



Forgiveness is learned, taught, rehearsed

By J. Bennett Guess

Forgiving is not forgetting, as some have naively thought. Instead, forgiveness is about choosing to remember a hurtful past in a new way.

As the narrator describes it in Journey Film's *The Power of Forgiveness*, "When one side feels injustices have never been properly addressed, the memory of that injustice is held firmly and moving on becomes difficult."

In the United Church of Christ (UCC), we learned this lesson well when, in 1991, our national General Synod issued a formal apology to the people of Hawaii for our church's "complicity" during the U.S. military's 19th-century overthrow of the Hawaiian monarch. For the denomination, and for me personally, it was a learning experience about the power and pitfalls when groups of people seek forgiveness.

For generations, the UCC's Congregational forebears enjoyed a long and complicated relationship with the people and lands of Hawaii. Sadly, they too often confused "the ways of the West with the ways of Christ," as a past president of the UCC, the Rev. Paul Sherry, aptly described it.

From 1820 to 1863, the UCC's former American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent more than 100 missionaries to Hawaii, forming the Hawaii Evangelistic Association, which continues to this day. Despite the fact that all of the original missionaries were dead by the time the 1893 overthrow of Queen Lil'uokalani took place, the first-generation descendents of these missionaries became wealthy landowners and influential members of prominent white Congregational churches. Many were key figures in Lil'uokalani's overthrow and, later, the annexation of Hawaii as a U.S. territory.

As part of the UCC's apology, the church paid modest restitution to native Hawaiian congregations and advocacy groups.

But, most visibly, the church organized a major "service of repentance and reconciliation" in January 1993. Attended by more than 10,000 people gathered outside Honolulu's Iolani Palace, Sherry and 30 other local and national UCC leaders pledged support and advocacy for indigenous Hawaiians. Church leaders then traveled across four islands for area gatherings and worship services.

When Sherry spoke the UCC's words of formal apology, a standing ovation followed.

But some were admittedly skeptical, even unimpressed. "The assumption is that [church leaders] can speak for the actions and apologize for the actions of 100 years ago,"

said a native Hawaiian, at the time, to the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. “The whole thing leaves me kind of empty.”

Forgiveness is not cheap grace. It is not earned simply because a seeker expresses remorse or practices penitence, but it is granted by victims who also feel it necessary, for the sake of their own empowerment, to offer some degree of absolution.

I was a pastor in Kentucky, when the 1993 apology was delivered in Hawaii. I remember grappling with how to make this significant denominational event relevant to a congregation that included no Pacific Islander members, nor had any real history with U.S. colonialism. But thankfully the people in my parish, for the most part, wanted to understand and respond to injustice.

Ironically, just as the Hawaii apology was being issued, our church was busy renovating an adjacent building and creating a community-based justice and peace center. One of the project’s financial backers was a Boston-based endowment fund that granted the dollars to us, in part, because it saw the need to give back to justice-related work in Kentucky communities. Unbeknownst to us before making application, this fund was first created decades ago by a prominent New England businessman who had earned his fortunes by profiting from coal mining in Kentucky.

That fact, to be sure, was something my congregation could relate to, namely the history of how the wealth of Kentucky’s natural resources had benefited wealthy barons in the Northeast while the state’s own people languished in abject poverty.

At the surface, it would seem, there are few parallels between the people of Hawaii and Kentucky, but anytime we look at the impact of economic domination, a similar story is heard over and over, in places around the world. Therefore, as part of our lament for the indigenous people of Hawaii, we remembered, too, how impoverished Kentuckians have been victimized by greedy exploitation. And we pledged to connect the dots, tell the stories, and learn the lessons that forgiveness offers.

Too often, “re-membering” takes years. But, as “The Power of Forgiveness” film shows us, forgiveness is learned. Or even rehearsed, one might say.

Whether it be in the post-9/11 streets of New York City, or the schools of Northern Ireland, or among the families of Pennsylvania’s Amish country, forgiveness, like revenge, is a choice.

“It’s not something done once and then it’s done,” as one voice in the documentary teaches. “It’s something you have to do everyday.”

In the film, Marianne Williamson describes forgiveness as both “moral conviction” and “spiritual audacity.”

Or, as Thomas Moore teaches, forgiveness comes in its own time, but we create the conditions where forgiveness can occur.

It takes time – and hard work.

In the case of the indigenous people of Hawaii, it took the UCC nearly 100 years before the church asked the native Hawaiians for forgiveness. But each time forgiveness is sought and granted we learn more of its value – and our collective need for it.

As the Rev. Jim Forbes states so well, the more we seek forgiveness the more comfort we also find when dispensing it to others. In the process, he says, we come to understand that we “have had to make withdrawals from the bank of grace many, many times.”

QUESTIONS

The Rev. J. Bennett Guess, editor of United Church News, is acting communications director for the 1.2-million-member United Church of Christ, based in Cleveland. He recounts his experience with a congregation in Kentucky and compares it with the experience of the people of Hawaii.

- What similarities do you see between the Kentucky and Hawaii stories?
- What differences do you see between the two stories?
- Do you feel that we can effectively or adequately apologize for the actions of 100 years ago?
- What do you understand him to mean by “forgiveness is about choosing to remember a hurtful past in a new way”?
- What do you understand him to mean when he says “Forgiveness is not cheap grace”?

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