

Courage in the Struggle

JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE UCC'S
DNA AND ITS STATEMENT OF FAITH

by Richard L. Floyd

When the group of 30 theologians, pastors, and lay people charged with crafting a Statement of Faith for the newly-created United Church of Christ were meeting back in 1957, justice and peace were in the winds and on their minds.

The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott that brought young Martin Luther King to national attention the year before had helped to spark a new awareness of racial justice in the country. And everyone was thinking about issues of war and peace. The country had just been through the biggest war in world history and the Cold War had begun in earnest. The Soviet Union had developed the first hydrogen bomb just two years earlier in 1955. The possibility of a devastating nuclear exchange was all too real.

One of the members of the group creating the UCC's Statement of Faith was Roger Shinn, who died this year on June 2 at the age of 96. Shinn knew plenty about war. In 1957, his experience in World War Two was still fresh. He had been an infantry company commander in the Battle of the Bulge, and had been captured by the Germans.

A teacher of ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Shinn encouraged the church to become more involved in issues of justice and peace. He was one of the principal authors of the Statement of Faith, and some of his passion for social responsibility can be seen in the words of the Statement.



▲ Roger L. Shinn in the 1960's.



We were not founded to be an activist church, but it was that same commitment to Christianity that led us into struggles for justice and peace.

▲ Delegates at First Congregational UCC in Oberlin, Ohio, during the Second General Synod.

Among Shinn's 15 books was *Wars and Rumors of Wars*, published in 1972. I was in seminary at the time, and the book had a big influence on my thinking during that Vietnam War era.

I came into the United Church of Christ that year. The things that excited me about the UCC were its passion for peace and justice and its passion for Christian unity, declaring itself to be "a uniting as well as a united church."

And I really loved the Statement of Faith, its grand re-telling of the Christian story, its testimony to the deeds of a loving active God, and its call for the church to be engaged in "the struggle for justice and peace."

The Statement of Faith convinced me that the UCC's social and ethical commitments did not come out of a vacuum. Rather, they are firmly rooted in the narrative of what God has done and is doing, and that is why the Statement of Faith is a profound theological document as well as a powerful ethical one.

The God whose deeds we testify to in the Statement of Faith is a God who acts, and in many ways our church has embodied this "activist God" in our history. Our concern for social justice, for racial equality, for justice for women, for gays and lesbians, and recently for environmental responsibility are all rooted in our longing for God's reign of peace and justice. We are who we are (or at least who we try to be) because God is who God is.

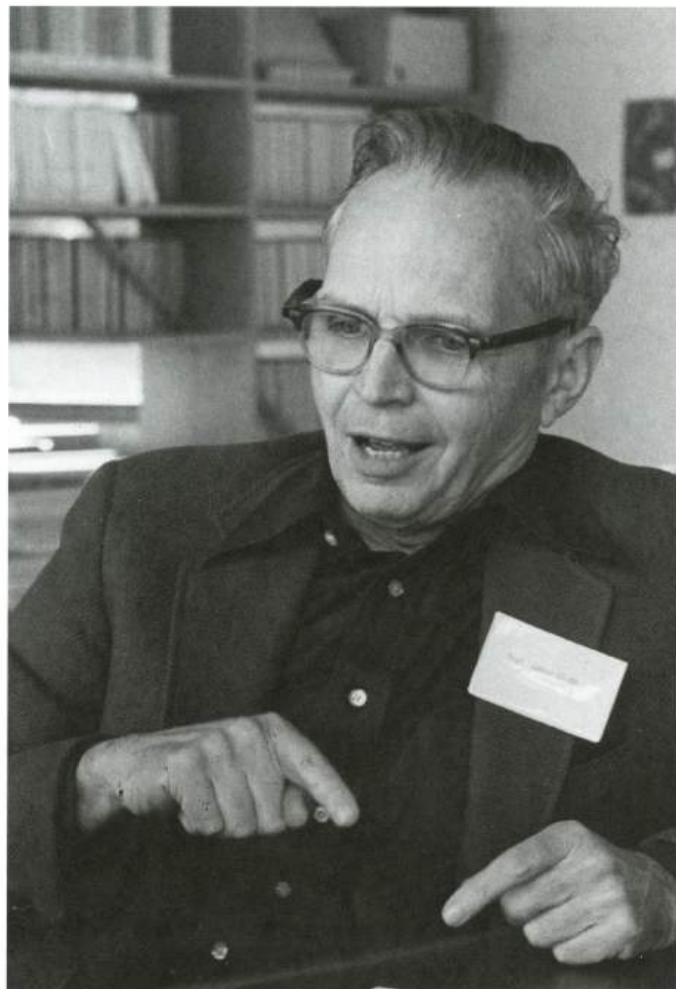
The creation of the United Church of Christ in 1957 was a bold experiment, a new kind of church never before seen, where unity was to be found only in Christ, and not in a common structure, not in a shared confession, nor in an ethnic or confessional identity.

The founders were putting together churches and congregations of widely divergent backgrounds in the trust (and hope) that our shared commitment to Jesus Christ would be enough for us to walk together into God's future. The motto of the United Church of Christ, "That they may all be one" from John 17:21, was a prayer and a hope that this new church could embody that unity.

That sort of passionate longing for Christian unity is rarely found these days, but it is key to understanding the birth of the UCC. We were not founded to be an activist church so much as to be a united church, but it was that same commitment to Christ that united us that also propelled us into struggles for justice and peace.

The late Reuben Sheares, one of our UCC saints, once told me that UCC polity was simple. He said, "I belong to Christ, and you belong to Christ, so we belong to each another." He didn't say, "Whether we like it or not," but his eyes twinkled as if to say that he was well aware of how much easier that is to say than to do. The conversation was in the context of an attempt to craft a statement about the United Church of Christ as church, and we had in front of us a Manual on Ministry that had grown to be nearly as big as a metropolitan phone book.

I share this by way of saying that the grand experiment of 1957 continues, as we struggle not only for justice and peace, but also with how to be church together in a day of fractious politics and increasingly polarized positions.



▲ Roger L. Shinn in the 1980's.

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There were some great people back in 1957; people like Roger Shinn, full of conviction and hope. They gave us some great ethical and theological navigational aids in the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith and the Preamble to the UCC constitution.



▲ Delegates to the Second General Synod read copies of the proposed Statement of Faith.

They had a wild, hopeful dream for a new kind of church. They emblazoned their hopes in the very name they chose: the "United Church of Christ." They knew that all three words are important. They wanted this new church to walk together into God's new future united in Christ and committed to changing the world. We give thanks to God for them. Now it's our turn. ♡

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▲ The approved Statement of Faith is presented on the stage of the General Synod.

*The original UCC Statement of Faith was adopted in 1959. A revised version (at right) was written in 1976 by then-UCC president Robert V. Moss, Jr, using more gender-inclusive language. A 1981 version of the statement renders it in doxological prayer form and the statement has also been translated into Spanish.

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith

(ROBERT V. MOSS VERSION*)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit,
who is made known to us in Jesus our brother,
and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being,
creates humankind in the divine image,
and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of
righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord,
God has come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues,
and races.

God calls us into the church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be servants in the service of the whole human family,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.

Amen.