

## DIVING INTO THE DEEP

## Our Tents of Hope on the move to Washington and Africa

*Editors note: As we go to press, many NCNCers are at the Tents of Hope Gathering in Washington, DC, along with tents painted by over 20 NCNC churches, now displayed on the Capitol Mall. In a project started by United UCC, Petaluma's Tim Nonn just over a year ago, churches, schools and community groups from across the nation have brought their hundreds of tents too. The project raises awareness in support of education, advocacy and fundraising for humanitarian assistance for the people of Darfur, Sudan. Below are some reflections on this powerful movement. See <www.tentsofhope.org> for more stories and photos.*

**Tim Nonn**, United UCC, Petaluma: "The tent is a symbol of our solidarity with the uprooted people of Darfur, Sudan. It is a visible sign of our commitment to transform suffering into hope through compassion.

"By placing the tents in our communities, we are saying to the people of Darfur, 'You have a place on this earth.' The tent is sacred ground because it ties our destiny to the destiny of the people of Darfur.

"The tent connects us as one human family on the journey toward ending genocide and creating a peaceful and just world. With this sense of solidarity, we will



Norm Luecke in front of the tent painted by his First Congregational UCC, Martinez, with US Capitol in the distance. More NCNC "Tenters" Jack Dawson, Drew Nettinga, Jo Siders, and (far right) Susie Claxton, flanking Kwame Reed, associate conference minister for the Potomac Association, Central Atlantic Conference, who said to the gathering, "Today we are all Darfuris."



never give up until the people of Darfur are able to safely return to their homes."

**Drew Nettinga**, Community UCC, San Lorenzo: "We've had a full first day at the Tents of Hope Gathering on the Capitol Mall. Within the sight of the Capitol, a city of over 300 tents is growing. In addition, there are 10 unpainted tents which the public will be invited to paint tomorrow afternoon.

"The artwork is absolutely stunning. All are representative of the solidarity people in this country feel toward their Darfuri sisters and brothers. In addition to the setting up of tents, there was

a demonstration in front of the Sudanese Embassy. Between 300-400 people attended and signed an arrest warrant for Omar Al-Bashir, the president of Sudan, accused of crimes against humanity for the genocide against Darfuris.

"Representing the NCNC are Susie Claxton of Niles Congregational UCC, Fremont; Jo Siders from First Congregational UCC, Murphys; Jack and Pamela Dawson from United UCC/DOC, Lodi; Nonn; Norm Luecke from First Congregational UCC, Martinez; Karen Kamaguchi and others from Congregational UCC, Danville, and me.

"Tomorrow morning there's

a special breakfast for UCC and DOC tenters. There will also be various self-guided activities on the Mall and workshops and panel discussions at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation. At dusk, there will be a special tent-lighting ceremony, followed by a benefit concert.

"Sunday activities will include an Interfaith Worship Service which will explore the moral choice between being a bystander or an upstander to genocide.

"This weekend is also being observed by Jews as the anniversary of Kristalnacht. The Tents of Hope Rally festivities will include blessings the tents, rally speakers

and musical performers.

"Once the weekend is over, the Darfur Peace and Development Organization will see to the shipping of the tents to Darfuri refugee camps in Chad to be used as classrooms."

**Norm Luecke**: "I am so excited to be able to participate in the Gathering of Tents in Washington. I've never been there before and to be able to go there not just as a sightseer but as an advocate for such an important cause and a participant in this event makes my trip feel like an honor.

"While I am gone, on Nov. 9, our church will include prayers for the people of Darfur as part of Interfaith Weekend of Prayer and Action for Sudan. By that time we will have a new president-elect and some new faces in Congress so the timing couldn't be better to let them all know that the people of our nation would like to see this crisis become a higher priority on their agendas."

**Jo Siders**: "I was blessed Nov. 2 in church by the Murphys congregation for this journey — with the kids who painted and Cynthia Restivo who heard me preach the Tent story and took the idea forward. Very moving.

"The whole congregation raised their arms and formed a tent over me — WOW! This was definitely a first!"

## Election

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continued. Churches across the Conference immediately organized vigils and marches on the theme of "standing on the side of love." Wendy Taylor of Ladera UCC, Portola Valley urged people "If your heart needs the balm of Gilead, go stand with others."

Several ministers reported people calling in both joy and sorrow at the results. A member of College Ave. Congregational UCC, Modesto, called not so much to be consoled as to console the pastor, and recent newlywed, Michael Schiefelbein. They came up with the idea of a candlelight vigil that night with other community groups in a local park. "We just want to sing and pray and share time together," Schiefelbein said.

In the lead-up to the election the Modesto church had helped to organize a program "Seven Straight Nights" where seven different local interfaith congregations held public forums seven consecutive nights on topics like Why Marriage Matters, The Texts of Terror: the Bible in Context and That's So Gay: A Game Show for Youth (where the audience tried to guess which youth was gay.)

Ross Johnson, a youth member

of Cloverdale UCC wrote on his Facebook page that he guessed he was no longer equal in America, as a gay young man. Many NCNC youth wrote him right back in support and affirmation. Conference Council president Tony Lewis also wrote, saying "Yes, it hurts. But at least we had a chance to take a stand against Prop. 8 on behalf of the church."

Janice Steele, pastor of Imani UCC, Sacramento wrote after the election, "I remain hopeful and committed to the Gospel of love and inclusion. We must continue to move forward, knowing that change is inevitable!"

"We must extend the olive branch of peace and reconciliation; continue to practice radical hospitality to those who disagree with us and cannot see beyond their own agendas.

"This is not the time to put up walls and barriers that separate and isolate us from one another. Through your lamenting, see the glass half full, not half empty. Know that your loving relationships are honored by God and the commitments that you made to one another, with or without a marriage license, is a covenant between you, your partner and God."

On Nov. 1, in the worship service at First Congregational



Barack Obama wore his UCC comma pin when he spoke at UCC General Synod in Hartford June 2007. Photo George Conklin

UCC, Murphys, Tami Chestnut read a statement against Prop. 8, inspired by her nephew Owen Stephens, who grew up in that church and is still active in the Conference camping program. Owen had written her and others urging a no vote and had added a personal note:

"Since June, I have now married 79 couples in my capacity as a San Francisco Deputy Marriage Commissioner for the State of California. Some of the couples have been opposite sex, and some have been same sex couples. They have all been incredibly happy and also incredibly supportive of each other.

"Each day when I enter City

Hall and marry as many as fifteen couples in a row, often in groups of three at a time, my heart warms to bursting when the other couples and their entourages stick around and cheer every couple in the group, no matter who they are or that they met just minutes before.

"This weekend I am marrying at least three more couples

before the election, including my best friend in the world to his partner, and other close friends who I have known for years.

"They are getting married for two reasons, one because they love each other very much, and also because they fear that this may be their only chance and that we will take their right away. Could you imagine that being that case for your marriage? It isn't fair."

As we go to press, the Conference Council has filed a writ with the State Supreme Court against Prop. 8 as denying our religious rights.

On Nov. 9 the folks at Filipino-American UCC, Sunnyvale prayed, "Thank you God for the

non-violent election this week, and for the new president you have anointed to lead our nation."

Several NCNC churches also organized in support of Prop. 2, on behalf of farm animals, and against Prop. 4, limiting abortion rights for minors.

Members of Community UCC, San Lorenzo, placed "voting pledge cards" in the plate Oct. 26, pledging to "Vote Out Poverty" by urging elected officials to work to cut in half the number of Americans living in poverty and support the UN Millennium Development goals to end extreme global poverty. The cards were sent to Washington by pastor Drew Nettinga, who was proud that 75 percent of the congregation signed the cards.

Churches were of course careful only to speak out on issues, not to endorse any candidates, in order to protect their tax exempt status. But just a few hung up this picture of Barack Obama speaking in 2007 at the UCC General Synod in Hartford, wearing his comma pin.

Our own George Conklin took that picture. He also took the pictures of the first UCC General Synod 50 years ago.

We were part of history then, and today we are again.