

“The Unfinished Agenda”

(1989)

Yvonne V. Delk

Yvonne V. Delk (b. 1939) is an African American UCC minister nurtured in the Afro-Christian tradition of the United Church of Christ. Born in Norfolk, Virginia, she is a graduate of Andover Newton Theological School and New York Theological Seminary. After ministries of Christian Education in Atlanta, Georgia, and in Cincinnati, Ohio, she joined the staff of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM) as secretary for urban and black church education (1969–76). Later she became executive director of the UCC Office for Church in Society (OCIS) (1981–90) and executive director of the Community Renewal Society (CRS), Chicago (1990–98). In 1989 Delk reminded the church that racism is an unfinished agenda. She calls upon the church to name it, move from denial to repentance to conversion to action, to stand with victims of racism, to make the church a political force, to speak to the economic systems under which people exist, and to give leadership to all groups opposing racism.

The year 1940 found my mother and my father bringing me in their arms to Macedonia Congregational Christian Church for a dedication service. I was not quite a year old. This was the moment that I was to receive a name, a people, a history, a community. They understood that we needed a support community if we were able to survive the racism of the nation in which I was born. They realized that for the first twenty-one years of my life, I would live in a segregated community, attend segregated schools, worship in a church that also was broken and wounded by the stain of race.

In 1940, the facts were relatively clear and uncomplicated; the law required separation of the races and no one challenged it. The moral issue was unmistakable, and clearly visible to the rest of the country. Blacks and other people of color were kept apart by law and custom in schools, on buses, in theaters, at luncheonettes, restaurants, hotels, toilets, at drinking fountains, swimming pools, at the ballot box, in the jury box, and in the work place. Blacks were denied equal access and opportunity. My parents knew then what the Kerner report would affirm twenty-eight years later: there existed in America two separate societies, one White and one Black, and the root cause was racism. They understood that the road that I and the rest of my sisters and brothers would travel would not be easy; that the residual effects of centuries of slavery and legal discrimination would not be erased without struggle; and further, that the hearts and minds of those who had either benefited from racism or who were blind to its effects would not significantly change in their lifetime.

They, therefore, brought me to the church, to the place where the word of God would confront and transcend the hostile forces of hate, violence, prejudice, and even the law of the land. They believed that the gospel had the power to bring together, in one transformed community, people of all ages, races, and tongues. They believed that membership in the household of Jesus Christ transformed persons to become the new creation. It was their belief and hope that the church would become that new creation and that it would use its moral and spiritual force to eliminate racism and to create a wholistic and inclusive society.

There was reason to believe that their hope was not in vain. The denomination to which they belonged had deep roots in the struggle for justice. The foremothers and forefathers had distinguished themselves by their opposition to colonialism and slavery. The American Missionary Association was established by people struggling to achieve a nation without caste or

slavery. The United Church of Christ, which was formed more than a century after the establishment of the AMA, continued to embody this hope. In an address to the third General Synod our first president, Dr. Ben Herbstler affirmed:

The United Church of Christ will be able to justify all the “blood, sweat, and tears” that have gone into the effort, during these past years, only if we shall be able to achieve a new devotion and loyalty to the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those demands include, beyond a personal commitment to the Way of Christ, also 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, good will, justice, and advantage.

However, in spite of our resolve and our commitments, racism continues to impact every level of our society. It is systemic and pervasive; it is sustained in 1989 by both personal attitudes and structural forces. Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans continue to be the targets of racial violence and bigotry. It is therefore clear that racial justice is the unfinished agenda that the church is called to address.

The challenge before us is urgent and theological. The division of the human family because of race challenges the Church of Jesus Christ to renew its foundational commitment to the faith. God’s promise to us is that we are one people because we are reconciled to God in one body through the cross. Therefore, we cannot support any pattern of subordination or domination that separates and divides. The destructive symptoms of racism continue to plague our society: poverty, crime, economic disadvantage, alienation, violence, and persecution. If we keep silent at this moment in our history we will invite despair and death for the people of God. . . .

In spiritual and biblical terms, racism is a perverse sin that cuts to the core of the Gospel message. It is a gaping wound in the body of Christ. Put simply, racism negates the reason for which Christ died, the reconciling work of the cross. It denies the purpose of the church: to bring together, in Christ, those who have been divided from one another. In the early church, it was Jew and Gentile; today, the division is based on race.

There is only one remedy for such a sin, and that is repentance. Repentance will always bear fruit in concrete forms like conversion, changed behavior, and reparation.

The church is therefore called to challenge racism in the following ways:

1. *Name it!*

The church is called to identify racism as a sin against God. We cannot afford to surrender our name, our message, and our understanding of the Gospel to those who consider themselves divinely superior. The church is called to position itself in opposition to any force or power that moves contrary to the will of God. The church cannot be silent at this moment in history. The church must regain a moral sense of urgency. A failure to do so represents a betrayal of the reconciling message of the Gospel and of the very God that has called us into existence.

2. *Move from denial to repentance, to conversion and to action.*

Whites must examine themselves, their relations, and their institutions for the ugly plague of racism. Whites have benefited from the structure of racism whether they have ever committed a racist act, uttered a racist word, or thought a racist thought. Just as surely as people of color suffer in a white society because they are Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American, Whites benefit because they are White. If Whites have profited from a racist structure, they must try to change it. Denial represents a refusal to see the truth, and that is no longer an acceptable response. Whites who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are called to repentance and conversion.

3. *Stand with the victims of racism!*

The primary task of the church is to make theologically real and relevant a God who sides with the oppressed. In the face of society's never-ending efforts to deny the basic humanity of people of color, the church must clearly come down on the side of those who are most vulnerable. It must extend its name, its resources, its theology, its power, and its influence to stand with the victims of racism, and to join with them in the struggle for a world that is free from the plague of racism.

4. The church must become a political force!

The church cannot accept a Christianity that does not relate the message of the Gospel to the humanizing of the social, economic, and political structures of the world. The freedom of our children and of others in the world is dependent upon our political engagement in the struggle for justice. Political decisions decide the course of our lives from the cradle to the grave. Political decisions decide how much dirt will be in the air we breathe, the kind of education children will receive, the kind of jobs we will have, whether we will have a job, and what our pay and working conditions will be. The church should encourage and empower persons to participate in the political process. Churches in the United States have participated in Voter Registration efforts, offered educational forums, and have advocated public policies that are fair, just, and equitable for all. Political action is a necessary step toward eradicating the racism in our midst because it allows us to take responsibility for our future. To be committed to the elimination of racism means making a political commitment to make the world a habitable place for all, irrespective of race.

5. The church is called to speak to the economic systems under which people exist.

The 17th General Synod of the United Church of Christ will be asked to declare its understanding on the relationship between faith and economics. By affirming that our economic life is also subject to the grace and judgment of God, we explore the relationships among racism, poverty, unemployment, and unequal opportunity in our nation. We are challenged to examine a system which attains the highest standard of living for some of us while denying to others even a job. In obedience to Jesus Christ, we are called to offer economic visions, theories, and policies that are more faithful with the Gospel.

6. The church is called to give leadership to the organization of coalitions composed of church leaders, movements of the oppressed, and support groups for movements of the oppressed for combatting racism.

Dr. Martin Luther King showed that the way to deal with racism is to find a common vision and bring people together, to find a common task on which those of all races can work together, hold hands, and move forward together. Racism can be eliminated if we can build a people's movement across racial lines in pursuit of a Just Peace world.

The unfinished agenda is still before us. The moment is at hand for us to press on towards the goal of a new, more humane society. This is not a moment for opting out or becoming passive observers. Each of us by virtue of our baptism into the household of Jesus Christ is called to be a participant in the struggle to combat racism. We will be called upon to risk our positions and our status as we pressure institutions to change, to become the wholistic and inclusive instruments that God intends.

As I face this moment in our history, I do not feel despair. The power of that dedication moment in 1940 is still with me. The words that were proclaimed over me continue to have binding authority. The faith of my parents and those early foreparents who believed in a new community now fuel my passion and commitment for A Just Peace Church and World. The power of the resurrection experience and the religious heritage of people of all colors and races,

bound in covenant to achieve a world without hatred or prejudice, empowers me to hope in the midst of the tensions that continue to haunt us. Let us, then, with Jesus Christ at the heart of our efforts, move to finish this agenda. We can and we must if we are to achieve the vision of wholeness that is promised in the Gospel.