



Biographical
Portrait

Reta L. Bigham*

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James Hutten Costen, the youngest child of the late William James Costen and Mary Lou Brookings Costen, was born in Omaha, Nebraska. William was born in Baltimore, Maryland and later moved to Omaha, the site of the headquarters of Union Pacific Railway. He was a private car pullman porter for the president of the company, Edward Harriman, the father of American diplomat Averell Harriman. Mary Lou was born in Owensboro, Kentucky. In the 1920s, she moved to Omaha Nebraska to assist an uncle who operated a mortuary. Mary and William were introduced to each other by Silas Johnson, a funeral director and friend of William. They were married and Mary conceived eight children. Three boys survived: William Theodore, Charles Alexander (now deceased), and James Hutten. William Theodore, the oldest, still resides in Omaha.

Mary Lou Costen promised her husband on his death bed that she would enroll their sons in the Roman Catholic parochial schools that had the reputation of a good educational program. She was faithful to her promise. The Costen boys were raised as Roman Catholics. As a young Black lad growing up in Omaha, the vocational aspirations of Jimmy (as he was best known) did not exceed the thought of working with the railway company or meat-packing plant. A turning point

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occurred during his junior year in high school. He considered attending college. Because his ambition was not to become a Catholic priest, Jimmy turned to other options. A Presbyterian church was located across the street from the Costen home and he began to worship there. He became enamored with the minister of this church and joined this congregation. Thus began the active, productive life as a Presbyterian for James Hutten Costen.

After his high school graduation, Jimmy enrolled at Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) in Charlotte, North Carolina and graduated with honors in 1953. While at JCSU, he met a young lady, Melva Wilson, who became his lifetime partner. Both he and Melva graduated in 1953 and on Baccalaureate Sunday, May 24, they were joined in holy matrimony in the Johnson C. Smith University Church. To this union, three children were born: James Hutten, II, Cheryl Leatrice and Craig Lamont.

The thirst for increasing his knowledge in the area of Philosophy and Religion was the catalyst for Jim to continue his education at the theological seminary of Johnson C. Smith, receiving with highest honors the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1956. His pursuit of the Master of Theology degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, resulted in his graduating in 1964 as the seminary's first Black enrollee.

Between the completion of the B.D. degree and enrolling in the Th.M. program, Jim was ordained a Presbyterian minister. He served as pastor of the Mount Pisgah Presbyterian Church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. In 1963, while pastoring at Mount Pisgah,

he attended a denominational meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio. Charles Talley, executive in charge of Presbyterian churches in the states of Georgia, Florida and South Carolina, returned with Jim on the same plane. Dr. Talley indicated that his hope was to establish another Presbyterian church in Atlanta. At that time, there was only one predominantly Black Presbyterian church—Radcliffe. This conversation led to Jim's consent to visit Atlanta. He had never spent time in Atlanta. C. T. Vivian, a key player in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, whom Jim had met at a meeting of SCLC in Richmond, Virginia, gave him a tour of the city. Impressed by what he saw, Jim returned to Rocky Mount, contacted Dr. Talley and indicated that he would seriously consider moving to Atlanta.

Subsequently, Jim returned to Atlanta on January 27, 1965 to initiate the tasks necessary for organizing the new Presbyterian church. After conducting feasibility studies and taking surveys, it was decided that the church would be located in southwest Atlanta. During this time, Jim resided at the historical Waluhaje Hotel on West Lake Avenue in southwest Atlanta. Owned by the Aiken family, it was the only Black residential hotel in Atlanta. (The name of the hotel was derived by using the first two letters of the names of four members of the Aiken family—Walter, Lucy, Hazel, and Jenny.)

Jim's first action was a meeting with a small group of interested persons in the Bamboo Room of the hotel. It was decided that a new Presbyterian church would be established and built in southwest Atlanta. The name of the church was Church of the Master Presbyterian Church. By late spring of 1965 the size of

the charter members had grown to the point of requiring a larger meeting facility. Negotiations were made with the Atlanta Public School System to use the Margaret Fain Elementary School on Delmar Lane in the Adamsville area of Atlanta. Land purchased for the church building was located on Gordon Road (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) next to Thornton Mortuary. Before building the permanent structure, the Church of the Master held worship services in several locations—Margaret Fain Elementary School, the auditorium of Blayton Business College, and Thornton Mortuary (to establish proximity to the permanent structure).

Human resources were identified and financial resources were raised. Construction of the church was completed on October 28, 1968. (Upon completion, Pastor Costen was on a six-week world-mission tour.) Shortly thereafter, the official move was made and dedication services were held. Under Pastor Costen's leadership, the membership grew to 180. Church of the Master was one of the few interracial congregations in Atlanta; its membership was 15% white when Pastor Costen left after four and one-half years of service.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, John Pharr, then pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC, characterized Jim, in his introduction, as "one who brings dreams to fruition." An example of this trait was the birth of the Harbison Development Corporation in 1967. The Presbyterian Church owned and operated Harbison Junior College in Irmo, South Carolina, twelve miles west of Columbia. (Melva Wilson Costen is a graduate of Harbison Junior College.) Originally, the parcel of

land on which the college was located was approximately 5,000 acres. However, portions of the land were sold, and eventually only 1,020 acres remained. It was then that Jim dreamed of this land becoming a community of several apartment complexes and several individual homes. The federal government had just instituted a grant program, Title IV, for community development. The "dreamer" contacted Robert Thompson in the regional office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in Atlanta. After surveying the area with Jim, Mr. Thompson agreed that the idea was good and assisted in the preparation of application processes.

HUD, at that time, was in the process of establishing Title VII, a program that had a much broader concept of community development. A master plan was developed and Jim convinced the Presbyterian Church to expand the original idea. Mr. Thompson's positive commitment to this project aided in the Presbyterian Church attaining a loan commitment from HUD in the amount of \$13,000,000. This loan was earmarked for the installation of the infrastructure, streets, sewer, and the procurement of an additional 780 acres of land, bringing the total to 1800 acres. The broadened goal was to have a community of 25,000 persons upon completion that would include a mix of all socioeconomic levels, racial groups, as well as commercial and industrial usage.

Title VII was discontinued by HUD in the early 1980s, causing a reorganization in the ownership of the Harbison Development Corporation, Inc. An immediate liquidation of the outstanding loan resulted in a New York-based company, Friedman's, becoming the new owner. The change in ownership occurred in

1983 at an opportune time for Jim Costen because of his new responsibilities as president of ITC. Today, the Harbison community has a population of 15,000 and is still growing. Visiting the community whenever he is in the area, Jim attributes the successful existence of Harbison to the strong establishment of its concept, community development and governance. In his words, "It is amazing to see everything we planned still in place."

The Religion Department of Jim's alma mater, Johnson C. Smith University, moved from Charlotte to Atlanta in 1969. Through official action of the University Board of Trustees and the 182nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), it became one of the constituent seminaries, Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, of Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). Filling the position of dean of the seminary was not difficult. An academically well-prepared alumnus of JCSU, a "mover" and "shaker" in the Presbyterian Church, and a pastor with successful organizational and administrative skills was named as the first dean of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary—James Hutten Costen. Thus began the twenty-eight year relationship of JHC and ITC.

In 1981 while attending the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, Arizona, Robert Newbold, then the assistant to the Stated Clerk, planted the "seed" in Jim's mind to consider becoming Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. The seed began to germinate and in 1982 Jim was endorsed by the Georgia Presbytery as a candidate for Moderator. There were five candidates nominated; however, on June 21, 1982 at the General Assembly in Hartford, Connecticut,

James H. Costen was elected Moderator of the Presbyterian Church.

The primary issue during Moderator Costen's term was the uniting of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. (the southern branch) and the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (the northern branch). A major proponent of the merger, it was during Jim's tenure as Moderator that the northern branch of the Presbyterian Church (of which he was a member) voted unanimously to endorse the union issue. During a meeting in the summer of 1982, the southern branch also voted to enter into union. The actual meeting of the uniting communion was held on June 10 during the 1983 General Assembly in Atlanta. Because this issue began during Jim's tenure, he also moderated during much of the 1983 General Assembly, the only Moderator in the history of the Presbyterian Church to serve two General Assemblies. The 1983 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church became the birthplace of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

It is customary that the Moderator becomes a member of the General Assembly Council (a two-year term) immediately following the one-year term as Moderator. The task of the Council of which Jim was a member was to delineate all of the minute details of the uniting of the Presbyterian Church.

1983 is a year full of outstanding accomplishments in the life of Jim Costen. In December of that year he became president of Interdenominational Theological Center. Under his leadership ITC has realized many of the dreams envisioned at its founding in 1958. The Institution has grown to one of the nation's strongest theological schools and the largest pre-

dominantly Black seminary in the world, currently enrolling more than 450 degree students and over 500 persons in Extension Education Programs in fifty-two sites throughout the country. The degree students represent thirty states and fifteen countries. The Institution's annual budget has more than tripled during his tenure, and the permanent endowment has more than doubled to over \$7.4 million. The number and quality of the faculty have been improved, resulting in numerous scholarly publications and participation in denominational and local church activities.

Along with the demanding responsibilities of leading and guiding ITC in its major accomplishments, Jim Costen has been a key player in many professional and community organizations. President Costen serves as chair of the Fund for Theological Education, and past chairperson and current member of the Atlanta Theological Association. He is the immediate past president of the Association of Theological Schools, a member of its Executive Committee, and chair of its Personnel Committee. He also serves on the East Lake Community Foundation and is chair of its Spiritual Life Initiative Committee, immediate past chair of the Atlanta University Center Council of Presidents, and former member of the Executive and Policy Advisory Board of the Atlanta Project. He is a member of the Society for the Study of Black Religion, and was a member of committees and advisory groups for the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games.

Dr. Costen's accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. He is a member of Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society and the International Society of Theta Phi—the honor society for theological students, scholars in

the field of religion and outstanding religious leaders. He holds honorary doctorate degrees from seven colleges and universities, along with numerous other awards and honors. He is continuously sought as a speaker on college and seminary campuses, in professional associations and in churches of many denominations.

President Costen's international travels have taken him to numerous countries around the world. Two noteworthy honors were bestowed upon him in African countries. A community well was dug near Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and in 1970 the well was named in honor of James H. Costen. The second honor occurred in Nairobi, Kenya for Jim and Melva. On one of their many trips to Nairobi, the country was in the midst of a drought. The day that they arrived the rains came. The nationalists honored Melva with the name *Nyambura*—one who brings rain. They gave Jim the name *Macharia*—one who is a blessing to others.

While serving as administrative dean of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary (JCSTS), Dean Costen visited Kenya for the first time in 1974. Initially, he offered a scholarship for one student from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) to attend JCSTS/ITC. One scholarship was offered each year afterward and resulted in the provision of scholarships for twenty-two seminarians from the PCEA. Many of these alumni have returned to their home countries and are now serving in various significant ministries as church leaders. Because Dr. Costen provided educational-degree opportunities for several of the ministers in Kenya, he is considered

a blessing to others.

In 1991 the Board of Trustees of ITC approved a six-month sabbatical for President Costen. His wife, Melva, was also granted a sabbatical from her teaching responsibilities. The main thrust of the leave was to visit the African countries where ITC graduates were located. These alumni were notified prior to their visit. The itinerary included Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zaire, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, and Egypt. An entire month was spent in Kenya. President Costen kept a detailed journal of their trip. During this sabbatical, President Costen completed a project that for several years he had wanted to accomplish. He made notes of significant life events from his childhood to the present. Among his retirement plans is a possible autobiography.

Upon his retirement in July 1997, he will spend parts of each year in Nairobi, Kenya where he will serve as a Volunteer in Mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This appointment as Director of Development for the Presbyterian Church in East Africa is in the areas of theological and continuing education.

In addition to their three children, Dr. Costen and his wife, Melva, have seven grandchildren. Describing them, Dr. Costen unequivocally states, "They are the finest grandchildren in which God blew breath." Ranging in ages from nineteen to one and one-half years, the oldest, Josef, is following in the footsteps of his grandparents. He is a freshman at Johnson C. Smith University.

In a summation of his tenure at ITC, Dr. Costen proudly states,

“The experience of being president of ITC has been the highlight of my career. It is primarily because ITC represents the epitome of what the world needs to be. It is a community that has outstanding potential; it is a demonstration of the Beloved Community. ITC is the greatest institution I know in the United States. Being president during this pivotal period of its history has been a rewarding experience, and I thank God for this opportunity.”

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF



