

# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

## The Ghost Of WLBT

By: Bernice Powell Jackson

Forty years ago, African Americans in Mississippi did not see any blacks on their television screens although about half of the residents in the Jackson area were black. They did not see news of the civil rights movement, which others across the nation saw. If Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was scheduled for a program, it simply was not carried. Then came a lawsuit against the owners of WLBT, the Jackson television station, and it all changed – not only for the people of Jackson, but for the whole nation. It was the United Church of Christ, which worked with a local group of African American citizens to challenge the license of WLBT owners.

It's a story well known and remembered by many African Americans within the broadcast industry, but has been forgotten by many in the general public. But history is now being repeated in a very chilling manner and not just in Jackson, Mississippi, but in New York City and all across the nation.

It seems that the NBC and CBS television networks are refusing to run a 30 second television ad from the United Church of Christ (UCC) because the ad's all-inclusive welcome has been deemed "too controversial." The ad is part of the denomination's new, broad identity campaign set to begin airing during the Advent season. It states that, like Jesus, the UCC seeks to welcome all people, regardless of race, ability, economic circumstance or sexual orientation. "No matter who you are or where you are on your journey, you are welcome here," the ad states.

The frightening response of the two networks was that because the commercial even tangentially includes gay and lesbian persons, it is too controversial to sell air-time to the UCC for these commercials. The actual words of the CBS response were, "Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations and the fact that the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the CBS and UPN networks." (Italics are mine.)

The United Church of Christ General Minister and President John Thomas said, in response, "It's ironic that after a political season awash in commercials based on fear and deception by both parties seen on all the major networks, an ad with a message of welcome and inclusion would be deemed too controversial." Ron Buford, UCC coordinator for the identity campaign of which the ads are one part, added, "In the 1960s the issue was the mixing of the races. Today, the issue appears to be sexual orientation. In both cases, it's about exclusion."

The television ads are directed to those persons who feel alienated, not welcome or excluded by the church. In focus groups and test market research done earlier this year, the UCC found many people who fit into such a category and so the ads were designed to reach out to them, especially during the Advent season leading up to Christmas. Nothing in the UCC ad deals with gay marriage. It does, however, deal with exclusion.

The chilling aspect of all of this is that some broadcasters seem now to be taking their cues from government leaders and in response to legislation which has not yet been introduced, passed or ratified. "The consolidation of TV network ownership into the

hands of a few executives today puts freedom of speech and freedom of religious expression in jeopardy," says former FCC Commissioner Gloria Tristani, currently managing director of the UCC's Office of Communication, Inc. "By refusing to air the UCC's paid commercial, CBS and NBC are stifling religious expression. They are denying the communities they serve a suitable access to differing ideas and expressions," she added.

If the airwaves are no longer owned by the public and if network executives can make such a decision about this ad, then every group whose message might be considered at all controversial must beware. Rev. Martin Niemoller was a 20th century German Protestant pastor who was attributed with this quote, "When Hitler attacked the Jews, I was not a Jew and therefore I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic and therefore I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and industrialists, I was not a member of the unions and I was not concerned. Then Hitler attacked me and the Protestant Church and there was nobody left to be concerned." If we remain silent at this attack on our right of freedom of speech, then our nation is in grave danger. The story of WLBT, the Ghost of Christmas Past, visits us. Let's pray and work for a happy ending.

(Note: You may contact your local NBC or CBS affiliate.)



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