

# “Our Fifth Stream”

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Mark 1:29-

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 5, February 4, 2024, dedicated to Aaron Inscho on his baptismal day, to the Cannons, the Deans, the Whites, the Palmers, the McCrarys, the Holts, the Willis family, the Spears family and all other African American families and members of First Church through the generations to this present moment, to the men and women of the Afro-Christian Convention, the Convention of the South, and to all who laid down their lives in service to Christ in our denomination and never got credit for it through the many centuries of our connections and existence together in Christ and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.  
Amen.*

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On June 25, 1957, the founding mothers and fathers processed from Cleveland’s Public Square to the Music Hall as the United Church of Christ was born and began to breathe life. There were leaders in the procession from the Evangelical and Reformed Church representing German immigrants coming to the shores of America seeking economic well-being and freedom from oppression. There were leaders in the procession from the Congregational Churches composed of Pilgrims who left their homes

in England in the 1620s looking for religious freedom. There were leaders in the procession representing the first indigenous American denomination – the Christian Church – which was born on these shores as an evolving experiment in faith and democracy. These all represented the four streams of the United Church of Christ as it was born that day.

But, there was a fifth stream present on June 25, 1957. In that procession, perhaps lost in the crowd to many, was Rev. J. Taylor Stanley, credited with bringing the Convention of the South into the United Church of Christ. This Convention represented most of the Black Congregations in this newly birthed denomination. The Convention of the South had been formed in 1950 bringing together the Black Congregational Churches and the churches of the Afro-Christian Convention – which represented a majority in this conference convention (Yvonne V. Delk, ed., *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ*, United Church Press, Cleveland, OH, 2023, p. 6).

Lost to most (except ALL in the Convention of the South) was that our denomination was formed by five streams, not four. This stream was separate from and equal to the other four streams. Thanks be to God for OUR FIVE STREAMS of the United Church of Christ. We must now and forevermore refer to the five streams of the United Church of Christ, not the four. We have made this stream invisible for too long. Never again!

The entrance of the Black Church into the United Church of Christ is something with which we should all shout for joy from the rooftops! We have for too long sifted our history (knowingly or unknowingly) through the racist lens of exclusion. I confess my ignorance and exclusion until Jackie Dean fully awakened me to the truth ten years ago! It might be true for others of you who care about the history of our denomination. What WAS is past and WHAT IS will never be forgotten! From this day forward and forevermore five streams will flow through us, and this will always be true for our children, grandchildren, and all who join us on our journey of faith into the future.

## **Five Streams are better than Four! Five Streams are blessed forevermore.**

According to Rev. Dr. Yvonne V. Delk, the editor of *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ*, one of the reasons the Black Church experience was buried and lost to most people was because it was filtered through a white perspective without an understanding of the distinct history, organizational structures, local church governance structures, or styles of worship of the Black churches in the convention (*Ibid*, p. 7).

Back to the origins of The Convention of the South, there were 150 churches that made up the convention with more than 25,000 members, 185 ordained pastors, and 150 Sunday Schools primarily in North Carolina and Virginia. From these congregations, the Afro-Christian Convention's story took root. It is the story of faith, survival, affirmation and empowerment in the hostile environment of racism and oppression. And it is a stream of faith that flows from the very first African – out of which the streams of living water run. But this stream is also (and always) Christian – coming from enslaved American Christians who told their stories through the freedom-bound person of Jesus Christ – who sought – and seeks still today – for their Lord and Savior to free them from every bondage that held their minds, bodies and spirits in captivity (*Ibid*, p.4).

This freeing of mind, body, and spirit unfolds in the context of America's original sin – the sin of racism. But, the cry for freedom and the fight for freedom comes from an undaunted spirit of belief in a Freedom Loving God and God's liberating son Jesus Christ – which is always and forever moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to right the wrongs in this world.

Our Fifth Stream flows out the stream of living water which Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:13-14. It is no less than the river of God. But this mighty river – which had its source flowing from Africa – surfaced in this new land faced with unbelievable challenges.

Coming out the Congregational Church of New England, the great W.E.B. DuBois, wrote about the “Double Consciousness” of Black Congregationalists. He spoke personally and powerfully saying that white Missionaries from the North (after the Civil War) would come to the South and set up schools and churches. White missionaries were incapable of or failed to consider African culture, African rhythms in African Music, African Understanding of scripture, African understanding of the Divine and African ways of being. So they created white ways, with white worship and white culture in hopes of making white Christians out of Black people. “It was a bifurcation that,” according to Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. “has never left us” (*Ibid*, xi).

So, there was an existential struggle to be grateful for those who came to educate, but also this deep challenge they felt in their bones that white folks didn’t listen to them and acknowledge and love them for the faith that was already alive forged in the pain, the anguish and the struggles of being enslaved Christians. It took special people committed to the stream of living water flowing out of Africa and connected to their hard-won faith in Jesus to blast through this bifurcation. One of my heroes (and a SAGE Genius of Justice in my book by the same title) is Dr. Jeremiah Wright. Dr. Jeremiah Wright served Trinity UCC in Chicago for 36 years. He grew the church from 87 to 8,000 members and added 72 ministries during his tenure on the South Side. Under Dr. Wright, Trinity UCC in Chicago, Illinois lived by the motto: “we are unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian.” This is how bifurcation gets healed.

As we close, receive these words from the Rev. Dr. Iva E. Carruthers in her essay, *Flowing as an Everlasting Stream*. “The fifth stream and the metaphor of rivers engenders a critical lesson on reparatory justice and reimaging inclusive beloved community spaces in the spirit of ubuntu and the Afro-Christian Church....Something new has been birthed out the African principles of coexistence, unity and parity – not dominion, supplanting and competition.

Rooted in the Black Sacred Cosmos, the Afro-Christian Church is a gift to the whole United Church of Christ denomination and beyond. The Afro-Christian tradition is not a fifth stream simply of the UCC, it is a mighty undercurrent of resistance, reclamation, and return to the source of African spirituality, independence and understanding of what it means to be human... regardless of when and how you enter the Black sacred cosmos space in the United Church of Christ, you will be blessed by the giftedness of the Afro-Christian Church, now embraced as the fifth stream.... As long as there are some who remember the story; remember to tell the story; and stand watch over the story, the story lives” (*Ibid*, pp.119-120).

Thanks be to God for all five streams of our faith tradition! Amen.

