

Presbyterians and the Struggle for Civil Rights

by Frederick J. Heuser



In 2013, the nation and the global community will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington. The story of how Presbyterians participated in the struggle for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s is an important part of our history that continues to shape the Presbyterian ethos to this day.

Many Presbyterians saw the civil rights movement as a theological and civic mandate, yet opinions were divided. In congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, as well as through ecumenical organizations like the National Council of the Churches of Christ, the struggle for civil rights was truly waged locally, regionally, and nationally.

Some Presbyterians, like Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake, were highly visible throughout the movement. Other Presbyterians, like William Watkins or J. Metz

Rollins, though less visible, were no less effective. Presbyterian Life chronicled part of the story of the American Presbyterian experience during the civil rights movement, but for each of those who attained visibility in the movement there were thousands of unnamed Presbyterians who participated in the struggle and whose stories go untold.

One hundred and sixty years ago, Cortlandt Van Rensselaer orchestrated the organization of the Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS) at the meeting of the Old School General Assembly in Charleston, South Carolina. The society's constitution clearly defined the purpose of the new organization: "to collect and preserve the materials of the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and to promote the knowledge of said history as far as possible."¹

As the national archives for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Presbyterian Historical Society has preserved our history from the fires that consume and the folly that forgets. Ensuring that this history, our documentary heritage, would be

available for future generations was the motivation that spurred Van Rensselaer and others to take action sixteen decades ago. That same ideal has inspired succeeding generations at PHS and continues to do so.

The story of how Presbyterians participated in the struggle for civil rights is an important part of our history that continues to shape the Presbyterian ethos to this day, and PHS has a unique collection of archival materials that illustrate this tumultuous time.

In 1986 I made a routine visit to the denomination's offices at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. The purpose of my trip was to assist staff with records questions and facilitate

the transfer of records to the archives in Philadelphia. Toward the end of the day, I wandered into an office that contained media materials—reel-to-reel tapes of various sizes, audiocassettes, phonograph records, and recording equipment. Stacked neatly on a shelf were boxes of reel-to-reel magnetic tapes, labeled by subject, date, and event.

I picked up a box at random and discovered the words: "MLK GA, 1958." Another I glanced at read: "MX, 1963." I had no idea what their contents might be, but decided to take them back to the archives to resolve this question. As I left that room, I entered one filled with books—what had been a library or resource center used by the staff. I began to peruse

Frederick J. Heuser is the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Historical Society, an Associate Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and the Chief Historical Officer for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He has written about Presbyterian missionaries, the value of history for congregations, and the nature of conflict within the American Presbyterian family. He also serves with James Moorhead as the Senior Editor of the *Journal of Presbyterian History*.



Clergy leading a civil rights march on June 15, 1964 in Washington, D.C. (Religious News Service Records, RT 1040, box 104, number 31160, Presbyterian Historical Society)

the shelves, looking for anything that might be worth incorporating in our library in Philadelphia. I picked up a volume entitled *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, a work I recognized by its author, Martin Luther King, Jr. When I opened the book, I found the inscription: “To Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, in appreciation for your genuine good-will and great humanitarian concern. MLK, Jr.” I wondered how this autographed book came to rest in this place, and how Eugene Carson Blake became the recipient of such a gift.

When I returned to Philadelphia the next day, I set about finding answers for some of these questions. The tape with the title, “MLK GA” was indeed of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recorded during a General Assembly breakfast meeting in 1958 at which Dr. King was the keynote speaker. And the other tape—“MX 1963”—was a recording of Malcolm X, the militant black leader assassinated in 1965, who also had spoken before the General Assembly.

I have long since forgotten what both men said on those nearly fifty-year-old tapes. But their presence at our General Assembly during that time symbolized the church’s concern for the growing movement for civil rights in this country during the 1950s and 1960s. Eugene Carson Blake, who was the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) during this time, knew Martin Luther King, Jr. and indeed would demonstrate his own personal commitment to civil rights by his actions several years later, when he was arrested protesting against the segregation of a Baltimore amusement park.

The presence of the tapes and the book symbolize our church’s growing concern for civil rights in a country torn apart by racism. The records generated by our sessions, presbyteries and other governing



Large crowd around Washington Monument during the March on Washington. (Religious News Service, from *Presbyterian Life*, Oct 1, 1963)

bodies contain the story of our church's role in that historic movement. The personal papers left by those who participated in the movement help to tell a story that is complex, complicated, and compelling.

Many Presbyterians who were involved in the struggle for civil rights are unlikely to be found in history books. While many of their contemporaries are widely recognized in the struggle for civil rights, these Presbyterians, with a few exceptions, achieved little notoriety. Their actions during this tumultuous period in our history are reflected in a variety of re-

cords that are preserved at the Presbyterian Historical Society as part of the PC(USA)'s documentary heritage. These collective experiences are an important part of both our church's and nation's history.

One of these individuals is William Watkins, a Presbyterian minister. In 1962, Watkins was pastor of the Crerar Memorial Presbyterian Church, a predominately African-American congregation on the south side of Chicago. Watkins was involved with the Albany Movement, an effort to gain equal rights for the African-American citizens of Albany, Geor-



Martin Luther King, Jr., Eugene Carson Blake and other speakers at the March on Washington. (Religious News Service, from *Presbyterian Life*, Oct 1, 1963)

gia. On August 28, 1962, he was among a group including approximately seventy-five clergy who participated in a civil rights prayer vigil in Albany that subsequently resulted in their arrest. Responding to a telegraph invitation sent by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. on August 22, 1962, Watkins and others were encouraged to “stand with the people of Albany as they strive for freedom.” King noted, “Albany is not a local situation, but a crisis in the national life of this democracy. When citizens are denied the right to pray and picket, when churches are burned for their use as voter registration centers, our nation suffers greatly.”²

The actions of Watkins and others during these years did much to change the fabric of America. Their experience has also shaped what it means to be a Presbyterian today, fifty years after that clarion call to action.

The 1950s and 1960s were decades when Presbyterians, like Americans in general, had to come to terms with the racism that had been deeply embedded in American society since the founding of the United States. That racism assumed a new level in the years following the American Civil War. Despite the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the U.S. constitution, the concept of “separate but equal”—affirmed by the Supreme Court in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896—became a part of the American mindset and legal landscape. Inter-

estingly, Associate Supreme Court Justice John M. Harlan, a Presbyterian, had argued against the majority decision in the *Plessy* case, claiming that the constitution was colorblind.³

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision remained the law of the land until 1954, when the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* case overturned the legal foundation for segregation. While that important Supreme Court decision ended the legal segregation of the nation’s school systems, it did not end the struggle for civil rights. That struggle entered a new phase in 1954.

As early as 1946, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) adopted the concept of a “non-segregated church in a non-segregated society.” During the 1950s, both the PCUSA and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) did away with segregation in their synods. Many Presbyterians also supported the peaceful civil rights protests eventually led by Dr. King and his followers. But many did not. Like other Americans, Presbyterians remained divided over the struggle for civil rights.

In the early 1960s, both the PCUS and the UPCUSA addressed racial and ethnic issues among Presbyterians and in society. In 1963, during the famous March on Washington when Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, Presbyterians from both north and south of the Mason Dixon line were among the more than 200,000 gathered that day. In 1964, the UPCUSA elected its first African-American moderator, Edler Hawkins; the PCUS elected their first African-American moderator, Lawrence Bottoms, a decade later in 1974. Over the next eight years Presbyterians in both the UPCUSA and the PCUS would continue to engage with the cultural conflict regarding race in America, supporting the efforts of those who sought to bring about racial justice and equality.⁴

It is hard to comprehend Presbyterian involvement in the struggle for civil rights from any one point of view. Like any movement that involves social change, there were various perspectives that reflected the work of individuals, organizations, and diverse governing bodies. Individual Presbyterians, congregations throughout the country, presbyteries, and the General Assembly, as well as ecumenical organizations like the National Council of the Churches of Christ, were all caught up in the turmoil of the times. The struggle for civil rights was indeed waged locally, regionally, and nationally.

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Telegram to the Presbytery of Washburn, 1958. (Presbytery of Washburn records, number 140956, box 2, Presbyterian Historical Society)

One source that captured these diverse perspectives was *Presbyterian Life*, a semimonthly publication that documented the church's growing involvement in this great struggle. In the pages of *Presbyterian Life*, both the temper of the times and the growing concern for racial justice within the Presbyterian Church and the ecumenical community became increasingly manifest.

In a special report that appeared in the June 1, 1962 issue, entitled "Troubleshooters of the Racial Crisis," *Presbyterian Life* chronicled the ministry of two UPCUSA ministers: J. Metz Rollins, an African American, and John H. Marion, a white man. Both had been born and educated in the South and both were involved in a special ministry that pursued prevention and resolution of problems that arose from racial tension. Rollins and Marion began their ministry in Nashville in 1958. Their mission was to demonstrate that the UPCUSA stood for a non-segregated church and a non-segregated society. In 1960, Rollins was arrested for his involvement in lunch counter sit-ins. A

year later, in February of 1961, a group of white teenagers physically assaulted him for attempting to intervene in a physical confrontation between them and a group of young African-American demonstrators.

The list of places both men visited "during the last four years," *Presbyterian Life* noted in 1962, "reads like a table of contents for a book about the desegregation movement: Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte, Little Rock, Montgomery, Tallahassee.... In these places they have consulted with citizens' groups and ministers' organizations, addressed mass meetings or visited demonstrators in jail." In the same issue, *Presbyterian Life* shared high praise for these two ministers from Reverend Will D. Campbell, racial and cultural relations representative for the National Council of Churches:

They blow a lonely horn, but its clarion call is loud and clear, and they are heard. It is the clear voice of Jack to a jailer in Brownsville, Tennessee who stands guard over an-



United Presbyterian ministers Metz Rollins and John Marion. (Photograph by Bernard Ikeler, *Presbyterian Life*, June 1, 1962)

other clergyman. It is the loud reminder of Metz as he goes silently to jail with a group which has sought to be served at a southern restaurant. When the history of the American racial crisis of the mid-twentieth century is written, it will have much to say about the Church. A lot of it will be unfavorable. But no reputable historian could say that the Church was not there. It is there in the person of [these] two ministers ... whose message resembles that of the prophets Amos and Micah.⁵

Rollins and Marion were not alone in this struggle for racial justice. Presbyterian ministers, like William Watkins, and laity from across the country joined in. The Reverend Dunbar Ogden was there at Little Rock's Central High in 1957, helping to escort seven African-American students through an angry mob toward Central High. Ogden had been a rather reticent participant, unsure whether it truly was "church business" to be involved in demonstrations such as this one. However, he had a "conversion experience" literally moments before he and his son accompanied the seven students to the school. It was in the tension of the moment that this Presbyterian minister, a respected figure in the Little Rock community, understood that segregation is the church's business.

It was not long after Ogden led those children toward Central High that a committee from his church, Central Presbyterian Church of Little Rock, requested that he find another position, "not within months, but within weeks." Ogden's experience was not uncommon.⁶

However not all churches responded with disdain to their pastors' involvement in the civil rights movement. In Birmingham, Alabama, the ministry of Dr. James Gregory at Birmingham's Woodlawn Presbyterian Church succeeded in doing things that many would have thought impossible in the city that became a symbol in the struggle for racial justice. In his first year at that church in 1959, he preached a sermon on race relations without alienating his white congregants. Before the service, Dr. Gregory, in his calm, sincere manner, told his session: "Today is Race Relations Sunday. I have always preached on race relations and I see no reason why I shouldn't this year. The problem certainly hasn't gone away—rather, we in the South are faced with a showdown, and we are going to have to be ready." Later, when the city commission moved to close Birmingham's parks in 1961 rather than obey a court order to integrate them, it was the session of the Woodlawn Presbyterian Church—one of the very few religious groups in the city to do so—that petitioned the commission to keep the parks open.⁷

Eight of Birmingham's clergy, during one of the city's most severe periods of racial tension, prepared a public statement which called the nonviolent protests against discrimination "unwise and untimely" and questioned the presence of "outsiders." While in the city jail, the chief "outsider," the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. penned a lengthy and considered reply to the clergy's statement. His response, now known as "Letter from Birmingham Jail," offers both a justification for the demonstrations in Birmingham as well as an important sociological, if not theological, treatise on what we today would call human rights. The editors of *Presbyterian Life* recognized the historic significance of King's letter, and published generous excerpts from it in the July 1, 1963 issue.

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people...

We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonvi-

olent pressure.... Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily ... [and] groups are more immoral than individuals.⁸

"I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate," King wrote. "I have almost reached the conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice."

King was especially critical of the religious community both in Birmingham and elsewhere. "In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause.... I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed." He concluded his letter:

So here we are, moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.... In my deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church.... I see the church as the body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.... I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future.... We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.⁹

The call for freedom resonated again one month later when more than 200,000 individuals descended upon the Lincoln Memorial in the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. If the events in Birmingham rocked the conscience of America, the March for Freedom stirred the souls of Americans across the nation. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed:

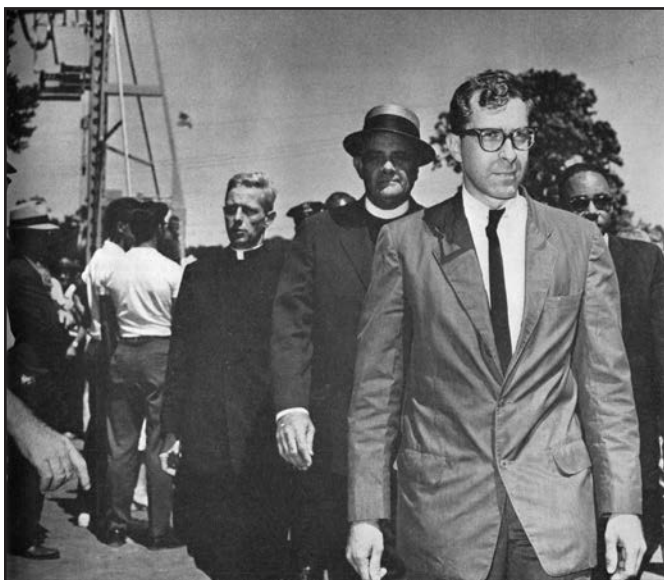
Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation

to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.¹⁰

The March on Washington brought together a "coalition of consciences"—labor unions, civil rights groups, and the religious community, in an unprecedented display of public action. The pledges made by the religious community—the American Jewish Congress, Roman Catholic Church, and National Council of Churches—were considerable. Speaking on behalf of the National Council of Churches and the UPCUSA, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake's words went to the heart of the issue:

I wish indeed that I were able to speak for all Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians as I speak on behalf of full justice and freedom for all born or living under the American flag. But that is precisely the point. If all members and all ministers ... were indeed ready to stand and march with you for jobs and freedom for the Negro people, together with all the Roman Catholic Church and all the synagogues of America, the battle for full civil rights and dignity would be already won. We do not ... come to this Lincoln Memorial in any arrogant spirit of moral or spiritual superiority to set the nation straight or to judge or to denounce the American people in whole or in part. Rather, we come—late, late we come—in the reconciling and repentant spirit in which Abraham Lincoln once replied to a delegation of morally arrogant churchmen. He said, 'Never say God is on our side, rather pray that we may be found on God's side.'¹¹

Several months later, in that same city in which King had been incarcerated, tragedy struck at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In a poignant editorial in the October 15, 1963 edition, *Presbyterian Life* addressed this most recent tragedy. "On an ordinary Sunday in Birmingham, Alabama, six Negro children were murdered, and some piece of the American dream died with them. What safer place can there be to send one's children than to Sunday school? Yet it was while they were having a recess between their lesson (on 'The Love That Forgives')



Eugene Carson Blake. (*Presbyterian Life*, October 1, 1963)

and the time of assembly for worship that three fourteen year old girls and one of eleven years, died by dynamite.” After describing the events following the tragedy and criticizing the white religious community of Birmingham for its complacency and complicity, *Presbyterian Life* concluded with the statement, “The question in the fall of 1963 seems to be: How many more innocents must die before it will be safe to send one’s children to Sunday school?”¹²

The Ku Klux Klan bombing in Birmingham galvanized both the church and the American nation. In its wake, ordinary citizens of diverse religious persuasions (including those without any) spoke out against segregation. Many commentators believe that the Klan bombing actually did more to strengthen the civil rights movement than deter it.

But the events of Birmingham, Washington, D.C., and other cities throughout the United States did not stir the souls of all American Christians, as Dr. Eugene Carson Blake had hoped. Shortly before the Sunday School bombing, on September 16, 1963, the UPCUSA Presbytery of West Tennessee in Greenfield, Tennessee approved what became known as “Overture 22” to deal with three specific issues related to the role of the church in what many perceived as “secular” matters. Overture 22 denied “the invitation of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and all others who share his persuasion to disregard law and violate constitutional laws to speak at sessions of the General Assembly.” The overture also sought to prohibit the allocation of funds to demonstrations, projects, marches, or sit-ins.

But the most substantial matter of all in Overture 22 concerned the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly. The West Tennessee brethren wanted to “remind the Reverend Eugene Carson Blake that by virtue of his office, his actions reflect on the United Presbyterian Church as a whole and request and require him to cease and desist from all violations of duly enacted laws of this land, and from any action that would bring disrepute or lower the dignity of the [UPCUSA] during such time as he is known as the ‘chief executive officer of the General Assembly.’”¹³

Eugene Carson Blake had been highly visible in the struggle for civil rights and was regarded as an ardent supporter of the movement. On the Fourth of July, 1963, Blake had been one of nine religious leaders arrested near Baltimore, Maryland as they demonstrated for the racial desegregation of an amusement park. A famous picture of Blake, with his customary straw hat, peering with a smile on his face from inside a police wagon, made the national news. While Stated Clerk, he was instrumental in integrating the workforce of the national Presbyterian offices. As president of the National Council of the Churches of Christ and a member of the central committee of the World Council of Churches, he joined in planning the church’s support for civil rights.

The issue of Overture 22 was problematic for the UPCUSA as their General Assembly convened in May of 1964. If the Assembly concurred with it, it would repudiate the Stated Clerk himself, the General Assembly pronouncements about race for the past several years, and the denomination’s fledgling Commission on Religion and Race. While few believed the Assembly would approve the overture, its existence provided an opportunity for the church to again speak out on the subject of race.

Instead of responding to the overture with a vote of “no action,” as had been recommended by the Bills and Overtures committee, the Assembly instead commended Blake for his courageous action and witness in the arena of race relations, and affirmed his right and his duty as Stated Clerk to speak and act in consonance with the pronouncements and actions of the General Assembly. The Assembly’s message to those Presbyterians who had supported Overture 22 was crystal clear. Upon final passage of the commendation, Blake was given a thunderous standing ovation. *Presbyterian Life* provided a closing editorial comment in its June 15, 1964 issue:

Overture 22 did not ... provide the expected excitement of debate and parliamentary

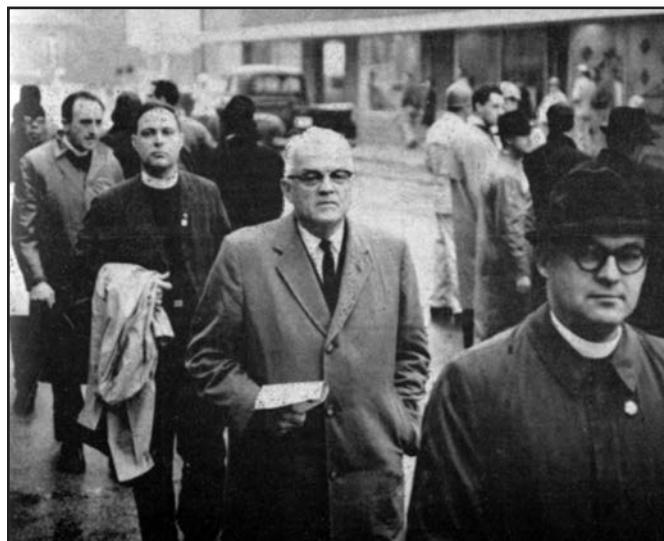


Police arrest protesters in Atlanta, 1964. (Photograph by Danny Lyon, RG 301.9-14-63, Presbyterian Historical Society)

maneuvering. It provided a quite different excitement of rendering spontaneous and passionate support of a man whom the General Assembly said is a great, brave, and good Stated Clerk.¹⁴

The year 1964 proved an important one in the history of the Civil Rights movement. The 1964 Civil Rights Act made racial discrimination in public places, such as theaters, restaurants and hotels, illegal. It also required employers to provide equal employment opportunities. Projects involving federal funds could now be cut off if there was evidence of discrimination based on color, race, or national origin.

The Civil Rights Act also attempted to deal with the denial of African-American voting rights in the Deep South. The legislation stated that uniform standards must prevail for establishing the right to vote. Schooling to sixth grade constituted



Clergy demonstrators in Hattiesburg, 1964. The four pictured are (left to right) United Presbyterians Dudley E. Sarfaty, Carl Raymond Smith, John Coventry Smith, and Robert J. Stone. (*Presbyterian Life*, February 15, 1964)

legal proof of literacy, and the U.S. attorney general was given power to initiate legal action in any area marked by a pattern of resistance to the law.¹⁵

As a result, voter registration drives, which had been initiated several years earlier, continued throughout the South, meeting great resistance in rural and more urban places. One that caught the attention of both the nation and the church in 1964 was in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

On March 9, 1964, in a Mississippi courtroom, nine Presbyterian ministers stood trial on charges growing out of a civil rights demonstration in Hattiesburg. The nine were part of a larger group of clergyman and civil-rights leaders who had been pressing for voter-registration rights for Forrest County's 7,000 voting-age African Americans. The judge found them guilty and assessed the maximum penalty—a \$200 fine and four months in jail. They were from Presbyterian churches in Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Illinois.¹⁶

The fifty-two Northern clergymen, thirty-two of whom were Presbyterian ministers, were joined by Jewish rabbis, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ clergy, along with one Unitarian. They found themselves in the company of civil rights legends: Charles Evers (brother of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers); James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and others. Presbyterian minister Gayraud Wilmore summed up the feelings of many. "We came to Hattiesburg to encourage and strengthen the Negro community in



A Delta Ministry staff member and two Mississippi residents walk past a voter registration center, circa 1964. (RTF 746, box 5, "Social Corporate Ministries: Delta Ministry," Presbyterian Historical Society)

its struggle for freedom—especially for the right to vote; to awaken the white community to its responsibilities under God and under the law of the land.... The situation [here] is extremely difficult, if not perilous. There is much, much more to be done.”¹⁷

One local Hattiesburg man had watched as the parading ministers encircled the red brick courthouse. Shaking his head in disbelief, he stated: “Those preachers—I just can’t understand them. It don’t make sense to think they are all insincere.... I just can’t understand how us in Mississippi can look so wrong to everybody else in the country.”¹⁸

Seven hundred miles north of Hattiesburg, at First Presbyterian Church in Charleston, Illinois, more than 600 people gathered for what was dubbed “Hattiesburg Day” on March 9, 1964. Located in central Illinois in a conservative, agricultural, “heart of the Bible belt” area, Charleston had sent more ministers to Hattiesburg than any other part of the country. The events of that day were deemed historic, as Presbyterian ministers from Hattiesburg, Mississippi who staunchly opposed the presence of

outsiders were invited to discuss the issues that divided both the nation and their town with fellow ministers from Illinois. At the heart of these discussions was whether the church should be involved in non-spiritual issues. One Southern minister asserted, “We do not believe that it is our calling as ministers to be running hither and yon at the beck and call of professional agitators and demagogues or ambitious members of an ecclesiastical hierarchy meddling in problems which other people probably understand far better.” The “invasion” of Hattiesburg by Northern clergymen was seen as a “prostitution of the church for political purposes.”¹⁹

One of the speakers that day was the Reverend John Cameron, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in Hattiesburg. He spoke movingly of the effect of the presence of “friendly white men ... marching with them.” “The fear that pervaded our community before your ministers came,” he noted, “is gradually abating, and only because you are *continuing* to come. We need you desperately.”²⁰

But in other places, far from Hattiesburg, racial tensions reached a boiling point. A story in the June 1, 1964 issue of *Presbyterian Life* entitled “Remember Chester” chronicled events in Chester, Pennsylvania during a five-month period in which police, demonstrators, and local community groups sought to prevent that city from becoming what some were already calling “The Birmingham of the North.” Indeed, James Farmer, leader of CORE, remarked that he had heard no stories regarding police brutality, arresting procedures, hearings, or high bail that matched the stories he had heard about Chester.

The scenario was a familiar one. Demonstrations and sit-ins against desegregation fueled anger, particularly within the police force, resulting in violence and the spilling of blood. By early 1964, the situation in Chester (near Philadelphia) had nearly reached the point of a race war. Five hundred people alone were arrested in a five-month period, including a number of white ministers from neighboring communities. *Presbyterian Life* reported “there was so much tension in Chester that one hardly dared light a match.”

But unlike Birmingham, the religious community spoke with one voice in calling for reconciliation and change. Quakers, United Presbyterians, and Episcopalians in Delaware County established a tri-faith commission to be a reconciling force in Chester. Presbyterian ministers Donald G. Huston and D. Evor Roberts joined with the Episcopalian Bishop of Pennsylvania, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and others to meet with Governor William Scranton to win his intervention in order to prevent further bloodshed in Chester.²¹

Finally, despite efforts to prevent the loss of life in places like Chester, some inevitably paid the ultimate price. On April 7, 1964, the Reverend Bruce Klunder, a twenty-seven year old UPCUSA minister, was crushed beneath a bulldozer on a school construction site—not in Birmingham, or Hattiesburg—but in Cleveland, Ohio. His death, officially ruled an accident, occurred as he joined a nonviolent protest against de facto school segregation.

Klunder was not an outside agitator. A quiet, unassuming man with two young children, he resided in Cleveland where he was active at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant and the YMCA. He had a passionate interest in civil rights. His commitment called him to head the local chapter of CORE. Earlier, in 1962, he had led a restaurant sit-in in Sewanee, Tennessee. Dr. Eugene Carson

Blake delivered an address at Bruce Klunder’s memorial service in which he stated:

Bruce Klunder died in a national contest still undecided. It is a civil war ... [pitting] neighbor against neighbor. Bruce ... was a private soldier in the battle for racial brotherhood and justice now joined in all the land.... Bruce Klunder did not seek to be a martyr. He did not expect to die last Tuesday afternoon. But he was one of those ministers of the church who had joined up, responding to the call of Jesus Christ, refusing in the national crisis to stand safe and eloquent behind a pulpit.... He died in the front lines of those who, having pledged themselves to nonviolence, are pledged also to stay in the struggle until the victory is won.

Klunder’s death continued to polarize a bitterly divided Cleveland. Some saw his death as an inevitable result of the breakdown of law and order. Others viewed his activism as an act of love, in fulfillment of Christ’s great commandment. Klunder is one of forty individuals listed as a civil rights martyr on the national Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.²²

The struggle for civil rights that began more than a half century ago continues to this day. The editors of *Presbyterian Life* understood that this noble effort would be an ongoing one. In the December 15, 1964 issue, they referred to an insightful letter from a reader who insisted on her devotion to equal rights for all people, but “hoped rather plaintively that the magazine would not find it necessary to deal with the subject *all of the time*.” The editors assured her that she was not alone. “Civil rights leaders, Negroes and whites, politicians, clergymen, social workers, doctors, school boards, and teachers are equally sick of the subject, but not sick enough to do the bold and good things necessary to solve the problems that injustice and discrimination create. For [all involved], the happy day to look for is the day when there will be no further need for a civil rights movement.”²³

Those Presbyterians involved in the struggle for civil rights more than fifty years ago offered a prophetic witness to address the issues of justice and equality. That public witness during those turbulent

times helped to transform American society. But that prophetic, public witness also reinforced our Presbyterian identity and its deep roots within our own history.

Many of those Presbyterians who were involved in this momentous struggle for justice and equality are now passing from the scene. Their legacy to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the history that they helped to create. That history must serve both as a guide and a paradigm for future generations.

I began this essay with an anecdote about historical tapes and a book. Had these unique materials of history not been preserved, along with the volumes of *Presbyterian Life*—not to mention the diaries, clipplings, photographs, and letters compiled by those involved in the struggle for civil rights—the story

of our church's involvement in that great struggle would have been lost. And with that loss, the memory of our church would have been impaired, and with it, our own identity as Presbyterians.

Arthur Schlesinger once noted that, “history is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As persons deprived of memory become disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been and where they are going, so a nation denied a conception of the past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.” What is true for a nation is equally as true for our church. Winston Churchill once remarked that “the longer you look back, the farther you can look forward.” For American Presbyterians, the perspective of the past half-century should offer a trajectory for the future.²⁴ *✍*

For Further Reading

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Notes

¹ Virginia F. Rainey, *Stewards of Our Heritage: A History of the Presbyterian Historical Society* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), p. 4.

² William Watkins, Letter of August 22, 1962, William Watkins Collection, folder 1, Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS).

³ James H. Smylie, “American Presbyterians: A Pictorial History,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, vol. 63, numbers 1 & 2, p. 135.

⁴ James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), pp. 129–130.

⁵ *Presbyterian Life* [hereafter *PL*], June 1, 1962, pp. 21–23.

⁶ *PL*, November 1, 1962, pp. 18–20; 40–41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁸ Note that *PL* misquoted the letter in two instances, substituting “vitriolic” for “hateful” and “groups are more immoral...” for “groups tend to be more immoral...”

⁹ *PL*, July 1, 1963, pp. 9–12; 35–36.

¹⁰ *PL*, October 1, 1963, pp. 7–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *PL*, October 15, 1963, pp. 4–5; 46–47.

¹³ *PL*, June 15, 1964, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *PL*, May 1, 1964, pp. 7–8.

¹⁶ *PL*, April 1, 1964, pp. 26–29.

¹⁷ *PL*, February 15, 1964, p. 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *PL*, April 1, 1964, pp. 26–29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *PL*, June 1, 1964, pp. 6–8.

²² *PL*, May 15, 1964, pp. 6–9; 39–40.

²³ *PL*, December 15, 1964, p. 27.

²⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Folly’s Antidote,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 2007.