

FCCEJ 150 Years of Service to God and Community

“Stirred Hearts”

*We Limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind
To notions of our day and sect, crude partial and confined.
Not, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred:
Our God has yet more light and truth to break forth from the word.*

These words were delivered to the pilgrims when they sailed to the New World by the Rev. Robinson in 1620. They challenged the small band of adventurers to keep their minds open to where God was leading them and to look for a hopeful future. The pilgrims and their forebears, the Congregationalists, drew from these words a desire to make the new world a better place.

Trying to create a healthy society where God’s demand to love our neighbor was applied to church construction by having churches built in the middle of town square right across from town hall. Puritanical movements to address issues of alcohol and rest from labor were early efforts to make our culture healthier. As Congregationalists applied old words to new contexts, social issues continued to guide both national movements and local congregations. Congregational pulpits rang out against slavery and generations later for civil rights for people of color. Voices cried out for fair wages and protective rights in labor unions and for migrant workers. Discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation were challenged as going against God’s spirit of love. War, corporate greed and geopolitical issues of justice were taught in seminary as part and parcel of a minister’s education and vital to the life of local congregations. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was the first major denomination to ordain an African American, the first woman and the first openly gay clergy. The words from John Robinson stir their hearts to make society better.

First Congo has tried to live out these words for 150 years. In 1966, our church hosted an interreligious dialogue to break down the barriers of division between various religions and just last year invited Rabbi Amy Small and Imam Islam Hassan to our pulpit in the same vein. During the Viet Nam War, our local clergy spoke out forcefully against the war. In addition, our clergy have preached forcefully for and continue to uphold the very best of Christ’s Gospel as it applies to civil rights, women’s rights, economic fairness and GLBTQ equality. When Vermont was debating civil unions, our church voted to allow the ministers to perform civil unions in the church. Later when civil union legislation was replaced with marriage equality laws, our church voted 97-3 to be an Open and Affirming Congregation which means that we support complete and full civil rights in our church and society for all GLBTQ folks.

Together, we continue to live out the words of Rev. John Robinson and continue to try to apply Christ’s message of love and justice to today’s world and modern issues.

Rev. Mark Mendes