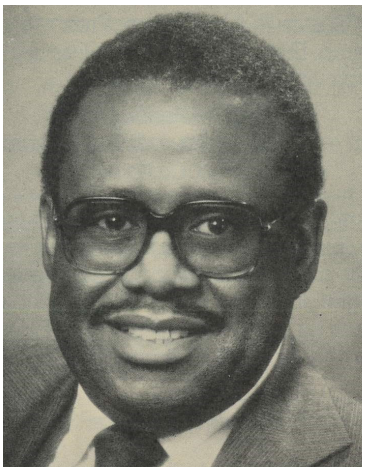
African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

James Costen



Reverend Dr. James (Jim) Costen was born on October 5, 1931, in Omaha, Nebraska. He graduated from Johnson C. Smith University in 1953 before entering the school's Theological Seminary, where he graduated in 1964. Costen was either the earliest or one of the earliest African American students to attend the Seminary.

After his ordination in January 1956, Jim served as pastor of Mount Pisgah Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, N.C. He worked closely with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement, including organizing King's visit to Rocky Mount in 1962. In 1965, Jim received the call to serve as pastor of the Church of the Master Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He was integral in establishing the church, which was deliberately organized as the first interracial Presbyterian congregation in Atlanta.

In 1969, Jim became dean of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, which had been newly relocated at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. Jim became the 5th president of ITC in 1983, serving in that role until his retirement in 1998. He was later named President Emeritus.

Jim served as moderator of the 194th General Assembly of the UPCUSA in 1982, becoming the 4th African American to hold the role. Additionally, he served as moderator of the UPCUSA's 195th General Assembly in 1983, when the UPCUSA and the PCUS reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Jim's other roles in the Presbyterian Church included being chairperson of numerous committees, including the General Assembly Permanent Nominations Committee, the Minority Taskforce on Reunion, and the General Assembly Council. Nationally, he served on the board of trustees of the Fund for Theological Education and was a member of the Black Theology Project and the Society for the Study of Black Religion.

Jim passed away on April 11, 2003, leaving behind a legacy of work as an administrator of religious education and as a Presbyterian moderator.

Former GA Moderators and their wives, 1983 Reunion march. From left to right: Rev. James H. Costen, Melva Wilson Costen, Rev. John F. Anderson, and Nancy Anderson.

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Read more about Rev. Dr. Costen on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series

AALC

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