

## **The African-American Contribution to the United Church of Christ**

**By Jeremiah Wright**

*Editor's note: The following is the original version of an essay that was somewhat abridged in the commemorative book, UCC @ 50—our history, our future.*

Prior to the “union” of the Congregational-Christian and Evangelical and Reformed churches in 1957, African Americans came into our predecessor denominations through two primary streams, the Congregational Church of New England and its missionary work and the Christian church (or the old “Convention of the South.”)

The Congregational Church in New England took very strong stands against slavery early on (in the 1600s!) and as a result, the UCC still has some African-American members who can trace their family’s memberships in New England Congregational churches as far back as the early 1700s. The Second Congregational Church of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, for instance, is a congregation that traces its African-American heritage in the denomination back to the old “First Church of Christ - Pittsfield” in the 1700s.

Because of the major role that the Congregational Church played in the Underground Railroad, the Abolitionist Movement and the Anti-Slavery Movement, many African Americans who had been born in slavery joined the denomination that helped to get them out of slavery. The Congregational Church of New England, in addition, took the lead in the freeing of the Mende people who were chained aboard the slave ship *La Amistad*.

The Congregational Church paid for the defense of the Africans in that case all the way up to the case being heard in the Supreme Court.

### **AMA opens schools after Civil War**

At the end of the Civil War, the Congregational Church did not slack up on its commitment to Africans in the New World. Through the American Missionary Association, the Congregational Church set up over 500 schools and academies for the “freedmen” who were liberated by slavery but uneducated because of the racism in the country that made it a crime to teach an African how to read.

Through the incredible work of the missionaries who went South to set up those schools, hundreds of thousands of Africans received training and became the beneficiaries of a “New England education” as they negotiated the waters between chattel slavery, sharecropping and Reconstruction. Of the five hundred plus schools that were set up there are eight that are still in existence today.

They are LeMoyne-Owen College, Houston-Tillotson College, Fisk University, Talladega, College, Tugaloo College, Dillard University, Clark-Atlanta University and Howard University. African Americans who we went to these schools many times went as members of the Congregational Church. Others became members of the Congregational Church after having attended those schools.

The largest number of African Americans who became a part of the United Church of Christ prior to the union, however, do not come from the Congregational side of the merger. They come from the Christian Church.

Of the 260 African-American congregations in the United Church of Christ, there are almost 200 of them that come out of the Christian Church side of the merger! Those churches are written about in Dr. J.T. Stanley's book, *The History of the Congregational Christian Churches of the Old Convention of the South*.

The story of the eight Black colleges and universities that are related to the United Church of Christ today as a result of the American Missionary Association's work is captured in Dr. Stanley's son's book, *The Children Is Crying*. (Dr. J.T. Stanley's son is A. Knighton Stanley).

### **Commission for Racial Justice established by General Synod**

After the "union" in 1957, the contribution of African Americans to the shaping of this denomination and the tremendous impacts that they have had upon its theology and praxis is really the substance not of one chapter in this book but of an entire book all by itself! The formation of the Commission for Racial Justice and the impact of that Instrumentality under the leadership of Dr. Charles Cobb is a story of courage, dignity and integrity.

Several votes that the denomination took from the 1960s up until Dr. Cobb's death were a direct result of the work of the staff and board members of the Commission for Racial Justice. (The Wilmington Ten case is perhaps the most famous instance of the impact of the Commission for Racial Justice.)

In addition to the Instrumentality (the Commission for Racial Justice) there are four additional groups of African-American members of the United Church of Christ that came into being as a result of the Commission for Racial Justice. The Black Clergy Caucus, the Ministers for Racial and Social Justice (MRSJ) has led the fight locally and nationally (and internationally) for issues of justice and race to which the church of Jesus Christ still speaks as God is still speaking!

The Black Caucus of the United Church of Christ as made up of both clergy and lay is United Black Christians. Both its national body and its local chapters have been involved in social justice issues since the early 1970s. (In recent years Ministers for Racial and Social Justice has included economic empowerment as one of their primary foci. That resulted in a name change to: The Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice or MRSEJ).

The other two groups that are "spin-offs" from the Commission for Racial Justice are the National Black Staff and the National Black Women's Clergy Caucus. These groups of African-American clergy (and non-clergy) have kept our denomination on the cutting edge in terms of issues of gender and race, Black theology, womanist theology and liberation theology.

The congregations that have been birthed since the union (and have no ties with either the historical Congregational church or the Christian Church) have impacted the nature of worship

and work for the past four decades. Individuals who are out of all of the various strands of the African-American congregations in the United Church of Christ who have made a name for themselves and put the UCC church “on the map” are far too numerous to mention.

### **African Americans assume leadership roles in UCC**

No work such as this one, however, would be complete without listing the names of Dr. Ed Edmonds (New Haven, Connecticut), Dr. Yvonne Delk (The Boston City Missionary Society, the Chicago Community Renewal Society and the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education), Dr. Kenneth B. Smith (Founding Pastor of our denomination’s largest church and the former President of the Chicago Theological Seminary) and Dr. Charles Shelby Rooks (the former CEO of the Fund for Theological Education and the retired CEO of the Board for Homeland Ministries).

Add to that list the names (and ministries) of Dr. Reuben Sheares (National Staff Member, CEO of the Office for Church Life and Leadership, Director of the Community Renewal Society and local church pastor), Valerie Russell (social activist, womanist theologian and national staff person), Bernice Powell Jackson (retired Executive Director of the Justice and Witness Ministries Division of the UCC) and you begin to catch a glimpse of the contribution made by African Americans to the UCC.

When you consider Rev. Ben Chavis (Deputy Director of the Commission for Racial Justice under Dr. Charles Cobb and successor to Dr. Charles Cobb as the CEO of that Commission), Reverend Clyde Miller (Conference Minister of the Rocky Mountain Conference), and Dr. W. Sterling Carey (the first African-American Conference Minister in the United Church of Christ who served for over two decades as the Conference Minister of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ), then you see why a separate book is needed to trace the history and work of these Black giants who are a part of our rich legacy in this denomination..

Other individuals like Rev. Channing Phillips who was the first African-American male to run for the Presidency of the United States, Dr. Henry Simmons who served the Board for Homeland Ministries and has served as the local church pastor in both the Southern Conference and the New York Conference, Dr. Marvin Morgan who serves on the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center and Dr. Lawrence Jones who served as the President of the Howard University School of Divinity make the tapestry of talent even more incredible.

Dr. Yvonne Beasley, Dr. James Hargett and Dr. Luther Holland are three other pastors whose work cannot be summed up in a few lines of one chapter! All of these persons are only a small number of the “great crowd of witnesses” who have made invaluable contributions to our denomination, shaping its history, shaping its mission, shaping its focus, shaping its theology and keeping it on the cutting edge of issues that affect the lives of persons of color throughout the globe and persons who are laboring under oppressions while holding on to a faith that is indestructible.

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