

This year, I approached the council about restoring full funding to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) which supports the ministries of the greater United Church of Christ including both the national setting and here within our South Central Conference. However, because there are a few in the congregation adamantly opposed to supporting our denomination, the council decided not to restore funding to OCWM in the 2009 proposed budget. Instead the church will take individual contributions towards supporting OCWM. Only those monies collected specifically designated for OCWM will be sent to the wider church. Further, to help discern the will of the congregation, at the next congregational meeting we will have a non-binding straw vote so folks can indicate how they feel about supporting OCWM.

We have a covenantal responsibility to support our church, for OCWM provides needed financial support for vital ministries. Think about your membership at Friedens. Are you not supposed to support your church? Give of your time, talents, and treasure? Do you think members, even if they disagree with a decision of the congregation, should suddenly drop out and become uninvolved, stop giving anything financially, or stop participating in worship? Is that being a faithful member of the body of Christ, a body that is beautiful in its diversity? Isn't being a member of a church—that covenantal agreement enlisting to do the work of the Lord in a local congregation— more like a marriage ... for better or for worse, through the good times and the bad times?

The United Church of Christ has the best structure of any denomination. Each local church is autonomous, which means we are independent and self-governing. It doesn't matter what announcements come from the national church, we have the covenantal right and obligation to discern all matters of faith and belief. Other denominations do not have this. What the "top" says, you must believe. Further, we have the right to call our own pastor. No one is "sent" here, and local churches can call anyone they want. Finally, we own our own property. The denomination cannot take that from us, no matter what. This is not true in other denominations. But along with this freedom and autonomy comes covenant responsibility, and sadly, few ever live up to the responsibility promised towards others. Not paying OCWM is a violation of our obligation to support the vital ministries of the United Church of Christ.

Jesus tells us that prophets are never welcome in their home town. Throughout the Bible, prophets were never popular. They were harassed, imprisoned, persecuted, beaten, stoned, thrown in lion's dens, and killed. Yet they spoke the Word of God to kings and nations, condemning their unjust economic and social practices. I give thanks to God that the United Church of Christ dares to speak prophetically in this age, calling us to be accountable to God's Word and the radical Gospel proclaimed by Jesus the Christ.

When many still thought slavery was acceptable in our nation, even that blacks were somehow less than human, our church, the United Church of Christ,

stood up and said slavery is wrong and against God's Word. And the fight did not stop with the Emancipation Proclamation for blacks were still discriminated against. And again, the United Church of Christ took a stand for justice, fighting for equal rights for all people, for all deserve the love, mercy, and redemption found in Christ Jesus. The United Church of Christ was the first predominantly white congregation to ordain a person of color and the first to ordain a woman. At the time, these prophetic stances were as controversial and unpopular as daring to say that even a person who is gay is welcome and loved by God.

You might not like what some folks in our denomination have to say or what they believe. On principles of faith and belief, you may even strongly disagree with their views. I certainly do not agree with everything that comes out of General Synod or the mouths of our pastors. But I give thanks to God that I am part of a denomination that allows **all** voices to be heard. If you profess Jesus as Lord and Savior and seek to do His will, then I call you brother and sister in Christ even though I may disagree with you. Today, more than ever, we need prophets in this world, for we are a people who have lost our way and have forsaken our God.

With all that being said, only a tiny fraction of the money sent to the national setting goes to support the kinds of announcements that anger folks in the pew. The reality is that money sent to OCWM goes to help fund vital ministries in our communities and nation and throughout the world, from missionaries to disaster relief to Sunday School and other local church resources.

Our Church's Wider Mission is ...

- Sunday School lessons for kids.
- Gift checks for retired pastors with emergency needs
- Irrigation pipes in the desert.
- Military Chaplains in Iraq.
- Teenagers at camps like Slumber Falls.
- Responding to human tragedies and natural disasters
- Caring about people our society has forgotten
- A Welcoming approach to the Gospel.
- Volunteers reading to the blind.
- Supporting missionaries around the world.
- New pastors for congregations.
- New ways to worship.
- Refugees coming home to their new country.
- Witness for peace on earth.

I ask you, I implore you to vote to honor our covenantal responsibilities, to support the vital ministries of the United Church of Christ. Support Our Church's Wider Mission.