

MY CHURCH AS A NEGATIVE EXAMPLE OF HOLISTIC MISSION

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The United Church of Christ is a bad church except in comparison with all the other churches, which are worse. Which is to say that for me, to be a member of any other church would be even worse. Which is the way the Prophets, including Jesus, felt about Israel (except that sometimes they felt that Israel was worst, as unresponsive-disobedient to the best Light)....This Thinksheet is (to use Robt. Frost's now-long-tired analogy) a lover's quarrel with my denomination.

1. Almost two decades ago, in the seminary (NYTS) where I was teaching, Dan Berrigan was holed up against the USG(overnment), using our Turtle Bay building for his activist fast--Turtle Bay, whose best-known buildings are those of the UN, whose vision-ideals-principles-charter upholds what Dan was holed up as a silent-hidden witness for. Thankfully, I remember my conversations with him then, before, & since....He became, in the (I think) great 1986 film "The Mission," the grand-old-man Jesuit priest in the founding of a holistic (evangelism + ecopolitics) mission to inland Brazilian aborigines. The historical mission, 2½ centuries ago, did indeed achieve the Christian ideal of conversion with an ecopolitics satisfying the demands of both justice & peace (with the exception that the resultant society was hieratic: the Jesuits stood behind the emerging democracy of the "Indians," as in the film Dan stands behind the Jesuits).... That's not the only model of Christian holistic mission in these almost 20 centuries, & it's a simple one in that the folk the missionaries went to were, when they stopped missionaries-killing, still stone-age. But I offer it in contrast to my own church's programmatic schizophrenia, splitting "mission" off from conversion. In evidence, I present only the Oct/87 KEEPING YOU POSTED: NEWSLETTER OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST.

2. The 1987 UCC Synod's adopted Statement of Mission (see my #2172 & #2183) sets forth 11 actions "we are called and commit ourselves" to. Two are in the tradition of "mission" & "evangelism": 2 ("to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our suffering world") & 7 ("to preach & teach with the power of the Living Word"). These are fragments scattered among other fragments--eg, those on "justice" (4,5,6,8,9, & even 2), which gets top billing in quantity of reference, we in these recent days calling ourselves "a just peace church." Notice the subtle shifting in the meaning of "mission" 1959-87, our brief UCC history:

(1) In the early days, when I was on the staff of UCBHM (United Church Board for Homeland Ministries) "Division of Evangelism and Church Extension" (soon to become only "Evangelism," as "Church Extension" became split off as a new division), a "community mission" was a community-wide evangelistic effort, either denominational or conciliar. In those days, when we had only one "denominational emphasis" at a time (rather than the present attention-diluting fistful), the 1968-69 Emphasis, for which I prepared the literature, was "The Local Church in God's Mission"--God's "Mission" (always capitalized when "God's") being the word-and-deed "redemption of the whole world" (p.9 of "An Exploration Guide"). The evangelistic word & the loving deed were never split off from each other, & the national chair (G. Fackre) came to emphasize this in a book whose title was WORD & DEED.

(2) This missional integration of word & deed was an advance on the earlier virtual limitation of "mission" to word, the Word, the evangelistic word, as in the earliest UCC practice. That usage appears in the churchwide program that came to involve 2,000 of our churches in intensive self-examination & (in this sense, evangelistic) "missionary" activity, viz, "M.O.R.E.: Mission on Renewal and Evangelism," for which I prepared the literature (with of course, as in the literature of "The Local Church in God's Mission," the vigorous participation of the churches & of others on the national UCC staff). (These materials were completed

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in 1962 & used by the churches during the several years thereafter.)

(3) We are now at the third stage of "mission" in the UCC. At first, it was word; then it came to be word & deed; & now, as you can see in the current KEEPING YOU POSTED, it's deed: "UCBHM Initiates Mission Program" (p.1) is deed only. Further evidence of this splitting of word off from deed is on p.7, which notes a UCBHM national meeting on evangelism (with emphasis on "church growth") without any suggestion of word-deed integration. The "UCBHM secretary for local churches in community mission" (again, p.1) uses the phrase "community mission" exclusively for service ministries, which he here calls also "'outreach ministries.'" ("Outreach" is an old ecclesial word that formerly, in American Protestantism, meant evangelism, in response to Jesus at the end of Matthew, "Go...disciple...baptize...teach....")

2. Why is this Thinksheet pointing to the breakdown of what I'm calling here "holistic mission," the natural-normal-canonical integration of word & deed? Broadly, I'm a restorationist here. Our church & other churches have known times-places of health, of integration, of the unity of word & deed. How come the UCC has fallen into reverse schizophrenia from "the old days" (when social action got too little attention) & from presentday Protestant fundamentalists (who are slowly struggling up from their almost total attention to the evangelistic word)? Narrowly, I'm praying-witnessing toward a fresh, contemporary, "relevant" integration of word & deed, with the ever-presence (but never imposition) of both word and deed.

3. But this Thinksheet has a further concern, viz, the pathology of the word/deed split. I cite a parallel from orthodox trinitarianism: Here are the pathologies resulting from splitting up the Trinity: (1) Unitarianism, the monotheism of the First Person; (2) Sentimental pietism, the monotheism of the Second Person; (3) "Signs"-thirsty pentecostalism, the monotheism of the Third Person. NOTE:

(1) Amnesia is inevitable in a community that, for whatever reason, defines a word more narrowly than, or with sememe other than, formerly. When "mission" is used exclusively for social action, its verbal-rhetorical-conversional force is lost--as (again p.1) "a mission strategy for each conference will be developed." Since Christianity is a missionary religion, is it still the Christian religion when "a mission strategy" is addressed to "the oppressed" rather than to, or also to, "the lost" (to use a code word from each of two "mission"-perceptions)? I judge the current "mission program" distortion of "mission" more innocent than, in the case of so-called inclusive language, efforts to seduce the church into forgetting (& thus alienating the children from the Bible in its use of) certain great words of our spiritual heritage, eg, "Father," "Lord," "King" (on which see #2178, #2181, & #2183.6&7).

(2) Selective condemnation of particular sins. Two decades ago I was one of the authors of a widely distributed book titled WHITE RACISM, which is something I hate together with all other racisms. But about that time, ecumenese (World Council of Churches lingo) began to use "racism" as a code word for "white racism." \$ raised to fight "racism" was malappropriated to fight only one racism, & the pernicious effects of this (deliberate?) distortion (including \$88,000 of WCC-raised \$ put in the pockets of terrorists opposing "oppression") abide with & multiply among us.

(3) Ideological & ecclesial alienation. UCBWM's exec (again, p.1) says that this month his board will "consider aid....for humanitarian purposes to oppressed groups...." Marxist jargon + the phrase that betrayed WCC into tragic foolishness! The word/deed split encourages an AIDS-like loss of immunity against foreign ideology (the AIDS antibodies loss paralleled by the Christian ideolog's loss of critical consciousness vis-a-vis, in this case, marxian rhetoric) + further UCC splitting.