

Awakened: A UCC revival meeting

by [Diana Butler Bass](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

As an Episcopalian, I was not entirely sure what to expect at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts conference of the United Church of Christ. When I mentioned my uncertainty to a colleague, he added his own views: “Massachusetts. UCC. That’s the belly of the beast.” He explained: “New England Congregationalism pretty much defines ‘God’s frozen chosen.’”

The meeting was held at Mount Holyoke College, nestled in a still-quiet village in the Connecticut River valley. As I drove from the airport I recognized the names of the towns from my studies in religious history. The First Great Awakening started here. George Whitefield itinerated in this area and stayed with Jonathan and Sarah Edwards in Northampton. During the Second Great Awakening, these villages sparked social reform movements. Mount Holyoke College, itself founded by evangelical Mary Lyon in 1837, was one of the first women’s colleges and a center of early feminism. The Third Awakening pulsed through the valley too. The revivalist Dwight Moody was born in Northfield and preached frequently in the area. His revival enthusiasm gave rise to the Student Volunteer Movement as young people at colleges throughout the valley enlisted as missionaries to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Surveying the valley, I could almost hear the haunting strains of “Shall We Gather at the River?” This has not always been the territory of the frozen chosen.

As people gathered for worship on the first night of the meeting, a jazz band was playing and a gospel choir singing. It was immediately obvious that this crowd did not match my stereotype of mainline New Englanders. People were laughing, clapping and swaying—indeed, dancing—to the music. Was I in the right place?

The conference theme was “Push Out into the Deep Water.” The worship leader called us to worship: “We enter the bright water of God’s grace.” We responded, “Shall we gather at the river?” Some holy coincidence, I mused. And then, led by the choir, we sang that song. And we really sang. It had the tremors of the kind of Pentecostal revival meetings I used to attend as a teenager.

What happened next was beyond my expectation—and almost beyond my comprehension. The music rocked the old chapel, and the New Englanders were lifting their hands to the music, swaying in their pews. Next came testimonies: one from a man who told the story of God’s gift of grace in giving him a gay son. Another from a woman who grew up in South Carolina as a Southern Baptist, then became a UCC minister (after a tortured academic journey at Pat Robertson’s Regent University) and came to accept her own identity as a lesbian. After each testimony, undergirded by the gentle humming of the gospel choir, the congregation responded with a chorus of “Thank you, Jesus, thank you, thank you, Jesus.” Without prompting, people were responding with “Amen” and “Preach it.”

Then the preacher got up: it was Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He preached on Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” For nearly an hour he held us spellbound. He imaginatively took us back to Jesus and these first disciples, through the mission of the early church, to the rocky shores of Nelson Mandela’s prison on South Africa’s Robben Island to the genocide in Darfur, to the streets of Washington and Chicago, and finally to the war in Iraq and the lies and moral corruption of the White House. As we entered the deep water of the word, the congregation shouted “Amen,” occasionally applauded, and wept in their pews.

It was a revival—an out-and-out Pentecostal revival—with a blue-state room full of white people, black people and Asian people; gay people and straight people; able-bodied people and people in wheelchairs. I thought to myself: “They aren’t supposed to be doing this!”

But they were. The people who are supposed to be the deadest of all liberal establishment types were basking in the presence of the Holy Spirit with the passion of early-20th-century Pentecostals.

After the sermon, Wright gave an altar call asking people to dedicate themselves anew to Jesus and to serving God’s kingdom, giving themselves to God’s dream for humankind of peace and justice, love and compassion, for unity, wholeness and the healing of the world. “Don’t be shy,” he urged. “Come forward. Come forward and give yourself to Jesus again. Come pray with a deacon.” And people started leaving their pews, walking down the aisles. Although it was not listed in the worship bulletin, the choir and congregation began to sing, “There’s a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in

This Place.” As the prayer ministers stood with those making a new commitment to Jesus, the choir led the congregation in “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” All across the building, people were crying, many were praying with their hands raised, people were holding and hugging each other. As the music built, folks got up, swaying with the sounds of the old gospel tunes.

The experience took me back to revivals that I attended as a teenager. But it was entirely different, too. Unlike at those evangelical revivals, here there were no doctrinal tests, and here everyone was welcome. I witnessed the Holy Spirit completely overtake this room of unreconstructed liberals—empowered by both supernatural grace and by the sheer energy of a renewed sense of mission to reclaim Christianity from the religious right and to enact a different kind of faith politics.

There we were: gathered at God’s river, at the edge of the Connecticut River, the great river of revival in American history, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards’s river, the river where the First, Second and Third Great Awakenings began. The river was running again. And I knew that we were being swept along with it. Heaven and earth had joined in one remarkable night on the ancient shores of American evangelicalism, and I found myself home, at peace, sure of God’s call, experiencing the powerful wholeness of God’s spirit. A revival, but not just a replay of the other Great Awakenings. Something new was happening, a new rendering of old faith, where boundaries were falling and a different sort of community was being formed. I thought I heard a voice say softly in my ear, “We are here. We are all here with you. We are one.” Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. George Whitefield. Mary Lyon. Dwight Moody. And us. Enacting God’s drama all over again.

I looked around. To my left, a 50ish lesbian held her partner’s hands in prayer. To my right, an 80-something woman laid down her cane and lifted her hands while gently repeating, “Praise you, God, praise you.” Wright blessed us, the congregation sang “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” and the choir offered a gospel “Amen” (twice, to the cheers of the congregation). No one wanted to leave. We applauded wildly. The choir sang more. We cheered more.

Well after 10 p.m., the jazz band danced us out the door. We had been worshiping for more than two hours. I cannot begin to fathom what the future may hold for these old New England churches. But having experienced revival on the Connecticut River, I suspect we are in for quite a ride.