

Full-Scale Investigation Set For Wilmington 10

BY STAN SWOFFORD
Daily News Staff Writer

J. Stanley Puttanger, chief of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, has ordered a full-scale Justice Department investigation into the case of the Wilmington 10.

transcript of the 1972 trial of Wilmington 10 affidavits filed by a group of witnesses who said he was a court and law enforcement official on the witness stand.

B12 Greensboro Daily News,
Thurs., Feb. 24, 1977
**Hunt Hasn't
Read Report
On Ten Yet**

North Carolina Governor Asked To Free Political Prisoners
The Wilmington 10 Defense has announced the delivering of a plea to the Governor of North Carolina...

Wilmington 10 Pair: Curfew Plea 'Common Knowledge'

FEB 20 1977

That's something the legislature will be monitoring.

FBI Reports

Threats Probed Against Hall

DEC 16 1976

Wilmington 10 appeal; say chief accuser lied

Church marks \$600,000 for Wilmington 10 fight

Perjury Charge

'Ten' Want A Federal Case

RALEIGH (AP)—Eight of the trial of the Wilmington 10 in state courts, if a request for the 10 is granted.



Lentz Fires Ingle Over Wilmington 10 Missing File Story

11-19-76

Tom Ingle, director of the State Human Relations Commission, was fired from his job this week a few days after he was confirmed to a Greensboro Daily News reporter that records concerning...

The
STORY
of the

WILMINGTON 10

Yvonne V. Delk and Bernice Powell Jackson

On December 31, 2012, Beverly Perdue, out-going Governor of North Carolina, granted pardons to a group known as the “Wilmington 10”. For some, this would be applauded as one of the last acts of a governor to correct an injustice in the state’s criminal justice system.

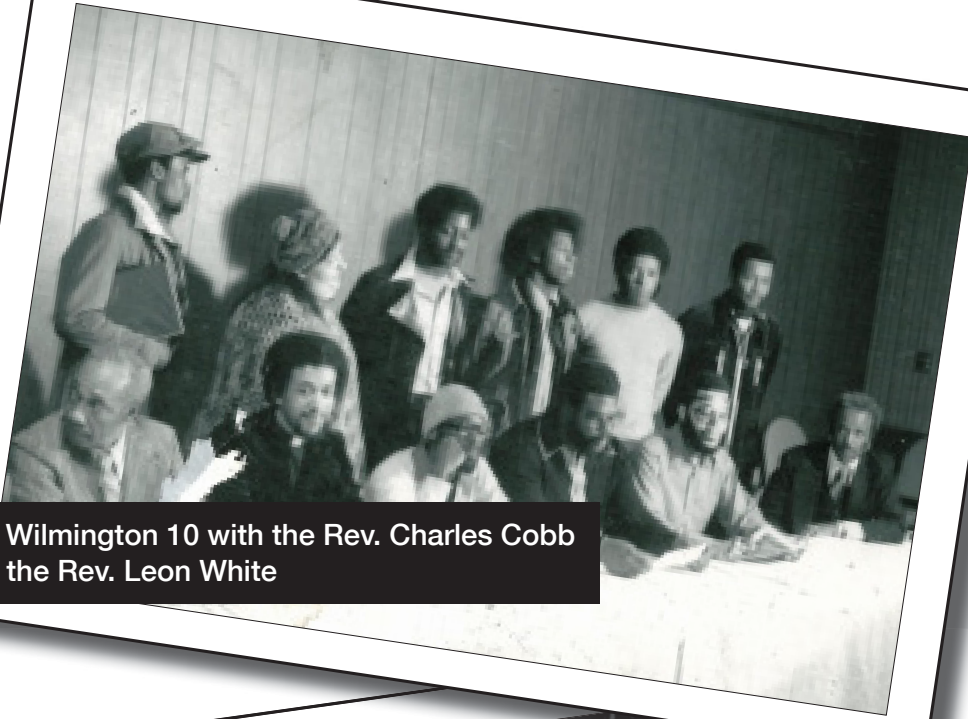
However, for those of us in the United Church of Christ, this was personal. It was personal in that the” Wilmington 10” was known to us by name. We see their faces, and we know the story of Ben Chavis, Marvin Patrick, Connie Tindall, Jerry Jacobs, Willie Earl Vereen, James McKoy, Reginald Epps, Wayne Moore, Joe Wright, and Ann Shepherd.

We know their story because it is our story. It is the story of the United Church of Christ (UCC), the story of a denomination seeking to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

challenging and resisting systems of injustice and standing with those who are marginalized or oppressed. It is a story we dare not forget.

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It is the story of the Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ), created by the UCC to mobilize and empower the membership of the church to work for racial justice and racial reconciliation at a time of great change and challenge in our nation. It is the story of courageous leadership – beginning with the leadership of Dr. Charles Cobb who served from 1963-1969 as the Executive Director of the Committee for Racial Justice Now, and from 1969-1985 as the Executive Director of the Commission for Racial Justice. “We cannot tell the story of the Wilmington 10 without the



The Wilmington 10 with the Rev. Charles Cobb and the Rev. Leon White



The U.S. National Guard surrounds Gregory Congregational UCC

God is still speaking,
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



name of Charles Cobb,” says Rev. Leon White, who served on the CRJ staff for many years. Dr. Cobb would often say “the UCC has the proclivity to do right -- when pushed”.

Not only did Dr. Cobb push this new denomination, but he and Dr. Edwin R. Edmonds, pastor of Dixwell Ave. Congregational UCC in New Haven, CT, Chairperson of Ministers for Racial and Social Justice and a Commissioner of CRJ, were the spirit and voice for the Wilmington 10 at General Synods, in the Executive Council, in Conferences and in local churches across the nation. Ben Chavis, one of the Wilmington 10, was serving as staff of CRJ’s North Carolina Field Office at the time of his arrest in March 1972.

**This is also the
story of a local
UCC congregation.**

This is also the story of a local UCC congregation. It began on Tuesday, February 2, 1971, when Rev. Eugene Templeton, pastor of Gregory United Church of Christ in Wilmington, NC, made a call to Rev. White asking for

help. Rev Leon White was the Director of CRJ’s North Carolina Field Office. This office was strategically placed in the Southern Conference, where a significant number of the African American churches in the UCC were located. The office worked to connect the African American churches to the larger life and mission of the UCC and also was addressing issues of racial discrimination in North Carolina and Virginia. These issues were exploding throughout the region as schools in both states were beginning to be desegregated more than a decade after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the US Supreme Court.

Reverend Templeton was the white pastor of an African American congregation with a long history of being involved in the freedom struggle in a city that had been a stronghold of the old

Confederacy. At the time that Rev. Templeton placed the call, Gregory was serving as the meeting space for African American high school students who had decided to boycott classes. The court-ordered ruling to desegregate schools in Wilmington had resulted in the closing of the black high school with black students forced to integrate into the city's white high school.

The environment of the school was neither open nor welcoming. The black students existed in a hostile environment with nothing to affirm their culture, their history or their identity and they experienced inequitable representation in the school administration and faculty and unfair representation in the student government organizations, clubs and athletic teams. As a result, the students had created a list of demands which they presented to the Wilmington School Board.

But the demands of the students were ignored by the Board of Education. Finally, in January of 1971, after school authorities refused a request from black students to hold a memorial service honoring the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the students decided to call for a boycott of classes. They needed a place to serve as an alternative school, to meet, regroup, and decide next steps. They approached Rev. Templeton whose church board gave permission for the students to meet at Gregory. The students, however, needed more than a place to meet; they needed leadership, counsel and organization.

That was when Rev. Templeton called Rev. White, who responded by sending his community organizer to Wilmington. The organizer was Ben Chavis, who was a native of Oxford NC, and, at the age of 24, was a veteran at community organizing, having already participated in, led and mediated civil rights protest movements throughout North Carolina and Virginia.



The Rev. Ben Chavis addresses the press



(L to R): James McCoy,
Willie Earl Vereen, Connie Tindall

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When Ben Chavis arrived in Wilmington, tensions in the town were running high. Ben assisted the students in writing down their grievances and releasing them to the press. When the Superintendent of Schools refused to discuss the students' demands, they marched to the school administration building and asked to meet with him. When he did not appear, the marchers, 400 strong, returned peacefully to the church.

The march and the confrontation with the Board of Education were met with anger and fear on the part of the white community. The Ku Klux Klan was now visible in the streets of Wilmington. The response to the boycott was a wave of harassment, intimidation and violence.

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Gregory Congregational UCC became a church under siege. Rumors were that 200 Klansmen had come into the city from surrounding areas. The church received bomb threats. Shots were fired at the church, and the lives of Rev. Templeton and his wife were threatened. The reign of terror continued with the burning to the ground of Mike's Grocery Store located a few hundred feet from the church. Steve Mitchell, a black youth, was shot dead by a policeman, and Harvey Cumber, a white policeman, was shot to death about a block from the church. Within hours of the death of Cumber, martial law and a curfew were declared in the city of Wilmington. The National Guardsmen moved in to surround Gregory UCC and to restore order to the city of Wilmington.

The Board of Education initiated a court suit aimed at curtailing the activities of Ben Chavis and numerous individuals who had advised, encouraged or otherwise assisted the boycotting

students. A preliminary, and later a permanent injunction, were issued.

On the surface of things, the presence of the National Guard and the court-ordered injunction seemed like a victory for the white establishment. However, the events of that week served as a wake-up call for the black community. The courage of the boycotting students had called into existence a continuing commitment to the struggle for justice. For the rest of 1971, Ben Chavis remained in Wilmington in order to organize the larger community to confront the racial injustices they were facing.

While Gregory UCC had been the free space for the student boycott, Ben Chavis and others formed a new church, the First African Church of the Black Messiah, which became the meeting space for the growing movement. As the freedom movement in Wilmington became more visible, the white establishment became more concerned about the role and influence of Ben Chavis in the empowerment of the black community. “We had built a movement in that year – people going to the School Board, to county commission meetings, bringing in national civil rights leaders to speak, turning the spotlight on Wilmington concerning voting rights and the election of black officials,” recalls Dr. Chavis.

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And while it seemed that the storm had blown over, the reality was something quite different. The police were busy fabricating evidence and identifying three “witnesses” who

testified against Ben Chavis and the students. These witnesses all later recanted their testimony. The arrest of the Wilmington 10

was clearly a strategy to oppress the social change movement under way in Wilmington.

Thus, one year after the incident in Wilmington, in March of 1972, Ben Chavis and eight young black men, some of them still in high school, were arrested in the doorway of the church by Wilmington police on charges of arson -- the burning of Mike's grocery store and conspiring to shoot police and firemen. In addition, a white woman, Ann Shepherd, a local anti-poverty worker and friend of the Templetons, was arrested after she refused to testify against the others and charged with being an accessory to the crimes. This group would be known throughout the globe as the "Wilmington 10". Except for minor traffic offenses, not one in the group had a prior criminal record.

But the injustices of the criminal justice system did not stop with the fabrication of evidence. The first trial of the Wilmington 10, with a jury of ten African Americans and two whites, ended abruptly when the prosecutor called for a mistrial due to his sudden and mysterious stomach ailment. The evening before the second trial was scheduled to begin, this time before a judge known to be unsympathetic to civil rights and with a jury of ten whites and two blacks, the car Ben Chavis was driving (his mother's car) was firebombed. The Rev. William Oliver, who served as a CRJ Commissioner during these crucial years, recalls the "Kill the Wilmington 10" signs that appeared in the windows of the Raleigh courthouse during this time and the 3,000 judicial errors that were later identified.

Not surprisingly, the Wilmington 10 was all found guilty and sentenced to a collective 282 years of imprisonment. They were immediately imprisoned until three months later, when, after an attack by white inmates on black inmates, the UCC, fearful for the



Ann Shepard Turner



Wayne Moore

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lives of the Wilmington 10, put up bail money for the entire group during the appeal process.

Thus, a denomination that in 1972 was only fifteen years old when the arrest warrants were issued, was now called to invest its name, its faith and its resources into the struggle for freedom— not just for its own staff member – Ben Chavis- but for the nine others as well. The journey would not be easy, and there were members of the denomination who disagreed vehemently with the leadership’s decision to support and, especially, to put up bail money for the group. Some could not believe there would be misconduct by the criminal justice system; some saw the dashiki-clad, Afro-hairstyled Ben Chavis as a radical. Moreover, some lawyers argued that the church had no legal obligation to anyone other than Ben Chavis. But others argued that the church had a moral obligation that must take precedence. The moral argument prevailed and the UCC agreed – not once, but twice – to put up bail money for the entire group.

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This commitment, which began with a telephone call from a local church pastor, reverberated throughout the life of the UCC. The struggle to free the Wilmington 10 was joined in our pulpits, in our conferences and in our public utterances. It became the very identity of this new denomination and the symbol of how the UCC would struggle on behalf of justice for the oppressed. It was also a pivotal moment for African Americans to see why they had joined this denomination.

Dr. Cobb and Dr. Edmonds embodied the spirit and the energy of the response. However, they were not alone. The United Church of Christ's leadership team was clearly visible and engaged. The team was composed of Dr. Robert Moss, President; Rev. Joseph Evans, Secretary; Mr. Charles Lockyear, Treasurer; and Rev. Lew Maddocks, Executive Director of the Council for Christian Social Action. The chairpersons of the Executive Council and others served as a courageous group of church leaders guiding the denomination to stay the course. Later in 1978, when the then-Governor Hunt ignored the evidence and refused to pardon the Wilmington 10, the then UCC President Avery Post pledged the ongoing commitment of the UCC to racial justice.

The church had made a definitive decision to stand for racial justice.

The name and identity of the UCC was now linked to the struggle to free the Wilmington 10. The church had made a definitive decision to stand for racial

justice. A prophetic church emerged with its voice and its resources. This placed a national and global spotlight on the injustices in the criminal system of North Carolina. The action of the UCC resulted in the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches and other faith-based groups speaking out in behalf of the Wilmington 10. Amnesty International declared the Wilmington 10 "political prisoners" caught in the web of a racist system.

CRJ's own leadership team was critical in the struggle to free the Wilmington 10. While Rev. Leon White was mobilizing churches in the southern region, the Rev. Bill Land, national organizer for CRJ, was traveling to conferences and churches throughout the UCC

interpreting the injustices of the charges against the Wilmington 10 and identifying ways that the church could be involved. Irv Joyner, CRJ's staff legal expert, served as national coordinator for the Wilmington 10 defense. Rev. Albert Cleage, Rev. Jeremiah Wright and other CRJ Commissioners were voices in the national church to interpret and build support for the church to put up bail money.

Also instrumental in this cause was Mrs. Elizabeth Chavis, mother of Ben Chavis. She did not waver in her support. She became an out-spoken champion in the struggle to free her son and the nine others. She carried them in her heart and in her spirit. She was present in churches, in courtrooms, and her resolve was to never quit until justice was achieved.

In the UCC Southern Conference there was not unanimity of support for the Wilmington 10, particularly among the white churches. But Irwin Smallwood, a UCC member, was the managing editor of the Greensboro Daily News at the time of the arrest and trial of the Wilmington 10 and hired a reporter, Stan Swofford, to focus on the case. Stan engaged in investigative journalism- talking to lawyers, sifting through court records, and talking to Eugene Templeton and providing crucial information for the defense. Moreover, with new conference leadership and Rollin Russell as Conference Minister, there was a new level of support.

The significance of leadership provided by ministers and churches in the Southern Conference, particularly those from the Afro-Christian tradition, cannot be under-estimated. Rev. White, Rev. Land, Rev. W. H. Thomas, Rev. Ronald Morris, Rev. J. M. Copeland and many others were in the forefront of this. Their prophetic voices were heard in the conference and their spiritual support surrounded the Wilmington 10.

Ben Chavis declared that pastors and churches provided a life line of support:

“We knew that we were not fighting alone. The system had not defeated our spirits. We were a part of a larger network of support that was fighting to expose the injustices of the system and at the same time empowering us with the hope and promise of freedom. The prayers, letters and demonstrations of support kept us going.”

The implication of the denomination standing with the Wilmington 10 had implications for the way in which many of the African American pastors and members who had been a part of the Convention of the South now understood the mission and mandate of the UCC church. It was not an easy decision to become a part of a predominantly white denomination. The denomination had declared in its Statement of Faith a willingness “to accept the cost and joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, to be servants in the service of others, and to resist the powers of evil”. A declaration on paper is one thing; to make the word visible is quite another. In its commitment to the Wilmington 10, the denomination was visible in its stance for freedom and justice.

Although the case of the Wilmington 10 was appealed, no court would hear the case, which was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. As a result, they returned to prison in January, 1976 and served three more years. During that time the witnesses recanted their testimony and then-Governor

Hunt shortened their sentences. In 1978 Amnesty International declared them political prisoners. On December 4, 1980 the 4th Circuit Court of North Carolina overturned their convictions. But there will still a cloud over their heads. It was not until December, 2012 – forty years later, that the Wilmington 10 was declared innocent.

On January 5, 2013, survivors of the Wilmington 10 (of whom four are now deceased) along with church members, family and friends returned to Gregory Congregational United Church of Christ in Wilmington, North Carolina. The call that Rev. Eugene Templeton made in 1971 had come full term. The “Wilmington 10” had received a full pardon. However, every ending provides the opportunity for a beginning.

What have we learned from the story of the Wilmington 10?

This is our story, and the story continues. What have we learned from the story of Wilmington 10? What can it teach us about the future of our

denomination and the role of the church in the struggle for justice in our world?

Our UCC Statement of Faith says that God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship. If we are to take that line seriously, we must be willing to accept the costs of discipleship. We must be willing to stand up to internal and external forces that support the status quo at best and oppression at worst. Ben Chavis says that while he was in prison, he was “constantly reflecting on that line and always saw what happened to the Wilmington 10 in North Carolina in the larger context of the struggle for racial equality in our nation and world.”

Indeed, the story of the Wilmington 10 reminds us that every generation must invest itself in the struggle for justice and must take the risks and make the sacrifices for justice. No generation can rest on laurels of those who have gone before.

The story of the Wilmington 10 also reminds us of the importance of leadership – strong voices willing to step out on faith, pushing the UCC towards its proclivity to do right, to take to the side of the oppressed. Ben Chavis recalls being grateful that the church didn't let what was politically expedient rule in its decision-making. And, like the story of the Amistad more than a century before, it reminds us of the power of people of faith working across lines of race and culture on behalf of justice.

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Finally, the story of the Wilmington 10 reminds us that the injustices of the criminal justice system that still prevail have deep roots in our nation. We look back upon the shameful conduct of officials in the state of NC, with misconduct at every level of the system, aware that in 1971, we were dealing with the signs and symbols of the “Jim Crow” system of segregation embodied in these injustices. In 2013, we face a new “Jim Crow”, identified by Michelle Alexander, as “the mass incarceration of black and brown men in an age of color blindness”.

These are the lessons we dare not forget. This is a story that is our story and that reminds us that God is Still Speaking and still calling us, even demanding, that we work for a world of justice and peace.



LESSONS FROM THE PAST, LEARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

The powerful story of the Wilmington 10 and United Church of Christ that span over forty years inspires us to claim our **core purpose** as UCC today – “we are drawn by the Holy Spirit, a distinct and diverse faith community that come together in covenant, joining faith and action, and serving God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world, according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

As our Statement of Faith testifies, God promises to all who trust in God “eternal life in [God’s] realm which has no end.” So let us fix our eyes on God’s realm, in which **Continuing Testament** witnesses to God’s justice on the side of the marginalized and the oppressed, **Extravagant Welcome** practices God’s beloved community, and **Changing Lives** is possible for the oppressed and the oppressors alike.

To co-create a just and sustainable world, our generation stands on the shoulders of those who stood with the Wilmington 10, so that our eyes are opened to see far and deep. Our Statement of Faith reminds us that we are called “to resist the powers of evil.” Injustices such as what happened to the Wilmington 10 have deep roots in our nation and are seldom random. The powers of evil are not static but evolve with the times e.g. mass incarceration of black and brown men in an age of “color blindness.”

God promises to all who trust in God “forgiveness of sins, fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God’s presence in trial and rejoicing [see Statement of Faith].” Just as those in the story of the Wilmington 10 who led with a strong voice, taking the side of the oppressed, we as UCC today are empowered by God to step out on faith with a **bold, public voice** to speak truth to power.

Our bold, public voice in the world is only as strong as the people behind it – a faithful people reflective of the **diversity of God’s beloved community**, and binding in covenant by the Holy Spirit. In face of the many systemic and evolving injustices, **engaged discipleship** requires life-long learning, living and struggling for justice and peace.