

# A Church of Firsts

## A HISTORIC AND ONGOING COMMITMENT TO JOINING FAITH AND ACTION

### prepare

#### What's behind all this?

The United Church of Christ is a distinct and diverse community of Christians that come together as one church to join faith and action. Nationwide and with partners around the world, the UCC serves God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world. The UCC is a church of firsts, a church of extravagant welcome, and a united and uniting church where "...they may all be one" (John 17:21).

The United Church of Christ has been a church of firsts, weaving God's message of hope and extravagant welcome with action for justice and peace. Together, we live out our faith in ways that effect change in our communities. The UCC's many "firsts" come from the traditions that came together in 1957 to form the UCC. This means that we have inherited a tradition of acting upon the demands of our faith. When we read in Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," a demand is made upon us to work towards equality and justice for all. And so we were the first historically white denomination to ordain an African-American, the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain an openly LGBTQ minister, and the first Christian church to affirm the right of same-gender couples to marry. We were in the forefront as partners in the anti-slavery movement and the Civil Rights movement. Our response to the demands of our faith is woven tightly into history.

#### Participants' Perspectives

- Participants may not yet realize the long tradition of justice work in the UCC. Help them connect our history with our continued presence and work today.
- Participants interested in historical movements will find the facts and historical figures interesting. Less historically inclined participants will benefit from seeing the bigger picture and the overall trajectory of historical movements that have carved the UCC's identity and propelled it forward.

#### *As you prepare for this session*

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

#### *Where is this going?*

Participants will explore the UCC's and its predecessor denominations' work for justice that made historic firsts in a variety of justice and equality movements. They will also explore how that work for justice remains central to the UCC today.

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# encounter

## Video

1. Warm Up  
The UCC is proud of its firsts in history. Our historic firsts distinguish the UCC as a leader in a variety of justice movements, an identity we are proud to carry on today. Give participants paper or personal sized chalkboards and ask them to sketch out a timeline, beginning with 1600 or 1700 and stretching on through today. Ask participants to fill any of the UCC's historic firsts on the timeline and an approximate date if they can. As they watch the video, invite participants to fill in their timeline.
2. Watch  
"A Church of Firsts: A Historic and Ongoing Commitment to Joining Faith and Action"
3. Unpack
  - What events were you able to add to the timeline?
  - What historic firsts were familiar to you?
  - What historic firsts were new to you?
  - These were important events unto themselves, but how and why are they important for the UCC to recognize as a part of our tradition?
  - What connections do you see between the historic events and the UCC's work for justice today?

### Materials:

-Ability to show video

# engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session's themes.

## Activity One: Everett Parker and the Office of Communication

In 1959, as the Civil Rights Movement was growing, Southern television stations imposed a news blackout on the movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., asked the UCC to intervene. Everett Parker of the UCC's Office of Communication took the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to court, earning a ruling that the airwaves are public, not private, property. The decision helped lead to a drastic increase in airtime for people of color and an increased presence in television studios and newsrooms.

Teach participants more about Everett Parker and his work with the UCC's Office of Communication by using and discussing one or both of following resources:

### Materials:

-Access to showing video  
-Copies of "Everett C. Parker, the UCC's trailblazing broadcast reformer, dies at 102" by William Winslow

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- Watch the video “A Tribute to the Rev. Everett C. Parker” available on the United Church of Christ’s Youtube Channel
- Read together the obituary for Everett Parker, “Everett C. Parker, the UCC’s trailblazing broadcast reformer, dies at 102” by William Winslow

In conversation afterward, ask participants

- In what ways was Everett Parker and the UCC’s Office of Communication a trailblazing first?
- What impact did this work have?
- Are there parts of this history you remember? What parts of this history were new to you?
- If participants remember hearing about the events as they unfolded, were they aware the UCC was involved?
- How does the UCC continue the work Everett Parker began?
- What are the theological and scriptural reasons the UCC continues this type of work today?

## Activity Two: Wilmington Ten

The American Civil Rights Movement made gains in the 1960s and ’70s, ending segregation and achieving other civil rights reforms, but many of these changes were slow to be implemented. One such place where progress was slow was Wilmington, NC. When several white-owned businesses were victims of arson, Ku Klux Klan members and other white supremacists began patrolling the streets, and violence broke out among the city’s residents.

In 1971, students decided to form a nonviolent protest by boycotting high school, and the UCC sent Reverend Benjamin Chavis, Jr., from their Commission for Racial Justice, to Wilmington. When another white-owned business was firebombed, Chavis and 9 other activists were accused, tried, convicted of arson and conspiracy, and sentenced to a total of 282 years in prison. Convinced that the charges were false, the UCC’s General Synod raised bail. Chavis and the other nine activists were collectively known as the Wilmington Ten.

In 1980, a federal appeals court overturned the convictions, but it wasn’t until 2012 that the Wilmington Ten finally received a pardon of innocence from the governor of North Carolina. There was a formal ceremony to present the pardons at the church where, forty years earlier, Chavis had worked with students. The church is now known as Gregory Congregational UCC. General Synod celebrated the end of this long process when they gathered in 2013.

Teach participants more about the Wilmington Ten and the UCC’s role in supporting them by using and discussing one or both of following resources:

- Read “The Story of the Wilmington Ten,” by Yvonne V. Delk and Bernice Powell Jackson

### *Take it one step further:*

Recently, the UCC’s Office of Communication has been advocating for internet neutrality. Look on [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) to learn more about their current work.

### *Materials:*

- Access to showing video
- Copies of “The Story of the Wilmington Ten,” by Yvonne V. Delk and Bernice Powell Jackson



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- Watch the video “Wilmington 10” available on the United Church of Christ’s Youtube Channel

In conversation afterward, ask participants

- What stood out to you?
- Are there parts of this history you remember? What parts of this history were new to you?
- If participants remember hearing about the events as they unfolded, were they aware the UCC was involved?
- Yvonne Delk and Bernice Powell Jackson write of the Wilmington 10, “We know their story because it is our story. It is the story of the UCC, the story of a denomination seeking to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, challenging and resisting systems of injustice and standing with those who are marginalized or oppressed. It is a story we dare not forget.” What is your reaction to their statement?
- How does the UCC continue the work of challenging and resisting systems of injustice and standing with those who are marginalized or oppressed today?
- What are the theological and scriptural reasons the UCC continues this type of work today?

## Activity Three: Marriage Equality

The 2005 General Synod overwhelmingly passed a resolution supporting same-gender marriage equality, a first for a mainline denomination in the U.S. In 2014, the UCC was pivotal in the establishment of marriage equality in North Carolina. In a historic court case, the denomination and its co-plaintiffs sued the state, claiming its marriage laws (defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman) violated the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion. The judge agreed, the ruling resulting in the legalization of same-gender marriage.

Teach participants more about the UCC as a Church of firsts and its role in fighting for marriage equality

- Read “United Church of Christ Sues North Carolina to Allow Gay Marriage” from *Time Magazine*
- Watch the video “UCC: ‘The Church of Firsts’,” Melissa Harris-Perry with Rev. Dr. J. Bennett Guess, available on the United Church of Christ’s Youtube Channel

In conversation afterward, ask participants

- What stood out to you?
- Are there parts of this history you remember? What parts of this history were new to you?
- If participants remember hearing about the events as they unfolded, were they aware the UCC was involved?
- This is not the first time the UCC has worked for justice by engaging the court system in the United States. What is your response to this kind of engagement? How did their legal strategy work?

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- How does the UCC continue the work of challenging and resisting systems that discriminate against the LGBTQ community?
- What are the theological and scriptural reasons the UCC continues this type of work today?

## Activity Four: Joining Faith and Action Today

The long legacy of working on the frontlines for justice and equality continue. Visit the [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) to see how the UCC is engaging in this work today. Pick one or two areas of focus. With participants, talk about what you have found and ways for the local church to be involved. If possible, connect the current ways the UCC is engaged in an area of focus with other events or movements within the UCC. Be sure to help participants connect faith and action by exploring why the Church has played a significant role in this work.

## Activity Five: What About You?

Observe your congregation. Look through bulletins. Recall recent announcements and newsletters. Think about prayers that are offered, scriptures that are read, and sermons that are preached. How does your local church embody the UCC's commitment to integrate faith and action, working for justice and equality? Send participants out to wander through the church looking for evidence or to strike up conversation with others about their hopes for how your church can better reflect its roots as a church of firsts, with both a historic and ongoing commitment to joining faith and action.

## wrap-up

## Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you've discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do in response?

## Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

### *Materials:*

-Copies of resources found on how to get involved in the UCC's justice work

### *Materials:*

-Access to the building, bulletins, and publications  
-Paper for note taking  
-Pens or pencils

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#### **Sending**

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for trailblazers in our denomination, their work, and their lasting legacy in the lives of many. Offer blessing for communities of faith and each of the participants as they seek to live out a calling to be people who join our faith with action.