

**Expecting to be Grateful:
Thoughts on Stewardship and Seminary Support
An interview with T. Michael Rock
By Kathleen Remund**

As Church Relations Coordinator for United Theological Seminary, I have the joy and privilege of getting to know many of our wonderful UCC pastors. When I first met the Rev. T. Michael Rock two years ago—not long after he had relocated to the Midwest to serve Robbinsdale UCC—I discovered that he had some very passionate, well-formed ideas about seminary support and stewardship. More recently, I asked him if I could interview him on this subject for the Voyager, and he graciously agreed.

KR: T. Michael, you have some very strong views on the importance of church support for theological education. What experiences shaped these views?

TM: When I was in high school and immersed in the UCC, I attended the General Synod where the decision was made to remove seminary funding from the Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) offering. This was seen as a very positive move. I remember vividly the excitement that was generated by a shared vision of local churches *owning* their relationship with the education of future clergy. Everyone in the room understood that local churches were, and are, the primary beneficiaries of high quality theological education and ministry preparation.

The expectation at that General Synod gathering was that churches would commit two percent of their budgets to seminary support, and that that would result in a significant increase in financial support for the seminaries.

KR: Two percent of their budgets? Wow! That sounds like such a significant commitment of resources; it's hard to imagine.

TM: You know, at the time, I just assumed that it made a lot of sense, and most other folks in the room seemed to feel the same way. I'm convinced that our UCC seminaries would not be in financial straits if the local churches truly owned their place in the chain of call to service.

In my current congregation, Robbinsdale UCC, we give ten percent of our entire budget—minus our OCWM support—to OCWM. We aren't yet where we need to be in seminary support, but we're moving in that direction. One step we've taken is to move seminary giving from our mission budget and put it into the category of denominational support.

KR: What do you mean by the "chain of call to service"?

TM: Some people are called to carry out their ministry in service to the church. Those people have to develop their skills and knowledge somewhere. They have to be trained and

prepared to serve as ministers. The church can't truly support someone's call or accept their service without also supporting the mechanism—the institution—that trains those people. I've thought for years that installation and ordination offerings ought to be directed to seminaries.

It's been a struggle, during my thirteen years of ordained ministry, to help the churches I've served understand how directly they are beneficiaries of good seminary education. But I'm committed to that struggle. At a minimum, I think every congregation should support the seminary where their pastor was trained. That's an appropriate way to express appreciation of the pastor's work and a way of helping the next generation of the church. If the congregation also has a local seminary in its area, or an organization like CUE that supports multiple seminaries, I'd like to see them supporting that entity as well.

KR: T. Michael, I know that while you have some very strong convictions about seminary support, you have a whole theology of stewardship that under girds those convictions. Could you talk a bit about your views on financial stewardship?

TM: I'm a strong believer in 100 percent pledging. The tried and true understanding of stewardship is this: if you're grateful, you give. Are you newly confirmed? Are you grateful for that? Then your response is to give. Did you spend time in the hospital and receive visits from the congregation and hot dishes when you got home? Are you grateful for that support? Then give.

In the church, we have essentially two responses to gratitude: worship, and giving. Giving of our energy; giving of our money.

The cool thing about pledging is that we make our pledges *expecting* to be grateful. We're so grateful that we've designed our lives with the expectation of being grateful again. Do you plan on being grateful this year? Then pledge your gift. If you're part of a church, then part of your membership responsibility is to give to support its work.

That's my philosophy of stewardship.