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THE UPCI'S RACIAL AND ETHNIC AFFIRMATION

The United Pentecostal Church International teaches that racism is a sin. We must preach and teach against racism in all its forms; eliminate all discrimination and prejudice; and promote intentional inclusion at all levels of participation and leadership. We strive for our churches and ministers to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of our society and for our leadership to reflect the diversity of our churches. Much has been accomplished in recent years, but much more needs to be accomplished.

To this end, we desire to increase awareness and sensitivity regarding matters of race and culture and to create a welcoming environment. We should speak with moral clarity on important social issues while maintaining Christian ethics, humility, and kindness. We are strangers and pilgrims whose principal citizenship is in Heaven (I Peter 2:11).

In the *UPCI Manual*, the position paper titled “Racial and Ethnic Affirmation” opposes racism, prejudice, and

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segregation. It states that the UPCI “must continue to take deliberate, intentional steps toward inclusion in all areas of the fellowship and at all levels of the organization. . . . [It] is dedicated to overcoming any appearance of racism within the church by making a deliberate effort toward inclusion and a firm, open stand against racial bigotry and segregation.”

Biblical Perspective

The Bible teaches that every human being is of equal worth in God’s sight. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). The church has diversity of members but is one body; by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body (I Corinthians 12:12–13). In Christ, there is no unequal treatment based on race, social class, male and female, religious background, or national origin (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). We are to conduct our lives and ministries without partiality, discrimination, or favoritism (I Timothy 5:21). It is wrong to be prejudiced against someone because of race, class, social standing, lack of education, or poverty. “If you show partiality, you commit sin” (James 2:9).

In the apostolic church, people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds worshiped together and served in leadership. The ministers in Antioch included Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon Niger, whose surname means “black” in Latin, probably referring to skin color; Lucius of Cyrene in North Africa; Manaen, of a noble family; and Paul, a Jew and Roman citizen from Tarsus (Acts 13:1). The Book of Acts recounts how the apostolic church grew by overcoming

social, cultural, and ethnic barriers. Jesus commissioned His disciples to become His witnesses in Jerusalem (home city), Judea (home province), Samaria (neighboring province, people of different ethnicity), and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). The church progressively expanded from Palestinian Jews to Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, an Ethiopian, and ultimately Gentiles of various nations, ethnicities, and races. (See Acts 6, 8, 10, 15.) In the process, it confronted and overcame prejudice and discrimination based on culture and ethnicity. (See Acts 6; Galatians 2.) Consequently, the New Testament church encompassed Middle Easterners, Africans, Asians, and Europeans, and this diversity was reflected in its leadership. (See Acts 13:1; 20:4.) It gave prominent roles to people who had low status in ancient societies including women, youth, foreigners, the poor, and even slaves.

The church in Heaven will have diversity in unity (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). Heaven will not eliminate our individuality and distinctiveness; people from every ethnicity and language will worship God together.

Historical Perspective

The modern Oneness Pentecostal movement began with an interracial vision of the oneness of the church based on the oneness of God. In contrast to segregation in the secular and religious cultures, interracial unity was particularly noteworthy from 1918 to 1924 and again from 1931 to 1938. Sadly, the movement failed to maintain this vision fully, and most of the responsibility for this failure rests upon the White majority. We the spiritual heirs of the early leaders

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express our sorrow and repentance for this failure, and we recommit ourselves to the original interracial vision of the Oneness movement.

When the modern Pentecostal movement began in the early twentieth century, American society was characterized by racial prejudice and segregation, yet the Holy Spirit overcame these barriers. The Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, which spread the Pentecostal message around the world, was started by an African American, William Seymour. Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and people from many nations worshiped together. Blacks and Whites served in leadership under Seymour. Frank Bartleman, who was the chronicler of the revival and who embraced the Oneness message, noted, “The color line was washed away in the blood.”

The three most significant theologians of the early Oneness Pentecostal movement were Frank Ewart, an Australian who immigrated to Canada and then to the US; G. T. Haywood, an African American pastor of a large interracial church in Indianapolis, Indiana; and Andrew Urshan, an Assyrian immigrant from Persia (Iran). By 1918, most Oneness ministers joined a new, interracial organization, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW). The oldest surviving list of Oneness ministers, from the PAW in 1919–1920, contains 704 names. About 25 to 30 percent were African American, 29 percent were women, and several Hispanic names appear. Once again, both Blacks and Whites served in leadership.

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By this time, Trinitarian Pentecostals were segregated racially, as were other major religious organizations in America. All social institutions, including business, the military, political parties, and labor unions, were influenced by racism. Oneness Pentecostals were one of the most integrated groups in society. Unfortunately, the external pressures of a racist society as well as some internal influences of prejudice caused a division. Persecution from unbelievers often resulted when Blacks and Whites worshiped together, and evangelism was often hindered. No conferences could be held in the South because Jim Crow laws prohibited Blacks and Whites to meet, lodge, or eat together. Travel was difficult and expensive, so most Southern ministers could never attend official conferences, and some began to organize fellowship conferences in the South. As a result, in 1924 most White ministers left the PAW and formed three regional organizations. Two soon merged to form the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ (ACJC), while the remaining smaller one became the Pentecostal Church Incorporated (PCI).

The desire for unity was so great, however, that in 1931 most ministers of the PAW and ACJC reunited in a new interracial organization with a merged name, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ (PAJC). The initial governing board was composed equally of Whites and Blacks. Sadly, the same social pressures continued to work, and by 1938 most Black ministers left the PAJC and rejoined the PAW, which had continued as a small group. While there were some Blacks and some Whites in each major Oneness organization, they were now mostly divided along racial lines.

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If Oneness ministers could have remained united for another twenty years as a countercultural witness to biblical holiness, perhaps they could have influenced the Civil Rights Movement. At the time, however, most Pentecostals felt marginalized from society and believed they should abstain from “worldly” political involvement. Nevertheless, some Black Apostolics participated. For example, Bishop Smallwood Williams was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council in Washington, DC, prayed at the funeral of President Kennedy, and worked with President Johnson to pass civil rights laws.

The UPCI was formed in 1945 as a merger of the PAJC and the PCI. Most of the ministers were White, but the first list included some Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other groups. From the 1970s onward, the UPCI began taking significant steps to recapture the biblical unity of the apostolic church and the early Oneness movement. For a detailed chronological list from 1975, see “A Timeline of Racial and Ethnic Affirmation.”

In 2006, Urshan Graduate School of Theology, the UPCI’s young seminary, invited the leaders of the seven largest Oneness Pentecostal organizations in the US to attend what became the annual Apostolic Fellowship Summit (AFS). This first meeting featured a frank presentation and discussion of interracial beginnings and divisions. A UPCI representative who was the grandson of a UPCI founder expressed historic repentance by washing the feet of the presiding bishop of the PAW, who then reciprocated. This commitment to reconciliation became the basis of the new

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fellowship. In recent years, the AFS has sponsored the National Apostolic Day of Prayer to foster the spiritual unity of Oneness believers.

The UPCI as a Multiracial Church

From its base in the US and Canada, the UPCI has established an international, multiracial, multiethnic fellowship of self-governing national churches. The Global Council, comprising leaders from each country, coordinates international operations. Here are statistics as of 2022:

- Worldwide the UPCI had 5.4 million constituents in 199 nations and 34 territories with over 42,000 churches and 41,000 ministers. The vast majority of its constituents were non-White.
- About 60 percent of the Global Council were from outside the US and Canada, including the secretary, and thirty-five members were Black.
- In the US and Canada, the UPCI had about 4,900 churches (including daughter works and preaching points) and 11,000 credentialed ministers. Hispanics, African Americans or Blacks, Asian Americans, and Native Americans comprised about 38 percent of constituents, 21 percent of pastors, and eight General Board members.
- The seven major ministries (divisions) had both Black and Hispanic members on their general boards or committees: Global Missions, North American Missions, Division of Publications,

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Ladies Ministries, Men's Ministries, Children's Ministries, and Youth Ministries.

- Thirteen other general boards or committees had Black members: Building the Bridge Ministries, Judicial Procedure Presiding Officers, Loan Fund, Military Chaplaincy (including the endorsing agent), Multicultural Ministries, Music Ministry, Office of Education and Endorsement, Parliamentary Committee, Resolutions Committee, Single Adult Ministry, Tabulating Committee, Urshan College and Urshan Graduate School of Theology, and World Network of Prayer (director). Most also had Hispanic or other non-White members.
- Seventeen District Boards had Black members; twenty had Hispanic, Asian, or Native American members.
- On the district level (2018), 261 district board members, department directors, and committee chairs were non-White, for an increase of 58 percent in six years.
- Black preachers and singers have regularly ministered at General Conferences for more than forty years.
- North American Youth Congress, with 37,000 participants, is one of the nation's most multiracial religious events.
- Blacks and other non-Whites serve as executives and employees at World Headquarters and as

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administrators, faculty, and staff at Urshan College and Urshan Graduate School of Theology.

In addition to messages preached in local churches and at General Conferences, the UPCI World Headquarters has issued statements on various social issues and news events. Following the tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the UPCI held a forum in St. Louis at its General Conference, which discussed interracial unity in the church despite political and social turmoil. This dialogue was published in the *Forward*, the periodical for ministers. In subsequent years, when communities were torn by social upheaval after race-related killings, the UPCI called for truth, justice, and peace. It conducted several video forums after events in 2020. Some churches and ministers have been at the forefront of ministering to affected families and communities. The UPCI also issued a statement about the importance of respect for immigrants and refugees. The UPCI promotes interracial unity in its publications including books, curriculum, and the *Pentecostal Life*. In 2021 the UPCI released *Mosaic*, a training curriculum for multicultural, multiracial evangelism.

Despite proactive efforts to promote justice and inclusion, we live in a sinful world, and the sin of racism sometimes finds its way into the church in tragic and heartbreaking ways. We sincerely regret and empathize with everyone who has experienced the pain of being treated differently in any way because of race when attending one of our churches or interacting with constituents. We are committed to fulfilling

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God's purpose for racial inclusion and harmony as we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Autobiographical Note

I grew up in Seoul, Korea, where my parents were the pioneer missionaries of the UPCI. They established churches for Koreans and interracial English fellowships for American soldiers. Some members later became ministers in the UPCI, PAW, and other Apostolic groups, including a presiding bishop of International Bible Way Church. In 1992 my wife and I started a church in Austin, Texas. When I resigned as pastor in 2009 to become general superintendent, the church had about one thousand constituents, of whom 50 percent were White, 26 percent were Hispanic, 18 percent were Black, and 6 percent were Asian or Native American, with about thirty nationalities. During my pastorate, the mother church started sixteen other churches in the Austin area, which grew to an additional constituency of about one thousand. The pastors included six Hispanics, one African American, and one Asian, and two churches were started by women pastors. During this time the church trained sixty-eight people who ultimately received UPCI ministerial credentials, an upgrade, or advancement in pastoral ministry, including eleven women and twenty-one ethnic minorities, for a net 43 percent of the total.

UPCI.org/statement-archive

For Further Study

- David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine, Vol. 3: The Twentieth Century* (PPH)
- Talmadge French, *Early Interracial Oneness Pentecostalism: G. T. Haywood and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (1901–1931)* (by UPCI minister)
- James Tyson, *The Early Pentecostal Revival: History of Twentieth-Century Pentecostals and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, 1901–1930* (by PAW minister) (PPH)

UPCI Articles

- Kenneth Stewart, “How Should the Church Deal with the Cultural Conflict Regarding Racism?” *Pentecostal Life*, UPCI.org/statement-archive
- Alonzo Terry, “Racism Is a Sin,” *Pentecostal Life*, UPCI.org/statement-archive
- “Racial and Ethnic Affirmation,” Position Paper, UPCI.org/statement-archive
- “A Timeline of Racial and Ethnic Affirmation,” UPCI.org/statement-archive

UPCI Video Presentations

- “The Church in a Time of Racial Tension,” Panel Discussion, UPCI YouTube Channel
- “Faces of the UPCI,” UPCI YouTube Channel
- “Race, Culture & the Church,” UPCI YouTube channel