

The announcement last week that the Puerto Rico Conference of the UCC is leaving the denomination is significant, not because of the number of churches leaving but because of what the conference represented to the denomination. The Puerto Rico Conference is a microcosm of the challenges we face across the denomination.

Puerto Rico has been a focal point for the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries for some time. Whether the UCC was opposing the Navy's use of Vieques as target practice or the defense of Puerto Rican FALN terrorists, the UCC was serious in its commitment to justice issues that were significant to Puerto Rico and to the conference. Even the boilerplate footnote on UCC press releases distinguished Puerto Rico from its mainland brethren. For many in the UCC, Puerto Rico defined our social witness of opposing colonial power and abuse and we dutifully defended David against Goliath. No one can question the UCC's commitment to Puerto Rico. But, in the end, it wasn't enough. At the end of the day, theological division about "Marriage Equality" trumped the commitment of our denomination to Puerto Rico. With this history of commitment, if the entire Puerto Rico Conference can leave the UCC, any church can leave the UCC.

The dirty little secret is that it didn't have to be this way.

The UCC General Synod resolution on "Marriage Equality" was more of a public statement than guidance for the local church. Local churches in the UCC are autonomous and have always had the freedom to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies. In this sense, the resolution didn't change anything functionally in the local church. Proponents of the resolution will quickly point out that the General Synod resolution only speaks TO local churches, not FOR them - and they are right, but disingenuous. Within hours of the resolution passing and before churches even had a chance to digest the resolution, the UCC national office issued a press release declaring that the "UCC affirms equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender". This isn't the way you speak "to" a local church; this is how you speak "for" the local church.

Despite the General Synod vote, there is no consensus within the local churches of the UCC on equality of marriage. Since the General Synod vote, John Thomas has defined the tension within our denomination on Marriage Equality in terms of morality and as "A United Church that stands for something". Unfortunately, we are not a united church and some would argue that we haven't been since the merger in 1957. Proponents for the marriage equality resolution boast of the 80% vote in favor of it at General Synod but little is said of the 10% of congregations across the UCC that have actually adopted the "Open and Affirming" (ONA) designation since 1985. This designation is the single most significant indicator that a local church accepts all people regardless of sexual orientation into the full life and ministry of their church. This doesn't suggest that the other 90% are opposed to the designation, but it clearly reflects the gap in Thomas's vision for a "united church".

Thomas has a great deal of responsibility for where we are at as a denomination since the General Synod vote. Instead of unifying the church, Thomas has increasingly polarized the church. While Thomas acknowledged initially that the resolution would "test our commitments and our unity", disagreement on Marriage Equality has been met with conspiracy theories. At his Gettysburg College speech, Thomas claimed that groups like the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) have been "encouraging members and congregations either to redirect mission funding or even to leave their denominations". However, of the nearly 180 churches that have left the UCC, Thomas has never identified a single church that left as part of a conspiracy from the IRD. By and large, churches are leaving for the same reason the Puerto Rico Conference left and it isn't related to a conspiracy. Churches are leaving because the national office and General Synod have claimed a consensus on Marriage Equality that doesn't exist in the local church. While the national office has been careful to disclaim in public announcements that the General Synod resolution does not speak for the local church, the headlines in the press, predictably, didn't seem to capture the spirit of our polity.

The loss of the Puerto Rico Conference (and the loss of all churches) is a reflection on the leadership of the UCC. In hindsight, some have over-simplified the issue that these churches are leaving because they didn't get their way and that there were plenty of opportunities to voice disagreement before the vote. While fair and accurate, this rationale fails to address the necessity of this resolution within our congregational polity.

Thomas recently lamented that there has never been a time in the history of the church "when conflict has been absent from our life." However, Thomas, and other leaders in our church today, fail to recognize that our forbearers understood this conflict and shaped our polity to address it. The "Marriage Equality" resolution, as it was constructed and subsequently executed, functionally failed to recognize the autonomy of the local church. It's not just our leadership that fails to recognize our polity either. People on all sides of the issue have framed the debate on Marriage Equality in terms of morality while failing to recognize that this is first a matter for discernment for the local church. For many churches, the polarizing effect of the General Synod resolution has shifted the discussion away from the discernment of the actual Marriage Equality issue to making decisions how (and if) to support the denomination... and it's all completely unnecessary.

-James Hutchins

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UCCtruths.com has never taken a position on the Marriage Equality resolution and fully recognizes that good people on all sides of this issue seek faithful deliberation and we honor our polity that allows for disagreement on this and other issues.