

Others unlikely to follow UCC lead on gay marriage: Activist credits delegates with courage

News in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

Members of the United Church of Christ, like their freedom-loving forebears in New England, cherish their local sovereignty and penchant for independent thinking.

Their ancestors, for example, were among the first to work against slavery, and in 1773 they helped spark the Boston Tea Party. They were the first white U.S. denomination to ordain a black man (1785). They also were first to ordain a woman (1853) and an openly gay man (1972).

So when UCC delegates in Atlanta voted on Independence Day to become the first mainline Protestant church to support civil marriage for gay couples, some might have wondered if it was something like the “shot heard ‘round the world” that sparked the American Revolution.

Are other mainline churches likely to follow the UCC’s July 4 example? The answer, for a number of reasons, is probably not.

Demographics: The UCC rank and file tend to be more liberal than most U.S. Christians. The “marriage equality” resolution at the UCC’s General Synod meeting passed overwhelmingly, while most other churches are sharply divided, if not more conservative, on gay issues.

The Episcopal Church, for example, voted in 2003 to approve an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire, and the fallout has been bitter and divisive. An unofficial policy that recognizes that some dioceses bless gay unions (but not civil marriages) has also provoked controversy. Other churches saw the acrimony and simply said, “No thanks.”

Most other denominations simply don’t have the kind of liberal support that would be necessary to endorse gay marriage, either as a religious rite or as a civil right.

“It’s pretty clear . . . that most of those denominations are pretty split on the issue of homosexuality in general, and the same-sex marriage stuff is probably even less supported,” said Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut and coeditor of the anthology *Gay Religion*.

Decentralization: The beauty—and frustration—of the UCC is that any statement made by the national church is simply advisory. The 1,600 autonomous UCC congregations are fully independent and are not compelled to abide by any policy or statement issued by the national church.

The gay-marriage resolution will likely spark a backlash among the UCC’s small conservative wing, which is as free to reject it as others are to embrace it, activists said.

“This decision will force many congregations to disassociate [from the UCC] and will cause the further decline of this historic denomination that is already a loss-leader among Protestants,” said David Runnion-Bareford, director of the UCC’s conservative Biblical Witness Fellowship.

Other churches—Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian, for example—have more centralized authority, and their policies must be embraced on the local level. In short, a national policy would need nationwide approval, and currently the support just doesn’t exist in other churches for a UCC-style statement.

Deliberation: While many American churches closely monitor what other churches do, at the end of the day they insist on making their own decisions, in their own way, on their own timetable.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, which shares a “full communion” agreement with the UCC that allows the churches to swap clergy and share ministry, is scheduled to debate both gay ordination and same-sex unions at its assembly in Orlando, Florida, in August. Emily Eastwood, the director of Lutherans Concerned North America, the ELCA’s gay and lesbian caucus, hailed the UCC vote but was skeptical that it will have much impact when Lutherans take up the issue this summer. “ELCA voting members are fiercely independent,” Eastwood said.

However, Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist at Boston University who has studied mainline churches, said churches often experience an “imitation effect” in which it

takes only one church to “open the door” and others soon follow. That’s what happened with women’s ordination, she said.

“This provides ever-so-subtle pressure or permission—depending on how you want to see it—for other churches” to follow, she said.

Whatever the long-term impact, gay rights activists say the UCC vote may have another, less tangible effect. Mel White, a former evangelical writer who now directs the gay rights group Soulforce, said the UCC resolution sends a powerful message about “courage” to other churches that may be hesitant to tackle the issue. *-Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*