



[Return to the Article](#)

May 06, 2008

Examining the United Church of Christ

By [Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom](#)

In his recent incendiary remarks, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. claimed that criticism of his views is nothing less "an attack on the black church launched by people who know nothing about the African-American religious tradition." Can it really be that millions of black Americans regularly choose to listen to viciously anti-white and anti-American rants on Sunday mornings?

Happily, Chicago's Trinity Church is an outlier in that regard. Most black churchgoers belong to congregations that are overwhelmingly African-American and are affiliated with one of the historically black religious denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) or the National Baptist Convention. Rev. Wright's Trinity Church, on the other hand, is a predominantly black branch of a white denomination that is not part of "the African-American religious tradition." The United Church of Christ (known until 1957 as the Congregational Church) has a little over a million members; a mere 4 percent of them are black. Fewer than 50,000 blacks in the entire nation worship at a UCC church.

In contrast, 98 percent of the National Baptist Convention's 4 million members are African Americans. Add in black Methodists and Pentecostals, as well as other black Baptists, and the total comes to more than 14 million members of an organized, predominantly African-American church. These churches include a substantial majority of all black adults today. In terms of sheer demographic weight, they clearly represent the "African-American religious tradition"-as Rev. Wright's branch of a overwhelmingly white denomination does not.

These churches vary in many respects. Some-by no means all-played a crucial role in the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. The civil rights movement, as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "came not from secular forces but from the heart of the Negro church." The movement's glory days are long gone but black churches remain more politically engaged, on the average, than their white counterparts. A 1998 study found that 35 percent of them had projects to increase voter registration, five times the rate of white congregations. Almost half informed their congregants of opportunities for political activity, double the white rate. They were also far more likely to have had political candidates and elected officials as guest speakers.

Some of these churches are led by figures like Rev. Wright, an adherent of what is called black liberation theology, which rejects racial integration and stresses the experience of black bondage. But not many. C. Eric Lincoln's mid-1980s survey of the leaders of 2,150 black churches found that two-thirds of them said they had not been influenced by "any of the authors and thinkers of black liberation theology." Indeed, 63 percent did not believe that the black church had "a different mission from the white church." A third did not even think it was "important have black figures in [their] Sunday school literature."

This integrationist vision is at one with the values of most Americans. A glance at the National Baptist

Convention and the AME web sites is revealing. They feature what one might expect of any religious denomination—a statement of their creeds, the tenets of the theology and worship practices that distinguish their faith from others. There is almost no indication that these churches are predominantly African American. The closest they come to mentioning race is the AME's statement that its basic beliefs do not "differ from what all Methodists believe." The church, we learn, separated from the main Methodist body two centuries ago because of "man's intolerance of his fellow man, based on the color of his skin."

The web sites of Rev. Wright's Trinity Church and the national body to which it belong stand in shocking contrast. Before the Trinity site was sanitized in early 2008, its material seethed with racial animus and hostility towards America. It described itself as "Afrocentric"; its motto was "Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian." Its quasi-literate foundational document, "The Black Value System," devoted much more attention to blackness than to Christianity. It is the manifesto of a church for people of the black race, designed to be an "instrument of Black self-determination." Blacks were depicted as a race apart—the scurrilous perspective that pervaded Rev. Wright's April 27 Detroit speech, in which he contended that blacks and whites had completely different brain structures, one left-dominant, the other right-dominant. This is nothing more than an updated version of the pseudo-science once used to defend segregation in the Jim Crow South.

It is no accident that Rev. Wright's Trinity Church is affiliated with the highly progressive United Church of Christ. The UCC had its first Jeremiah Wright back in the 1960s, when it tolerated the activities of Rev. Albert Cleage of Detroit, a pioneer preacher of the gospel of Black Power. Cleage was determined to "dehonkify" Jesus. Jesus was black, he insisted, and a black revolutionary. He went on to form his own Black Christian Nationalist Church, later renamed the Pan-African Orthodox Church. This racist conception did not trouble the leadership of the United Church of Christ, which saw it as helping to "make the church more sensitive to and aware of its need to respond to the agenda of black people."

The web site of the UCC currently features plans for a May 18 "sacred conversation on race" in which white participants will need to acknowledge "the sins" of their "ancestors" and their own "failures to confront racism." Non-whites who have "suffered the ravages of racism" will be expected only to keep their "rightful indignation" and their "temptation to despair" under control. The conversation is desperately needed, we are told, because "the quality of life for the majority of racial and ethnic people is worse today in many ways than it was during the 1960s"—a ludicrous claim.

Clearly, Rev. Wright does not speak for mainstream black churches—and he has done them a gross disservice by claiming to do so. He shares neither their vision nor their values. Why their relative silence in the face of Rev. Wright's rants? Perhaps they believe they are protecting Sen. Obama, but if Wright convinces white Americans that his hateful speeches reflect the ways African-American churchgoers think and worship, the quest for racial equality will be set back decades.

Stephan Thernstrom is Winthrop Professor History, Harvard University. Abigail Thernstrom is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and the vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Page Printed from: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/05/examining_the_united_church_of.html at May 15, 2009 - 09:22:48 PM PDT