

News

A Vision for All

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The Rev. Ben Mohr Herbster

Churches to form the United Church of Christ. In 1961, the United Church of Christ elected Herbster as its first president.

“It’s no accident he was chosen to be president of the newly combined church,” said the Rev. Geoffrey Black, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ. “He was clearly a visionary and ahead of his time. He had a sense we would need to be innovators.”

Herbster was outspoken on issues such as U.S. participation in the Vietnam War and the quest for racial justice, and created a culture that emphasized fellowship, equality and caring. In his first

The Rev. Dr. Ben Mohr Herbster, the first president of the United Church of Christ, once told his parishioners, “we are a risk-taking fellowship.” Throughout his life, he exemplified this statement, and created a lasting impact by speaking out and helping those who needed support, even when doing so wasn’t a common or popular practice.

Born in central Ohio on Aug. 26, 1904, Herbster was drawn to the ministry. After graduating from Heidelberg College and seminary, he was ordained in the Reformed Church. Shortly after marrying Elizabeth Beam, Herbster began his first pastorate at the Corinth Boulevard Reformed Church in Dayton. Two years later, Herbster was elected as pastor of Zion Reformed Church of Norwood, near Cincinnati, where he served for 30 years.

During his tenure, Herbster developed a vision for ministry as having a dual responsibility of preaching and pastoring. He believed that it was important to deliver lessons and messages from the pulpit, but that it was also essential to be responsive to his parishioners.

With a deep interest in developing ecumenical churches, Herbster guided the 1957 merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, to which he belonged, with the Congregational Christian

post-election comments to the general synod, Herbster promised to lead the church to increased devotion to Christian work, including, he said, “an unending effort to guarantee to all men, women and children, here in America and to the ends of the earth, a chance to live in freedom, justice and good will.”

After completing his term as president, Herbster served on the United Church Homes Board of Trustees, which was a natural extension of his work in caring for parishioners and those in the surrounding areas. Based in Marion, Ohio, CHHSM member United Church Homes is one of the largest senior living communities in the country.

“He helped lead us to a whole new approach to modern retirement living,” said the Rev. Kenneth Daniel, United Church Homes president and CEO. “We went out to find alternatives to loneliness, homelessness and isolation.” The approach resulted in the development of independent, assisted, rehabilitative and affordable housing communities focused on person-centered care.

Herbster died on Dec. 16, 1984, but his commitment to looking to the future and bringing people together, willingness to take risks, and devotion to providing help and love to those in need provide a lasting legacy in CHHSM and the UCC.