

A Message From our PASTOR

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., Senior Pastor

Maybe I Missed Something!

Thirty years ago at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, which met in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1975), there were scores of issues that were voted upon by the delegates to that General Synod. At that time in the life of our denomination, we were wrestling with the racism and the Apartheid in South Africa and the total indifference of the American public to the suffering of 22 million Blacks under the heel of the Afrikaaner government's racist policies. (Four million whites ruled 22 million Blacks!)

Passbooks were required for Blacks in South Africa (in their own country) to move from one part of the country to another part of the country. Blacks were not allowed in white cities after dark. Families were separated because of Black wives who worked as domestics not being able to be with their Black husbands who worked someplace else in the racist economy.

While our denomination grappled with how to address that human problem, the denomination also, at that same Synod, voted to ordain a homosexual. Guess which item made the newspapers?

Maybe I missed something!

Our denomination has led the fight for divestment. Working along with Randall Robinson and TransAfrica, we knew that the only way to get the "attention" of white businessmen and white politicians who only understand "the color of money" was to pull all of our investments out of South African banks, South African businesses, South African mining and South African ventures, like the gold and diamond industries that kept the "fat cats" fat.

While we were leading their fight, guess what issue stayed in the news? The homosexual issue. ***Maybe I missed something!***

Trinity United Church of Christ joined the "Free South Africa" movement with a vengeance. We put up our "Free South Africa" sign and we began to walk lock step (with Reverend Thando



N'gcobo, Dr. Bonganjalo Goba, Dr. Elkin Sithole, Dennis Brutus and Miriam Makeba.

We asked other churches – Black and white – in the city of Chicago to join with us in the fight for a free South Africa. We asked other churches to simply purchase a "Free South Africa" sign for \$39.95. We sent out letters to 3,000 churches. Not one of those churches responded in the affirmative!

Guess what issue stayed in the press? You got it! The homosexual issue. ***Maybe I missed something!***

In 1975, that same fateful year, Reverend Ben Chavis was denied a *writ of certiorari* by the Supreme Court of the United States and was sent to prison because of the Wilmington 10 case. Trinity United Church of Christ began a four-year struggle to free the Wilmington 10.

Four years later just after we moved into our new Sanctuary at the 532 West 95th site, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the Wilmington 10 case, because of the 264 trial

errors that the judge had committed in trying to railroad Ben Chavis. We celebrated that victory and Ben's freedom but guess what the press focused in on? You got it! The homosexual issue. ***Maybe I am missing something!***

In the 1980s the Black constituency of the United Church of Christ and thousands of our committed Black brothers and sisters in the denomination finally got all of the agencies in the United Church of Christ to divest from banks and businesses carrying on trade with the racist Apartheid government of South Africa. That didn't make the news. Guess what made the news? You got it! ***Maybe I am missing something!***

Twenty years after the divestment strategy concerning South Africa worked, a similar strategy has been proposed by members of the United Church of Christ as it pertains to Sudan and to Israel! Even the State Legislature of Illinois has agreed with the divestment strategy as it pertains to Sudan. The rest of the nation, however, still has money as the primary concern, so that divestment strategy has not been heavily endorsed across the denomination or across the nation.

When it comes to Israel and divesting from banks and businesses that are heavily invested in Israel, until the Palestinian problem has been resolved amicably for both sides, you can throw that out of your mind! Nobody is trying to hear what we are saying in terms of divestment from Israel.

That was one of the hot ticket issues addressed at the 25th Session of the General Synod of the United Church of Christ which met in Atlanta during 2005. Guess which of the 25 issues made the news? You got it! ***Maybe I am missing something!***

Let me skip the 1990s when Apartheid ended, when Nelson Mandela was freed and when Mandela and Bishop Tutu became "photo op" personalities for the colored church of America and for the news media of America. Let me fast forward to the 21st century.

Let me skip the 1990s when Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa and when Blacks in South Africa got to vote for the very first time in their lives. Let me fast forward from the 90s and skip over Trinity Church's involvement in ministry to South Africa, min-

istry in Saltpond, Ghana, ministry in Ethiopia and ministry with the Steve Biko Institute in Brazil. Let me come into the 21st century.

In the 21st century, Trinity United Church of Christ moved from its 12-year history of supporting a hospital in Saltpond, Ghana, and supporting a mission church in one of the townships outside of Capetown. Trinity Church started a computer school in Saltpond, Ghana.

In the 21st century, white America got a wake-up call after 9/11/01. White America and the Western world came to realize that people of color had not gone away, faded into the woodwork or just "disappeared" as the *Great White West* kept on its merry way of ignoring Black concerns.

The hundreds of thousands who have been killed in Rwanda, in Angola, in Zimbabwe, in Mozambique and in Kenya are still invisible. There has been no international uproar about the thousands of Black lives lost, just about the loss of white life, American life and British life!

Forty Britons were killed in one day of violence and that item stayed on the news every day for two weeks. On July 14th, forty-five Kenyans were killed in one village when Ethiopian bandits raided the Turbi area of Kenya, and that didn't even make the front page! ***Maybe I am missing something!***

Black women are being raped daily in Darfur, Sudan, in the Congo and in Sub-Saharan Africa. That doesn't make the news. One 18-year-old white girl from Alabama gets drunk on a graduation trip to Aruba, goes off and "gives it up" while in a foreign country and that stays in the news for months! ***Maybe I am missing something!***

With thousands of Blacks dying every day, the Black church and Black Christians are silent. One vote on recognizing same-gender unions and those same Black Christians are screaming from the top of their lungs! ***Maybe I am missing something!***

What most members of Trinity United Church of Christ have not read is the resolution that was passed by the delegates at the 25th General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Atlanta. They have reacted to what the newspapers said.

They have reacted to what they heard. They have reacted to rumor and they have reacted to their emotional hatred of the “hot ticket” item. ***Maybe I am missing something!***

The Conference Minister of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ wrote a very powerful message to all members of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ following the General Synod in July. I have shared her letter with several key leaders of our church.

I am now sharing it with you, our general membership and you, our national reading audience. It is a very thoughtful and sensitive letter.

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A Letter from the Conference Minister of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ

*Several thousand lights were shining in the darkness as delegates and visitors to the 2005 General Synod worshiped and sang **This Little Light of Mine**. It was one of many moving moments in the worshipful work life of our General Synod. The more than 700 delegates and many others shared in 5 days of an experience of Christian community that is difficult to describe to others not there. One way of telling about it comes from one of our delegates who said, “I have been changed because of being here.”*

Before reflecting on the work of Synod on one particularly challenging issue, I want to try to convey how truly participatory and spiritually engaging the Synod experience is for our delegates. The Illinois Conference delegation of 52 persons was made up of lay folks and clergy from all around the Conference. They are regular people like all who read this!

Our delegates come to Synod with varieties of opinions and experiences and they work very hard, engaging in dialogue with others, listening, praying and finally, deciding on specific issues raised at the Synod. Everyone has a chance to speak and be heard and only delegates make the decisions. And all is done in the context of worship, prayer and Christian love.

At the 2005 Synod in Atlanta, our delegates studied and addressed more than 20 important issues ranging

from affirming the need for fair pay and benefits for lay employees of churches (Yes, that means your church secretary, custodian, etc!) to urging global action to bring peace with justice in the Sudan. As you may know, one of the issues regarding full Marriage Equality without regard to gender, has received much press attention and some in our churches are responding, too often, only based on press reports which are often mistaken or distorted.

So here I want to urge you to go to the UCC Website (ucc.org) and read the powerful statement by our General Minister and President John Thomas or contact one of our delegates or Association or Conference offices that can provide you with copies of the actual resolution passed until final versions are available on the website. There is also a very helpful resource on the UCC website called “God is Still Speaking about Marriage.”

Now let me make a few comments about this resolution. First, it is essential to know that this is about civil and human rights that are denied to same gender people living in committed, long term relationships. Did you know that there are 1400 different rights and benefits provided under law to married heterosexual persons that are denied others?

These include things like visiting spouse in hospital intensive care unit or during restricted hours; making medical decisions for spouse if he/she is unable to; receiving Social Security, Medicare and disability benefits for spouses; filing joint income tax returns; receiving family rates for homeowner’s, auto, and other insurance; filing for joint adoption or foster care rights; taking bereavement leave if a spouse dies, and many more.

Some asked at Synod if the word “marriage” needed to be included and one response was that many of these rights and benefits are tied in the laws to that word. Another reason for its use is that “marriage” is transportable among all states whereas other civil unions/covenantal relationships are not.

But perhaps most compelling was the response that just as in matters of race, “separate does not always mean equal” and full equal rights for all people is what truly makes for justice. When the scriptures were studied on these matters, it was discovered that polygamy is never condemned in scripture but marrying outside of one’s tribe or nation isn’t. In other words, there is no clear biblical

statement about the nature of marriage.

Delegates to the General Synod knew that there are many emotional and faith-related concerns among members of our churches and among delegates themselves around this issue. I rejoice that those attending Synod were respectful of one another, seeking to listen and hear, not applauding when resolutions were passed, etc.

It is my heart felt prayer that throughout the United Church of Christ and our Illinois Conference, ongoing discussion of this issue will be equally respectful, prayerful and faithful. I want to express special concern for those for whom this action by Synod will be disturbing and difficult. I pray that we will all stay in relationship and prayerfully engage one another about this issue.

And please note this reminder: the actions of General Synod are intended to speak to and challenge local churches, members, Conferences and Associations but Synod actions are not binding on any other setting of the church. Even the press seem to be "catching on" that our local churches are all free to make their own decisions about their marriage practices and their own support or non-support for this resolution and all actions of Synod. If you would like more information about any aspect of General Synod, including the equal marriage rights resolution, please call your Association office to ask for the names of our delegates in your area. The Conference office also has print copies of the approved resolution, a brief list of Marriage rights and benefits, and the statement by John Thomas, on this matter.

Let me close with a true story. One of our Illinois Conference members, a woman, was in a long term committed relationship with another woman. One evening our member was in a car following her partner in another car, when a terrible accident occurred for the first car and her partner was killed.

At the scene of the accident, our member was not allowed to see her partner and was not allowed to accompany her to the hospital or to see her at the hospital. Anyone who loves another person and feels they are committed to that person for life can understand the incredible pain of that experience. Marriage equality is not just about words, it's not even just about civil rights. It is about love

and commitment between two people.

The General Synod delegates voted by an estimated 80% or more in favor of a resolution that expresses the conviction that God is Still Speaking about marriage. Let's talk with one another in open, respectful conversation about this and let's speak and listen to one another in the love we are called to by our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Rev. Jane Fisler-Hoffman
Conference Minister, Illinois Conference
United Church of Christ, Westchester, Illinois

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Is Black life so cheap that it becomes secondary to same-gender loving issues? **Maybe I am missing something!**

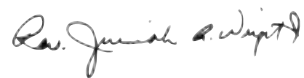
Is the rape of Black women that unimportant? Is domestic violence that unimportant? Is the President lying to the nation and causing the deaths of 1800 American boys and girls that unimportant? **Maybe I am missing something!**

Are 44 million Americans with no health care insurance less important than "gay marriage?" Why aren't Black Christians in an uproar about that? **Maybe I am missing something!**

Did Jesus say, "Whosoever believeth in Him?" Or did Jesus say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that all **straights** who believe in Him shall not perish?" **Maybe I am missing something!**

As the days of summer wind down and we begin to look at the heavy agenda that we have on us as the Christian church in America in this fall season, I write you as a pastor to urge you to stop majoring in minors and to follow the Prince of Peace who calls us to serve "this present age." ✎

Sincerely and respectfully yours,



Pastor Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.