

Conversation on race: When self-affirmation is a mission priority

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

Last month the United Church of Christ invited its congregations to conduct a “sacred conversation” about race in response to the controversy swirling around Trinity United Church of Christ and its now retired pastor, Jeremiah Wright.

Assuming that the invitation applied to Presbyterians too, I went to the bookshelf and found Cornel West’s *Race Matters*. West, a professor of religion at Princeton, introduces *Race Matters* with an account of one of the biweekly treks he and his wife have made to New York City. Both of them had appointments in Manhattan. It was raining. West dropped his wife off on 60th Street near Park Avenue, parked his car and stepped to the curb to hail a taxi. An empty cab passed, then a second and a third. Angry and wet, he watched as a tenth cab sailed by and stopped for a well-appointed woman of European descent.

West also recalls driving to Williams College to deliver a lecture and being pulled over and accused of cocaine trafficking. When he told the officer that he was a religion professor, the officer said, “Sure you are and I’m the Flying Nun. Let’s go, nigger.”

When we have the conversation on race and reflect on how much progress we have made—and we have made progress toward racial equality and equal opportunity—we must also reflect on how deep and complex racism is. If we listen carefully, those of us of European descent will learn how differently “the police are on their way” sounds to blacks than it does to whites.

West says the crisis in African-American culture stems from too much poverty and too little self-love. It’s a crisis of nihilism, which West defines as trying to live without hope or meaning and in the absence of love. It is a spiritual crisis, and it will be healed, he says, not by argument or analysis, but by love.

Self-identity, self-affirmation, self-love are mission priorities of African-American churches. Someone told me recently that the beautiful gospel song “Steal Away to Jesus” refers to an actual event: slaves stealing away to a secret place where cotton field and forest met, to sing and pray and encourage each other, because slave owners did not allow slaves to gather for anything but work.

For decades black churches have confronted the reality of nihilism with the power of love that transforms self-hatred into self-love. Many congregations, including Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ, do that faithfully and courageously, and they ought to be celebrated, encouraged, prayed for and supported.