

# New England UCC churches look to organize progressive 'Christian voice'



MASSACHUSETTS CONFERENCE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

**Delegates representing United Church of Christ congregations in Massachusetts voted to join with sister churches in Rhode Island and Connecticut in the effort.**

**By John Hilliard**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 16, 2018

United Church of Christ churches in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut agreed Saturday in a first-of-its-kind vote to join together to help launch an organized, progressive Christian voice to counter right-wing religious forces in US politics.

“The reality is that Southern Baptists don’t speak for all Christians,” said Jim Antal, the head of the UCC’s Massachusetts conference. “I hope going forward that as a consequence of what we initiated . . . there comes a religious Christian voice in America that represents the values of Jesus, which are, in fact, progressive. They are inclusive; they demand justice in ways over the past year and a half we haven’t heard a lot about.”

ADVERTISING



The churches will seek out other Christian denominations that share their values on issues like climate change, as well as racial and economic justice, to join them, Antal said.

The vote creates a new nonprofit organization that would pool staff and oversee operations for the three individual state conferences beginning in 2020.

Delegates representing about 600 United Church of Christ congregations in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut voted to form the alliance Saturday morning at Springfield’s MassMutual Center.

Combined, those churches count about 160,000 people as members, Antal said.

While the state conferences don’t have direct authority over local congregations, an “overwhelming” number of delegates backed the plan, Antal said.

The new nonprofit is not a formal merger of the state organizations: Although the three state conferences will cooperate in the new endeavor, each will remain independent, Antal said.

“I think what the world needs now are Christians who are unified by common values, and this creates an organizational possibility for that, without in any way harming or undermining congregations’ continuing affiliations with their denominations,” Antal said.

The UCC vote comes as President Trump continues to hold strong support among the nation’s white evangelicals: He won 80 percent of their vote during the 2016 election.

And [nearly 8 in 10](#) white evangelicals approve of Trump’s job performance, according to the Pew Research Center, though that support has been tested by the president’s treatment of women [and his use of racist language](#).

“People say that the president says mean things. I can’t think of anything mean he’s said. I think he speaks what he feels,” [the Rev. Franklin Graham, the son of the Rev. Billy Graham and heir to his father’s ministry, told The New York Times in February](#). “I think he’s trying to speak the truth.”

Antal said the churches’ alliance would push back against the appearance of Christianity being used to justify right-wing government policies, such as when Attorney General Jeff Sessions cited the Bible on Thursday to defend a crackdown on immigration.

“Just because somebody like Jeff Sessions quotes scripture and claims that it represents the Christian view, it’s really important to realize that there are tens of millions of Christians that are outraged at such a claim,” Antal said.

Trump administration officials frequently point to their faith as a guide, including Sessions, who [quoted a Bible verse to support prosecuting anyone who crosses the border from Mexico](#). The practice has been widely blasted for separating children from their parents.

“Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent and fair application of the law is in itself a good and moral thing, and that protects the weak and protects the lawful,” Sessions said told law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Antal said no reading of the New Testament would show Jesus supporting a government practice that breaks up families.

“This is a complete misappropriation of a particular scripture... that was used to justify slavery, for God’s sake,” Antal said.

Antal is a climate activist who wrote a UCC resolution last year calling on clergy to [speak out against climate change and undo its “disproportionate impact”](#) on communities of color, indigenous communities, and poor white communities, the text read.

Nationally, there has been opposition against the Christian faith being co-opted by one side of the political spectrum.

Among those efforts is the [“Reclaiming Jesus”](#) declaration, a call-to-action among Christian leaders to put aside politics and reject practices that “dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith,” including racism, the sexual abuse of women, and the mistreatment of the sick and poor.

The declaration’s backers include the Most Rev. Michael Curry, who dazzled the world with his impassioned sermon during the wedding of Britain’s Prince Harry and former actress Meghan Markle.

The Rev. Laura Everett, the executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, said Massachusetts denominations have a long tradition of working together on local issues like providing for the poor or helping those with drug addictions.

The group represents thousands of churches across Massachusetts, she said.

Since Trump was elected, there has been urgency among churches to work together on confronting racism, protecting the environment, and immigration, she said.

“This is a moment for reckoning for American Christianity. . . . The God I serve reconciles divisions, instead of exacerbating them; the God I serve brings families together, and does not separate them,” Everett said. “I hear a lot of Christians heartbroken that the faith that they love is being expressed in ways that feel exceedingly divisive.”

The Right Rev. Douglas Fisher, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, said local Episcopal churches have been working closely with other denominations, including the UCC and Lutherans.

Fisher, who leads a diocese of about 16,000 people, said he would seek to work closer with UCC congregations on issues like immigration and gun violence.

“At a time when it feels like the world is coming apart, we’re coming together,” Fisher said.

*Material from the Washington Post was used in this report. John Hilliard can be reached at [john.hilliard@globe.com](mailto:john.hilliard@globe.com).*

---

© 2018 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC