

Ten Years of UCCMA!

by K. Bryan Kirk

As UCCMA completes its first decade, we reflect upon our history and how we began.

For many years, most other major denominations have had organizations for their musicians with printed materials and venues for sharing, networking and education within their respective denominational boundaries. In the early 1990s, several UCC church musicians in Connecticut noticed the absence of an organization for the UCC and set out to start "something" to change that scene.

Led by Jayson Engquist, a letter was sent out by him in August 1994 to more than 25 area UCC church musicians, inviting them to come together for an informal meeting, with a vision to form a UCC musicians organization. The first gathering included several people and was held in Newington, Connecticut as part of an AGO mini-convention.

Interest and excitement were high from the beginning, and plans were made to contact more UCC church musicians. Our first official, organizational meeting of what was first called NUCCMA (National United Church of Christ Musicians Association), was held in Naugatuck, Connecticut in January 1995 with 12 persons present.

From this first meeting, ideas and topics to be covered included: salaries/benefits, contracts/Professional Concerns, UCC resources, hymnals, UCC liturgy, new music (choral, organ, handbell), having an annual Conference, computer/Midi use, placement service, grievance procedure, an organization that would eventually become national, and networking with other UCC church musicians/clergy and the UCC denomination.

Committees were organized and members volunteered to serve and help out. Future meetings were held in different church and home locations in Connecticut, with an eye to cover a wide geography and initially involve people from all over the state, as well as looking toward becoming a nationally known group.

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The first newsletter appeared in December 1994 (sent about every other month since), with the purpose of networking members and keeping them abreast of our activities, placement information and future opportunities for involvement.

1995 brought the important task of setting up and collecting dues (\$25 then!) and officially organizing and incorporating ourselves outside the denomination to ensure longevity. To that end we came up with a mission statement and our first roster of members, which included 20 people (founders), many of whom are still actively involved in the organization. As this time, the organization became known as UCCMA.

From this point on, we knew we were off and running and much work was done to formulate bylaws, establish policies and procedures, begin publicity, solicit new members and inform the denomination of our activities. We were officially incorporated by 1996 and our tax-exempt status process was begun, but not completed until 2001.

Quarterly meetings of the Board were held (as well as Annual Meetings open to the membership) and the newsletter continued as word gradually spread about our organization. Musicians and clergy joined and participated. Interest and participation grew as we foraged ahead, realizing we were becoming a more diverse group.

A realization of one of our first dreams was to have a major Conference event to bring the membership together, and so in 1997 plans were made for "Enhancing Our Song in the New Century", which was held in July 1998 at the beautiful Trinity Conference Center in the pastoral area of Cornwall, Connecticut.

After much planning by the Board, a multi-day event with an opening plenary session, anthem readings, workshops on many topics and several services involving clergy were planned, including a traditional, contemporary and a Taizé service by candlelight. The Woodland Scholars served as a guest choral group and performed a concert. Representatives from the UCC in Cleveland were present. Everyone was enthralled!

This successful event drew more than 85 musicians and clergy from several states in New England, the Middle Atlantic, the South and the Mid-West areas. All in attendance were ecstatic about what they had experienced, the closeness and collegiality of everyone and the fact this was a UCC-focused activity, something new, different, and needed. As the Board met after the final event, we knew we were on a roll. Membership grew to more than 100 and plans were set forth for future biennial Conferences in different states.

1999 brought forth the planning and implementation of the Journal, "Worship, Music and Ministry", featuring articles from other journals and UCC specific materials by members and others, and included planning resources from and for our members. The quality of this publication was very high in content and in format and has received well-deserved praise for each issue since its inception. Published three times a year and sent to all members, the Journal has remained one of our finest printed accomplishments.

The second Conference, "Sacred Music + Sacred Calling", was held in July 2000 at Amherst College in Massachusetts and brought more than 120 individuals from even more states (including the west coast!) for varied offerings on many topics, as well as several different worship services. The Conference Choir, involving most participants, and a Conference Handbell Choir were highlights of the final service. A special treat was a closing concert by CONCORA's Consort of Voices.

As Board meetings progressed in 2000 and 2001, we developed a format of bringing together the entire Board three times a year for two-day meetings to give us ample time to think, vision, strategize, deliberate and discuss important matters. Planning focused on our growing organization, now close to 150 members, and how to effectively reach and keep in touch with the growing membership. Realizing we were an organization containing everything from volunteer organists to part-time church-employed musicians to those with major full-time positions, our diversity was evident and we reviewed our makeup to see how best to effectively and efficiently "reach" all members.

Policies and procedures of operation were reviewed and discussions also included how to become more national, one of our initial, but continuing goals. Increasing membership, improving publications, publication of a complete membership directory and bylaws, and regular meetings were all things accomplished during these

important growth years. Plans for marketing/advertising and a major membership survey were also begun.

The third Conference, "Many Gifts, One Spirit" was held in July 2002 at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island and welcomed 135 members from even farther away states. The major highlight was the singing of a commissioned anthem, "Many Gifts, One Spirit", composed by Charles Callahan for the occasion. The combined forces of organ, handbells, large choir and congregation literally raised the roof in praise.

The heat and humidity of that busy week did not dispel conferees' enthusiasm and thirst for more workshops, Conference Choir and Handbell Choir participation, networking, social time and renewing friendships. As the days went on, the hungry were well-fed spiritually by two clergy-in-residence, and nurtured musically by inspiring services and music. "Table Talk" discussions at lunch added much to the networking and informal sharing of ideas, and all in all, members came away nourished, renewed and inspired.

After the success of this Conference, the Board focused in 2003 on having a separate Conference Committee to handle all the aspects of planning and presenting these major events so the Board could stay on track with membership development, publicity, programs, long-range plans, organizational improvement and the overall health of UCCMA. Membership reached more than 200 and included people from 28 states.

A membership mass-mailing was sent out to all UCC churches in selected states, in an effort to increase making ourselves known to non-members, and a member-targeted survey was sent out and evaluated. Much of the information gathered from these surveys has been used in Conference planning, organization and for future programs.

According to our bylaws, the Board was originally set up as a self-electing group, and annual meetings were held, to which all members were invited and regular reports were disseminated to the membership about our financial and physical health and activities.

As we grew and become more diverse, discussions ensued about having regular elections for Board positions. The prospect and excitement of new members elicited new thinking.

Regularly having new Board members has been a part of our organization since its inception, and the Board is currently taking steps to revise our bylaws, leading to member-based elections. We also hope to attract

even more new members to serve in the operations and governance of UCCMA to ensure fresh ideas for the next decade.

As the Conference Committee planned the fourth Conference, the theme of "Adding Spice to Worship" appeared and permeated the event at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania in July 2004. Attracting more than 110 people, this wonderful event brought together a most diverse group of people, some of whom have attended all previous Conferences, some who have been members since the beginning of UCCMA, and some who were new members and "first-timers". Amidst a welcoming atmosphere (and air-conditioned facilities!), all enjoyed the varied offerings and seasonings to take to our home churches. Again, two clergy-in-residence provided spiritual guidance and leadership for the four very different services.

The closing service included the commissioned anthem, "Ever With Me", by Gwyneth Walker, sung by a choir of nearly 100 voices. As participants parted, all were abuzz with anticipation for the next Conference in 2006, scheduled to be at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. Each Conference has generated much interest and attracted new members, many of whom have stayed on for years.

The format of our Conferences has been mostly consistent, with an opening plenary session/panel discussion focusing on a "hot topic", well moderated and facilitated, a wide variety of workshops and anthem reading sessions to provide practical and useful information, resources for choirs, organ repertoire, service playing and worship planning ideas and materials for "take home".

Several worship services of various coherent designs and formats served as models for things to enrich our spiritual experiences and were offered with music and inspiring singing by those leading and attending. The collegiality of it all, including the networking, social time and renewing of acquaintances, helped nurture, support and inspire everyone to share what they experienced with their own congregations and staff - truly a ministry.

UCCMA, Inc. has been here for you the past ten years, and all the tasks of time, meetings, communications, publications, Conferences, etc. have mounted in-

calculable volunteer hours for nearly everything that has been and is done. From the early years, it was obvious the "sweat equity" and determination of the founders is what made the organization survive. Over the years the passion and drive has continued, and by involving new members from all across the nation, we have moved ahead in not only accomplishing many of our original goals, but also dreaming and visioning new ones to carry us through into the 21st century and beyond.

As we begin our second decade, the Board is currently looking at hard questions and answers about our organization, how to become even more national, a more well-known entity in areas where we already exist, looking at our structure and governance, strengths and weaknesses, long-range health, and how to continue to minister to members' needs in the future. As we become more diverse, our challenge is to readily meet that opportunity.

The mission, philosophy and commitment from that first day in the autumn of 1994 still continue now on a much larger scale and are critical to the success and continuance of UCCMA, so please be a part of it if you feel called to serve or are asked to help out in any way. This mission is not and was not done exclusively for us, but inclusively for you, the real part of the organization - this nation-wide membership of UCC musicians, clergy, and the congregations you serve.

Our thanks and well-deserved praise go to all who have and will serve in any capacity for this much-needed and much-appreciated organization that began in earnest as a grass-roots effort with a few like-minded UCC church musicians who got together over coffee and cookies in a church choir room.

This overview of our history is by no means a complete accounting of all that we have or have not done as we reach this milestone, but through the early efforts of our Founding President and founders, successive Presidents and Board members, we have worked together with our membership, creating an organization that certainly and truly "supports and nurtures musicians and their ministry in the United Church of Christ."

We hope you will all be with us when we reach our next major milestone 15 years from now - "25 Years of UCCMA"!

Let Us Rejoice and Be Glad in it! 