

# **UCC's marketer leaves; so do Puerto Ricans: Ad campaign increased visibility and controversy**

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The United Church of Christ, whose often-daring progressive stances on full inclusion of homosexual worshipers in church life stir controversy inside and outside the denomination, suffered two losses last month.

- The creator of the UCC's much-hyped "God Is Still Speaking" ad campaign announced June 12 that he is leaving his position with the denomination. Ron Buford, 49, who directed the provocative effort to "rebrand" the UCC through expensive television commercials and other efforts, said the decision to part ways was mutual.

The marketing entrepreneur's work brought headlines when television networks refused to air ads that touted the UCC's inclusiveness.

One ad, in which a black woman, a gay couple and other minorities are ejected from church pews, was deemed "too controversial" by the networks. Some TV officials contended that one line in the commercial—"God doesn't reject people. Neither do we"—was an implied slur on other churches.

- In another move, the Puerto Rican branch of the United Church of Christ voted June 10 at its annual assembly to dissolve formally its union with the American church because of "discomfort" over the denomination's liberal stance on sexuality issues, such as ordination of gay ministers, conducting same-gender union rites and endorsing legal gay marriages.

The two church bodies had been associated since 1961. A UCC news release reported that 75 percent of the delegates meeting in Puerto Rico voted for the split. "The news . . . is deeply and profoundly disappointing," said John Thomas, UCC general minister and president.

Speaking separately of Buford's departure, Thomas said that "Ron leaves a permanent legacy on the UCC for which the church will always be grateful."

The 1.3-million-member denomination's increased visibility is marked by the number of visits—nearly doubling to 7.1 million in 18 months—to the UCC's Web site, according to Buford. He said also that 58 percent of the UCC's 6,000 member churches have adopted elements of the initiative, which will continue in the hands of other church officials.

"Any time you do something that is a radical departure, you're going to create conflict," Buford said. "This was not an exception."

Buford became a UCC member almost 30 years ago. "For me, as an openly gay African-American man, to find a church like this was a big surprise," he said. "I was a deeply religious person. I read my Bible and prayed and people welcomed and embraced me. I started telling my friends about it. The same thing happened with this campaign."

The church's General Synod voted last July to support civil marriage for gay and lesbian couples, which angered the church's small conservative minority. Though local and regional autonomy allows dissenters to disagree with synod stances, last year's vote evidently was the last straw for the Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico.

Untangling the finances between the churches—such as pensions, loans and health insurance programs—will take time, according to the UCC. *-Religion News Service*