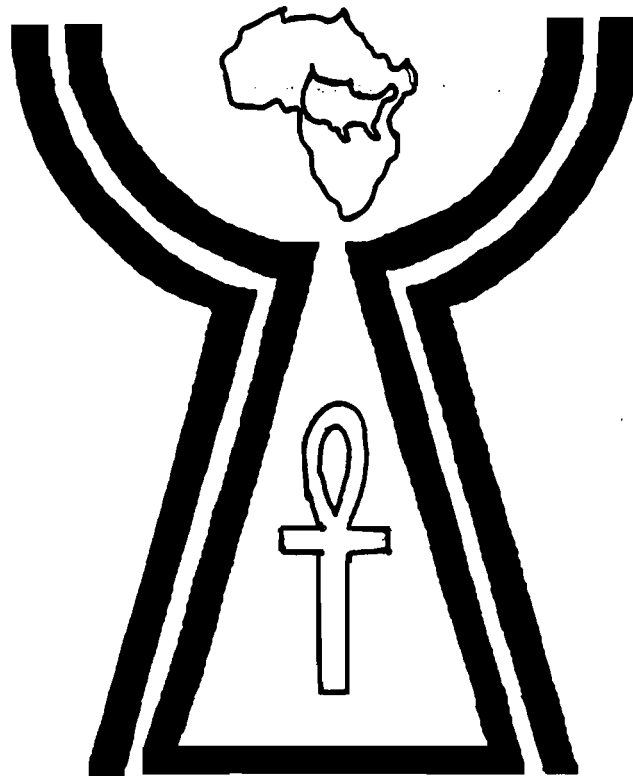


# ***Is THIS NEW WINE?***

***A paper addressing African American issues  
for discussion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)***



**presented by**

**African American Presbyterians  
for**

**Prayer, Study, and Action**

**August 22, 1993**

*No one uses a piece of new cloth to patch up an old coat, because the new patch will shrink and tear off some of the old cloth, making an even bigger hole. Now does anyone pour new wine into used wineskins, because the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins will be ruined. Instead, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins.*

*Jesus (Mark 2:21-22)*

## Contents

Introductory Letter .....	i
Definition of Terms .....	iii
Part I: Challenge Faced by the Church .....	1
Part II: The Call to Prayer, Study, and Action .....	4
Part III: Reformed, Reforming, and the Challenge to Be Transformed by an Afrocentric Perspective .....	6
Part IV: The Half Century Anniversary of the African Presbyterian Church in America: A Vision .....	10
Part V: Where to From Here: Conclusion and Recommendations ..	12
Discussion Questions .....	14
Notes .....	16
Endorsement Sheet .....	18

# **PRESBYTERIANS FOR PRAYER, STUDY, AND ACTION**

June, 1993

Dear Christian Friends,

As we approach the 21st century, how will African American Presbyterians create viable ministries in their respective communities? In light of critical needs in the African American community, several lay and clergy African American Presbyterians have begun serious discussion concerning the best means to embrace a proclamation of the Gospel that can give birth to Afrocentric new church developments, evangelism, Christian education, and mission. We have chosen to call ourselves **"PRESBYTERIANS FOR PRAYER, STUDY, AND ACTION" (PPSA)** as we join together in **PRAYER** (for the guidance of the Holy Spirit concerning these matters), **STUDY** (of options that will assist in alleviating the negative situations now gripping our communities nationwide), and **ACTION** (to create Afrocentric ministries to uplift and liberate the oppressed).

"Is This New Wine?" suggests that African American Presbyterians may need to consider the option of forming a whole new denomination in order to achieve a truly Afrocentric proclamation of the Gospel. Understandably, this option may not be endorsed by all African American Presbyterians. It is hoped, nonetheless, that discussion of the need for more viable ministries by Black Presbyterians in African American communities will not become the occasion for further factionalism among Black Presbyterians. At all costs, we must avoid "crabs-in-a-basket" style inner group behaviors while the common problem, the racism within the PC(USA) and wider society, remains unaddressed and our children and communities continue to be alienated from the congregations that should be able to assist them. Analysis and debate concerning difficult realities (from which we Christians often shy away) can provide the genesis of new hope if dialogue takes place in an atmosphere of mutual love, trust, and respect.

This paper is presented to all African American Presbyterians for consideration. This is not to suggest that we are unconcerned for the welfare of our sisters and brothers among other racial/ethnic groups, including our White sisters and brothers. We are also not unaware of the current crisis of spirit that is currently forcing the denomination to make drastic cuts of staff and programs that can only result in the further marginalization of African American concerns. This focus on the African American community merely reflects our realization that it is inappropriate for us to: (1) Attempt to suggest what others should do in their respective communities; and (2) Place denominational politics as a priority over the welfare of our own children and communities.

The aim of this paper is to challenge African American congregations to action concerning the most viable way we can most effectively address the urgent needs of the African American community. Our aim is only to present this matter for prayerful reflection and discussion by all Sessions of predominantly African American congregations and their congregations. A "grass roots" discussion among African American Presbyterians concerning these issues is the objective: God, alone, is Sovereign of conscience. At the meeting of the **National Black Presbyterian Caucus in San Antonio, TX on July 28, 1993**, the issues involved in the "New Wine" paper

## **Presbyterians for Prayer, Study, and Action**

will be discussed by all African American Presbyterians in attendance.

We are grateful to Ronald Peters, Associate Professor of Urban Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, for the time and energy he has spent listening to our collective conversations in meetings and by phone as he has sought to collect and present our thoughts in a cohesive fashion. It is hoped that this dialogue will contribute to all Presbyterians being empowered to more faithful witness to the love of Jesus Christ in a way that is truly reflective of their own historical, ethnic, and cultural identity.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*Presbyterians for Prayer, Study, and Action*

(Concerning the Challenge of 21st Century Ministry: an Afrocentric Proclamation of the Gospel)

Ms. Mildred Brown, Elder  
Berean Presbyterian Church  
Philadelphia, PA

Rev. Oliver Brown, Pastor  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Los Angeles, CA

Rev. Robert Burkins, Pastor  
Elmwood Presbyterian Church  
Orange, NJ

Rev. Jerry Cannon, Pastor  
CM Jenkins Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC

Rev. Warren Dennis  
New Brunswick Theological Seminary  
New Brunswick, NJ

Rev. Phyllis Felton, Coordinator  
African American Evangelism  
Harambe Project  
Baltimore, MD

Mr. John Grayson, Elder  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Los Angeles, CA

Rev. Marsha Shulligan Haney  
Altadena, CA

Ms. Francis Hollis, Elder  
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church  
Los Angeles, CA

Ms. Rubye Houston Everett, Elder  
University Presbyterian Church  
Houston, TX

Rev. Amittiyah Elayne Hyman,  
Parish Associate  
New York Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Washington, DC

Rev. Curtis Jones, Pastor  
Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Baltimore, MD

Rev. Robert Jones, Pastor  
College Hill Presbyterian Church  
Dayton, OH

Dr. Johnnie Monroe, Pastor  
Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Pittsburgh, PA

Dr. Lonnie Oliver, Pastor  
New Life Presbyterian Church  
College Park, GA

Dr. Ronald E. Peters  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
Pittsburgh, PA

Dr. James Robinson, Pastor  
Bidwell Presbyterian Church  
Pittsburgh, PA

Rev. Katheryn Smallwood  
East End Cooperative Ministries  
Pittsburgh, PA

Rev. Charles Todd, Pastor  
Westwood Presbyterian Church  
Louisville, KY

Ms. Marjorie Ward, Elder  
Shawnee Presbyterian Church  
Louisville, KY

## Definition of Terms

**Afrocentricity**: A perspective of the universe (or world-view) that places Africa as the center for persons of African descent (as for Asians, an Asian-oriented center or Europeans, a European-oriented center). This perspective makes Africa the subject rather than object of all inquiry and investigation. Instead of using other cultural perspectives by which to evaluate/compare Africa, Africa becomes the standard by which other cultures, histories, and sociopolitical systems are compared.

**African American Church**: Church denominations or individual congregations in the United States whose constituent memberships/parishioners are predominately composed of persons of African descent.

**Afrocentric Church**: An African American congregation whose proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is informed and shaped by an Afrocentric consciousness. It points out Africa's role in giving birth to Judeo-Christian theological tenets in ways generally overlooked by traditional Eurocentric scholarship. Evangelism, mission, Christian education, nurture, and stewardship in the Afrocentric congregation all emphasize the distinctive contributions of Africa in the formation of the Gospel.

**Black Theology**: Black theology is a distinct theological position within Christian religion which uses the experience of Black people as the starting point for all discussion about God and Divine relationship to and involvement in the universe. It is based upon a sociopolitical and economic context apart from that which is generally identified as (so called) traditional Western theology, but which is, in fact, White western theology. White western theology, by contrast, has been structured primarily in keeping with the sociopolitical and economic events in Europe or theological tenets growing out of that context.

**Outreach**: Efforts of a particular congregation to organize and carry out activities aimed at:

- A. Inviting persons who are not actively affiliated with any faith or Christian congregation to become involved in the mission, life, and ministry of that congregation based upon faith in Jesus Christ; and/or
- B. Activities that are not primarily designed to have individuals become part of the congregation, but which are essentially service and/or advocacy oriented.

## Part I: The Challenge Faced by The African American Church

*Nobody knows de trouble I've seen; nobody knows but Jesus.*

*Nobody knows de trouble I've seen! Glory! Hallelujah!*

African American Spiritual

In the paper, "A Call to a National Dialogue," produced for the recent Kelly Miller Smith Institute on African American Church Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School (October, 1992), the challenge faced by the African American Church is clearly outlined as follows:

The African American Church is in crisis. At a time in history when we are about to enter a new millennium, the African American Church stands at the crossroads of decision. Its traditional role as the conservator of Black culture and the conscience of the Black community is at stake. It must choose either life or death, blessings or curses. Whatever choice it makes will determine whether or not we and our descendants will live as a redeemed and redeeming community in this land where God has befriended us.

The signs of the crisis we face today are unmistakable:

Witness the social and economic descent of more than a third of the Black population into a burgeoning and permanent underclass.

Witness the children of our impoverished, drug-infested neighborhoods coming to the point of birth, and yet dying in the womb of human possibility.

Witness the rate of incarceration of young Black males which has 23 percent of those aged 20 to 29 (almost one of every four) in prison, on bail, on probation or parole.

Witness the turning of thousands of our young people toward illegal drugs in a vain, hedonistic escape from reality, or an attempt to enter a degrading, criminal career.

Witness the unprecedented assault on Black family life by urban violence, poverty, homelessness, and teenage pregnancy on one hand, and on the other, the demands of an upwardly mobile, materialistic lifestyle that is scornful of God and has no place for the church of Jesus Christ.

Witness the reversals in the public arena of hard won policies ensuring affirmative action for minorities and women.

## Is This New Wine?

Witness the rampant individualism, the loss of community, and the decline of the Black Church as an effective agent for justice and liberation among all poor and oppressed people. The list goes on. <sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the above information is common knowledge in our society. It is also, unfortunately, common knowledge that, overwhelmingly, Black Presbyterian Christians lack the ability to address themselves to this crisis in their communities. At a time when human suffering in urban areas where high percentages of African Americans are found has dramatically increased, frequently Black Presbyterian congregations are experiencing dwindling numbers, decaying physical plants, and vacant pulpits with the result that many Presbyteries are closing more and more Black congregations and starting none. It has been noted that an upsurge in the initiation of new churches is reflected nationwide throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in every racial group, except among African Americans. Indeed, while there are several examples of new church development, growth, and vitality regarding effective urban ministry among African American churches in other denominations, the nationwide record of African American new church development within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) over the past ten years has been effectively written off by the denomination.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to suggest that merely the initiation of new congregations is needed. Also needed are efforts that will enable existing African American congregations to more effectively address critical issues of economic blight, educational, social, and political disenfranchisement of their parishioners. Many Black Presbyterian congregations, however, view themselves as being so "middle-class" in their orientations and imitative of what they view as proper "White Presbyterian" liturgy and ethos, that they do not relate effectively to other Blacks. Many Black Presbyterians expend so much time and energy perpetually trying to relate to the structures of White Presbyterians that they are unable to relate to their own heritage or to others within the African American community, a characteristic Gayraud Wilmore (*Black and Presbyterian*, 1983) documented long ago:

Let us put the matter squarely. Some of us have been so anxious to prove to our white brothers and sisters that we too are Americans and that we too "belong" that we have deprived them of the gifts God has given to us as a people.... We have been so busy learning how to be "human beings in general" that we have paid little attention to the special qualities of Black humanity that we have to bring when we are true to our own history and traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Wilmore further suggests that this identity crisis among many Black Presbyterians has engulfed them in a situation of dual penalty wherein they are frequently not taken being seriously by their White Presbyterian sisters and

## Is This New Wine?

brothers nor by members of the wider African American community:

Black Presbyterians have been criticized by other Blacks for remaining in a predominantly white church where they were under the double jeopardy of having to fight both class consciousness and racism.<sup>4</sup>

Is it possible for African American Presbyterians to reclaim, unapologetically, their cultural and spiritual African heritage? Is it possible for Black Presbyterian churches to truly reclaim what Wilmore<sup>5</sup> described as the *five resources of the Black religious heritage* and suggested as the means to more effective relationship of Black Presbyterianism to the African American community? These five resources are defined by Wilmore as: (1) Personal and Group Freedom from White Control; (2) The Image of Africa as the Land of Origin; (3) The Will of God for Social Justice; (4) Creative Style and Artistry; and (5) Unity of Secular and Sacred (avoiding the Euro-American sharp and artificial divisions of reality).

In light of the challenge faced by the African American community today, the Rev. Marsha Snulligan Haney has described the challenge faced by Black Presbyterians this way:

Because of our professed belief in the "one, holy, universal, apostolic church," we join committed Christians throughout the world (be they in Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, or Australia) in asking key questions concerning discipleship and ministry...

1. What shape will our Christian obedience take?
2. What kind of theological reflection is appropriate to this obedience?
3. How do we (as African American Christians) understand the command to follow Christ into the 21st century?<sup>6</sup>

"Is This New Wine?" is a challenge directed especially to Presbyterians of African descent. This challenge, however, is also issued to any and all persons (Presbyterian or not) who, regardless of ethnic or cultural considerations, are concerned with the welfare and future of African American communities as part of their concern for the future of humankind. *It is a challenge to take whatever steps as are necessary to empower Black Presbyterians toward a more clearly Afrocentric proclamation of the Gospel in the African American community as the essential means of addressing the social and spiritual crisis in that community from a Christian perspective.*



## Is This New Wine?

### Part II: A Call to Prayer, Study, and Action Concerning the Formation of African Presbyterian Churches in America

*Sing a new song to the Lord!  
Sing to the Lord, all the world!  
Sing to the Lord, and praise God!  
Proclaim every day the good news  
that God has saved us.*

Psalm 96:1-2

As Moses was called to lead the people of God out of bondage into freedom and out of the wilderness into the promised land; and as the Ethiopian official was called to return to Africa and proclaim the Good News to his people; and, as John Gloucester and Lucy Craft Laney were called to address the unique needs of African peoples in America, we are called by God to acknowledge the Sovereignty of God in and over our lives and affirm dignity and respect for all humankind by the following:

**WHEREAS**, we are a communal people with a rich African heritage and background acknowledging the triune God and the imperative of justice and love as the prerequisites of real unity and peace; and

**WHEREAS**, we as persons of African descent and members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for the last 185 years of laboring within its bounds, give thanks to this denomination for its attempts, at many points, to stress inclusion and to proclaim justice issues, we yet recognize that its behavior has been and continues to be inconsistent with its stated objectives; and

**WHEREAS**, the various governing bodies, ministry units, committees, and task forces of the denomination formed to address the constitutional aims of inclusion and justice have failed to do either adequately with regard to its sisters and brothers of color; and

**WHEREAS**, African American membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been dually penalized in that we are neither fully embraced within the denomination and, as a result, viewed with some skepticism by our sisters and brothers in the African American community beyond the church; and

**WHEREAS**, African American Presbyterians can no longer be held back by denominational structures of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which prevent our immediate and ongoing responsiveness to the pain, suffering, oppression, and hopelessness that characterizes the community inhabited by our African sisters and brothers worldwide;

Is This New Wine?

**WE, THEREFORE, APPEAL** to our African American sisters and brothers within and without the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to join together with us in fulfillment of our common hope and divine destiny to become a community wherein God's love, our respect for the dignity of all people, and the rich diversity of God's creation will be cherished, honored, and preserved.

**LET IT BE KNOWN** that, while it is our hope that all Presbyterians of African descent will join us in this noble undertaking should events require, we will respect the decision of those who choose to remain apart from these efforts as part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) beyond the designated period of prayer, study, and action; we will continue to love, respect, honor, and be in partnership with them; and

**LET IT ALSO BE KNOWN** that this call extends to sisters and brothers who are not of African descent, but who seek to embrace the creation of African Presbyterian Churches in America which, of necessity, includes the adoption of an Afrocentric perspective which binds us to love, respect, and value all people as human beings and as our sisters and brothers under Almighty God.

**BE IT RESOLVED, THEREFORE, THAT WE**, the people of African mothers and fathers, daughters of the dust and brothers of the earth, ***call for the immediate initiation of a seven year period of prayer, study, and action that may require formation of an AFRICAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH in AMERICA.*** This period of prayer, study, and action:

- A. Is to commence August, 1993 during a special service of covenant and celebration; and
- B. Will conclude not later than seven years following its initiation and may result in the formation of separate corporate denominational entity.

May the Love of God, the Grace of Jesus Christ, and the Power of the Holy Spirit undergird and bless this undertaking.

**SIGNATORIES TO THE CALL FOR STUDY, PRAYER, AND ACTION CONCERNING THE FORMATION OF THE AFRICAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA:**

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## Is This New Wine?

### **Part III: Reformed, Reforming, and the Challenge to Be Transformed by an Afrocentric Perspective**

*When the Israelites saw the king and his army marching against them, they were terrified and cried out to the Lord for help. They said to Moses, "Weren't there any graves in Egypt? Did you have to bring us out here in the desert to die? Look what you have done by bringing us out of Egypt!" ...Moses answered, "Don't be afraid! Stand your ground, and you will see what the Lord will do to save you today." ...The Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out for help? Tell the people to move forward."*

from Exodus 14:10-15

*Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to God and is perfect.*

Romans 12:2

While a very grave step, the formation of a new African Presbyterian Church in America would not be as radical a departure from the historical tradition of Black Presbyterianism in this country as it might appear to be, at first reading. Indeed, this is not the first time Black Presbyterians have considered such action.<sup>7</sup> This movement, in essence, represents an evolution of the spirit of previous generations of Black Presbyterians to address the needs of the wider African American community and to engage in "uplifting the race" not only spiritually, but also educationally, economically, socially, politically, and culturally. In this sense, an Afrocentric approach to worship, evangelism, Christian education, nurture, mission, and stewardship only implies a more focused and less racist approach to addressing the concerns of the African American community.

#### Why Black Christians or White Christians?

#### What About "In Christ There Is No East or West"?

Discussion of this topic, with any semblance of integrity, would carry us far afield of the aims of this paper. Yet, for many Presbyterians (whether Black, White, Native American, Hispanic, Korean, or any other of the multitude included in God's mosaic called humanity), this issue surfaces as paramount prior to any serious consideration of the merits of Afrocentricity as an enabler of the Christian proclamation of the Gospel among African Americans. Wilmore addressed this issue in his book, *Black and Presbyterian*:

Sometimes one hears the question: "What does the Bible have to do with a Black Christianity or a White Christianity?" ...The word

## Is This New Wine?

“Christian” appears only three times in the Bible (Acts 11:26; 26:28; and I Peter 4:16) and “Christianity”—with or without a modifier—never. It is a term used to describe the religion that developed around the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, long after he and those who knew him in the flesh had passed off the scene. When you and I use the term “Christianity” we are speaking...as sociologists of religion—that is to say, as persons interested in the belief systems, practices, and social structural aspects of this tradition....<sup>8</sup>

According to Wilmore (and many others including Cone, Felder, Grant, Mays, Roberts, Thurman, West, or Woodson) the reality of Black Christianity and the uniqueness of the Black historical, cultural, social, and *theological* frame of reference in distinction from the main of White reality in America hardly needs elaboration here. In addressing the matter within the context of the Black Presbyterian Christian perspective, Wilmore writes:

To speak of a Black Christianity is simply to refer to a social and cultural fact of life. It just happens to be a fact that for the more than four hundred years of Black history in the New World, eighty-five to ninety percent of all Black Christians have worshiped with people of their own race in all-Black congregations. As we might expect, certain realities and characteristics of faith and life are attached to that simple fact. To recognize them and take them seriously in a discussion about the Christian religion is neither to condemn nor to commend it. ...Like it or not, there is such a thing as Black Christianity and it is neither unbiblical nor unchristian to acknowledge its existence.<sup>9</sup>

### The Value of Afrocentrism

During this 500th anniversary of the Columbus event, there has been much discussion concerning its impact upon cultures outside of Europe. There is widespread agreement that one of the most harmful cultural effects of this era has been the distortion of history. It is in this area of historical and, therefore, cultural perspective that one of *Afrocentrism's* greatest contributions to Black Christianity can be made. Molefi Asante (one of the most prolific writers on Afrocentrism) defines the aims of an Afrocentric approach to reality this way:

My work has increasingly constituted a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view in the fields of intercultural communication, rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology, and history. Yet the critique is radical only in the sense that it suggests a turnabout, an alternative perspective on phenomena. It is about taking the globe and turning it over so that we see all the

## Is This New Wine?

possibilities of a world where Africa, for example, is subject and not object. Such a posture is necessary and rewarding for Africans and Europeans. The inability to 'see' from several angles is perhaps the one common fallacy in provincial scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

Asante argues that when persons of African descent are able to perceive the world from an African-oriented center (as for Asians, an Asian-oriented center or Europeans, a European-oriented center) a new awareness or consciousness of one's own humanity is fully achieved.<sup>11</sup> This movement toward an Afrocentric consciousness enables persons of African descent to achieve, from within an African center, what Jesus talked about when he articulated the great commandments: first, love of God and second, love of neighbor as one loves self. (Mark 12.31)

### Afrocentrism and Black Presbyterians

By their very historical definition and current expressions, African American congregations in general and the Black Presbyterian congregations in particular are (in their best and most authentic expressions) informed by an Afrocentric perspective. While the term *Afrocentric* is relatively new, the historical reality of Black Christians, corporately and individually, whose perspective of the Gospel message has been oriented within the context of the issues and needs of an African-centered world view is well documented. Numerous writers on the subject of the Black Church have affirmed this position from a variety of differing perspectives, including Cannon, Cone, Grant, Lincoln, Mays, Mitchell, Paris, Woodson, and Wilmore to mention a few. Specifically, the history of Black Presbyterianism that has been guided by what would now be considered as an Afrocentric world view, is also rich with examples (see Inez Parker's *The Rise and Decline of the Program of Education for Black Presbyterians of the United Presbyterian Church 1865-1970*; *Periscope I, II, and III*; Wilmore's *Black and Presbyterian: the Heritage and the Hope*; Wilson's *Black Presbyterians in Ministry*; and *Black Presbyterians in History*, Vol 51-52, among others).

One of the worst legacies chattel slavery has left to many African Americans has been self-hatred. There is an old adage, well known within the African American community, that betrays not only the values of society at large regarding Black people, but the internalized values of oppression and self-hatred among Blacks. The adage says: "If you're white, you're right; yellow, you're mellow; brown, stick around; but black, get back!" The internalization of this warped value system is supported by the systemic relegation of the concerns of Blacks and other non-Europeans to the periphery of conscious thought in western society while lifting up the cultural, aesthetic, and social values of Europe as central and portraying them as *universal* values. Christianity has figured prominently in this distortion of reality.

The White institutional church in America and many of its imitators among

## Is This New Wine?

Black churches have been part and parcel of this deceptive misuse of the Christian Faith. The National Dialogue on "What It Means to Be Black and Christian" has suggested that this misuse of Christianity must first be addressed by Black Christians, if they are to be able to truly address the needs of the broader African American community:

It is not possible to be a Black Christian...without recognizing the deep ambiguity and paradox that are at the conjunction of these two ways of being. Malcolm X described Christianity as the "perfect slave religion" because he saw how White people invented a religion calculated to keep Black people passive in slavery and subservient after emancipation. Therefore, the first requirement for understanding what it means to be Black and Christian is to admit that Christianity has been used to subjugate Africans and African Americans. Too many (persons of African descent) lack the spiritual and intellectual courage to make that admission. But only after we have made it can we begin to see how Blackness (Afrocentrism), as a state of mind...and as a theological and cultural demystification of Anglo-Saxon religion and culture, can correct the distortions that modern racism induced into the message and mission of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

The Rev. Warren Dennis has assessed the origins of this situation as it pertains to Presbyterians of African descent and suggests how an Afrocentric perspective provides a means of remedy:

The last five hundred years of world history have been devastating for the acquisition of knowledge about other than European culture and history. Thus, we need to reclaim the negative and the positive of our African past prior to our converting to the Presbyterian system of belief as further response to the conditions of racism that have maligned, omitted, and distorted our images and culture as important contributions. As Black Presbyterians, we no longer have to view ourselves from the cultural perspective and history of the majority of Presbyterians.<sup>13</sup>

According to Dennis, Afrocentrism is one method by which African American Presbyterians can reclaim their cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage as a means of more effectively relating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the challenges faced by the wider African American community today:

As a method of inquiry [Afrocentrism] asks the question, how do we gather meaning out of African or other existence?  
...Afrocentrism becomes the source of regeneration for our true values and beliefs grounded in a method of inquiry and discernment. ...By lifting up Afrocentrism as a method of

## Is This New Wine?

exploration, the centrality of African ideas, beliefs, and values as valid frames of reference for acquiring and examining historical and Biblical data for truth and accuracy is established.

Afrocentrism then is a picture of the way things are actually represented in our most comprehensive ideas of nature, self, and society. It is the composite montage of specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, which is peculiar to African Americans in general, and African American Presbyterians in particular as distinguished from other groups.<sup>14</sup>

### **Part IV: The Half-Century Anniversary of the African Presbyterian Church in America: A Vision**

The year is 2052, and the African Presbyterian Church in America is celebrating its 50th Anniversary. Seven years before its founding a small group of African Americans, who were then members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), captured a vision for a new Presbyterian church free of the tenacious grip of racism. We are gathered in the Sanctuary of the First African Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. For all who know, this represents a phenomenon in human history. For this was the first congregational expression of Black Presbyterianism in the older Euro-American Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Today, at almost 250 years of age (First African was founded in 1807), it is the first church of the 50 year old denomination whose anniversary we are assembled to celebrate today.

As an overflowing crowd fills the pews and chancel, a speaker emerges from the gathered community and approaches the pulpit. It is the daughter of one of those who ventured to dream sixty years ago. She was one of the first persons ordained to ministry in the African Presbyterian Church. As she begins her prayer she recalls how good God has been to this community of believers. She recalls the early struggles: how some African Americans resisted the call toward an African-centered proclamation of the Gospel, but how the faithful were the continuing recipients of God's love, mercy, and grace.

Other speakers followed. Among some of the points being made included: recognition of how the "new" church began with 100 congregations following a seven year long planning/education process; how the denomination has 575 congregations with 1.75 million members; how its communion reflected every African grouping in the world: Afro-Brazilians, Jamaicans, Afro-Brits, Haitians, Ghanaians, Kenyans, and so many others. And of course, there were African-Americans who hold special place since it was the fathers and mothers of those present today who were the bearers of a dream first realized fifty years ago with no real notion of what God would wrought.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) out of which that first group of Blacks

## Is This New Wine?

emerged, is still in existence, though barely. Currently, it numbers less than 250,000 members, many of whom are white, male, and over seventy years old. For this denomination, towards the end of the last century, so successfully alienated women, people of color, and others who were determined not to be suitable for membership, that the current church is almost a homogenous group, racially, generationally, nationally, and in gender. While there are residual representatives from communities of color and other formerly marginalized people, they enjoy no real access to the corridors of power within the PC(USA).

It is remarkable, notes one celebrant, that in the 1990s African American males were considered an "endangered species." Now, as the speaker surveys the participants crowding the sanctuary, he notes how the room is a balance of men and women, many of whom appear to be arranged in family groupings with as many children and young adults as older believers. Young men now are rarely seen idle on urban street corners since most work long hours in family-owned businesses or have formed partnerships and others business organizations with what tend to be members of the church.

Most congregations within the APCA have founded elementary parish schools where young pupils are taught the typical grammar school's as well as APCA church history and PC(USA) history since 1807. The required languages are Spanish and at least one primary African language. Some schools offer Korean where there are large numbers of Korean people residing in close proximity to APCA neighborhoods. Musical instruction as well as art appreciation are also significant components of the curriculum. Early on in the education of the young is fostered the belief that a college education is an absolute minimum for preparation for the world. The APCA child is taught that they have been called by God to lead the world. Education is believed to be a principal means of preparing for this responsibility.

There were many, many more expressions of joy testifying to the power and love of God as reflected by the successes of this community of God.



## Is This New Wine?

### **Part V: Where to from Here: Conclusion and Recommendations for Action**

*God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears...  
Keep us forever in the path we pray.*

James Weldon Johnson, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*

#### **Conclusion**

Presbyterians for Prayer, Study, and Action aim to encourage African American Presbyterians and others concerned with the welfare of the Black community to be more focused in addressing the crisis of survival facing African Americans today. In so doing, we feel that all options, including establishment of an entirely new denominational structure if necessary, must be considered. Inevitably, some will view even dialogue of this matter to be schismatic. On the contrary, it is not schismatic to suggest that Black Presbyterians must be concerned with the welfare of their own children and communities as the first priority rather than the denominational politics of trying to be heard by others as a primary concern. That is common sense.

It should be emphasized that this concept is not presented as some sort of ultimatum to the denomination: "If it does what we want, then we will do this; if it doesn't, we'll do that." Indeed, this discussion is not about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all. It is about the needs of African American communities and what we, as African American Presbyterians, intend to do about addressing those needs.

While the task may not be easy, the late Rev. James Cleveland reminded us that we "*don't believe that God brought us this far to leave us*" alone and unattended now. It is clear that the "*God of our weary years, the God of our silent tears, ...who has led us into the light*" is able to "*keep us forever in God's path*" as we journey toward a new century with new theological wine: the Gospel of Jesus Christ in African American communities by Presbyterians that is truly Afrocentric.

#### **Recommendations**

In order to initiate dialogue about the concepts presented in this paper, some very practical and strategic recommendations are in order. The following are submitted for consideration of all who wish to pledge themselves anew to a witness to the love and liberation found in Jesus Christ which seeks to be oriented within the unique needs, history, culture, and aspirations of the African American community rather than viewing these as peripheral. This is a call to pour what we believe is "the new wine" of an Afrocentric proclamation of the Gospel into "new wine skins" of relevant ministries.

## Is This New Wine?

### Recommended Actions

- 1. Distribution of This Paper to African American Presbyterian Sessions for the Education of Their Congregations through Prayerful Study and Dialogue.** It is recommended that African American Presbyterian Sessions and congregations should, as soon as possible, arrange for the prayerful study and dialogue within their respective Presbyteries and Synods of the issues raised in this paper.
- 2. Arrange a National Meeting of African American Presbyterians to Discuss This Matter.** A national meeting to which all African American Presbyterians would be invited should be arranged as quickly as possible to consider the issues raised in this paper. This would allow for dialogue around ideas presented and/or for the development of appropriate alternatives aimed at accomplishing the goal of empowering Black Presbyterians toward an Afrocentric proclamation of the Gospel.
- 3. Initiation During 1993 of a Seven Year Period of Prayer, Study, and Action Regarding Concepts Outlined in This Paper.** It is recommended that a seven year period of prayer, study, and action be initiated by AUGUST, 1993 concerning the proposals outlined in this paper. During this period, pragmatic steps will be outlined and undertaken with a view toward creation of an African-centered Presbyterian witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These steps should include, but not be limited to the following:
  - (A) Development of appropriate theological reflection regarding concepts raised in this paper;
  - (B) The adoption of a national goal calling for the establishment of at least five new African American Presbyterian congregations annually over the next seven years;
  - (C) Funds should be set aside (\$500 annually) by all existing African American Presbyterian congregations for support of new church development in African American communities as well as by individuals able to do so;
  - (D) The establishment of New Church Development Leadership Teams (a paradigm for new church development that includes the pastor, secretarial support, and a musician with skills in Afrocentric musicianship); and
  - (F) The outlining of regional organizational and administrative structures.

## Is This New Wine?

- 4. Dialogue Concerning Issues Raised in "New Wine."** The following questions are designed to help Black Presbyterian sessions and congregations analyze the various issues presented in this paper through open dialogue. It is suggested that copies of this paper be distributed to all Session members at least two weeks prior to coming together for discussion. An entire Session meeting should be devoted to dialogue around the following questions. Sessions may wish to involve their congregations in the discussion and/or meet with representatives of several area congregations. In addition to the following, other discussion questions may be formulated.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why are you Presbyterian?
2. What are the merits of being an African American Presbyterian?
3. The paper suggests that it may not be possible for Black Presbyterian congregations to be Afrocentric and remain in the denomination. Do you agree/disagree? Explain the rationale behind your answer.
4. What is Afrocentrism? What does the paper describe as its major value to society today? Do you agree/disagree?
5. How is Afrocentrism similar to and different from efforts to "lift up the race" undertaken by Black Presbyterians of previous generations?
6. Analyze your congregation's efforts to do outreach community ministry.
  - A. What are things your congregation is doing well? What causes these efforts to be successful?
  - B. What is not working as well as you think it should? What are some of the reasons causing this lack of success?
7. Would you describe your congregation as an Afrocentric congregation? If so, in what way? If not, why do you think it is not?
8. Do you see the denomination as being supportive of your church's ministry in African American communities? If yes, how? If no, why do you feel it is not?
9. Is it possible for Black Presbyterians to reclaim the five resources of the Black Religious Heritage (see page 3)?
10. What is the portrait of the African American community outlined in the

## Is This New Wine?

half-century vision of the African Presbyterian Church in America?

- A. What are the practical steps Black congregations need to take to contribute toward achieving such a goal?
  - B. Is it possible for African American Presbyterians to work toward achieving that vision in ways other than creating another denominational structure? If so, which ways? If not, why not?
11. The paper suggests a seven-year period of prayer, study, and action regarding the issues presented. Is this practical? If yes, explain your answer. If no, how would you modify the suggestion in order to strengthen it?
  12. **Luke 4:18-19** is typically understood as underscoring Jesus' understanding of his mission to be one of liberating the oppressed. **Matthew 28:19-20** is generally viewed as a scripture wherein the Risen Christ stresses evangelism on the part of the disciples concerning the message of the Gospel. Examine some of the following scripture passages. What do these Bible verses suggest concerning the faith community's belief that God calls believers to testify, through their deeds, concerning Divine liberation goals.
    - A. Exodus 3:1-10
    - B. II Chronicles 7:11-14
    - C. Psalm 40:1-11
    - D. Amos 5:21-24
    - E. Micah 6:6-8
    - F. Acts 2:1-13; 4:32-35
    - G. I Corinthians 13:1-13
    - H. Revelation 21:1-4

## Is This New Wine?

### Notes

1. The Kelly Miller Smith Institute, *What Does It Mean to Be Black and Christian*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Divinity School. October, 1992. pp. 1-2.
2. Mildred Brown, Associate, Evangelism and Church Development Work Area, PC(USA), noted that as a result of consultations with Congregational Development Committees of several Presbyteries, there was little or no manifested interest in initiating new congregations in areas of significant African American populations. Report on "African American New Church Development" given to the African American Advisory Committee Meeting, 10-12 December, 1990s, Longboat Key, FL.
3. Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope*. Philadelphia, PA: Geneva Press, 1983. p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-100.
6. *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.
7. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine such issues, it should be noted that at various times throughout the history of Black Presbyterianism, the matter of withdrawing from the predominately White denomination has been debated (see Wilmore's *Black and Presbyterian*, pp. 69-70.) At the December 1-5, 1992 African American Advisory Committee meeting in Montego Bay, Jamaica, it was informally reported that in at least two separate meetings of key African American clergy leaders within the denomination (one in 1968 and the other as recently as 1990s) serious discussion was given to withdrawal from the denomination.
8. *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.
9. *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.
10. Asante, Molefi Kete. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987. p. 3.
11. Asante, Molefi K., *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1988. See chapter 3: Analysis and Science, particularly the discussion of "The Way of Newness, Levels of Transformation, Consciousness, and Relationships." Asante presents a radical critique of the limitations of an Eurocentric presentation of the Gospel for the African and what movement toward an Afrocentric consciousness can do to enable a "victorious"

## Is This New Wine?

perspective. pp. 47-52.

12. *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.
13. Dennis, Warren, "Afrocentrism," an address delivered 13 November, 1992 to the African American Presbyterian Heritage Colloquium II held at Johnson C. Smith Seminary, Atlanta, GA.
14. *Ibid.*

## Is This New Wine?

### Presbyterians for Prayer Study and Action

#### The Following Persons Have Read the "New Wine" Paper and Endorse Its Distribution and Discussion:

Elder Dame Armstrong  
First United Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC

Elder Louwanna Askew  
Little Rock, AK

Rev. Lawrence L. Bethel, President  
National Black Caucus  
Pastor, Carver Presbyterian Church  
Newport News, VA

Rev. Clarence Cave, Honorably Retired from  
Program Agency. UPC(USA)  
Philadelphia, PA

Rev. Jon T. Chapman  
Area Associate for South Africa  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Louisville, KY

Rev. Eric Chavis  
Associate Executive  
Synod of the South Atlantic  
Jacksonville, FL

Rev. Joseph B. Crawford, Pastor  
Lochearn Presbyterian Church  
Baltimore, MD

Dr. Rita Dixon  
Associate for African American  
Congregational Enhancement  
Racial Ethnic Work Area  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Louisville, KY

Ms. Bettie J. Durrah, Elder  
Radcliffe Presbyterian Church  
Atlanta, GA

Rev. Samuel George, Pastor Emeritus  
Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Pittsburgh, PA

Rev. Edward P. Harding, Jr., Pastor  
Northeastern Presbyterian Church  
Washington, DC

Rev. John H. Howard, Jr., Pastor  
Pine Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Oak Park, IL

Ms. M. Leola Hutt  
Berean Presbyterian Church  
Philadelphia, PA

Rev. Frank Jackson, Pastor  
Faith Presbyterian Church  
Oakland, CA

Rev. Eddie L. Knox, Jr., Pastor  
Pullman Presbyterian Church  
Chicago, IL

Dr. Clinton Marsh  
Past General Assembly Moderator  
Atlanta, GA

Rev. Danny C. Murphy, Pastor  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
Winnsboro, SC

Dr. Clive Neil, Pastor  
Bedford Central Presbyterian Church  
New York, NY

Rev. Kermit Overton, Honorably Retired  
First African Presbyterian Church  
Philadelphia, PA

Rev. Floyd Rhodes, Jr.  
Associate for Ethnic and Urban Concerns  
Greater Atlanta Presbytery  
Atlanta, GA

Mr. Charles Suitt, Elder  
Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Roosevelt, NY

## Is This New Wine?

**Dr. Darius L. Swann, Retired Faculty**  
Johnson C. Smith Seminary  
Atlanta, GA

**Dr. Eugene Turner**  
Director, Governing Bodies  
and Ecumenical Relationships  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Louisville, KY

**Ms. Verna Watson, Retired Staff**  
Berean Presbyterian Church  
Philadelphia, PA

**Dr. Gayraud W. Wilmore**  
Lecturer, Writer, Retired Seminary Faculty  
Atlanta, GA

**Elder Esther G. Wilson**  
Clerk of Session Emeritus  
Berean Presbyterian Church  
Philadelphia, PA

**Rev. Michael O. Wilson, Pastor**  
Berean Presbyterian Church  
New Orleans, LA

### **Elders of the Bidwell Presbyterian Church** Pittsburgh, PA

**Ms. Virginia Barnes**  
**Ms. June Pickett Dowdy**  
**Ms. Mary A. Evans**  
**Ms. Gwendolyn M. Favers**

**Ms. Summera James**  
**Ms. Julianne MacAdoo**  
**Mr. Keith Willis**  
**Ms. Maxine Willis**

### **Elders of the Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church** Pittsburgh, PA

**Ms. Edith Dawkins**  
**Mr. Charles David Enty**  
**Dr. Gayle W. Griffin**  
**Mr. John B. Horne**  
**Ms. Ethel Jones**  
**Ms. Edith Mitchell**

**Mr. Robert L. Owens**  
**Mr. Raymond N. Page**  
**Dr. Alice M. Scales**  
**Ms. Georgetta Stevens**  
**Dr. Janet L. Thompson**