



UPCI
UNITED PENTECOSTAL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL

News Bulletin from the
General Superintendent

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THE UPCI AS A MULTIRACIAL CHURCH

Recently, there has been a discussion on social media about racism and the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI). Many people have described personal experiences both positive and negative. On the day after the original post, I met with the couple who initiated the post. We had a cordial and productive conversation. They expressed appreciation for the overall direction of the UPCI but shared their concerns and personal experiences. These concerns are genuine and should be discussed. I would like to give some context for the discussion.

The UPCI has 4.9 million constituents in 193 nations and 35 territories with 42,000 churches and 40,000 ministers. The vast majority are nonwhite. The goal of the UPCI is to establish self-governing churches in each country, with national leaders. International operations are coordinated by the Global Council, which consists of delegates from each nation. In the US and Canada, the UPCI has 4,825 churches and 10,500 ministers. Hispanics, African Americans or Blacks, Asian Americans, and Native Americans comprise 27 percent of pastors, 19 percent of credentialed ministers, about 34 percent of constituents, and 6 members of the General Board. All of the 18 boards and committees that govern the major ministries and general business of the UPCI have minority representation, usually both Black and Hispanic membership. On the state or provincial level, 261 ministers in these categories are district board members, department directors, or committee chairs, which is an increase of 58 percent in the past six years. (For detailed information, see the [Report on Minority Participation](#).)



**General Superintendent
David K. Bernard**

The UPCI teaches that racism is a sin. (See [Position Paper on Racial and Ethnic Affirmation](#). See also [General Superintendent's Message, General Conference, September 24, 2018, Louisville, KY, begin at 9-minute mark](#).) We believe it is important to preach and teach against racism in all its forms; to eliminate all discrimination and prejudice; and to promote intentional diversity at all levels of participation and leadership. We strive for our leadership to reflect our existing diversity and for our churches to reflect the increasing diversity of our society. Much has been accomplished in recent years, but much more needs to be accomplished. It is a work in progress.

To this end, we seek to increase awareness and sensitivity regarding matters of race and culture and to create a welcoming environment for people of all social backgrounds and political persuasions. We desire to speak with moral clarity on important social issues while maintaining Christian ethics, humility, and kindness. In all our statements and discussions, we do not take political sides, but we try to speak as the church, even though this has led to criticism from people on both (or sometimes several) sides.

In addition to the messages preached weekly in our churches, we have issued statements on various social issues and news events from our World Headquarters in Missouri. (See [Statement Archive](#).) Following the tragic events in Ferguson, we held a forum in St. Louis at our General Conference in which we discussed ways to maintain interracial unity within the church despite political and social turmoil, and we published the dialogue in the *Forward*, our periodical for ministers. When communities were torn by social upheaval following shootings by and towards police, we called for truth, justice, and peace. Some of our local churches have been at the forefront of ministering to the affected families and communities. We also issued a statement about the importance of respect for immigrants and refugees. We have published articles about the sin of racism in our periodicals and conducted diversity training for all leaders of the US and Canadian districts. (See Pentecostal Life articles by [Alonzo Terry](#) and [Kenneth Stewart](#).)

Despite the progress we have made and our proactive efforts to promote justice and inclusion for everyone, we

recognize that we live in a sinful world and that the sin of racism finds its way even into the church in tragic and heartbreaking ways. We sincerely empathize with every individual who has experienced the pain of being treated differently in any way because of his or her race as they have attended our churches or interacted with our constituents. We are committed to working together to fulfill God's purpose for racial inclusion and harmony.

Historical Note

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. Hispanics, blacks, whites, and people from many nations worshiped together. Blacks and whites served in leadership. 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; and Andrew Urshan, an Assyrian immigrant from Persia (Iran). The oldest surviving list of Oneness ministers, from 1919-1920, contains 704 names. About 25 to 30 percent were African American, 29 percent were women, and several Hispanic names appear on the list. Once again, both blacks and whites served in leadership.

By this time, Trinitarian Pentecostals were segregated racially, as were all 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 perhaps one of the most integrated groups in society. Unfortunately, the pressures of a racist society as well as 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 of Jim Crow laws that forbade 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 original fellowship and formed three regional organizations.

The desire for unity was so great that in 1931 most of these ministers reunited in a new organization, stipulating that the governing board would be composed equally of whites and blacks. Sadly, the same social pressures continued to work, and by 1938 most black ministers left the group. If Oneness ministers could have remained united for another twenty-five years as a countercultural witness to biblical holiness, perhaps they could have influenced the Civil Rights movement. Some black Apostolics did. For example, Bishop Smallwood Williams was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council in Washington, D.C., prayed at the funeral of President Kennedy, and worked with President Johnson to pass civil rights laws. While some blacks and some whites remained in each major Oneness organization, they were mostly divided along racial lines. Most of the responsibility for the failure to maintain full racial unity in the church rests upon the white majority. (For a full historical discussion, see [David K. Bernard, A History of Christian Doctrine, Vol. 3: The Twentieth Century \(Word Aflame, 1999\)](#). For a black historian's perspective, see [James L. Tyson, The Early Pentecostal Revival: History of Twentieth-Century Pentecostals and The Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, 1901–30 \(Word Aflame, 1992\)](#)).

In recent decades the UPCI has sought to recapture the biblical unity of the apostolic church and the early Oneness movement. It adopted a position paper entitled "Racial and Ethnic Affirmation" that opposes racism, prejudice, and segregation. The paper 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."

Personal Note

I grew up in Seoul, Korea, where my parents were the pioneer missionaries of the UPCI. They established Korean churches and also interracial English fellowships for American soldiers. Many of their American converts and members later became ministers and even bishops in groups such as the UPCI, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Bible Way Church, and Pentecostal Churches of the Apostolic Faith. In 1992 my wife and I started a church in Austin, Texas. When I resigned as pastor in 2009 to become general superintendent of the UPCI, the church had about 1,000 constituents, of whom 50 percent were Caucasian or White, 26 percent were Hispanic, 18 percent were African American or Black, and 6 percent were Asian American or Native American, with a total of about 30 nationalities. During my pastorate, the mother church started 16 other churches in the Austin area with an additional constituency of about 1,000. The pastors included six Hispanics, one African American, and one Asian American, and two of the churches were started by women pastors. During this time the church trained 60 people who received UPCI ministerial credentials, including 8 women and 19 ethnic minorities, for a net 40 percent of the total.

For Further Information

- [Multicultural Ministries: Interview with Brocc Chavis and David K. Bernard](#)
- [Building the Bridge Ministries: Interview with Micheal Mitchell and David K. Bernard](#)
- [Urshan College and Urshan Graduate School of Theology: Interview with Director of Admissions, Dinecia Gates](#)
- [Kenneth Stewart Statement](#)