



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries

FACING RACISM:

A Vision of the Intercultural Community

Antiracism Study Guides



Week 3. PC(USA) and Racial Reconciliation

Read Micah 6:8

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?**

Introduction

Most local churches adapt a unique mission statement that summarizes in clear and simple language what the church sees as its primary aim in the community in which it worships and serves and in the broader world. These statements appear in bulletins, newsletters, pamphlets, and handouts and are periodically recited by the congregation. Mission statements help us to remember who we are and what we are about.

The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. also has a mission statement that appears in *The Book of Order* in a section entitled "The Mission of the Church." This section lists "The Great Ends of the Church," a concise statement of who we are and what we are about as a denomination. The Great Ends of the Church are: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world (*Book of Order*, F-1.0304).

The Great Ends of the Church are a uniquely balanced statement of the church's mission, a statement that makes it clear our mission is focused on worship, proclamation and nurture on one hand and on preservation, promotion and exhibition of the Kingdom on the other. This same balanced focus and responsibility in mission is evident in our confessions and our church policies and actions.

Through the years the PC(USA) has made the promotion of social righteousness an integral part of its mission as a church, with varying degrees of success. Racial justice is one of the areas where the promotion of social righteousness has been pursued. In this section of our study guide we will briefly review several areas in recent church history where this witness has evolved into the policy positions and structure that exist today.

Discussion Questions

1. Does your church have a mission statement? Review it and examine your mission for similarities and common elements to the Great Ends of the Church.
2. The Micah passage gives a straightforward formula for what the Lord requires. How many elements of this formula are apparent in your mission statement?
3. Can you think of instances where the church has been successful in promoting social righteousness? Examples of where it has been less successful in recognizing and promoting social righteousness?

The Confession of 1967

In the middle of the 17th century, the English Parliament convened a group of men to provide guidance on matters of faith and worship. The group met at Westminster Abbey over a period of years and produced a confession of faith that was adopted by the Church of England in 1647. The Westminster Confession of Faith, with various revisions, has been the primary confession of Presbyterians for generations. While Presbyterians in the United States edited out particularly British references to state religion, we still lacked a unique statement addressing the requirements of faithfulness in this country. The church found that testimony in the creation of The Confession of 1967, which states, “The purpose of the Confession of 1967 is to call the church to that unity in confession and mission which is required of disciples today” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.05) Indeed, the time had come for a dynamic statement of confession and mission given the challenges of modernity and the constant threat of geopolitical forces.

So arduous was the task of creating The Confession of 1967 that it was eleven years in the making. Its central theme is reconciliation: between God and humanity and among human beings. It states, “This [reconciling] work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.07). The confession is very pointed in acknowledging challenges to this task, stating, “In each time and place there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity, and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations (*Book of Confessions*, 9.43).” The question of race and racial justice was one of these aforementioned concrete situations.

The Confession of 1967’s statements on race and racial justice comprise the church’s first comprehensive policy stance on racism and establishes roots upon which later policy statements and actions grow. The confession unequivocally asserts, “Therefore the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it (*Book of Confessions*, 9.44).” This focus on reconciliation, thoroughly

grounded in scripture and affirmed by actions of the church, forms the foundation upon which the church's anti-racism work firmly rests.

Discussion Questions

1. Are you familiar with the Westminster Confession of Faith? What are some of your memories of this confession and its importance to the church?
2. Are you familiar with The Confession of 1967? What are some of your recollections about this confession and its importance to the church?
3. In what ways does the theme of reconciliation continue to be appropriate for these times?

Council on Church and Race

The scriptural requirement to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God is a towering challenge in a world that embraces a win-at-all-costs philosophy, that routinely sees kindness as a weakness, and that views humility as a form of inadequacy. In a world that sets up this type of dichotomy between what Christians are taught to believe and what the world teaches, it is easy to mouth platitudes but much harder to commit to action. In adopting The Confession of 1967, the Presbyterian Church was clear about what it believed. Now it needed to put structures in place that would express these beliefs in action.

Faced with the indisputable turbulence and brutality of the civil rights era, Christian churches were compelled to respond. These were divisive times for the church. It was called to a lofty ethical and moral standard but its members lived in a society that tenaciously clung to detrimental social and economic traditions and deep seated discriminatory practices. Many of church members found it difficult to let go of long held beliefs and interpretations. The National Council of Churches in Christ, an organization of mainline Protestant churches, responded to this situation by creating a Commission on Religion and Race and by urging member denominations to do the same. These were the beginnings of what would eventually become the Presbyterian Churches' (UPCUSA & PCUS) Councils on Church and Race, which were formed to promote reconciling action on issues of racial justice. By designating these bodies "commissions" and "councils," the denominations gave them formal standing and the opportunity to influence church leaders and staff.

The Presbyterian Church realized the intrinsic difficulties in a predominantly white denomination understanding the true magnitude of the underlying issues in racial justice. Many members refused to recognize the problems of racism until the Civil Rights Movement made it impossible to ignore. Other members recognized the problem, and the complicity of white churches in maintaining racial injustice. The issue for the

Presbyterian Church was how to make effective decisions about what it should do when it was a part of the problem. Thus the Council on Church and Race was created “to be the focal point for the identification of issues and the development of churchwide policy relating to racial and intercultural justice and reconciliation” (*UPCUSA Minutes*, 23 May 1972, p. 747). The Council, by design and intent, was to be permanently diverse. This was a structural change in the denomination designed to give voice to those who previously had been virtually voiceless. The Council brought a challenging word to corridors that previously condoned silence.

The strength of this commitment to diversity and fairness was soon tested. In 1970 the Council on Church and Race approved a \$10,000 grant to the Angela Davis Defense Fund. Angela Davis, Ph.D. was a black faculty member at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). She was also a political activist, leader of the Communist Party USA, and affiliated with the Black Panther Party, a highly controversial black activist group in the 1960s and 70s. Dr. Davis was arrested for conspiracy relating to the armed takeover of a California county courtroom by the Black Panther Party that resulted in four deaths. The Angela Davis case was a vortex of social dissent for the denomination. Many saw Angela Davis as the antithesis of traditional American values and they were enraged that the church would be sympathetic to her and supportive of her defense. They petitioned the General Assembly to reverse the Council’s decision.

In its response the Council stated, “The General Assembly, by establishment of a Council on Church and Race, has challenged Presbyterians to a more radical posture in the struggle for social justice and world peace than many American citizens care to assume. The call to Presbyterians to support those who conscientiously practice civil disobedience under extreme injustice, the call to bear witness for peace in international relations, ‘and, in its own life, to practice the forgiveness of enemies,’ (*Book of Confessions*, 9.45) all break with the conventional righteousness and mark our Church as a voice crying in the wilderness of moral complacency and chauvinism, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord!’” (*Minutes*, 24 May 1972, p. 994).

The money for the legal defense fund grant was quietly reimbursed to the General Assembly by a group of concerned Presbyterians and guidelines for the consideration and awarding of subsequent grants were approved by a later assembly. However, the grant action was sustained.

The Council on Church and Race was formally disbanded at the formation of the reunited Church [the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] in 1983. Today, the work of the council continues directly through groups including the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns and the Racial Ethnic and Women’s Ministries area, as well as indirectly through other program staff and denominational agencies. The spiritual legacy of the Council resides in the people of the church who continue to advocate for and support its aims and objectives.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of divisive issues have you experienced in the church and what are some of the common elements they share with issues of race and racial justice?
2. What are some of the most effective ways of advocating Christian values? Are there points at which the line should be drawn?
3. When have you been required to take a stand for Christian principles and values? What was the outcome?

Resources

“Race and the Rights of Minorities in America ACSWP,” *Presbyterian Social Witness Policy Compilation*, 2010,
< [http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/1?fn=default.htm\\$f=templates\\$vid=pcdocs:10.1048/Enu](http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/1?fn=default.htm$f=templates$vid=pcdocs:10.1048/Enu) > (20 August 2015).

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1: Book of Confessions. Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2007.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 2: Book of Order. Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2013.