

UCC reaps publicity from banned ad: Church bouncers

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

The United Church of Christ, a budget-struggling mainline denomination often confused with a similarly named church, felt that only a bold regional and national TV ad campaign costing \$1.7 million might rescue it from public anonymity.

The denomination's daring historical stances against slavery and for women's rights—back when its members were known as Congregationalists—may be matched today only by their openness to gays and lesbians in church life.

A 30-second spot featuring bouncers outside a church denying entry to various people, including a gay couple, ran without incident earlier this year in six regional TV markets. "The same ad ran in Oklahoma City last spring and there were no objections whatsoever, and we are a very conservative state," said Robin Meyers, senior pastor of Mayflower United Church of Christ in that city.

But in negotiations with NBC and CBS just prior to the campaign's national debut December 1, network officials said they would reject the ads as too controversial. An outcry from religious officials, who contrasted the prurient and provocative programming on network television to the church's message of inclusion, sparked immediate interest in the ads. Shades of the free publicity generated about every 15 years by controversial Jesus movies!

Indeed, items tied to the UCC's "God Is Still Speaking" campaign—T-shirts, baseball caps, postcards, coffee mugs, balloons, tote bags and notebook binders—are selling at record-shattering rates.

"Everything is just flying off the shelves," said Marie Tyson, the distribution services manager at the UCC warehouse in Berea, a suburb of Cleveland, the city where the 1.3-million-member denomination is headquartered.

Local churches are ordering high numbers of door hangers, yard signs and banners to connect with people who have seen the paid ads on many cable channels such as

AMC, Discovery, History, TBS, TNT and ABC Family. The ABC broadcast network avoided the flap because it has a fixed policy against accepting religious commercials, according to published reports.

The explanation given by CBS said: "Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations, and the fact the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the [CBS and UPN] networks." NBC rejected the spot as "too controversial."

UCC President John H. Thomas said, "It's ironic that after a political season awash in commercials based on fear and deception by both parties . . . an ad with a message of welcome and inclusion would be deemed too controversial."

The network refusals were termed baseless and "chilling" for freedom of religious expression by Larry Hollon, who heads national advertising for the United Methodist Church. "The belief that God loves every person without condition is so basic to Christian teaching [that] if a denomination cannot make this assertion, what can it say?"

Some Christian conservatives disagreed. "It is a piece of masterful propaganda, but it is a diabolical misrepresentation of Christianity," said R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on ABC's *Good Morning America* December 2. Jesus, Mohler said, "did not invite persons to stay in sinful lifestyles. . . . Homosexuality is one of those [sins]."

"The ad is clearly allegorical," countered Robert Chase, UCC director of communications, who appeared with Mohler on the program. "There are no churches that have real bouncers out in front of their structures with velvet ropes." For people who feel alienated and rejected by churches, Chase added, "those barriers are very real, and we're simply trying to say, 'You're welcome here.'"

Saying he agreed the ad says "we are equal in God's eyes," Dennis Thatcher, CEO of the six-state Mission Broadcasting Inc., said December 7 that his 14 stations—including several that are network affiliates—will run the UCC spot for 12 months. Thatcher, also a minister at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Sharon Center, Ohio, accused the major networks of "running scared" on the possibility that some would see the ads as endorsing gay marriage. "We didn't see that at all," he said.

The Association for Church Renewal (ACR), linked with the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy, urged the UCC to withdraw the ad voluntarily. “We believe this ad is dishonest and insulting to other Christian churches,” said Diane Knippers, vice chair of ACR.

In the same news release, however, ACR Chairman James V. Heidinger, a Methodist who is also president of *Good News* magazine, defended the rights both of religious groups to air controversial messages and of private broadcasters to determine what they will accept.

“In general, we hope that the media would err on the side of openness,” said Heidinger in arguing that there should be room on TV for the UCC to express its views on sexuality, “as there should be room for Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist teachings.”

A coalition of communications experts aligned with the National Council of Churches, including Lutheran, Catholic and Greek Orthodox officials, suggested that the Federal Communications Commission should reflect on the arbitrary standards exercised by broadcast networks. “Church doors are open to all who would come, but broadcast channels are increasingly closed to all but the wealthy and well-connected,” the statement said.

In fact, the United Church of Christ announced December 9 that it is filing petitions with the FCC, asking that two network owned-and-operated affiliate stations in Miami be denied license renewals for failing to provide viewers “suitable access” to a full array of ideas and to serve the public interest. Cited by the UCC petitions were two stations currently up for FCC license renewal, WFOR-TV (CBS) and WJVT-TV (NBC).

The denomination, for decades the leading mainline body advocating for the public interest in broadcast media, about a year ago hired Gloria Tristani, a former FCC commissioner, to head the church’s Office of Communication.