

*“Washington Consultation Statement” and “Now More Than Ever: The Church Is Challenged”*  
(1966, 1966)

*Forty-five United Church of Christ clergy, most of them black, met at Plymouth UCC in Washington, D.C., October 18–20, 1966, to discuss mutual concerns, problems, and opportunities in the United Church of Christ. They were troubled by the lack of progress within the UCC toward racial inclusiveness and freedom of opportunity. Not only did the group issue a statement, it organized an ongoing advocacy group within the United Church of Christ known as UCC Ministers for Racial and Social Justice (MRSJ), and it developed strategies to support racial justice and expand the presence of African Americans in the leadership of the UCC. The Steering Committee behind the “Washington Consultation Statement” was Edwin R. Edmonds (Dixwell Avenue Church, New Haven, Connecticut); Robert R. Johnson (St. Albans Church, St. Albans, New York); W. Sterling Cary (Grace Church, New York); Arthur D. Gray (Park Manor Church, Chicago); Robert D. Sherard (Corona Congregational Church, Corona, New York); George Gay Jr. (Gregory Congregational Church, Wilmington, North Carolina); Martin Duffy (Vernon Heights Congregational Church, Mt. Vernon, New York); Channing Phillips (Lincoln Temple, Washington, D.C.); and Charles E. Cobb (Committee for Racial Justice Now, New York).*

*Charles Earl Cobb (1916–98) was an African American Congregational Christian/UCC minister educated at North Carolina College and Howard University. After a long pastorate in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1966 he became executive director of the Committee for Racial Justice Now and the executive director of the Commission for Racial Justice (1969–85). In a 1966 article in Social Action magazine, “Now More Than Ever: The Church Is Challenged,” Cobb outlines past ways in which African Americans have challenged the church and describes the frustrations of young blacks in the mid-1960s that led to the black power movement. He also reports on the Washington, D.C., meeting of UCC Negro clergy and its call to the United Church of Christ to face the facts of the social revolution.*

### **Statement to the United Church of Christ**

No one can be unaware that the world in which we live is a world in revolution. Everywhere the winds of discontent are blowing against the status quo. Moreover, the revolution we face is not one but many. For the racially dispossessed the revolution is rooted in the frustrations and yearning nourished by a century and more of delayed justice. We talk a great deal about the American way and the Free World but are strangely blind to a sterner truth; the impossibility of achieving a Free World through a segregated society.

We, a group of United Church of Christ clergymen, concerned with predominantly Negro congregations, are deeply disturbed over the failure of the United Church of Christ to be the servant church in the world and particularly its failure to be a servant in the world by reflecting in its own life as well as in its efforts in the world, a community free of racial and class prejudice and discrimination. We are unanimous in support of racial justice for reasons over and above self interest. We are equally concerned about the welfare of the nation. We are morally obligated to confront ourselves and our white brothers with the requirements of our Judeo-Christian Faith. We cannot and will not be equivocal with the ethical and moral principles involved.

*First we are alarmed over the increasing moral impotence of the church.*

Whenever an instrumentality, publication or conference takes a stand upon the issues of race, open housing, economics or politics a hue and cry goes up throughout the land. Who

authorized them to speak for the church? The answer is clear: the New Testament authorizes them to speak for the church. However inadequate his words the Christian must speak for God, to himself, to the church and to the world, or his speaking is in vain. It is better to speak and be wrong than to remain silent and safe.

Our refusal to face controversial issues for the sake of harmony, or the budget or fellowship has no support in the New Testament or the Old. The prophets and apostles took no opinion polls and granted no equal time. Their “thus saith the Lord” was spoken without fear, favor or consensus.

*Next, we are appalled by the racial discrimination within the church.* Discrimination and attitudes of prejudice manifest themselves throughout the length and breadth of the United Church of Christ. This is significantly revealed in a study made by the Committee For Racial Justice Now in 1966 on non-white employment within the Instrumentalities. This condition is also shown as we look at the composition of policy-making boards and commissions of the church. It is again revealed in the meager employment and use of non-whites on the Conference and Association levels. Discriminatory practices are also noted as we look at the faculties, staffs and student bodies of our predominantly white colleges, universities and theological seminaries. Tokenism is also evident in Church Extension. The absence of open pulpits and memberships is further evidence of discriminatory practices and prejudicial attitudes. A report prepared for the Urban Church Advisory Committee by the Department of Research documents prejudicial attitudes that are current in the United Church of Christ.

*Thirdly, we are concerned for the use and racial misuse of power within the United Church of Christ as well as in the social order.* If the United Church of Christ is to be the Beloved Community and become an instrument for social justice, our inner and outer architecture must agree. . . . In order to achieve that full community, we believe the time has come to maximize the collective power of clergy and members of predominantly Negro churches to influence the structure, policy and program of the United Church of Christ towards that end.

#### *We Call Upon*

1. Our churches to include commitment to interracial community and racial justice in membership vows and training, to instruct pulpit committees with a clear mandate for pastoral search without reference to race, and to initiate exchanges and mergers between white and Negro congregations, with the goal of eliminating segregation in the churches. We call upon all churches to join their Lord in the establishment of a truly human society. To this end we urge them to work aggressively for interracial and inter-class urban and suburban communities, to mount programs to establish decent housing, quality integrated education, job opportunities and job training programs, adequate annual income for all citizens, and to work for international justice and peace.

2. Our Associations to develop and to enforce similar standards of interracial commitment in (a) ordination of ministers and (b) acceptable standing of churches in the United Church of Christ, (c) to promote those congregational exchanges recommended to churches as a matter of urgent priority.

3. Our Conferences, especially through their staff and boards of directors, to take affirmative action to recommend qualified Negro clergy for every available pulpit and other staff positions and carefully to assess rejection of Negro candidates, to seek out qualified Negro representation on all decision-making bodies of the Conference, to develop and commend

standards for membership training, staff selection and interracial church goals for congregations and Associations.

4. Our Boards for Homeland Ministries and the General Synod to give priority to new mission projects which explicitly gather interracial and inter-class congregations committed to Christian reflection and concerted community action, and to finance such projects adequately and patiently when self-support is slow in coming; to include in its regular budget provisions for a United Church of Christ program for racial justice which does not therefore depend on occasional and unpredictable free-will offerings; to bring the historic concerns of our American Missionary Association for a “society without caste” north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

5. Our Consultations on Church Union to seek only those ecumenical unions which can shape themselves around a mission in the world which is thoroughly interracial and interclass in intent, strategy, structure and forms of worship.

6. Our Commission on Worship, Divisions of Christian Education and Evangelism, and other appropriate groups to develop and to promote the use of worship resources — forms of prayer; preaching, hymns, sacraments—which honor and draw upon the rich religious resources of Negro congregations and Negro history, in order to help overcome those barriers of cultural and religious style which tend to separate us and to prevent the establishment of genuinely and permanently interracial churches.

7. Our white brethren in the United Church of Christ to work with us for fully interracial life in church, school and society. At the same time, we lay upon their conscience those spurious efforts at token integration which are patronizing and finally alienating, as seen in those who would admit Negroes into white churches but never urge whites to join Negro churches, who proudly open the door of segregated suburbs to a few prosperous Negroes but show little concern for the plight of the poor in slum housing, who would allow Negro children to be bussed into white neighborhood schools but never allow their own children to be sent to Negro neighborhood schools, who fear Black Power but never complain of the ancient inequities wrought by generations of White Power. Interracial community is our goal, but anything less than a peer relationship is degrading to those of both races.

#### *We Pledge Ourselves*

1. To organize for the achievement of these ends, to accept whatever group discipline is necessary, to delegate responsibilities for addressing those individuals and groups with critical power of decision in the church, and to seek primarily from our own constituents and churches the necessary finances for this.

2. To develop and to promote qualified Negro nominations for church leadership positions throughout the United Church of Christ.

3. To develop and to promote whatever direct or indirect political action techniques may be necessary and consistent with Christian ethics to eliminate racism within all United Church of Christ institutions.

4. To develop resources for mutual aid, including financial, for our fellow members who suffer or risk serious loss in the course of pursuing these purposes.

5. To explore fully, and to develop if feasible, a clergy union committed to minimal standards of church racial and interracial policies for pulpit, membership, and outreach, with sanctions against churches and pastors supporting or promoting racist activities.

6. To develop those worship resources we have commended to the church at large, resources which mirror the Negro tradition but which can and must enrich the total church life if our fellowship is to become fully interracial.

7. To support whatever consolidations of Negro economic and political power may prove necessary to force a change in America's racial inequity in housing, jobs, schools, access to all cultural advantages and in political self-determination, and those which may be necessary to assert a pride and dignity so long denied by a white society.

8. To review periodically the performance and achievement toward implementing these goals and actions, and to issue a progress report on accomplishments and failures to each general synod in the most effectual manner.

9. To develop as a last resort procedures for withdrawal and reorganization of churches and clergy of the United Church of Christ committed to interracial community and to racial justice, if the denomination fails to renew itself as a community committed to a kingdom without caste and showing this in its own church life.

### **Now More Than Ever: The Church Is Challenged**

This new approach by these militant young men manifested itself on a Mississippi road during the Meredith March for Freedom in the cry, "Black Power," from the lips of Stokely Carmichael. Across the length and breadth of the land there was a response to this cry, both positive and negative, fanned to a white heat by news media whose motivation yet remains a question mark.

The positive response came principally from Negroes because, from the lowest to the loftiest, each knew what Stokely Carmichael was talking about, whether they could explain it or not. Even those Negroes who were horrified at Stokely's articulation were so because of their own vested interests and the possible implications of the term, even though they knew what he meant.

Stokely Carmichael himself spells it out to some measure in the September 1966 issue of *Ebony* magazine, saying:

- (a) Black Power is a black declaration of independence.
- (b) Black Power is a demand that black and white people recognize and actualize the existing power potential of black Americans.
- (c) Black Power is an attempt to instill pride in black Americans.
- (d) Black Power is a developing program that will ultimately be defined in action by black Americans.
- (e) Black Power is not an end, but a means to the transformation of American society.
- (f) Black Power is a call, perhaps a last call, to the black middle class to come home. It is a demand that the black haves make common cause with the black have-nots so that all blacks, haves and have-nots, can have more.

There are few Negroes and few whites who could disagree with these definitions or goals. Only when one's effort to expand on them, is mingled with emotions born of frustration, deprivation, denial, or fear, does the possible negative connotation that is inherent become most evident.

Negatively the response has run the gamut; and the civil rights movement itself has become fragmented, with some of the major segments of it calling for isolation of other major segments. President Johnson, who had been responsible for more civil rights legislation than any president in history, panicked and in his panic saw fit to warn the Negro community of the most

obvious fact, stating ominously “that the Negro community only comprised 10 percent of the nation’s population.” Harold Howe, U.S. Commissioner of Education, who had honestly set out to implement the law as it had been passed, became apologetic and suffered Congressional abuse, getting little assistance from the nation’s resources — judicial, legislative, executive, or population-wise. Congress became recalcitrant; liberals became indistinguishable from the conservatives, consequently killing pending civil rights legislation for 1966 and “gutting” civil rights legislation already passed. Liberals literally quaked, conservatives became belligerent. And, perhaps most shattering of all, the church for the most part was ominously silent.

*The Church Is Challenged Anew*

Our thesis here is that the church once again is in the midst of a significant period of turmoil and unrest. And, if it responds to the need and meets the challenge as it has so courageously done in the past, it stands upon the threshold of its finest hour.

When one views the historical church, it has always been at its best in crisis—particularly when that crisis has had at its center human dignity and freedom. But first the church must search its own soul, come to terms with itself, and realize to what extent it contributes to tensions and crises by ignoring or even denying human dignity through fear, intimidation, hostility, ignorance, or lack of commitment.

It is safe to say that a large number of those who make up the so-called white backlash, who retain and sustain segregated substandard education, who maintain rat-infested inner-city ghetto housing, who are now withholding assistance from the civil rights organizations, are church people.

The President of the United Church of Christ, addressing the Executive Council in Cincinnati, October 1966, said:

I have one concern at the moment, and that is that many people within the church will use the militancy that has developed in the Negro community and the fragmenting of Negro leadership because of differences of opinion concerning this militancy, as an excuse to withdraw from the effort. . . . Civil rights is one of the areas where the church can continue to make its influence felt for justice, for righteousness, for compassion, and for reconciliation. Unless we are able to stand here, we will not be worthy of standing any place.

One could change President Herbster’s last sentence and say that “unless the church is able to stand here, it will be unable to stand anywhere.”