

AUCE Beginnings

by Rev. Ruby J. Schroeder

Where, when, why, how, and who preface questions often raised about the origins of the Association of United Church Educators. Perhaps it is time for those of the present to record our personal recollections of what has been mainly an oral tradition to this point. Notwithstanding the vagaries of time, selectivity of nuance, and natural attrition of memory, this eyewitness and participant is emboldened to commit these personal recollections to print, with the sincere intent and hope that this account is faithful to the core.

From Christian Education Fellowship to AUCE

The question in 1971 was, “Shall the UCC Christian Education Fellowship continue to be a fellowship group, an organization dependent on the national UCC Christian education staff? Or shall we become an independent organization, self-supporting and responsible for our own advocacy, able to stand up not only for quality church education, but also as advocates for educators?” Up to this point, the Christian Education Fellowship was dependent upon the national UCC Education Division and gathered only when there were national events scheduled. With the advent of the Joint Educational Development thrust (of then nine denominations) in 1971, and the first National Event for Church Educators (NECE) in New Orleans, a new beginning in ecumenical church education events was begun. It was a bright, hopeful, heady beginning -- with the Hall of Preservation Jazz Band leading the way!

These questions about the existence and purpose of the Christian Education Fellowship were related to such issues as representation at General Synods and all pertinent denominational meetings. They had to do with being able to present resolutions at General Synod through Voice Without Vote status. They also had the potential to give us an opportunity to be critical of what the Education Division of the national offices did. In other words, we were advocating for quality education. Ruth Sprague, of the Education Division staff, had the foresight and wisdom to encourage us to “stand on our own feet” rather than to be told what to do by the national staff and how to do it. She encouraged us to critique the Division and become an advocate for UCC Christian educators and the importance of educational ministry in the church. She encouraged us to be independent of the denomination, yet related.

Support for Educators and Education

At the end of that day, it was the consensus of the approximately ninety UCC educators in attendance at NECE that our future was to support quality church education and professionals in the field. This meeting convinced me of the basic importance and need for a denominational base to obtain standing, accountability, and recognition. I also gained a deep appreciation for our denominational leadership in the ministry of Christian education and for the long history of excellence in the production of fine curriculum resources. I felt then, and continue to feel, a strong need to continue our unique and excellent tradition.

Several of us, representing the United Church of Christ regions, agreed to meet around the edges of the NECE meeting to develop an organizing document. My memory may be faulty, so if I have forgotten someone or place someone there who wasn't present, I apologize. I recall the following persons being present at those evening sessions: Eleanor Allen from the Great Lakes region, Mary Germ from the Wisconsin Conference, Elden Zuern was President of the Christian Educator Fellowship, and I. There may have been others.

Birth Complications

We developed Articles of Organization that we believed were faithful to the task we were given by the UCC educators present. When we presented our report at a final meeting with the UCC educators before the close of the NECE event, there were plaudits of affirmation as well as a storm of protests. Clearly, the use of the word “professional” touched a nerve. Indeed, I recall one national staff person remarking that even he did not have the criteria to belong! The vote on the Articles split the assembly and we, the planners and writers, were asked to take them back to the drawing board.

Later that evening, Mary Germ (of the Wisconsin Conference staff), Eleanor Allen (an educator from Illinois who later became the first Chair of AUCE), Patricia Goldberg (an educator from Wisconsin who now serves on the Iowa Conference staff), Ruth Sprague (of the national education staff), and I were walking in New Orleans. The gloom and discouragement that settled upon us was like Mississippi mud. What had happened between our first meeting and this last one? Had we not heard? True, there was a large number of folk present at the second meeting who were not part of the initial process. It also was true that raising the issue of quality education and professional standards had created feelings of defensiveness and anger. Then from somewhere out of the depths and melancholy of the mud and the musings came the image of an organization for church educators that was committed to the service of *all* educators -- volunteer and professional -- even as the continuing concerns for high standards for church educators, advocacy, and justice were raised. Our goal was most succinctly articulated in these words of Ruth Sprague: "Theologically trained church educators are uniquely equipped to work at the intersection of theology, educational process, and contemporary personal and social issues." [from *A Study of Church Educators*, 1971] For me this definition and vision remains a hope and dream for all church educators.

The Regions Respond Affirmatively

A meeting of the planners was held in Chicago in late 1971. Representatives of the regions and national staff were in attendance: Eleanor Allen who chaired the meeting, Mary Germ (Great Lakes region), Gus Woerner (New England region), Jim Boler (West Central region), Ken Ostermiller (Middle Atlantic region), June Grubb (Southern region), Patricia Goldbeg (Great Lakes region), Lee Moore (New England region), Ruth Sprague (national CE staff), and I. The Articles of Organization were revised and then the regional representatives were asked to present the revision to the educators in their regions for feedback and action.

The entire AUCE Coordinating Committee gathered to report from their regions early in 1972. I had the honor of moving that the Association of United Church Educators be formed, and the motion passed unanimously!

AUCE's Vision

In re-reading some of the notes from those early beginnings, I am struck by the foresight and continuing relevance of those organizing visions and dreams, even in the very different context of today. Some of the issues and concerns noted then were:

- Inform church educators about the certification and commissioning procedures;
- Lobby at General Synod for the priority of church education;
- Review the place of Christian education in seminary curricula;
- Investigate the remunerative scales of positions of Director of Christian Education, Minister of Christian Education, and local church pastors;
- Set standards and qualifications for church educators
- Form an organization that functions in concerted action on behalf of church educators;
- Develop communication networks to guard against feelings of isolation;
- Plan for solid, ongoing continuing education for church educators;
- Become proactive in the placement process;
- Develop relationships with educators in other denominations.

What a wondrous gift was birthed on that soggy, dark night in New Orleans in 1971! Many people have worked hard to continue the dream and many educators have benefitted. All of this is due to the work of those who know and understand that if our churches are going to survive, it will be because of sound, vital educational ministry, empowered through the Spirit and made present in God's redeeming love through Jesus Christ. How dare we grow weary!

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