

# Grace for the Day

www.gracefortheday.org  
Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

## Obama's Church: Trinity United Church of Christ (UCC)

By Rev. Peter Eng

### Introduction

This article is exactly as the title states. It is *not* about Barack Obama's view on race, and it is *not* about his race with Hilary Clinton. Obama has stated his position, and it would not be proper for me to bind him to, or distance him from the controversial remarks of his former pastor (Rev Jeremiah Wright). As a minister, I know many whom I serve may not agree with a particular position I adopt.

What is of greater interest to me is to see if the church, Trinity UCC, has a theological position that is as racist as that of its former pastor. I know off hand that UCC is a very liberal denomination. In this article, we will examine together the church's own stated position and not the spur of the moment comment. I assume that a minister can hold certain positions that are his own, not held by, or agreed upon by, most people in the congregation, positions that are apparent only during Freudian slips. I am therefore interested to see if Trinity UCC has anything to say about race.

This article about Trinity's theology on race should be a study for us to gain a better understanding of race and the Christian faith. It is not about whether Obama should be viewed as adopting a particular theology. This article is not about Obama. It is about Obama's church: Trinity UCC. It is not about Obama's theology of race, it is about Trinity's theology on race.

### UCC AS A MAINLINE DENOMINATION

The UCC is a mainline denomination. What does this mean?

The theological characterization of mainline denominations is that they are more liberal than the evangelical churches. Evangelical churches tend to adhere to the historic creeds and confessions, or to the teachings found in them even if they do not make reference to these historic documents in their statement of faith. Conversely, mainline denominations regularly refer to historic creeds but tend to use them as historical points of reference rather be committed to them. On the surface, it would seem that mainline denominations are more traditional, but in reality, they are more liberal with regard to how they relate to the historic theology of Christianity.

Mainline denominations were the main Protestant denominations in America from the 19th century and earlier. The 20th century witnessed many of these denominations adopting a more liberal theology. Many conservative elements leave these denominations and planted new churches that were more conservative. These form the evangelical churches.

Organizationally, the mainline churches are older, but theologically, the evangelical churches are more traditional. A significant number of people within mainline denominations are conservative / evangelical in their theology, but chose to remain within these denominations. Certain large denominations with the same historical legacy as the mainline denominations are not considered mainline because their theology is conservative (e.g. the Southern Baptists).

Only denominations that are relatively liberal are considered mainline.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume that everyone in a mainline denomination is an advocate of the liberal theology. Some families have belonged to mainline denominations for many generations and choose to remain there even though they have a more conservative theology.

Evangelical Christians subscribe to the authority of the Bible as the basis of their theology and practice. Mainline denominations allow for other influences to redefine the teachings of the Bible. For instance, two persons can agree that the Bible considers homosexual practices sinful. The conclusion of an evangelical would be that homosexuality is a sin because the Bible says so. The conclusion of a liberal would be that the Bible is expressing the cultural bias of its time, and we who live in more enlightened times should not perpetuate this prejudice.

Consequently, UCC prides itself as being on the cutting edge of progressive thought in ordaining homosexual ministers. Other mainline denominations such as The Presbyterian Church (USA) continue to debate the issue. On account of evangelicals adopting the authority of the Bible, there is agreement that homosexual practices are sinful and the ordination of homosexuals is not an issue among evangelicals.

The UCC "embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation." (See UCC website) This may sound no different from the evangelical affirmation of the authority of the Bible for Faith and Life. But the word "authoritative" is stripped of its meaning when we note the following:

(1) The UCC embraces the theological heritage that makes the affirmation, but does not make that affirmation itself. (2) The Bible is presented not as the Word of God, but as a witness to the Word of God. To the extent that they deem the witness to reflect God's truth, they accept the witness, and to the

extent they think the Bible teaches a flawed understanding of the Word of God, they are at liberty to reject it. (3) The UCC "embraces the theological heritage that affirms ... the creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation." This is another erosion to the authority of the Bible because it places the same commitment to the Bible as it does to the creeds. In short, the Bible is not the supreme or ultimate or final authority of Faith and Life, it is on parity with ecumenical councils and confessions of the Reformation (which sometimes contradict each other).

Evangelical churches tend to insist on certain core beliefs from the historic Christian confessions. Some evangelical churches include their denominational distinctives into their belief system. An example of beliefs that evangelicals hold in common is expressed by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). (See ECFA website.) There is no central organization of all evangelical churches, but this organization promotes financial accountability for those who profess to be evangelicals, and it has deliberately adopted a broad evangelical statement.

Personal opinions differ. My personal understanding of the UCC is that they are on the far left among the mainline denominations.

The UCC has a statement of faith. It goes as follows:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us

and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him.

Amen.

I call your attention to the following: (1) There is no affirmation of the Trinity. (2) There is no affirmation of the deity of Christ, simply called "the man of Nazareth." (3) There is no affirmation that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit or that he was born of the Virgin Mary, no mention of his death as atonement for sin and no mention that he resurrected from the dead. (4) Salvation consists of being saved from "aimlessness and sin." There is no mention of any aspect of salvation that goes beyond the existence on this earth, or salvation as reconciliation to God. (5) The judgment of God does not consist of our direct accountability to him. Instead, God "judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through the prophets and apostles." The judgment is merely declarative and not executive. (6) There is an equivocal suggestion that "He promises to all who trust in him ... eternal life in his kingdom/realm which has no end." The affirmation here is that God's realm that has no end, not an affirmation of eternal life itself. Eternal life is not explained.

UCC has an interesting theological arrangement. In common with many liberal and mainline denominations, they emphasize unity over truth (ecumenical theology). Where there is a conflict of beliefs, unity takes precedence over truth. The UCC statement expresses their commitment (or lack thereof) to their own statement of faith as follows: "The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith."

*This statement is very significant. It specifically states that the references to the historic creeds are not tests of faith. They are merely confessions or testimonies to what people believe at one time, and should be given due regard according to its historical gravity.*

I should add here that almost all past presidents of America were from mainline denominations. Even though the numbers in mainline denominations are declining, they remain the largest organizational representation of Protestant Christianity in America. I emphasize this is not an issue about Obama. *All the current presidential contenders belong to mainline denominations, and they would be what evangelicals consider nominal Christians.* Most American presidential candidates have had to appear within the Protestant tradition regardless of whether or not they personally confess Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord of their life.

### **TRINITY UCC'S BLACK THEOLOGY**

Trinity UCC's distinctive is that it is a black church. I have been to black churches and they can be mainline, evangelical, or charismatic. Trinity is a black mainline (liberal) church. It is not uncommon for churches to have a certain racial profile. But most churches recognize that their common racial or cultural heritage is always secondary to the call of Christ that had always been trans ethnicity. The ethnic profile of a church is often incidental to their existence. They may come about because of language difference, liturgical distinctives or cultural heritage. In the past certain churches in America had ousted black Christians from their midst, committing a truly egregious wrong that is

totally unworthy of those called by the name of Christ. But this was probably no more recent than about 50 years ago, and Christians today have learnt from their past – hopefully.

The fact that Trinity is a black mainline church should not raise any more concern than a white mainline church. My apprehension is about Trinity's exclusive theology not its composition of blacks.

Trinity has a 12-point **Black Value System** and a 10- point Vision Statement. Together, they form Trinity's declaration on race and church practice. The system begins with a commitment to God, but the following 11 points assert black exclusivism. The 12-point Black Value System does not seem to have room for non-blacks in Trinity UCC. They are:

1. Commitment to God
2. Commitment to the Black Community
3. Commitment to the Black Family
4. Dedication to the Pursuit of Education
5. Dedication to the Pursuit of Excellence
6. Adherence to the Black Work Ethic
7. Commitment to Self-Discipline and Self-Respect
8. Disavowal of the Pursuit of "Middleclassness"
9. Pledge to make the fruits of all developing and acquired skills available to the Black Community
10. Pledge to Allocate Regularly, a Portion of Personal Resources for Strengthening and Supporting Black Institutions
11. Pledge allegiance to all Black leadership who espouse and embrace the Black Value System
12. Personal commitment to embracement of the Black Value System.

Let's suppose there is a white church that has a **White Value System** which asserts commitment to the White Community, and the White Family, and dedication to a White work ethic. The people there pledge to regularly allocate financial support for White Institutions. They pledge allegiance only to Whites who espouse the White Value System, and make a personal commitment to embrace the White Value System. If I were to visit such a church, I would be convinced that it is only a front for the Ku Klux Klan. I would suppose they are prostituting the gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of such blatant contradictions to the trans-racial character of the Gospel.

I do not presume to know the personal conviction of individuals within Trinity, nor can I judge how Trinity conducts its regular ministry. But there is little doubt in my mind the Black Value System of Trinity UCC is a racist system.

Their 10-point vision states:

1. A congregation committed to **ADORATION**.
2. A congregation preaching **SALVATION**.
3. A congregation actively seeking **RECONCILIATION**.
4. A congregation with a non-negotiable **COMMITMENT TO AFRICA**.
5. A congregation committed to **BIBLICAL EDUCATION**.
6. A congregation committed to **CULTURAL EDUCATION**.
7. A congregation committed to the **HISTORICAL EDUCATION OF AFRICAN PEOPLE IN DIASPORA**.
8. A congregation committed to **LIBERATION**.
9. A congregation committed to **RESTORATION**.
10. A congregation working towards **ECONOMIC PARITY**.

The commitment to Africa sounds as strange to me as a commitment to Serbia, China, Britain or Singapore would sound to me. The overall thrust of these assertions would lead one to place Trinity UCC in the tradition of Black Liberation Theology. Again, this is too involved for discussion here, but we can always gain some sight on the church once we understand the church's tradition.

### **RACISM OF ALL SORTS**

I am Chinese. I deeply sympathize with the African Americans who suffered abuse first as slaves, then as second class people, and now as a race that continues to suffer prejudice and discrimination. Since I am not black and can only sympathize from afar, I will not pretend I know all the prejudices they continue to suffer. But enough is seen from daily life to conclude that the charge of prejudice is not without basis.

The biblical theology of reversal with the coming of Christ calls us to give special hope to the downtrodden. This is totally consistent with Scripture. But I do not pretend I know how this should be done, and leave this noble task to those who know better. Affirmative Action or any other program is as good as they are effective. At this point, it does not seem a truly effective method has been found.

Racism in America had resulted in much evil towards various communities. The Japanese American community suffered from internment during WW2. The rights of Japanese and other Asian Americans were eventually restored.

Most Americans are not even aware of how the Chinese were treated in America. The Chinese came to America to work the railroads and the gold mines, settling mainly in the West. The collapse of the gold rush and the general economic malaise unleashed a series of actions against the Chinese. Immigration was prohibited, the women were forced into prostitution because of the severe discrimination, men were reduced to domestic work, and the Chinese were attacked by the white population. From 1850 to 1906, the Chinese suffered repeated attempts at ethnic cleansing. There were more than 100

roundups, pogroms, expulsions, lynching, and mass murder. (see Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: the forgotten war against Chinese Americans*, Random, 2007).

It is not useful to ask "Who is the greater victim?" But it is useful to note different groups that have suffered from racism. We need Christians to be in the forefront to protect the oppressed.

### **CHRISTIANS SHOULD LEAD**

White racism cannot be compensated by Black racism, or Chinese racism or Japanese racism. It was true Christian theology that abolished slavery in Britain, and it was a minister of the Gospel, Martin Luther King Jr., who rallied the Black community so that America would live up to its declared principles of equality.

Martin Luther King Jr., the champion of desegregation, to whom *all* non-whites owe a debt of gratitude, made an astute observation: "eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of Christian America." This remains a challenge in our churches.

Most of this segregation may not be motivated by racism. We readily observe that when the European immigrants came to America, they would tend to congregate according to their national origin, according to their mother-tongue, or according to their denomination, even though they were all white.

Let me share with you my own experience as an English-speaking minister of the Gospel in America. The real test of racism in a church is not whether you are well received. The real test is whether the church has a specific racial profile in its leadership.

My family and I attended a local church in Princeton. The pastor had been a wonderful pastor to us. He is truly accepting of everyone. The music director is Korean; the elders included an African (working in the US) and a Japanese American, and a Korean American. (The previous music director was Chinese). Eventually, I served on the church staff, and I am Chinese. When I expressed my appreciation to the pastor, he looked

rather surprised, as though it has not occurred to him that he has a rainbow tribe. This is a person who is truly color blind. He did not even realize he was being open to all races. He simply evaluated people based on their own merit.

Where this church has been exemplary, many others fail. There are many very capable Asian-American ministers who are born in this country, and are fully acculturated as Americans. These Asian ministers (usually Korean and Chinese) have a difficult time finding positions in any church other than an Asian church. Asian churches have been very receptive to white ministers, but white churches have not returned the acceptance.

What should Asian churches do? Should they assert a commitment to Chinese / Korean leadership in the church to off-set the unstated prejudice among the white churches? I am happy to say I have not found that to be the case. Indeed, I would be very upset if Chinese churches become insular and assert that non-Chinese have no place in the leadership of the church.

I find it hard to accept the Black Value System of Trinity UCC as it seems to be Black Racism in response to White Racism. The church is the place where we must not disqualify anyone from leadership on account of race. It is a shame for any church to replace the call of Jesus to make disciples of every race with a racially defined perimeter.

## CONCLUSION

Ideas are powerful. We cannot underestimate the indescribable suffering unleashed as a consequence of wrong ideas. The human story on race can be very dark.

I sympathize with the downtrodden. The Chinese populace has shed rivers of tears and oceans of blood. The same can be said for many people groups. But that is not a justification for racism.

What should I choose as a Christian? Should I focus on injustices done towards my race and promote Chinese Racism? Or should I focus on the unifying work of Christ on the cross to

promote a Christian community of all races? As language and needs converge in a melting pot society, should we not create a Christian community that is a more perfect reflection of God's value for all humankind?

There is no shame in a Christian community that enjoys its cultural roots in addition to their Christian faith. But the more perfect Christian community is racially inclusive not exclusive. It is more racially integrated not segregated. So help us God.

20080330



Please pass this on  
so that many more can be blessed.

Want a **FREE** subscription?  
Send an email to [subscribe@gracefortheDay.org](mailto:subscribe@gracefortheDay.org)  
with Subject: SUBSCRIBE

Listen to Rev. Peter's **sermons** and find **other articles**  
in [www.gracefortheDay.org](http://www.gracefortheDay.org)

Wish to support this ministry? Have any questions?  
Write to: [admin@gracefortheDay.org](mailto:admin@gracefortheDay.org)

**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.