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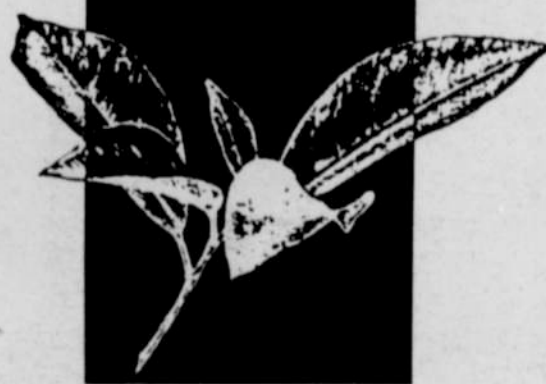
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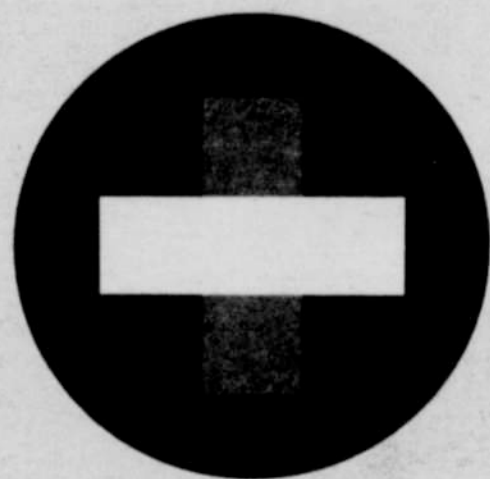


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# Activated by Activism

First Congregational UCC celebrates 1992 decision

by Patricia L. MacAodha

It's that huge stone church with the ivory and red tower on the corner of Southwest Park Avenue and Salmon Street: home to one of Portland's most open-minded Christian congregations. On Jan. 28, First Congregational United Church of Christ celebrated the 15th anniversary of the day in 1992 when its parishioners voted to become an open and affirming congregation, welcoming gay, lesbian and bisexual members to fully participate in the life of their church.

The morning service featured a sermon by retired UCC minister the Rev. Jean Erb, who is a lesbian. Her sermon, "Standing Before God," addressed the church's ongoing commitment to sexual minorities and what it means. The Portland Lesbian Choir was this year's visiting choral group, and a reception followed the service.

Although this Portland church was not the first congregation open to gays and lesbians in the UCC circuit (that honor goes to Riverside UCC in New York City), its membership is historically known for embracing issues that other churches hesitate to touch. Congregationalists have held a strong role of social concern in U.S. political strata. Oberlin College, for example, became the first college to accept women and black people as students.

Activism is identified with this denomination. In July 1985, at the UCC General Synod 15, it encouraged churches to study and become open and affirming toward sexual minorities. The Portland church took up the challenge. According to the Rev. Paul Davis, minister of congregational life, they didn't know at first if there were any sexual minority members. Then, gay and lesbian members started coming out to their fellow parishioners.

The congregation's decision, guided by then associate pastor the Rev. Patricia Ross, was preceded by a six-week study series marked by presentations, readings and interactive question-and-answer opportunities. On July 2, 1992, the congregationalists voted, acknowledging that they were "persons of different ages, education, races, abilities and sexual orientations."

According to open and affirming committee chairwoman Joyce Liljeholm, having made this commitment, they didn't "decide to welcome, but

then it goes in the drawer." The annual service is one of the ways First Congregational keeps the issue in front of its members and continues to address approaches through which it can be a serious participant in the empowerment of sexual minorities.

In 2003, the phrase "gender identities and gender expressions" was added to the 1992 statement. Two transgender women had attended services at the church. Though welcomed and treated well, their presence raised the question: Are trans people fully welcome here? This led to a second series of educational discussions and a second vote, on Jan. 26, 2003, to include trans people in the open and affirming declaration. The vote was preceded by a sermon from Ross, who now serves as senior pastor. Her topic: "When Superman Becomes Lois Lane." The decision in support was unanimous.

Davis says that not all UCC churches have embraced the open and affirming position and that about 81 churches have left the denomination because of the issue. Others, though, have come in. Progress on a controversial issue can be slow, but Davis recognizes positive signs from his own experience. When he was ordained 10 years ago in Philadelphia—the first gay person ordained in Pennsylvania—there was only one open and affirming church. Today, the state boasts 13 churches that have taken up the challenge.

Oregon can claim the highest percentage of UCC churches that are open and affirming, and the Central Pacific Conference (which includes Oregon, southwestern Oregon and southern Idaho) has ruled that any new UCC congregations in the district must be open and affirming.

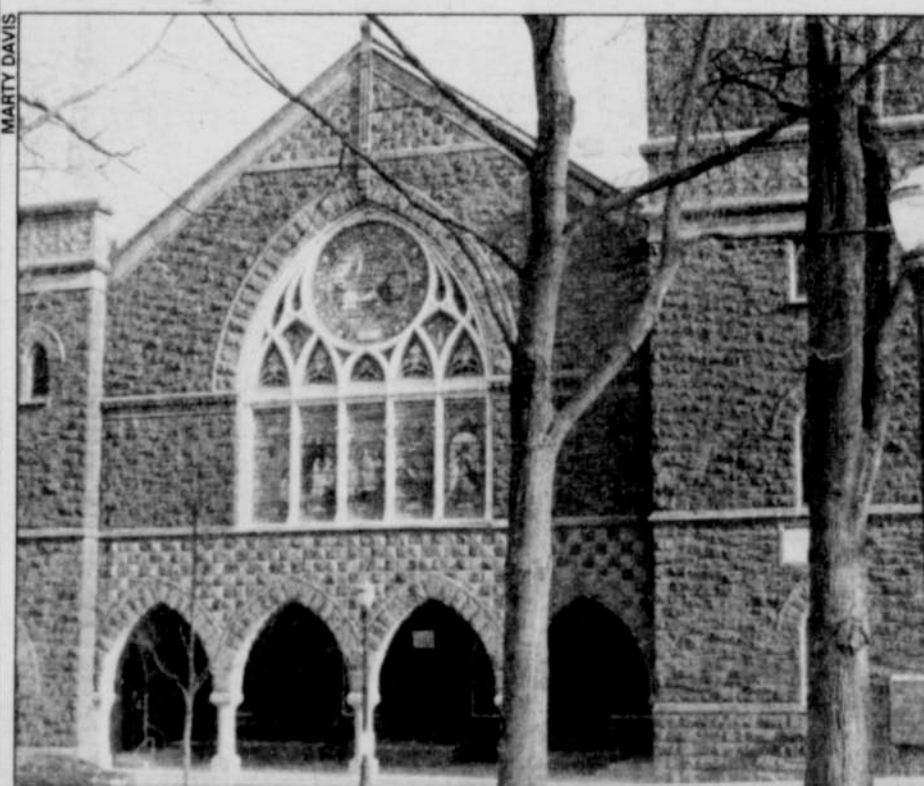
When Multnomah County briefly legalized same-sex marriage, both Ross and Davis happily performed legal marriages. Davis says he remembers his total as being around 100 ceremonies. Both continue to offer the church's marital blessings on gay and lesbian marriages, even though the state of Oregon has withdrawn recognition.

The declaration specifically addresses relationships: "We pledge ourselves to support and honor committed partnerships of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people recognizing the difficulty of maintaining such partnerships in the absence of the social validation and legal frameworks which do support the heterosexual unions."

First Congregational's January celebration was more than a service and a party, but confirmation that, for this church, the commitment continues. 10

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The historic First Congregational United Church of Christ represents open and affirming values.