CHAPTER 6

Yvonne V. Delk

A "Soul on Fire" for Justice

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In 1989, the Rev. Dr. Yvonne Virginia Delk was nominated for president of the United Church of Christ (UCC), becoming the first and, to date, the only woman nominated to lead the denomination. Her nomination came not through the formal nominations committee, but was brought from the floor of the General Synod by delegates. While the effort to elect her was not ultimately successful, it was a measure of how far Delk had moved the needle on the possibilities for ministry for women in the UCC. The first Black woman ordained in the UCC, she has been a trailblazer in ministry for almost sixty years. In local congregational settings, at the national level, and as an executive of a community-based organization, Delk established a reputation as a "soul on fire" for justice (Delk, "A Soul on Fire," *Sojourners*, September-October 2001). She was the second woman to head a national instrumentality for the UCC. She took on leadership roles in ecumenical efforts, including the National Conference of Black Christians, Black Theology Project, World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism, and *Sojourner*'s Call to Renewal. She is an inspiring preacher, a prophetic voice on issues of racial justice, an educator, an organizer, a social justice champion, and a voice for the marginalized and oppressed. Her career intertwines with changes in the church as well as in the wider society, including the civil rights

movements, urban ministries, education for liberation, anti-racism efforts, social justice movements, and the history of women's ordination. Her career and life story offers important insights about the experience of African American women in ministry.

It is no exaggeration to say that Delk was a trailblazer in her ministry. In 1963, when Delk graduated from seminary, the possibility that she would one day be nominated to lead the UCC–a predominantly White Protestant denomination with roughly one million members in 1989–would have seemed far-fetched. Nevertheless, through the years, her path continually led her to new opportunities in ministry, breaking through glass ceilings along the way. In 1969, she became the first African American woman to hold a program staff position on the United Church Board of Homeland Ministries (UCBHM). She was the first African American woman to be ordained to the ministry in the UCC. In 1981, she became the first woman of color in the UCC to lead a national instrumentality, as director of the Office of Church in Society (OCIS). Had she become president, she would have been the first woman to lead a mainline Protestant denomination in the United States. After twenty years serving at the national level of her denomination, she moved to Chicago to head the Community Renewal Society, becoming the first woman and person of color to lead CRS in its 110-year history. She was named one of the "15 Greatest Black Women Preachers" in the United States in *Ebony* magazine (Joy Bennett Kinnon, "15 Greatest Black Women Preachers," *Ebony,* Nov 1997, 110). In 2020, she will be given a lifetime award in ecumenism by the Virginia Council of Churches–the first woman to be so honored by the council.

Yet Delk's life story, the breadth of her ministry, and her many contributions to church and society are not widely known. This paper will examine the Rev. Dr. Delk's ministry as a leader within the UCC as a Christian educator and social justice advocate, her contributions to ecumenical efforts and community organizing, and her preaching, organizing, and mentoring. Her story lies at the intersection of two important "hidden histories" within the UCC (Zikmund 1984). One is the history of African Americans in the UCC. The second is the history of women within the denomination, especially as ordained leaders. One of the problematic tendencies of writing American history is to lionize the "first" person who achieved a position of leadership. In framing the history of women and African Americans this way, selecting only a few exceptional individuals who achieved firsts, we run the risk of overlooking the significant contributions of many African American women. White women and African American men often achieved access to positions of power before African American women did because of the double barrier of racism and sexism. Historic surveys that discuss the ordination of women often highlight the first White woman ordained in a tradition and neglect to examine the ministries of women of color who may have been ordained in more recent years.

Documenting the contributions of women of color to their religious traditions deepens our understanding of religious experience and how our faith traditions function in the world. In particular, African American women's religious leadership in social justice movements is an area of research that deserves further study. Bettye Collier-Thomas addresses this gap in her landmark text, *Jesus, Jobs and Justice* (2010). She notes, "As scholars have continued to focus almost exclusively on a select few of the individual histories of black and white organizations and their personnel, they have overlooked the very rich and complex history of organizing networks and the ways in which women functioned in, among, and across black and white, male and female, religious and secular organizations" (xxiii). Works by Emilie Townes (1995), Marcia Riggs (1997), and Mary R. Sawyer (2000), which have highlighted the activism of lay and ordained women in the Black Church, are important resources. More recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of the role of women in the civil rights movement (Olson 2001; Holsaert et al. 2010; Bell 2018; Houck and Dixon 2009). Biographies of Pauli Murray (Rosenberg 2017) and Anna Arnold Hedgeman (Scanlon 2016) provide analyses of the way Murray and Hedgeman's religious leadership dovetailed with their advocacy for civil rights and social change. These scholarly works help fill in the gaps of our understanding about the intersection of African American women's spirituality and activism.

Like Hedgeman and Murray, the Rev. Dr. Delk played a critical role in ecumenical and denominational movements for justice in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. When interviewed for this project, she said of herself, "I am just an ordinary person" (Y. Delk, pers. comm., October 25, 2019). Indeed, it is the work of "ordinary" women like Delk that has fueled faith-based social justice ministries for generations. Their impact on the churches and society has greater significance than is often recognized in histories that focus on charismatic personalities, or "great persons."

Image 1: The Rev. Dr. Yvonne Virginia Delk at New Macedonia Christian UCC in 2019 (courtesy of Yvonne V. Delk).

Biographical Sketch

Early Years: Nurtured by Family and Church

Yvonne Delk's parents, Cora Elizabeth Chambers Delk and Marcus Thomas Delk, married in 1930 in Norfolk, Virginia (Y. Delk, pers. comm., August 10, 2020). Tragically, the Delks' second child, Audrey Marie, born in 1937, died of pneumonia at three months old (Y. Delk, pers. comm., March 2, 2020). Cora Delk was broken-hearted and bereft after the loss of her daughter. She thought perhaps she might be losing her mind. When she found out she was pregnant again, it was a powerful re-affirmation of life. She decided to do everything in her power to make sure this life growing inside her would live. Raised in the Baptist Church, Cora Delk's home church was too far away to make the journey safely while she was pregnant. Instead, she went across the street to Macedonia Afro-Christian Church and joined the congregation for support during her pregnancy. Macedonia was part of the Convention of the South, an association of Black churches affiliated with the Congregational Christian Church. Many of these churches were Afro-Christian congregations established during slavery or after Emancipation. After 1957, when

the Congregational Christian Church merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to become the United Church of Christ, most congregations in the Convention of the South joined the UCC. In this way, Delk's mother's decision rooted her in the traditions and worship experience of the Afro-Christian Church, which eventually became a "fifth strand" within the United Church of Christ.

Growing up, Yvonne was told the story of how her own birth on April 15, 1939 (Y. Delk. pers. comm, August 10, 2020) had helped heal the wounds of her mother's earlier loss. Delk recalls,

> There was something about the pregnancy–the life force growing in her, that enabled her to reconnect to the divine as well as her connected consciousness with the past and the present. The life force growing in her was healing the pain of her loss. Once again, she flowed the boundaries–receiving and connecting to the life and spirit of those who had come before her–the living and the dead. She channeled that spirit and connection into the life force that now was in her. Audrey Marie's death would have meaning if the baby within her could live. (Y. Delk, pers. comm., March 2, 2020)

This story had a profound effect on Yvonne and her self-understanding. She was always a little different from her siblings. As a child, she was quiet and inwardly reflective. When she was ten, she liked to climb atop a log pile that her father kept in the backyard. There, she would talk aloud to God, whom she believed was just above in the sky. Her mother got calls from the neighbors telling her to "go get Yvonne," because the neighborhood would think she needed psychiatric help, talking to herself. "My mother would always laugh about that," she recalls, "because she knew that the seeds had been planted in my spirit for a kind of spiritual connection, that I continue to live by, even though I didn't make some of the connections until much later" (Y. Delk, pers. comm., March 2, 2020).

The Delks lived in Norfolk's "red-light district," surrounded by the bars and nightlife that attracted sailors. Outside their home, the realities of life in Norfolk were oppressive. Jim Crow laws, redlining, employment barriers, and the brutal violence of the Klu Klux Klan made daily existence a struggle. For the Black community in Norfolk, survival was the priority. Marcus Delk worked as hard as he could to feed the family and to make sure that Mother Delk could be at home to care for the children. He cut wood, dug graves, worked in the Navy yard as a laborer in WWII, and was on the maintenance staff of Norfolk State University. Although Delk's mother worked for a time as a domestic servant, her husband's efforts allowed her to stay home with her children. Cora Delk prayed over her children, each one by name, every day before they left for school. She gave her children a sense of pride in who they were and modeled a faithful and God-

centered life. Delk recalls, "My mother's words are deep within me–'no matter where life takes you, Yvonne, remember who you are and whose you are'" (Delk 2004, x). On her father's side, Delk was influenced by her grandmother, Julia Anna Pope Delk–a minister in the United Holy Church who co-founded their Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Department in 1917 (Obrion 2015). While her theology was different, her example as a minister served as an inspiration for Delk in later years as she considered ordination for herself.

In addition, the Black church served as an antidote to the ever-present racism around her. "I grew up in a strong faith tradition," she says, "that affirmed me as a daughter of God, and created in me a powerful sense that nothing and nobody can, once you have been named in the image of God, name you in a lesser way" (Comstock 2001, 256). She understood that Christian discipleship included service to others and to God and required a wholehearted commitment. She joined the church at age ten, already ready to commit her life to God. While she did not envision becoming an ordained minister, Delk understood herself to be someone who would serve God with her gifts and talents. She later had to rethink some of the assumptions she learned in church, including its stance on homosexuality and the patriarchal models of church leadership. Over time, as she matured in her faith and grew in her career, she would be both a vocal advocate for the importance of the Black church and a loving but honest critic of its flaws.

Coming of Age: Franklinton Center and Norfolk College

Delk was fortunate also to have the opportunity to spend summers at Franklinton Center at Bricks in Whitakers, North Carolina. Formerly a college established for freed slaves, Franklinton was an important institution in the history of the Afro-Christian Church (Stanley 1978, 62; Alston 1984). By the 1940s, it served as a camp and conference center for the Convention of the South. Delk started attending Franklinton at age seven. She attended every summer and eventually became a camp counselor. As she grew, she found herself increasingly drawn to the history of the enslaved people who had once inhabited the site. She would walk to the neighboring cotton fields and ponder their suffering, struggles, resilience, and strength. That sense of being part of a long line of ancestors and connected to a people struggling for dignity, a better life, education, and freedom–all became part of her experience at Franklinton and shaped her perspective on the world.

Delk also was fortunate to develop close relationships with two key mentors, both leaders in the field of Christian education. Franklinton offered a three-year Christian education training program developed by Leila Waite Anderson, a staff member for the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. Anderson was an

itinerant Christian educator and she traveled throughout the South during the civil rights years of 1953–56, "preaching and teaching at hundreds of local churches" ("Antoinette Brown Awards," *A.D.*, June 1981: 35). Anderson stayed with the Delk family one summer. In the evenings, she and Delk would sit on the porch and talk. Anderson was the first White adult to be genuinely interested in her. She took Delk seriously, listened to her questions, and encouraged her interest in Christian education (Delk 2008). Franklinton also served to connect Delk with another significant mentor, the Rev. Percel O. Alston, who was the superintendent of Christian education for the Convention of the South. Alston recognized Delk's potential and made it possible for her to attend conferences so that she could connect with the wider church. Such was the segregated nature of her world that Delk was shocked to find out that her denomination included White congregations! The same year that she graduated high school, Delk completed the three-year program in Christian education. While in college, she spent her summers teaching Vacation Bible School programs and Christian education programs in rural Black churches in Virginia. This allowed her to earn money for college while giving her valuable teaching experience.

In 1957, Delk graduated from high school and began attending Norfolk State College (today known as Norfolk State University), an historically Black college established in 1935 (Y. Delk, pers. comm., October 25, 2019). Living at home while in school, she majored in sociology and minored in psychology (Myers 1991, 90). The sociology department, under the leadership of Dr. Titus Blue, was very strong (Brooks 1983). Through her studies and as a student leader, she became more aware of the civil rights struggle in the South. The winter of 1960 was particularly significant. After the Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-ins at Woolworth's lunch counter sparked a national movement, a whole generation of students began to take similar actions (Joseph 2014, 9). Students at Norfolk State began organizing sit-ins in downtown Norfolk, led by Milton Gay, Jr., a Norfolk State student and president of Virginia's Youth Council of the NAACP (Littlejohn 2008, 333). Delk, in her junior year, was serving on the student council and supported the sit-ins. She recalls having a disagreement with her father about it. He was deeply concerned about the likelihood of a violent response from Whites (Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). Norfolk civil rights workers had been firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan and there had been "massive resistance" to school desegregation (Littlejohn and Ford 2012, 83). Tensions were still very high.

Delk, while recognizing the risks, was not deterred. She was inspired by Cassius Clay, who later changed his name to Muhammad Ali after converting to Islam. In a speech to Norfolk State College students, Clay challenged them not to wait for others to make change, but to do it themselves. Delk participated in the first non-violence training sessions and joined the rotation of students who took turns sitting

at counters downtown. In a 1990 *Chicago Tribune* article (Michael Hirsley, "Her Life's Work a Symbol of Hope," April 20, 1990), she recalls "shaking in her boots." Despite her fears, she was determined to be an active part of the liberation movement. After months of struggle, demonstrations, sit-ins, and arrests for trespassing, on July 23rd, the lunch counters at the three main department stores in Norfolk were formally desegregated (Littlejohn 2008, 340). The success of the movement energized students all across the nation.

The 1960s: Discerning Her Call

When her college career ended in the Spring of 1961, Delk was faced with a decision that would shape the course of her life. Delk was offered a full scholarship for a master's degree program in social work at the Atlanta University School of Social Work (Delk 2004, xi). However, the Rev. Alston was urging her to consider a career in Christian education and to attend Andover Newton Theological Seminary (ANTS) in Newton, MA, his alma mater. ANTS, a UCC-affiliated seminary, offered a Master of Religious Education degree. Having skilled Christian education leaders was vital for the Black churches. Alston wanted Delk to gain the highest professional credentials for a future role in Christian education among the churches back home.

After much prayer and soul-searching, Delk decided to attend seminary in far-away Boston. The deadline for applications for the incoming class had already passed but, with a last-minute exception, Andover Newton Seminary admitted Delk. She was one of only thirteen women in her class and the only African American woman. Delk felt the absence of her family and church community keenly as she struggled in the predominantly White environment of a Northern seminary. The campus was still a few years away from the student advocacy and agitation of the late 60s that would increase the representation of African Americans and women on the faculty (Bendroth 2018, 185). She notes, "I was trying to find my way; I had to take a risk and reach beyond my comfort zone, and I cried every step of the way" (Vicky Waltz, "Minister's Faith Supports Her in Life of Battle for Human Rights," *Athens News*, February 1, 2001). She considered quitting, but her mother encouraged her to persevere. Her community supported her as well. She received care packages from Macedonia and churches for whom she had served as a Christian education teacher. With much community support and encouragement, Delk persevered.

In the summer of 1962, Delk, several of her ANTS classmates, and other seminarians from across Boston drove south to join the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Eastern Shores desegregation campaign in

Cambridge, Maryland. The situation in Cambridge was tense. Delk recalls getting off the bus and seeing police everywhere, including officers with dogs. In one particular instance, as soon as the students entered, the restaurant was immediately closed. After the students took their seats at the lunch counter, some of the men in the restaurant started pushing and hitting the male students, Black and White, causing a scuffle. The police came in and arrested all the men, although they allowed the female students to leave (Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). Delk came to respect her fellow students for their willingness to participate in the struggle and put their bodies on the line. Returning to campus for her second year, Delk began participating in local ecumenical efforts to address racial injustice and economic disparity in Boston, which helped fuel her sense of purpose. She graduated in the spring of 1963, earning her master's degree in religious education. However, the experience also underscored the ways in which the seminary was not providing for the needs of students of color–a problem she would return to and address later in her career.

As she neared graduation, Delk faced a daunting proposition regarding employment. She knew that it would be hard to find a church that could afford to hire her. The congregations in the Southern Conference that had come from the Afro-Christian Church were too poor to pay for a Christian education director. Because of their relative affluence, the Black Congregational Churches were more likely to have the resources needed. The Rev. Alston personally contacted five pastors, including the senior pastor of First Congregational Church in Atlanta, the Rev. Homer C. McEwen. An historic Black church, First Congregational Church was established by the American Missionary Association in 1867. The largest Congregational Church in the South, it was the church home of many prominent and well-to-do African Americans. The church had played a significant role in the Black community throughout its history, and several members, including Andrew Young, were leaders in the civil rights movement. McEwen was looking for a Sunday school director and agreed to hire Delk for a nominal amount of money and housing. She arrived in August 1963, just as Dr. King was speaking at the March for Jobs and Justice in Washington, DC. Delk spent the next two years learning the ropes and building up the Christian education program. She also had opportunities to speak publicly and preach. As a new staff member, she was invited to preach on Women's Sunday, a major event in the life of the church. Although she received only last-minute notice, she gave a rousing sermon, at the end of which the church stood and applauded (Rose Marie Berger, "The World as God Intends," *Sojourners*, May-June 1999, 21).

After two years, Delk accepted a new opportunity as the community outreach minister at the First Reformed Church, UCC, in Cincinnati, Ohio. A predominantly White congregation from the German Reformed tradition, First Reformed was

seeking to transition into being a multi-racial urban church. Delk was excited about the opportunity to serve on an inter-racial staff, inspired by the vision of building the "beloved community" about which Dr. King preached. This would be her first staff position in a predominantly White church. Before starting, she had the summer months free, so she worked as a field worker for the Migrant Ministry of the National Council of Churches in Michigan. Run by the local Council of Churches, Michigan's Migrant Ministry was one of the largest in the country. Delk provided Christian education programming for children of agricultural workers, who lived in poor housing conditions with few resources.

In the fall of 1965, Delk moved to Cincinnati to begin her new role. The city was changing demographically, as "White flight" meant that affluent Whites moved to the suburbs in large numbers, and poor Whites and African Americans from the South moved into the inner-city neighborhoods. The staff at First Reformed was working hard to build relationships with newer neighborhood residents, but it was an uphill battle, given the mood in the country. Unrest erupted in Cincinnati in June 1967, as in many other cities that summer, and again in 1968, in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Delk still vividly recalls the night of King's death. She opened her apartment to the youth of her church that night. Together, they took shelter as much of the neighborhood was burned. The next day, they discovered that the church building had been spared, perhaps out of respect for First Reformed's outreach efforts in the community. Later that year, Delk was invited by Cincinnati's mayor, Eugene Peter Ruehlmann, to join a commission that met to address the racial and economic issues that led to the crisis (Y. Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019).

In 1968, Delk received an invitation to join the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC)[1] as a result of her work in the community. NCBC emerged in the mid–60s, as debates surfaced around the emerging Black power movement. Some leading Black clergy felt that their White colleagues' critical reactions to the Black power movement necessitated a response. NCBC began "to interpret black power to an outraged white religious establishment, and to more closely align the institutional Black Church with the sentiments of its more progressively inclined leaders" (Sawyer 1994, 68). NCBC served as a vehicle for Black ecumenism and challenged the institutional church on its racism and a-political stances. NCBC emphasized the importance of political and economic access for Blacks and called the churches to be responsive. Delk was one of a handful of women actively involved with NCBC in its early years, which included Anna Hedgeman as a founding member. Delk would later serve on its board. She remained involved for many years, sharing her expertise on urban ministry and raising consciousness around poor Black women's concerns.

Joining the National Staff of the UCC

Delk left Cincinnati in the summer of 1969 to join the staff on the United Church Board for Homeland Ministry (UCBHM) in the Division for Christian Education, becoming the first Black woman to hold a program staff role at the national level (Y. Delk, pers. comm., March 2, 2020). As secretary for urban and Black church education, Delk stepped into a vital program position that had been established as a result of Black ecumenical advocacy. A new awareness of the needs of Black churches had emerged in the late 60s as an outgrowth of the civil rights and Black power movements. Delk quickly became a leader in developing Afro-centric Christian educational materials for use in churches. Traveling around the country, she worked with Black churches to develop educational programs that celebrated Black culture, history, and identity. Among others, she worked with the Revs. Jeremiah Wright and Barbara Allen at Trinity Church UCC in Chicago. With their collaboration, she developed new educational materials for the congregation, in keeping with Trinity's affirmation of being "unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian" (Billingsley 1999, 180).

Her first General Synod as a national staff member, just months after accepting her new position, turned out to be a tumultuous one, resonant with the call to address racism in the church. The Ministers for Racial and Social Justice (MRSJ) were deeply angered over the UCC participation in an injunction against James Forman, sponsor of the Black Manifesto, for his take-over of the Interchurch Office on Riverside Drive in New York City. Delk had just arrived at the hotel when she ran into the Rev. William Land, a civil rights activist and influential member of the MRSJ. Land invited her to attend an emergency meeting that evening. At the meeting, the ministers decided not to allow the Synod to proceed until the denomination lifted the injunction against Forman. The clergy planned to march along with Forman to the podium and support him as he presented the Manifesto to the delegates. For Delk, this plan created a dilemma. According to the prepared schedule, Delk was due to be introduced as a new staff member by the Rev. Howard Sprague, head of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (UCBHM), on the second day.

Delk was faced with a choice. Would she keep to the original arrangement to be introduced by the Rev. Sprague, or would she march in protest with the Black clergy on the opening day? Delk was no stranger to these kinds of difficult choices as a veteran of sit-ins and civil rights struggle. She was aware of her junior status as a new staff member and cognizant that there could be criticism of her actions and perhaps more serious repercussions. As she recalls, "It was one of those moments where you have to decide, "How are you going to walk?" (Y. Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). Delk understood the importance of the demand for

reparations. She had seen the brutal effect of racism and systemic oppression on the lives of Black people. Furthermore, she had been part of the discussions at NCBC when the organization decided to support the Black Manifesto, and she understood both the urgency of the moment and the risks of backlash from moderate Whites who were uncomfortable with Forman's aggressive tactics. Despite the possible ramifications, Delk knew what she must do. The UCC minutes from the Synod note that, as the Synod was getting underway, the proceedings were interrupted and Forman was "escorted by Ministers for Racial and Social Justice and others of the Black community" to present the Black Manifesto (UCC General Synod 1969, 16). One of the "others" with him was the newest United Church Board for Homeland Ministry staff member, Yvonne Delk, walking in solidarity with Forman and the senior clergy.

Delk's participation in that moment and her challenging remarks on racism, which she delivered as part of UCBHM's report, helped bring her to the attention of church leaders. Following the Synod, she was invited to give the charge to incoming President Robert V. Moss, Jr. at his installation service. Delk was surprised by the invitation. Many senior and well-respected Black clergy, including the Rev. Edwin R. Edmund and the Rev. Charles Cobb, had been working on racial justice issues for years. She felt her selection reflected the UCC's desire to improve their "optics." As Delk wryly notes, "They needed a woman" (Y. Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). Yet her selection as the person to charge the incoming president with a mandate for social justice foreshadowed her work in the denomination for the next twenty years. A photo of Moss at his installation shows him wearing a heavy set of leg irons, symbolizing the chains worn by the enslaved. Delk laid the chains on his shoulders as a symbol of the charge. This was the first of many symbolic moments when she stood before the church as a prophet and guide. After Moss passed away in 1976, Delk was invited to give the charge to Avery D. Post at his installation service as the next president of the UCC. "Be a drum major for justice," she charged Post. "Be one who sees life in its wholeness and calls us to be whole" ("A Celebration of the United Church of Christ, Including the Installation of Avery D. Post as its Fourth President," *A.D.*, December 1977/January 1978: A-D). As her career progressed, she would be called upon to speak at many denominational and church settings, inspiring people to work for justice, while also challenging the church to look honestly at the places where it was falling short.

In 1970, Delk traveled to Africa for the first time. The four-month-long trip was a profoundly moving experience that empowered her and reinforced her pride in her African heritage. She traveled to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia at a time when liberation movements were reshaping the continent. She experienced warm hospitality in all the churches she visited and shared in their vibrant, spirit-filled worship. She listened to drum choirs and had the opportunity

to teach her hosts to sing "Oh Mary Don't You Weep"–one of the spirituals she had learned growing up. The trip's impact on Delk was profound, both for her own self-understanding and for connecting her to the transatlantic struggle for Black liberation. Africa would become an important focus of Delk's social justice work in later years, especially the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. Though tempted to stay in Africa permanently, she returned to her work in New York, convinced by the Rev. Alston of its continuing importance (Rose Marie Berger, "The World as God Intends," *Sojourners,* May-June 1999, 22).

By 1973, Delk had become the head of the Black Church Education Team for Joint Education Development (JED), an ecumenical effort to develop church curriculum. Under Delk's leadership, the team developed an ecumenical "pro-Black" Christian education curriculum that could be used in Black congregations. Affirming God's intention for *shalom*—a just peace—was at the heart of JED's educational efforts. In an interview, Delk emphasized the centrality of education for liberation, rather than an emphasis on individualistic salvation. "Black educators agreed that the church's educational programs with proper leadership, can make a substantial contribution to the liberation of black people and the development of the black community" ("JED Pushes for Liberation of Blacks," *Bay State Banner*, December 20, 1973, 21). Influenced by Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Black educators encouraged consciousness-raising as part of the education for liberation model. Education for liberation would "help people to understand what oppression is in their country, in their nation, and in the world, and to move toward the rejection of oppression and the development of liberated persons" (Stokes 1973). Delk was energized by the work. "It was, for me, a very pregnant and wonderful time for me in the 70s. We were concerned about helping Black children to see themselves as subjects and no longer as objects" (Dease Lee 2012, 70).

Accepting the Call to Ordination

By this time, Delk's views on her ministry began to shift. For years, she had been struggling with issues of identity, authority, and call. "I kept saying, 'No, God, not me … How will I do it? I'm female. How am I going to respond in the midst of a male-dominated world and all the other pieces of it?' … I found all the reasons for no, but God's yes was louder than my 'No'" (Myers 1994, 19). In her wrestling over the question of ordination, Delk drew inspiration from other women who had gone before her, including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Their example gave her the courage to say "Yes" to God's call. However, when Delk did decide to pursue ordination, she ran into a new obstacle. UCC polity

at the time required that all candidates for ordination have a call from a local church. Delk's ministry was at the national level and not connected to any one local church. As a result, the Church on Ministry Committee for the Eastern Virginia Association of the Southern Conference, UCC, felt they could not approve Delk for ordination. To overcome this new obstacle, several Black churches in Virginia joined together to offer Delk a call as a shared Christian education director for their churches. Approval for ordination was granted. A new precedent was set in the UCC that opened doors for others to pursue a three-way covenantal arrangement for ordination (Y. Delk, pers. comm., March 2, 2020).

Delk was ordained on November 17, 1974 at Fellowship UCC in Chesapeake, Virginia, with her parents, family, and friends in attendance. Also participating in the service were colleagues from the national and regional settings, including Thomas, Sprague, and Alston ("Ordination of Rev. Yvonne Delk," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 16, 1974, B3). In 1978, Delk achieved another milestone when she completed her doctorate in ministry at New York Theological Seminary. The following year, at General Synod, Delk was recognized by the United Church of Christ with the Antoinette Brown Award for her "unflagging commitment to the life and ministry of the church" (UCC General Synod 1979, 22). The award was established in 1975 to honor "UCC clergywomen who exemplify Brown's spirit of trailblazing leadership in church and society" ("Antoinette Brown Award," *UCC*, www.ucc.org/women_abawards). Delk, like Vincent Harding and others, was part of a larger movement in the 70s to include Black church studies in the curricula of seminaries and the academy. In 1972, Delk joined a team of consultants to help ANTS evaluate their seminary curriculum and improve their offerings related to Black church studies. She also taught classes in the Boston Theological Institute on Black church and urban ministries. While pursuing her degree, she taught classes at Harvard Divinity School on "Education in Urban Churches" and "Black and Third World Perspectives in Education." She helped White students understand that their perspective was not universal, and she supported the efforts of Black students to confront White supremacy in their institutions.

Delk also founded and led networks for African Americans and women within the UCC for support of individuals and as a means to create change within the church. She chaired the United Black Caucus, established in 1978 to "exert influence on church policy" ("Black UCC's Form Caucus," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 18, 1979). She also organized the UCC's Black Staff Group. She was part of the Women's Interstaff Team and helped plan the UCC's first Women's Convention in 1979. She was one of 100 women clergy who presided over communion at the historic gathering. As was typical with Delk, her remarks at the gathering drew connections between the spiritual and the political. "With the global vision we get

from our local church," she said, "we can become a political force for public policy and justice" (Benz and Cunningham 1979, 41).

Working to Create Just Peace: Office of Church in Society Years

In 1978, Delk began serving in the UCC's newly constituted Office of Church in Society as an associate for constituency development ("Keeping You Posted," *A.D.*, December 1977/January 1978, 64). In this role, she began to speak more broadly on issues of justice, highlighting the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Like many Black women in her time, she was initially skeptical of the White feminist movement, especially when it overlooked race as a critical factor in women's lives. She and Valerie Russell, an African American colleague working on women's issues in the UCC, found themselves often debating which was the more important issue, racism or sexism. For Delk, racism was paramount in her ministry. However, she also understood the challenges women faced and personally had experienced the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and classism. As she moved through the 70s, and especially after her ordination, she began to speak about these related issues. In 1979, she wrote, "We must be willing to be women who have not forgotten what it is to dream. We must be able to see that what *is* is not necessarily the way it is supposed to be. We do not have to live with unemployment, hunger, inadequate housing, inadequate health care, inferior education, and violations of human rights. We do not have to live with a permanent underclass in our society" (Delk 1979, 29). Delk also mentored and encouraged other women to take on leadership roles and advocated for greater gender parity at all levels of church governance.

A more profound shift occurred around her views on the full inclusion of LGBTQ Christians in the church. In an interview, she acknowledged that, as a young person, she was very homophobic (Comstock 2001, 264). Years later, her close friend Jan Griesinger came out to her. This was a turning point. Their deep friendship and Jan's openness to talking about her sexuality helped change Delk's perspective. In time, Delk would become known within the UCC as a straight ally for queer rights. She was vocal in encouraging churches to be Open and Affirming —a UCC designation for churches that are welcoming to LGBTQ members (Comstock 2001, 262).

On January 1, 1980, Delk became the UCC's affirmative action officer, a new position that had been established by the Twelfth General Synod ("Affirmative Action Officer Named," *A.D.*, March 1980: 43). A key to her approach to affirmative action was to help people see a broader vision for the church, rather than thinking in terms of quotas. "I tried to move outside of a numbers game by talking about

gifts and about the church and the community that we can create through faith. I tried to erase the boundaries that we've built up around fear and to create another vision of a church that celebrates the gifts of all folk, where the gifts would be enriching and renewing us" (Comstock 2001, 262). She advised the Executive Council in its adoption of an affirmative action statement that included protections on sexual orientation for the first time.

Delk was elected as the executive director of the Office of Church in Society for the UCC in 1981, another historic first. She became the first African American elected to head a national instrumentality in the UCC and, at the time, was considered the first woman to lead a national instrumentality for the United Church of Christ.[2] In this highly visible leadership role, she became a spokesperson on behalf of the UCC. In the nine years she held this post, she spoke out and organized on a wide range of issues, including peace and nuclear disarmament, welfare reform, childhood poverty, ending apartheid in South Africa, women's reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, and more. Delk's ministry was grounded in the belief that Christian faith requires action to make the love of Christ real in the world and to create a just peace.

In her advocacy efforts, Delk made it a priority to raise up the voices of poor, especially poor women of color. In 1984, OCIS organized a "National Consultation on Economic Justice for Women Who Are Poor." In Washington, DC, welfare reform was an area of particular concern along with growing childhood poverty ("Confab to Focus on Women's Issues," *Washington Informer,* January 25, 1984, 22). Delk chaired a National Planning Committee on Children in Poverty (NPCCP) —a coalition of twenty religious and secular organizations. The NPCCP organized hearings on the topic "Who Speaks for the Children?" across the country to assess the situation of children living in poverty by listening to people directly affected (UCC, *Keeping You Posted Newsletter*, March 1988, 2). Delk presented on the findings at a US House of Representatives committee hearing (U.S. House of Representatives 1988, 107). These issues continued to be a concern for Delk throughout her ministry. In 1993, she served on the advisory board for the Black Community Crusade for Children, sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund (Hoots 1993, 66).

Image 2: The Rev. Dr. Delk speaks at a conference sponsored by UCC Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice (courtesy of Yvonne. V. Delk).

Delk's work with the Office of Church in Society also included interpreting policy issues for local UCC congregations. Three major issues within the UCC on which she took leadership during her tenure were: developing resources on what it means to be a Just Peace Church; encouraging churches to be Open and Affirming; and the use of inclusive language in worship. In 1981, she spoke at the Language and Liturgy Convocation, organized by the Women's Task Force of the Consultation on Christian Union. She affirmed, "Once we have found our words, our names, *Nobody*–no institution, no cultural practice, no tradition can reduce us to namelessness again. Language and liturgies give us an identity. They give us a mission and a purpose in the world" (Delk 1983, 4).

Organizing against Racism: Ecumenical Engagements

In the 1980s, Delk continued to be active in ecumenical work with a focus on racial justice. For many years, Delk was actively involved in the Black Theology Project

(BTP) established in 1976. It was self-described as an "ecumenical, North American, Christian organization devoted to the discovery, development and promotion of historic and contemporary Black religious thought and action" ("Priorities of Black Church Addressed at Convocation," *Washington Informer*, February 22, 1984, 50). James Cone's 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power* launched the field of Black theology, which emerged from "a conscious investigation of the socio-religious experience of Black people in the struggle for freedom and dignity" (Essex 1989, 48). The BTP served to bridge a gap between the academy and the church, encouraging the development of education materials on Black theology and also pushing theologians to be relevant to and in conversation with the concerns of the community. Women were in the minority in the project, but their involvement was significant (Sawyer 2000, 311). Delk was chair of the board of directors from 1981 to 1982, working closely with Cornell West, who was executive director. She also served as co-chair from 1987 to 1989 and chair from 1990 to 1993 (Sawyer 1994, 129). She taught workshops and helped plan the annual BTP convocations, serving as co-chair of the convocation held in 1986. Other key women leaders included Olivia Stokes, Sr. Shaun Copeland, Jualynne Dodson, and Iva Caruthers.

In 1984, Delk was appointed by Avery Post to serve as the UCC representative on the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) for the World Council of Churches. She was involved with the PCR for the next 15 years. In 1991, when the Honorable Justice Annie Jiagge from Ghana stepped down as moderator, Delk would succeed her. A major focus of the PCR in the 80s was to end the apartheid system in South Africa, and Delk was an outspoken anti-apartheid activist. At a protest in front of the South African embassy in 1985, Delk proclaimed, "We refuse to remain silent while 24 million black brothers and sisters are denied their inherent worth. It is not enough for us to sit in our pews and pray" (Karlyn Barker and John Ward Anderson, "8 Arrested Peacefully at Antiapartheid Rally; Fear of Disruption Reduces Protest's Size," *Washington Post,* April 20, 1985). As a member of the PCR, Delk traveled to Lusaka, Zambia, in May 1987 for a historic consultation, which led to the Lusaka statement issued by the PCR. WCC leaders met representatives from the African National Congress, PAC, and SWAPO, along with African church leaders like Desmond Tutu. Representatives of the resistance movements underscored the brutality of the apartheid system and the urgency of the need for liberation (Jiagge 1989, 34). The financial support that PCR offered to liberation groups was controversial. Because they embraced armed struggle, the ANC, SWAPO, and PAC were considered by many Christians in the US and Europe to be terrorists. They were also labeled as communists. Delk understood that these groups were fighting for the liberation of their people and that their voices were important. She continued to be an outspoken advocate for church engagement in

the anti-apartheid movement and financial support for liberation efforts, both in her work with the WCC and also in her own denomination.

Delk also challenged the UCC to do more to combat racism internally. In an essay entitled "The Unfinished Agenda: Racism," published on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Amistad uprising, she called on the church to name racism when they saw it. Delk also called on the church to reject any denial of continuing problems. She urged the church to conversion, repentance, and action. She challenged the faithful to stand with the victims of racism, to work for change in the political realm, and to take a leadership role in ecumenical anti-racism work. Finally, she called on the church to critique economic models that create inequity and oppression. "In obedience to Jesus Christ, we are called to offer economic visions, theories and policies that are more faithful with the Gospel" (Delk 1989, 44).

Stepping Forward: Nomination for UCC President

When Avery Post announced his intention to step down as president of the UCC, a national search was initiated to find a successor. Delk was one of six final candidates given serious consideration for the position and the only woman and person of color (Marjorie Hyer, "6 Listed for Church of Christ Job," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 1989). After interviews with all candidates, the nominations committee selected Paul Sherry, the executive director of the Community Renewal Society in Chicago, IL. Colleagues at United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, Sherry and Delk knew each other well. Delk was committed to unity in the church and arrived at Synod determined to support the committee's nominee. As in 1969, a surprise encounter the night before Synod changed her course. She met a young Black girl, Wiletra Burwell, who challenged Delk and other Black elders at a pre-Synod gathering. She urged them to offer her hope that she might "see herself" in the leadership of the church. After wrestling mightily with the young woman's words, Delk decided to allow her nomination to be brought from the floor.

Delk's name was submitted by the Rev. G. William Webber, co-founder of the East Harlem Protestant Parish and long-time president of New York Seminary. The nomination was seconded in speeches by Ms. Gretchen Eick, an anti-apartheid and social justice activist from the Central Atlantic Conference, and the Rev. Clyde Miller, Rocky Mountain Conference minister and a civil rights leader (UCC General Synod 1989, 30). In a speech to delegates, Delk shared the story of her encounter with Burwell and the impact it had on her decision to stand for election. She concluded with a characteristic challenge and hope for the future.

> I thank God for the diversity that is within us and the vision that beckons and calls us … I am inspired with the fervent hope that despite the brokenness and divisions within our church and our world, oneness in Christ is possible. (UCC General Synod 1989, 48)

In the end, Sherry won the election. Delk was gracious in defeat, and Sherry was supportive of her. They embraced on stage in an intentional show of unity and, by agreement, the final vote tally was not released.

Moving On: Chicago and Beyond

The aftermath of the election was a challenging time for Delk. She had put herself forward, challenging the authority of the nomination committee in the process, and been defeated. While she understood the importance of her participation in the election, she now had to deal with the results. After twenty years of leadership and prophetic witness, she found herself at a crossroads. It was time to move on to something new. Delk moved to Chicago to begin serving as executive director of the Community Renewal Society, the position Sherry had recently left. Delk became the first woman and first person of color to lead the organization in its long history (Michael Hirsley, "Her Life's Work a Symbol of Hope," April 20, 1990). Reflecting on her work at the national level, she wrote, "In spite of 20 years of engaging in denominational ministries, I came to the conclusion that the goal of justice, equality and freedom was continuing to elude our reach. A few things had changed for the better for a few, but for the many and the masses, things had gotten worse." Delk wanted to make a difference where it would count. She wrote, "[W]ith the Bible in one hand, a newspaper in the other, and a committed spirit, I decided to move to the streets of the city" ("The Hospitality of the City Extends to the Poor," *Living Pulpit,* April-June 2002, 10). In her years in Chicago, she tackled homelessness and poverty, systemic racism, community health issues, and affordable housing (Rhonda Anderson, "Tearing Down the Walls of Society," *Chicago Tribune,* January 31, 1992; Herbert G. McCann, "Service Agency in Right Direction," *Philadelphia Tribune,* July 21, 1992). During Chicago's redevelopment, she insisted that city and federal officials listen to public housing residents directly and fought the destruction of public housing units desperately needed by low-income families (Tonita Cheatham, "The Voice of the Voiceless," *Sojourners*, May-June 1999). She made it a priority to shift CMR away from charitable support only to being pro-active in tackling the roots of the problems in the city.

Delk also continued to take a leadership role in ecumenical and interfaith efforts for social justice, locally and globally. As moderator of the World Council of

Chuches' Programme to Combat Racism, she was part of the planning team for the Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation held by the World Council of Churches in Seoul, Korea. This major global conference brought Christians from around the world together to discuss ways to affirm common social justice commitments. Controversially, the conference also included participants from liberation and social justice movements. Delk was supportive of the inclusion of these groups at the table, believing that those who worked at the grassroots level should be heard (Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). Delk consistently tried to center the voices of the marginalized and disadvantaged in her advocacy work.

Throughout the 90s, she was actively involved with *Sojourners,* serving on the editorial board, as a leader in the Call to Renewal movement, and as a contributor ("A Moment of Turning: An African-American Vision for the K*airos* of 1992," *Sojourners*, October 1991; "To Move beyond Denial," *Sojourners*, July 1992). After the Rodney King beating and subsequent urban uprisings in Los Angeles in 1992, she helped organize a visit to LA for the leaders of the World Council of Churches (Larry B. Stammer, "World Churches to Focus on L. A. Unrest," *Los Angeles Times,* June 27, 1992). She served on the interfaith planning team for the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1993 and moderated one of the sessions (Delk, pers. comm., November 23, 2019). In 1997, Delk was named in *Ebony* as one of the fifteen best Black women preachers in the US and recognized for her "bold, courageous explicit articulation of the Gospel" (Joy Bennett Kinnon, "15 Greatest Black Women Preachers," *Ebony,* Nov 1997, 110). UCC General Minister and President John C. Dorhauer heard Delk speak for the first time when, as a new UCC minister, he attended the Impact Briefing—now known as Ecumenical Advocacy Days—in Washington, DC. He recalls, "[O]ne of the keynoters was Yvonne Delk. Never heard of her, all I knew was she was UCC, and when she finished the keynote, everybody in the room was just grateful that they were there and were never going to forget that moment. And I remember listening to her, thinking so this is what it means to be UCC and just being so proud that I had chosen this as my pathway" (John Dorhauer, pers. comm., November 5, 2019).

While progress has been made in opening doors to women of color in the UCC, work remains to be done. "The challenge for the church is to be open and affirming in not only receiving their gifts but being open and assertive in the placement of these gifts. Racism and sexism were barriers 40 years ago, and they are barriers today," Delk notes (Anthony Moujaes, "Celebrating Yvonne Delk and 40 Years of Service to UCC," *United Church News*, October 7, 2014). Throughout her career, Delk built shared networks and regular gatherings for women in ministry. She helped launch the SISTERS network in North America—a program within the World Council of Churches' Women under Racism program. At the first

gathering of the SISTERS network in North America–the *Women Under Racism: SISTERS North America Conference* held in Albuquerque, New Mexico on February 26, 1998– she presented an opening meditation on the theme "A Safe Space" (WUR-SISTERS North America Box, WCC Archives, Geneva). Speaking to the women gathered, she noted a connection between the experience of being wounded by racism and the drive to make the world better for others. With Bernice Powell Jackson, Delk co-founded the African American Women in Ministry Conference in the early 1980s, which has been held bi-annually ever since.

Delk retired from her position at the Community Renewal Society in 1998. She founded the Center for African American Theological Studies and taught classes through the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) in Chicago. A few years later, she moved back to Norfolk, Virginia, to be closer to her extended family. In her 80s, she continues to speak at churches and conferences and to participate in organizing efforts on social justice issues. She served on the UCC's Historical Council and spearheaded a project to preserve the history of the Afro-Christian Churches. She also serves on the board of the UCC's Council for Health and Human Services.

Despite ongoing challenges, for Delk, her faith gives her hope for the future. It also calls her to stay engaged and to continue to work for a just world. "I grew up with the notion that the Christ we serve is a wounded Christ, not one who has it all together in terms of one strength, but strong in different ways than we think of. So when I have moved through the struggles, pain, and wounds like I have had to move through, I've looked at them as part of what it means to be a part of the community of Jesus Christ … It is the place of woundedness where even the Christ figure takes on the wounds of the world; therefore we take unto ourselves the wounds of the Other" (Comstock 2001, 258).

Conclusion

Delk's ministry spanned more than four decades and intersected with many significant trends and movements within church and society. While her ministry within the UCC is the primary focus of this paper, many other aspects of her life and ministry deserve study. Her activism in ecumenical and interfaith settings reflects the ways in which women, lay and ordained, have sustained social justice movements by providing key organizational support. Her sermons and writings provide rich resources that could be analyzed for insights on Black women's preaching, rhetorical styles, and the spiritual sources from which they draw strength. Delk's love of the arts and her creative use of arts in her ministry are topics not covered in this paper but ones well worth exploring. Her connections to

Africa and the ways that influenced her ministry is another topic given too little attention in this chapter. As a leader, Delk was a natural bridge builder, and she always sought to ensure that diverse voices were "at the table." Her style of leadership could be examined for insights into non-hierarchical leadership models. Her recent ministry as a "spirit guide" is a good example of the inter-generational transmission of spiritual values by African American women, a topic discussed by Teresa Fry Brown in her book *God Don't Like Ugly* (2000). Delk's writings on racism are still highly relevant today and worth revisiting.

Nevertheless, a few concluding observations can serve to shed light on her notability. Delk's ordination helped pave the way for African American women and women of color to enter ordained ministry. More specifically, the increasing visibility of her work at the national level provided members of the UCC the opportunity to see a Black woman clergy leader. For many, Delk was the first ordained Black woman they had ever seen. She inspired young women and tore down prejudices and biases. Her sociological and political awareness, grounded in her own experience facing racism, sexism, and classism, provided an important perspective on social justice issues. Her willingness to speak honestly about racism within the church has helped challenge the UCC to be more diligent in engaging this issue internally. Her articulate exposition of the theology that underlies her work helped other members of the UCC ground their work more deeply in spiritual truths.

Furthermore, as an advocate for the poor, especially poor women of color, she modeled an inclusive approach that centered the voices of poor women, allowing them to speak for themselves. This perspective is too often lost, especially in wealthy or middle-class churches. Her leadership on Black church curriculum development helped ensure that Black congregations could provide meaningful educational experiences for their congregants, affirming the vibrant history and culture of the Black church. Her preaching has challenged, uplifted, and sustained congregations. As a teacher, she prepared students for ministry in urban and Black churches as well as for social justice advocacy. In her early work as an affirmative action officer, she challenged barriers in hiring practices. As a spirit guide, she has nurtured younger clergy, many of them African American, and helped support their ministry within the UCC. Her participation on the Historical Council and her advocacy for the Franklinton Center have raised the visibility of Black church traditions within UCC history, a topic still underrepresented in the denominational literature. Throughout her ministry, she has been a friend and inspiration to many. Like many African American women in the church, her preaching and activism have been impactful on the lives of hundreds who may never make it into the history books, but who make up the majority of the faithful in the pews. Her ministry will have continuing ripple effects for generations to come.

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Notes

1. The organization later changed its name to the National Conference of Black Christians.
2. Marilyn Breitling, executive director of the United Church of Christ's Coordinating Center for Women, has since been rightly recognized as the first woman to lead a national instrumentality in the UCC. The Center was established in 1979, but not fully recognized as a national instrumentality until 1987 (Connie Larkman, "UCC Mourns Marilyn Breitling, Denomination's First Woman National Executive," *United Church News,* May 28, 2018).