but also allies who are looking for an inclusive environment in which to raise their children. Once on a path of inclusion, churches also begin to examine their actions on other issues, expanding their understanding of the implications of the diversity of race, gender, economic class and physical ability.

"Prophecy brings confidence. Some congregations decide to offer their welcome, even with concerns about potential losses of membership or financial support. 'What will people think? Who will be alienated? Won't we lose members?' Most churches find that they gain much more than they lose. In the United Church of Christ, welcoming congregations are among the most vital in our denomination.

"Having found that welcoming LGBT people brings new life to their community life, many of the churches respond to events outside of the church, taking their theological convictions to schools where bullying is a problem, to workplaces that would fire LGBT people, to local and state elections where ballot issues of LGBT equality are on the ballot.

"When churches accept risk and still step out into courage, they discover new joys in their life together.

"The United Church of Christ has taken public prophetic stands that are controversial and the denomination thrives. In 2005, when the General Synod passed a resolution supporting marriage equality, some people predicted the precipitous decline of the church. In 2007, however, church

members affirmed their commitment to the shared ministries of the UCC tangibly: by increasing their financial support of the UCC."

The Rev. Ruth Garwood is the executive director of the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns.

Responses from National Religious Leadership Roundtable Members

"Clarity on inclusion as base line for common hope draws a circle wide enough to extend love to all of God's children. The UCC's clarity of extravagant hospitality including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people inspires others to pray, to participate, to reach out and to give generously. Clearly loving - amazing! Where do I send my check?"

- Rev. Troy Plummer
Executive Director
Reconciling Ministries Network, United Methodist Church

"People join and support churches that stand for something. Good for my beloved United Church of Christ that our longtime members and new friends are supporting prophetic justice in the name of Jesus Christ!"

- Harry Knox
Director
Human Rights Campaign Religion and Faith Program

"As president of the World Congress of GLBT Jews, it does my heart good to see results like this. All religious denominations are well-served when they open their doors to all congregants wishing to participate and support issues of importance to them. I applaud the stance of the United Church of Christ as well as their members in both doing the right thing and supporting their church financially for doing so. Most branches of Judaism are welcoming and the rewards are many. I am pleased to count the United Church of Christ among supportive religious denominations. As a legally married man living in Massachusetts, the lone U.S. state with legal same-sex marriage, I can say that the support of denominations like the United Church of Christ can only help spread legally recognized same-sex marriage across the United States of America."

- Howard Solomon
President
World Congress of GLBT Jews: Keshet Ga'ava Two

"All people of faith can celebrate this good news which comes during Holy Week for Christians. The positive side of what happens when a church takes a courageous stand is seldom told but fortunately, is more and more common. What gets told most often is the threat of diminished membership and contributions. My friend, the Rev. Timothy Downs, conference minister of the UCC's Southeast Conference here in Atlanta, has pointed out that the fear of moving forward on justice issues for GLBT people in the church should not dictate the way denominations respond to the needs of people. There is renewed life on the other side, just as the story of Easter tells us. Congratulations to our sisters and brothers of the United Church of Christ, for giving us Lutherans, and indeed all denominations, an example of how courage and faith do lead to blessings in every respect when the message of full inclusion for people of all sexual orientations is made clear."

- Bob Gibeling
Lutheran Services of Georgia
Member of the Roundtable Steering Committee

"This news supports other studies that have shown that local congregations that become publicly welcoming and affirming of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks experience an increase in giving and in membership. It affirms what we know - when communities have the courage and faith to engage in God's extravagant welcome, new life is released. People are inspired and drawn to the ministry. When congregations live out their belief that love is stronger than death, openness than ignorance and faith than fear - power and energy and the Spirit are palpably present. And folks want to be part of it!"

- Rev. Rebecca Voelkel
IWR and Faith Work Director
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force