

Through *the* Waters

A 40-Day Lenten Journey of
Faith, Resilience & Sacred Memory

Reflections from the Afro-Christian Convention
Archives of Franklinton Center at Bricks

John 7:37-39 (RSV)

*Tracing the Fifth Stream from Africa to
the United Church of Christ*

Rev. Brenda Billips Square

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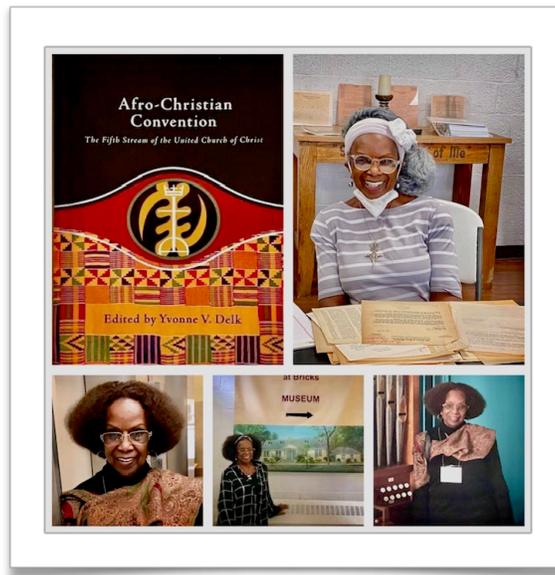
On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

**Reflections from the Archives of the Afro-Christian Convention
Franklinton Center at Bricks**

Celebrating the Ministry of Reverend Dr. Yvonne V. Delk
by

Rev. Brenda Billips Square
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Franklinton Center at Bricks

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Celebrating Black History Rev. Dr. Yvonne V. Delk

Reverend Dr. Yvonne V. Delk stands as a prophetic voice within the living stream of the Afro-Christian Convention of the United Church of Christ. She has served for sixty years as an educator, preacher, organizer, and prophetic voice leading light for human and civil rights for people of color, children and the poor throughout five continents. Her ministry embodies the promise that “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

The Rev. Yvonne V. Delk is lovingly known as Mother Yvonne - a spiritual mother, she has consistently joined faith with action, theology with justice, and memory with movement. Her leadership has helped sustain a tradition that refuses to separate spirituality from social transformation. Through preaching, organizing, and denominational leadership, she has demonstrated that remembrance is resistance. As she has taught, **“To remember is to define who we are in ways that we are not free to walk away from.”**

Her life mirrors the rhythm of this devotional: Faith that survives crossings. Memory that preserves identity. Justice that flows like water. Spirit that cannot be contained. Like a river, her ministry has moved across generations — sometimes quietly, sometimes forcefully — but always faithfully.

This Lenten journey honors her witness and celebrates the sacred stream she continues to nourish.

About This Devotional

Through the Waters: A 40-Day Lenten Journey of Faith, Resilience, and Sacred Memory is a devotional companion grounded in the historical and theological work presented in *Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ* edited by Yvonne V. Delk, (UCC Press 2023).

This devotional draws upon the foreword by Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. and the introductory reflections of Yvonne V. Delk, whose theological framing of memory and identity shapes this Lenten journey.

It also engages the interpretive framework offered by Vincent Harding in *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981). Harding's river imagery provides a powerful lens for understanding the continuity of Black faith and freedom struggle across generations.

This Lenten guide does not reproduce the historical text. Rather, it invites prayerful engagement with its sacred memory — offering daily reflection, spiritual practice, and meditations drawn from the stream it chronicles.

Readers are encouraged to study the full historical volume alongside this devotional in order to deepen their understanding of the legacy, leadership, and spiritual witness of the Afro-Christian Convention — the Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ.

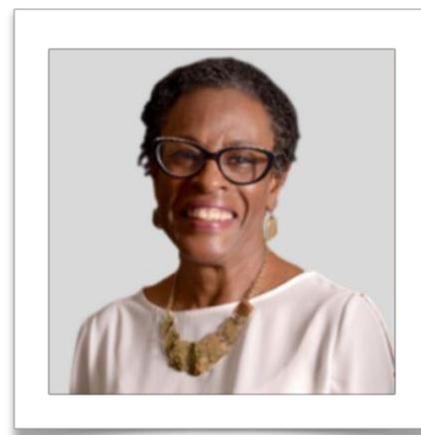
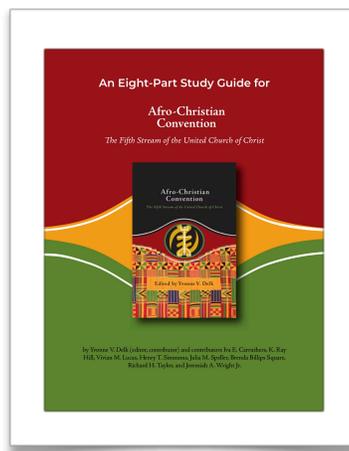
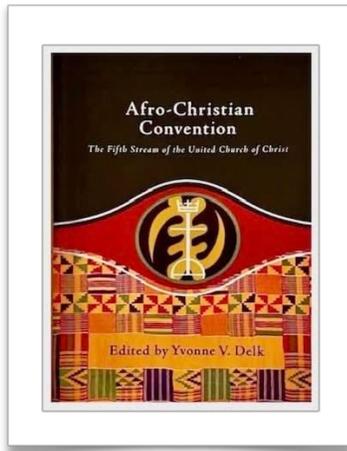
Understanding the Afro-Christian Convention

The Afro-Christian Convention was an organized ministry of Afro-Christian churches located primarily in North Carolina and Virginia. Formally organized in 1867 and active through 1950, it represented a powerful stream of Black church leadership during Reconstruction and beyond.

At its height, the Convention included:

- 150 churches
- 25,000 members
- 185 ordained ministers and licentiates
- 150 Sunday schools

It also established the Franklinton Theological Institute, later Franklinton Christian College (1871–1930), providing theological and educational formation for generations of leaders. The Convention also embodied a Women’s National and Home Foreign Convention and a Christian Publishing Convention. More than an institution, it was a river — carrying faith, literacy, justice, leadership, and sacred memory. That river continues to flow today through 66 Afro-Christian churches and through the preserved archives of Franklinton Center at Bricks and various ministries of the United Church of Christ.



Order the book: *The Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ*, Edited by Yvonne V. Delk 2023 and download the *The Afro-Christian Convention Eight-Part Study*. by Julia K. Speller available through UCC Press. [Afro-Christian Convention on The Pilgrim Press website](#)

Introduction

Rivers of Living Water

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.... ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” — John 7:37–39 (RSV)

Faith, Jesus says, is not a container.
It is a current.
It moves.
It gathers.
It deepens.

But rivers do not flow without memory.
Mother Yvonne reminds us:

“To remember is to define who we are in ways that we are not free to walk away from”. Remembering is a sacred liturgy that grounds and equips us with identity, meaning, and purpose. It connects us to all life — the living, the dead, and the yet to be born.”

If the Spirit is the river,
then memory is its riverbank.

Vincent Harding wrote that the struggle for freedom did not begin in 1619. It began deep in the belly of Africa and flowed as a river fed by many streams.

Dr. Jeremiah Wright reminds us that this river produced the Afro-Christian Convention and feeds the the Fifth Stream of our beloved United Church of Christ.

The river did not begin with us.
And it will not end with us.

It has crossed oceans.
It has flowed beneath oppression.
It has carved channels through injustice.

It still flows.
Lent is not a season of forgetting.

It is a season of remembering.
We do not enter this journey searching for living water.
We enter it standing in a river that is already flowing within us.

Section I

The River's Source

Day 1: The River Begins

John 7:37–39 If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'

Jesus promises rivers of living water flowing from within believers. When enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic, the river within them crossed too. Chains did not stop it. Waters did not drown it.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Respond:

Take one spiritual action connected to today's lesson. (pray, write, encourage)

Remember: The river is still flowing.

Day 2: Passing Through the Waters

Isaiah 43:2 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.*

Reflection:

The Atlantic was horror beyond language, yet faith survived. The promise was God's sustaining presence.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Respond:

Write down a moment when you endured hardship. Offer gratitude. Take one spiritual action: sing, pray, encourage.

Day 3: Songs Beneath the Surface

Psalms 137:1 *By the waters of Babylon...* In hush harbors, the Invisible Church nurtured faith beneath surveillance.

Reflection:

In hush harbors, faith moved beneath visibility. Songs carried theology. Prayer carried resistance.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Respond: Sing, pray, write, encourage.

Remember: The river is still flowing.

Day 4: Springs in the Invisible Church

John 4:14 *The water that I shall give them will become in him a spring...*

Reflection: Before there was visibility, there was invisibility. The invisible church was a spring.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Respond:

Identify one hidden blessing. Journal your reflection.

Remember: The river is still flowing.

Day 5: Wells in the Wilderness

Genesis 21:19 *Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.*

Reflection:

Faith became the survival system.

Wells do not remove the wilderness.

They make life possible within it.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Respond:

Recall a wilderness season. Strengthen someone else's hope today.

Remember: The river is still flowing.

Day 6: Memory as a Riverbank

Psalms 102:18 *Let this be recorded for a generation come.* Memory preserves the river's identity.

Reflect:

Where does this theme appear in your life?

Journal: Write your personal reflections.

Respond: Take one spiritual action connected to today's lesson.

Remember: The river is still flowing.

Day 7: The River That Could Not be Stopped

Amos 5:24 *Let justice roll down like waters.*

The river flows today through 66 Afro-Christian churches and in various ministries of the United Church of Christ.