

**A Statement by the Rev. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President of
the United Church of Christ on the importance of
the Durban Review Conference
April 20-24, 2009, Geneva, Switzerland**

The sin of racism casts shadows of division and discrimination that threaten societies as deeply as they harm the soul. The international community, having adopted in 1965 the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, rededicated its commitment to end racism in all its forms in 2001 at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. A delegation of the United Church of Christ participated in that historic conference. This week, under the direction of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, representatives of states and non-governmental organizations from around the world will gather in Geneva, Switzerland at the Durban Review Conference to evaluate the efforts outlined in the Durban Declaration and Plan of Action set forth in 2001.

I am grateful that the international community is assessing progress on its commitments and is renewing global attention to the persistent reality of racism and all manifestations of discrimination. An international process that invites dialogue across borders and boundaries helps all governments and citizens become aware, self-critical and empowered to take action in opposing discrimination and intolerance, whether perpetuated by official policy or popular practices. I am pleased that the UCC continues to be part of this important process, and that the UCC Minister for Racial Justice, the Rev. Karen Thompson, will be our official representative at the Review Conference. I am grateful as well that other ecumenical partners in the United States will also be present.

The United Church of Christ has called our society, starting with our own communities of faith, to engage in sacred conversations on race. We acknowledge that in the United States we struggle with the enduring legacy of racism, manifest most tragically in our national experience of slavery and the genocide perpetrated against America's indigenous Native American population. We are also challenged to deal with attitudes and policies revealing racism in our current debates over immigration, post-9-11 profiling, and citizenship in an increasing multi-cultural and mobile world.

Other countries share similar responsibilities to end discrimination in their midst, and to recognize the rights and dignity of any who are marginalized by status, disenfranchised by class, poverty or economic policies, or trapped by political systems that are racially defined. For example, the Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits, hosted by the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation last month in Bangkok, Thailand, highlighted the continuing discrimination faced by Dalits in India as well as others around the world marginalized by Caste-Based Discrimination (CBD). The Rev. Dr. James Vijayakumar, Southern Asia Executive for Global Ministries

of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ, represented the UCC and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The United Church of Christ has repeatedly expressed its concern about the impact on the Palestinian community of the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza – which includes discriminatory practices and policies. The UCC advocates an end to all violence and a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is regrettable, however, that Durban's attention to the Occupation as a particularly negative manifestation of Zionism has become the rationale for some governments to recuse themselves from participation in the Durban process and Review Conference. In this regard it is profoundly disappointing to hear that the Obama Administration has chosen not to send representatives. It is deeply ironic and sad at this historic moment in our own nation's political life for the United States to absent itself from the shared global responsibility to address enduring racism wherever and whenever it occurs. Failure to participate in this Conference not only diminishes the global gathering; it will diminish our nation as well.

It is my hope that this Conference will once again bring to public awareness the obligation of states and of individuals to protect the rights and dignity of all, to repudiate fear, and to transform attitudes and structures that sustain racial discrimination. May we all pray that this gathering, with all of its complexity and controversy, will become a prophetic moment calling us toward the moral responsibility and political courage these days demand.