

Amistad Interfaith Service
ST. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral
Buffalo, NY
September 10, 2003

Good Evening. I bring you greetings in a spirit of justice and peace on behalf of the Covenanted Ministries of the National office of the United Church of Christ, officers and staff. It is truly an honor and blessing to be here with you commemorating and celebrating the Amistad Africans and the legacy of the Amistad experience.

As we gather at this historic moment, we are aware of the cloud of witnesses consisting of the Amistad Africans, their defenders and supporters. We are reminded of those throughout history who fought in various ways with an indomitable spirit for what was right, what was fair, what was just, in a world that even today, still calls us to live out our faith in ways leading to a higher level of social consciousness and Christian witness.

The Amistad story is a story of collaboration and the building of a coalition consisting of the Amistad Africans, white abolitionists and African American free men, female abolitionist, and people of different faith traditions joining together in the pursuit of justice. Several members of the early New England Congregational church, one of the forebears of the present day United Church of Christ, were organizers of this coalition which became known as the Amistad Committee.

Supporters of slavery sought to seal the plight of the Amistad Africans in 1839. A plight rooted in the dehumanization of African people through their enslavement and sanctioned by structures, systems and institutions of the day, including the church. When we look at Africa, 1839, forty-nine young men, three girls and one boy (most from the Mendi culture of western Africa), were kidnaped and cast into the transatlantic slave trade. These fifty-three were counted among several hundred other Africans on the Portugese slave ship Tecora.

The Tecora set sail from western Africa to the New World, stopping in Havana, Cuba where the fifty-three Africans were purchased illegally by two Spaniards, Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes, crew of the Spanish ship La Amistad. La Amistad, captained by Ramon Ferrer, was a coastal trader/cargo ship. Unlike vessels designated specifically for the trafficking of illegally captured Africans, the Amistad was not a slave ship.

Mendi leader Sengbe (known as Cinque by the Spanish), led a revolt aboard the vessel resulting in the death of Captain Ferrer and taking of Ruiz and Montes as prisoners. Sengbe orders them to sail the Amistad eastward, which he considered would be toward Africa. The Spaniards sail east by day and northwest by night, tricking the Africans and moving them closer to the American coast. The U.S. Coast Guard ship Washington encounters the Amistad off the tip of Long Island. Sengbe and his companions are arrested and the Amistad is towed to New London, CT. Slavery is still legal in Connecticut. The Africans are charged with mutiny and piracy and jailed in New Haven, CT.

But, there are always voices of conscience within the community of faith, urging God's people to remember God's plan for humanity and the teachings of Jesus Christ of freedom and affirmation of everyone regardless of race, culture and other forms of human diversity. History teaches us that in our humanness we have often turn God's gift of diversity into barriers. The United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith acknowledges that we are called to commit ourselves to embody God's love for all people, to name and confront the powers of evil within and among us, to join the oppressed in the struggle for liberation, and to embrace the unity of Christ's church. Convictions which continue to guide the UCC's witness today as in 1839.

Members of the Amistad Committee, such as Joshua Levitt, a lawyer and Congregational pastor and editor of the *Emancipator*, the journal of the American Anti-

Slavery Society, Simeon S. Jocelyn, a white congregational minister who became the first pastor of a black Congregational church, today known as Dixwell Avenue United Church of Christ, New Haven, CT, Lewis Tappan, a prosperous merchant and evangelical abolitionist, whose home was burned down by members of his own church due to his convictions, and James Pennington, an escaped slave and pastor of the First Colored Congregational Church in Hartford, through their faith and pursuit for social justice, allow us to envision and embrace possibilities for change within ourselves, our institutions, and our society.

The Amistad story is a story of charity and justice. As the fifty-three Mendi captives were embroiled in the legal arguments of whether they were kidnaped, slave, or free, the Amistad Committee and members of the Congregational church looked after their day to day needs. Dr. Josiah Willard Gibbs, a professor of theology and sacred literature at Yale sought to break the language barrier by learning to count to ten in Mendi and walking the docks of New York until he found James Covey and Charles Pratt, two sailors who recognized the language. The Amistad Africans were tutored in English, given religious instruction, and monies were raised for their defense and repatriation.

Court proceedings begin in U.S. Circuit Court, Hartford, CT. The defense attorney, Roger Sherman Baldwin argues that the Africans are free people, held illegally due to falsified documents, were kidnaped and transported and therefore were not anyone's property. The court agreed. The decision is appealed by President Van Buren's administration and the "Amistads" become the first human rights case tried before the U.S. Supreme Court., Former President John Quincy Adams successfully argues the case and they are released. The Amistad Africans were not slaves but free and they wanted to return home, to Africa. Members of the early Congregational church, who dared to utilize their faith as a tool to witness for justice

were instrumental in making this a reality. They taught us that injustice must be recognized, once recognized it must be named, and once named it must be acted upon.

But, the Amistad story is yet another story. It is the story of promise and hope for today. During the Amistad's visit to Cleveland, community dialogues were held. Some who came did not know the story and some who had heard the story did not know the extent to which the faith community had been involved. One of the goals of the dialogues was to encourage people to think, talk, and act regarding the racial justice issues which plague us today. We must continue as people of faith and a society to address the "Amistads" in our midst. Who or what are the "Amistads" of today? Where are the bridges or potential for bridges across differences today? Can there be racial reconciliation today without acknowledgment and restitution for injustices of yesterday? What can we do individually and collectively to promote the lessons from the Amistad experience each and everyday?

As we move forward from this day of remembrance let's not forget the words of Cinque, when he said "Give us Free". May we continue to ask God to free us from the shackles of oppressive attitudes, behaviors, and environments. And in that freedom be

renewed to serve as advocates for justice, ambassadors of peace and builders of community.

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Data compiled from Voices of Freedom Amistad Curriculum- The Amistad Event: Background Information and What You Didn't See At The Movies: The Real Story, Free Men: The Amistad Revolt and The Anti-Slavery Movement- The Connecticut Historical Society, The Amistad Event- United Church of Christ Resources, Amistad- Spielberg Film, A Study guide for church groups, United Church of Christ, Amistad America, Most Frequently Asked Questions, Witness for Justice: The Amistad Lives.

