



Central Southeast Ohio Association of the Heartland Conference
United Church of Christ

So, We Speak – A Statement Urging Anti-Racist Action

Columbus, Ohio - June 25, 2020

As your Association Council in the Central Southeast Ohio Association of the United Church of Christ, we struggled mightily with the words you are about to read.

On this day, when we mark the 63rd anniversary of the formation of the United Church of Christ, we grieve that it has been one month since the tragic killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. We lament that it has taken us this long to give voice to these words, and we also give thanks that they come now from a place of deep commitment and honest wrestling.

As a Christian denomination predominately populated by white members, all settings of the United Church of Christ have a great deal of privilege and power.

We are inheritors of privilege based not simply on the color of our skin, but on the systems, institutions, and societal advantages that have been built to structurally secure our power through reinforcing the sinful lie of white supremacy.

We use the term white supremacy deliberately throughout this letter, and we understand that term to include all four elements of the definition provided by the Anti-Defamation League:

White supremacy is a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people. As a full-fledged ideology, white supremacy is far more encompassing than simple racism or bigotry.

This reality we have inherited is an intentional outcome driven by systems of white supremacy and colonialism in this nation that have benefitted our church for many, many years.

In this region, many of our churches sit on land stolen from indigenous peoples. Many of our ministers have been educated in seminaries fueled by funding from bequests and estate gifts of people who benefitted from the economic realities of racism. Even now, many of our congregations find themselves economically driven by endowed funds that have aligned themselves more often with advantage for industry and capital than with justice and equality for people who are oppressed.

“Only those who do not know bondage existentially can speak of liberation ‘objectively.’ Only those who have not been in the ‘valley of death’ can sing the songs of Zion as if they are uninvolved.” — James Cone, “Sanctification, Liberation, and Black Worship” in *Theology Today* (July 1978)

In fulfillment of these words of James Cone, many of us struggle now to fully name our complicity in a system of racist violence that pervades every element of our society. In the United States, healthcare, government, policing, farming, education, housing, entertainment, religion, reproductive rights, and the legal system are all sick with the sin of systemic racism.

We question the power of one more statement against racism from one more setting of the United Church of Christ — this letter from our Association joins literally thousands of similarly-intentioned expressions over the life of the church.

We question the power of our words, but there can be no question of the power of our silence over the vast majority of the last 401 years of racist social ills in our nation.

So, we speak.

We speak with one voice to say simply & clearly that **Black Lives Matter**.

We speak to confess the complicity of both our denomination and our faith tradition in the establishment and maintenance of systems of white supremacy.

We speak to implore our local congregations to not only acknowledge our historical role in maintaining racist systems, but to own our responsibility for taking both immediate and ongoing anti-racist action against the systems that have benefitted our church at the expense of Black and Brown bodies for the majority of the last four centuries.

We speak to beg you to not turn away from the sufferings of those who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color, but instead to sit with their pain, hear their voices, center their leadership in your work, receive their anger as a holy gift, and not rush to soothe your own soul with hope formed out of platitudes when we as Christians are commanded, as Paul shares with us in the fifth chapter of Romans, to let our hope be built first out of the truthful embrace of suffering.

We will continue to speak as an Association by providing anti-racism resources for continued self-awareness and growth and by demonstrating anti-racist leadership throughout our covenant together.

And we speak today to say their names — the names of those who have died at the hands of systemic racist violence and due to our nation’s wholehearted historical and ongoing embrace of white supremacist ideology.

These represent only a few names of those in our nation and our region who have suffered at the hands of historical silence, waiting on change to come even as their last breaths cried out for help, mercy, justice, and God. We invite you to speak their names aloud no matter where you are when you read this statement, and we invite you to speak also the names of those who you do not see listed but who you know are also among those who deserve the justice of being named aloud.

May God grant us the strength, through the example of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to make no peace with oppression, to interrogate our complicity in systems that harm and abuse, and to let our action be the living memorial to these who have died who are all named by God as Beloved:

Riah Milton, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Rem'mie Fells, Julius Tate, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Medgar Evers, Tyre King, Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Susie Jackson, Laquan McDonald, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd.

May God grant everlasting light
To shine upon their souls;
May God grant everlasting fire
To burn within our hearts
As we seek justice for them
And for so many more.
Amen.

Together in Christ,

The Central Southeast Ohio Association Council

Rev. Jean Feeney, Moderator

Mr. Robert Kutschbach, Vice Moderator

Rev. Dr. William Nirote, Immediate Past Moderator

Dr. Cynthia Tyson, Secretary

Mr. Stephen Flenner, Treasurer

Rev. Jackie Nehls, DCAM Representative

Rev. Dr. Nancy Livingston, DPAM Representative

Ms. Jennifer St. Clair, DCV Representative

Rev. Terry Williams, Heartland Conference Director

Mx. MK O'Haver, Heartland Conference Director

Rev. Jill Dunlap, Personnel Committee Chairperson

Rev. Melodie Rezac, Administrative Minister

Rev. Patricia E. H. Battle, Association Minister