

AUCE Beginnings

by Rev. Ruby J. Schroeder



The Association of United Church Educators (AUCE) is to be a community of people who recognize that church education is a vital ministry in the life of the church, and that the continued growth toward greater competency of persons engaged in church education is essential to that ministry. Therefore AUCE is organized as a support community of church educators to broaden the scope and depth of their educational ministry through personal and professional development.

- Statement of Purpose from the AUCE Articles of Organization, 1972

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.

As you have undoubtedly surmised, the lead paragraph quotation did not simply appear from out of the blue! Indeed, it was birthed with many bright hopes and visions, as well as with a little pain and struggle. As has ever been true, context is key.

The year was 1968, the place was Chicago in the aftermath of the Democratic political convention riots and unrest, and the rescheduling of the annual National Council of Churches Division of Christian Education in that city. This event featured national figures prominent in educational circles, cutting edge leaders and ideas, and many varied workshops -- in short, a Christian education learning experience *par excellence!* The 1968 event was planned utilizing the newest approach to relevant learning -- learning through action and reflection -- moving conferees into the urban streets to learn and teach. As you may have guessed, the conference was seriously undersubscribed, was a financial bust, and ended the long history of excellent education in an ecumenical setting for church educators.

A casualty of that event was the demise of the United Church of Christ Christian Education Fellowship, an organization for all church educators that met for a day preceding the National Council event. Planned primarily by our national staff with several representatives from our churches, this was an important time for all of us. It was an opportunity to meet and study and hear from our national staff --

then some twenty or more persons who wrote curriculum, authored many resources, were specialists in the various age groups and various interests such as camping and many others. These were key opportunities for local church educators. But with the cessation of the National Council events, there was not a structure in which the meetings could be held. Sequences and planning and officers' terms were interrupted.

With the advent of the Joint Educational Development thrust (of then nine denominations) in 1971, and the first National Event for Christian Education (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!

But what about the United Church of Christ Christian Education Fellowship? Fortunately there was enough funding to gather a group of some ninety folk for one day in new Orleans to explore the questions of the group's future. The question on that day was, "Shall the 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 sown advocacy, able to stand up not only for quality church education, but also as advocates for educators?"

These questions were related to representation at General Synods and all pertinent denominational meetings. They also had to do with being able to present resolutions at General Synod through Voice Without Vote status. It also gave 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. (I, for one, gave serious thought to the possibility of becoming one NECE organization for church educators. It was the hey-day of the mega-church visions of the Consultation of Church Union.) 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. (Ruth had the credentials to become ordained but chose not to.) These were the options before us. Eleanor Allen, then of Oak Park, Illinois, was asked to convene this day-long meeting. With a committee, they planned a process to discern a decision about our future.

At the end of that day, it was the consensus of the approximately ninety educators in attendance 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.

Back to context: The day was nearly over. The ninety-plus educators were in agreement. But the NECE event was to begin the next morning and our plans for organization needed to be shared with the group. 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 representing the Great Lakes region, Mary Germ representing the Wisconsin Conference, Elden Zuern was President of the Christian Educator Fellowship, and I represented the Great Lakes region. There may have been others.

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 (Wisconsin Conference staff), Eleanor Allen (educator from Illinois), Patricia Goldberg (educator from Wisconsin), Ruth Sprague (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 was also 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* church educators -- volunteers and professionals -- 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.

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), Herb Hosanna, Ruth Sprague, 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.

Each regional representative planned a process of presentation appropriate for that area. As the Great Lakes Regional Representative, I convened the first gathering of church educators at Yokefellow Institute in Richmond, Indiana. My responsibilities included securing a place, planning the program, publicity, registration, and serving as treasurer. Thirty-four people attended. Dr. Edward Powers, then the head of the national Christian Education Division provided the program. He also ferried registrants from the Dayton Airport to the Institute! After thorough discussion of the proposed Articles of Organization, the Great Lakes educators approved their adoption.

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!

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:

- Define who a Christian is and what he/she does;
- 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! Marvelous things have been accomplished since yet much more remains to be done. 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!

Ruby Schroeder is one of our "founding mothers" of AUCE and is a retired faculty member of Eden Theological Seminary. She was Chair of AUCE from 1976-1980, and currently serves as AUCE's Archivist.

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