

A CHALLENGE TO THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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I. Introduction

My challenge can be put very simply. I am proposing that the United Church of Christ take as its mission working with God for the salvation of the world.

The proposal makes many assumptions. First, it assumes that the world needs saving. I believe this is by now a widespread assumption. Since the late nineteen-sixties many of us have been aware that deeply entrenched habits, practices and policies are leading humanity toward catastrophes of unimaginable proportions. Wars in general, and the danger of weapons of mass destruction in particular, complicate the problems resulting from our abuse of nature. Issues of global warming, of which we were not aware at that time, have given added intensity to concern for the global future. If there is no consensus among leaders of the UCC about the seriousness of the world's problem, then this challenge is wrongly directed.

A second assumption is that God cares about the salvation of the world. This is an assumption that is made implicitly by all who pray the Lord's prayer. We ask that God's will be done on earth. Having learned to pray this way from Jesus, it is hardly possible to think that God's will for the world is immense destruction and suffering.

A third assumption is that God is already working in and through creatures, and especially human beings, toward the salvation of the world. If there is no consensus of this sort among the leaders of the UCC, then once again, my proposal is misdirected. It is my belief that the salvation of the world is so daunting a task and will face so many discouraging obstacles, that to lack faith that when we work on this task we are joining in the working of God will ultimately undercut the hope apart from which human efforts fail.

A fourth assumption is that there is some very important work to be done that is not now being done.

A fifth assumption is that the United Church of Christ is uniquely positioned to give national and even global leadership in accomplishing this important work.

These last two assumptions need to be spelled out, and much of this paper will be devoted to this task.

II. Important Tasks Not Now being Done

One might well say that at every level of the denomination, the UCC like all other Christian bodies is already working with God for the salvation of the world. I think this is true. Everything that works for the well being of human individuals and human communities contributes in some way to the salvation of the world. There are also many efforts to reduce our negative impact on the world by using fewer of the Earth's resources and polluting less. Working for just peace is certainly a contribution to the salvation of the world.

More work, much more work, is needed on all these and many other fronts on which the church is already engaged. In no way do I wish to disparage the many little efforts on many fronts that are already occurring in the church in tandem with the work of many different nongovernmental organizations. Such optimism as one now musters can come only from noting these many promising ventures and efforts.

But the world cannot be well understood as a congeries of many separable features. The Earth, including all its inhabitants, is constituted by a complex web or net of relationships. This is clearer in the biblical language of "creation" than in talk of human beings and our "natural environment." Even ecological language that emphasizes relationships too often conjures up images of a "nature" that does not include human beings. Modern thought is profoundly dualistic, whereas God's creation is not.

What is needed is an inclusive vision of what the world must be in order that there be a healthy survival not only of human beings but of the biosphere as a whole. We need a careful appraisal of the many threats we face in relation to that goal, as well as of the existing efforts to deal with these threats. We need to be guided into seeing what changes and what new ventures would be most promising for redirecting the whole into more sustainable and regenerative channels. We need to clarify what can be done at the local level with private initiatives, what can only be done by legislation, and what requires international or global agreement. We need to appraise all proposals from an inclusive standpoint, so that we will not again rush into such blind alleys as the use of agricultural land for generating energy for transportation and industry without considering the effects on global food supply. We need to ask whether finding substitutes for fossil fuels so that we can continue our present lifestyle is the right investment of research and money.

III. Who Can Lead?

If we agree that there is now no place to look for fully developed and sustained guidance on the big picture to which I am pointing, then the question arises, How might such a place come into being? Thus far, the best work has been done by individuals and small groups. There is much such work on which to build. But the task is not one that can be done by any individual or small group of self-appointed individuals, however much some can contribute.

We Protestants have grown accustomed to looking elsewhere for leadership in thought about global matters. We assume that these are dealt with by governments, for example. But clearly no one government would have credibility in the effort to guide the efforts of people everywhere who are concerned for the fate of the Earth. Even the best governments are primarily committed to the well being of their own people, even if this is costly to others.

We might then look to the United Nations, and I believe that the UN has produced some very important documents and proposals. But inevitably and necessarily its work involves compromises among the national interests of its

members. It would be a mistake to look to any political organization or institution for the kind of guidance and leadership the world needs if it is to redirect itself away from utter catastrophe.

The place we often look for guidance in the area of thought is the university. The universities have drawn into themselves a great proportion of the most intelligent people on the planet. It is the locus of the most research. Its libraries contain vast resources in information and knowledge. It produces experts in many fields. Thousands of professors with great expertise in many fields are personally devoted to the salvation of the world. Can we not expect the universities, or some one university, to undertake the needed task?

Sadly, the answer is no. The university no longer aims to achieve any unifying vision of the world. It only offers an enormous wealth of information on an extraordinarily wide range of topics. It makes no effort to evaluate their respective importance. In general it prizes “value free” inquiry and teaching. That makes it highly vulnerable to the sort of evaluations made by the market. Nowhere in the university is there an aim at wisdom.

There is a profound disconnect between the personal concerns for the salvation of the world on the part of many individual faculty members and what is expected of them. What is expected of them is the advancement of their disparate and largely disconnected disciplines. The uselessness of looking to the university as an institution for help is indicated in the title of a new book by Stanley Fish. Fish is a humane and humanistic scholar with high status in the academic world. The title of his book, addressed to professors in universities is, “Save the World on Your Own Time.” Clearly there are many, many professors in many universities who are ready to give time and effort to contributing to the salvation of the world. Clearly, also, we cannot expect much help from universities as universities.

Once we are clear that political and educational institutions are not equipped for what may well be the most important task currently facing humanity, we may be ready to consider religious institutions. I cannot consider

every possibility here. In many religious communities there are wonderful things occurring from which we all have much to learn. Mary Evelyn Tucker organized a series of conferences on religion and ecology at Harvard University bringing together leading thinkers from each of the world's major traditions, including the primal religions. In all traditions there are thoughtful and concerned persons able to show how they can bring their heritage fruitfully to bear on the critical global problems.

Of all religious groups it is in the primal ones that people are least alienated from the world about them. There is much that we can, and indeed must, learn from them. But they are not in position in themselves to give the global leadership we need.

Much of what is most important in our heritage for guiding us today has come from the prophetic tradition of Israel. That tradition is alive among Jews today. But the absorption of Jews in Israel/Palestine seriously reduces their readiness to take on the task of which I am writing.

For several centuries Islam was the center of culture and spiritual maturity at least in the Western world. It provided the most comprehensive and universal vision then available. It has retained some positive elements in the shared heritage of Christians and Muslims that Christianity abandoned in the Enlightenment period. But today much of the energy of Islam is absorbed in internal conflicts and much more in its struggle with the Western Enlightenment and the consequences of Western imperialism.

The great strength of Buddhism lies elsewhere than in guiding society into the solution of its problems. Through much of its history in most of the countries where it has flourished it has not directly engaged issues of public policy and has accommodated to whatever political structures existed. The center of its concern is the achievement of personal serenity and compassion through an ahistorical realization of reality as it truly is at the deepest level. On the other hand, in comparison with the Abrahamic traditions, Buddhism has been wonderfully free of the recourse to military violence. There have been occasions when those with

political power were influenced by Buddhism in admirable ways. In our own day, in Sri Lanka, Sri Ariyaratne has led a largely Gandhian movement working for the common good in overcoming the distorting effects of egocentrism through Buddhist meditation. Around the world, thousands of Buddhists have joined the movement of “socially-engaged Buddhism” established by the Thai activist, Sulak Sivaraksa. I know of no group with whose commitments and actions I can agree more wholeheartedly. But socio-historical thought is not deeply rooted in Buddhism, and there is no Buddhist institution that could undertake the task outlined above.

Among the world’s communities of faith, Christianity has the tradition that points most strongly to efforts to save the world. This is not to say that Christianity has been making the most positive contributions. The global crisis has been precipitated by developments in what was once Christendom. Our nation, in which Christian faith of one sort or another still plays a large role, has become the greatest threat to the future of the world. This is both by its excessive consumption and by its aim at global hegemony. If American Christians today undertake to guide the world, this effort must not be accompanied by any self-righteousness about either Christianity or the United States. My point is that Christians and post-Christian secularists have been the most important actors on the world scene in recent centuries, and just for this reason we Christians have special responsibility for dealing positively with the world’s problems. Also, historical consciousness is crucial for wise direction of efforts today, and this has been honed most among us.

When we ask what Christian group is in the best position to give leadership, we might think first of the largest, best organized, and most powerful, the Roman Catholic Church. This is also the church that most often assumes some responsibility for the larger community as a whole. Further, the Vatican has made some excellent statements. Nevertheless, we all know that statements coming from the Vatican do not carry a great deal of moral authority in today’s world. The Roman Catholic Church has committed much of its authority to maintaining traditional ideas and practices in the areas of sexuality, reproduction, gender, and

sexual orientation. As a result, many people who are honestly seeking the salvation of the world view this church as an obstacle to achieving their goals rather than an aid. Any official Catholic group would have to avoid anything that contradicted official Catholic teachings, most of which were developed at a time when the world was not in global crisis.

Needless to say, there are similar problems with most Protestants. Many people, both Catholic and Protestant, suppose that their faith requires clinging to doctrines and ethical teaching formulated in a very different context. The secular world expects Christian pronouncements to be in defense of these traditional ideas or at least informed by them. Those who are bound in this way can give little leadership outside their own membership.

IV. Progressive Protestantism and the United Church of Christ

Christianity has, however, produced another understanding of what faith means. To have faith is so to trust God that we will be open to wisdom wherever we encounter it. If that wisdom requires that we change our teaching and practice, we will do so. God is Truth; so no truth is alien to God or forbidden to the believer. There is much wisdom in our scriptures and in our tradition, and we will be informed by this and sink our roots deeply into it. But this wisdom opens us to an appreciation of others and to learning from them. We may call this understanding of faith “progressive.”

We progressives have had a tumultuous history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, we learned that our scriptures consisted of the library of an extraordinary ancient people who understood themselves and their history as deeply related to the one God who was the creator of heaven and earth. This gave that people a unique role in the world. For example, in the Roman Empire it made of them the great resisters, whose ultimate obedience could never be to Caesar. Through Jesus and Paul’s interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, Gentiles could be engrafted into this history. We deeply prize that privilege. But this does not lead us to supernatural interpretations of historical events, or to think that

any part of the biblical record is inerrant, or to suppose that there are no other sources of wisdom.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, in the United States, we progressives became aware of profound suffering especially among new immigrants being exploited by early stages of industrialization. We came to understand that the salvation to which we were committed was the salvation of society from such injustice as much as the transformation of the inner spiritual condition of individuals. Many of us rightly saw the personal and social dimensions as deeply interconnected. Millions of American Protestants opened themselves to this new understanding that they were called to work with God in the salvation of all dimensions of human life. We dreamed of bringing God's Kingdom to the world in the twentieth century.

Our hopes were not fulfilled. Many of the formulations that came out of the social gospel were excessively optimistic about what could happen in human history and naïve about the depth of the power of sin and evil in the world. Reinhold Niebuhr with great wisdom corrected and deepened our thinking about social issues. Perhaps this prepared us for new waves of criticism of what we had been and were.

In the past fifty years, our openness to truth and wisdom wherever they were to be found has led us again and again to repentance. "Repentance" translates "*metanoia*," and this is not simply regret about past sins but a genuine change of mind, heart, and action. We recognized that we had acquiesced in outrageous racism. Black Christians led the nation to overthrow the institutions of segregation, and led the church to serious repentance. There is still much to be done, but the churches as a whole have truly tried to change.

We learned that we had much else of which to repent. Our inherited form of the Christian faith was anti-Jewish, patriarchal, religiously exclusivist, anthropocentric, and demeaning of our bodies and their sexuality. Repentance on all these matters has been remarkably widespread. I believe that the

emergence of the present form of progressive Protestantism is an event of great potential importance in the history of religion.

Sadly, even among those who participated, or at least acquiesced, in the churches' repentance on all these points, a majority have not been able to overcome their negative feelings toward homosexual relations. The commitment of progressives to end the millennia of discrimination against those who express their love for others of their own gender has clashed with the determined resistance of many other Christians to yielding on this point. For this reason, most Protestant denominations are not able to give wholehearted attention to the still more fundamental problems facing the world. Also for this reason the ecumenical organizations that include these churches are limited in their capacity to speak strongly on the needs of the world.

There is one major denomination that has worked through the conflict about homosexuality and has thus completed the process of repentance with which for fifty years our more progressive denominations have been preoccupied. The United Church of Christ can now put the issue of homosexuality behind it, just as it and many other denominations now assume, at least, that women should have equal opportunities with men at all levels of church life. This is not to say that women never confront problems in the church caused by the continuing power of patriarchal thinking and feeling. And it does not mean that those in the UCC who express their attraction to members of their own sex will never again feel demeaned. But it does mean that the church as a denomination can move on to other matters. At a time when the global crisis is so acute, and the voice of Christianity in relation to it is so muffled, this is a truly wonderful opportunity.

IV. Practicality and Self-interest

The most common institutional reaction to any major proposal is that it is impractical. This proposal may be impractical for the United Church of Christ for a variety of institutional reasons. However, I would like to urge that it need not be a major problem in terms of finances. At least initially it need not be expensive.

The first task is to select the people who jointly can provide wisdom with respect to the vision that those who want to save the world can share and about the interconnection of the many different problems the human species now faces. I believe that many of the sort of people the church would want to involve would volunteer their time and talent to the task if they were persuaded this was a serious long-term commitment. Although some face to face meetings are eminently desirable, groups can do much of their work today without travel. Results can be published on the net at very little cost.

If good work is done at the early stages, and it turns out that later implementation of ideas generated in the early stages *is* expensive, it is probable that funds can be raised from foundations for specific research or projects. If the program as a whole generates excitement, funding will cease to be a major concern.

Reinhold Niebuhr taught us that we should never ignore the question of self-interest. The occurrence of positive historical events is typically influenced by noble ideals and selfless motives. But it usually depends also on those who are engaged in bringing it about seeing some gain for themselves.

What about the UCC? What gains could there be for the denomination as such? Many.

The more progressive denominations on the whole have been losing members and resources. There are many reasons, but the deepest one may be that what we do and say does not seem to be very important. This is true with regard to the children whom we bring up in the church. They may have a positive attitude toward the church, but they may not see any reason in later life to give much, if any, of their time and energy to its support.

Let us suppose that the United Church of Christ became visible in our society as the place where the broadest vision of what needs to happen could be found. Let us suppose that people had some confidence that this vision was being constantly honed and its implications for action reformulated as the global

situation changed. Suppose people thought that typical UCC local congregations shared that vision and kept up with developments relevant to it. Suppose that congregations found ways to play some role in implementing some part of the identified need. Joining a congregation significantly involved in saving the world would seem important.

Children growing up in such a community might feel that they were at the center of action that the world needed. They might understand the faith that grounded the activities of the church as deeply worthy of incorporation into their hearts and minds and as a center around which all the rest they learned could be integrated. Some of them might see professional work in a denomination wisely committed to the goal of saving the world as their highest calling.

In the late nineteenth century, the church's effort to respond helpfully to the problems of industrial society made it seem important to many of its members. To respond helpfully today to the problems of a dying planet might have a similarly positive result.