

Council of Conference Ministers
United Church of Christ
February 28, 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

Greetings in the name of a God who creates and recreates; a Christ who challenges and comforts; and a Spirit who sustains and inspires!

By now, many of you have probably already heard that the Internal Revenue Service has made the decision to investigate The United Church of Christ's tax exempt status. In its letter, the IRS stated that their concerns were due to "articles posted on websites" that stated "United States Presidential Candidate Senator Barack Obama addressed nearly 10,000 church members gathered at the United Church of Christ's biennial General Synod at the Hartford Civic Center, on June 23rd, 2007" and that "40 Obama volunteers staffed campaign tables outside the center to promote his campaign." The full text of the IRS letter as well as our denomination's initial response can be found on our website (the exact link is <http://www.ucc.org/news/obama-speech-in-2007-prompts-1.html>).

This week, the Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ are meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When this news came to us, we realized that we had the opportunity to address the congregations and settings of the church with a pastoral letter that would be appropriate and, we hope, helpful. As this story continues to be discussed in the coming days, we wanted to address, directly, the two points contained in the IRS letter.

The first is to know that the invitation to Senator Obama to address Synod was given *before he was a Presidential Candidate*. He was invited, as a member of our denomination, to reflect on the connection between public service and personal faith; *not* to give a campaign speech. He was one of more than 60 speakers that addressed Synod in a variety of venues from a variety of perspectives throughout the week.

Secondly, the Obama campaign tables that were set up outside on the sidewalk were not there by the invitation or consent of the UCC. These tables were set up in public space on the sidewalk and those individuals supporting Senator Obama's campaign needed no permission from the United Church of Christ to set up there. Nor was the United Church of Christ in any position to object, much less preclude, citizens from exercising their constitutional rights on such public space.

From everything we have heard and learned, we are convinced that everything our denomination did was legal. We are also conscious of the discouraging effect this inquiry may have on our sisters and brothers of other faiths who seek to gather and hear the faith journeys of their own. The work that will be done in future days regarding this case will be vitally important. The good news is that we have excellent legal counsel and are sure our case will be well made. However, the financial cost of responding to this

inquiry will be part of our challenge. If you would like to donate to our church to help offset these legal costs, there is an opportunity to do this through our website (the exact link is: https://secure.ga3.org/03/ucc_legal_fund). Such donations will help minimize the use of funds currently earmarked for serving other aspects of our mission.

We understand that this news will cause many in our church to have some degree of concern and, possibly, worry as people try to figure out what this means as some of those voices that believe the actions of the IRS are justified are raised. As you hear these concerns, please do share with them the points we have shared with you and pray with your brothers and sisters that we may seek to discern the ways that God is still speaking in this moment.

That last point is no less important than any of the others preceding it. Within this moment many of us see yet another opportunity to share with others about The United Church of Christ. Encourage those you encounter as a result of this recent news to look at our website (www.ucc.org); share your own testimony about what this denomination means to you; and invite them to come to church with you to learn more about who we are.

As is always the story of the Church, it is within these moments of adversity and challenge that the Holy Spirit is also breaking through. Let us all invite and celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in *this* moment as we remain true to our vocation as Christ's Church and are held in the care of a God who loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

Please continue to hold your Conference Ministers in prayer this week as we continue to hold all of you in prayer, as well.

Faithfully,

The Council of Conference Ministers

Mary Susan Gast, Northern California Nevada
Jane Fidler Hoffman, Southern California Nevada
Karl K. Ludwig, Calvin Synod
John R. Deckenback, Central Atlantic
John Gantt, Central Pacific
Davida Foy Crabtree, Connecticut
Kent J. Siladi, Florida
Charles Buck, Hawaii
Jorge Morales, Illinois
Sheldon Culver, Illinois South
Stephen C. Gray, Indiana-Kentucky
Rich Pleva, Iowa
David Hansen, Kansas-Oklahoma
David R Gaewski, Maine
Jim Antal, Massachusetts
Kent J. Ulery, Michigan
Karen Smith Sellers, Minnesota
Randy Hyvonen, Montana Northern Wyoming
Jeffrey A. Whitman, Missouri Mid-South

Wade Schemmel, Northern Plains
Bob Molsberry, Ohio
Michael Denton, Pacific Northwest
Marja Coons-Torn, Penn Central
Alan C. Miller, Penn Northeast
F. Russell Mitman, Pennsylvania Southeast
Alan N. McLarty, Penn West
Charles Barnes, Rhode Island
Tom Rehling, Rocky Mountain
Douglas Anders, South Central
Tim Downs, Southeast
Stephen W. Camp, Southern
Lark J. Hapke, Southwest
Carole Carlson, Vermont
David G. Moyer, Wisconsin
Lynne Simcox, South Dakota (TCE)
Roddy C. Dunkerson, Nebraska
Gary M. Schulte, New Hampshire
Geoffrey A. Black, New York