

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

March 2020

“Helen Kenyon: A Remarkable Church Leader in Difficult Times”

The shaping of the United Church of Christ in the 1940s and 1950s was difficult. Although leaders in the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church were deeply committed to Christian unity, their views of autonomy and ecclesiastical practices were different. Many members in the Congregational Churches feared that the creation of a “united church” would violate local freedoms; whereas most members in the Evangelical and Reformed Church were not as anxious. One group worried about a “merger,” while the other group concentrated on the “union.” Even today UCC historical language flips back and forth between “merger” and “union.”

In 1949 some members of the Cadman Memorial Church (Congregational) in NYC, who believed that the “merger” violated the local autonomy of all parties, filed a lawsuit in a New York court. The combination of Congregational polity and judicial legalities required the case to be called “Cadman vs. Kenyon,” because the Congregational Christian Churches had elected a woman named Helen Kenyon as moderator in 1948. On January 26, 1950 the New York Supreme Court upheld the case and stopped all activities leading to the UCC. Finally, in December 1953 the decision was overturned by the New York Court of Appeals and the UCC was born in 1957.



Helen Kenyon (1884-1978) played a very important role during these years. She was the first woman to be elected Moderator in Congregational Christian Churches. She attended all the legal hearings and kept extensive notes, reports, committee minutes, legal documents, and opposition publications, (now in the archives at the Congregational Library in Boston).

Contemporary UCC members know little about this amazing woman. As a student at Vassar College, she was active in sports. In 1928, she became the first female chairperson of the Vassar College Board of Trustees. The UCC, however, needs to remember and be thankful for Helen Kenyon’s church leadership during some difficult times.

Contributor: Kendall H. Brown

Sign up at www.ucc.org/ucc_roots_sign_up