

The rest of the story: Ministry at Trinity UCC

by [David Moyer](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

Jeremiah Wright needs no defense from me. Anyone who has built a congregation from 87 members to some 8,000 and whose congregation has created models of ministry in one of the poorest areas of Chicago has a body of work that speaks for itself. A recent press release from Trinity United Church of Christ, issued by its new senior pastor, Otis Moss III, notes that on Sunday mornings alone, over 36 years, Pastor Wright has spoken for a total of 207,792 minutes. The video clips from YouTube that are repeatedly being shown represent perhaps 15 to 20 seconds of that time—or .0000012 of his preaching ministry at Trinity. Yet many are quick to judge him, his church and, indeed, the UCC denomination on this statistically ridiculous sample.

Would I have chosen the exact words spoken by Wright in the clips that are on the airways? No. But, unlike Wright, I have not preached to the same congregation for 36 years and loved a church into remarkable growth in ministry and seen generations be born, mature and return to God. I have not ministered regularly to people in terrible poverty and been confronted in my study week after week with texts that provide a dramatic contrast to the scene of boarded-up buildings in some of my parishioners' neighborhoods. I have not faced the challenge of finding a "word from the Lord" to people who, no matter their success, daily face the realities of racism.

The psalm for Easter Sunday, Psalm 118, begins and ends with these words: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever." If you go to the Trinity UCC Web site, you will hear Wright's voice shout these words with great power and warmth. This could have represented his preaching just as well as the clips that media outlets have chosen.

Put yourself in the study at Trinity and look out on the city and juxtapose those texts for Easter Sunday and find your voice in the context of poverty, racism and poor-

quality education and health care. Any authentic word of hope in such a situation will be a hard word, one not easy to hear. But an easy word isn't likely to be a saving word, and that is something that Wright knows. Good news cuts through life and it can wound, but Easter tells us that God in Christ heals those wounds and "makes us strong at the broken places."

On Palm Sunday I was in Milwaukee to share in the second anniversary service at Grace United Church of Christ. The wonderful celebration reminded me not only of Grace's story but of the significant role in it played by Jeremiah Wright and Trinity Church. Grace was established after Mt. Tabor United Church of Christ voted to end its ministry and decided to give its building to the Wisconsin UCC Conference with the Easter hope that a new ministry could arise on that location. About a year after the conference received the building, I drove to 95th Street on the South Side of Chicago and visited with Wright. I told him that we wanted to start a new African-American congregation, but we had no idea how to do it. I told him that we had engaged in a capital campaign and had money to start a church. I said we were not asking for money but guidance and help in identifying leadership for this new church.

We met for more than an hour, and as I got up to leave, Wright handed me a card with the name of Wanda J. Washington, at that time a senior associate on the Trinity pastoral staff. He indicated that he thought Washington would be interested and would be a good pastor for a church start.

Not long after this meeting, I met with Pastor Washington, and she came up to Milwaukee to see the church building and to meet with some members and association and conference leaders. She discerned that God was leading her to this new challenge, and we began to make plans for a new church.

Once Washington indicated her willingness to come to Milwaukee, we received a letter from the mission board of Trinity, saying that it would pay her salary and benefits for the first year. In the second year Trinity gave the conference and Grace another significant gift. When Washington prayed to discern her call to Milwaukee, a group of Trinity women met with her and prayed for and with her regularly, calling on the Holy Spirit's guidance in this life-changing decision.

When plans were moving forward to have an opening service for Grace in 2006, a carload or more of Trinity people came to Milwaukee nearly every weekend to clean,

paint and otherwise prepare the building for the first Grace service. When Palm Sunday 2006 came, more than 300 people came from Trinity to Milwaukee to ensure that the service would be well-attended and Spirit-filled. Trinity sent more than 20 deacons to serve, plus a team of trained ushers and security people. It sent 15 women who prepared a feast to follow the service. It also sent one of its women's choirs, and for the first months of Grace's life it sent musical leaders to lend their extraordinary gifts to Grace's worship. Some individual members of Trinity tithed to Grace for the first year to offer additional financial support.

On this past Palm Sunday a bus from Trinity brought a group to the anniversary service, among them some deacons who came to again serve the congregation's spiritual needs and to support the pastor. I counted some 80 people from Trinity at the celebration.

All this support—financial, spiritual, physical, material—was the result of one visit to Jeremiah Wright's office. A new congregation, a critical new ministry to a large African-American population, came from this one visit. My hour with Wright was probably even less than .0000012 of the time he spent in meetings over the past 36 years. I wish that some scenes conveying the grace and generosity he and Trinity showed to us in Wisconsin would be included in video clips somewhere.

Wright was the preacher for our conference's annual meeting last June. He was invited because Grace led the worship, and we wanted to show our appreciation for Trinity's exceptional gifts. Prior to the service, Wright and I were eating dinner when his phone buzzed; he received a text message telling him that someone in the Trinity congregation had died. He asked my pardon and for the next 20 minutes made phone calls to his assistant and to members of the pastoral staff. "Who's on call tonight? Remember, we need to respond to the family in one hour! Who is available to do the service? Let me know when someone has followed through." Though 200 miles from his church, he was still pastorally engaged, seeing that the church did what it is committed to doing—being with a grieving family and bringing a word of hope and a presence of love.

Jeremiah Wright's preaching in its totality, in its African-American context, in its willingness to struggle with the hardest of biblical texts, in its recognition of the essential role of confession in forgiveness and judgment in grace—conducted in the midst of a vibrant African-American community in a major city—this preaching helped to build a church. This preaching would not have yielded the kind of fruit that it did without the absolute clarity of mission that also brought to life a new

congregation in another state—or without the deep compassion and clarity about the pastoral vocation that led Wright to pause in a busy speaking schedule to minister to a family that had lost a loved one. This is a part of the story that is essential to giving a fair and just account of Jeremiah Wright's ministry.