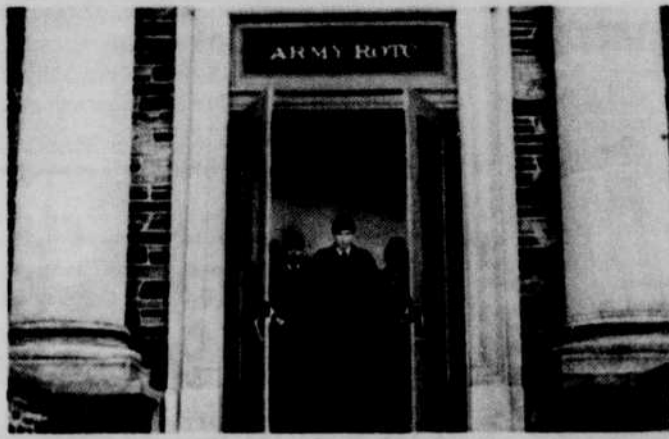


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NATIONAL

Church decries racism

WASHINGTON (AP) — In an effort to "sound a national alarm" and reinvigorate the civil rights movement, a major church group is issuing an unusual pastoral letter warning that racism is a deepening problem in America.

More than three decades after the start of the modern civil rights movement, poverty is worse for non-white Americans and racially motivated violence has increased, the United Church of Christ contends.

Racist attitudes, it concludes, "permeate most of our institutions" and systemic racism underlies economic and social disparities between whites and non-whites.

"As a result of racial discrimination, all over the United States there are 'quiet riots' in the form of unemployment, poverty, social disorganization, family disintegration, housing and school deterioration, and crime," church leaders said.

Next Sunday, a day before the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, church leaders will read the letter to more than 6,000 congregations of the United Church of Christ, a 1.7-million-member Protestant denomination.

The past carries both theological and social meaning for church members, but it is intended to draw wider attention to show that racism has worsened, said the Rev. Benjamin Chavis Jr., a veteran civil rights leader and church official.

"We are trying to sound a national alarm," Chavis said in an interview last week. "We believe the leadership of our nation has focused so much on the world situation that we're losing sight of the domestic — the internal deterioration of our society."

"We should have made much more progress toward racial harmony."

The church calls on its followers to recognize racism as a sin and to become active in the political process on behalf of equality.

The pastoral letter is only the third in the history of the United Church of Christ, said Chavis, who is executive director of the church's Commission for Racial Justice.

In the 1970s, Chavis spent 4½ years in North Carolina prisons as a member of the Wilmington 10, a group including nine young black men convicted of firebombing a store and related charges during civil rights unrest in Wilmington, N.C.

They were cited by Amnesty International as the first case of U.S. political prisoners, and a federal appeals court overturned their convictions in 1980.

The church's statement voices alarm at an increasing frequency of violent acts against minorities. The violence cannot be dismissed as isolated acts of fringe groups and extremists, it says.

The attacks are, in fact, "visible consequences of racist attitudes" permeating society, the church says, and reflect a growing climate of racial intolerance and hostility.

An accompanying background paper cites federal statistics showing increasing inequities in living standards for whites and non-whites:

Minorities make up 30 percent of the population, but 58 percent of the American children living in poverty; black males have a life expectancy of 65.3 years, lower than the level of white males in 1950; infant mortality among blacks is twice that of whites; and health care is far less accessible for non-whites than whites.

In addition, unemployment among blacks is 2½ times that among whites, and blacks are far more likely than whites to receive the death penalty in cases involving capital crimes, the church notes.

A small percentage of ethnic Americans gained some socioeconomic status in the 1970s and 1980s, the church says, but the quality of life for most minority Americans is worse today than it was in the 1960s.

"Virtually no progress toward social and economic equality for African Americans has been made since the early 1970s," it says.

Racism extends far beyond black-white relations in a nation growing in ethnic diversity, the church says. Racism is a daily problem for Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, it says.

Chavis pointed a finger at the Bush and Reagan administrations, saying the federal government "has become the obstacle" to racial justice.

"I think what we're witnessing is the federalization of racism," he said.

He cited an Education Department decision last month, later rolled back, barring universities from setting aside money for scholarships to minorities only.

Chavis also pointed to President Bush's veto of the 1990 civil rights bill passed by Congress and political exploitation by Republicans of white backlash to affirmative action hiring practices.

Without change, Chavis said he feared American society "could explode from within" in ways worse than the urban riots of the 1960s.

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