

Liberal Denomination Fires Salvos at Right
By NEELA BANERJEE
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David Richard for The New York Times
The Rev. John H. Thomas, leader of the United Church of Christ.
Correction Appended

After years of turning the other cheek, the United Church of Christ, among the most liberal of the mainline Protestant denominations, has recently staked out a more pugacious stance toward the Christian right.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, the denomination's president, has sharply criticized the Institute for Religion and Democracy, a conservative religious watchdog and advocacy group, for supporting groups within mainline denominations that would further a conservative theological and political perspective. And the church has undertaken new advertising and e-mail campaigns to combat more conservative forces.

"I.R.D. is using church members, and even outside groups, to disrupt and ultimately control the mainline to promote its own political agenda," Mr. Thomas said last month in a speech at Gettysburg College.

In the e-mail campaign, the denomination is accusing the ABC News political program "This Week" of booking far more conservative Christian leaders than moderates for the Sunday morning broadcast. The network has called that assertion "unfounded and not based on fact."

And after stirring up publicity in late 2004 with an advertisement about tolerance, the church is distributing an even more pointed commercial that shows people who might not be considered mainstream, like a single mother and a gay couple, being shot through the roof of a church from an "ejector pew."

"God doesn't reject people," the commercial says. "Neither do we."

Critics of the United Church of Christ, including the Institute for Religion and Democracy, assert that the church tries to silence those who do not agree with its liberal interpretation of Scripture.

"In Thomas's case, I'm seeing an advancing case of paranoia," said Steve Rempe, the content editor for the institute's Web site. "He sees this vast conspiracy centered around conservative political motivations and doesn't seem to see the possibility that these people might have a legitimate pastoral concern for their churches."

The United Church of Christ appears to be battling two trends: the influence of the Institute of Religion and Democracy within mainline denominations and the influence of the religious right, particularly its influence with the news media.

Detractors and allies agree that the recent actions by the United Church of Christ signal a growing impatience among the mainline denominations with their far-right brethren and an increasing willingness to take some of them on.

"Leaders have responded strongly before, but the U.C.C. has taken it to a new level of battle or conflict," said the Rev. Christian Sharen of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

The United Church of Christ, which is made up in part of churches descended from the Puritan congregations, takes pride in its liberalism, and it has led other Protestant denominations in the ordination of women and on civil rights issues, said Randall Balmer, professor of American religious history at Columbia University. As with other mainline churches, it has been subject to disputes over homosexuality, in its case, a decision at its General Synod meeting last year to support same-sex marriage.

In an interview, Mr. Thomas said he welcomed spirited debate about issues like sexuality. But he said that in his March speech he was speaking out against those within the church and outside it who sought to wreck the denomination. He said in his speech, for example, that some dissenting groups in the church had encouraged members who agreed with them to withhold donations.

"We need to be more active in protecting our churches from this kind of behavior," Mr. Thomas said. "We need to differentiate between loving critics and critics who are looking to divide and destroy."

Mr. Rempe, who recorded Mr. Thomas's speech at Gettysburg, denied that his organization sought to destroy the mainline churches, pointing out that many of the institute's staff members belonged to those denominations. He also denied that the group had advised conservative dissenters to withhold money.

Financed in part by wealthy religious conservatives, the Institute for Religion and Democracy provides information to so-called renewal groups made up of conservative dissenters within the mainline churches. Mr. Rempe played down its efforts, saying it included an annual meeting "and some press releases and a couple of traded e-mails."

But experts on American Protestantism argue that the institute plays a far greater role in nurturing dissent and organizing a broader movement across denominational lines to battle leaders of the mainline churches.

Professor Balmer attended last year's annual meeting of the renewal groups organized by the institute's Association for Church Renewal

"A lot of the rhetoric was triumphalist," he said. "They thought they could use issues of homosexuality, gay clergy and same-sex unions to take over their denominations."

Others have joined the United Church of Christ in speaking out. Recently, the Rev. Michael Livingston, the new president of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A., told a meeting of representatives of the group's member churches, "Mainline Protestant and Orthodox churches have been pounded into irrelevancy by the media machine of a false religion; a political philosophy masquerading as gospel; an economic principle wrapped in religious rhetoric and painted red, white and blue."

Although some mainline Christians feel energized by the new toughness, others worry that such an approach could threaten the very pluralism that the mainline churches have come to stand for and the gospel of love that so many preach.

"I think this is a dangerous place to be," said Mr. Sharen of Yale. "You stand to lose the integrity of 'turn the other cheek.' "

Correction: April 8, 2006

An article yesterday about a clash between the United Church of Christ and its conservative critics misspelled the surname of the director of the Faith as a Way of Life Project at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, who said the church had taken its response "to a new level of battle or conflict." He is the Rev. Christian Scharen, not Sharen.