

Unity, Covenant, and History That Needs to Be Told
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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John 17:20-24 20 “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

In the UCC, we say God is still speaking. I want to tell you about a pastor and prophet who is still preaching, still teaching, still prophesying and provoking, still blessing. This week, my UCC polity class met a hero of the United Church of Christ, and after her virtual visit, I asked if I could share her story and her teaching with you. I won't do it as well as she does, so watch the footnotes to learn more - and maybe, just maybe, if she is in Boston sometime, we'll get to invite her to share her word directly.

Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk was born in Virginia, and raised in the New Macedonia Afro-Christian Church. She was called to ministry and lifted up for ministry, attending Andover Newton Theological School, and while in Boston she worked at Old South Church. She became the first African-American woman ordained in the United Church of Christ (in 1974). She served multiple UCC churches and then led our national Office for Church in Society (the first African American woman to lead a UCC national office), and represented the UCC to the World Council of Churches' programme to combat racism. She is the founding Director of the Center for African American Theological Studies and a leader in the African American Women in Ministry Conference.

But her bonafides are not why I am telling you about her. Rev. Dr. Delk has a unique perspective bridging the historic origins of the UCC & our life together as a denomination today. And it's history that was almost lost.

Now, for at least the last three decades of our six decade old denomination, we have summarized our history the same way:

The United Church of Christ combines four traditions - it's an ecumenical joining of Congregational Churches, a group often called the Christian Connection, German Evangelical and the German Reformed denominations.

But that negates and forgets a fifth tradition. In 1852, free African Americans started Providence Church in Chesapeake, Virginia,¹ the first congregation in what would become the Afro-Christian Connection, the fifth constituent tradition of the UCC. The moment the Civil War was over, formerly enslaved folks immediately began organizing more Afro-Christian churches in this same tradition.² Most of the particular congregations I'm talking about were in Virginia and North Carolina. While there was some historic relationship to the Christian Connection, including some early assistance from the white Southern Christian conference, and there were shared theological priorities,³ this was an independent movement, founded and organized by African American Christians, influenced by the spiritual traditions of Africa. As Dr. Delk reminded our class, the Christian Connection as well as the other Euro-centric traditions that preceded the UCC, were rooted in the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. Afro-Christians churches organized themselves so they could worship authentically and safely, and as subjects of their own faith, rather than objects of mission from white churches. The Afro-Christian denomination existed as an independent body all the way through 1950.

Dr. Delk told us of growing up in a church that was the economic and cultural center of her community, with a faith that worshiped an African-centered God. She testified to us about the church's "understanding of a God that they had met in Africa...they understood that this God was in all of life, this God was for life, this God was a God whose spirit could still move through the horrors" [of their life].⁴ Their preachers proclaimed a God who liberates in human history, "Jesus Christ, the one who had been set to proclaim liberty for those who are oppressed," and the African concepts of community and family, "the belief that I am because you are, and you are because I am" (the concept of Ubuntu). This was a church where African American folks lived and

¹ Percel Alston, UCC Hidden Histories Volume 1, Chapter 2, https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/exploring-ucc-history-polity-and-theology/about-us_hidden-histories/

² Alston. It goes without saying there were many many other churches founded by African Americans in other Christian traditions, and many other missionary churches funded by white denominations for African Americans - more on one of those traditions in a subsequent paragraph.

³ Alston.

⁴ This and all direct quotes of Dr. Delk are from my notes and an unedited transcript of Harvard Divinity School 2975, February 14, 2022. I am grateful to Dr. Delk for permission to share.

grew in spite of the realities of the Jim Crow South, and where folks encountered God's Spirit and were reminded that in their baptisms they were made in the image of God. This was a church where everyone was treated with dignity and respect, unlike the way in which its members were treated in the world. And, in contrast to a white supremacist culture, this was a church and a tradition "for liberation and rejoicing and healing...and preparing for the not yet." It was right there, in New Macedonia Church, that folks started encouraging her to ministry.

Now, by 1941 there were about 13,000 members of Afro-Christian churches. At around the same time, there were a similar number of Black Congregational Churches in a similar geographic region. Black Congregational churches were mostly founded as missionary projects of northern Congregationalists - with the same post-civil war missionary zeal that brought into being many of our UCC affiliated historically black colleges and educational institutions. Another very important part of our history. Those churches, as part of the Congregational denomination, had already joined in with the Christian connection in the 30s to form the Congregational Christian churches. But, the Black Congregational churches and the Afro-Christian churches were very different traditions - one that closely adhered to a fairly wealthy and euro-centric model of church of their northern white funders; one that was more working class and more centered in African American culture. They were very different in worship style and culture. In 1950, anticipating the coming formation of the UCC, the Afro-Christian convention and the Black Congregational churches formed a common body, the Convention of the South. Dr. Delk says that some of the first meetings of the Convention of the South were...tense. But they came together. Together, they could be a key influence in a new denomination, founded with the intention to be multiracial.

And in 1957 the UCC was formed.

And, presumably with good intentions, national church leaders wanted to see every conference of our UCC be as integrated and multi-racial as possible. While the leaders of the Convention of the South initially intended to stay together as an African American

body within the UCC, instead conferences were organized based only on geography⁵ and the Convention of the South was distributed into other conferences.

And we started teaching a history of four traditions, neglecting both the history and beauty of the Afro-Christian tradition. Its existence and influence faded in the consciousness of the broader UCC, even as individual congregations from that fifth stream are still going strong today. Dr. Delk, in retirement, has returned to membership in New Macedonia Christian UCC.

I give thanks for Dr. Delk and her colleagues who are bringing this crucial part of the UCC into the spotlight in this moment. As Dr. Delk puts it, this is a moment to correct the record: “We joined the new [church] model as subjects....Not as objects of its mission, but as subjects....But today we come out from under the hidden shadows of the Christian denomination and the Convention of the South into the fullness of who we are as a fifth stream in forming the United church of Christ.” She also asks us - equally important, in my opinion - to shape the current UCC not only from a euro-centric model, but “from an African perspective of beliefs, that are centered in God as life and freedom and spirit and love and justice and community.”

We’ve been talking, these past few weeks, about covenant. The sacred promise between God and people, between members of congregations, between congregations and our denomination. The sacred bond that holds us together. Last week I talked about the ligamentous character of church covenants, as Ephesians says, members of the body of Christ held together by these strong ligaments.

This is a moment, in the wider church, in which we acknowledge that our ligaments were stretched in some painful ways. A whole arm of the church, as it were, has been neglected and is now waving, coming back into visibility and offering the whole body of the United Church of Christ something powerful and strong.

⁵ Except the ones that weren’t... which has always bugged me.

Dr. Delk said, “My roots are in the Afro-Christian tradition, but my future is in the beloved community of a church that is seeking to become the church that God intends.”

Y’all, let me repeat that.

“My roots are in the Afro-Christian tradition, but my future is in the beloved community of a church that is seeking to become the church that God intends.”

Jesus prayed “that they may all be one” and the UCC was founded on that motto. But sometimes we’ve used that to mean we should all be the same.

It is not that we should all be the same -

Indeed Dr. Delk’s teaching reminds us that we cannot negate difference for the sake of unity.

But neither, by my way of thinking, neither we should let differences keep us from working together to worship God and serve our neighbors. There must be, to use a rather worn phrase, diversity in our unity. Every piece of our history contributes to being able to serve all our neighbors in the present. The stories of every distinct group in our diverse history should be told and known, should enrich our common life. In the United Church of Christ, the wisdom and legacy of the Afro-Christian churches should bless the whole of today’s UCC.

We are a denomination that is not perfect, that surely needs to stretch its ligaments. Let us be the church seeking to become what God intends.

I’ll close with an adapted Psalm from another great African American leader in the UCC, Rev. Benjamin Chavis:

Psalm 141

The Faithful Community

The church

The faithful community

Of believers in Jesus Christ

Who come together

To worship God

To confess sin

To share in everything

Who come together

To take a stand for justice

Peace and liberation...

The faithful community

The church of Christ

Continues to the remnant

Existing and struggling

To reconcile the world

Unto God. Amen.⁶

Learn more:

The Afro-Christian tradition - A webinar: <https://youtu.be/MEvcyUQmliw>

Hear a dialogue by Rev. Dr. Delk offered for First Church in Bedford, UCC:

<https://youtu.be/xPRg7x58jYo>

Read about the Afro-Christian Tradition in Percel Alston's chapter in Hidden Histories of the UCC -

<https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-minist>

⁶ Psalms from Prison, - Benjamin E. Chavis, Jr.

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