

**Revolution and Reconciliation:
The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Protestantism, and
the Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1970**

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of doctor of philosophy in the Department of History.

Chapel Hill
2010

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ABSTRACT

DAVID P. CLINE: *Revolution and Reconciliation: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Protestantism, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1970*
(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

The Student Interracial Ministry (SIM) was a seminary-based, nationally influential Protestant civil rights organization based in the Social Gospel and Student Christian Movement traditions. This dissertation uses SIM's history to explore the role of liberal Protestants in the popular revolutions of the 1960s. Entirely student-led and always ecumenical in scope, SIM began in 1960 with the tactic of placing black assistant pastors in white churches and whites in black churches with the goal of achieving racial reconciliation. In its later years, before it disbanded in mid-1968, SIM moved away from church structures, engaging directly in political and economic movements, inner-city ministry and development projects, and college and seminary teaching. In each of these areas, SIM participants attempted to live out German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's exhortation to "bring the church into the world."

Revolution and Reconciliation demonstrates that the civil rights movement, in both its "classic" phase from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s and its longer phase stretching over most of the twentieth century, was imbued with religious faith and its expression. It treats the classic phase of the civil rights movement as one manifestation of a theme of Liberal Protestant interracial reform that runs through the century, illustrating that liberal religious activists of the 1960s drew on a tradition of Protestant interracial reform, building on and

sometimes reinventing the work of their progenitors earlier in the century to apply their understanding of the Gospel's imperative to heal the injustices of the modern world.

By examining the Student Interracial Ministry's role in the civil rights movement, this dissertation contributes to the scholarship of social justice movements and of American religious activism by showing how progressive Christian young people worked for social change at the community level, and in the process created reform within both the seminary and the institutional church. By demonstrating the centrality of liberal Protestantism as a transformative force in twentieth century America, *Revolution and Reconciliation* offers a nuanced understanding of the student participants in the civil rights movement and a new perspective to the ongoing debates about the social, cultural, and political roots and legacies of the 1960s.

To Shelley and Genevieve

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The best part of writing this dissertation was the people to whom this project introduced me. I accumulated many debts of gratitude along the way, only a portion of which I will be able to recall here. If you don't see your name, and you're not grateful for the omission, consider yourself thanked.

First in line, by dint of her great display of patience, support, and more patience is Shelley Nichols Cline. Genevieve Louise Cline came along part way through the writing and provided much needed perspective on the project, as well as on many other parts of life. My friend Tracy K'Meyer, a fantastic scholar of history and religion and overall insanely busy person, cut into vast swathes of her personal time to read and re-read and advise on this dissertation in its final phases. My father, Dr. Martin J. Cline, was my other faithful reader and adviser, whose close eye for language and timely sideline speeches got me through the last months. Thanks be unto you.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to the many former participants in the Student Interracial Ministry who happily gave of their time to recall their important past for me. I would especially like to thank several individuals who not only showed great enthusiasm for the project but nearly adopted it as their own. This has produced special relationships through the life of this research and so I thank, in no particular order, my friends and advisers John Collins, Maynard Moore, George Walters, Bob Seymour, Bob Hare, and Steve Rose. David Langston, an alum of Union Theological Seminary's turbulent years in the late 1960s and

early 1970s, although not of the SIM program, similarly adopted me and my research project and has given me many, many hours of his time.

I am of course grateful to the members of my committee for their guidance and superlative scholarly models; thanks to: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Fitz Brundage, Bill Chafe, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Heather Williams. It is worth repeating the name of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall again. I benefitted greatly from her guidance and especially from her close and careful attention to the writing within this dissertation.

A number of other scholars and archivists have been greatly helpful to me over the past few years, including David Strickland, Clinton Stockwell, Craig Werner, Rhonda Lee, Laura Clark Brown and her colleagues at the Southern Historical Collection, and above all, Ruth Tonkiss Cameron, archivist extraordinaire at the Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary.

Friends and colleagues and teachers in North Carolina who made living and researching here a pleasure include Beth Millwood, Seth Kotch, Anne Olivar, Rhonda Lee (again), Wayne Lee, Michael Hunt, Jason Bivins, Nina Bivins, Adriane Lentz-Smith, Christian Lentz, Katherine Charron, Brett Whalen, Malissa McCloud, Emily Burrill, Harry Watson, Ayse Erginer, Dave Shaw, Joseph Mosnier, Kendra Cotton, Sally Greene, Emily Baran, Josh Davis, Mark Sheftall, Bryan and Kelly Gilmer, Gordon Mantler, Christina Headrick, Bethany Keenan, Ryan and Katie Sabino, Christina Snyder, Aidan Smith, Willoughby Anderson, and Paul and Mindy Quigley. My thanks, too, to my friends and co-workers at the Southern Oral History Program and the Center for the Study of the American South. For their “soul support,” I thank my family and the Nichols clan far and wide, and the kind staff of Elmo’s restaurant in Durham. Mmmmm.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

National Council of Churches: NCC

Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Student Interracial Ministry: SIM

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: SNCC

Union Theological Seminary: UTS

INTRODUCTION

When God enters, history for the while ceases to be, and there is nothing more to ask; for something wholly different and new begins – a history with its own distinct grounds, possibilities, and hypotheses.

– Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*¹

Our Christian calling does not [give us] the answers to every social problem, and all conflicts have not been decided beforehand in favor of our side. Our job is to struggle along with everybody else and collaborate with them in the difficult, frustrating task of seeking a solution to common problems, which are entirely new and strange to us all.

– Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*²

The Reverend David Jones sang loudly in a vibrant, clear baritone. While his wasn't the only voice singing freedom songs that day in July 1963 in Wilmington, NC, it was the one that the angry judge would remember. Jones, a Presbyterian from St. Louis, Missouri and a student at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, was arrested along with other civil rights demonstrators after a downtown protest against racially discriminatory businesses. The next day Judge H. Winfield Smith dismissed the charges against all the demonstrators except Jones, to whom he added an additional charge of contempt of court after the seminarian began singing on the courthouse steps. As he sentenced Jones to thirty

¹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, edited and translated by Douglas Horton (originally 1928, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publishers, 1978), 274.

² Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 142-143.

days in prison, Judge Smith scolded him, “People like you are causing all of this. You are just as sorry as you can be.”³

What did Judge Smith mean by “people like you?” White? An outsider? A minister? Jones was all of these. The only white demonstrator among the 131 marchers arrested, he was in Wilmington that summer as an assistant pastor at Gregory United Church of Christ. He was working with the black pastors and congregation as an intern from an experimental civil rights project called the Student Interracial Ministry which, through much of the 1960s, attempted to foster racial reconciliation through interracial interaction both within and beyond individual church parishes.

The civil rights movement, in both its “classic” phase from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s and its longer iteration stretching over most of the twentieth century, was imbued with religious faith and its expression. The movement was animated, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., by “thousands of dedicated men and women with a noble sense of purpose, ... anonymous, relentless young people, black and white, who have temporarily left behind the towers of learning to storm the barricades of violence, ...ministers of the gospel, priests, rabbis, and nuns, who are willing to march for freedom, to go to jail for conscience sake.”⁴ Even gatherings or organizations that were secular on their surface were still often supported by a skeletal structure based on religious ethics. The civil rights movement itself often took on the feeling of a religious movement and was pursued with similar fervor by its believers.

³ “Adults, Kids Sing and Pray for Jailed White Minister,” *Wilmington Journal*, July 20, 1963, p. 10.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. “A Witness to Truth (Eulogy for the Reverend James Reeb),” as published on <http://www.thatsalabama.com/speeches/mlkjr/witness/>, accessed on June 16, 2009. In April of 1965, James Reeb, a white minister from Boston, was killed by a white mob on a street corner in Selma, Alabama. He was there at the behest of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had invited all clergy to join him for the second Selma to Montgomery march.

John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee once described the mass meetings of the civil rights movement as: “[they] *were* church, and for some who had grown disillusioned with Christian otherworldliness, they were better than church.”⁵ David Jones, arrested and singled out for faith-based civil disobedience, was just one of the thousands of young people who, motivated by their religious beliefs, joined the struggle for civil rights. As part of this group, he was also heir to a century-long tradition of American progressive Protestants taking a stand against perceived injustices and, in their words, making a Christian “witness” to just action in the world.

Just a few months before Jones’ arrest, Martin Luther King, Jr., while serving his own jail sentence after conducting a civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama, was incensed to read that local clergymen had accused him of being a trouble-making outsider and an extremist. They argued that instead of leading “unwise and untimely” demonstrations, King and his supporters should pursue their cause through the courts, not in the streets, and should “observe the principles of law and order and common sense.”⁶ In reply, King wrote what became known as “The Letter from Birmingham Jail,” using a stub of pencil to scribble in the margins of smuggled-in newspapers. Extremism, especially for those involved in the ministry, he wrote, was necessitated by the times. “The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists for love.”⁷

⁵ Quoted in Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 207.

⁶ “Statement by Alabama Clergymen,” Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University, www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs. Accessed on February 27, 2010.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University, www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs. Accessed on February 27, 2010.

The seminarians of the Student Interracial Ministry (SIM) anticipated King's jeremiad. David Jones was just one of SIM's 350 "creative extremists," theological students from every Protestant denomination and region of the country who worked in churches, participated in marches, registered voters, and contributed to many other aspects of the civil rights movement between 1960 and 1968. These practitioners of progressive Christianity believed that the spirit of the Church and its cultural role was changing, and that in order to remain relevant to a society in the process of being reshaped, the Church as institution must perforce change too. As one seminarian put it, "The churches are in for a shocking century – at least that is my hope. It will be the century in which the churches died and the church was born again."⁸

Revolution and Reconciliation: The Student Interracial Ministry, Progressive Christianity, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1970 explores a moment in history when American society and the American Protestant church underwent a sometimes chaotic evolution and transformation. The events and personal stories recounted in the chapters that follow highlight the roles of progressive Christians in social change movements by means of a close examination of one small component, the Student Interracial Ministry. The liberal Protestant seminaries which peopled the project make for particularly revealing sites for historical enquiry since, as students and would-be ministers, seminarians were deeply invested in defining, through theological, political, and social expression, their way of being Christians in the modern world. They studied it, thought about it, wrote about it, and acted on

⁸ "1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry," 45-67. UTS1: Student Interracial Ministry papers, 1960 - 1968, 1C:2:f11. The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, New York. (Hereafter known as SIM, UTS.)

it. Their story adds to the growing body of historical evidence about the intersection of American religion, culture, and politics during the 1960s.

Liberal religious activists from the “big three” religious groups, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, drew on deep wells of progressive Christian reform ideas during the 1960s and profoundly influenced a “movement of movements” that altered American life in the late twentieth century.⁹ I have focused in this work on the first of the three groups and, even more specifically, on Liberal Protestants. Liberal Protestants pioneered American social activism in the Abolitionist and Social Gospel movements of the 19th century, but liberal Protestantism really came into its own in the 1930s with the flowering of modernist theology. Tamped down by economic depression and world wars, Liberal Protestantism again found particular expression in the social movements of the 1950s through 1970s. These were often led or promoted by a cadre of young ministers, black and white, emerging from the liberal seminaries to preach – not always from the pulpit – that the Gospel must be applied to heal the injustices of the modern world.

Progressive Christianity and the Long Civil Rights Movement

In order to trace the ways in which the long history of religious ethics, institutions, and individuals informed and inspired the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, we benefit from looking at the movement over a longer chronology that starts with Progressive Era political reformers and the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century and

⁹ See Van Gosse, “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, editors (Blackwell: Malden Mass., 2002).

continues up through the present.¹⁰ This longer lens reveals the course of a Progressive Christian tradition that has stalled, stuttered, and several times been reincarnated, but continues to inform American religious, political, and cultural life.

Religion undergirded the civil rights movement and motivated both those who fought for and those who fought against changes in the racial status quo. Religious historian Charles Marsh has argued that “in every mass meeting, church service, and Klan rally, God’s name was invoked and his power claimed. White conservatives and civil rights activists, black moderates and Klansmen, all staked their particular claims for racial justice and social order on the premise that God was on their side.”¹¹ Historian David Chappell further claims that the civil rights movement was not a political movement with religious undertones, but a religious movement with political implications.¹² However, neither description is entirely accurate, because the two strands – political and religious – operated on separate tracks that usually ran in parallel, but which often intersected. Thus Chappell’s assertion that it was prophetic faith that drove reform and not rational liberalism or realistic humanism is based on a selective analysis of events that often has little relationship to actual political and social manifestations; all can and did function at the same

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* (Vol. 91, Issue 4), March 2005. For another historiographical take, see Charles Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,” *Journal of Southern History* (Vol. 66, No. 4, November 2000); 815.

¹¹ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3, 4.

¹² David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Part of Chappell’s argument is that the civil rights movement was more a religious than a social or political movement – indeed, it was “The Third Great Awakening,” spurred by prophetic Christianity as modeled by Martin Luther King, Jr. Chappell repeatedly claims the originality of the Third Great Awakening thesis, even though it was first proposed by David R. Goldfield in *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

time. It is useful, then, to look beyond regional boundaries and to view Progressive Christianity as an ideology that was enacted differently in specific contexts, and which overrode traditional cultural and geographical distinctions.

By looking beyond regional boundaries and expanding our periodization, we can see a series of individuals, organizations, and institutions, liberal seminaries, rural agrarian experiments, and student Christian groups among them, that influenced one another and created a series of overlapping movements for social change. Historian Tony Dunbar calls the activists of the 1950s and 1960s the “spiritual heirs” of their progressive progenitors.¹³ Looking at the movement this way helps us to see the 1960s phase as just one instance of a longer movement to force America to make good on its promise of citizenship and equality for all.

While a number of historians have now called for a more inclusive study of the civil rights movement beyond its “Montgomery to Memphis” classic phase, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has offered the most recent and fully realized re-periodization in which she argues for a “Long Civil Rights Movement” that begins with the “civil rights unionism” of the 1930s and 1940s and continues through the classic phase and up until at least the Reagan election of 1980.¹⁴ By shifting the focus to religion, however, we can see how Progressives and the Social Gospel inspired the civil rights unionists and other reformers of the late New Deal period. Then, rather than being quashed by the combination of the Great Depression and the anti-communism of the early Cold War, the interracial civil rights impulse carried forward

¹³ Anthony Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlotte: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

¹⁴ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” Hall draws on Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein’s claim that the “civil rights unionism” of the 1940s was the “unequivocal first step” of the movement.

from the Social Gospel to pacifist organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, through the Student Christian Movement exemplified by the YMCA and YWCA, and through a small but hardy band of Christian radicals and reformers.¹⁵

Sociologist Aldon Morris wrote of the role of social justice movement incubators such as the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, that they functioned as “movement halfway houses [which] develop[ed] a battery of social change resources such as skilled activists, tactical knowledge, media contacts, workshops, knowledge of past movements, and a vision of a future society.”¹⁶ Morris’ halfway house theory could also be applied to the movements and organizations of Progressive Christianity, especially to the liberal seminaries. Union Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, McCormick Theological Seminary and others of their ilk trained ministers in liberal theology and encouraged social activism. The ministers and Christian educators they trained then carried this ideology into individual communities and even from movement to movement. Richard Unsworth, who as a chaplain at Smith College in the 1960s and 1970s worked in a variety of social justice causes, described being part of a “network of clergy that grew in the civil rights movement ... [and followed] a track that moves from the civil rights movement to the anti-Vietnam War issue to women’s sexuality and feminism.”¹⁷

Historian Michael Friedland observed that when clergy activists from the civil rights movement became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement, they brought with them

¹⁵ Labor unionists, civil rights lawyers, politicians, and voting rights activists also carried the progressive strain forward. See Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* – need full citation

¹⁶ Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 139-140.

¹⁷ David Cline, *Creating Choice: A Community Responds to the Need for Abortion and Birth Control, 1961-1973* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 129.

“not only their theological beliefs about human dignity and justice but their newfound organizational and tactical tools as well, from mailing lists of liberal clerics to expertise in mounting peace conferences, demonstrations, and educational campaigns.”¹⁸ Considering liberal Protestantism in this way, as providing both a structure and a set of tools for living and for creating change, opens up new avenues of inquiry for historians of the civil rights movement.

A Case Study of Liberal Protestants in Action: The Student Interracial Ministry

On Easter weekend 1960, over 200 student organizers from across the country gathered on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina to discuss how to follow up on the recent lunch counter sit-ins in order to leverage greater civil rights for black Americans. Two student movement organizations were founded that Easter weekend, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), widely regarded as the most influential youth-based civil rights organization of the 1960s, and the Student Interracial Ministry (SIM), an innovative interracial effort by seminarians to achieve racial reconciliation through the churches.

The simple but effective strategy of the Student Interracial Ministry was to place white seminarians in summer internships within black churches, and black seminarians in white congregations. Rather than asking blacks to continue to bear all the burden of crossing the color line, whites would cross it as well, working in black churches, living in black communities, and modeling peaceful interracialism for both blacks and whites. The Student Interracial Ministry organizers seemed to understand early and almost instinctively that racial

¹⁸ Michael Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6.

reconciliation was not just a southern but a nationwide necessity, and they created pastoral exchanges not just in the South, but in churches of all Protestant denominations across the country. This quiet and decidedly local tactic assumed that as individual racial attitudes changed within a given community, the effects would ripple outward. With time, the group of seminarians grew to embrace other goals and strategies as well.

Over SIM's nine-year lifespan, its student ministers made up an important cadre of the civil rights movement's soldiers, and participated in most of the movement's major battles, as well as in many unsung skirmishes. Seminarians from the project joined sympathy pickets of Woolworth's stores in the days immediately following the first sit-ins in 1960, brought messages to Martin Luther King while he waited in the Birmingham jail in 1963, strode alongside the estimated 40,000 church people attending the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs that same year, listened to Stokely Carmichael and others articulate a vision for a Black Power movement while trekking through Mississippi in 1966, and supported SNCC leader James Forman as he interrupted a worship service at Riverside Church in 1969 to issue The Black Manifesto, a demand for churches and synagogues to pay reparations to America's black citizens. SIM students worked with many well-known movement figures, including Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his father Martin Luther King Sr., Ralph Abernathy, James Lawson, Charles Sherrod, Julian Bond, Diane Nash, Jesse Jackson, and Andrew Young. They also studied and worked with many Protestant thinkers and leaders, including theologians Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Harvey Cox, and Paul Tillich, ecumenical leaders Eugene Carson Blake, Oscar Lee, Robert Spike and others from the National and World Council of Churches, and a range of influential and charismatic ministers and community organizers from William Sloane Coffin in the Northeast to Will

Campbell in the South to Joe Matthews and Saul Alinsky in the Midwest. They worked within and alongside numerous reform organizations, including the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Methodist Student Movement, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Congress of Federated Organizations during Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, the Delta Ministry, and many others. They also worked with dozens of groups and churches and communities, and with thousands of people – ministers, laypeople, and grassroots organizers – whose names we don't know but who contributed to the country's greatest mass democratic movement.

As the civil rights movement evolved during the middle years of the 1960s, so too did the Student Interracial Ministry. The summer internships extended into yearlong exchanges and more and more students engaged in non-congregational fieldwork that encompassed community organizing, voter education, and economic project development. Inspired by a successful fieldwork experiment in its Southwest Georgia Project, the Student Interracial Ministry added a series of urban projects in such far-flung locations as Los Angeles, Baltimore, New York City, Minneapolis, Chicago, and St. Louis. The Student Interracial Ministry was not simply a civil rights organization, however, it was a coalition of seminary students and would-be and current ministers. As such, its mandate ran beyond the black freedom struggle to the efforts to reform church institutional structures and theological training, in order to create what the seminary students perceived as a better and more just world. Project participants returned to their seminary campuses having experienced what more than one student called "the church at work in the world," and were freshly motivated

to reinvent the seminaries themselves, and especially how they trained ministers, to better reflect how they felt the church should most successfully function in the modern world.

By the end of the 1960s, SIM was grappling with further changes within the civil rights movement, including the post-civil rights legislation landscape, the implications of the Black Power movement for its own projects, and the increased demands for attention from the war in Vietnam and the students' rights movement. It was also grappling with its own success, finding that it had grown too large too quickly during 1967 and 1968 to sustain itself any longer. However, even as the organization itself dissipated, its participants carried forward both the ideas it had nurtured and many of its specific aims.

Chapter Organization

The story of the Student Interracial Ministry enables us to see the role played by young religious actors on the stage of both civil rights and church reform and provides us with insights into how progressive Christians drew on past examples and contemporaneous networks as they informed, reacted to, and guided church and social change movements in the 1960s. The dissertation is organized into three sections, and then further divided into chapters.

Section One, "'A Stirring in the Mulberry Trees': Interracial Ministry and the Civil Rights Movement," explores the progressive Christian history and ideas that informed much of the classic phase of the civil rights movement and led to the birth of the Student Interracial Ministry organization. In the first chapter, I demonstrate that progressive Christian theology and social commitments developed over much of the century and that this legacy inspired and informed the seminary students who created the Student Interracial Ministry in the

summer of 1960. I look at the various historical, intellectual, and spiritual wells from which civil rights activists in this period drew, exploring the ideas – including social and theological revolution and racial reconciliation – and the organizations that animated progressive Christianity.

In the second chapter I look in depth at the creation of the Student Interracial Ministry as an expression of Progressive Christian social reform, exploring the stories of its founding members and ideas. This chapter asks how seminary students came to their decision to join the civil rights movement, why they chose the Student Interracial Ministry as their method of participation, and how the pastoral exchanges influenced personal and community change.

The third chapter explores the methods and consequences of employing a program of racial exchange and interaction in the context of the southern church. I look closely at the 1962 summer assistant pastorate of a black seminarian, James Forbes, with Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Founded specifically to be one of the first integrated Baptist churches in the South, the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church nevertheless had only two black members and perhaps a half-dozen black congregants in 1962. Congregants and the minister remember the summer that James Forbes was a pastor in the church as a fundamental changing point in the life of the congregation, when their stated ideals were put into action, and they were forced to deal with the consequences. That summer created change within the congregation and community that reverberated long after the period when the civil rights movement is supposed to have ended.

In section two of the dissertation, “‘These Walls Will Shake’: Other Forms of Ministry for Changing Times,” we see the civil rights movement in transition, the churches in crisis over how to respond to race issues, and meet the Student Interracial Ministry in its

“middle age.” In Chapter Four, I show how the project reacted and responded to changes in theology, the church, and the developing civil rights movement. We meet several students whose personal stories demonstrate how young, progressive Christians formed their own theology and commitments and participated in a range of social change activities. And we see how the mainline churches, led by the ecumenical National Council of Churches, responded in fits and starts and then finally committed itself wholly to participating in the civil rights struggle.

In Chapter Five, I present a novel retelling of the civil rights history of Albany, Georgia, and the Southwest Georgia region. The Albany story is a pivotal marker in the classic telling of the civil rights movement, used to indicate how Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movement learned from their failures to extract meaningful change from civil leaders there. Past historical accounts, however, all end with King’s departure from Albany in 1962 and fail to follow the story forward. I do just that in this chapter, finding not a story of failure, but one of persistent commitment by local and movement volunteers through the Southwest Georgia Project and in their partnership with a large group of seminary volunteers from the Student Interracial Ministry; a commitment that slowly led to significant changes in an area marked by deeply entrenched white supremacy and poverty. The story of Southwest Georgia that emerges here is one of progressive Christian social action and the search for the Beloved Community, and also one that helps us to see that the civil rights movement was actually composed of hundreds and thousands of small local movements whose needs and desires and successes and failures need to be judged on their own terms and according to individual chronologies.

The third and final section of the dissertation, ““Living Completely in This World’: Into the Urban North, Back to the Seminary,” begins in the period just after the “classic phase” of the civil rights movement, a time during which the civil rights movement is typically depicted as a black movement from which whites, in this case white Christian liberals, have largely disappeared. Instead, we find these liberals very much alive and well as we follow the Student Interracial Ministry into its final years when its students are laboring on two fronts. The first of these fronts is the industrial urban city, and Chapter Six explores how progressive Christians re-embraced their long tradition of urban ministry and adapted it to address economic, racial, and other issues in the “post-civil rights” era. In the seventh and final chapter we return to the place where the students first encountered their ideas and the civil rights movement, the seminaries, to see how they brought the lessons of their experiences of the preceding years back to the academies and attempted to reshape these institutions according to new visions.

Revolution and Reconciliation tells the complex story of a great tradition of liberal Protestant reform through the account of one group of religiously-motivated young people. It broadens our vision of the participants in the civil rights movement and their motivations for joining the struggle. Through the history of this unique project and the many fascinating individuals that contributed to it, we can gain insight into the relationship between American politics and religion, seeing how Progressive Christianity was and remains a critically important animating force in the American experiment.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the “Religious Left”

Lest the previous statement seem too bold, allow me to add a note about my approach to this project and the changing context within which it was written. A previous study of the women's movement and reproductive rights struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s introduced me to the rich history of religious liberals and radicals at the forefront of social change movements. Many of the ministers and laypeople I studied and interviewed for that project described the community and networks from which they came and which they relied on in their work, tracing them backward to the civil rights period, and in some cases to World War II, and forward to anti-war, nuclear freeze, women's and gay rights, and other social justice movements. I decided to explore this story further and, while interviewing Reverend Robert Seymour, a progressive Baptist in North Carolina, I learned of the Student Interracial Ministry project in which he had participated and which he felt had fundamentally altered the life of his congregation and the course of his own ministry. When I began researching and writing this dissertation in early 2005, however, I was somewhat at a loss as to how to describe the group to which Seymour, the participants in SIM, and their colleagues and fellow travelers belonged. Were they the Religious Left, a counter-force to the well-established and politically important Religious Right? I was not quite sure there existed a group, so unified by shared principles and beliefs, they could accurately be referred to in this way. While I could point to any number of individuals, congregations, even denominations that I thought could be described as both theologically and politically "left," there was so much possibility for variation – evangelical political liberals or politically conservative social Christians, for example – that it was difficult to think of them as a bloc. Historical and contemporary cultural sources were of little help, and while a literature had developed on the Religious Right there seemed to be scant reflection on anything termed the Religious Left.

And yet, I could not bring myself to abandon the idea of a culturally and politically important Religious Left, imprecise as the term itself was. I kept in mind a quote from religious historian Martin E. Marty: “Observers of American religion regularly need to map the terrain. Its bewildering pluralism, they soon learn, resists a single or permanent outline.”¹⁹

Heeding Marty’s challenge I charged ahead, educating myself about liberal theology, the progressive reform tradition, and the middle ground between religion and politics. By the time I was several years into the project, however, I found I was no longer alone in my pursuit of the illusive Religious Left. Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners* and a self-described liberal evangelical, led the charge in 2005 with his book *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*. Within several years, my bookshelf had filled up with similar titles: *Dispatches from the Religious Left: The Future of Faith in Politics in America*, *Getting on Message: Challenging the Religious Right from the Heart of the Gospel*, and even one bearing what had up to then been my working title, *The Left Hand of God*.²⁰ Hot on the heels of this new burst of publishing, the Democratic primary and then the presidential election made the candidates’ religious views hot topics and served to further push the religious left term, sometimes capitalized and sometimes not, into regular usage. *TIME* magazine and the website beliefnet collaborated on a weekly “God-o-Meter” to track the candidates’ use of religious rhetoric and their appeals to religious constituencies. Media outlets from Slate.com to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The National Review*, and the *New York*

¹⁹ Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Believers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 18.

²⁰ Frederick Clarkson, *Dispatches from the Religious Left: The Future of Faith and Politics in America* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2008); Rev. Peter Laarman, *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2006). In addition to these generalist and populist works, were monographs explicating the sometimes surprising work of the Religious Left. One example is Tom Davis’s *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

Times ran features describing the phenomenon of a “fast-emerging religious left.”²¹ In 2006, the CBS Evening News asked if religion was “Taking a Left Turn?” A year later, the cable news channel CNN reported that Barack Obama’s campaign was seeking to mobilize the “Christian left” on behalf of his candidacy and *The Christian Science Monitor* wondered, “Can the Religious Left Sway the ’08 Race?”²² Jim Wallis argued against the term, claiming that liberal Christians were centrists not leftists, but *U.S. News and World Report* would not hear of it – not only was Wallis wrong in downplaying the radicalism of the Religious Left, it reported, he was in fact one of its newly powerful leaders.²³

In June 2008, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which has been funding the study of American religion for decades, held a public dialogue in order to define the Religious Left and its implications for the Religious Right.²⁴ It did so in the context of a presidential race that would see the election of a chief executive who celebrated his joint heritage in the mainline Protestant and the evangelical African-American churches as well as

²¹ Steven Malanga, “The Rise of the Religious Left,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2007, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119249786852260187.html?mod=opinion_main_commentaries; David Klinghoffer, “Where Religious Left Meets Right: Biblical Common Ground,” *National Review* online, June 2, 2006, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NmIyYmNjZjc0MzY4MGM4YTMwN2QzYTllOWE1YTdhMzA=#more>; Alan Wolfe, “Mobilizing the Religious Left,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/books/review/Wolfe2-t.html?_r=1, all articles accessed on February 28, 2009.

²² Christine Lagorio, “Religion Taking a Left Turn: Conservative Christians Watch Out – There’s a Big Churchgoing Group Seeking Political Power,” CBS Evening News, July 10, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/07/09/eveningnews/main1786860.shtml>; Linda Feldman, “Can the Religious Left Sway the ’08 Race? Democratic Political Candidates are Speaking Openly About Faith, Competing for ‘Values Voters,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0606/p01s02-uspo.html>; [cnnpolitics.com](http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/01/obama.evangelicals/index.html), July 2, 2008; “Obama Works to Mobilize ‘Christian Left,’” <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/01/obama.evangelicals/index.html>, all articles accessed on February 28, 2009.

²³ Dan Gilgoff, “Why Jim Wallis Represents the Religious Left, Even if He Rejects the Label,” *U.S. News & World Report*, January 8, 2009. <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/1/8/why-jim-wallis-represents-the-religious-left-even-if-he-rejects-the-label.html>. Accessed on February 28, 2009.

²⁴ “Question and Answer: Assessing a More Prominent ‘Religious Left,’” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, June 5 2008, <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=187>, accessed on February 28, 2009.

in religiously based community organizing methods. The Religious Left now seemed not only to exist but to have political, cultural, and even theological relevance. Commemorating the forty-fourth anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” when Alabama state troopers attacked civil rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Alabama, former state governor George Wallace’s daughter used overtly religious terms to describe the country’s historic journey. Embracing Eric Holder, the country’s first black Attorney General, on March 8, 2009 in Selma’s Brown Chapel, the black Methodist church from which many marches had once begun, Peggy Wallace Kennedy declared that the moment was one of “reconciliation and redemption.”²⁵

In order to understand what was significant about that day and what motivated Kennedy and her choice of words, we need a better historical understanding of what is by now commonly called the Religious Left. There is a large body of literature, written during the 1960s, on the crisis in the church, and another almost equally as large written more recently that reviews modern American religion in transition, including the rise of the Religious Right. But while the former literature is written almost entirely from within the church, and the second by academic practitioners of religious studies, sociology, and philosophy, neither is particularly well integrated with the study of history or of social movements. “Culture War” theorists in the 1980s and 1990s only muddied the water by creating a false duality between left and right, conservative and liberal, that leaves no room for a liberal religious agenda distinct from that of secular liberals.²⁶ Historians’ attempts to adhere an understanding of religious ideas and motivations to analysis of the historical

²⁵ Phillip Rawls, Associated Press, Selma, Alabama, March 8, 2009.

²⁶ Alpert, 2. See, for example, James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

developments in the mid- to late-20th century America, have been for the most part rudimentary.²⁷ This dissertation cannot, of course, bridge this gap entirely, but it is an attempt to acknowledge the religious contexts of historical events while at the same time providing a historic context to changing theological ideas and praxis.

²⁷ Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box-Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History*, March 2004, 1358-1359.

SECTION ONE

“A STIRRING IN THE MULBERRY TREES”: THE FOUNDING OF THE STUDENT INTERRACIAL MINISTRY, 1960-1961

CHAPTER ONE

First Stirrings: Seminarists and the Call to Join the Southern Struggle

A primary task of the church in the modern world is to smash the barriers of racial segregation and prejudice everywhere.

– *New York Times*, 1955²⁸

And it shall be, when thou shalt hear a stirring in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then thou shalt go forth to battle, for God is gone forth before thee.

– Chronicles I, 14:15

The sun was just coming up on May 31, 1960, as John Collins, a gangly thirty-one year-old white seminarian and former naval officer from Chicago, pulled his car to the side of the road outside Anniston, Alabama. He had been driving for several days from his parents' home in Illinois, bound for a summer of ministry among black "church folk." Collins had been inspired to take personal action by a recent series of non-violent sit-ins against southern segregation practices. Now here he was, traveling for the first time into the Deep South, where he would be working hand in hand with a young black minister in Talladega, Alabama, reputed home of the Grand Imperial Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.

Alabama had just recently expelled student demonstrators from its state university and was one of two southern states that reacted to the student-led sit-ins during the winter of

²⁸ *New York Times*, December 31, 1955, 1

1960 by passing new laws expressly prohibiting integrated dining facilities.²⁹ Collins was suddenly conscious of the license plates on his car that proudly declared he had just arrived from “The Land of Lincoln.”

Collins tried to calm himself by recalling the advice that Ella Baker, the Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had recently given him when he admitted his fear over his impending journey. “Don’t be afraid,” Baker had told him. “You can go into a strange country. Abraham did.”³⁰ Now as he sat in his parents’ car parked in the dust by the side of a rural Alabama road, Collins cracked open the cover of his new journal and began to write: “I am not as frightened as I have been at times the past couple of days. I know that handling hostility will be my biggest problem and that if I can do that I can stick it out. Even with the apprehension, there is the thrill of being here and going into the midst of this situation. It is certainly being alive – I hope my fears will not blot out the vital sparks. I am determined to stay, not heroically, but just to stay. Grant unto me, O Lord, faith to know, when I need to know, that thy grace is sufficient.”³¹

Collins had wanted to go south for about four months, ever since February 1, 1960, when four students from all-black North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro sat down at the segregated lunch counter of a downtown Woolworth’s Store and asked for service. That demonstration, while not the first of its kind in the South, garnered unprecedented publicity and launched a wave of nonviolent demonstrations throughout the region, ushering in one of the most visible campaigns of the early 1960s phase of the civil rights movement. By March

²⁹ *the Grain of Salt*, March 31, 1960, 2.

³⁰ John Collins, “Statement on the Student Interracial Ministry, 1960,” SIM, UTS, H1:1:f7.

³¹ John Collins diary, entry for May 31, 1960. Possession of John Collins.

16, 1960, the National Student Christian Federation was reporting to seminarians that more than 935 black and white students had been arrested in non-violent protests.³² In the North, John Collins and his fellow students observed these events with intense interest. The Congress of Racial Equality, CORE, a nearly twenty year-old interracial organization that promoted non-violence and racial equality, had organized pickets of a number of Woolworth's branches in New York City. Collins and some of his seminary colleagues showed their sympathy with the Southern demonstrators by joining these pickets.

Collins was in his second year at Union Theological Seminary, located just north of the Columbia University campus and not far from Harlem, at 121st Street and Broadway in Manhattan's Morningside Heights neighborhood. The racial crisis in the South had sparked a movement of re-examination and self-reflection at both the institutional and student levels at many seminaries. It had special resonance for students studying a theology that stressed the importance of human beings' reconciliation to God and Jesus Christ and of human beings to one another. The sit-ins were cause for much self-reflection at Union Seminary, which was known for its liberal theology, its pioneering teaching on Christian ethics, and where, according to one student, "the whole seminary was faced with the realization that the church itself confronted a serious race problem within the fold."³³ For many students who had studied religion and philosophy only in the classroom, the Southern situation brought biblical ethics to life and demanded an active response. "The sit-ins knocked us out of our arm chair theology," wrote another student in the seminary's newspaper. "Now we have to make a

³² *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 12, March 31, 1960, 2.

³³ *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 12, March 31, 1960, 2.

decision.”³⁴ For some that decision was to stay safely in the academy but for others, like Collins, it was to get personally involved, to head into the fray and join the battle, even though doing so was uncomfortable, personally challenging, and potentially dangerous.

A group of seventeen Union Theological Seminary students traveled from New York City to Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960 to attend the Southwide Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance, a national conference organized by Ella Baker and Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. One hundred and fifty students, including the leaders of the recent sit-ins, were invited to a several day conference on the campus of Shaw University to discuss the impact of the sit-ins and to strategize about capitalizing on the momentum they had created to change racially restrictive laws and practice. The students at that Easter Weekend conference created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as a leadership organization. However, the seeds of another organization, one that would arise from the seminaries and work through church and religious structures, were also planted at the same conference.

Students from Union and other seminaries created the Student Interracial Ministry, or SIM, a small ecumenical project that sought to cross the lines of comfort and race in order to bring about the reconciliation that their religious studies encouraged. Just a month or so after the conference in North Carolina, seven students, including John Collins, teamed up in creative interracial efforts in the Deep South. As Collins sat in his car near the Alabama border that cold morning in 1960 with both state and racial boundary lines looming in front of him, he prayed for the strength to cross them.

But how did John Collins get to the side of that road in June 1960? What in his life and in the country had set him on a path to that place where race and religion met? What

³⁴ “An Attempt at Understanding,” *the Grain of Salt*, May 4, 1960, 3.

made a liberal theological seminary like Union a site for racial change in 1960, and a gathering place for folks like John Collins? In order to answer these questions, we must look back to the turn of the century, to the continuum of liberal Protestant theology and activism that progressed from there to the mid-century, and to some of the networks, organizations, and individuals whose engagement with race and religion and social change had laid down a path that Collins and his colleagues followed in 1960. In this chapter, I explore the ideas and the progenitor organizations that, united by the catalyst of racial issues, combined to draw progressive Christians into the civil rights struggle and motivated them to challenge their own religious institutions at the same time.

Drawing from Different Wells: The Fertilizing Ideas behind Progressive Christianity

Seminarians and religious students were attracted to the civil rights movement in a wide variety of ways, but at Union Seminary in particular, a tradition of liberal Protestant theology, activist professors, and outreach ministry combined with current events to draw students into the action. The CORE-led pickets at the Woolworth's 109th Street branch in Manhattan and at the 125th Street branch in Harlem connected students not only with their fellows in the South but with a seventy-year legacy of progressive Christianity within the liberal Protestant fold. Progressive Christians since the turn of the century had sponsored a myriad of interracial pacifist and social justice projects that had created organizations like CORE. But the sources of inspiration were many and the progressive Christians of the 1960s drew from different wells.

Liberal Protestantism and "Progressive Christians"

Liberal Protestantism developed beginning in religiously plural colonial America as the religious expression of new political and social developments, and grew into its full form following the Civil War and into the early twentieth century. Liberal Protestants emphasized the goodness of human nature, belief in progress, the worldly presence of divinity, and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The term itself can be confusing because Liberal Protestantism can refer to a particular worldview or to a theological movement within larger Protestant thought, and be used to describe those denominations that most clearly embody both that worldview and that theology. Liberal Protestants argue that the bible should be interpreted in the light of modern conditions, and its message translated into an injunction to serve “the least of these” while trying to correct injustices of all kinds.

Liberal Protestantism fully developed within the following American churches: the American Baptist, Episcopal, United Methodist, the Presbyterian Church USA, Congregationalist, Evangelical Lutheran, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ, known collectively as the mainstream or mainline Protestant denominations.³⁵ In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Baptist and Presbyterian denominations split over slavery, creating two new groups, the Southern Baptists and the Presbyterian Church in America. As modern theology developed and was adopted by the Northern churches later in the century, the division between Liberal

³⁵ The mainline churches are organized according to three distinct kinds of church polity. The Episcopal and Methodist churches adhere to the Episcopal structure whereby bishops have authority over the priests and congregations in a given region. Presbyterian and Lutheran churches are organized into a synodal system in which an overall church board shares power with local church officials. In the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ, each congregation elects its own minister. (Michael Friedland, *“To Proclaim the Acceptable Year of the Lord”: Social Activism and Ecumenical Cooperation Among White Clergy in the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s*. Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1993, 10-11.) A democratic spirit that gives the laity a strong voice, though, governs all three systems, and each system considers the laity to be part of a “priesthood of all Believers.” Thus the minister and laity of a given congregation are often able to determine its particular direction and, more importantly, congregations themselves are often strong enough to push the church in a direction other than that selected by their particular minister.

Protestants located largely in the North and fundamentalists located largely in the South became so distinct that it came to define America culturally as well as religiously through the remainder of the century and into the next.³⁶ Liberal Protestants can be viewed in contrast to Christian Fundamentalists who accept the bible as literal truth and believe in the imminent return of Jesus Christ to redeem the world. However, a word of caution is in order. Theological and denominational boundary lines and definitions were often in flux and there has always been a certain fluidity among liberal and fundamentalist Protestants, and especially among groups that cross the border or exist within the border space – the evangelical movement for one example. Thus it is impossible to make blanket statements about left or right, or completely differentiate between “liberal” and “conservative” religion.

For our purposes then, I use the terms progressive Christianity and progressive Christians to refer to that subgroup, within the larger category of Liberal Protestantism, to which the protagonists in this story belong. Although progressive Christians emerged from different backgrounds and embraced a range of beliefs, from the Social Gospel and to Neo-orthodoxy, and appeared north and south and in both black and whites churches, they found common cause at multiple points throughout the century, and none more importantly than that of the cause of racial justice.

Liberal Protestant Theology and the Social Gospel

Liberal Protestants, from the Gilded Age forward, attempted to reconcile their faith with the modern world, including the theory of evolution. Liberal theology encouraged

³⁶ Robert S. Michaelsen and Wade Clark Roof, eds., “Introduction,” *Liberal Protestantism: Realities & Possibilities* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986), 4-5.

biblical criticism, treated the bible as only one part of God's ongoing revelations, favored a focus on human goodness and potential over the stain of original sin, and emphasized the lived experience of religion rather than devotion to doctrine. Liberal Protestants stressed God's immanence but believed in the ability of mankind to interpret and live out God's instructions in the world. But Liberal Protestantism was also elastic, and as it interacted with American political and cultural realities, it had enough room for those who acted in concert with the dominant paradigm, modernists, those who withdrew from the worldly character of modern Protestantism, and those who tried to use their religion as the basis for transforming the national character.³⁷ This latter group found mature expression in the Social Gospel movement of the turn of the century, and in even more radical variants that followed.

Growing out of the Populist movement in the 1890s, and responding to the social unrest they perceived as brought on, in part, by the Industrial Revolution, Protestant clergy in the Social Gospel movement developed strategies for regulating behavior to conform to their image of a civilized society. Combining Christian tenets with liberal reform tendencies, adherents to the Social Gospel believed that if companies and social institutions could be persuaded to operate according to Christian ethics, "righteousness and justice would appear on earth."³⁸ For these believers, personal salvation through a relationship with Jesus Christ was only part of the equation; in order to realize the Kingdom of Heaven, Americans needed to address political and economic social inequalities. The practitioners of the Social Gospel criticized large-scale corporate organization, trusts, and the concentration of wealth in the

³⁷ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Thomason Wadsworth, 1999, 4th edition 2007), 94-101.

³⁸ Michael B. Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 11.

hands of a few. The Social Gospel movement underlay many of the Progressive reform movements in the early 20th century.³⁹ Believing people to be basically rational and moral, proponents of the Social Gospel stressed Christian love and cooperation and the belief that good deeds, moral conviction, and individual sacrifice could create a new social order. Whereas the Liberal Protestantism that first developed in America contained a strongly prophetic critique of the old world churches, the Social Gospel was now a prophetic voice directed at the worldly structures of society.⁴⁰

Proponents of the Social Gospel reached out especially to urban working and poor people, many of them recent immigrants. The Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch, who once served a parish in Hell's Kitchen and was the best known of the Social Gospel theologians, endorsed a brand of democratic socialism that challenged the hegemony of the "possessing classes." For most practitioners of the Social Gospel, race relations and racial equity were not their primary concerns. However, Social Gospellers did not all together ignore race and the few steps they made in addressing racial reform laid down a clear track that others would follow. Union Theological Seminary's president Charles Cuthbert Hall preached on the necessity for integration and racial equality during lectures to white Southern audiences throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s.

Social Gospellers were also instrumental in the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Federal Council of Churches, and the National Urban League, organizations that would serve as midwives to the civil rights

³⁹ Maurice C. Latta, "The Background for the Social Gospel in American Protestantism," *Church History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1936, 269; Warren Goldstein, "A Liberal Dose of Religious Fervor," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 8, 2005, 6.

⁴⁰ Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 12-14; Albanese, 102.

movement.⁴¹ Still, the Social Gospel movement was essentially middle class, tended to be moralistic and paternalistic in its attitude toward immigrants and the poor, and, with some notable exceptions, reaffirmed the basic political and class structure of the country, including southern segregation. A small cadre of clergy and lay people, both North and South, however, defied the restraints of the Social Gospel, pushing the definition of reform to include revolution and a radical restructuring of society that embraced changes in both the class and the racial order.

Christian Realism and Prophetic Christianity

Unlike some of his fellow faculty members at Union, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was not always a proponent of the Social Gospel Movement. Originally a devotee of the Social Gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr gradually changed his beliefs based on the World War, the dominance of corporate capitalism, and the rise of fascism in Europe. In 1939 Niebuhr renounced liberal theology as naively optimistic, based on “simple little homilies” which ignored “the brutal facts of life,” which indicated that mankind was at essence sinful, and thus incapable of realizing utopia.⁴² Niebuhr came to be seen as the leader of a new school of thought known varyingly in America as neo-orthodoxy, crisis theology, or Christian Realism.

Other religious forces with deep roots were also at work in the country, and many of the black churches in the South supported social change based on religious tenets. This could

⁴¹ Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Writing A Way Home* (in progress, collection of author).

⁴² Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 1-2, 11.

vary from a dominant belief in many evangelical black churches that a better home awaited in the next world to a Prophetic Christianity that drew on the examples of the Old Testament prophets to urge society to change in the present. Many of the black ministers who led the early phases of the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr., are identified with this prophetic strain of Christianity, though many in the small community of white progressive Christians also felt strong links to the prophetic tradition.

Christian Existentialism and the Search for Authenticity

Many Christian students in the years directly following World War II turned to theology and, often, Christian existentialism. Eager to understand the alienation, estrangement, human cruelty, and seeming meaninglessness of life that the war had highlighted, students devoured the work of Christian existentialists Bonhoeffer, Soren Kierkegaard, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. In particular, Bultmann's argument that Christianity should be wrenched out of its ancient trappings and recast using modern language, symbols, myths, and aspirations had obvious appeal for students searching for answers through faith. Bonhoeffer, too, called for "a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming – as was Jesus' language; it will be a new language of righteousness and truth."⁴³ Students living in a time of great anxiety found that the existential Christian faith of these writers and thinkers offered one path to what they described as "authenticity."⁴⁴

⁴³ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55; Sara M. Evans, *Journeys that Opened Up the World: Women, Students Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 4-5; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, editor (New York: Macmillan, 1953, revised edition, 1967), 172.

⁴⁴ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).55. Tillich and Bultmann both referred to themselves under the

The term authenticity first entered the lexicon of the white student movement via the Student Christian Movement that had bloomed in the 1920s and grown in size and influence up through the 1960s. The Port Huron Statement, the defining statement of the Sixties' "secular" student movement, released by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962, also called for finding "a meaning of life that is personally authentic," reflecting the later movement's religious roots. Dick Flacks, an SDS activist, defined authenticity as "acute sensitivity to hypocrisy, a wish for self-knowledge and understanding, concern that one's own personal potentialities – as well as those of others – be realized, rejection of imposed standards of behavior, and acceptance of situational ethics."⁴⁵ In general terms it meant that something must be pure, "feel right," and resonate with one's ethics and morals. In a sense, authenticity was the antithesis of alienation, if by the latter one meant, as Lionel Trilling wrote in 1970, "the sense of something intervening between man [and] his own organic endowment."⁴⁶ Finding authenticity would restore one's wholeness.

Christian Existentialist label. Tillich and Bonhoeffer were also, along with Reinhold Niebuhr, considered Neo-Orthodox. "Existentialism, however, served as the pathway between theological conservatism and radical humanism. Historically, existentialist philosophy had emerged from Protestantism, particularly in the thought of Soren Kierkegaard. (Rossinow, 60) The Christian existentialists "focused on the paired danger and promise of modern life." The main danger, according to Tillich, was anxiety, which was the result of estrangement from God, or in his secular term, "the ground of Being." Anxiety was an unavoidable part of the human condition but it had been worsened in the modern age, which made estrangement from the ground of Being all the easier. Tillich saw fascism as the attempt to introduce a new set of grounding symbols. Mankind's triumphs as understood by humanists and in the Enlightenment cast God's greatness into doubt. (Rossinow, 62) Still, it was difficult in the face of modernity and exposure to new ideas and cultures, to return to the surety of the "old Christianity." Bonhoeffer was less anxious and more political. His "religionless Christianity" recognized the attraction of jettisoning Christianity's church trappings and invoking a primitive church of believers. He felt that science and human accomplishment had "freed" man from a necessary belief in the almighty, but that this freedom shouldn't cause angst, it should be a cause for celebration of the fact that man could choose freely to believe. He celebrated what he called the "world come-of-age." "He urged a breakthrough to God that would coexist with, not contradict, the breakthrough to autonomy." (Rossinow, 63)

⁴⁵ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 204-205.

⁴⁶ Trilling quoted in Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnick, eds. *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 544.

Authenticity also equated truth and justice with democracy on the one hand and personal fulfillment on the other, both of which were attractive goals to young people coming of age in the 1960s. Although the search for authenticity was not new to this historical period, religious historians Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney argue that “in the sixties and seventies this quest was pursued with particular intensity [and] on a far wider scale than ever before, touching almost every sector of society.”⁴⁷ The search for authentic experience could take the form of traditional religion but was also often expressed in intellectual terms or through an amorphous spirituality.

Theologian Reuel Howe, addressing the alumni of the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1965, invoked authenticity when he decried the average sermon as an empty monologue “and at last the world is beginning to cry, ‘Stop!’” He said, “We can’t stand more words. Your words are empty because they are not reinforced by actions that give them authenticity.” Illustrating his point with explicitly religious language, Howe urged his listeners to “make the Word flesh,” to bring the injunctions of the Bible to life through real world action.⁴⁸

If the 1960s was the decade of social consciousness and change and the 1970s was the “Me Decade,” then perhaps the quest for authenticity, which encompassed both concern for the greater good and acute self-examination, can be seen as linking the two. Religious historian Charles Marsh writes that the quest for authenticity could result in “an

⁴⁷ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney. *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*, 8.

⁴⁸ Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 5. Howe delivered this address at Princeton Seminary, shortly after the death of James Reeb, an alumni of that school, who had certainly engaged in “authentic action” when he traveled to Selma, Alabama, in response to Martin Luther King’s invitation to clergy to join him in marching to Montgomery. Reeb was killed on a Selma street corner by members of a white mob on March 11, 1965.

existentialist-therapeutic rendering of humanity's 'potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self understanding, and creativity.'"⁴⁹ Although the search for authenticity needed not have an explicit link to church or organized religion, it was undergirded by basic Judeo-Christian tenets and often informed by a common biblical language and tradition shared by both white and black church people. Involvement in social and political causes was one way to make life more meaningful, and for students of religion in particular, this meant translating thought into action.

Students found that the feeling of alienation, or being estranged from what felt real and meaningful, could be combated by greater involvement in social change efforts, which in turn led to personal satisfaction and a greater sense of wholeness. Involvement attacked meaninglessness and produced wholeness, or authenticity. The existentialists described such inner completeness as "a state of unity with the self or the divine," or what Paul Tillich called "the ground of Being." Existentialism provided an ideology and a language to describe how the alienation created by current political and social structures could be combated, and authenticity achieved, through embracing radical social change.⁵⁰ "In the world of Christian existentialism," writes Rossinow, "salvation was returned to its original, therapeutic meaning: the healing of a wound, the bridging of the awful separation of the human from the divine. Sin was translated as alienation and salvation now meant authenticity."⁵¹ Put another way but in equally religious terms, authentic connection – both on the human and the spiritual level – was reconciliation, and successful connection or reconciliation could lead to

⁴⁹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 4.

⁵⁰ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 4-5.

⁵¹ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 6.

the achievement of authenticity, redemption. Many white students in the New Left political movements used the less obviously religious terms – authenticity, connection – but, in applying their search for the real to their political demands for a more just society, they were speaking the same language as Christian reformers from the biblical prophets to the Social Gospelers of the turn of the century. This is to say both that organized liberal Christians were central animators of mid-twentieth century social reform movements, *and* that social Christianity was a key ingredient in animating even those parts of the reform movements that were purportedly secular.⁵²

Movement and Organizational Incubators

Progressive Christians drew ideas from these various wells, but they also modeled the new projects they developed, among them the Student Interracial Ministry, on earlier organizational and movement expressions. These provided examples of Christian principles in action, of community organization, and of prophetic “witnessing” to the better world that could be realized in the present.

Social Christianity and New Deal Progressives

One well from which the progressive Christians of the 1960s drew deeply was provided by the small group of urban missionaries and southern clergy and activists in the 1920s through 1950s who combined aspects of Christian Realism with Social Gospel elements. These predecessors of the civil rights movement bravely addressed racial

⁵² According to Rossinow, “What emerged from this process by the start of the 1960s was a politicized, seemingly de-Christianized dissident evangelism, a kind of ‘religionless Christianity,’ to use the pregnant phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” (Rossinow, 54.)

inequalities at a time when to do so was “to pay the price of brotherhood in blood,” and “to feel the violence, hatred, and wrath of those who benefited from the status quo.”⁵³

Historian Patricia Sullivan has argued that Southern New Deal progressives, made up of a loose alliance of “student radicals, CIO organizers, civil rights litigators, national policymakers, congressional lobbyists, [and] voting rights activists,” attempted to extend economic and political democracy in the South during the 1930s and 1940s. Inspired by the New Deal and having come of age during the Depression, the multi-racial members of this loose alliance tried to promote and protect black civil liberties, interracial unionism, and universal suffrage, focusing their efforts especially on registering black voters and repealing the poll tax. Although not all members were religious, they espoused a practical Christian socialism based in the belief of the equality of all people. These beliefs made them vulnerable to both Cold War anti-communism and white segregationist backlash, and the combination of the two eventually suppressed much of the movement. By the 1950s, these forces had left the small coalition of southern radicals disjointed and marginalized. They had, however, as Sullivan demonstrates, “tilled the ground for future change,” “collectively expand[ing] the possibilities of democracy in a racially fractured civil landscape.”⁵⁴ These progenitors of the civil rights movement were not totally suppressed by the Cold War and white backlash, only briefly quieted, and both their legacy and many of the individuals

⁵³ Michael Brooks Friedland, *To Proclaim the Acceptable Year of the Lord*, 51. See also, John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994) and Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981) and Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), iii.

⁵⁴ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 275

themselves lived on to influence the generation that would bring forth the social change movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁵⁵

A small cohort of racially and socially progressive Protestant ministers, many of them Baptists, made up a major portion of the loose alliance of southern radicals. Although in mid-20th century America most white Southern churches adhered to Jim Crow policies, there had been room, since at least the first third of the century and the popularization in the North of the Social Gospel, for at least a small number of ministers and congregations that dissented from both the conservative theology of the time and from strict separation of the races. These southern Christian dissenters exhibited “a culture of indigenous protest,” whose ideology and activism was fueled both by the tenets of the Social Gospel and by its practitioners’ belief that southern social patterns, specifically those governing religion and race, were inconsistent with scripture.⁵⁶ Although born and raised in the South, many of these individuals had taken theological training in the North. They were not numerous, but these homegrown radicals were nevertheless an important alternative voice in the southern churches, and through non-church based social change projects. They influenced one another and spread their ideas on religion and social justice through what historian David Stricklin calls “a genealogy of dissent,” which was still influential in the 1960s, especially in North Carolina and Georgia.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Among the works on the Depression-era generation of radicals are Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981); and John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁵⁶ David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 20.

⁵⁷ Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent*, 23-24.

The institutional church in the South generally moved slowly on social issues despite the entreaties and efforts of Christian dissenters. Seeking other paths, progressive Christians, Populists, and radicals often found homes outside the church structure, creating a number of religiously centered or inspired reform organizations through which they worked. At the turn of the century, even secular reform groups were imbued with a spirit of regional evangelicalism that gave political gatherings the same energy as religious camp meetings. Sixty years later, a similar spirit would animate the early incarnations of the southern student-led civil rights movement, whose fervor, rituals, and demands of devotion, would cause organizer Diane Nash to characterize it as a kind of “applied religion.”⁵⁸

Populists at the end of the nineteenth century, such as those in the evangelically oriented Farmer’s Alliance and the Colored Farmer’s Alliance, and Progressives in the early twentieth century were similarly animated. Progressives applied Christian ethics to a variety of reform projects, from prohibition to education to controls on immigrants. As the century wore on, evangelical Populism became increasingly focused on personal salvation, and progressivism focused on “uplift” of the poor and dispossessed. Since Southern churches in the main refrained from sponsoring the reform movements, social reformers, many of them women, created “extra-church” efforts, including mission societies, anti-alcohol efforts, child labor reform efforts, educational programs for women and blacks, anti-lynching societies, and interracial discussion groups, as well as influencing established organizations like the YWCA toward an interest in racial issues and, eventually, racial inclusiveness.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, 21. John Lewis of SNCC once described the mass meetings of the civil rights movement as: “[they] were church, and for some who had grown disillusioned with Christian otherworldliness, they were better than church.” Quoted in Charles Marsh, *Beloved Community*, 207.

⁵⁹ Thus, an organization like the Commission on Interracial Cooperation was formed in Nashville in 1919. It originally focused attention on racial problems within “separate but equal” chapters. By 1944 it had evolved

Radical Christian rural experiments, such as Koinonia Farm, the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union, Delta and Providence Farms in Mississippi, and Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, provided other outlets for religiously inspired dissent. Southern society and the churches were stratified as to class, and so these organizations were especially important modes of expression for rural poor whites and blacks. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr later observed, the black and white share croppers of the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union were not served by the middle class churches of the region but were instead led by "lay preachers, who develop spontaneously without religious training." Though these leaders may have had only a basic understanding of Christian theology, "they know their bible" and "they express[ed] the religious protest against social injustice in terms reminiscent of the classical examples of this protest."⁶⁰ To be fair, the lay leaders of the sharecroppers had help from a few individuals schooled in the progressive Christian tradition, including a radical West Virginian and member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Howard Kester, who had been educated at Princeton and Vanderbilt and then studied with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary. Under Niebuhr, Kester's philosophical outlook had changed from a rather staid Social Gospel progressive stance into a more radical one committed to aggressive social action. Robert Martin describes Kester as "one of the most uncompromising of that lonely band of white southerners who in the years before it was remotely fashionable,

into the interracial Southern Regional Council, whose mission was "to attain through research and action the ideals and practices of equal opportunity for all peoples of the region." (www.southerncouncil.org/history.html, accessed on December 25, 2009.)

⁶⁰ Quoted in Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 99.

devoted their lives to removing the social and economic inequalities that they saw as blighting their region.”⁶¹

Two other notable southern dissenters, Myles Horton and James Dombrowski, also studied with Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary, and also returned to the South heavily influenced by his practical Christian socialism. Horton, who gradually moved away from organized religion and who was also mentored by Jane Addams at the seminal Hull House settlement house in Chicago, helped to create and run the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Dombrowski was a key early member of both Highlander and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen formed in 1934 as the Younger Churchmen of the South, and was led by Kester, Dombrowski, and a group of radical and progressive clergy. The Fellowship was from its inception was an interracial organization that identified itself “with the emerging minority of prophetic Christians who are trying to discover and give practical expression to the historic redemptive mission of our religion.”⁶² The Fellowship ran an interracial youth camp and conference center at Swannanoa, North Carolina. It also published a biannual journal called *Prophetic Religion*. The Fellowship’s stance on segregation was clear. In a widely circulated pamphlet the organization declared: “The churches, both Negro and white, must end segregation within their fellowships or segregation

⁶¹ Robert F. Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904-1977* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991).

⁶² Although the organization languished in the post-War years, it was revived again as the Committee of Southern Churchmen in 1964 by the Reverend Will Campbell under the auspices of the National Council of Churches. However, during that period the organization was to serve mostly as a home base for Campbell’s own activities and fundraising, and the Fellowship no longer acted as a progressive ministerial bloc. Campbell, again perhaps not un-coincidentally, was one of SIM’s first endorsers and an early adviser to the project.

will end them. A church existing in a pattern of segregation imposed by society is a living lie, untrue to its Gospel, a Judas in its betrayal of Christ.”⁶³

Although the influence of southern Christian dissenters was never very great –and the anti-communist crusades at mid-century shook much of what standing they had acquired – their faith-based radicalism questioned both the evangelical assumptions of the southern churches and the established order of the society.⁶⁴ Together, these dissident ministers and sympathetic-laypeople formed a tiny network that applied pressure to a small crack in the wall of Southern religious hegemony. In time increasing pressure would build up in this fissure, threatening the integrity of the entire structure.

Ecumenical Movements: The Federal and National Council of Churches

The Federal Council of Churches, the National Council’s predecessor, established a Department of Christian Social Relations in 1908 and a Department of Race Relations in 1921.⁶⁵ The Department of Race Relations had only a part-time director until 1934,

⁶³ Pamphlet, “We Affirm,” published by the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, in possession of Robert Seymour. Biblical reference is from Luke 4:19.

⁶⁴ Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 47-49.

⁶⁵ The history of the National Council of Churches, the main ecumenical body in America, is intertwined with the stories of American liberalism and the racial crisis. Yet, telling the National Council of Churches’ story is a distinct challenge since it has, for an organization of its vast influence, engendered very little in the way of critical scholarship. A good history of the organizations is sorely needed as, other than James Findlay and Mark Newman’s fine work on the NCC from the 1950s through the 1970s, the few other sources are either highly critical and biased lambasts from the right, or dated scholarly overviews from the pre-War period. See James Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*; Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators*; K.L. Billingsly, *From Mainline to Sideline: The Social Witness of the National Council of Churches* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990); G. Russell Evans, *Apathy, Apostasy and Apostles: A Study of the History and Activities of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. with Sidelights on its Ally, the World Council of Churches* (New York: Vantage Press, 1973). This last title is an “expose” of rampant communism within the Council, and is representative of a half-dozen books, most published between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, that accuse the National Council of Churches of being infiltrated by and sponsoring communism. Billingsly is a former student radical and reformed Marxist who believes that the National Council of Churches has been swayed by communists and politically correct radicals, and that it has misspent millions of dollars donated by unsuspecting Christians.

however, when it named as executive secretary Dr. George Haynes, a black scholar and activist with a national reputation as one of the founders of both the Urban League and of Fisk University's Department of Sociology. Under Haynes, the Department of Race Relations immediately began publishing a newsletter on race issues, the *Interracial News Service*, as "a digest of trends and developments in human relations." By 1962, when the entire issue was devoted to the Student Interracial Ministry, the *Interracial News Service* was up to volume 33 and publishing every two months.

Haynes retired in 1947 and was replaced by his assistant J. Oscar Lee, an African American scholar from Philadelphia who had been educated at both black and integrated institutions, including Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, from which he earned a Ph.D. in 1946. Lee stayed on after his department became the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations under the new National Council of Churches in 1950.

Until 1963, the Federal and then National Council took only halting, and then sometimes conflicting, steps on race issues. The steps usually took the form of support of other organizations or of proclamations in the form of resolutions proposed either by the General Board of the council or in the biennial or triennial national meetings, but they did date back to just after World War II. At its called meeting in March of 1946, the Federal Council denounced segregation and devoted itself to the realization of "a non-segregated Church and non-segregated society."⁶⁶ In 1947, the Federal Council also gave the seed money to start the East Harlem Protestant Parish, an interracial urban ministry project

⁶⁶ Benjamin Mays, review of *The Protestant Church and the Negro* in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1948), p. 299.

targeting the poor of metropolitan New York, a program that sparked the growth of liberal Protestant urban ministry and the birth of what would grow into the Urban Training Movement, a defining strategy of seminary field training throughout the remainder of the century.⁶⁷ In 1948, the council sponsored the first of many ecumenical race relations institutes on college campuses. The council collaborated with the YMCA, YWCA, and other ecumenical state and national agencies in the institutes which used several days of prayer and discussion to create what the Council called “laboratories in practical Christian brotherhood”; by the middle of the 1950s, over 500 students a year were attending.⁶⁸

In 1949, the Federal Council took another step forward when it submitted to the United States Supreme Court an *amicus curiae* brief in support of the Sweat v. Painter lawsuit brought by an African American attempting to attend the segregated law school at the University of Texas. The case was an important precursor to the Brown v. Board of Education suit in 1954, and the Council’s brief caused significant blowback from its southern constituents. A similar response came from its southern members after the Federal Council released its Second “Statement on the Churches and Segregation” in 1952, one of two dozen official policies on racial issues it adopted between 1950 and 1958.⁶⁹ In the 1952 document, the Council reasserted its 1946 position statement, which had by that point spawned a number of similar statements by the denominational bodies. But it also went further, accusing the Church of complicity in racial discrimination, asserting that the churches “must take our

⁶⁷ Bruce Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness: The Story of the East Harlem Protestant Parish* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 33; Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870-1970* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 736-739.

⁶⁸ “The Department of Racial and Cultural Relations: What it Does,” quoted by Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 18.

⁶⁹ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 16, 14.

stand against it,” and calling on the churches to create “a non-segregated church and a non-segregated community.”⁷⁰ The statement received strong backing from the African American churches. At one point, when the council seemed to hesitate, the 2,000 members of Adam Clayton Powell’s important New York Abyssinian Baptist Church voted to secede. The incident was revealing on several levels. First, it showed that although the Second Statement passed without further trouble, the slight hesitation seemed in keeping with the new Cold War climate that had infiltrated America in the years between the first and second statements. Anti-communism and fear only added to the Council’s traditional cautious approach. But the other revelation exposed by the debates over the Second Statement was the willingness of black churchmen, in the years before the Brown decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to take leadership roles and to pressure their white clergy brethren.⁷¹ This was not to result in much progress, however, as the NCC of the Cold War Era contented itself with further proclamations, on the Brown decision and on the Little Rock desegregation crisis, for examples, that had little actual social or political effect. Notably, the Council did not provide another *amicus* brief for the Brown case as it had done in Sweat v. Painter.

Under Oscar Lee, the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations steadily if slowly advanced its agenda, continuing to oversee the college institutes and to promote a national “Race Relations Sunday” among the Protestant churches, urging them to devote one yearly church service to questions of race and brotherhood. Taken together the projects of the Department were educational in nature, with the occasional foray into interracial exchange and interaction. The somewhat isolated department seemed to focus on ideas rather than action and so didn’t threaten the campaign of slow progress endorsed by the liberal white

⁷⁰ Quoted in Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 14.

⁷¹ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 15.

leaders of the Council. However, by creating a network of supporters through the interdenominational institutes, by keeping lines of communication open with the black churches, and by developing interracial communication and cooperation, Lee and his department were quietly sowing the fields from which change would grow.

Student Christian Movements

Like the Social Gospel movement that also inspired the student religious activists of the 1960s, the Student Christian Movement began at the end of the previous century. The movement's American roots can be traced to the founding of the YMCA in 1851, the YWCA in 1858, and the first YMCA for African Americans, opened in 1860. The YMCA mostly directed its activities to college males and the YWCA to young working women. Together they offered a variety of services ranging from outdoor activities to housing to student orientations and discussion groups on matters of cultural importance. The college YMCA chapters were joined in the years following World War I by a number of campus ministry ventures sponsored by the mainline Protestant denominations, as well as by Roman Catholic and Jewish organizations. Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian chaplains worked alongside the Catholic Newman Centers and Jewish Hillel Houses to offer worship services, seminars, and recreational activities. Most of the Protestant groups were linked to one another and to their partners overseas through the World Student Christian Federation, and referred to themselves collectively as the Student Christian Movement.

A sense of global outreach was an intrinsic part of the Student Christian Movement. In addition to those groups that based themselves on college campuses, other Student Christian groups devoted themselves to overseas Christian mission. The Student Volunteer

Movement for Foreign Missions began in 1886 amidst the excitement of a rising nationalism geared toward the expansion of business and empire, and with the assuredness of divine sanction. The Student Volunteer Movement arranged for American, British, and German students to serve as missionaries throughout the world and occasionally exchange ideas at international conferences. The student ecumenical movement itself flowered into full being with establishment of the World Student Christian Federation in 1895.⁷²

Rooted both in social Christianity and in the evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening, student groups thrived, offering a mixture of foreign service and domestic engagement. The American Social Gospel movement was developing on a parallel path to the student Christian movement and it was not long before they met, imbuing what had been a strictly evangelical movement with stated commitments, by 1905, to “social and economic justice.”⁷³ This was re-emphasized again following World War I, with a new commitment to exploring social problems and working for global peace, although within the context of Christian evangelicalism.

The global evangelical nature of the movement – World Student Christian Federation founder John R. Mott had laid out his vision in the 1897 book *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest* – persisted, making the Student Christian Movement into a global phenomenon with far reaching theological and political consequences. Mott focused on universities and through them the movement and his organization quickly spread across the world, both

⁷² The Student Volunteer Movement evolved into the United Student Christian Council in 1959. See Risto Lehtonen, *Story of a Storm: The Ecumenical Student Movement in the Turmoil of Revolution* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 9-10. The organization name was changed from World's Student Christian Federation to World Student Christian Federation in 1960. (“Historical Note,” Guide to the Archives of the World Student Christian Federation: Europe - Part 1, Record Group No. 46/4, Compiled by Paul Codispoti, Joan R. Duffy, and Martha Lund Smalley, Yale University Library, Divinity Library Special Collections, Copyright © Yale University Library, 1984, 1989.)

⁷³ Lehtonen, 12.

English and non-English speaking. Race relations first played out on the international student Christian movement stage in 1913 when an integrated American delegation attended a World Student Christian Federation conference in Lake Mohonk, New York. This conference also marked the emergence of a continuing pattern of strong female participation.⁷⁴

World War I challenged the inherent optimism and missionary enthusiasm of large portions of the student Christian movement. A pre-war faith in progress was severely challenged, and for Christian students in 1920, the main theological questions being debated were about who was Jesus Christ and what was his meaning for the twentieth century church and the post-war world.⁷⁵ The answer differed according to the two main theological camps that were crystallizing at the time – liberal and fundamentalist – and that have, though evolving, grown ever entrenched. The post-war liberal position interpreted Christ's life as an example of the good works man should do in his time on earth, while the fundamentalist position adhered to the central evangelical focus of the pre-war period, belief in a Christ sacrificed for the sins of man and a focus on personal salvation.

The Christian Student Movement, according to Princeton theology professor Charles C. West, “was where ecumenical awareness was cultivated and where the ecumenical vision challenged the churches in at least the first sixty years of this century. It held evangelical motivation and social involvement in creative tension. It was a vision of church renewal in mission, in and for the world.”⁷⁶ Movement organizations convened national gatherings on a yearly basis. Each year a host, either the Student YMCA or YWCA, a denominational body,

⁷⁴ Lehtonen, 13.

⁷⁵ Lehtonen, 14.

⁷⁶ Lehtonen, xiv

or the Student Volunteer Movement, would gather thousands of students for days of discussion, fellowship, and prayer. Though they were given little media attention at the time, the huge national and international gatherings were vastly important touchstones for the involved students, imparting to them both their national particularities and their global unity, and the potential combined power and devotion they possessed to put their faith into action in a world where racial, economic, and gender injustice were the norm. The international nature of such gatherings also served to challenge the American's closely held notions of imperialism and anti-communism, and to emphasize global issues of inequality. The 1955 gathering of the Student Volunteer Movement was especially important in this regard. Sixty religious groups represented by 3,500 students from eighty countries massed in Athens, Ohio, just after Christmas. The title of the conference was "Revolution and Reconciliation."⁷⁷

At the "Revolution and Reconciliation" Conference, the Christian Student Movement embraced the civil rights movement. During the course of discussions, the global gathering explored American anti-communism from global vantage points, highlighting American economic and cultural imperialism. Panelists asked how Americans could force their democratic ideals on the rest of the world when they weren't able to deliver on them themselves and they charged the churches with leading a domestic change movement to bringing about justice and equality at home.⁷⁸ A similar conference, also in Athens, Ohio, in 1959, continued the discussions, addressing topics from radical expressions of faith to the birth of post-colonial nations overseas to the necessity of missionaries to focus more on

⁷⁷ Evans, *Journeys that Opened up the World*, 4-5.

⁷⁸ Evans, *Journeys that Opened up the World*, 5.

justice and less on conversion. An editorial in the conference newspaper declared, “Each of us must create for himself the bridge whereby his faith can lead to works.”

Out of the conference grew a seminal mission project of the Student Christian Movement, the Frontier Intern program, a Christian precursor to the federal Peace Corps. One month after the conference, the student sit-in movement began in the South, and many of those who had participated in the student Christian movement conference rushed to get involved.⁷⁹ By 1960, these young students already had jumped to the other side of a generation gap forming between them and the older generation of ecumenical leaders. According to theology professor Charles West, the students’ had no patience for the status quo. “It was a bust. Students wanted to be inspired, but they were not interested in the wisdom their elders had gained from fighting other battles in other decades.”⁸⁰ The students now had their own battle and they would remain an important cadre within the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement until the end of the decade.

The Student Christian Movement in the 1950s and early 1960s embraced existentialism in both its secular and Christian forms, and many students first encountered existential ideas through the movement’s discussion groups that introduced students to this new world of ideas. The Methodist Student Movement produced its own highly influential thought and culture magazine, *motive*, of which then First Lady Hilary Clinton said in 1994, “I still have every issue they sent me.”⁸¹ In 1958, the Student Y’s annual conference was organized around the theme “The Search for Authentic Experience.” The campus groups and

⁷⁹ Evans, *Journeys that Opened up the World*, 6.

⁸⁰ Lehtonen, xv

⁸¹ Kenneth L. Woodward, “Soulful Matters,” *Newsweek*, October 31, 1994, 22.

their intellectual explorations made the search for social and personal wholeness part of the same process.⁸²

The Social Gospel and the Seminaries

The Social Gospel, and some of these later more radical reformers, found a home in the mainline Protestant denominations and in a number of their seminaries, most notably Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The Presbyterian Church established Union Theological Seminary in 1836, and it moved onto its new campus in Morningside Heights in 1910. It quickly established a reputation for exploring the relationship of religion to everyday life and the relationship of the bible to social ethics.

Union Theological Seminary also contributed to the growing application of the Social Gospel as a tool in urban reform. It helped to establish a settlement house, Union Settlement, in Harlem as early as 1895, attempting to address the social as well as spiritual needs in one of New York's poorest neighborhoods. The settlement house movement began in England in 1884, and while settlement houses varied in their structure and mission, they attempted to serve poor and recent immigrant communities through a combination of basic services and language and acculturation programs. America's first settlement house was created in New York City around 1886 and its most famous, Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, in 1889. During the first years of the twentieth century, Union Settlement house was led by a Union Seminary faculty member and, according to a president of the seminary, became "widely

⁸² Rossinow, 6.

known for the excellence of its ministry to its neighborhood and for the delightful fellowship of its residents.”⁸³

In 1892, Union Theological Seminary separated from the Northern Presbyterian Church over the issue of biblical criticism, formally committing itself to the liberal Protestant camp while at the same time promoting the burgeoning ecumenical movement that was to take on concrete structure in 1908 with the formation of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ. The anti-fundamentalist Harry Emerson Fosdick graduated from Union Theological Seminary in 1904 and he, Social Gospel theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr all taught there, making Union perhaps the country’s leading liberal Protestant institution.

The spirit of the Social Gospel experienced a revival following World War II as clergy returned to urban mission work filled with an optimism born from coming perilously close to the brink of global destruction. One such example was the group of newly minted clergy from Union Seminary who, in 1948, ventured into New York City’s most notorious urban ghetto to start the East Harlem Protestant Parish. J. Archie Hargraves, George W. Webber, and Donald L. Benedict established East Harlem Protestant Parish as a collection of storefront churches that offered religious services and vocational programs and soon became a political voice for Harlem’s poor as well.⁸⁴ Don Benedict, was a Congregationalist and former pacifist who had been jailed for resisting the draft. He had later enlisted and joined the Navy, where as a first sergeant, he found himself on Iwo Jima in 1943. After the war he

⁸³ Henry Sloane Coffin. *A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary, 1896-1945: An Informal History* (New York, 1954), 23 (as quoted in Handy, 110); Handy, 218; Union Settlement still exists today as the Union Settlement Association, providing a range of social services to its East Harlem neighborhood, although it has long been independent of the seminary that gave it its name.

⁸⁴ Handy, 252-253

enrolled at Union Seminary where he met a fellow Navy veteran and Congregationalist from Des Moines, Iowa, Bill Webber, just back from serving on a submarine. Archie Hargraves, the third founder of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, was an African American Baptist from North Carolina who had moved to Harlem in the 1930s. He had worked his way through college as a reporter for the black *Amsterdam News* and then served with the U.S. Army in India.⁸⁵

As a Union student, Benedict had often sat in the school chapel and looked out through the large central window on which was lettered a verse from Mark, 16: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Seminarians of the day had no problem taking that advice to Africa and India, but they generally ignored undeveloped parts of America. East Harlem, just three blocks away, had been labeled “The Hell of Manhattan” by the U.S. Public Health Service, and was in desperate need of attention itself.⁸⁶

Upon graduation from the seminary, the three began to survey the needs and problems of this neighborhood, finding it choked by tuberculosis, poverty, festering garbage, overcrowding, abusive landlords, crime, drugs, and rampant alcoholism. Like Jane Addams and other precursors in the settlement house movement, the three men decided that they could only be effective preachers if they identified with the people by living and working among them. As Webber recounted, “We saw that neither our enthusiasms, nor our bright ideas, nor our compassion for East Harlem were of much avail. There was no way out by means of evangelism” without works.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Bruce Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness: The Story of the East Harlem Protestant Parish*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 4.

⁸⁶ Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 3.

⁸⁷ Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 10.

Hargraves pointed out that often religious and real world concerns united in political action: “Obviously the God who can get the plumbing fixed becomes the center of faith for the great majority.”⁸⁸ This reinforced the parish leaders’ decision to focus on earthly as well as spiritual needs, citing that it would be hypocrisy to pray for clean air but not to clean the slums. In this respect they directly challenged the only other preachers who still remained in the neighborhood, storefront Pentecostals whose entire focus was on otherworldliness. The Union alums recognized that while escape from the hardships of the world was appealing, even better were direct solutions to problems in the here and now.⁸⁹

During the 1950s, Union Seminary put many students to work in a variety of urban ministries; between 1948 and 1962, over 500 Union students worked with the East Harlem Protestant Parish and more than twenty graduates undertook post-seminary ministries there.⁹⁰ East Harlem was never officially related to Union Seminary but the two institutions had close ties and the parish was to serve as a strong local example of Union’s brand of ecumenical ministry. In subsequent years, some of those who founded the parish created similar projects in other cities, combining a mission of service to the poor with “normal” congregational functions. These projects included the West Side Christian Parish, the Westside Organization, and the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission in Chicago, the Cleveland Inner City Protestant Parish, the Wider City Parish in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Denver Inner City Parish.⁹¹ Twenty-seven such centers were established by fifteen national

⁸⁸ Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 36.

⁸⁹ Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 23.

⁹⁰ Kenrick, *Come Out of the Wilderness*, 66.

⁹¹ In Chicago, one of the original founders established the West Side Protestant Parish and the West Side Organization in 1952; this latter would serve as the seat of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Chicago Campaign in 1965 and 1966, the SCLC’s first northern campaign. See Lowell W. Livezey, “Church as Parish: Union Theological

church agencies in twenty-two cities during the 1960s, and ministries, as far away as Glasgow and London, credited East Harlem as their inspirations. Although most of these centers did not survive the decade, together they trained thousands of the “new breed” of clergy in urban and community ministry.⁹²

Liberal Protestant seminaries including Union experienced a period of growth in the mid-1960s. Part of that growth was fueled by liberal Protestant philanthropists who were worried that Protestantism’s cultural and political dominance in the 1950s, and an unprecedented rate of American church attendance, had not translated into an increased popularity in ministerial careers. Indeed, the opposite seemed to result. The relatively small population in the generation before the Baby Boom entered a job market with many new opportunities that made the relatively meager salaries of parish ministers unattractive by comparison. All of this combined, by the early 1950s, to cause such authorities as the National Council of Churches and Liston Pope, the dean of Yale Divinity School, to predict a coming shortage of Protestant ministers. Hoping to minimize the losses, and no doubt maintain and reinforce their power within American life, a number of liberal foundations, including the Carnegie Endowment for the Advancement of Teaching, the Danforth Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, funded efforts to study theological education and entice young people to join the ministry.

The Rockefellers were particularly interested in keeping Protestantism “in the bloodstream of the country,” and funded several efforts through their foundations, including

Seminary's East Harlem Protestant Parish,” *The Christian Century*, December 9, 1998.

⁹² Clifford J. Green, “History in the Service of the Future: Studying Urban Ministry,” in *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States, 1945-1985*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 19-20.

the Seatlantic Fund and the Rockefeller Brothers fund.⁹³ In 1952, the Rockefeller Brothers fund developed a new program to support students interested in taking a trial year in seminary in order to consider a career in the church. The trial year grants, commonly known as Rockefeller Grants, had a different effect than intended, likely increasing the number of students who were spiritually engaged and philosophically interested in religion, but who often chose a non-ministerial career over the church.

The Catalyst: Race Issues and the Long Civil Rights Movement

The Student Interracial Ministry project was informed by two historical strains of social reform, each of them having long roots in the century but each also bursting forth with new urgency at the end of the 1950s. These two social forces – the racial and economic justice reforms of the student-led civil rights movement and the ecumenical and “worldly” reforms of the mainline Protestant churches – each hoped to bring pressure to bear on American culture and politics to deliver freedom and equality to all citizens, the basic rights upon which the country had been founded. The two reform movements crossed paths at multiple points, one of the most notable of which was the race issue.

The liberal theology taught at Union Seminary, Yale Divinity School, McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, and a few others, spurred the reapplication of an activist theological tradition that dated back to the turn-of-the-century Social Gospel movement. From the 1920s through even the complacent 1950s, student Christian organizations brought

⁹³ Jonathon Strom, “A Half-Century of Strengthening Christian Mission: The Fund for Theological Education,” (The Fund for Theological Education, 2002), 4-5.

the spirit of the Social Gospel from the Gilded Age and into the Cold War era and provided an alternative voice to the prevailing conservative paradigm.⁹⁴

Liberal Protestants took a step toward embracing the race issue at last when the Federal Council of Churches finally made the first major ecumenical statement on race relations in 1946, declaring segregation “a violation of the Gospel of love and human brotherhood.” The Council further pledged to work for an integrated church and society and called upon member churches to integrate.⁹⁵ However, the call went largely unanswered at the congregational level, illustrating the inability of resolutions passed by ecumenical and denominational bodies to effect change in individual churches. At the local level, the pressures of the culture were often stronger than those of the institutional church or even the liturgy, and for many the post-war Cold War culture stressed conformity and allowed little room for any but the most radical of clergy to take a stand on social justice issues.⁹⁶ Christian students, however, away from their families and stimulated by intellectual discussions of modern freedom and theology, were not so restricted, and they helped animate a reform movement that can be seen as part of the early phase of the civil rights movement.

At the head of this movement was the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) organization, begun by settlement house leader Jane Addams among others, which spun off the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as an interracial, ecumenical group in 1942. Many of the first CORE members were black and white seminary students and they considered their new organization as following in the footsteps of the earlier Christian student groups.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 6.

⁹⁵ Friedland, *To Proclaim the Acceptable Year of the Lord*, 68.

⁹⁶ Friedland, *To Proclaim the Acceptable Year of the Lord*, 68-69.

⁹⁷ Inge Powell Bell, *CORE and the Strategy of Non-violence* (New York: Random House, 1968), 9.

Of the six original CORE members, three were seminarians, five were Protestant and one Catholic, and three of the six were black.⁹⁸ The group's leaders, James Farmer and his white colleague George Houser, had both been involved in the Methodist Student Movement. Before joining Farmer and the other future CORE members at the University of Chicago, Houser had also attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, but had been jailed as a conscientious objector before he could finish his degree there. The early chapters of CORE were centered at college campuses, since students were both a natural constituency for its philosophy and had the time and flexibility needed for in-depth training sessions or hours on a picket line.⁹⁹ Focusing on students, however, kept the organization small and its impact relatively low. But in 1946, CORE organizers went courting publicity, and found it, when they took what they called their "sit down movement" on the road with the Journey of Reconciliation, a test of the Supreme Court's 1946 decision banning segregation in interstate travel. The organization's notoriety and influence grew over the next two decades, becoming less focused on students.¹⁰⁰

Throughout the 1950s, liberal Protestantism continued to strongly influence American politics and culture. Between 1940 and 1960, church membership in America grew from forty to sixty percent of citizens, and the largest groups of these, thirty-five percent, were members of the mainline Protestant churches.¹⁰¹ By 1960, the National Council of Churches,

⁹⁸ Meier, August and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE :A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.

⁹⁹ Marvin Rich, "The Congress of Racial Equality and Its Strategy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 357 (January 1965), 113.

¹⁰⁰ Inge Powell Bell, *CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence*, (New York: Random House, 1968), 11.

¹⁰¹ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 13.

the ecumenical body that had succeeded the Federal Council, was composed of thirty-one Protestant and Orthodox denominations with forty-two million individual members.¹⁰² But the racial and regional tensions that had originally torn several of the denominations apart in the mid-nineteenth century also persisted to some degree in the surviving mainline denominations and were often manifested in a disparity between a declared principle of racial equality on the one hand, and a hesitancy to act to achieve it on the other. From the abolitionist era through the 1950s, the mainline denominations issued hundreds of resolutions calling for an end to racial discrimination but rarely enforced them or acted according to the spirit of their own rhetoric.

“A Triangle of Liberal Protestantism”

The National Council of Churches was headquartered in New York City at 475 Riverside Drive in what was called the Interchurch Center, which also housed some of the Protestant denominations’ national headquarters. Together with Union Theological Seminary and Riverside Church, the Interchurch Center formed “a triangle of Liberal Protestantism” in upper Manhattan.

The ornate Riverside Church, the “cathedral of Protestantism,” based on Chartres Cathedral in France was built in 1931 and its spires dwarfed the surrounding buildings. It was as unsettling in this landscape as the messages preached from its pulpit were to religious fundamentalists. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Jessup Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary around the corner and the reigning dean of liberal Protestantism,

¹⁰² Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 1.

served as the church's first minister.¹⁰³ He had been drummed out of another leading city church in 1925 for declaring theological war against fundamentalism in a sermon titled, "Shall the Fundamentalists win?" John D. Rockefeller answered the question in granite, building the grand fortress of Riverside Church as a new home for Fosdick and for Liberal Protestantism.

Twenty-seven years later, on October 12, 1958, the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, joined Fosdick to inaugurate the fourteen-story Interchurch Center. With hundreds of clergy, bell ringers, local citizens, and some 300 construction workers and 500 choir members looking on, and with the colorful banners of all 37 Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations swaying in the autumn breeze, Eisenhower laid down the cornerstone of the building and announced that it, "symbolizes a prime aspect of our faith – 'The Truth' that sets men free." Eisenhower added, "In this land our churches have always been sturdy defenders of the Constitutional and God-given rights of each citizen. They have sought to protect, to broaden, and to sustain the historic laws of justice and truth and honor that are the foundations of our community life. May they always do so."¹⁰⁴ It seemed in that moment that Protestantism and Liberalism, the intertwined streams of which helped fuel America's political and financial engines, would never falter.

The 1940s and 1950s: The "New Breed" of Clergy Emerges

¹⁰³ Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 171.

¹⁰⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the Cornerstone-Laying Ceremony for the Interchurch Center, New York City," October 12, 1958. From *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>, accessed on August 6, 2009.

Believing ever in progress, American liberals marched forward in the 1940s and 1950s, taking slow and cautious steps toward social change. Political and religious leaders spoke a common language and reinforced one another. The National Council of Churches' biennial and triennial meetings always featured speakers from the major political parties, sometimes a sitting president. Rising church membership indicated a religious landscape that seemed to be thriving with a vast Protestant majority.¹⁰⁵

When black lawyers and black students and black churches ignited the spark of the civil rights movement, their actions resonated with a persistent theme of progressivism within mainline white liberal Protestantism, albeit one that was acted on primarily at the fringes and only cautiously from the top leadership. However, Christian “radicals” and a new group of young churchmen sought common ground with the black churches and the black freedom struggle and were ready and willing to support it. They called for their own churches to support the movement and in many cases to join it. The majority of these liberal leaders were young ministers, fresh from the Protestant seminaries in the Northeast and Midwest, influenced by the philosophy and politics of their time as well as by an older generation of clergy radicalized by World War II. The religious historian and theologian Harvey Cox described them as “the ‘New Breed’ of socially activist clergy,” – although as inheritors of the Social Gospel tradition what they practiced was not entirely new – and called their emergence within both church leadership and social justice struggles “a nationwide phenomenon.”¹⁰⁶ The new breed of ministers was multi-racial in its composition, including black preachers active in civil rights organizing and white ministers hoping to work toward

¹⁰⁵ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey Cox, “The ‘New Breed’ in American Churches: Sources of Social Activism in American Religion,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 96, No. 1, Winter 1967, 135.

the same goals. The Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky, who had worked since the 1930s with religious leaders, most from the Catholic Church, said he had never seen anything else like the “pure flame of passion for justice you find in these young ministers today.”¹⁰⁷

The Catalyst Creates Action: Southern Sit-Ins and a Seminary Expulsion

This flame was just beginning to burn brightly when the CORE-led Woolworth’s pickets in New York City in the winter of 1960 connected the Union Theological Seminary students to the long lineage of their liberal Protestant predecessors. The pickets gave the seminarians, some of whom were questing for a real world application of the Christian Gospel they were studying, an exhilarating taste of theology – whether it was known as the Social Gospel or Christian realism or some combination of these and other ideas – in practice in the world.¹⁰⁸ The Union students, among them John Collins and his classmate and close friend Jane Stembridge, gradually integrated some of their religious beliefs and practices into the demonstrations, so that within several weeks, student-led “pre-picket worship services” had become an integral part of the Woolworth’s protests.¹⁰⁹

On March 6, 1960, five Southern sit-in veterans presented a lecture at Union Seminary, regaling the seminarians with their first hand-accounts of lunch counter

¹⁰⁷ As quoted in Harvey Cox, “The ‘New Breed’ in American Churches,” 135.

¹⁰⁸ Several editions of *the Grain of Salt* devoted extensive coverage to the pickets, including arguments justifying them on moral and economic grounds. The March 31, 1960 issue featured a full-page guide to writing letters to the presidents of national chain stores whose southern branches included segregated dining facilities. Picketers often took on more than they bargained for; on March 8, 1960, picketers at the Woolworth’s store at 109th Street were surprised to be joined by a leaflet-bearing contingent from the Provisional Organizing Committee to Reconstitute a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party in the U.S.A. According to the March 24 edition of *the Grain of Salt*, the Union students reacted with panic and confusion, eventually deciding to assign one student to each communist, “telling everyone to whom he gave his flier that it was Communist propaganda. Unfortunately it took as much time to picket the Communists as to picket Woolworth’s.” This incident gives an indication of the anti-Communist nature of most Union students at the time.

¹⁰⁹ *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 11, March 24, 1960, 1.

demonstrations, arrests, and community reactions. What they described sounded to Collins and others like a true test of Christian faith. The event that seems to have spurred the seminary students to take action, however, was an attack against one of their own. News reached Union Seminary that an African American Vanderbilt Divinity School senior named James Lawson had recently been expelled for his participation in the Southern sit-ins, despite the fact that a majority of Vanderbilt's own faculty believed that Lawson had simply "endeavor[ed] to follow his Christian conscience."¹¹⁰

Union students and some faculty identified with Lawson, as a fellow seminarian and future minister, and rallied around his cause. Roger Shinn, Union's professor of Christian ethics, spoke to Lawson and to other students and faculty at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, reporting that "they are greatly strengthened by the solidarity of Christians in theological seminaries and colleges across the country."¹¹¹

To be sure, Lawson was not a typical young seminarian, engaging in theological consideration of the world around him for the first time. He was at that point already a committed pacifist and was fast becoming an established civil rights leader. He had spent fourteen months in prison as a conscientious objector in the early 1950s, after which he served as a Methodist missionary in India, where he studied Ghandi's *Satyagraha* techniques of nonviolent resistance. While attending the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College in Ohio, he met Martin Luther King, Jr., and they began a long association that had a strong influence on Martin Luther King's later adoption of non-violence as a protest tactic. Lawson moved to Nashville toward the end of the decade to attend Vanderbilt's Divinity

¹¹⁰ Statement from Divinity School faculty as quoted by *The Nashville Tennessean* and reprinted in *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 10, March 10, 1960, 4.

¹¹¹ *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 12, March 31, 1960, 5.

School and to work as the Southern Director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He developed a cadre of Nashville students who would become major civil rights leaders in their own right, including John Lewis, Marion Barry, Diane Nash, and James Bevel. With them Lawson conducted the first test sit-ins at Southern establishments in 1958 and 1959. At the time of his dismissal from Vanderbilt, Lawson was three months shy of completing his Bachelor's of Divinity, a degree now equivalent to the Master's in Divinity. Union's Student Cabinet sent a letter of protest to the Board of Trustees at Vanderbilt University, warning them that they were being watched by "fellow citizens, fellow members of the wider academic community, and Christians."¹¹²

The sit-ins and the Lawson incident created a division among some members of the Student Christian Movement. Where some supported Lawson and his methods, others in the National Student Christian Federation, the leading federated Christian student organization and a major ecumenical body, celebrated the tide of reconciliation they felt was at work in the South, but they also urged respect for the rule of law. In a nationally-circulated "Letter to Christian Students and Campus Christian Student Groups in the U.S.A.," the group's central committee wrote that, "We, as Christian students, do not simply seek the realization of American democratic values; we witness to the fact that Christ died to reconcile all men to each other and to God." The Southern situation was proof, they wrote, that a living Christ was hard at work "healing and reconciling where our efforts have fallen short."¹¹³ But rather than enjoin Christian students to join the sit-ins or similar demonstrations, they urged strict

¹¹² Letter to Board of Trustees, Vanderbilt University, March 8, 1960, as printed in *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 10, March 10, 1960.

¹¹³ Central Committee, National Student Christian Federation, "Letter to Christian Students and Campus Christian Student Groups in the U.S.A." quoted in *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13, No. 12, March 31, 1960, 3.

observance of the law, which they claimed had been divinely inspired “to preserve relative order and peace.” They urged Christian students to embrace another kind of reconciliation, that between themselves and the demonstrators, so as to understand that black Americans’ cause was just even if their methods were not.¹¹⁴

The national councils of the other leading national Christian student organizations, the YWCA and YMCA, disagreed with the other student group’s position and took a more activist stance. While they urged students to inform themselves, they also cautioned against taking too long to act. In a nationally distributed report the YWCA and YMCA wrote, “Action apart from an attempt to keep informed is irresponsible. Yet to wait for the day when all the facts are in is to read history, not to participate in it significantly.”¹¹⁵ Among these student Christian groups can be seen the variety of liberal Protestant approaches to contemporary problems, from a Social Gospel faith in human kind’s goodness and liberal progress to a Christian realism arguing for action that met the world where it was.

At Union Seminary, student reactions to the sit-ins varied widely, some agreeing with the National Student Christian Federation’s cautious approach and others urging direct action and immediate change. However, the entire campus community did take notice of the sit-ins and their religious implications. Many on campus went to listen to Martin Luther King, Jr. speak at nearby Salem Methodist Church in Harlem on April 1, and *the Grain of Salt* published an entire special addition on “the present racial crisis” under the headline “Report for Action.” At the same time, the student government’s Social Action Committee called a special campus-wide meeting to discuss appropriate responses to the sit-ins and to Lawson’s

¹¹⁴ “Letter to Christian Students,” March 6, 1960, printed in full in “The Basis of Concern,” *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13 No. 12, March 21, 1960, 3.

¹¹⁵ “How Can We Respond?” *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 13 No. 12, March 21, 1960, 4.

dismissal. Again responses varied. Some students vowed to travel south to join the sit-ins themselves, while others decried the public demonstrations as breaking the rule of law. Referring to those demonstrators who had been arrested for trespass, student Roger Nils Folsom claimed that they had broken good laws and violated the rights of others. “May we not recklessly destroy rights in the process of fighting for rights?” he asked. “At least may we consider what other rights we are destroying, and whether their destruction is really necessary.”¹¹⁶ Another student in the audience suggested a compromise: the seminarians, who regularly spent summers doing pastoral fieldwork, might involve themselves directly in the civil rights situation – and adhere to both civic law and their Christian consciences – by undertaking their assistant pastorates in southern communities.¹¹⁷

The students who urged caution and care for the rule of law and property typified the conservative, cautious, non-interventionist approach that characterized the mainline churches and most seminaries prior to World War II. Even in 1960, a liberal seminary like Union still harbored a number of faculty and students who thought the parish minister’s duty was to attend quietly to the needs of his immediate flock or to convert heathens overseas, not to challenge American beliefs and social structures. As one Union student put it, “the seminary campus [at that time] was the last place one would have looked for an awakened social concern.”¹¹⁸ The Second World War, however, and the terror and cruelty it exposed, had shaken up a number of church folk, radicalizing them in their beliefs about the churches’ role in influencing social conditions. The traditionalists in the churches and seminaries were thus

¹¹⁶ *the Grain of Salt*, March 31, 1960.

¹¹⁷ “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” August 1966, 2. SIM UTS: 4A:1:f9.

¹¹⁸ “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment That Worked,” August 1966, 1. SIM UTS: 4A:1:f9.

joined by a swelling cohort of both faculty and students who urged the mainline churches to take a stand on social issues and actively involve themselves in contemporary affairs. Many of these same individuals supported the growing ecumenical movement, and found in it both common cause and strength in numbers. Chief among those at Union, which was widely considered one of the most liberal of the mainline seminaries, were ethics professors Roger Shinn and Reinhold Niebuhr, who was considered one of the most influential theologians in the country. At Union, the sit-ins, the local Woolworth pickets, and the Lawson discussions eventually led directly to involvement in the southern civil rights movement. The student government established a new Special Committee on the Racial Crisis, whose first task was to organize a trip to the South during Union's Spring Break.¹¹⁹ The trip would allow students to observe first-hand the Southern situation and to report back to the rest of campus.

Easter Weekend: The Death of Christ, the Birth of SIM and SNCC

As Easter Weekend drew closer, plans for the Southern trip developed around attending a conference of sit-in student leaders and supporters during Easter Weekend on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. The Student Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), under the guidance of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ella Baker, organized the Southwide Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance to discuss strategies for channeling the momentum generated by the sit-ins.

As word of the conference spread, the Union Seminary contingent grew from a group of four students to twelve and finally to seventeen in a delegation that was both interracial and international in composition and that also included Union spouses and alumni.¹²⁰ Union

¹¹⁹ Jane Stembridge, "A Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry." SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f7.

Theological Seminary was one of only a few Northern schools invited to attend, along with a handful of white Southern “observers.” Ella Baker, then the Interim Executive Director of SCLC, planned the meeting at her alma mater and invited student leaders and supporters “TO SHARE experience gained in recent protest demonstrations and TO HELP chart future goals for effective action.”¹²¹ More than 200 students turned up for the conference, representing some fifty-six colleges and high schools and thirteen activist and reform organizations. A number of smaller, satellite conferences were held concurrently in other parts of the country in support of the main gathering. The SCLC was the nominal host, but it was joined by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, CORE, the National Students Association, Students for a Democratic Society, and the National Student Christian Foundation.¹²² While a number of seminarians and other Christian students attended, the delegation from Union Theological Seminary was likely the largest contingent from one seminary.

Ella Baker, who had grown up in the South but cut her teeth in organizing in New York City and through long association with the NAACP, was within a month of leaving the SCLC, to be replaced by Wyatt Tee Walker as director. She had chafed under the ministers’ leadership, which she found imperious and often dictatorial, and was ready for both a change of scene and a change of leadership style. She relished the enthusiasm of the students, and especially the egalitarian, communitarian impulses of James Lawson and his group from Nashville. Baker’s position of responsibility within SCLC and her willingness to challenge King, who had risen to national stature during the Montgomery bus boycott, came as a

¹²⁰ “An Attempt at Understanding,” *The Grain of Salt*, May 1960, 3.

¹²¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 20.

¹²² Carson, *In Struggle*, 20-21; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 240.

revelation to the students.¹²³ As the conference unfolded, Baker remained behind the scenes, convinced that the movement sparked by student initiative should continue to be student led.

Throughout the weekend, Lawson used religious rhetoric that was quite familiar to the Union students. He described the sit-ins not as protests against police treatment, unfair laws, or even segregation, but as silent jeremiads meant to show that prejudice was a sin and that its manifestations in law and custom should be quickly dismantled. He described the non-violence of the movement as testifying to “the reality of God’s promise ... non violence as Christian love exemplified in the voluntary suffering and forgiveness of the cross” and based upon the hope of resurrection.¹²⁴ His language and delivery lent the conference something of the feel of a revival meeting.

During his opening remarks, Lawson disagreed with the Union student who had described the seminaries as the last place where one should expect social action. Instead, Lawson claimed that students had harbored strong beliefs about equality and justice but had been “simply waiting in suspension; waiting for that cause, that ideal, that event, that ‘actualizing of their faith’ which would catapult their right to speak powerfully to their nation and world.”¹²⁵ Moreover, he characterized the sit-ins not as youthful acts of rebellion, nor even as challenges to unjust laws, but as conscious moral acts designed to show segregation as sinful. In other words, his approach revealed a greater evangelical purpose. He described the sit-ins and integration as a means, not the end, the end being reconciliation and redemption. As he put it: “The Christian favors the breaking down of racial barriers because

¹²³ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 292.

¹²⁴ Jane Stenbridge, “A Wind is Rising,” *The Grain of Salt*, April 27, 1960, 4-5.

¹²⁵ James Lawson, “Speech at Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina, April 15, 1960” in Houk and Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 357.

the redeemed community of which he is already a citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity.” In Lawson’s belief system, the pursuit of racial justice was just one part of his Christian goal of realizing the “Kingdom of God” on earth. Defining nonviolence, Lawson described it as “Christian Love” and a “radically Christian method” as exemplified by Christ’s suffering and the belief in his resurrection.¹²⁶ When, on April 17, members of the Raleigh conference voted to form a temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Lawson’s Christian language and ideas set the tone for the new organization. One participant from Union Theological Seminary wrote that day: “Down in Carolina there’s a great Wind and it is not going to be stopped. It is the wind of the word of God. ... People are always asking about God and always waiting for Him to act. Well now, it seems, He is. What a glorious, marvelous, unutterable April day.”¹²⁷

However, while the Raleigh conference was interracial, invoked Christianity, and was often guided by Lawson’s description of the Beloved Community, his vision was not wholly embraced by all present, and the seeds of a different *modus operandi* for the freedom movement were also being planted. When the larger body broke into small workshop sessions, one participant noted that the working group devoted to discussing the philosophy, goals, future, purpose, and structure for future action held such a diversity of ideas and strategies that he held out little hope that Lawson’s vision for the movement would be sustained.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Lawson, “Speech at Shaw University,” Houk and Dixon, 360-361; John Webster, “The Conference at Shaw,” *the Grain of Salt*, April 27, 1960, 6.

¹²⁷ John Webster, “The Conference at Shaw,” and Jane Stenbridge, “A Wind is Rising,” *The Grain of Salt*, April 27, 1960, 4-6.

¹²⁸ Webster, 6.

Julian Bond and a group of students from Atlanta represented one faction that was pragmatically political rather than religious in its orientation. Others present were already conceiving of the struggle as a black-led movement in which martyrdom might be necessary and white support peripheral, an ideology that prefigured the rhetoric of the Black Power movement later in the decade. Birmingham pastor Fred Shuttlesworth, when asked at the end of the meeting by Union Seminary students what they could do in the movement as it progressed, replied, “Sure we want your help, but it’s our battle now. Sure we may be killed but somebody’s always had to die for freedom, haven’t they?”¹²⁹ His words were rooted both in the prophetic Christian tradition of a leader haranguing the masses and sacrificing himself in order to change the status quo, and in a tradition of black self-reliance. The motivating concepts of both the Beloved Community and of Black Power were thus articulated at one of the founding events of the movement. Although much between the two concepts appeared contradictory, both the primarily Christian and primarily secular conceit could exist at one time or be employed along a continuum from interracialism to black separatism and from strict non-violence to armed self-defense.

Lawson’s particular message did find eager ears among the Union students. Jane Stembridge, a native of Virginia and the daughter of a Methodist minister, reflected that Lawson’s motivation was “essentially spiritual, ... that the purpose goes beyond integration.”¹³⁰ For the seminarians in attendance, Lawson’s keynote speech had special significance. Calls for reconciliation and justice resonated with their understanding of the

¹²⁹ Shuttlesworth’s words proved uncannily prescient. He himself would survive four beatings and assassination attempts during his movement work, but his friend and co-pastor Charles Billups, who also spoke with the Union students at the Raleigh conference, was killed in 1968, not long after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Billups murder remains one of the unsolved killings of civil rights figures.

¹³⁰ Jane Stembridge, “A Wind is Rising,” *The Grain of Salt*, April 27, 1960, 4-5.

Gospel and seemed a call both to action and to service. What other students may have interpreted as right or just, Christian students like Stenbridge saw as providential. The seminarians from Union identified themselves as part of an interracial student movement to change society at large, but, as individuals bound for church service, they also felt called to act within the church itself. They recognized the importance of the kind of student organizing and public demonstrations that had given rise to SNCC and which it would carry forward. But they also saw a need to bring the concerns of the movement into the church itself, to challenge congregations to live out the implications of their theology.

The students wondered if there was not something they could do, as seminarians, which would differ from SNCC's approach and which would help foster racial reconciliation within the church. Based on the belief that such reconciliation would come through understanding and understanding would come only through firsthand interaction, they hatched a relatively simple plan. They would encourage their fellow seminarians who were planning their assistant pastorates for that coming summer – work required as part of their seminary training – to join parishes of another race in the Deep South. They would work for reconciliation between the races by reaching out to black students at other seminaries and joining them in their churches, creating a series of interracial pastoral teams for summer ministries in a project that became known as the Student Interracial Ministry. John Collins, sitting in his parents' car on an Alabama road, was one of the first of many students in the project who tried to change prejudice within the church and to achieve reconciliation through individual contact and interracial ministry.

CHAPTER TWO

“So That None Shall Be Afraid”: Establishing and Building the Student Interracial Ministry, 1960-1961

“Only insofar as we lend our support and energies to a creative witness such as this will we ever realize the promise of the Holy Scripture: ‘...And every man will sit down under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.’”

– Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., March 29, 1961,
offering to co-sponsor the Student Interracial Ministry¹³¹

¹³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. to The Student Interracial Ministry Committee, March 29, 1961. The letter is addressed c/o Mr. John Collins, National Student Christian Federation. SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f1.

“Free-lancing for the New South”: Seminarians Join the Student Revolution

In the spring of 1960 the Union students returned from the conference in North Carolina to New York City motivated to keep alive the vision of a mighty wind of change that would blow through the country. They had some reason to be hopeful; not only had the gathering in Raleigh excited them with its emerging leaders and engaging religious rhetoric, but a civil rights bill, albeit a weak one, had survived a Senate filibuster and been signed into law on April 21, 1960. Energized by this chain of events, the returning Union students called an all-campus meeting and delivered a report on their trip to the South. They also proposed a resolution on the racial crisis for general discussion. It read, in part, “As Christians, we seek the realization of the Kingdom of God and the reconciliation of man to man and man to God. Segregation is incompatible with this, God’s plan for us by His love in Jesus Christ. Therefore we cannot remain silent in the face of recent events. ... We thereby commit ourselves to the struggle against segregation and for full human dignity in our own churches and communities, wherever they may be.”¹³² In this small way, the Union Theological Seminary committed itself to the civil rights movement.

Jane Stembridge regaled her friend John Collins, with whom she had been working the year before in a storefront church in Harlem, with tales from her trip to Raleigh. They had picketed Woolworth’s together and now she encouraged him to undertake an interracial ministry that summer. Collins had left behind an engagement and a relatively staid life as a lawyer in Chicago to come to seminary in New York City, where he was immediately entranced by both the city and the social engagement of many at the seminary. A number of

¹³² “Text of Resolution to be Submitted to an Open Meeting of the Student Body, April 28, 1960,” *the Grain of Salt*, April 27, 1960, 6b.

Collins' classmates were attending seminary courtesy of Rockefeller grants. Collins described them as "seekers" who were more experimental in their thinking and social engagement than were more typically religious pre-ministerial undergraduates who felt "called" to the church. They tended to be bright students from the top liberal undergraduate institutions, and Collins found the ideas and interests of these "Rockefeller types," as he called them, inspiring and engaging.

Collins also found fellowship with the members of Union's Social Action Committee, which had arranged for the incoming students in Collins' class to take an orientation tour of the city and meet some of its progressive leaders. Their tour included a discussion with A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters at his Harlem headquarters and long visits with the pacifist activist Bayard Rustin and a leader of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The day concluded with a meeting with Bill Webber at the East Harlem Protestant Parish. Collins remembers thinking, "Boy! This was where the action was, you know. This was on the very threshold of the Sixties – there was no civil rights movement yet, other than the Montgomery bus boycott, but there was a stirring. And all of a sudden, I felt exciting things were happening."¹³³

Collins was stirred again by Stenbridge's excitement about the events in North Carolina and their possible involvement in southern ministries. He in turn enticed two other Union students, Franklin "Chris" Gamwell, a "northern" Presbyterian from Bay Shore, New York, and Charles Helms, a "southern" Presbyterian from rural northern Florida and southern Georgia. Collins and Stenbridge also sought the advice and assistance of their Christian ethics professor, Roger Shinn, and of J. Oscar Lee, the director of the National Council of

¹³³ John Collins, oral history interview with author, December 5, 2006.

Churches' Department of Racial and Cultural Relations and one of the only African Americans in that organization. Lee helped out by contacting Gammon Seminary, a black theological seminary in Atlanta, which advertised on a bulletin board there that Union students were seeking seminarians with whom to collaborate in interracial ministries.¹³⁴ The Union students began to receive calls from Gammon and soon they had formed three interracial pastoral teams: Charlie Helms from Union would join Willis Goodwin at Wesley Chapel Methodist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, Chris Gamwell would work with Maurice King at Bethel Methodist Church in Morristown, Tennessee, and Union's John Collins would pastor alongside Gammon's John Watts on a rural church circuit near Mobile, Alabama.

Jane Stembridge took a different approach, one that led her into the frontlines of the civil rights movement. In 1960, female seminarians did not have the parish ministry as a career option, and most who sought church careers did so as music or education directors. Because joining a black seminarian in a team ministry was not an option for her, Stembridge contacted Ella Baker, hoping that the SCLC Executive Director could suggest another path of involvement. Baker was then in Atlanta, just getting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee off the ground. She invited Stembridge "to come on down" and join her working in the office.¹³⁵ The two women became inseparable that summer, beginning a long friendship and working relationship. When the summer of 1960 ended, Stembridge took a leave of absence from Union Seminary and stayed on in Atlanta as SNCC's first white staff member.

¹³⁴ Charles Helms, oral history interview with author, October 30, 2009.

¹³⁵ Jane Stembridge, "The Trouble is the Fear," *the Grain of Salt*, fall 1960, 7.

First Steps for SIM, the Summer of 1960

In the first summer of the Student Interracial Ministry project, each of the seven students involved had a unique experience that presaged the variety and depth of lessons that would be learned by SIM students over the next eight years. Most changes, both at individual and community levels, were so modest and subtle that they were barely noticeable at the time. In other ways, the impact was so great that Reverend William Crewes, the director of an ecumenical seminary program, claimed that, “in particular communities the whole pattern of social mores was destroyed and witness to peaceful reconciliation evolved.”¹³⁶ Though this may have been an enthusiastic overstatement, the students and their supporters hoped that by demonstrating alternative racial relationships within the church, especially by having a white assist a black pastor and, later, by having a black pastor lead a white congregation, their small steps would help to engender greater understanding and to begin to break down patterns of segregation and the mindsets that supported them. These small steps would be the beginning of a long and difficult journey, which over the years would encounter many setbacks as well as grand achievements. But it was in that summer of 1960 that SIM’s great adventure began.

Chris Gamwell and Maurice King: Before that summer of 1960, Chris Gamwell had already had a small taste of interracial exchange, having spent the previous year engaged in a fieldwork practicum at the La Guardia Housing Projects on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Gamwell was born on Long Island in 1937 and grew up in Peekskill, New York in a conservative white neighborhood, where his only exposure to diversity was the few Italian and Jewish kids in his high school. He attended Yale University and then, thinking about a

¹³⁶ William E. Crewes, “A Statement on the Student Interracial Ministry,” 1960. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f8.

career in the ministry but unsure, enrolled at Union to study theology. Reinhold Niebuhr was then at the end of his teaching career and had lost a lot of his dynamism following a stroke in 1952, but his neo-orthodox theology still held strong at Union and immediately captivated Gamwell. Though most first year students at Union were given fieldwork assignments in small parishes, Gamwell chose to work for the Henry Street Settlement House, which at that time did community organizing in the La Guardia public housing units, home to a diverse mix of southern whites, blacks, Jews, and Latinos. There, he recalled, “though I was kind of wet behind the ears, I got educated in the problems of poverty and race in this country, somewhat at least, through the work at the Henry Street Project. So when the opportunity came to work with the Student Interracial Ministry, I leapt at it. That sounded like a great way to spend the summer.”¹³⁷

Gamwell was teamed with Maurice King to minister at Bethel Methodist Church in Morristown, Tennessee, from June 19 to September 4, 1960. Though also a young seminarian King was already married and so spent most of his weekends back in Atlanta with his family. Gamwell’s closest association ended up being with Paul Edwards, the Dean of Students at Morristown College, a black institution that provided most of the members of the Bethel Methodist Church. Edwards served as Gamwell’s local contact and hosted him in his house for several weeks. Later Gamwell lived with several other members of the church, and felt that the experience of living in the black community “helped to erase very real racial feelings within me,” as well as contributing to the racial reconciliation of black community members to him.¹³⁸ In addition to working with Morristown’s black community, Gamwell

¹³⁷ Franklin “Chris” Gamwell, oral history interview with author, December 4, 2009.

¹³⁸ Chris Gamwell, “A Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry” 1960. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7. Also published as “A Bulldog Goes to Bethel” in *the Grain of Salt*, fall 1960, 5.

and King also attempted to reach across racial lines to whites in town. They hosted a gathering of prominent white citizens at their church one Sunday evening, likely the first time whites in Morristown set foot in a black church. Gamwell reported that the gathering “helped greatly to foster a certain, though far from complete, understanding of the attitudes of the white community and augmented my discussions with the Negroes in gaining somewhat of a picture of the racial situation in Morristown.”¹³⁹

Charles Helms and Willis Goodwin: In Greenville, South Carolina, Charles Helms, a white Union student from Decatur, Georgia, partnered with a black ministerial student, Willis Goodwin, to pastor at two churches, the Wesley Chapel and the Minus Chapel. Helms had been born in New Smyrna, Florida, and raised in northern Georgia in a family with many generations of roots in the South and a strong commitment to segregation. He recalled that race issues were not talked about in church or in his family. “There was no *need* to talk about it because there was nothing perceived wrong with the prevailing system. Questioning segregation was unthinkable. I grew up not having any zeal about changing things but also not having any conviction about black people being bad or unequal or unsanitary or whatever.”

As an adolescent, he had a religious awakening while listening to a visiting missionary at his church, and decided then to join the ministry. He attended Davidson College beginning in 1954, with the goal of attending seminary afterwards. The Brown v. Board decision came down while he was at Davidson, which at least broached the subject of race. Helms was among a few students who urged Davidson to desegregate. Among the few other progressives at the school was his Philosophy professor, who was a graduate of Union

¹³⁹ Chris Gamwell, “A Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry” 1960. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

Theological Seminary in New York City and urged Helms to go there as well, which he did in 1958.

The theology he encountered at Union Seminary, in which the social and political aspects of the Gospel were highly emphasized, was distinctly different from that with which he had been raised. Most of his classmates, too, had much more liberal backgrounds. He recalls, however, that he readily accepted his upbringing as abnormal and embraced the tenets of the Social Gospel approach. He also embraced the novel living arrangements he experienced in his dorm, Hastings Hall, where he lived on the same floor as both African and African American students.

During his first year at Union, Helms did his parish fieldwork in Hell's Kitchen in a little church that had been a German Evangelical and Reformed Church, but was now reaching out to the African Americans and Puerto Ricans who had more recently moved into the neighborhood. Although the system of inequality was not as rigid as in the South, Helms was taken by the high incidence of poverty and few opportunities the parishioners had for advancement. Having already been working in a kind of interracial ministry among the poor, he, like Gamwell, responded positively when their mutual friend John Collins proposed the summer program that would evolve into the Student Interracial Ministry.¹⁴⁰

Helms and Willis Goodwin lived together in the black community of Greenville and spent most of their time working with church youth. About a month into the experience, however, their summer took a sharp turn when the two preachers spontaneously led a sit-in at the Kress Department Store lunch counter in Greenville. It was to be the first public demonstration of its kind in South Carolina, and the first known attempt to desegregate a

¹⁴⁰ Charles Helms, oral history interview with author, November 30, 2009.

lunch counter in the Deep South. As Helms exited the restaurant, he was attacked by whites, who cursed him and called him a Bolshevik, Communist, and “mulatto” who had “incited the niggers to riot,” before proceeding to beat him up. Helms recalled that when “they started in, I remember I wasn’t so much scared as I was remorseful – about all those teeth I was going to lose.”¹⁴¹ Helms was vilified in the local press and spent the rest of his pastorate in Greenville shifting from house to house within the black community, afraid to stay too long in any one place for fear of further reprisals.¹⁴²

John Collins and John Watts: For John Collins, a white Methodist born and raised in Chicago, the fear of possible danger, of new experiences, even of the judgment of his fellow whites was at times overwhelming. Collins, who had never been south of Illinois before, teamed up with the Reverend John E. Watts, an African Methodist Episcopal minister who was reared in Mobile, Alabama, and had never been north of Raleigh. Collins and Watts served two churches, the Star of Zion A.M.E. Zion Church in Talladega, Alabama, and a rural parish known as Wesley Chapel #2, about six miles out of town. They took turns preaching at each church, so that in one month, they would have each given two sermons to each congregation.

Collins met with the pastor of the white Episcopal Church later that June and learned that he was not alone in fearing for the consequences of upsetting the racial order. Although a self-described liberal Alabaman in his mid-thirties, and a graduate of General Theological in New York City, the Reverend Franklin urged Collins not to introduce himself to whites as a pastor in a black church, and warned him that staying in the parsonage could make him the

¹⁴¹ Charles G. Helms, “Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry,” 1960. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

¹⁴² Charles G. Helms, “Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry,” 1960. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

target of violence. Franklin confessed that he could not himself preach on the race issue in Talladega or he would be out of a job. “It’s too bad you can’t meet the whites and hear what they say,” he told Collins. “There’s plenty to learn and it’s all bad.”¹⁴³

Collins also learned that middle class blacks too feared upsetting the racial peace, when a Talladega College faculty member implored him and Watts to conduct their activities only on the campus so as to avoid trouble in town. Collins confided to his journal that such an attitude impeded progress, because the campus was relatively safe and nothing would be accomplished by going the safe route. “But,” he wrote, “It’s not for me to push them – only to participate in whatever program is developed. Nor do I want to push them further that I am prepared to go.”¹⁴⁴ However, pressure would soon come from above as well. A few days after Collins wrote these thoughts in his journal in June of 1960, the Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy held his first meeting with Martin Luther King to talk about civil rights. It was a first step toward the tougher federal civil rights legislation that would overturn Jim Crow and guarantee black voting rights.

Collins found himself welcome in the black community and in the church, where almost everything was new to him. At first, the active call and response of the congregation surprised him and upset his Midwestern Methodist sensibilities. Soon, though he came to see it “as a real dialogue [that was] extremely helpful to the preacher” and he tried to get into the swing of delivering a real southern fire and brimstone sermon. After one early attempt, John Watts congratulated him by saying, “you almost preached!” and an elderly lady came up to

¹⁴³ John Collins diary, entry for June 3, 1960. Possession of John Collins.

¹⁴⁴ John Collins diary, entry for June 19, 1960. Possession of Rev. Collins.

him after the service to say, “if you stay here long enough we’re going to make a preacher out of you!”¹⁴⁵

Jane Stembridge: Southern preaching was not new for Jane Stembridge, the fourth of the Union students to make up the first SIM “class.” She had been raised in Virginia as the daughter of a Baptist minister and was a budding poet as well as seminary student. Stembridge spent her SIM summer working for Ella Baker and the embryonic SNCC organization. Baker had given SNCC a home by allowing it to use a section of her SCLC office in Atlanta. Stembridge took control of this “SNCC corner,” helping to coordinate monthly meetings, planning a newsletter, establishing a fundraising effort. Eleanor Roosevelt made the first donation, one hundred dollars, and Reverend Will Campbell of the National Council of Churches’ Southern Project made the second, in honor of the recently deceased Patsy Cline.¹⁴⁶ The writer Lillian Smith also provided early emotional and financial support. Stembridge reached out to fellow students as well, giving a speech on behalf of the organization in front of a meeting of the National Students Association in August of 1960.

Constance “Connie” Curry, the director of the National Students Association’s southern program, put Jane up in her apartment in Atlanta. Curry, though only a few years older than Stembridge and the other SNCC students, was, along with Baker, one of the so-called adult advisers to SNCC. She remembers Stembridge then as a “pixie and poet, wide-eyed and full of Christian existentialism and faith in the movement.”¹⁴⁷ In late summer, Stembridge and Baker hired Bob Moses and sent him to Mississippi as SNCC’s first field

¹⁴⁵ John Collins diary, entry for June 19, 1960. Possession of John Collins.

¹⁴⁶ “Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement” (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 16.

¹⁴⁷ “Deep in Our Hearts,” 16.

organizer, but the three women, Baker, Curry, and Stembridge, were the true galvanizing force behind the organization's successful start. Historian Clayborn Carson writes that if it weren't for the team of Baker and Stembridge, SNCC would probably have remained as simply a clearinghouse for information on student protests rather than developing into an influential force in the black freedom struggle.¹⁴⁸

At the end of the summer, Stembridge withdrew from Union temporarily to stay-on in what she initially described as an "ex-officio" position with SNCC. This developed into a permanent though short-lived staff role managing the SNCC newsletter, trying to recruit white Southern students, and "sort of free-lancing for the New South." The work with SNCC was alternately "hard, depressing, utterly beautiful, painful, and full of great meaning," and she decided later in 1961 to return to school. She had been shaken somewhat by the hypocrisy she saw among leaders, especially in the church, and hoped that projects like SIM would challenge the church's tendency to "allow untruth to go unabated and even provide sanctuary for it." Her experience with SNCC in Atlanta and the difficulties it faced in the early years also challenged her faith that the Beloved Community could soon be realized. She foresaw that change might come in the form of civil rights legislation, but it would be essentially meaningless without a deeper spiritual change, without redemption. "Otherwise, we will only desegregate...we will never meet in understanding."¹⁴⁹ But even in 1960, with both SNCC and SIM just emerging, she could already see both these goals,, legislative reform and spiritual awakening, as decidedly linked but nearly unattainable.

¹⁴⁸ Carson, *In Struggle*, 25-26.

¹⁴⁹ Jane Stembridge, "Statement on the Student Interracial Ministry," January 1961. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

1960: SIM Takes Form: “A Quiet Experiment”

Four Union Theological Seminary students had gone south for interracial experiences during the summer of 1960. John Collins, Chris Gamwell, and Charlie Helms wrapped up their ministries late that summer and gathered at a friend’s cabin in the mountains of rural Tennessee before returning to Union Seminary. Collins, Gamwell, and Helms stayed in the cabin for several days, swapping stories, and, on August 24, 1960, hammered out the text of what would become SIM’s Statement of Purpose. In it they claimed that “the Church should be providing a witness to the true brotherhood of men in Christ and playing a role of leadership and conciliation in the struggle for social justice.” These three founders conceived of the project not as a civil rights organization but as a reform effort within the institutional church, one especially designed to use the means of church integration toward an ends of achieving “reconciliation between the white and Negro races, and the redemption of segregated communities.”¹⁵⁰ They also established it as a religious alternative to other civil rights participation, and as unique opportunity for those planning to make careers in the church. As one participant noted, the sympathy sit-ins in Harlem had given them a chance to participate in the movement, but they had not solved “a major problem for future ministers: How can the Church as an institution witness to the equality of all men under God?” The student also wondered if the conservative apparatus of the Christian church would even allow for such expression, or if students were better off joining “a secular organization such as the Congress of Racial Equality in order to really be Christian?”¹⁵¹ The establishment of the Student Interracial Ministry was meant to answer these questions.

¹⁵⁰ Report, “1963: Student Interracial Ministry,” 1. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

¹⁵¹ Stephen C. Rose, “Student Interracial Ministry: A Break in the Wall,” *The Christian Century*, February 1962.

Although all four Union students continued to contribute to the movements for change both outside and within the church, only, John Collins and Chris Gamwell, returned to campus that fall. Jane Stenbridge, elected to take time off from seminary to stay on in Atlanta working for SNCC and Ella Baker. Maurice King, Willis Goodwin, and John Watts also stayed in Atlanta, returning to their studies at Gammon Seminary.

The fourth Union Seminary student, Charlie Helms, headed directly from his summer work in Greenville, South Carolina, to an internship year as an associate campus minister with the Westminster Foundation's Presbyterian University Center in New Orleans, Louisiana, serving the campuses of Tulane and Sophia Newcombe Universities. But Helms, newly radicalized by his interracial SIM experience, quickly ran afoul of the authorities when he helped establish an interracial study group and supported CORE protests in New Orleans. He was dismissed from the campus position by Christmas. Helms was given a new intern assignment at the University of Florida, in an area where there was less political activity, and therefore, it was thought, he would get himself and the church into less trouble.¹⁵²

Back at Union, Collins and Gamwell found an eager audience for their stories of working "behind the lines" of the racial conflict in the South. During their first days back in New York City, they sought the support of some of these fellow students, and also of some key adult advisors both at Union Seminary and across the street at the InterChurch Center, home of the National Council of Churches. By the end of August 1960, the seven original summer students announced the creation of the Student Interracial Ministry project. They issued a statement of purpose, and created a governing committee of fourteen students which

¹⁵² Charles Helms, oral history interview with author, November 30, 2009.

included the original seven, as well as five other Union students and a member each from Yale Divinity School and Drew University.

Dr. Roger Shinn, Professor of Applied Christianity at Union, signed on as the project's academic adviser. Shinn had graduated from Union Seminary with a B.D. in 1941 and a Ph.D. in 1949. He returned to Union after ten years at Heidelberg College and Vanderbilt University. He had not been back at the seminary long when the student sit-in movement began. Shinn, an early supporter of the civil rights and ecumenical movements – he was arrested while participating in a Freedom Ride – eagerly supported the new organization. He felt that what SIM could bring to the civil rights movement a focus on the development of interpersonal relationships and understanding at the local level, a point of contact “that is often neglected in the large, dramatic conflicts of our times.”¹⁵³

In an era that became known for its mass marches and protests and the creation of public policy to dismantle institutional racism, Shinn encouraged SIM's individual and personal approach, a hearts and minds conversion strategy steeped in the Christian Gospel. Shinn hosted the weekly SIM meetings over sandwiches in his kitchen in Knox Hall. According to him, the students were so motivated and well organized that they didn't really need an advisor, but he saw that a faculty connection would be helpful to them as they raised money and built the program.¹⁵⁴

King and Other Religious Leaders Endorse the Project

¹⁵³ Rev. Roger L. Shinn, “A Statement on the Interracial Summer Ministry,” January 1961. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

¹⁵⁴ Roger Shinn, oral history video with Eileen Crowley-Horak, 1999. Union Seminary Archive. Excerpts on <http://www.utsnyc.edu/NETCOMMUNITY/page.aspx?pid=840&srcid=760>, accessed on January 7, 2009.

William Crewes, the director of a storied ecumenical organization called the InterSeminary Movement, and Will Campbell, the director of the National Council of Churches' Southern Project, also became sponsors and advisors. They were joined a few months later by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King endorsed the project as "a bold and creative venture in human relations." He predicted that by placing white seminarians in black congregations and black seminarians with whites, "the two church communities will be building significant bridges of mutuality which will better equip both for resolving the troublous times in which we live."¹⁵⁵ These advisors helped to shape SIM's vision as interracial, inter-regional, and explicitly ecumenical. The program itself, from its first days, would be entirely student run.

Crewes did not work as closely or as directly with the students as Shinn did, but his status as co-sponsor ensured that the Student Interracial Ministry would be seen as an ecumenical project. The InterSeminary Movement was the oldest continuing student Christian movement in the United States, begun as an alliance between thirty-two seminaries in 1880. It later became the Theological Section of the InterCollegiate YMCA, and in 1950, joined the newly created National Council of Churches as a founding agency.¹⁵⁶ In "adopting" SIM, the InterSeminary Movement continued to develop its ecumenical, activist student ministry into the 1960s. Reverend Crewes, who spent most of each year traveling the country and meeting seminarians, agreed to handle the bulk of student recruiting for SIM.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. to The Student Interracial Ministry Committee, March 29, 1961. SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f1.

¹⁵⁶ "A Brief History of the InterSeminary Movement," pamphlet published in 1967, in possession of Maynard Moore.

¹⁵⁷ Crewes, "A Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry," SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f8.

Will Campbell, Assistant Director of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations at the NCC, had more direct contact with the students, a role for which he was well suited. A native Southerner, Campbell had grown up in Mississippi and after service in the Army had been hired as the campus chaplain of the University of Mississippi in Oxford in 1954. But he was drummed out after only two years for his attempts to racially integrate meetings and social activities on campus.¹⁵⁸ J. Oscar Lee hired him to lead the Division's new interest in pursuing more direct involvement in race relations in the South. Given the Council's blessing and mission but little money and no staff, Campbell was a one-man movement, charged with traveling across the region to wherever civil rights struggles broke out in order to provide moral support and represent in person the support of the National Council of Churches. Based in Nashville, Campbell ranged widely throughout the South, undertaking such activities as escorting young black students into the public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, and serving as the only white person present at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.¹⁵⁹

Will Campbell volunteered to serve the Student Interracial Ministry "as a sort of clearing house for the placement of students" and to work with the SCLC to find suitable church congregations willing to host the seminarians. In addition, Campbell committed to convening an organizational conference at the start of each summer, and function as a sort of field coordinator by remaining in close contact with the students throughout their internships.¹⁶⁰ Campbell was enthusiastic about SIM and its promise for racial reconciliation

¹⁵⁸ Merrill M. Hawkins, Jr., *Will Campbell: Radical Prophet of the South* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 30-40.

¹⁵⁹ Hawkins, *Will Campbell*, 40-42.

¹⁶⁰ Will D. Campbell, "A Statement on the Interracial Student Ministry." SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

in the South. “For a white minister to serve as assistant to a Negro pastor will break down the pattern in the South even before it is broken in other areas of the country. It will also break down the pattern in the South which is that it is acceptable for a white minister to go and preach to a Negro congregation as long as it is clear that he is there as a missionary to ‘convert the heathen.’” Campbell predicted that student ministers could serve as bridges between Southern black and white communities where the pastors themselves were too bound by tradition and fear to break social mores.

Campbell also saw the SIM program as providing a valuable educational experience, especially for white Southerners preparing for the parish ministry. “When they return to the South as full time pastors with churches of their own,” he predicted, “they will be much better prepared to understand the complexities of the situation [and] will have a tie with the Negro community which will make it much harder for them to get caught up in their own problems, unaware that the Negro and his problems even exist.”¹⁶¹ In that way, Campbell and SIM’s other supporters saw the project as educating pastors for what they hoped was to be a future of a more racially diverse and open Protestant church community.

Campbell’s boss, J. Oscar Lee, the Director of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations and the only African American executive in the National Council of Churches, quickly came to play the major support role for the budding student organization. With Campbell out in the field, Lee served as the main National Council contact in New York City, and when Campbell left the NCC in late 1962, Lee took on an even greater advisory role. He arranged for his department to become the project’s official sponsor, in charge of managing all funds and providing secretarial support in the form of his personal assistant, Doreen Graves, and office space in the so-called “God Box,” the Interchurch Building on

¹⁶¹ Will D. Campbell “A Statement on Interracial Student Ministry.” SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

Riverside Drive. While many grassroots organizations have complained of having to work out of a closet, SIM literally did. Lee had the boxes and old lamps moved out of the windowless storage room across from his office on the fifth floor, and crammed in a couple of desks from which John Collins, Chris Gamwell, and a handful of other students created and ran the Student Interracial Ministry.

The Student Interracial Ministry, in ways similar to Oscar Lee's Department of Racial and Cultural Relations, seemed on its surface to be a quiet, harmless initiative that would stay within the bounds of churchly good behavior. But in coming under the wings of Oscar Lee and Will Campbell, it had found perfect mentors for its vision of reconciliation leading to revolution. Under Lee's guidance, the students' pioneered a subversive platform of church integration under the guise of an educational training program. Under Campbell's influence, they occasionally were less than quiet as well, speaking out and acting in public in such a way as to "bear witness" to the sin of segregation.

Defining Goals and Plans

The Student Interracial Ministry's Statement of Purpose declared "the Church should be providing a witness to the true brotherhood of men in Christ and playing a role of leadership and conciliation in the struggle for social justice." The purpose of the project was to provide a number of southern communities with interracial team ministries "to witness to the concern of the church for the problem of human relations in the South and to further the work of reconciliation between the white and Negro races in the South and the redemption of segregated communities." In keeping with their identity as liberal Protestant ministers-in-

training, they further declared that such tasks “are one aspect of the reconciling and redeeming work of Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁶²

The founders further enunciated five goals by which they hoped to turn their statement of purpose into a plan for action. The first was closely related to the common course of seminary study at the time: to provide student seminarians with a parish experience while aiding congregations through the addition of pastoral leadership. Most seminary programs required a practicum in parish ministry and part of the genius of the Student Interracial Ministry was that it conducted the truly radical work of integrating church congregations through such a standard and comfortable structure. This enabled students to get academic approval and credit for work that otherwise may have been seen as too potentially volatile for a seminary to support. The next two stated goals of the program also focused on their effect on the individual seminarians who would participate; these goals were to prepare white and black seminarians for future ministries by acquainting them with contemporary problems of human relations and, second, to aid in the development of an individual student’s growth and personal maturity by placing him or her in a true intercultural and interracial exchange environment. The fourth goal – that students serve communities in which they were placed – returned to the congregational community setting and to relatively uncontroversial ground. The final goal was “to increase communication and understanding between the races.” The students stated this goal matter-of-factly, as if it were a simple task to undertake and to accomplish.¹⁶³ Nothing could have been further from the truth. In point

¹⁶² “Statement of Purpose of the Student Interracial Ministry, August 24, 1960.” SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

¹⁶³ Report, “1963: Student Interracial Ministry,” 1, 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:11.

of fact, they were taking on the number one social issue in the country, one that was at that point still building pressure that would take the nation nearly to the bursting point.

The students saw the main goal of the project as using individual interracial interaction to create racial understanding at both the personal and institutional levels. On the personal level, SIM planned to immerse students in a cross cultural and multi-racial environment, creating understanding and empathy across racial, regional, and class lines. Institutionally, SIM's goal was no less than to use the church to transform society. However, the students had a pragmatic understanding of the challenges they faced and they recognized the need for achievable goals that would be attractive to local congregations and denominations. On that level, SIM offered churches much needed summer staff and brought services to underdeveloped communities, all while creating interracial exchange and understanding, and helping the students gain real world experience for eventual application in their own ministries.¹⁶⁴

In addition to its five stated goals, SIM pursued an implicit sixth aim, one that it would begin to articulate more and more as the decade progressed. This goal was to reform and renew the Church itself, from the inside out. The students in SIM claimed that challenging the church and making its institutions both more accountable to the Gospel and more relevant to current social situations were part and parcel of what they described as 'Jesus Christ's work of reconciliation and redemption.'¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ "The Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked," 3-4, SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7. Also in Maynard Moore papers, now in collection of author. The Student Interracial Ministry was not the only attempt by liberal Protestants to use the church space itself as a theater for discussing integration and social change. Charles Marsh well describes the interracial "church visits" of maverick Methodist pastor Ed King in Mississippi, in which black and white teams of church goers would attempt to attend various services, often provoking dramatic reaction and sometimes arrest. See Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 6-7, 117-151.

¹⁶⁵ "Statement of Purpose," SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

But even as the Student Interracial Ministry articulated its goals, especially this last one of Church reform and renewal, some of its members wondered if they were indeed attainable. Was such reform likely or even possible, and what would it look like? What would be demanded of the church – wholesale reorganization or just more attention to matters of race and equality? Were students enamored of the ideal of reconciliation, or committed to its actual realization? How would social change be actualized? Social theorist Harry Boyte and historian Sara Evans write that as important as legislation is to guaranteeing equal rights before the law, true transformation happens at the local level. Only through active participation in change at the local level, they argue, is a cultural shift possible, creating a democratic “movement culture.”¹⁶⁶ With this in mind, the students wondered what local events and players had to join forces to result in a critical mass such that “a movement” develops?

The Student Interracial Ministry helped to stimulate a movement culture within local congregations, tapping into both a revolutionary strain in the black Church and a persuasive minority of dedicated racial reformers within the white Church. The project required a commitment of three months of full immersion in an interracial ministry, it tended not to attract those students looking for a quick fling in the movement or a “contact high” with revolution. Doug “Buddy” Renick, a white seminarian from Texas who worked in a black church in North Carolina, reflected on the early years, “To picket, sit-in or engage in a ‘freedom ride’ requires a certain amount of courage, but to live in the Negro community for three months, more especially, in the home of a Negro family – requires more than courage. It requires ... the ability to face oneself honestly with all the masks removed.” The process of

¹⁶⁶ Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 66.

facing oneself and one's own bigotry and limitations, made Renick and others understand unity and brotherhood not as theological abstractions, but as realities. And while such insight could certainly be achieved in a secular setting, the seminarians and SIM operated in a different way. Renick and others experienced the process of greater understanding – taking place within the context of the church and according to religious rhetoric – as no less than a conversion experience. “This is not theory,” Renick insisted. “It has happened to me and to many others who have participated in SIM.”¹⁶⁷

Returning students described learning several lessons from their experiences in living and working across the color line. These included new sensitivity to social and racial prejudice and to daily injustices perpetrated and endured, and greater empathy for others. The founders of the Student Interracial Ministry proclaimed, “We are convinced that this project will have a significant impact upon the life of the communities involved. Our need today is for understanding between individuals. Legislation alone will not bring understanding. New channels of communication between negro and white communities must be found if we are to move, on the deepest levels, toward a genuinely integrated society.”¹⁶⁸ Roger Shinn described the project as “cultivat[ing] human understanding through shared experiences. The aim has been development of person-to-person relationships and understanding, especially within the Christian church.” Shinn further wrote “Theological education in these times is greatly concerned with the relationship between its scholarly aims and the functional life of

¹⁶⁷ Douglas Renick, “SIM: A Student's Evaluation,” *The Inter-Seminarian*, 1:4, December 1962, 27. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f5.

¹⁶⁸ “Description of the Student Interracial Ministry Project,” August 24, 1960. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

the church. Among the many experiments in field work, internships, clinical years, etc., this summer student interracial ministry is one of the most imaginative.”¹⁶⁹

Returning students also noted that the project taught them a new appreciation for the impact of the Church on a given community and its struggles to maintain relevance and membership. Often, this appreciation for the Church came through first-hand involvement with daily congregational activities, both humdrum and exhilarating. For nearly all of the SIM students, this was their first practical ministerial experience outside of classroom training exercises. Having studied the finer points of theology and writing sermons, now they ran vacation bible schools, visited the sick in hospitals, organized playgrounds and baseball games, ran bible study, cut stencils for song books, preached Sunday sermons, bought supplies for the parsonage, facilitated or created youth groups, gave communion, sat in finance committees, and did office work. And they did all of this within a community of another race.

Summer of 1961

In planning its second summer in 1961, the SIM committee recruited white and black students and raised enough money to provide each student with a \$300 stipend, with room and board to come from churches. Campbell’s office in Nashville was to serve as base for the project coordinator. John Collins recalled that Campbell’s commitment gave the project shape and really got it going: “Will encouraged us and supported us when we wondered if we

¹⁶⁹ Roger L. Shinn, “A Statement on the Student Interracial Ministry,” New York City, January 5, 1961. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

were crazy idealists. There is no doubt in my mind now that he went out on a limb and that SIM is greatly in his debt.”¹⁷⁰

Through Roger Shinn, Union Seminary became SIM’s academic sponsor, but an economic sponsor was still needed, a tax-exempt organization through which the project could raise and administer funds. Dr. Oscar Lee received approval from the National Council of Churches to sponsor SIM and his Department of Racial and Cultural Relations became SIM’s official administrator. John Collins, one of the original four participants, with the help and suggestions of Will Campbell of the NCC and Wyatt Tee Walker of SCLC, contacted potential host churches, black and white. Chris Gamwell, another of the original four, recruited students and raised funds. From the start, the students were determined that SIM not be just a Union Seminary program, and so Gamwell set out on recruiting visits to Harvard and Drew Universities. Relying on help from Dr. Lee and his assistant, the students also raised money from denominations, congregations, foundations, and individuals.¹⁷¹ By June, their kitty held \$5,049, enough to pay stipends for twelve student pastors and a project coordinator.

In the summer of 1960, SIM had placed a total of seven students in three southern states. A year later, SIM placed nine white students in black churches in the South, and three black students with majority white churches, one in the South and two in the North. Students served in northern and southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational

¹⁷⁰ “Final Report of John Collins – 1960-61,” Student Interracial Ministry. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

¹⁷¹ Walter T. Davis, “Student Interracial Ministry Report – 1960-61.” SIM, UTS: 1C:2:f8. Donations came from the Union Seminary student cabinet, the Board of Home Missions of the Congregational and Christian Churches, the Bishop of New York, one of the boards of the Disciples of Christ denomination, and a number of private individuals. They also successfully raised two major grants, one from the Wesley Foundation and one from the William C. Whitney Foundation.

churches in Maryland, Georgia, New York, Tennessee, North Carolina, Texas, and Connecticut.

The summer began with an orientation conference on June 13-15, 1961 at the old Fellowship of Southern Churchmen campground in Swannanoa, North Carolina. Located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains on a piece of river valley land, the campground had been purchased by an earlier generation of radical pastors in order to have a place where blacks and whites could freely gather in the South. Arriving students were required to have read Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, Martin Luther King's *Stride Toward Freedom*, and Kyle Haselden's *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective*. John Collins and Charlie Helms helped organize the orientation and Will Campbell, Vanderbilt professor Arthur Foster, and Connie Curry, the director of the U.S. National Student Association's Southern Project, were among those leading sessions. The opening session, "Facts and Presuppositions," looked at the "real and imagined differences, in worship and preaching, in theology, in culture" of blacks and whites. Other sessions included discussions of the role of the churches in race relations, the place of nonviolence, how to react in stressful situations.¹⁷²

Stephen Rose, who was on his way to serve for the summer in Nashville, recalls participating in a non-violence role-playing exercise that was meant to mimic the feeling of being harassed by white supremacists during a sit-in. After the orientation, one student, Dennis Loo, continued his training by attending an Institute for Race Relations held at historically black Fisk University and featuring James Lawson, Thurgood Marshall, and black historian C. Eric Lincoln. Joseph Carter, one of the three black student participants, attended a similar type of race relations institute, this one run by the American Friends

¹⁷² Schedule, Student Interracial Ministry Orientation Conference, June 13-15, 1961, Fellowship Center, Swannanoa, North Carolina. SIM: UTS, 1F:1:f1.

Service Committee, a Quaker social justice organization, before serving with a white church in Plattsburgh, New York. The mainline white churches and their ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches, were not yet obviously involved in the race struggle in an organized way, but black church leaders and the traditionally pacifist and activist Quakers were already substantively engaging with these issues.

Individual Experiences

Notable placements that summer were Gurdon Brewster with Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. in Atlanta, Stephen Rose with the Rev. Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville, and Oscar McCloud with Collins Kilburn in Raleigh. While Martin Luther King, Jr., was originally quite positive about hosting a SIM student, that summer found him often on the road, and so Gurdon Brewster spent his summer assisting “Daddy” King, as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., was known, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He also was charged with running the church youth group. On his very first day, after a long day in the car driving down from North Carolina, he was immediately invited to preach, which he did, despite the fact that it was the first sermon he had ever given. A few days later he had his first experience of a segregated lunch counter while downtown on a hot day with six members of his youth group. Separated from his group of students at the restaurant, he smoldered with rage. “I began to wonder how, confronted with this indignity, I could ever be expected to contain my anger. For the first time in my life I knew I had enough violence in me to tear the world apart. My blood boiled over and I could feel in my bones the will to destroy anything and anyone who hurt these lovely people in my youth group.”¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Gurdon Brewster, “1961 Mid-Summer Report, Student Interracial Ministry: A Ministry of Reconciliation,” 7. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6; Gurdon Brewster, *No Turning Back: Living with Daddy King, Working at Ebenezer*,

Of his SIM experience with the Kings at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Brewster wrote, “that it will leave a lasting effect on my faith through my life, I can have no doubt. The Negro is impatient, like a new shoot in the Spring. It must grow. And the white race is impatient, like the ocean. Somewhere, in the middle I stood this summer, trying to plant a cross on the beach head.”¹⁷⁴ Brewster spent his time not only preaching at Ebenezer and reinvigorating the congregation’s youth group, but he also cooked daily breakfasts for “Daddy” King and ran messages to Martin Luther King, Jr. while the latter was in prison. After Brewster’s summer in Atlanta, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy requested a SIM intern of his own, supposedly declaring, “Martin had one last year and I want one this year!”¹⁷⁵

Brewster was not the only student to land an assignment with one of the better known figures in the movement. Stephen Rose served with Smith, the prominent leader of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. Rose and his wife and daughter lived in a small house owned by one of the members of Smith’s congregation, and they frequently socialized with Kelly Miller Smith, his congregants, and his frequent visitors, many of whom were also movement leaders. The Roses grew particularly close that summer with C.T. Vivian, a leader in James Lawson’s Nashville Movement and a participant in the 1961 Freedom Rides to test integrated facilities along federal transport routes. Rose also began to develop a close friendship with Will Campbell, with whom he was emotionally and intellectually sympathetic.

1961, draft in possession of author, 14. This work has since been published as *No Turning Back: My Summer with Daddy King* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

¹⁷⁴ Gurdon Brewster, final report, 1961. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

¹⁷⁵ Rinaldo “Bud” Walker, SIM intern with Ralph Abernathy, 1963.

Rose, who was already showing signs of the religious writer he would grow to be, reflected on the SIM project a few months later as “A Break in the Wall” of southern race relations in the pages of *The Christian Century*, an established liberal journal. He used the occasion of the recently observed Race Relations Sunday to comment that “the furtive once-a-year exchange of white and Negro ministers may salve some consciences, but it actually demonstrates how far we are from achieving brotherhood.” Rose wrote that in order for churches to make the Gospel relevant, they needed to create concentrated efforts in racial reconciliation. He praised a group of Episcopal priests who had recently been arrested during a civil rights march in Mississippi, commented favorably on the establishment of a few interracial churches in the North, and put forth the Student Interracial Ministry as an example of a project trying to do more than embrace “a once-a-year approach to healing.”¹⁷⁶

One placement in particular that summer would help lay the groundwork for further development of the SIM project. Oscar McCloud, a black Union Theological Seminary student from Georgia, and his new wife Robbie joined the United Church in Raleigh, where McCloud assisted white pastor Collins Kilburn. Oscar McCloud reported that the all white church was attended by a number of North Carolina State University faculty members and had a reputation as a “radical institution” in downtown Raleigh. The first Sunday he was there, the church started selective buying campaigns at two local supermarkets, demonstrating that it could use its economic purchasing power to pressure local businesses to do away with discriminatory hiring practices. McCloud also built a close relationship with a white SIM student, Tom Frazier, who was working with a black church, Oberlin Baptist, also

¹⁷⁶ Stephen C. Rose, “Student Interracial Ministry: A Break in the Wall,” *The Christian Century*, February 1962.

in Raleigh. Since each was responsible for their church's youth group, they decided to hold joint, integrated meetings.

Through this interracial work in Raleigh, Oscar McCloud got to know some of the members of Davie Street Baptist Church, a black congregation downtown, which invited him to apply to be their minister. Davie Street Church elected McCloud as their new pastor directly after his SIM summer, and he continued to collaborate with Collins Kilburn. The two ministers and congregations hosted numerous SIM students over several years.

As in the summer before, SIM continued to attract female students even though future careers in the congregational ministry were not yet possible. Alma Wolber, one of the three female students in 1961, made SIM's first steps into urban ministry while working in Baltimore, Maryland. She served a middle-class black church located in a low-income and racially diverse neighborhood and devised a weeklong summer camp program for the "unchurched" local kids.

Evaluating the Summer of 1961

At the end of the summer work, nearly all of the students and a few of the ministers convened for an evaluation conference in Nashville, Tennessee, during the final days of August, 1961. In discussing what had most surprised them during their work, the students largely agreed that whereas they had previously thought of specific problems as racially coded, some being white problems and some black, the interracial experience showed them a common humanity that seemed to prove such problems to rather be universal. They reported that, for the most part, personal relations and interrelations had been "surprisingly smooth." The black students were pleased to discover that allegedly superior white churches suffered

the same financial difficulties and internal squabbles that beset black churches.¹⁷⁷ One black student felt that the program had prepared him to work in any congregation in the country. Some of the white students saw SIM as a “theological laboratory,” and felt that their studies gave them insight into the theology of the black church, which they concluded mixed both fundamentalist and liberal theologies. Based on the black churches they served that summer, the white students concluded that, unlike the white churches which they well knew, the black churches and ministers were as concerned with civil rights and social action as they were about individual souls.¹⁷⁸ The ministers they served, however, were a unique group, both select and self-selected, who were already dedicated to, and in many cases leading, local or national civil rights efforts. Not all black ministers were similarly devoted to civil rights and the work of Charles Payne, John Dittmer, and others has demonstrated that especially in the rural South, black ministers were more motivated by self-interest and thus preserving the status quo than they were interested in promoting voter education, school integration, or other efforts at achieving greater rights for blacks.¹⁷⁹

The students found less agreement on the question of the proper role of the churches in reconciling the races. Some questioned whether the church as an institution should be engaged directly in social action or whether it should serve more as “a ‘sustaining colony’ out fighting the battle through the NAACP, CORE, etc.” Other students wanted to define the relationship between organizations like CORE and the church, wondering if in some ways

¹⁷⁷ Will D. Campbell and Iva May Foster, “Report of the Evaluation Conference of the Student Interracial Ministry Held August 29-30, 1961,” October 11, 1961, 1. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

¹⁷⁸ Will D. Campbell and Iva May Foster, “Report of the Evaluation Conference of the Student Interracial Ministry Held August 29-30, 1961,” October 11, 1961, 3-4. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2nd ed. 2007), and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

CORE was the church, or if involvement in social actions could be described as a form of ministry. One student insisted “We must find radical new forms for the Gospel outside the institutional church.” Others felt that ministers need not necessarily be out in the streets but should be teachers impelling their congregants outward.

The students agreed that their primary task in SIM was to create deep relationships across the boundaries of race and so to witness to the Christian concern for racial reconciliation. They felt that white SIM ministers should particularly reach out to other white ministers in the South, and also pointed out that while the presence of whites in black churches was by no means new – whites had often visited black churches as guest preachers or as evangelists to the heathens or as paternalistic “older brothers” lending a helping hand – what was new with SIM was the kind of relationship involved. Kelly Miller Smith said of the project, “There’s a big difference between lending a helping hand and extending a brotherly hand.”¹⁸⁰

The evaluation conference also included discussions of practical matters for continuing the program and enhancing its effectiveness. It was suggested at this early date that year-long internships be considered, since the summer was so brief and was not entirely representative of the life of a given congregation because many members were often absent during that period. Clusters of SIM students in the same cities were suggested as a way for students to interact, reflect, study together, and support one another during the program. This had been modeled in Nashville, where Dennis Loo, Steve Rose, Alistair Raynham, and Marion Cox had met weekly with Vanderbilt professor Arthur Foster to interpret their experiences of interracial ministry through their theological studies. A discussion also ensued

¹⁸⁰ Will D. Campbell and Iva May Foster, “Report of the Evaluation Conference of the Student Interracial Ministry Held August 29-30, 1961,” October 11, 1961, 2.; Franklin I. Gamwell, “Report: Student Interracial Ministry Evaluation Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, August 29 and 30, 1961,” 4. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

as to whether SIM should remain independent and student run or should seek to affiliate with an institution such as the NCC or the Inter-Seminary Movement. One minister pointed out the potential impact of certain alliances, such as with the SCLC, on fundraising. Another minister hoped that the program would retain its ecumenical nature and continue to send students across not just racial lines but denominational lines as well.¹⁸¹ The group also pointed to the successful ministry of the black students in white Northern churches and of Oscar McCloud in Raleigh, and urged that more Southern white churches be found as hosts for black SIM students.

Summing up the first two years of the project, John Collins reflected that the student leaders should continue to refine and reflect upon their goals and to pray for inspiration. “Without this kind of continuing analysis,” he wrote, “and without consciously submitting to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the program will become stagnant, uncreative, dull and very successful. That is the time to turn it over to a stagnant, dull, uncreative, and very successful institution to administer.”¹⁸² Barring that, the students would continue to lead and experiment with additional forms of interracial ministry.

Conclusion: Seminaries on the Doorstep of Rapid Change

The student-led sit-ins of 1960 wrought quick change on the nation’s campuses, and by 1961, seismic theological tremors could be felt shaking the ground in Morningside Heights. The second group of SIM participants thus returned in the fall of 1961 to a seminary

¹⁸¹ Franklin I. Gamwell, “Report: Student Interracial Ministry Evaluation Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, August 29 and 30, 1961,” 5-6. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

¹⁸² “Final Report of John Collins – 1960-61,” Student Interracial Ministry. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f6.

campus that had changed palpably since the previous fall. Students had been stirred up by the civil rights movement and were restless with the pace of change in the country on race issues. They were also dissatisfied with their institutions' response to the racial crisis and to a theological curriculum that seemed suddenly out of step with the times. At Union Seminary, students bemoaned a stuffy curriculum that failed to plumb the deep meanings of their materials and an intellectual environment in which, "vital theological discussion seems to have stopped with the departure of Tillich and Niebuhr."¹⁸³ Faculty members were sympathetic but torn as to appropriate roles for themselves. As one student pointed out, the faculty was as rattled by the rapid change as the students. "Perhaps," he wrote in the student paper, "it is unfair to impose the burden of leadership on a generation which in many ways is as befuddled as we are."¹⁸⁴

There was also the first glimmer of a disturbing counter-trend. Rather than working to create change from within their institutions, some seminary students in what the *New York Times* had then termed "the post-Protestant era," were either jumping ship from the seminaries or not coming aboard in the first place. At least twelve members of Union's junior class dropped out at the end of 1961 to join the newly minted Peace Corps to work overseas.¹⁸⁵ Seeking to serve others in a meaningful way, they preferred to leave seminary to join a federally sponsored secular program rather than continue on into parish ministry careers for a church that seemed unclear who it was to serve or how.

¹⁸³ Steve Rose, "Union: Where We Are Today," *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 14, 1. Rose, who had just returned from his SIM summer with Reverend Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville, was now serving as the editor of the student newspaper, *The Grain of Salt*. He would soon write a book, *The Grass Roots Church*, which would suggest new directions for the reforming mainline denominations.

¹⁸⁴ Steve Rose, "Union: Where We Are Today," *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 14, 4.

¹⁸⁵ Steve Rose, "Union: Where We Are Today," *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 14, 1.

While the search for a coherent way to practice the Gospel in service to others drove some seminarians, other Christians of the type John Collins had called “seekers,” found themselves drawn more deeply inward to questions of meaning and faith. Religious structures and ideas which they had long assumed were steadfast seemed now to be fragile. Not far from Union Seminary stood a legendary watering hole, the West End Bar, home to poetry readings, radical thinkers, and formerly a haunt of Beat Generation mavericks including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Steve Rose, along with other returned SIM students, began to hang out there. The bar, a sort of secular yet still spiritual retreat for those seeking other paths, posed a direct threat to some of the more cautious Union faculty. Steve Rose, now the editor of the Union Seminary newspaper, pondered in a 1961 editorial the crisis that Union found itself in during the fall of 1961.

Both students and professors, Rose wrote, were unsure of their future directions, that worship attendance had fallen off, and that the curriculum was no longer relevant to the ministry some of them faced. Suggesting future directions, Rose wondered if the answer was to be found at the juncture of these two places, Union Seminary and the West End Bar, where the seminarians crossed the threshold into a place that symbolized what were for them new philosophies and ways of seeking meaning.¹⁸⁶ Progressive Christians throughout the country were gathering at similar places, where the secular and religious met, questioning what their religion meant in light of society’s deficits, whether the church practiced what it preached, and what roles they would set for themselves in trying to realize their faith.

¹⁸⁶ Steve Rose, “Union: Where We Are Today,” *the Grain of Salt*, Vol. 14.

CHAPTER THREE

To Be Both Pastor and Prophet: Interracial Ministry in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1962

“If the church has a mission of reconciliation and healing, can the Southern clergyman be both prophet and pastor?”

– Bud Walker, Union Seminary Student, 1960¹⁸⁷

“Religion in the South has kept Jesus in the heavens. Because if he ever gets in our alley, we’ll have to be like him A person who keeps Jesus too godlike doesn’t have to be responsible as a human being.”

– Carlyle Marney, Southern Baptist minister, 1978¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Bud Walker, “The Southern Dilemma,” *the Grain of Salt*, May 2, 1960.

¹⁸⁸ Bill Finger, “Preaching the Gospel, South of God: An Interview with Carlyle Marney,” *The Christian Century*, October 4, 1978, 920.

The start of the 1960s saw major challenges to existing patterns of race relations and the stirrings of great change within the churches. Seminary students were increasingly challenged not only to think about theological and social problems but to act on them, both in and outside of formal church structures. As one seminary professor noted at the time, “For many of our students the time has come to break the prolonged mood of introspection [and] the fashionable reveling in anxiety.”¹⁸⁹ Instead, the time had come for action. For some this was through involvement in the civil rights movement through protests and marches. For others, even for those who also participated in these public displays, involvement came primarily through religious expression and involvement at a local community level. In the context of its larger mission of seeking racial reconciliation, the Student Interracial Ministry contributed to this latter approach by targeting church congregations.

In this chapter, I show how the students in SIM incorporated changing ideas of the church and society, and the specific lessons of their first two summers, into their program for realizing racial reconciliation. After exploring the events and ideas of the academic year 1961-1962, I turn to look at the example of one SIM host congregation, Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and at its black student pastor, James Forbes, and its white minister, Robert Seymour. Their story illustrates that certain Southern churches were ripe to respond to pressure for greater change on racial inclusion and relations. It also highlights the legacy of Southern reformers that influenced this ability to progress and the ties held by some within the genealogy of Southern dissenters to Northern liberal Protestant institutions like Union Theological Seminary. Above all, this chapter illustrates the success of SIM’s basic presumption that interracial cooperation within the congregational setting

¹⁸⁹ Roger Shinn, *The Tower: Alumni Magazine of Union Theological Seminary*, Fall 1963, 3.

would lead individuals to alter their racial perception and to profound community changes as well.

SIM, Academic Year 1961-1962

Throughout the academic year 1961-1962, the students on the SIM committee again recruited students and host churches and raised money for the next summer's project, which eventually would number fifteen students in eight states. By September 1962 they had raised nearly \$7,700 from individuals, congregations, seminaries, foundations, and denominational boards. The bulk of the program expenditures would go toward \$300 stipends and insurance policies for each of the summer students.¹⁹⁰ Once again, the project emphasized improving race relations through interracial witness. By living, praying, and interacting daily with persons for another race, the seminarians publically testified to their belief that all people were brothers in the sight of God.

The students' summer reports for 1962 attested again and again to their conversion experiences, as if the seminarians were discovering for the first time a joint humanity and faith not bound by race. For many of the SIM students, like their forerunners in the YWCA and other interracial organizations decades earlier, this challenged notions of racial inferiority that remained at the bedrock of both their educational and social formation. They rethought how they understood basic human equality beyond the abstraction of theological study. Students thus "converted" to a racially progressive church proselytized to others and drew them into the fold. Doug Renick, the seminarian from Killeen, Texas, testified that it was the "enthusiasm and sincerity" of the returning students that attracted him to the project. "All the

¹⁹⁰ "Student Interracial Ministry Committee, Income and Statement of Balance, January, 1962 – September, 1962," 1-2. SIM, UTS, 1D:1:f3.

facts and figures about SIM's work meant little to me, but the people who had been in the work were alive with new insights into themselves and the nature of the church. This 'aliveness' was catching."¹⁹¹

The summer program of 1962 again began with an orientation at the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen campground at Swannanoa, North Carolina. Participants were instructed to bring sleeping bags, bathing suits, and bibles to the three-day meeting. From there, the fifteen students from thirteen different seminaries and colleges headed out to their assignments in North Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Washington, D.C., Alabama, Texas, Tennessee, and Georgia. Students were again assigned to work with Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville, Martin Luther King, Sr., in Atlanta and Collins Kilburn in Raleigh. In addition, Oscar McCloud, who had participated in SIM the year before and then been called to a black church in Raleigh, and Joseph Ellwanger, the well-known Lutheran pastor who was King's key white clergy ally in Birmingham, each hosted a student for the first time.

The students in general were welcomed into their host churches with a minimum of complaint, although the same could not be said for their reception in the communities at large. In Macon, Georgia, Ralph Luker's plans to stay with another white student from Duke ended when his friend's parents objected to Luker's interracial summer plans. Suddenly lacking a place to live, he rented a room at the YMCA in Macon, only to be turned out for the same reason. Luker recalled that the director of the Y told him, "You have spent the last night you're going to spend at the Y, and if you know what's good for you, you will pack

¹⁹¹ Douglas Renick, "A Southern Student Evaluates," *Student Interracial Ministry: 1962*, 11. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

your bags and get out of town.”” He eventually secured an apartment with another SIM student, but even then their landlady forbade them from having black visitors.¹⁹²

For most of the students the major learning opportunities came in two ways: through hands-on involvement with the functions of the church and through personal interactions across the lines of race. In many cases the two were intertwined. All seminarians did fieldwork within congregations, but the SIM experience, set within the context of an experiment in racial exchange, forced the students to interact with the experience at a more profound level. As Oscar McCloud, the black Union seminarian who served as both student and host pastor, recalled in 1962. Whatever a student’s race, he wrote, “you earn your acceptance and understanding ... because [you] are able to minister in some meaningful way to these people.”¹⁹³ Both black and white students reported that the project gave them their first intimate interactions with the other race, and most concluded both that they were indeed prejudiced, and that the members of the other race, once they got to know them, were not so different from themselves. Students reported this personal transformation in terms varying from how they had learned the true meaning of love to how they had been unaware of what it meant to be in the minority until they had personally experienced it.

The Student Interracial Ministry project, which sought to encourage interracialism and discouraged its seminarians from any appearance of paternalism, not only put student ministers into pulpits but also into communities, encouraging understanding through daily interaction that would demystify supposed differences. White seminarians, who lived in the

¹⁹² Ralph Luker oral history interview with author, November 5, 2006. Luker would go on to earn a doctorate in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and write a book on the religious roots of the civil rights movement, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*.

¹⁹³ Oscar McCloud, “Words from a Negro Pastor,” *Student Interracial Ministry: 1962*, 7. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

neighborhoods in which they worshipped, were often the first and only white person many black congregants came to know personally. The same held for many black seminarians who lived among white congregants.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had hailed the interracial approach in his endorsement of the SIM program, possibly because of his own experience while an undergraduate at Morehouse. There he had participated in Atlanta's interracial Intercollegiate Council, which he said convinced him that there were indeed allies to be had among whites, especially younger whites. Through knowing and working with white individuals, his "resentment was softened, and a spirit of cooperation took its place."¹⁹⁴ Students were able to delve more deeply into race relations precisely because they were able, by virtue of a relatively short but concentrated stay of three months, to become deeply involved in the personal lives of their hosts.

By living within a community of another race and culture for several months at a time, SIM participants were able to witness the ramifications of the racial divide in America much more thoroughly than they would at a one-day protest or through "regular" fieldwork. Other organizations, including SNCC, also recognized the benefits of an immersion approach, and arranged for their field workers to make long stays within local communities. One southern college chaplain, when asked why his students joined public demonstrations yet were not willing to sacrifice a summer to serve with SIM, replied, "Well, you know, it's relatively easy to go out and walk a picket line for a couple of hours – you can do it without giving much of yourself; but to deeply involve yourself in people's lives for three months –

¹⁹⁴ Stephen B. Oates. *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 21.

that is a different matter.”¹⁹⁵ Students got to know people within their congregations not just as people of another race whose cause they supported, but as individuals, whose personal stories they carried with them.

As for the congregations, Roger Shinn, the Professor of Applied Christianity at Union, felt that many of them were roused by the presence among them of a young person of faith, whose work in their churches was a kind of Christian witness that “jarred their complacent assumptions.”¹⁹⁶ Oscar McCloud pointed out that whites serving in black churches were nothing new, but that in the past such relationships had usually been in some manner exploitative, and that blacks had learned “to suspect the ‘outgoing’ white who was traditionally the ‘bait’ or instrument of the segregationist.” Consequently the white SIM student had to confront this legacy while establishing his or her own personal relationships. McCloud also cautioned that white SIM students would encounter black church folk who would make no effort to get to know or understand them, “because they feel that they are the only ones who need to be or should be understood.” Also, having chosen to serve a black church, the SIM student was not likely to be accepted by the majority white community in the area, compounding the possibility for rejection, but also sending the student deeper into the arms of the host community.¹⁹⁷ However, as one black pastor warned incoming seminarians, the host congregations were being asked to challenge their own racial prejudices and convictions, and a student should not assume that all within a congregation, simply because it had extended the invitation, would be especially welcoming. “It should always be

¹⁹⁵ John Collins, “Student Interracial Ministry: A Venture in Reconciliation,” *Interracial News Service*, 33:4 (September-October, 1962), 2. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f4.

¹⁹⁶ Roger Shinn, “The Student Interracial Ministry: A Venture of Faith,” *Student Interracial Ministry: 1962*, 5. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

¹⁹⁷ Oscar McCloud, oral history interview with author, December 9, 2006.

remembered that interracial confrontation is not the customary way in which the people express their Christianity...[they] are not accustomed to the type of relationship which is now placed before them. Negroes as well as whites have to learn how to like another person and accept him.”¹⁹⁸

Collins Kilburn also attested to the value that personal interactions with the student minister had for members of his Raleigh congregation: “Our students have lived in some of the homes of the congregation, have shared meals in many other homes, and have visited freely in yet many others. The students get to know us as people. They become acquainted with our weaknesses. They learn not just about the race problem, but about human problems: loneliness, alienation, fear. And we, in turn, come to know the student not just ... as a representative of another group, but as a person with needs and sins not so different from our own. Dialogue on the personal level breaks down stereotypes on both sides, and real human contact is achieved. Often hidden hostility and fear emerge. But when this happens in the community of faith, it is the opportunity for deeper reconciliation.”¹⁹⁹

During the summer of 1962, the SIM placement of James Forbes with the Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was one placement which seemed to lead to such reconciliation and deeply affected not only the congregation but the future work of both the white and black pastors involved. Their story illustrates the practical workings and long-range effects of an interracial ministry on a southern church, its members, and its clergy.

¹⁹⁸ Oscar McLoud, “Report from a Local Church,” *The Interseminarian*, December 1962, 30. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f6.

¹⁹⁹ Collins Kilburn, “A White Minister Reports,” *Student Interracial Ministry: 1962*, 10. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

A Case Study of Racial Reconciliation in a Southern Church Community: James Forbes,
Robert Seymour and Binkley Memorial Baptist Church

The Congregation, Binkley Memorial Baptist Church: In the summer of 1962, when it hosted a young black minister through the Student Interracial Ministry program, the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina was only six years old – hardly much of a pedigree for a southern church. However, its very existence testified to the fact that the white southern Church was not monolithic. Although the vast majority of white congregations supported – often adamantly — the racial status quo, the church community was expansive enough to accommodate rogue outliers, inventive experiments, and the possibility for change. Indeed, many Southerners seemed to pride themselves on their potential for non-conformity. The “bootleg preacher” from either end of the theological or political spectrum was sometimes tolerated if not celebrated. In 1958, a group of about forty parishioners from the Baptist Church at Chapel Hill split off from the parent church and created their own congregation, partly in anticipation of a period of exceptional growth at the University of North Carolina and a predicted attendant rise in the need for religious services. The new congregation, however, was also a direct response to the racial situation in the South and in Chapel Hill, and an effort to offer an alternative, racially inclusive worship option to local Baptists.

The new congregation named itself in honor of Olin Trivette Binkley a North Carolina native and a Wake Forest University theology professor. Binkley had once been the minister of Chapel Hill Baptist Church and had moved on to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he would serve as president from 1963 to 1975. He was part of that small group of Southern progressives, many of them Baptists, who shared ideas and

supported one another and which we have already identified as forming a “genealogy of dissent.” This lineage was especially strong in North Carolina, where a network of shared ideas, training, and experience united ministers like Binkley, Carlyle Marney in Charlotte, Collins Kilburn and William Finlator in Raleigh, and Charles Jones in Chapel Hill.

Robert Seymour and many of the other southern ministers who formed the small community of dissenters were educated in northern institutions. There they created an amalgam of their southern identity with the liberal modern theology more typical of the North. Southerners James Lawson, Myles Horton, Howard Kester, Martin England of Koinonia Farm, Sherwood Eddy of the Delta Cooperative Farm, Collins Kilburn, James Dombrowski, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others studied at Northern divinity schools and patched together their own theology, agenda, and methods based in part on the Social Gospel, but also taking equally from the jeremiads of the Old Testament prophets, the neo-orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr, the existentialism of Karl Barth, and in some cases, the evangelicalism of the black church. Many of the students who participated in the Student Interracial Ministry, and particularly those who created and helped to craft it, were northern-educated Southerners made in this same mold. North Carolina’s Christian progressives focused their attention on race relations, and followed in the path laid down earlier by a number of Baptist ministers from the Tar Heel state who had supported Populism and the Farmer’s Alliance at the turn of the century, and who had published their own newspaper, the *North Carolina Baptist*, as an alternative to the official Baptist paper in North Carolina.²⁰⁰

During the Great Depression, North Carolina ministers were among those who founded the

²⁰⁰ See Tracy Elaine K’Meyer *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 2000; David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 23-24, and Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 92-107.

Fellowship of Southern Churchmen as an interracial effort to address race relations, anti-Semitism, poor farming and labor conditions, and other social issues. After World War II, progressive Baptists in the state joined and supported national efforts such as a 1953 retreat in Kings Mountain, North Carolina, sponsored by the United Christian Youth Movement, an interracial and ecumenical organization whose meetings often were co-sponsored by the National Council of Churches.²⁰¹ In later years, Baptist progressives founded their own racial reform group under the innocuous title The North Carolina Discussion Group. A major purpose of the Discussion Group was to speak about racial inclusiveness within the church.²⁰²

The minister of Chapel Hill's Second Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Charles Jones, was one of the leaders of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in the 1940s and 1950s and was an early and outspoken activist for racial equality. Jones was a native of Tennessee and had been educated there, in New York at Columbia University, and at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He preached about social justice issues from the pulpit and invited African American participation in worship services. In 1947, Jones gave safe haven to the pacifist Bayard Rustin and others on the Journey of Reconciliation, a forerunner to the

²⁰¹ Andrew Young, later the United States' ambassador to the United Nations, was one of two blacks who attended a similar United Christian Youth Movement (UCYM) conference in Texas in 1951. Young has called the UCYM conference "one of the pivotal experiences of my life," because young people there "were questioning their family traditions and the basic value structures of their communities because of their realization that the Bible and the Spirit of Christ were different from what they were being taught." This conference led Young to examine his own faith, to enroll in Hartford Seminary, and to his later leadership roles in the civil rights movement. (See <http://www.nccusa.org/about/young.html>.)

²⁰² The North Carolina Discussion Group had a roster of 45 participants in the late 1950s, and had grown to 123-strong by 1961 when Binkley Baptist Church hosted the Discussion Group's annual meeting in Chapel Hill with 39 people in attendance. He made provisions for taking integrated meals at the Carolina Inn cafeteria and set up lodging for "Negro" attendees in private homes. Though an organization of and for ministers, about two-thirds of those attending the Chapel Hill meeting were laypeople, demonstrating the involvement of local congregations in progressive matters, even at the beginning of the decade. (Materials on The North Carolina Discussion Group in possession of Robert Seymour.)

Freedom Rides to test the federal desegregation interstate travel. Rustin and his colleagues were met by an angry mob when they arrived in Chapel Hill. Led by taxi cab drivers, the mob later set up in a ring around Jones' house, although the minister was able to slip out spirit Rustin and the others to safe houses in Greensboro and elsewhere.

Charles Jones was later accused by the Judicial Commission of Orange Presbytery, the county church board that oversaw his congregation and others, of heresy, and was pressured to resign from his post.²⁰³ The stifling of radicals like Jones suggests that Southern denominational conventions and presbyteries sometimes found ways to purge those preachers who actually sought to put the social gospel into practice.

Olin T. Binkley was one of the survivors, however, and by naming their congregation after Binkley, the founder of the new church in Chapel Hill clearly signaled their intention to pursue a more radical approach to Christian social concerns. The congregation set out to find a minister who was at least as progressive as Binkley, and in the summer of 1958, a search committee called on Dr. Robert Seymour, who was at the time pastor of the Mars Hill Baptist Church in Mars Hill, North Carolina, not far from the town of Asheville. He was happy in the relatively progressive climate of his Mars Hill church, where he had fallen in love with and married the organist. Mars Hill was tolerant of Seymour's commitment to racial and social justice principles, but only to a point. The new congregation of the Olin T. Binkley Memorial

²⁰³ While the official charge of heresy had to do with Jones' tendency to stray from Presbyterian theology and traditional worship practices, his willingness to transgress racial boundaries was likely the real concern that had inspired denominational action against him. Jones wasn't the only progressive white minister to lose his job in this way. J.C. Herrin, a Baptist campus minister at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill from 1946 to 1954 was also fired for his support of integrated church services, and six members of the Religion and Labor Fellowship in Lynchburg, Virginia, all lost their pastorates in the mid-1940s over their support for labor organizing. Although he originally fought the heresy charge, Jones stepped down from the church leadership in 1952 and lost his ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Within a year, however, he was ordained in the United Church of Christ and was hired to lead the newly formed interracial and interdenominational Community Church of Chapel Hill in August 1953.

Baptist Church, on the other hand, offered him a rare chance to focus his ministry on, and indeed to dedicate a church to, such principles. He felt that it was an opportunity he could not turn down.

When Seymour arrived to take up the reins at Binkley, the small congregation was just nine months old and had already welcomed its first black member, George Grigsby, a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The new integrated church was little known, however, until Seymour offered the apartments in the parish house to Grigsby and some fellow students in exchange for some upkeep of the building. This interracial living situation in the heart of Chapel Hill displeased neighbors and brought Binkley Church to the attention of the *Durham Morning Herald*, which announced Grigsby's church membership under the headline "Negro Joins White Church." Subsequently letters of both praise and damnation came from throughout the region. One writer told Seymour that he had been "shocked and grieved when I saw that one who professed to be a Christian ... had committed such a sinful thing as to take a Negro in your church. I'm a Baptist and believe the teachings of God, and He taught segregation from cover to cover."²⁰⁴ The University of North Carolina, however, tacitly supported the effort by allowing the Binkley congregation to worship in Gerrard Hall while its own building was being erected. Grigsby, reportedly only the second black person to cross the race barrier as a member (as opposed to a non-member worshipper) in a North Carolina church, was joined by a few other black members, and through the first years of the 1960s perhaps a dozen black students from UNC worshipped at Binkley.

²⁰⁴ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 77-79; Letter in possession of Robert Seymour.

In addition to racial issues, Seymour committed the Binkley Baptist Church to ecumenicalism, seeking membership in the North Carolina Council of Churches and welcoming members who had not been baptized by full immersion. This was a controversial move, both within the congregation and within state Baptist circles. Several families renounced their memberships in Binkley's congregation. The Yates Baptist Association, the regional Southern Baptist convention to which Binkley would normally have belonged, permanently refused its application for membership. Seymour believes that the Yates Association's decision was based not just on Binkley's baptism policies but on the fact that it had black members. If it had accepted Binkley, the Yates Association itself would have been integrated; a fact of which contemporary newspaper accounts took note.²⁰⁵ While it was not accepted by the Yates Association, Binkley Baptist Church did become one of the ten percent of predominantly white churches in the Southern Association of American Baptist Churches, since renamed the American Baptist Churches of the South, an association of predominantly black churches.²⁰⁶

Despite its founding statements and the efforts of its liberal pastor, true racial change at Binkley developed slowly. For its first several years in the late 1950s, the congregation had only two black members and perhaps a half-dozen black congregants, most of them temporary residents studying at the nearby University of North Carolina. Racial tolerance was preached from the pulpit, but usually only once a year on "Race Relations Sunday." The church may have pushed a few boundaries, but initially it did so quietly and conservatively,

²⁰⁵ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 80-81; "Binkley Memorial Rejected by Yates," *Durham Morning Herald*, October 27, 1960.

²⁰⁶ Much later, in 1984, Binkley became a founding member of the Southern Baptist Alliance, later called the Alliance of Baptists, a group protesting the right-wing takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Binkley was officially "disfellowshipped" from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1992 after ordaining a gay minister, and is now solely affiliated with the American Baptists.

in the manner of a number of other congregations in the Chapel Hill area which were also cautiously committed to social reform. About thirty area clergy were members of the Chapel Hill Ministerial Association, which publicly supported pickets and demonstrations in 1960. On March 24, 1960, Seymour was one of twenty-seven Chapel Hill ministers to sign a “Statement of Convictions,” which ran as a full-page advertisement in the *Chapel Hill Weekly*. It read, “We, the undersigned ministers, living in Chapel Hill, feel that we would be remiss in our responsibility if we did not express publicly certain convictions that we hold in regard to the current crisis in human relations within this community.” Later in the “Statement,” the ministers “confess our own responsibility for the existence and toleration of such attitudes and practices as make this request necessary.”²⁰⁷ Such attitudes and practices did, of course, continue, even within the walls of Binkley Baptist Church.

In 1962, however, Seymour tested the commitment of his congregation and pushed the boundaries of the church’s and Chapel Hill’s racial tolerance when he won approval from the board to request a black summer intern from the Student Interracial Ministry. Seymour was attracted to SIM’s commitment, in the words of one of its student founders, to “attempt to ... bring confrontation in depth. Just as each group has its own role to play, so SIM is concerned with grace, with reconciliation, with opening lines of communication where none have existed, and with reopening those which have been temporarily cut off.”²⁰⁸ While much of the rest of Chapel Hill lapsed into the quietude of summer in a half-empty college town, the congregants of Binkley were roused from their torpor by a young, black preacher by the

²⁰⁷ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 95; “Statement of Convictions,” *Chapel Hill Weekly*, March 24, 1960. Copy of original signed petition in possession of Robert Seymour.

²⁰⁸ “A Church That Pioneered,” *The Southern Patriot*, Winter 1963, 3.

name of James Forbes. Forbes' visit marked a fundamental turning point in the life of the congregation.

The Student, James Forbes: In the summer of 1962 Seymour and his deacons agreed to welcome James Forbes to the Binkley Church as a summer pastoral intern. The recommendation to invite Forbes was approved by the congregation with one negative vote and several abstentions.²⁰⁹ As Seymour later recalled, "Our people were intellectually committed to an inclusive church, but having this black pastor with us for the summer helped them work through some of the emotional vestiges of feelings that were still there."²¹⁰

James Forbes was born in 1935, the second oldest of eight children raised by a father who was the pastor of Raleigh's Pentecostal Providence Holy Church on the weekends and a candy salesman during the week. Forbes' father would later go on to become a Pentecostal bishop. His mother worked as a domestic servant for a white family. Forbes went north for college, earning a degree in Science at Howard University. He was intending to pursue a career in medicine before being called to the ministry in his junior year. After graduation from Howard, he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary, having been rebuffed by Duke University, which did not welcome black students into its Divinity School until March 1961 despite continuous demands from students and faculty dating back to 1948.²¹¹ Forbes entered

²⁰⁹ Seymour, Robert. "Interracial Ministry in North Carolina: What It Was Like for a Southern White Church to Have a Negro Assistant on its Staff One Summer," *The Christian Century*. January 23, 1963, 109.

²¹⁰ Robert Seymour, oral history interview performed by Bruce Kalk, May 21, 1985, for the Southern Oral History Program. C-20, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 6.

²¹¹ Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 437.

the seminary in New York City still considering himself to be a doctor of sorts – “God called me to be a healer, but a healer of souls and culture.”²¹²

Forbes received his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in May of 1962, and in the absence of an immediate call to a congregation, he accepted the summer internship in Chapel Hill that SIM offered him. This was not his first experience of an interracial project. While in college he had participated in the Panel of Americans, an organization devoted to interracial understanding that had formed on college campuses in California in response to anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II. The project sent white, black, Puerto Rican, Christian, and Jewish representatives to high school and college campuses to discuss bigotry and understanding.²¹³

In the spring of 1962, having spent three years living in the North, Forbes was anxious about returning to his native North Carolina, wondering how he would now react. He had grown up within the confines of segregation, but his years in college and divinity school had showed him the possibility of a different society. He especially looked forward to seeing a white church from the inside and hoped to learn “what causes some white folks to run away from others who are different and what causes others to be open to actually help to build the beloved community. As Dr. King used to say when he’d roll past these white churches, ‘What kind of people are in there? What kids of gods do they serve, and what kind of values do they hold?’”²¹⁴ He was soon to find out, both from his interactions with the Binkley and Chapel Hill communities and through his intimate work with his senior pastor, Robert

²¹² “From the Pulpit, a Struggle for Justice,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2004; “James Forbes, Jr.: Speaking to Power,” *NOW with Bill Moyers*, December 26, 2003.

²¹³ James Forbes, oral history interview with author, February 15, 2008.

²¹⁴ James Forbes, oral history interview with author, February 15, 2008.

Seymour, with whom he developed a close personal relationship. The two men had both been raised in the South and studied for the ministry in the North, and they shared a strong antipathy toward the Jim Crow system.

As the summer-long Associate Pastor of the Binkley Church, Forbes was put in charge of guiding the interracial vacation bible school, as well as of leading a bible class and a supper seminar for University students. He also served as the church's liaison to the Baptist Student Union at the University of North Carolina, where he presented two lectures, "Social and Political Movements in the Negro Community" and "The Black Muslims." In August he gave his own sermon to the congregation of the Binkley Church and led a retreat to the beach. While in Chapel Hill, he lived in the parish house and took most of his evening meals with church families. For many parishioners, his presence marked the first black visitor to their homes.

Forbes reported at the time that the church work itself was no different than he would have been doing in a black church, "but because most of the members of this church are white I have had an opportunity to approach my work from a slightly different perspective. I have attempted to understand more fully some of the problems of the white community during this period of social change. One thing has become increasingly clear and it is that real understanding requires genuine confrontation. Mere contact has not been productive of deepened understanding."²¹⁵ Forbes regarded his serving a leadership role in the church as providing a "vital Christian witness to the larger Chapel Hill community."²¹⁶

²¹⁵ James Forbes, "Mid-summer report for the Student Interracial Ministry," August 1962. SIM Collection, UTS.

²¹⁶ Forbes, Mid-summer report. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

Forbes also found personal fulfillment through the experience. Recalling a time when Rev. Seymour was out of town and parishioners sought him out during the birth of a baby and during a medical crisis, he wrote to Seymour, “I could have wished for you, but I would take nothing for their looking to me; I have never felt so completely a person!”²¹⁷ He later reflected that the experience had surprised him with how it broke up his preconceptions of southern whites. “All my life I have heard white people say, ‘we know our colored folks;’ until this summer I thought I knew our white folks.”²¹⁸

In a few cases, his pre-judgment of the situation that he thought he would encounter at Brinkley turned out to be unfortunately accurate. Just as George Grigsby’s membership in Binkley’s congregation had caused a furor back in 1958, now in 1962 hate mail once again came pouring in from outside the community in response to news reports of Forbes’ ministry. But unlike during the earlier period with Grigsby, now there were numerous positive responses as well, and the *London Illustrated Times* sent a photographer all the way from England to create a photo essay depicting the integrated congregation. *The Southern Patriot*, the newspaper of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, wrote in 1963 of SIM and Forbes’ ministry at Binkley that “it is one of the most promising of a number of projects which concerned people are carrying on quietly in an effort to move beyond the stage of desegregation to a glimpse of real integration.”²¹⁹

From his perspective, Forbes was both welcomed into the Binkley community and protected by them. “They received me with absolute open arms,” he recalls, “and granted me

²¹⁷ Seymour, “Interracial Ministry in North Carolina,” *The Christian Century*, 110.

²¹⁸ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 92, 93.

²¹⁹ “A Church That Pioneered,” *The Southern Patriot*, Winter 1963, 1.

all the rights and privileges of inclusion in their community. Of course, the [outside] culture itself had not yet turned the corner.” This meant that service at restaurants would be inordinately slow for him and that at town softball games, the opponents peppered him with racial epithets. But the Binkley congregation rallied around him at the softball game and at other times, so that Forbes felt that he was “in a sense, within that community, was in a protective relationship that was totally committed to full inclusion. [I was] accepted beyond the consideration of race.”²²⁰

Ordained in both the American Baptist and the Original United Holy Church of America, Forbes went on to pastor his father’s church in Roxboro, North Carolina and the Holy Trinity Church, a large black Presbyterian church in Wilmington, North Carolina. It was at this church that Robert Seymour presided when James Forbes married Bettye Franks Forbes. Forbes pastored in Wilmington from 1960 to 1965, then moved on to St. John’s United Holy Church of America in Richmond, Virginia, where he stayed until 1973. In 1976, he was invited back to Union Theological Seminary as a professor of homiletics, the art of preaching. In June 1989, he became the Senior Minister at the Riverside Church, the historic congregation of Harry Emerson Fosdick and one of the few nationally-known churches that proved the exception to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s statement that “at 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.”²²¹ Not so at Riverside Church, which was sixty percent white and forty percent black when Forbes arrived. He served as Senior Minister there until June 2007.

²²⁰ James Forbes, oral history interview with author, February 15, 2008.

²²¹ Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Western Michigan University, December 18, 1963.

The 1995 Baylor University Survey on religion named Forbes as one of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world, an honor that was repeated by the press. *Newsweek* called him one of the twelve “most effective” English language preachers in the world, and *Ebony* twice recognized him as one of the country’s great black preachers. He continues in retirement to speak and preach nationally, and is the founder of the Healing the Nations Foundation of New York City. He also hosted a radio show, “The Time is Now,” on the Air America network in 2006 and 2007.²²²

Forbes looks back on his experience as an assistant pastor through the SIM project as a formative part of his ministerial training and career. “Getting the opportunity to provide leadership at Olin T. Binkley Memorial in Chapel Hill was almost a forecasting of the fact that my work would be across boundaries. In whatever work I did, the interracial aspect was something very natural to me and not something foreign. It opened up the world of interracial activity, making it a norm. For me, my world became not an isolated black existence but a world in which black and white had commerce together on many different levels. Working at Binkley made the world an interracial world, so that living in a subset was no longer a natural way to be. Binkley was a boot camp for the extended interracial ministry that I would experience.”²²³

Forbes’ eighteen years at the helm of Riverside Church were not without controversy. During his tenure, the racial composition of the congregation changed to about seventy percent black. Forbes’ “Southern,” Pentecostal-inspired preaching style did not sit well with some members, nor did his altar calls, occasionally authoritarian leadership style, AIDS

²²² James Forbes biography on Riverside Church web site.

²²³ James Forbes, oral history interview with author, February 15, 2008

ministry, or his acceptance of gay and lesbian members. Forbes, like his old mentor at Binkley, Robert Seymour, was not afraid to rattle cages by taking unpopular stands that he considered just.

The Minister, Robert Seymour: Robert E. Seymour, Jr. was born in Greenwood, South Carolina, in July, 1925 into a conservative Southern family. His parents were active in the First Baptist Church of Greenwood, which, like all social institutions in town at the time, was segregated. Seymour's exposure to black people was limited primarily to "Uncle" Henry, who worked on his grandfather's farm, and to his mother's maid, Rosa, with whom he developed a close and long-lasting relationship. Though his parents were kind to black people, the kindness came with a paternalism typical of the time. "Their self-image," Seymour recalled, "was that of folk who had the well being of blacks at heart, protecting them as if they were children unable to take care of themselves. They honestly believed that the restrictions imposed upon blacks by the system was for their own good." The church in which Seymour was raised did nothing to challenge these assumptions, and in fact used Sunday school scripture lessons to reinforce racial barriers. "Never once during all my growing-up years did [my church] cause me to see any inconsistency in the racial practices of the community with Christianity."²²⁴ Even so, as early as those Sunday school lessons, Seymour sensed an inconsistency between the biblical messages and the way people lived in the South.

Seymour graduated in 1943 from high school in Greenwood, where his yearbook staff predicted that he would become either a preacher or a politician. With the draft on, Seymour

²²⁴ Robert E. Seymour, *Whites Only: A Pastor's Retrospective on Signs of the New South* (New York: Judson Press, 1991), 13, 18.

was instead initially destined for the Navy, but was allowed a year before joining up. At his father's insistence, he enrolled at the Citadel, his father's alma mater, where he spent a miserable year, before the Navy's V-12 program accepted him for pre-chaplaincy training and sent him to Newberry College in South Carolina. The V-12 program was the Navy's way of providing undergraduate education at civilian colleges in anticipation of needing educated officers for a long war. Seymour spent two years at Newberry and transferred to Duke University for his final year. These segregated institutions did little to challenge the racial norms with which he had grown up. It was not until he attended theological seminary in New England that Seymour was confronted with direct challenges to the southern system and for the first time began to articulate the inconsistencies he had long experienced in his church upbringing. Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, turned his sense of proper relations between the races upside down. "Like explosives with delayed timing devices, the biblical message eventually jolted my life and made it imperative for me to challenge the culture that had cradled me."²²⁵

At Yale, Seymour found himself in a dormitory where black seminary students lived in the adjacent rooms and where white folks cleaned the buildings and cooked the food. In New Haven, Seymour was converted to a broader worldview that embraced racial equality. His outlook changed not simply according to the desegregated social sphere in which he was now immersed, but according to the theology to which he, a fundamentalist Southern Baptist, was now exposed. He studied Christian Ethics with H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr's brother, and studied the Social Gospel with Liston Pope. The Social Gospel, as taught by Pope, was the enactment in everyday life of the commandment to love God and to love thy

²²⁵ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 21; Conversation between Robert Seymour and author, April 10, 2004.

neighbor as thyself. “It all seems so obvious now,” Seymour later wrote about learning the lessons of the Social Gospel. “These are not two commandments; they are one. Personal gospel and Social Gospel go hand in hand. Not until Yale did the full impact of this insight begin to inspire the direction of my life and become the mainspring of my later ministry in the South.”²²⁶

It did not sit well with Seymour’s parents when their son brought his new Northern attitudes back home. He caused his parents great embarrassment when he aired his views in public by writing a letter to his hometown newspaper, the Greenwood *Index-Journal* on March 17, 1947, to denounce a planned American Legion World War II monument that would list the names of dead black and white servicemen on separate panels. Soon after, Seymour’s fellow congregants at Greenwood’s First Baptist were noticeably ambivalent about having him ordained there.²²⁷ Seymour’s letter to his hometown paper represents a significant turning point in his relationship to the racial caste system of the South and his willingness to speak out publicly against it.

Seymour’s first job, as assistant to the senior pastor at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1949, immediately introduced him to a congregation that was willing to flout some of the conventions of the Southern Baptist Church. Not only did Myers Park approve of dancing, but it was the first Southern Baptist congregation to seek reconciliation with the Northern Baptist churches. George Heaton, the senior pastor, also invited controversy when he welcomed as members Christians who had not been baptized by full immersion. Myers Park continued to be a radical Baptist presence in the South.

²²⁶ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 39.

²²⁷ *Whites Only*, 36-37; *Index-Journal*, March 17, 1947; included in Scrapbook #1 file, Box 5, Robert E. Seymour Papers, Collection # 4554, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Following Heaton's departure in 1958, Myers Park hired Carlyle Marney from Austin, Texas, where he had already proven himself a controversial and influential progressive southern minister who served as a mentor figure to others among the small cadre of southern Baptist dissenters.

After a year in the relatively sophisticated urban setting of Myers Park, Seymour was called in 1950 to lead a church of his own, Warrenton Baptist Church, in what he later described as "a charming county-seat community of Eastern North Carolina that had bypassed the modern world."²²⁸ This church held far more traditional social and theological views than had the Myers Park church. Even so, Seymour began to raise issues of racial equality from the pulpit and also in the larger Warrenton community. He strategically sought common causes on which the white and black churchpeople in town could work together and so get to know one another as individuals. Negroes represented sixty-two percent of Warrenton's population at that time, and Seymour believed that "one interracial meeting may be more effective in changing attitudes of prejudiced people than countless sermons on the subject." In 1953, Seymour joined the minister of a white Baptist church in Hickory, North Carolina, and clergy of both races at a series of fellowship meetings in which all participants lived and worshipped together in the church. Throughout his ministry he endeavored to create such encounters.²²⁹

By 1953 Seymour sensed that his time in Warrenton had come to an end – his petition to the town to hire a black policeman was the final straw – and he counted himself lucky to have survived three years and to have risen to the "challenge to confront persons in that kind

²²⁸ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 48.

²²⁹ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 51.

of setting [with] what the Gospel demanded of them.”²³⁰ Upon Seymour’s departure, Bignall Jones, the editor of the *Warren Record* and one of Seymour’s few allies in town, wrote in the paper, “For three years Bob Seymour has served the members of his congregation well, through precept and example, preaching the brotherhood of God, building and strengthening his church. Because of his sincerity [and] a liberality of views which at times has seemed shocking to his congregation ... he has been tolerated by those to whom such views are anathema and even, happily, some of those views have become accepted.”²³¹

Seymour left North Carolina for Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1953 to finish his Ph.D. dissertation on the eighteenth century English Baptist preacher John Gill. In 1955, as a newly minted Ph.D., he returned to North Carolina as the pastor of Mars Hill Baptist Church next door to the campus of Mars Hill College near Asheville. The church had a conservative reputation, but one member of the pulpit committee told Seymour that this could work in his favor because, “you can do anything you want to do and no one would ever suspect it.” Seymour made good on that offer and, from the start of his Mars Hill ministry, delivered sermons on racial justice and integration. He preached one such sermon on February 5, 1956 in observation of the Baptist church’s National Brotherhood Week, the church’s annual nod toward race relations. “It seems almost blasphemous to me for us to talk about brotherhood in our churches unless our words become deeds. No church can afford to keep silent on this matter. I am convinced that if the Church sits quietly on the sidelines, it will have suffered an irreparable defeat and will never regain commensurate influence in the future.”²³²

²³⁰ Robert Seymour, oral history with Bruce Kalk, May 21, 1985, for the Southern Oral History Program. C-20, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 5.

²³¹ *Warren Record*, July 31, 1953.

²³² Robert Seymour, sermon, “Prejudice, Barrier to Brotherhood,” delivered February 5, 1956 at Mars Hill Baptist Church and revised for February 14, 1960 at Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill. Possession of Robert

In the spring of 1957 Seymour again turned to the subject of what he called a coming revolution in race relations in a sermon titled “Trumpets of Uncertain Sound.” He borrowed from Corinthians the metaphor of a weak trumpet call to describe the anemic message that the Southern churches had been sending out about racial equality. Seymour said that in the midst of a social revolution, “the Church seems to have closed her eyes and gives every appearance of sleeping comfortably in the midst of the tumult ... now the time has come for action. The trumpet of Christian truth has not been loud enough to protect us from following the Pied Pipers of expedient compromise.”

Seymour went on to question those who supported segregation from the safety of the Church and to castigate the Church itself for remaining silent following the Brown V. Board of Education Supreme Court decision: “Most of the Christian people of North Carolina consider State Rights more important than human rights, regard law evasion as an acceptable course of action for our children to practice, and consider that which is easy and expedient preferable to that which is difficult but morally right.”²³³

Seymour’s stance on racial justice caught the attention of the leadership of the General Baptist Convention, the separate black Southern Baptist convention in North Carolina. Invited to preach at their Convention in 1957, he delivered a sermon titled “When Segregation Seemed Sacred,” saying “surely there can be no genuine brotherhood where people are legally required to live apart from one another.” Amidst the ovation that followed

Seymour. While his own church may have had a conservative reputation before his arrival, Mars Hill itself, especially Mars Hill College, had experiences dating back to the 1940s of ministers challenging the system of segregation. The pioneering radical Baptist minister Walter Johnson held interracial religious fellowship retreats at the campus in the 1940s, provoking criticism from the local community, though most of that was directed toward the college faculty who supported Johnson and his retreats. (Stricklin, 33-34, 45.)

²³³ Robert Seymour, sermon, “Trumpets of Uncertain Sound,” delivered late February or early March 1957 at Mars Hill Baptist Church. Possession of Robert Seymour.

his sermon, one angry voice cut through the applause to ask if “this white preacher would say to his own people what he has said to us today?” Seymour was pleased to respond that he had delivered the very same sermon word-for-word at his own congregation a few weeks previously.²³⁴

After he had moved to Chapel Hill in 1958, he and other ministers created the Fellowship for School Integration there and sent a number of integration proposals to the Chapel Hill School Board. Seymour realized that none of these proposals would pass unless the composition of the School Board changed, and so he took aside one of his deacons, Fred Ellis, and promised that he would relieve him of some of his church duties if he were to be elected to the board. Ellis ran and won, and at his very first meeting proposed what would become Chapel Hill’s plan for voluntary school integration. In 1961, Chapel Hill became the first North Carolina school district to voluntarily implement a plan for total school desegregation.²³⁵

In May of 1963, Seymour attended the Southern Baptist Convention in Kansas City and proposed a resolution against prejudice in the Church and in support of the protestors, including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who at the time was in jail for marching against discrimination in Birmingham, Alabama. The National Convention would not even hear the mild words of Seymour’s resolution; it was shouted down and then buried in committee. But it did get written up in the newspapers, and in the weeks that followed the hate mail again flowed into Dr. Seymour’s church.

²³⁴ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 70; The year cited is not definite; there is a possibility this sermon was delivered in 1958.

²³⁵ Oral history with author, February 22, 2005; Seymour, *Whites Only*, 86-87.

“My Dear Dr. Seymour,” a Mrs. Howard of Longview, Texas began politely, “How I resent your asking for support of the Birmingham Negroes! There are thousands of Southern Baptists who feel as I do. You know your Bible – the Lord put a curse on Ham and his descendants. The Negroes are not meant to mix with and marry into the white race. I’ve been a Baptist all my life but I’m fed up with ministers who take the stand you do.” An anonymous writer claimed, “Us Baptists in Birmingham know you’re a communist listed with J. Edgar Hoover in Washington – you’re red. Hoping you’re git [sic] your ears trimmed at convention in future.”²³⁶

Seymour became known for his commitment to racial equality and social justice for blacks in the South. “Race, perhaps more than any other contingency, had set the agenda for my life.”²³⁷ His sermons and especially his speeches at the Baptist state conventions earned him a reputation as a zealot and a troublemaker. “I think it fair to say,” he said in a 1985 oral history interview, “that I was pretty well labeled during those years as a person who was concerned with this issue [of racial equality] and almost nothing else. I have been virtually ignored and isolated by North Carolina Baptist churches since the Sixties.”²³⁸

Seymour had a strong influence on another Binkley congregant who would go on to have a major impact on race relations nationally. Dean Smith would become the legendary head basketball coach for the University of North Carolina Tar Heels. He joined Binkley Baptist Church with his wife Ann in 1959 while he was still an assistant coach. Seymour immediately asked him to serve as the chair of the church’s Student Affairs Committee. Dean

²³⁶ Letters in possession of Robert Seymour.

²³⁷ Seymour, *Whites Only*, 4.

²³⁸ Robert Seymour, oral history by Bruce Kalk, May 21, 1985, for the Southern Oral History Program. C-20, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 7.

Smith also joined Seymour and a black colleague for a meal that effectively integrated The Pines, a venerable Chapel Hill restaurant that served as the site for the basketball team's press conferences and for their pre-game meals. The threesome was served promptly and without comment. Seymour believes that this incident took place around 1964, but author Art Chansky locates it in 1959, just after Seymour arrived at Binkley.²³⁹ In either case, the incident became a part of the Dean Smith legend, and in a 1982 *Sports Illustrated* article, it was again recounted, alongside a picture of Robert Seymour and Coach Smith.²⁴⁰

Smith later recalled that Seymour had charged him with applying Binkley's open race policy to the UNC basketball team. Smith reported, "My pastor, Dr. Robert Seymour, said my first job was to get a black athlete. Of course, I was well aware of that and wanted to."²⁴¹ The first two black players Smith recruited were unable to join the team because of academic reasons, so it was not until 1966 that Smith succeeded by adding Charlie Scott to the team. Smith was eager to make Scott feel welcome, and he reached out to black Binkley congregants Howard and Lillian Lee, who would serve as Scott's Chapel Hill "parents" throughout his time as a Tar Heel.

By recruiting Charlie Scott, Dean Smith made the University of North Carolina the first major white Southern university to have a black athlete on a varsity team. It was a precedent that was soon followed by other coaches and institutions, and which has had a major impact on collegiate sports ever since. Recalling his pastor's influence, Smith later wrote, "'Through the years, I have publicly taken 'controversial' stands on issues beyond

²³⁹ Art Chansky, *Dean's Domain: The Inside Story of Dean Smith and His College Basketball Empire* (Marietta: Longstreet Press, 1999), 63; Robert Seymour, oral history with author, February 22, 2005.

²⁴⁰ *Sports Illustrated*, November 29, 1982.

²⁴¹ Chansky, *Dean's Domain*, 63.

race, such as supporting a verifiable freeze on nuclear weapons, ending the death penalty, and promoting tolerance for gays and lesbians. While I'd like to think that I would have taken these stands on my own, there is no doubt that the support of Bob Seymour and the faith community that he helped to create and foster encouraged me to speak out sooner and made it easier to do than would have been the case without him."²⁴²

Ignored by Southern Baptist authorities in the state, Seymour was perhaps more free than other pastors to develop a ministry in keeping with his objectives. He used his influence as a pastor and as a public figure in the Chapel Hill community in progressive social and political ends. He consistently singled out individuals in his congregation and assigned them specific roles designed to have impact in Chapel Hill and beyond. He encouraged the community involvement of Howard Lee, a black graduate student who, with his wife, joined the congregation in 1964 and mentored Charlie Scott in 1966. The Lees encountered significant racism when they began to search for a home to buy in Chapel Hill. Local residents resisted their presence and realtors steered them away from white neighborhoods. When they finally did purchase a house after six months of searching, they were greeted by harassing phone calls and, according to Seymour, a cross was burned in their yard.

By 1969, however, with Seymour's encouragement, Lee was elected mayor of Chapel Hill. He thus became the first North Carolina black mayor elected by a majority white electorate since Reconstruction. The story made national news and was covered by both *Time* and *Newsweek*. According to a retrospective article in the *Chapel Hill Herald*, by voting in Lee and "by also electing a liberal slate to the Board of Aldermen, voters swept out an old guard that had dragged its feet on civil rights, on establishing a public transit system and on

²⁴² "Dean Smith Had a Coach of his Own," *Independent Weekly*, November 24, 2004.

support for the efforts of the Inter-Church Council.”²⁴³ Lee served three consecutive terms as Chapel Hill’s mayor.²⁴⁴

Seymour’s concern with affecting real world change for the needy prompted William Finlator, the progressive Baptist minister of Pullen Memorial Church in Raleigh, to remark that, “Bob likes to think of himself as something of a reverent secularist and would not be offended if you called him a secular humanist. But he hasn’t fooled any of us because we know that he sees all life from a theological perspective.”²⁴⁵ Perhaps a better description of Seymour’s Christian Progressive belief system then is as “graceful humanism,” a term coined by SIM co-sponsor Roger Shinn. “The humanist,” Seymour said in a 1969 sermon, “lives by a confidence in man’s ability to fulfill his own life, whereas the [Graceful Humanist] lives by a trust in what has come to him and been given to him in life.” Seymour acknowledged the humanist’s desire to “assume the goodness of man,” but cautioned that “at best man is a mixed bag with a strange combination of virtue and vice, selfishness and altruism, evil and good.”²⁴⁶

²⁴³ “Howard Lee: Still Going Strong,” *Chapel Hill Herald*, February 7, 2005.

²⁴⁴ He failed in bids for Congress and Lieutenant Governor in 1972 and 1976, but was elected to the state senate twice, and later was named as the first black Chairman of the State Board of Education. <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/ref/nchistory/may2004/>. Accessed on May 4, 2006.

²⁴⁵ Dr. William W. Finlator, “Seymour’s Four Square Gospel,” (sermon), June 10, 1984, Box 5, Robert E. Seymour Papers, Collection #4554, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill.

²⁴⁶ Robert Seymour, oral history by Bruce Kalk, May 21, 1985, for the Southern Oral History Program. C-20, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 7. Dr. Roger Shinn was one of the original founders of the Student Interracial Ministry, the group that had sent James Forbes to Binkley Church in 1962. Shinn, considered an expert on Reinhold Niebuhr, later served as president of his alma mater, Union Theological Seminary. In 1963, at the same time that Seymour was urging his congregation to embrace the desegregation of Chapel Hill, Shinn was writing in his seminary newspaper: “For many of our students the time has come to break the prolonged mood of introspection ... the fashionable reveling in anxiety ... [and they have] learned instead to march and sing. The American ear [has] heard the clear strains of ‘We Shall Overcome...’” *Union Seminary Tower*, Fall 1963, 3.

Over the next decades, both Seymour and Binkley changed and adapted, moving from a highly focused vision of improving race relations, to applying the Christian Progressive ideas of Graceful Humanism to other areas of social concern, such as poverty and economic justice, world peace, the death penalty, the Vietnam War, equal rights for women, issues of economic justice and work for the poor and homeless, and in his later years, providing for the elderly. With his faith as a base, Seymour moved his congregation into involvement with a number of social movements and political causes, always taking an activist stance in the context of his humanistic Christian beliefs. To cite but one example, when a shopping center, the University Mall, was erected right next to the Binkley Church building, the congregation demanded and won a commitment from the new merchants to train and hire underprivileged workers from Chapel Hill's black community. When, after 30 years, Seymour retired from the Binkley pulpit in 1988, a local newspaper remembered his "maverick" ministry, but another local minister took issue with the term. In a sermon he said, "the [paper] was wrong when it called Dr. Seymour a maverick. Modern journalism is devoid of Biblical language, as well as thought, and thus missed an opportunity to really pay tribute to a modern-day prophet."²⁴⁷

Seymour's pastoral colleague, Reverend Charles M. Jones, also from Chapel Hill, said of his own prophetic ministry and activism from the 1940s through 1960s, "our time had come, and it went past, and we did what we could." Historian Paul Harvey cites this as an "epitaph [that] serves an elegant summary of the career of the white southern religious

²⁴⁷ Dr. Denton Lotz, "Justice, Compassion, Faith: Farewell Sermon for Dr. Robert Seymour," (sermon) Chapel Hill, May 29, 1988. Box 5, Robert E. Seymour Papers, Collection #4554, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill.

progressives of his generation.”²⁴⁸ But perhaps Jones and Harvey wrote the epitaph too early. Christian Progressives such as Jones, Seymour, and Forbes had important and far-reaching impact not only on the civil rights movement, but also on a series of late twentieth century social movements. The current motto of Binkley Baptist Church, “Every Member a Minister,” reflects just such an approach to both faith and social change. The stories of James Forbes, Bob Seymour, and of the Binkley congregation show the effects some local churches had on creating social change within their communities. In some cases, they found allies among SIM seminarians who employed a similar, grassroots approach to changing the church and society.

Conclusions: Seminarians and the local Church

S. Collins Kilburn, the white minister at The United Church in Raleigh, not far from Binkley Baptist, also hosted black SIM students. Of SIM and the changing church, he quoted the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel saying that religion in America has waned not because of its defeat by science, but because religion has become predictable and dull, bureaucratized, suburbanized, and out of touch with society. “The sins of the modern church are its isolation from life, its tired blood and its attachment to boredom. In contrast, the Student Interracial Ministry is exciting. It has to do with reality. It is a pioneering venture. It ploughs open some of the dry, parched ground and brings fresh soil to the surface.”²⁴⁹

The project indeed produced exciting results in Chapel Hill. Binkley Baptist was but one church of many that participated in the SIM program over the subsequent years, but its

²⁴⁸ Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 97.

²⁴⁹ S. Collins Kilburn, “Risking a Christian Ministry,” *The Interseminarian*, 1:4, December 1962, 29.

story illustrates how the project tapped into existing forces for racial change in the South and how its own efforts could forward them in major ways through seemingly quiet interpersonal interaction. Robert Seymour was not as radical in his views or his approach as better-known Christian Progressives like Howard Kester or Carlyle Marney. He was more classically liberal in his approach, and yet, his theology of Christian humanism and the impact he had in his community were revolutionary for the times. He is proof of the varieties of resistance to southern racial mores and to the power of an individual to change them.

James Forbes' story shows that racial reconciliation took place at the individual level but in such a way as to continue to replicate itself to the point of creating great impact within the larger community and sometimes even farther away. As Seymour pointed out, racial inclusiveness was an ideal until Forbes stepped to the pulpit and gave form to the abstract. Like the proverbial pebble in the lake, his short stay in Chapel Hill caused a series of ripples of change that continued for years. He, too, absorbed the experience and carried it with him through his career and into the Riverside Church. Forbes' work in Chapel Hill and the ministry he did subsequently resulted directly from the Student Interracial Ministry's approach to Christian racial reconciliation. It was one of SIM's clear success stories. However, as the 1960s proceeded and the war for equal rights grew bloodier, new tactics were required.

PART TWO

“THESE WALLS WILL SHAKE” NEW FORMS OF MINISTRY FOR CHANGING TIMES

CHAPTER FOUR

Beyond the Church Walls: Adopting New Strategies for Ministry, 1963-66

“Atonement, regeneration, the Holy Ghost, the love of our enemies, the cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship – all these things have become so problematic and so remote that we hardly dare speak of them.... So our traditional language must perforce become powerless and remain silent, and our Christianity today will be confined to praying for and doing right by our fellow man. Christian thinking, speaking, and organization must be reborn out of this praying and this action.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1945²⁵⁰

“If by the church we mean the fellowship, both visible and invisible, of those committed ‘in Christ,’ to each other and to the world, then the problems of the people ... are the problems of the Church. Such problems include urbanization, the population explosion, new interpretations of ministry, laity, work, leisure, and the ‘holy.’ The churches are in for a shocking century. It will be the century when the ‘churches’ died and the Church was born again. At least that is my hope!”

– Ed Feaver, Student Interracial Ministry, 1966²⁵¹

The Student Interracial Ministry grew in size each year during the first half of the 1960s, placing students in congregations of a different race from New York to Georgia and from Washington D.C. to Washington State. The initial phase of the Student Interracial

²⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the baptism of D. W. R.," *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1943-1945, (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1953 first English translation, 1962 rev. ed.), 187-88.

²⁵¹ Ed Feaver, "1966 Report: The Student Interracial Ministry," 79; Also quoted in "The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked," 10. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

Ministry, from its pilot summer of 1960 through the summer of 1963, can be characterized as being devoted to the goal of achieving racial reconciliation. By 1964, however, the students' reports contained fewer references to a mission of reconciliation and more calls for revolution. Revolution was often ill defined; it could mean throwing out racially constricted legal and cultural structures, reimagining the church mission, or, for some, reinventing the church itself. The students often did not know what change they sought, only that they wanted the present to be different. During this period they called for and tried on a series of new ideas pertaining to activist ministry, especially in regards to race issues.

No SIM student called for revolution in a louder voice than Stephen C. Rose, who served with Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville during SIM's second year, in 1961. His story provides a brief glimpse into the thinking of SIM students caught up in the changes that were sweeping through the seminaries and churches in the 1960s. Rose was born in 1936 into a wealthy Manhattan family. His father was a lawyer who became one of Richard Nixon's legal partners, and his parents were "nominal Protestants," meaning they belonged to the Brick Church in central Manhattan but attended only occasionally. Rose was educated at Phillips Exeter, a private boarding school in New Hampshire, and at Williams College in Massachusetts. Even as a teenager, he had an interest in race relations, and at Williams, Rose quit his fraternity when a West Indian student was denied acceptance based on his skin color.

Looking for a place to live, Rose stayed for a time at the home of William Sloan Coffin and Eva Rubenstein. Coffin, then chaplain at Williams, would go on to become chaplain at Yale University and later preside over Riverside Church in New York City. Coffin's liberal theology and social concern influenced the younger man. Rose also benefited from Coffin's predecessor at Williams College, William Graham Cole, whom Rose describes

as pompous, but especially skilled at recognizing important thinkers and attracting them to campus. The theologian Paul Tillich was one such visitor, as was Don Benedict, founder of the East Harlem Protestant Church. Rose particularly fell under the spell of another visitor, James Robinson, the founder of an organization called Crossroads Africa, and “became a convert to his idea of service and responsibility.”²⁵² Crossroads Africa, the “progenitor of the Peace Corps,” in the words of President John F. Kennedy, was a secular mission program that sent American youth to Africa to work within grassroots development efforts. Inspired by Coffin’s social concern and Robinson’s idea of service, but feeling that he needed a firm grounding in Protestant theology, Rose headed to Union Seminary in the fall of 1958.²⁵³

Once there, however, Rose was disappointed by the coursework and unimpressed by the theological stars of the seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Rose saw Niebuhr at that time as “running a balancing act, a kind of stasis philosophy in which anything that you did that came from feeling was questionable.” Rose was more impressed by Reinhold’s brother H. Richard Niebuhr, who was a visiting scholar at Union during Rose’s final year in 1961. Rose recalls that Richard Niebuhr understood that theology was in flux during that time of uncertainty. “He gave a lecture in which he basically said neo-liberalism is dead and neo-orthodoxy is dead. And I don’t know what is coming after, but they ain’t gonna be around. And he was right. That H. Richard was a smart one.” Already, Rose was formulating his own ideas about modern theology and the need for an activist church with greater relevance to the immediate concerns of its members.

Rose graduated from Union in 1961, and traveled to Nashville together with his wife and young daughter. After spending that summer working with Kelly Miller Smith and SIM,

²⁵² Stephen C. Rose, oral history interview with author, September 21, 2009.

²⁵³ Stephen C. Rose, oral history interview with author, September 21, 2009.

Rose was ordained at the Brick Church by John Collins, his old friend and one of the founders of the Student Interracial Ministry. Rose and his family then moved to Chicago, where Rose became the editor of *Renewal*, a progressive Christian journal published by the Chicago Missionary Society under the direction of Donald Benedict, a founder of the East Harlem Protestant Parish.

In coming to work for the Chicago Missionary Society and Benedict, Rose landed among progressive Christians working at the cutting edge of change in American urban ministry. He began writing articles and books reflecting on the changing church, especially in the urban context. He first published a short study on religion and urbanization called *The Day the Country Mouse Expired*, followed by a collection of *Renewal* pieces called *Who's Killing the Church?* A few years earlier, while still a seminarian and the editor of the Union school paper, Rose had pondered about what future lay ahead for a Church that seemed so distant from the needs of society. Now that he was in Chicago, he pursued this question his books and in the pages of his magazine.

Rose wondered what would replace the old ways of the church now that they appeared to him to no longer be relevant, and was frustrated at what he described as a flood of recent books complaining about the wayward church but offering no suggestions for righting its course. In 1966 Rose produced his own road map for church reform in *The Grass Roots Church: Manifesto for a Renewal Movement*. Rose argued that the days of denominationalism had passed and that in order to reinvigorate themselves, churches needed to band together as community ministries. He further suggested new forms for the three basic kinds of ministry, chaplaincy, teaching, and mission. A *New York Times* review suggested that Rose had created the modern equivalent of Luther's ninety-five theses, and the magazine

Theology Today published a round table discussion of the book by leading theological scholars.²⁵⁴ Rose wrote more prolifically than most of his fellow seminarians, but his intellectual grappling's with race and the changing church proceeded along a similar trajectory as many of his peers. Still deeply motivated by their faith, they sought ways to make that faith meaningful during a time in which the relevant application of religious conviction seemed hard to come by and was much sought.

Standing at the Brink: SIM During 1962-1963

Steve Rose was in part a product of the SIM experiment and the evolution that the seminarians and their organization experienced in the first years of the 1960s. As Rose pointed out in *the Grain of Salt* in 1961, the seminary atmosphere had changed from one of relative complacency to something new and as yet not totally defined. If the form of change could not yet be named, some of the reasons for it could, and many explanations for this change were proposed. Seminarians in the early 1960s were more likely than in previous generations to be either single or married but waiting to have families. The seminaries, which had previously been under pressure to get married students out into paid fieldwork positions as soon as possible, now had time to experiment with fieldwork education. The students were also younger and they were coming to the seminaries in greater numbers. Higher education had rapidly expanded over the previous decade, with the number of teaching positions doubling, and it was now more common for students to continue on to graduate school directly from college.²⁵⁵ Many of the theological schools had maintained hiring freezes from

²⁵⁴ Hugh T. Kerr, "Reactions to a Manifesto," *Theology Today*, Vol. 24, No. 1, April 1967.

²⁵⁵ Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870-1970* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 726-727.

the Great Depression through World War II; as the freeze thawed it created a boom market for young theological professors.

These young professors and the seminarians they trained in the early 1960s were as likely to have been influenced by the Christian existentialism of Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann as by the bible lessons they learned in Sunday school. Many also considered themselves to be progressive on social and racial issues, as well as interested in a wide range of theological approaches. Some had been undergraduate philosophy and literature majors who wanted to join Camus's "grouping of those who ... are resolved to ... be something more than a dog."²⁵⁶ Other students, including a majority of the female seminarians, had been involved in the student Christian movement while in college and had a bent toward social involvement. Seminaries also became a welcome haven for those who sought refuge from the war in Vietnam. What all of these new constituencies had in common was a shared questioning of the inherited wisdom of their elders and a sense that what previous generations valued – jobs, family, progress – were shallow values that were not real, not "authentic."

To such young men and women, the Student Interracial Ministry program offered what they considered an authentic experience – real world parish training in an interracial setting with the possibility of nitty-gritty civil rights work. Following its successful summer of 1962, an energized SIM executive committee convened in the early fall. Twenty-five students signed up to work in the coming summer of 1963. Responding to the fact that increased participation in the program and successful fundraising brought with it new institutional complexities, SIM executive committee members voted to create the

²⁵⁶ As quoted in Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 7-8.

organization's first paid staff position, a student coordinator who would start in the late spring of 1963 and be underwritten by the Field Work Department at Union Theological Seminary.²⁵⁷ The project also shored up its financial footing as it grew, raising \$13,500 during the year from individuals, churches, denominational boards, and private foundations. The Field Foundation and the William C. Whitney Foundation, known for supporting social justice causes, each gave substantial support.²⁵⁸ A stronger financial footing and a larger administrative staff enabled the project to recruit and serve more seminarians and more congregations interested in exploring an activist ministry.

As the volunteers in the Student Interracial Ministry's continued to pursue reconciliatory work within churches and communities, often without much fanfare, national figures called out the mainline Church for its culpability in maintaining the racial status quo.

²⁵⁷ "Minutes, the Student Interracial Ministry Committee, September 28, 1962" 1-4. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f11. The Student Interracial Ministry continued to be run by student volunteers, supervised by a central executive committee, and supplemented by selection, finance, and promotion committees. The executive committee briefly considered establishing closer ties with the National Council of Churches and the Inter-Seminary Movement but decided, again, to remain independent with a loose and flexible central structure. The project, however, did elect an official student representative to the Executive Committee of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations of the NCC. The project also expanded its national reach that summer by establishing an office in Chicago, where a number of SIM alumni had settled.

²⁵⁸ "Student Interracial Ministry, 1963," 10. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11. Donations during the year broke down as follows: about \$1,700 from individuals, \$1,100 from congregations, \$4,500 from two foundations, the Field Foundation and the William C. Whitney Foundation, and \$3,400 from boards within the Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the Lutheran Church in America, The Congregational Church, and the Disciples of Christ. The William C. Whitney Foundation was established by social activist, heiress, and *The New Republic* founder Dorothy Payne Whitney in 1937. Whitney was a major supporter of women's trade unions, charitable organizations like the Junior League, and feminist, pacifist, and racial justice causes. The Field Foundation was established in 1940 by Marshall Field III, grandson of the department store empire founder and a wealthy bon trader in his own right. He created the Field Foundation to support New Deal efforts to alleviate poverty during and after the Great Depression. The foundation's funding priorities in the 1960s encompassed civil rights, women's rights, and feminist concerns. The Foundation reasserted its radical commitment to social justice in 1965 by appointing as director Leslie Dunbar, an old school progressive Christian and the former director of the Southern Regional Council. Dunbar in turn hired as his Associate Director former SNCC director and civil rights leader John Lewis. By supporting small grassroots organizations like the Student Interracial Ministry, Dunbar and the Field Foundation nurtured and helped to grow progressive social justice experiments, quietly exerting an influence out of proportion to its relatively small size and national reputation. (See Dan T. Carter, "Introduction," in Leslie Dunbar, *The Shame of Southern Politics: Essays and Speeches* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), xiii.

Will Campbell and Martin Luther King, Jr, both of whom served as SIM advisers, articulated this critique before an historic gathering, the National Conference on Religion and Race, in Chicago during January 1963, helping to shape the environment in which young religious men and women questioned the proper approach to healing America's racial divide. The conference was the first national ecumenical meeting devoted solely to the topic of race, and it brought together several hundred Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy and laypeople. Stephen Rose, who now lived in Chicago, attended the conference in the dual capacity of a correspondent for the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, and as a good friend of Will Campbell, whom he had first met and befriended while the former was a SIM participant.

The conference featured a number of prominent speakers, including Jewish theologian, professor and King ally, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, but it was also organized into a number of breakout sessions designed to formulate specific proposals that would translate the insights of the conference goers into specific proposals for action. Among the suggested plans was one for blacks to take memberships in predominantly white churches and vice versa, a proposal that bore more than a passing resemblance to the SIM strategy. Others suggested sponsoring voter education drives, forming small activist cells of laypeople within churches, and eliminating racial discrimination in church hiring practices.²⁵⁹

Will Campbell saw the gathering as too little too late, and used the occasion to chide church leaders for being too self-congratulatory about the little progress they had achieved so far on civil rights. Campbell, however, offered not just criticism but solutions, and he urged the churches and seminaries to widely adopt the Student Interracial Ministry project. He also argued that they embrace full integration of housing and promote scholarships for minorities

²⁵⁹ Stephen C. Rose, "Religious Conference," *The Crisis*, March 1963, 158-159.

to attend majority white colleges and universities.²⁶⁰ Campbell was increasingly frustrated with the Council's approach to race and the Council grew unwilling to support this rogue minister who spoke his mind. Before the year was out, Campbell quit as director of the Southern Project and retreated to the mountains of Tennessee, where he continued to play an important role in progressive Christian thinking, although more often as a writer in semi-seclusion than as a frontline leader. Campbell continues to write and remains a revered figure in liberal religious circles.

Martin Luther King, another of SIM's advisers, also addressed the national gathering, hailing it as "the most significant and historic ever held for attacking racial injustice," despite the fact that he was the only black person to give one of the eleven major speeches. His public assessment of the conference belied his declining faith in the white Church as an ally in the black freedom struggle. He too was growing frustrated, however, and he did not hold back for long from addressing these shortcomings directly and in devastating fashion. Several months later, King was arrested and incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama, while leading marches to desegregate the city. From his cell, King wrote what became known as "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," in which he excoriated white clergy for their lack of understanding and support of the black struggle. Incensed at having been termed an extremist by a group of Birmingham clergy, King responded that extremism, especially for those involved in the ministry, was necessitated by the times. "The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or for

²⁶⁰ Merrill M. Hawkins, *Will Campbell: Radical Prophet of the South*, 45-46. For more on both Will Campbell and the National Conference on Religion and Race, see also Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 22-34.

love? Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists for love.”²⁶¹

Students at Union responded to King’s letter by proposing an immediate and local plan of action. Students Val Frakes and Lefty Schultz asked their fellows students to address King’s critiques within the churches that they were serving in New York. “We suggest,” they wrote in the school paper, “that you go to your fieldwork churches this weekend and lay before them our responsibility as Christians to work and pray for equality and freedom for the Negro community – in the North as well as in the South.”²⁶²

Another member of SIM network, Robert Seymour at the Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, also responded to King’s jailing in Alabama. Seymour submitted a resolution on May 8, 1963 to the national Southern Baptist Convention that he was attending in Kansas City. Seymour expressed concern that “there are 2,400 of our brethren in Christ, many of whom are fellow Baptists, who have freely chosen to go to jail in order to remind us that they, too, would like to be free.” Seymour’s resolution called for the denomination to commit itself to the “responsible use of our freedom to co-operate with our brethren in the eradication of all prejudice from our hearts and in the elimination of all discriminatory custom from our communities. Too long have these laid waste our powers, dissipated our resources, denied our common humanity and violated our Christian witness.” Seymour closed the resolution by asking that a message be sent to those jailed in

²⁶¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, retrieved on March 14, 2006 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/king/frequentdocs/birmingham.html>.

²⁶² Val Frakes and Lefty Schultz, “A Response to Birmingham,” 1963. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

Birmingham: “You who are free in there, pray for us who are in prison out here.”²⁶³ Lamar Jackson, a Birmingham minister, opposed Seymour’s resolution, after which it was referred for further study, buried in a committee, and never revived. The *Christian Century* reported several weeks later that “so far as official action is concerned the Southern Baptist Convention at Kansas City ignored completely the oppressed Negro and the racial strife in that part of the nation where Southern Baptists are the predominant Christian body.”²⁶⁴ Despite, Seymour’s attempt to raise the subject, his denomination remained tight lipped on racial change.

Not all the churches remained silent, however. In contrast to the Southern Baptists, other mainline churches had commissions on race that now began to increase their work and visibility, and to generate new efforts. On May 20, 1963, the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., established a commission on religion and race and provided \$150,000 in support for the remainder of the year. The National Council of Churches followed in early June by establishing a new Commission on Religion and Race and backing it with \$450,000 through the end of 1964.²⁶⁵ This was the climate within which the Student Interracial Ministry convened its 1963 summer orientation weekend in North Carolina.

²⁶³ “Birmingham Comes Up at Baptist Meet,” *The Kansas City Star*, Wednesday, May 8, 1963. From Box 5, Scrapbook File No. 1 in the Robert E. Seymour papers #4554, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁶⁴ *The Christian Century*, May 22, 1963. From Box 5, Scrapbook File No. 1 in the Robert E. Seymour papers #4554, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁶⁵ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 33.

The Student Experience in the Summer of 1963, “A New Church and a New World”

Oscar McCloud, Collins Kilburn, and Robert Seymour, North Carolina ministers who had participated in SIM the previous summer, led off the orientation program, which also featured a panel of lay members from the Raleigh churches that had previously hosted SIM students. James Forbes, who had worked with Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, was there representing his new church in Wilmington, North Carolina. Much of the orientation was spent in-group sessions, identifying and discussing stereotypes. The students and ministers role-played several scenarios, including a typical encounter on a segregated bus and a SIM student’s first meeting with his host pastor, as part of their preparation.²⁶⁶

A number of important black ministers, all national leaders in the civil rights movement, hosted SIM students that summer. These ministers included Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville, Martin Luther King, Sr. in Atlanta, James Lawson in Memphis, and Atlanta’s Ralph Abernathy, who had learned of the program through Martin Luther King, Jr. Other students served with less famous but equally adventurous clergy members in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Macon, Georgia, and Portsmouth, Virginia, among other places. Although the students’ primary duties were as assistant pastors tending to church business, they also immersed themselves in the lives of the congregation, participating as a member of the community. The students were expected both to lead and follow their new flocks, and the seminarians at times found themselves engaged beyond the confines of the local church. They accompanied congregants not only to picnics, beach outings, and basketball games, but also to newly formed interracial ministerial association meetings, biracial community negotiations, voter registration drives, and picket lines outside segregated businesses. The reports students sent back from their assignments, however, reflected the fact that the civil

²⁶⁶ “Synopsis of the Student Interracial Ministry, Raleigh, North Carolina, Orientation Conference, 1.

rights movement in 1963 was far from cohesive and that, in different locations, it had proceeded in different directions and at different paces. While some students found that little headway had been made in achieving even basic integration of public facilities, others worked in areas where public facilities had been already been integrated and which seemed to be proceeding relatively quietly and peacefully.

Donald Black, who served with Orval Black at a Presbyterian church in Nashville, was disappointed by the staid atmosphere at his small, middle-class black church and by the relative lack of civil rights activity in Nashville. Black complained, “Many people have begun to feel that the battle is over, not just starting.”²⁶⁷ This peace could be attributed to Nashville’s early and particularly enthusiastic complement of young civil rights leaders and was also a function of several years of successful efforts and the cooperation of the mayor and his Human Rights Committee. But Nashville was the exception rather than the rule.

Other students in the program experienced communities in considerable turmoil. In Raleigh, North Carolina, white seminarian Charles Boyer worked in a black church, and he and his wife boarded with an African American widow in a black neighborhood, where their presence roused the ire of segregationists. The Boyers and their host were awakened one night by the sight of a crude cross, wrapped in paper towels soaked with motor oil, burning on the front lawn. At another point during the summer, Boyer was excited to hear that North Carolina governor Terry Sanford had called a meeting of black leaders in Raleigh, where a series of pickets of segregated businesses was underway. Expecting an important announcement from the governor and an equally strong response from the black community, Boyer was frustrated to hear Sanford instead order that the civil rights protests in the capital

²⁶⁷ Report of Donald Black in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

city cease immediately before they led to violence. Boyer was equally dismayed by the fumbling response from black leaders, whom he characterized as disunited and disorganized. “I don’t know with whom I was more disgusted,” he commented, “the whites or the Negroes.”²⁶⁸

Where Black worried that he had missed the main thrust of the civil rights campaign in Birmingham and Boyer found himself in the confusing middle stage of the Raleigh fight, Douglas Parks managed to alight in Charleston, South Carolina, on the same day that the NAACP’s national leadership arrived to begin a major statewide campaign to integrate public facilities. The NAACP worked through a network of local churches that turned out crowds as large as two thousand people for twice daily mass meetings, prompting Parks to write, “This is the church in the street, this the church at work!”²⁶⁹

The students’ reports revealed a number of common themes which included a sense of having gained a greater understanding of the black situation, experiencing guilt and shame at white contributions to black degradation, seeing that racial reconciliation could be achieved through personal interaction, and a belief that God was working through them and the people of the church to heal racial tensions. Thomas Hoyt, a black seminarian from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta who had been born in Alabama and raised in Indiana, wrote from a white church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, “It is my opinion that via this method of reconciliation to God through Jesus, we shall break down the walls of segregation, fear, prejudice, mistrust, hatred and guilt. Laws cannot do what a changed heart,

²⁶⁸ Report of Charles Boyer in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 4. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

²⁶⁹ Report of Douglas Parks in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 16. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

mind or attitude can do.” He went on to say that civil rights laws could regulate behavior and mandate desegregation of certain parts of society, but that it was up to the Church and programs like SIM to change people’s hearts. “Through SIM,” he wrote, “I can see the hand of God moving.”²⁷⁰

Another student, Daniel Klement, who worked in a black church in northeastern Washington D.C., had to keep reminding himself that his work and his daily interaction with black folks was based in an attempt to “live out the faith.” Inherent, but unexplored, in his reports is the conclusion that activities like community organizing or running teen recreation programs could easily be considered secular and, but for his constant effort to remain grounded in faith, would have little effect on the church as institution or on himself as a minister of that institution.²⁷¹

George McClain, whose work with the Alabama Council of Human Relations had been supported by a Union Seminary fundraiser, arrived in Birmingham soon after the notorious police chief Bull Connor was removed from office. City officials had just reached an accommodation with demonstrators and agreed to integrate public accommodations later that summer. Nevertheless, McClain found the city “still very much divided and rent by fear,” with a great deal of apprehension around the coming desegregation plan.²⁷² Nevertheless, McClain found a certain amount of exhilaration in being on the frontlines, both of the southern civil rights movement and of the churches’ attempt to work relevantly in this context. He couldn’t help but feel “the excitement of helping to create a new church and a

²⁷⁰ Report of Thomas Hoyt in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 8. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

²⁷¹ Report of Daniel A. Klement in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 11. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

²⁷² Report of George McClain in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 13. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

new world – you knew what you were working against.”²⁷³ One wonders how he felt when, on September 15, 1963, less than a month after he returned to Union Seminary to continue his studies, members of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four African-American schoolgirls.

Students who engaged in urban ministry that summer learned that it could differ greatly from scholarly portrayals of the inner city church. Most discussions of urban church flight and suburban church captivity assumed that those few white churches that stayed in urban areas adapted to a non-white congregation and that black churches that remained had no problem attracting black congregants.²⁷⁴ Robert Lynn’s experience at the black Liberty Baptist Church in Atlanta belied this assumption. Much of the housing in the urban landscape around the church building had been cleared as part of urban renewal and the neighbors, the church’s traditional attendees, relocated to other parts of town. The church has literally been stranded, and without adequate private or public transportation, traveling back downtown to attend the church became a burden for its poor and working class members. To help, they created a transportation committee and carpool and worked to raise funds for a communal church vehicle.²⁷⁵

Warren Moore served his internship with the Northside Community Church in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was one of sixteen members of a summer project called the Service Corps of the Christian Inner-City Council of Kansas City. One of the few black students in the program, he lived and worked communally with the other corps members,

²⁷³ George McClain, oral history interview with author, July 10, 2007.

²⁷⁴ See, for example, Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

²⁷⁵ Report of Robert Lynn in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 12. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

most of whom were undergraduate college students, in an urban environment he described as “a crisis situation.”²⁷⁶ He spent much of his summer trying to negotiate an agreement between the city’s housing officials and the tenants of a housing project who were trying to establish a new community playground. Because of his willingness to listen to the tenants express their needs and to appeal to city officials on their behalf, he gradually won their acceptance, but, he stressed, “I was given no quarters due to my black skin.”

Moore was also assigned to work with the Northside Community Church, a pilot inner-city mission project of an all-white Presbyterian Church. Large parts of the congregation had not “bought in” to the new mission nor did they endorse Moore’s presence among them, and some tried to pit Moore and the senior pastor against each other in arguments over these issues. This caused Moore to wonder if his presence in Northside would result in sustained interracial contact and greater understanding, or if it would have a net negative effect. By the time he left Kansas City, the answer was still not clear. Nevertheless, Moore found the experience a profoundly enriching – and religious – one. The language with which he described the interracial ministry testified to the intensity of his conversion experience. “I can only submit,” Moore wrote, “that the experience is a genuine opportunity for any sincere seeker to do significant work, while finding himself. He may come to know the will of God through a concerted effort to implement the proclamation of the Gospel.”²⁷⁷ The students sought, and the program supported, change of hearts and minds at the individual conversion level of experience and through the process of an involvement in both the larger struggle for social justice and within the larger circle of the local community

²⁷⁶ Report of Warren Moore in “Student Interracial Ministry Mid-Summer Reports, July 1963,” 15. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

²⁷⁷ Final Report of Warren Moore, Kansas City, Missouri, date stamped September 16, 1963. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f1.

and the community of believers. Students understood their acts as a radical Christian witness to God's intended plan of brotherhood and equality on earth. A personal witness, seemingly a quiet, individual act, could shock the sensibilities of a community and often resulted in strong reactions.

Of all the summer placements in 1963, that of David W. Jones, whose singing voice begins this dissertation and who was assigned to work with a black congregational church in Wilmington, North Carolina, best illustrates the clash that could result from taking one's ministry into the street, even in such a seemingly calm and earnest way as praying and singing on the steps of a courthouse. Wilmington, site of an 1898 race riot that had resulted in the deaths of at least twenty-two African Americans, was a city not historically noted for its progressive race relations.²⁷⁸ Jones, a young white man from St. Louis, Missouri, came to serve in the Gregory United Church of Christ, a middle-class, black Congregational church. According to the pastor, George Gay, Gregory Church's congregants were an unlikely group to challenge the racial status; rather, they primarily "worshipped the great god suburbia" and seemed unlikely to do anything that might endanger their upper middle class standing. As associate pastor, Jones participated in all sorts of traditional church activities. When Rev. Gay left for the month of July, Jones filled in, preaching his first Sunday in town, and recording a series of five meditations for broadcast on local radio. He supervised the vacation

²⁷⁸ The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 saw the death of at least twenty-two African Americans at the hands of white supremacists rebelling against Reconstruction. See, for example, Cecelski, David S. and Timothy B. Tyson, eds. *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot and Its Legacy*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.)

bible school, was guest preacher at an African Methodist Evangelical Church, and led a church study group.²⁷⁹

Jones found that Gregory United's parishioners were a relatively exclusive group with little interest in social protest. However, he sensed this might be changing, as a result of the willingness of a local NAACP youth group to take a leading role in demanding social change. Soon after his arrival in town, the NAACP youth group began planning demonstrations against segregated restaurants, and Jones "was fortunate enough to get in on the ground floor of these meetings and be generally accepted as one of the student demonstrators." Jones joined about fifty students in an attempt to integrate Wilmington's leading cafeteria on June 12 and was arrested along with everyone else. Two days later, a larger group of students staged a second round of demonstrations, and they were also arrested. When it was over, 131 black demonstrators and one white demonstrator, Jones, had been arrested for trespass and one white cafeteria owner was arrested on two charges of assault. All of the arrested demonstrators stayed a night in the Wilmington jail before being released. Jones, being white, was held in a separate cell, where he "received a slight beating by the inmates."²⁸⁰

After these arrests, members of a newly formed biracial civic committee agreed to suspend demonstrations in favor of negotiating with the city government for the desegregation of all public facilities by July 8. Jones wrote from Wilmington to SIM headquarters in New York at the beginning of July to report that the negotiations had failed

²⁷⁹ Jones led the group through Elton Trueblood's 1961 book *The Company of the Committed: A Bold and Imaginative Re-Thinking of the Strategy of the Church in Contemporary Life* and *The Test of the True Church*, a book by the National Council of Churches' Robert Spike.

²⁸⁰ David Jones, Mid-Summer Report, July 1963, 9-10. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

and demonstrations were due to resume on July 9. The youth group members planned to seek service at a number of restaurants while at the same time the members of the black Ministerial Alliance, with Jones among them, led a silent march to City Hall.²⁸¹

The demonstrations began as planned on July 9, but when the marchers reached City Hall, they found the area outside blocked by construction, so they moved across the street to the steps of the county courthouse. There the black ministers talked, led prayers, and sang freedom songs. Standing in the crowd of supporters, David Jones sang along. Events then took a dramatic turn. Judge H. Winfield Smith, the same judge who was scheduled to hear the case of the June arrests in a matter of days, was at the time holding a session of the recorder's court inside the building. The judge became enraged at the singing and praying, which he claimed "broke up" his court so that it couldn't function.²⁸²

Judge Smith ordered all ninety-seven of the demonstrators, including nine black ministers, arrested on the spot and marched directly into his court room, where he subjected them to an angry lecture that the local paper described as "one of the stiffest tongue-lashings ever heard in a local court." When he at last finished yelling, he sentenced all present to thirty days for contempt of court.²⁸³ Turning to David Jones, the only white participant in the march, he called him forward to the bench, asked why he had lied about being assaulted while in jail in June, and finally accused him of coming down South for the purpose of riling

²⁸¹ David Jones, Mid-Summer Report, July 1963, 9. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f3.

²⁸² "After Wilmington Court Lecture, 96 Demonstrators Freed; Seminarian Gets Jail Term," *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 11, 1963, 1.

²⁸³ "Adults, Kids Sing and Pray for Jailed White Minister," *Wilmington Journal*, July 20, 1963, p. 10.

up the local black population. “You are trying to intimidate whites,” he said to Jones. “They have some rights, too, and this has got to stop.”²⁸⁴

In charging Jones alone with being responsible and painting him as an outside agitator who had caused Wilmington’s blacks to rise up in protest, Judge Smith invoked what was by then classic segregationist rhetoric that assumed that the only way that local blacks could have been inspired to cause trouble about a perfectly good system was if they had been stirred up by foreign *provocateurs*, usually from up North. “The NAACP,” Judge Smith proclaimed from the bench, “is just as bad as the Ku Klux Klan.”²⁸⁵ He then ordered the jailer to take Jones away to start serving his sentence. After a long discussion and series of negotiations between black leaders and the judge, Smith agreed to dismiss the charges against all of the other demonstrators and let them go. Jones, however, was to serve the full thirty days.²⁸⁶ Several days later, when Judge Smith heard the trespass and assault cases from June, he dismissed them all, but left David Jones to serve out the remainder of his sentence for contempt. Smith added that Jones and any other future demonstrators could “sing all they want to” in jail, “and if they bothered people there, we’ll move them out to the county farm where they won’t bother anybody.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ “After Wilmington Court Lecture, 96 Demonstrators Freed; Seminarian Gets Jail Term,” 1.

²⁸⁵ “Adults, Kids Sing and Pray for Jailed White Minister,” *Wilmington Journal*, July 20, 1963, p. 10.

²⁸⁶ David Jones, “An Evaluation of a Summer in the Student Interracial Ministry,” *The Interseminarian of The Midwest Region*, 1:1, January 1964, 2. SIM, UTS, 2A:2:f4; “Demonstrator Stays in Wilmington Jail,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 11, 1963, 1; “After Wilmington Court Lecture, 96 Demonstrators Freed; Seminarian Gets Jail Term,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 11, 1963, 1; “Wilmington Trespass Cases are Dismissed,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 13, 1963; “Adults, Kids Sing and Pray for Jailed White Minister,” *Wilmington Journal*, July 20, 1963, p. 10.

²⁸⁷ “After Wilmington Court Lecture, 96 Demonstrators Freed; Seminarian Gets Jail Term,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 11, 1963, 1.

After Jones' arrest, the local black community rallied to his aid, passing food to him and singing freedom songs with him, finding a bond through the bars of his jail cell. Jones himself came to believe that his incarceration was at the bedrock of the work of reconciliation he was attempting that summer. He believed that many blacks in Wilmington "came to view their strife for freedom no longer as black against white, but as members of both races proclaiming the truth about all men as children of God against the old myths of racism." Before his arrest, he wrote, the acknowledgement of the real nature of the struggle was largely academic; afterwards, it "became for a large number of Wilmington people a living conviction because they finally actually saw 'black and white together now.'"²⁸⁸

Jones later reflected that he could understand that some might judge that in joining a public protest, he had veered beyond an assistant pastor's appropriate expression of concern about racial issues. He said he would leave that discussion to the Christian ethicists, but held out little hope that they would understand. "The ethic and the value of my experiences this summer rest in the peculiar situation, the particular time and place and set of circumstances that I encountered. I am certain that what occurred was within the sphere of the church's work, for I did what I did because I had to. There was growing in me the feeling that the Christian witness I hoped to establish by my identification with the Negro community could not realistically be contained strictly within the life of the church."²⁸⁹ In taking what he regarded to be his Christian witness into the street, Jones understood himself to be part of the prophetic tradition of Amos and Isaiah. Martin Luther King, Jr., was also particularly fond of

²⁸⁸ David Jones, "An Evaluation," 3. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f1.

²⁸⁹ David Jones, "An Evaluation of a Summer in the Student Interracial Ministry," *The Interseminarian of The Midwest Region*, 1:1, January 1964, 2, 4. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f1.

the Prophets and invoked their example in relation to his own campaigning and public witness.

At least one man, interviewed by the local black newspaper, agreed that the young seminarian had made a step in the direction of racial reconciliation and had, to his mind, redeemed a suspect church. “The Rev. Mr. Jones, a white man, has shown us Christianity in action. I have changed my mind on religion. There is really nothing wrong after all with Christianity. The people who profess to follow Christ and treat the Negro so badly are not Christians. But, the Rev. Mr. Jones has demonstrated what Christ preached. Here is a man ready to lay down his life for a friend, be he a black one.”²⁹⁰ Jones witness then had, according to long established church understandings of mission and conversion, been effective.

The arrest of David Jones caused a ripple effect that emanated out from Wilmington to the state capital at Raleigh, where in the hands of conservative television journalist Jesse Helms, it turned into a smear campaign against the National Council of Churches. Among the items in Jones’ pockets at the time of his July arrest in Wilmington was his paycheck from SIM, drawn on an NCC bank account with the memo “Grant for participating in Student Interracial Ministry program.” Facsimiles of the check found their way from the police station to the media and into the hands of segregationists. Pictures of the check were used in newspaper advertisements deriding the support of the NCC. Jesse Helms reported in an evening WRAL-TV news editorial on Jones arrest that the NCC was underwriting outsiders to come down and meddle in North Carolina’s business. These inflammatory remarks spread throughout the South and generated negative letters and complaints from

²⁹⁰ “Adults, Kids Sing and Pray for Jailed White Minister,” *Wilmington Journal*, July 20, 1963, p. 10.

NCC members from as far away as Virginia, Alabama, and Florida. In a typical letter, a minister from Monroe, North Carolina, in the central part of the state, castigated the NCC for supporting “young Jones, [who] had precious little time for preaching, [but] instead, he spent his time leading masses of young Negroes through the downtown section of Wilmington.”²⁹¹ This event, springing from its association with the Student Interracial Ministry caught the National Council at a vulnerable time on the race issue. Throughout the 1950s and into the early Sixties the National Council of Churches had taken only cautious steps in calling for an end to segregation or committing itself to the civil rights movement.²⁹² As a consequence it was left on the sidelines of a movement that many, both within and outside the church, felt it should be leading. The Council thus reacted to the Jones “affair” in its usual conservative fashion in handling issues of race. However, contained within that response could be seen the glimmer of a changing attitude. Before the year was out, that glimmer would become much brighter.

This did not happen right away, however, and when David Jones undertook his witness as an individual, his affiliations – to Gregory Church, to SIM, and to the National Council of Churches – were used by Helms and others to paint a portrait of the National Council as a cabal of northern liberal outsiders meddling in the cultural affairs of Southerners with whom it had little in common. Administrators at the National Council of Churches could have used the opportunity to make their own Christian witness, to stand behind one of the student members of a project it had sponsored for several years. Instead, the Council responded with grave concern to the negative press coverage and went to some lengths to

²⁹¹ Letter dated September 13, 1963 to the National Council of Churches from Harley M. Williams, Minister, Central Methodist Church, Monroe, North Carolina. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f3.

²⁹² See, Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, and Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators*.

distance itself from Jones and SIM. Fletcher Coates, Executive Director of the NCC's Department of Information, fired off a memo to Dr. J. Oscar Lee, Director of the Commission on Religion and Race, which was SIM's fiduciary sponsor, complaining that the NCC now had another public relations mess on its hands. Coates chastised Jones for letting the police copy his check, and requested that SIM find another fiscal agent to handle its payroll. Coates wrote, "There is, as I see it, no moral or ethical issue involved in this suggestion, just simple common sense."²⁹³

Roger Shinn of Union Seminary traveled to Wilmington to plead Jones case in person while Oscar Lee attempted to defend Jones to the National Council, pointing out that the NCC was much more to the Student Interracial Ministry than a fiscal agent. Since March 1961 the Student Interracial Ministry had been in effect a cooperative effort between the SIM committee at Union Seminary and the NCC, Lee argued, and "it would be poor judgment of the Department to consider transferring or repudiating a program that it has had an integral part in developing, merely because irresponsible sources are misinterpreting it for their own purposes."²⁹⁴ These pleas from Lee were largely ignored and the Council continued to portray SIM as a distantly related and "informally organized group ... of theological students," not as a project that the council had directly sponsored for the past three years. It indicates how conflicted the Council was about when and how in what way to join the racial struggle, that as late at 1963 it was reacting to the Jones situation with confusion and seeming unwillingness to defend its own program according to its own stated beliefs.

²⁹³ Memo from Fletcher Coates to Oscar Lee, September 6, 1963. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f3.

²⁹⁴ Undated memo. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f3.

Another sign of the confusion was that at the same time as it distanced itself from Lee and the Student Interracial Ministry, the National Council was in fact quietly making some of its largest forward steps on race issues. It is possible that the Jones situation caught the Council off guard and, in some way, ruined its plans to announce their new efforts to engage with the Southern situation. A group of black cultural and intellectual leaders, including the writer James Baldwin, sociologist Kenneth Clark, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and singers Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne, had approached the National Council in May, seeking greater Council involvement in the racial crisis.²⁹⁵ The General Board of the Council responded to this request and other pressure from its member denominations by creating the Commission on Religion and Race on June 7, 1963. The board chose to directly supervise the new commission itself as a way of bypassing bureaucracy and guaranteeing that money would flow quickly to its projects. However, by creating the Commission on Religion and Race in this way, the General Board effectively sidelined Oscar Lee and the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations, cutting them out of the Council's racial justice efforts. The Department of Racial and Cultural Relations had been working toward this end since 1903, and now its J. Oscar Lee was shunted to one side in favor of a young white minister, Robert

²⁹⁵ Robert Kennedy held a series of off-the-record forums in late spring and early summer of 1963, trying to get a bead on the racial crisis and whether to push his brother to propose a new civil rights bill. He met with mayors, northern owners of department store chains that were being picketed, lawyers, and ministers. He also invited, at the suggestion of the comedian Dick Gregory with whom he was in regular contact about these matters, James Baldwin to put together a group of entertainers and intellectuals. Baldwin showed up on May 24 with the luminaries described above, but also with his agent, his secretary, his lawyer, and a TV producer. Belafonte wondered out loud why Robert Kennedy was wasting his time meeting with such a strange menagerie. The meeting spun out of control following some heated words from Jerome Smith, a CORE volunteer and a Freedom Rider. After the meeting broke up over a heated exchange between Smith and Kennedy, some of the participants stopped by the nearby National Council of Churches offices. See Findlay, 34, and Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 809-813.

Spike, who was named the director of the new commission, and granted nearly unprecedented autonomy and a sizeable budget.²⁹⁶

In passing over an experienced black leader for a young white pastor to direct the Commission, the Council dismissed Lee and his office as a Negro toiling at Negro matters. Announcing the formation of the new Commission, a spokesman for the council even seemed to implicate Lee in the Council's formerly slow progress on race issues, claiming that the days of gradualism had passed. "Up to now," he said, "modest tokens of progress in racial justice were accepted as the best we could do. ... This summer may be a decisive period in American history for beginning to deal with this haunting sin. The world watches to see how we will act – whether with courage or with fumbling expediency."²⁹⁷ In trying to paint their new effort as a radical involvement in racial justice, however they downplayed and dismissed their previous efforts, hardly acknowledging Will Campbell's Southern Project, Oscar Lee, or the Student Interracial Ministry. Perhaps the Council leaders ignored these continuing efforts largely because they saw them as outside of their direct control.

At one point in the drama over the Jones arrest, an NCC executive did acknowledge the work of the Student Interracial Ministry, saying that it would "hopefully lead to the broad kind of fellowship within the church which Christ clearly asked his followers to establish."²⁹⁸

But a closer relationship between SIM and the council's new Commission was not to be. SIM

²⁹⁶ The commission was funded with \$175,000 for the last half of 1963, and \$275,000 for 1964. In a significant reversal of policy toward demonstrations, a sum of \$25,000, donated from member denominations, was earmarked expressly for the purpose of funding bail for those who might be arrested during Council-sponsored activities. Oscar Lee continued to direct the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations and was named to serve on the new Commission, but he was passed over for all the leadership positions, a clear statement that the NCC was distancing itself from its past efforts and entering into a new, and very public phase of wrestling with the racial crisis. (For more, see Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 34-35.)

²⁹⁷ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 3.

²⁹⁸ Letter to Harley M. Williams, September 18, 1963. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f3.

was closely tied with Oscar Lee and the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations, and that department was now old hat. In fact the Council's Southern Project, which had only ever had about one-tenth of the budget granted the new commission, was shuttered for good, and Will Campbell left the Council at the end of the year. Had the National Council addressed its new efforts on race through its established programs, Oscar Lee and the Student Interracial Ministry might have taken a much larger and more public role than they did. Instead, they were both left to continue their work with little institutional support.

The National Council, SIM, and the March on Washington

The National Council did begin to take very public stands, embracing the kind of prophetic witness that the Student Interracial Ministry had long employed. The new Commission on Religion and Race, with the encouragement of Jewish and Roman Catholic leaders, prioritized the passage of a federal civil rights act. Religious leaders met with President Kennedy on June 17, 1963 in a meeting led by NCC president J. Irwin Miller. Kennedy's suggestion that Miller chair the meeting and lead follow-up efforts points to the close ties between the liberal establishment church and the presidency, and also signals the turn that both had just made toward seriously addressing the racial crisis.²⁹⁹

The National Council in fact hurried to make sure it was well represented at the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs on August 28, 1963. The Commission on Religion and Race led that effort, coordinated by a new black staffer, Dr. Anna Hedgeman, a long time organizer within Church Women United. About 40,000 church people joined the

²⁹⁹ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 48.

March on Washington, a significant percentage of the estimated 250,000 who attended.³⁰⁰

Student Interracial Ministry students and host pastors were among the marchers that day, including Bob Hare from Richmond, Virginia, who hosted some of SIM's first experiments in urban ministry. Hare, though white, was pastor at a black church in Richmond and brought a group of his parishioners to the march, where they stood right at the front of the crowd, within easy view of the speakers.³⁰¹

The National Council of Churches was represented both on the podium and behind the scenes, where Council volunteers put together some 80,000 box lunches – comprised of a cheese sandwich, an apple and a slice of pound cake – available to marchers for fifty cents each.³⁰² The National Council was also represented within the crowd of marchers by a delegation of some one hundred clergy council members, many in religious regalia. Robert Spike described the appearance of this delegation as “an act so full of symbolism that no one could escape it.” Spike felt “the satisfaction that we were no longer token representatives. The power of Protestantism was marching with us, and we had a right to be there at long last.”³⁰³

Eugene Carson Blake, stated clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly, former president of the NCC, and the vice chairman of the its new Commission on Race Relations and a co-sponsor of the march, struck a less triumphant tone. He represented the National Council of Churches on the podium and gave the day's fourth speech, directly following A.

³⁰⁰ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 49-50.

³⁰¹ Robert Hare, oral history interview with author, November 19, 2009.

³⁰² “The March in Washington,” *TIME Magazine*, August 30, 1963. Accessed on January 28, 2010 at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,940697,00.html#ixzz0czbhiT3u>.

³⁰³ As quoted in Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 50.

Philip Randolph and just before Daisy Bates and Rosa Parks were honored. Although Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech would be the iconic one remembered by history, but Blake's speech, which was also broadcast across the country and throughout the world, was notable for the position he took on white church involvement in the racial struggle, humbling himself and the mainline churches before the crowd.

The churches, Blake admitted, had not done enough to address racial and economic inequalities. Earlier in the year, at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, Martin Luther King and Will Campbell had called out the churches in the manner of biblical prophets. Now here was one of the churches' actual and symbolic leaders, stepping forward to accept a portion of blame and to, in this very public way, use his power to urge the churches deeper into the struggle. Blake organized his speech around the refrain, "late, late we come," a reference to the tardiness with which he felt the white churches and the National Council had brought their support to the black freedom struggle. Blake admitted that the National Council of Churches and its constituent bodies "have said all the right things about race" but had failed to accompany their rhetoric with action. He pointed especially to the functional segregation of most churches. "It is partly because the churches of America have failed to put their own houses in order," Blake said, "that ... the United States of America still faces a racial crisis."³⁰⁴ Blake did now have hope, he said, that "there is a new spirit abroad in the Churches. We have come to know that we can no longer let the burden of the day be borne alone by those who suffer the discrimination we contest. We who are white

³⁰⁴ Eugene Carson Blake, "Late We Come," in Houck and Dixon, eds. *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 581-583.

have been at best followers, certainly not the leaders.”³⁰⁵ Blake’s act on behalf of the National Council was significant in two ways: first it applied public and prominent pressure on the Kennedy administration to get civil rights legislation enacted, and secondly, it provided a directive to its members churches to actively address the racial crisis. Most of the Protestant denominations had already begun to make steps at this point but the Council’s position put pressure directly on individual member congregations as well. Thus by mid-1963, the Council’s top brass committed the organization and its churches to a public role in the civil rights struggle, albeit belatedly.

The Council’s stance, however, did not necessarily mean that congregations would follow suit; at the local level churches and especially individual churchgoers were not of one voice when it came to racial issues. For those who disagreed with the new efforts, the Council was elitist and out of touch with congregational realities. What this meant for the Student Interracial Ministry going forward was that its students were increasingly undertaking their missions within a fractured church climate and in a society where the racial crisis was no longer seen as a strictly southern phenomenon but one with which congregations from Minneapolis to Seattle were now struggling.

SIM’s Fifth Year, 1963-1964: the Civil Rights Vigil, Freedom Summer, and the Delta

³⁰⁵ Theodore Gill, “Biography of Eugene Carson Blake,” in *Perspectives: an Online Publication of the Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.*, accessed on January 18, 2010 at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/nov06/blake-biography.htm>. If Blake’s point was to get other white Christians to ask the same question, to understand the racial struggle as a moral cause, than his speech succeeded in reaching at least one person. Bill Troy, who was preparing to travel from his home in Marston, Tennessee, to New York City to begin his first year at Union Theological Seminary, recalls watching the march on television with his parents. “I remember thinking to myself at the time, “What am I doing here?” but I had had no exposure ... to anything having to do with civil rights, except I knew it was all going on. But we were very secluded here, you know? It’s a predominately white area, and I never went to school, until I got to seminary, with a black person.” (Bill Troy, oral history interview with author, October 5, 2009.) Troy would join SIM while at Union and, completing the circle, spent the summer of 1966 working in Mississippi with the National Council of Churches Delta Ministry project.

Ministry

In the fall of 1963, the SIM committee met at Union Theological Seminary to review their accomplishments and plan their goals for the coming year. They combined practical tasks – an overview of budgets, numbers of students, and the need for a larger and more advanced administrative structure – with the philosophical. In 1960, SIM’s founders had proclaimed: “the Church should be providing a witness to the true brotherhood of men in Christ and playing a role of leadership and conciliation in the struggle for social justice.” The initial goal of the project was “to witness to the concern of the church for the problem of human relations in the South and to further the work of reconciliation between the white and Negro races in the South and the redemption of segregated communities.”³⁰⁶ In reworking the project’s statement of purpose in 1963, the second generation of SIM leaders left it unchanged except for the notable removal, twice, of the phrase “in the South.”³⁰⁷ The new statement reflected SIM’s growing understanding of the widespread problems of racism and inequality to which the church had historically been a partner. By removing the words “in the South,” the students indicated their understanding that the problems of human relations knew no regional bounds nor would the project confine itself in addressing them.

The March on Washington and the subsequent lobbying effort of the National of Churches may have had something to do with SIM’s newly stated objectives. In any case, like the clergy leaders in the National Council, seminarians were also becoming aware that their battle was not just in the South but also in the halls of Washington, D.C. A new civil rights bill had made it to the Senate by April 1964, but was being held up by Republican filibusters. In response, theological students organized a silent vigil, standing outside the

³⁰⁶ “Statement of Purpose of the Student Interracial Ministry, August 24, 1960.” SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

³⁰⁷ “1963: Student Interracial Ministry,” report, 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f3.

Lincoln Memorial twenty-four hours a day, bearing a public witness to what they saw as the travesty taking place on Capitol Hill. In groups of three and four on three-hour rotations, seminarians from across America, but led by Union Theological Seminary students, stood in support of the legislation next to a hand-made sign that read: "Theological Students Civil Rights Vigil. Protestant-Catholic-Jewish. Civil Rights is Basically a Moral Issue. We are Here to Speak to the Conscience of Every Man. We Are All Brothers Before God."

The seminarians began their vigil on April 19, 1964 and in short order the students had 200 people signed up each week, with the schedule filled all the way through June. While many of the Catholic theology students who participated came from seminaries in the greater Washington D.C. area, most of the Jewish and Protestant students, including those from Union Seminary and Jewish Theological Seminary next door, drove down from New York City. Every day, a car left the Lincoln Memorial for New York at 9:30 p.m. carrying the previous night's participants, and every afternoon it left the corner of Broadway and 122nd again, heading to Washington with two Jewish and two Protestant students onboard. One Union student participant recalled that in addition to the regular cars ferrying demonstrators to their shifts at the Lincoln Memorial, "at the seminary we had a room set up as a letter-writing campaign headquarters. It was a really big deal at Union. [It made the] front page of the *New York Times* and five minutes on "Huntley-Brinkley", and a number of students became so involved they took incompletes for the semester."³⁰⁸ When they were not on duty, up to eight students at a time would sleep in the basement of the Holy Comforter Roman Catholic Church at Capital and 14th Streets, where local women's organizations provided them with hot meals.³⁰⁹ By the time the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was actually

³⁰⁸ Virginia Wadsley, letter to author, August 4, 2006. Possession of author.

passed on July 2, the theological students had been on duty for approximately 1,536 hours over sixty-four straight days.³¹⁰

The origins of the vigil in Washington are slightly contested. Religious historian and former Union Theological Seminary professor Robert Handy maintains that the vigil was first suggested by Jack Pratt, a staff member of the National Council of Churches' Commission on Religion and Race, and then organized by Union Seminary student Tom Leatherwood, who two years later, would serve with the Student Interracial Ministry in Kingstree, South Carolina. Virginia Wadsley, another volunteer in both the vigil work and SIM, credits the vigil to none other than John Collins, one of the founding students of the SIM project. She recalled that Collins approached Union's social action committee about the possibility of members of his church standing witness with Union students at the Lincoln Memorial.³¹¹ Whatever the particulars, participants in both SIM and the vigil recall that the two projects fed and inspired one another. Tom Boomershine, who worked on both projects, was excited to "tap a lot of the energy that was shown in the Vigil and channel it into

³⁰⁹ William V. Shannon, "The Voice of the Churches," *The Commonweal*, Vol. 80, No. 8 (May 15, 1964), 227-228.

³¹⁰ In late June the students in the vigil learned that three civil rights workers, two white Jewish men from New York City and one black man from Mississippi, had gone missing while on their way from Meridian to Longdale, Mississippi, to investigate the burning of a black church. The three men, 20 year-old James Cheney from Meridian, Andrew Goodman, a 23 year-old anthropology student, and Michael Schwerner, a 24 year-old CORE organizer, were all working as part of Mississippi Freedom Summer. Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner's disappearance attracted national attention to Freedom Summer and provided additional fodder for civil rights leaders and President Johnson as they tried to push the Civil Rights Act of 1964 past the filibusters and get it signed into law. The bodies of Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner, were discovered on August 4 in an earthen dam south of the town of Philadelphia, Mississippi. During the six weeks that FBI investigators and Navy divers searched the Mississippi backcountry, they discovered the bodies of three more African American civil rights workers and the bodies of five other blacks who were never identified. "Neshoba Murders Case — A Chronology," Arkansas Delta Truth and Justice Center, <http://www.crmvet.org/info/csg.htm>, accessed on January 3, 2010.

³¹¹ Wadsley, August 4, 2006.

SIM.”³¹² Wadsley, who later served a black Presbyterian church in Charleston, South Carolina for almost fifteen months, also recalled that, “From my perspective, SIM blossomed after the Theological Students Vigil for Civil Rights. When we came back to school in the fall of 1964 after the bill had passed, we raised the question of where to go from there and SIM seemed the logical step.”³¹³

This excitement helped the Student Interracial Ministry grow even larger. Since 1960, when seven students worked together in the South, the project had evolved by the summer of 1963 to twenty-five students working in eight southern states and in Washington D.C., upstate New York, New Jersey, and suburban Colorado. For that coming summer of 1964, thirty seminarians – twenty-four white, five black, and one Filipino – from thirteen seminaries and seventeen states and fifteen denominations joined the project. In total, sixty-four students had participated since the project’s inception.³¹⁴

The seminarians who participated in the program came from a multitude of religious backgrounds, and some participated out of a commitment to social justice while others regarded the work as part of an evangelical expression. Many of these latter students interpreted the civil rights struggle through the lens of Christian conversion and a belief in Jesus Christ having died for mankind’s sins. A seminarian from Germany who was working with SIM in Greensboro, North Carolina, thus understood SIM’s work as spreading to Southern whites the good news that their sins of segregation had already been forgiven by Jesus Christ. Another white student, a southerner working in Rocky Mount, North Carolina,

³¹² Letter from Tom Boomershine in New York City to Russ Richey in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, August 7, 1964. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f4.

³¹³ Wadsley, August 4, 2006.

³¹⁴ “The New Stage of S.I.M.’s Development,” report. SIM, UTS, 1G:1:f1.

argued that while one must still work at race relations it must be remembered that “the victory is already won; it was won upon a cross in Galilee,” or In other words, that mankind has already been redeemed by the death and rebirth of Jesus.³¹⁵ However, most students in the project, even those who believed similarly, also understood that a long period of racial interaction – certainly more than a summer – might be required to result in racial reconciliation.

This was the thinking behind SIM’s experiment with adding year-long ministerial placements to the usual summer program. Two of the 1963 summer students, Bob Carey and Ralph Ross, the latter a black Baptist Interdenominational Theological Center seminarian from Miami, stayed on in their summer placements for their seminary fieldwork intern year.³¹⁶ Carey, a white Methodist from Connecticut, had graduated from Wesleyan University before attending Union Seminary. While still an undergraduate, he and some friends had organized demonstrations in downtown Middlebury Connecticut in sympathy with the sit-ins in North Carolina. He was also a veteran of Operations Crossroads Africa, the same mission-oriented project that had inspired Steve Rose to come to Union Seminary.³¹⁷ Carey recommended that SIM adopt an intern-year program as well since “the summer is too

³¹⁵ “Impressions from the Field,” *the Grain of salt*, Vol. 18, No. 2, September 29, 1964, 7, 8.

³¹⁶ All seminarians in a four year degree program spent their third year in a fieldwork placement, then returned to school for their senior year. The sophomore years, which was technically the second of three years on campus, was called the middler year.

³¹⁷ While serving for the summer in what was then Dahomey, modern day Benin, Carey began a long-distance relationship with another Crossroads volunteer, Pat, a black woman from Chicago working that summer in Nigeria. Bob and Pat’s relationship had continued after he entered Union Theological Seminary and Pat went to Michigan State to study for a Master’s Degree in Psychology from Michigan State. After Bob came to Atlanta to work at Ebenezer, they lived together in a Mennonite communal house, and got married in Chicago the following year, interracial marriage in Georgia still be illegal. Carey was one of two white SIM students that summer who were in interracial long-term relationships; Robert Sullivan reported from Nashville that his mixed marriage has not garnered much attention from the locals, who he thought regarded it as “a matter of course.” Exactly which locals he meant, white or black, he didn’t specify.

short. One needs to get 'integration' out of his system so that he can encounter and be encountered as he is himself, not an abstraction."³¹⁸ It took time to get beyond the novelty of the interracial experience to a place where, it was hoped, racial reconciliation might be possible.

For the present, SIM decided to adhere to its practice of working within churches, but the question of tactics had now been raised and would be tested during the coming year. Interracial ministry, however, required integration in both directions, and the student co-coordinators were frustrated at their inability to attract more black seminarians to participate. One of the obstacles was apparently the relatively low stipend. Many seminary students used summer work, church or secular, to make enough money to get them through the coming year of school, and the SIM stipend was not competitive with what a student could otherwise save. Another obstacle was simply demographic; there were relatively few black seminarians and only a handful of accredited black seminaries. One of the SIM student coordinators, Tom Boomershine, worried that if he tried to recruit black students from other institutions, "there may be a danger in trying to attract fellows that may not be too talented."³¹⁹ Nevertheless, the student leaders worried that their interracial ministry program was becoming a one-way conversation; they were determined to involve more black students in the program.³²⁰ In an attempt to make sure that black churches remained involved, the project tried to create a sister church program, whereby a white church that "wasn't ready" to host its own black

³¹⁸ Robert Carey, Final Report, September 1963. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

³¹⁹ Letter from Tom Boomershine in New York to Russ Richey in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, dated July 15, 1964. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f4.

³²⁰ Letter from Russ Richey, SIM student coordinator, to C.J. Malloy, Jr., at Virginia Union University, dated November 23, 1964. SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f4.

seminarian, could become a sister church partner to a black church, providing the \$300 stipend for it to host a white student.³²¹

At the end of the summer of 1964, SIM again held an evaluation conference. The organizers posed a series of questions to the students, including whether the SIM experience had changed their vocational plans, how the experience had changed their “image of the ministry,” and how the problems of their host congregation compared to the problems of the church in which they were raised.³²² The students concluded that most seminaries, which did not provide interracial ministerial experience or directly address racial relations, perpetuated ignorance of other races, and therefore of prejudice. They hoped to combat this in part by increasing the size of the SIM project to about 100 summer students.³²³

As SIM was packing up for the summer and evaluating its experiences, its work was flattered by the imitation of the National Council of Churches’ new program in Mississippi. The council followed SIM’s example in launching the Delta Ministry field project in September 1964 as a follow up to the work of the Freedom Summer volunteers. One SIM student had worked with Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in Jackson, Mississippi, that summer, laying the groundwork for the National Council of Churches’ new project. The Delta Ministry’s primary goals were to continue COFO’s voter registration drives but also to develop programs for economic relief and development, advancing literacy, and organizing communities in the Delta. It reached its zenith at mid-decade, with fifty-seven staff and volunteers deployed in the state, and in 1967 it claimed to have the largest staff of

³²¹ Letter of July 23, 1964 from Russell Richey to “the Ministers of Rocky Mount.” SIM, UTS, 1A:1:f4.

³²² Memorandum regarding Evaluation Conference, Internships and Publicity, written by Tom Boomersshine to SIM participants, August 6, 1964. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f7.

³²³ Memorandum regarding Evaluation Conference, Internships and Publicity, written by Tom Boomersshine to SIM participants, August 6, 1964. SIM, UTS, 1F:1:f7.

civil rights workers in the South.³²⁴ The Student Interracial Ministry, however, had a larger staff deployed over a larger area. It had forty students working in the South, but also another forty-four in Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, and other cities.

Six SIM volunteers worked with the Delta Ministry over a several year period. Mark Lundeen ended up spending nearly two years working on the project and wrote that participating in voter registration, marches, and economic development projects had brought the gospel to life in a way that seminary courses or pastoral work usually did not.³²⁵ The students' experiences working outside of the institutional church led the students to suggest that SIM expand its program beyond pastoral exchange and include work with voter registration, political campaigns, and other projects based outside of congregational life.

The Delta Ministry did continue on in its civil rights work long after many other volunteer organizations had long since left. However, many historians maintain that the Delta Ministry arrived too late on the scene to benefit from its association with the civil rights movement, and instead it felt the full force of white resistance.³²⁶ *TIME* magazine alleged at the time that the project's "27 energetic, aggressive lay and clerical staff members, by ardently siding with Mississippi's Negro poor, tended to set them against other segments of society rather than reconcile the factions."³²⁷ The project met continued resistance from within the National Council, as well as garnering the resentment of some Mississippi whites

³²⁴ See Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), and Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*. The rest of COFO collapsed within a year, but the Delta Ministry stayed on, surviving until the mid-1980s, though it had been in severe decline for a decade by then.

³²⁵ 1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry, 21. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

³²⁶ John Dittmer, review of Mark Newman's *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 122-123.

³²⁷ "Curbing the Delta Ministry, *TIME*, June 10, 1966. Accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,942038,00.html> on February 14, 2009.

who accused the project of operating in collusion with black militants. The Delta Ministry's main success during its years in Mississippi was in attracting federal funding to the state for Head Start programs. It also helped register over 70,000 black voters and created some 6,000 jobs.³²⁸

The Movement at Middle Age: 1964-1966

The years 1964 through 1966 were years of great change in the civil rights landscape, and of great growth in the Protestant seminaries and for the Student Interracial Ministry Project. The SIM program expanded to accommodate many more summer students and yearlong interns, thirty-five summer students and five yearlong interns in 1965 and fifty-five students and 24 interns in 1966. The summer of 1964 had been successful, but the relatively larger number of participants stressed the all-volunteer staff and prompted the organization to restructure into two regional committees and to hire an administrative staff. M. George Walters, who had recently graduated from Southeastern Baptist Seminary and had been a SIM student in 1964 with Rev. Oscar McCloud's church in Raleigh, was hired as a full-time Intern Coordinator and Field Representative, while his wife Carol Walters took on part-time secretarial duties. Douglas Renick, a Union Seminary student, became the Student Coordinator.

In previous years, Will Campbell and William Crewes had recruited potential participants to the summer program while traveling the country on behalf of the NCC and the

³²⁸ But this was far fewer than its Delta Foundation, founded in 1969, had planned. Mark Newman credits this in part to a failure on the part of the Delta Ministry to draw Northern businesses to the South, and in part to Mississippi's native black community, which was, he claimed, "riven, by factionalism, fear, and apathy. Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 89.

InterSeminary Movement. Now, with Campbell having left the National Council and the InterSeminary movement in a quiescent phase, SIM took it upon itself to find interested students and congregations. Walters worked through a network of contacts, some of them activists in the civil rights movement, to recruit host churches to the program and to recruit interested students. In Arkansas in 1965, for example, he worked with members of SNCC's Arkansas Project to recruit two likely host ministers. He also crisscrossed the country, visiting over seventy college and seminary campuses by the end of March 1965. The result of this ambitious recruitment was a much-expanded project for the summer of 1965, with over forty summer students from eighteen different colleges and seminaries working in fifteen states, and a budget in excess of \$29,000.

In its seventh year, 1965-66, the Student Interracial Ministry continued to grow its administrative structure and professional staff, and expanded from the two committees of the previous year to a series of regional branches and committees. George Walters helped establish regional branches in the Northeast in New York City, Midwest in Chicago, West in San Francisco, and South in Atlanta. The regional committees were envisioned as independent branches of the SIM project that, as they grew, would split off as separate entities. Walters wrote in late 1965 that he considered organizational structures to be "secondary to purposes," so each of the regional committees was encouraged to develop its own program designed to meet specific regional needs. This resulted in the creation of six thematically oriented sub-committees under the national and regional directors.³²⁹ The major development in SIM'S seventh year was the formal inclusion of the Southwest Georgia

³²⁹ When all of the committees met in a national meeting at the start of 1966, the growth of the SIM project was obvious. In addition to nearly three dozen students from Union, the national meeting was attended by student representatives from thirteen other seminaries and theological and divinity schools, including Harvard, Duke, Yale, Princeton, Southeastern Baptist, Southern Baptist, and the Interdenominational Theological Seminary.

Project under Charles Sherrod, and the subsequent enormous growth of that project, a story that is told in detail in the next chapter.

The expenses of SIM's programs grew along with its size, and by the end of April 1966, the students still had to raise nearly \$46,000 of its \$116,000 budget. The larger budget reflected the involvement of three paid staff, ninety-two summer students and thirty yearlong interns. Twenty-two different denominational boards or religious agencies donated funds, as did three foundations, eighteen congregations, and twenty-one seminary organizations.³³⁰

Maynard Moore, a graduate of Southeastern Seminary and veteran leader in both the InterSeminary Movement and the Methodist Student Movement, was hired in the late spring of 1966 to serve as the SIM Field Secretary, charged with recruiting students and churches and checking on student assignments. While George Walters ran the New York office, Moore moved into the role of the National Coordinator. The committee structure grew again, to include five regional or project committees – Northeast, West, Southeast, Southwest, and the Southwest Georgia Project – each with its own director. A publicity committee was also added and charged with developing a new SIM publication, the quarterly magazine, *skandalon*. Again, funds were raised from individuals and church congregations, though the significant majority of funding came from church denominational boards and from private foundations, including the Henry Luce Foundation, which signed on for a \$5,000 donation.³³¹

Conclusion: A Changing Ethos

At the conclusion of the summer of 1966, SIM coordinators received multiple negative reports from host pastors dissatisfied with their student interns, the first time in the

³³⁰ 1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry, 90, 98-99. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

³³¹ SIM Budget Report, April 28, 1966. SIM, UTS, 1D:1:f2.

history of the project that this had occurred. The increased size of the program, and the related increase in the number of individuals and amount of money to be managed, led to some breakdowns in the administration of the program and between its students in the field and their assigned churches. In one case, a pastor complained that a teenaged student was lacking in the necessary maturity required in delicate racial relations. In another case the student seemed uninterested in any part of the “ordinary” work of the church and only in the most public and exciting demonstrations. The participation of such students may have been related to the second theme that was emerging that summer – that of a more radical outlook on both civil rights participation and church reform. The civil rights movement itself had by then taken a more radical turn, as attention turned from integration and voting rights to economic issues and power disparities. Calls for reform morphed into calls for fundamental transformation of defunct systems.

Similar demands were made of the churches and the language used by SIM’s students often reflected this change. The students begin to refer to the churches as “the establishment” and looked back on the first years of the Student Interracial Ministry as being part of “propping up this establishment”. According to Marshall Jones, who was SIM’s publications director in 1966 and 1967, if the early years were to be given “a temporary label, it should read: idealism seeking experience. The idealists got their experience but they probably didn’t change very much of the establishment.” He went on to say that SIM, as a “child of the establishment,” reflected both the establishment’s concerns with its own structures – that is, even though reform was sought it was conventional reform of existing systems not radical rethinking – and the establishment’s ruling white ethos. Calling the program “a white man’s movement with marginal participation by Negroes,” Jones excoriated SIM’s past leaders for

not including an equal number of blacks in its administration and not involving the all-black denominations in recruiting host churches.³³² But, Jones wrote, there had been a change in the “mood” of SIM participants, who were no longer motivated by personal guilt to “passionately, righteously” reform the church, as their predecessors had been, but had been freed by secular influences to think outside of the rigid vocational patterns of seminary training, parish ministry, and denominational leadership. Students now participating in SIM “may not actually give a damn about the church as it now is” and were open to more radical rethinking of the concepts of worship, congregation, and community. The implication was that not only were there many students in seminary at the time who were not seeking vocational training for a life in the ministry, but many too who were not even believers. They were students prompted to study Christian theology by their quest for authenticity, or who were, in some cases, merely pursuing a higher degree to receive shelter from the selective service draft. As editor of the SIM publications, Jones wrote that he intended to use the organization’s journal “as a tool for revolutionary change,” one part of SIM’s “attack upon the target” of the seminaries, which needed, he wrote, to be shaken up so that they in turn could reform the church.

As Jones recognized, SIM had reached a critical junction and needed to declare its allegiances in order to select the path of its future direction. The organization could go in one of three directions: it could become absorbed by the establishment, continue consciously to try to revolutionize the establishment, or simply fade away. For some within the organization, its work in Southwest Georgia would hold the answer.

³³² W.M. Jones, “SIM Evaluation.” SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f6.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Church at Work in the World: Ministry in the Fields and Towns of Southwest Georgia, 1965-68

“I don’t know that there were any more powerful and beautiful people. Albany was one of those areas where blacks seemed to be still intact culturally. The singing, the folklore, had a kind of indigenous power to it that meant you couldn’t walk away from Albany, Georgia.”

– Andrew Young³³³

“Albany! Albany, Georgia, is on the brink of ruin. It’s time that we moved out of the ruts of life and began to contend for the things that all Americans ought to have. God has called upon us to point this city back to God. God is no doubt using the Negro to a great extent to help save this nation.”

– Preacher at Albany mass meeting, 1962³³⁴

Charles Sherrod, slight and reedy with a medium-brown complexion and horn-rimmed glasses, arrived at Union Theological Seminary in 1964 with more baggage than the usual student. In addition to the trunks of books and clothes that he hauled from Albany, Georgia to New York, he brought along the experience he had gained working on the frontlines of the American civil rights movement. After three years in Southwest Georgia as the first field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Sherrod had taken a leave of absence from the movement to focus on his theological training. But the movement would not leave Sherrod.

At Union, the Student Interracial Ministry was preparing for its fifth year pursuing its own form of civil rights work. By sending black seminarians into white congregations, and whites into black congregations, the students had hoped to make change one person at a time, one church at a time. But the pace of such change was glacially slow, and the civil rights movement seemed to be moving on without them. SIM was ready for something new, and Charles Sherrod, standing on the steps on Union Seminary, had something to offer, the

³³³ “Andrew Young” in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 113.

³³⁴ “Freedom in the Air,” FT-9649, in the Guy and Candie Carawan Collection #20008, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

project he had created several years earlier in the heart of the Deep South, the Southwest Georgia Project in Albany, Georgia.

The Student Interracial Ministry began sending students to the region with Sherrod in the summer of 1965 and continued to do so until the project closed in the spring of 1968. Some of the SIM interns, however, stayed on beyond scope of SIM, working with Sherrod for up to a decade. The Southwest Georgia Project and SIM's partnership allowed the former to continue its political and economic development work in the region even as its other stakeholders, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), discontinued their own involvement.

Albany, the largest city in Southwest Georgia, came to national attention when Martin Luther King, Jr. led mass demonstrations there during the winter of 1962, and was jailed along with hundreds of ordinary black citizens. King's efforts in Albany drew the nation's attention to the civil rights issues in the South, but failed to win any immediate concessions from white civic leaders. King left Albany behind and went on to other more successful marches and campaigns. But the struggle to achieve civil rights and economic justice for blacks in Southwest Georgia continued apace long after King's supposed defeat.

Most historians have depicted the Southwest Georgia Project as essentially dying out after King's departure at the end of 1962. However, Sherrod found in a SIM a new source of volunteer labor and energy that allowed the project to continue to expand long after its supposed demise. The story of the Albany Movement that has become part of the standard civil rights movement narrative misses the larger significance of the ongoing, persistent attempt, now fifty years old, to realize the Beloved Community there through interracial

cooperation and a combined program of economic and political action and, importantly, religious faith.

The Southwest Georgia Project gave the seminarians of SIM another opportunity to leave the walls of the institutional church, to go out into the fields as on a mission trip, and to attempt to change society in a hands-on way while also fulfilling the basic tenets of their faith and ministerial training. The passage of national civil rights legislature had failed in many ways to change the racial inequities that existed in the South and certainly so in Southwest Georgia. Students who demanded civil rights equality were now more impatient and more sophisticated about changing the deeper structures that supported racial and economic inequities. For the Student Interracial Ministry, the Southwest Georgia Project represented an attempt to, in religious terms, make a living Church manifest in the world. In secular terms, this simply meant to do good work in the here and now.

The Student Interracial Ministry embraced the opportunities that Sherrod's project offered for the seminarians to involve themselves in voter registration, political campaigns, business projects, and other ventures that aimed at racial reconciliation but that did so outside the walls of the conventional church. This is the story of the expansion and ongoing experimentation of the Student Interracial Ministry *and* of how the struggle in Southwest Georgia continued after the King period under the leadership of the charismatic, sometimes visionary, and often difficult Charles Sherrod. The story of the Southwest Georgia Project is not one of failure or loss of hope, but a story of a grass roots community organization, deeply rooted in religious faith and commitment, challenging entrenched social structures over a period of many years.

Albany, Georgia

Albany lies two hundred miles west of the Atlantic Ocean and two hundred miles south of Atlanta. A one-time slave trading center and home to King Cotton, it had over the years earned a number of nicknames, including “the buckle on the Black Belt” and “Egypt of the Confederacy,” overflowing with goods and profits.³³⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, referring to Albany’s role as a major slave market and distribution point, wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the city was the domestic birthplace of the country’s “Negro problem, the centre of those nine million men who are America’s dark heritage from slavery and the slave trade.”³³⁶

One hundred years after the Civil War, the impoverished rural peanut, cotton, and corn-producing counties of southern Georgia provided a sharp contrast to thriving urban Atlanta and Savannah. The black population of Albany roughly equaled that of whites, and although blacks had achieved some level of mercantile independence in the city itself, the vast majority in the surrounding counties remained outside the political system, disenfranchised, exploited, and afraid. The entrenched poverty was exacerbated by economic and political isolation from the state’s centers of wealth and power. While the rest of the state’s population grew during the 1950’s and 1960’s, it declined in Southwest Georgia. Only five of the region’s counties had populations over 5,000. The median income for a farm family was under \$1,170 per year; roughly half that of the state average.³³⁷

Distanced from state government and funding, local white authorities ruled with an iron hand, propping up a system of white supremacy that had been somewhat tempered

³³⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics Edition, first published 1903), 83.

³³⁶ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 83.

³³⁷ Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 159.

elsewhere in the state. Economically deprived and politically isolated, the region, according to a SNCC volunteer, was “usually ignored by the ascendant moderates in state and national affairs.” It was “a tragic area, the stepchild of the New South.”³³⁸ County sheriffs ruled over the counties as their personal fiefdoms and were, according to one historian, “invariably the leading perpetrators of racial violence.” The region’s poverty and violence gained national attention in June 1958, when during the course of a single week, numerous blacks were beaten by whites and three black men were shot dead by white police officers. *The Washington Post* ran a cover story under the headline, “The Negroes of This South Georgia Town are Scared.”³³⁹

Charles Sherrod originally set out for Albany – which the locals pronounced Al-Benny –in the middle of the summer of 1961, as SNCC’s first field secretary. The SNCC project dispatched Sherrod and another young SNCC worker, eighteen year-old Cordell Reagon, to Southwest Georgia because the area was representative of the racial and economic problems of the Deep South, but also because it had recently been the site of the first federal action against unfair voting practices under the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Terrell County, Georgia had been singled out by the United States Justice Department as having a voter registration record which exemplified the practice of black disenfranchisement at the whim of the local white authorities. In 1958, only forty-eight black voters were registered in the county, where they made up sixty-four percent of the population. Whites and blacks were held to different standards of literacy and competency, and local officials routinely rejected even those applicants who managed to pass the rigged tests.

³³⁸ SNCC worker John Perdew in 1965, quoted in Tuck, 159.

³³⁹ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 159.

The U.S. Department of Justice brought suit in 1959, demanding an injunction against Terrell County's discriminatory practices. Even though the Justice Department won its case, a year later only five more black voters had been added to the county roles.³⁴⁰ The students in SNCC saw the injunction as a crack in the edifice of white power and Sherrod and Reagon ventured to Georgia to push and prod, perhaps to cause the whole structure to collapse.³⁴¹

Sherrod was only twenty-one years old at the time he first went to Albany. He had grown up poor, the oldest of eight children in Petersburg, Virginia, and had worked in the school cafeteria to send himself through Virginia Union University, where he earned both a B.A. and B.D. in Theology, the latter the equivalent of a modern Master's in Divinity. Described years later as "a Christian mystic" by journalist Taylor Branch, Sherrod held deep religious beliefs and even at that young age was intensely committed to the ideal of the "Beloved Community," the Old Testament-based concept that had anchored the thinking of James Lawson and some of the other religious SNCC founders.³⁴² Put simply, the Beloved Community envisioned the embodied expression of Christian faith as an integrated society

³⁴⁰ Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman, *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 71-72.

³⁴¹ Some SNCC students were troubled by the decision to send students to Georgia, and in fact, Sherrod and Reagon's small effort was a compromise that came as the result of internal tension about whether to focus on voter registration or on non-violent protests in the manner of the lunch counter sit-ins, dubbed "direct action." During a meeting at the Highlander Folk Center in 1961, SNCC came close to dissolving over this contentious issue. Ella Baker stepped into the fray and resolved the quarrel by suggesting two wings, one devoted to each strategy. Sherrod was elected field secretary and dispatched to Georgia to work on voter registration. Baker predicted that experience in the field would prove to the students that the two strategies, in fact, differed little and often bled over into one another. See Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 239. Hampton and Fayer write in *Voices of Freedom* (98-99) that Sherrod and Reagon first arrived in Southwest Georgia sometime during the summer of 1961, and settled into rural Terrell County to conduct a voter registration drive. Disappointed by their limited success in organizing the rural blacks in this white supremacist stronghold known as Terrell County, they concluded they had to start with the young, more urban blacks of Albany and relocated there in November. Clayborne Carson has them arriving in Albany in October. In any case, they set up a SNCC office in downtown Albany some time that fall and certainly prior to the beginning of December.

³⁴² Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 465.

based in brotherhood and built on love and justice. Racism could be escaped Sherrod expressed in an oft-quoted statement, if only one could “free men’s minds.”³⁴³ Sherrod, in describing this utopian goal, was given to high-flown language, “always making allegories and imageries,” using turns of phrase he himself referred to as “Sherrodian”.³⁴⁴ SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman called Sherrod’s field reports “Proustian” and Julian Bond remarked that Sherrod wrote “like a drunk Jack Kerouac.”³⁴⁵ Although religious faith lay at the foundation of SNCC, the organization was not in 1961 an explicitly religious project and over time became more distanced from the theology and biblical language of Sherrod and other founders. But Sherrod’s religious upbringing, deep faith, and theological studies guided and sustained his activism and they became a hallmark of the movement in Southwest Georgia.

The local black citizens, especially eager high school students and young college students at Albany State College, were fed up with the system of white domination. By the time of SNCC’s arrival locals were ready to strike and waiting only for the motivation of good organizers. Sherrod and Reagon helped encourage local leaders to form the Albany Movement, a coalition of six middle class black organizations, which elected a young black doctor, William Anderson, a relative newcomer to town, as its president.³⁴⁶ The Albany

³⁴³ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 309. See also Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan’s Edge*.

³⁴⁴ Charles Sherrod, 1986, C-5047/59, in the Taylor Branch Papers #5047, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁴⁵ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 161.

³⁴⁶ The NAACP dragged its feet, but others in Albany were “willing and ready to go” into battle to achieve civil rights. (Cordell Reagon, “Voices Old and Young, Albany Georgia,” Guy and Candie Carawan Collection. 20008, FT-3692, side one.) C.B. King, the only black attorney in town, had in 1960 filed an unsuccessful petition for relief from segregated voting lists and voting facilities. Also that year, Albany’s black ministers wrote a joint letter of complaint to the Albany Herald protesting what they regarded as only negative coverage of blacks. In response to the letter, local whites vandalized some of the minister’s homes, breaking the

Movement organized a series of very large, non-violent marches in order to apply pressure on white leaders to desegregate Albany's businesses.

Sherrod, himself an ordained minister, and Charles Jones, a seminarian at Johnson C. Smith University and a new SNCC arrival, met with local church leaders.³⁴⁷ They encountered some resistance but managed to convince most ministers in the city of Albany to open their doors for the mass meetings. Allowing their churches to be used as staging areas for mass resistance was, Sherrod said, the ministers' "gift to the movement."³⁴⁸

Sherrod and his colleagues also reached out beyond the pastors themselves directly to the congregants, crafting their civil rights rhetoric in the familiar prose of a revival meeting. However, he also consciously employed a rhetoric of interracial cooperation and the Beloved Community. In the flyer he posted announcing Albany's first mass meeting on November 9, 1961, Sherrod beseeched locals to "COME, LISTEN, LEARN AND LOVE!" and proclaimed: "If we are of one blood, children of one common Father, brothers in the household of God, then we must be of equal worth in His family, entitled to equal opportunity in the society of men We are called upon, therefore, to love our fellow man, all of them, with all the risks that implies and all the privileges that it promises."³⁴⁹ Sherrod knew to whom he was preaching – the black churches and their congregants were at the

windows. One resident recalled that attack as "the first overt act which sparked the diehard attitude of the present movement. It seemed like, if you had to die, you might as well die fighting." ("Voices Old and Young," Albany Georgia, speaker unknown, Guy and Candie Carawan Collection. 20008, FT-3692, side one.) Morris, 241. In addition to SNCC, its members represented the Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, the NAACP Youth Council, the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Negro Voters' League, and the Criterion Council, a fraternal organization. The NAACP joined despite avowing that they would not cooperate with the SNCC students.

³⁴⁷ From untitled pamphlet in Maynard Moore collection, now in possession of author, undated but likely from the summer of 1967.

³⁴⁸ Charles Sherrod, 1986, C-5047/59, in the Taylor Branch Papers #5047, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁴⁹ Quoted in Marsh, *Beloved Community*, 3.

center of community life and would form the lynchpins of the Albany Movement. Sherrod knew the power of his prophetic stance and he hoped that the handbill would happen to fall into the hands of white church folk as well.

The familiar culture of the black church nourished and sustained the movement, particularly the black spirituals that were molded into freedom songs. From Albany came the adaptations of “Eyes on the Prize” and “We Shall Overcome,” as well as locally specific songs including “Oh Pritchett, Open Them Cells.” Song had the unique ability to reach across boundary lines and unite diverse peoples, recalled Bernice Johnson Reagon, a member of Albany’s Freedom Singers. “After the song, the differences among us would not be as great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which was common to us all.” The song itself was a weapon in the battle for freedom, “like an instrument, like holding a tool in your hand.”³⁵⁰ Civil rights activists in other regions knew of Albany as “the singing movement” and the songs first sung in Albany were heard throughout the movement and across the country.³⁵¹

But Albany could just as well have been called “the praying movement,” distinguished by hours-long mass meetings in its churches and by large groups of demonstrators bowing in silent prayer on the steps of municipal buildings. Sherrod felt that prayer united Albany’s blacks across class lines that had previously been nearly impassable.

³⁵⁰ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “In Our Hands: Thoughts on Black Music,” *Sing Out!* 24 (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 1. Quoted in Howard Zinn, “SNCC and the Albany Movement,” *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* II (Fall 1984), 23. Reagon was a local Albany student who was among those first organized by SNCC in 1961. Bernice Johnson, Cordell Reagon, Charles Neblett, and Rutha Harris formed The Freedom Singers in 1962. She married Cordell Reagon in 1963. She was a professor of history at American University in Washington D.C., and also worked as a guest curator for the Smithsonian Institution. She continued singing and recording albums, most notably as a founding member of the vocal ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock.

³⁵¹ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 241. See also Josh Dunson, *Freedom in the Air: Song Movements of the Sixties* (New York: International Publishers, 1965); Guy and Candie Carawn, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2008) and *Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement: We Shall Overcome!* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963).

“There were people from all walks of life,” he recalled. “The professional man, the preacher and the man on the street, the nurse, the housewife, the busboy, the shoeshine boy – they stood in front of the courthouse praying to almighty God that justice would come to Albany, Georgia.”³⁵² Prayer and song often went together and could be especially powerful, as one Albany woman remembered: “Two things we knew held us together: prayer of something good to come and song that tells from the depth of the heart how we feel about our fellow man.”³⁵³

Keeping the Pressure On: Albany After King

By December 1961, Albany had developed into the largest mass movement in the South, aimed at increasing voter registration and achieving desegregation of all manner of public accommodations and facilities. Several hundred people had been arrested and many of them were still in the county jails. Business in downtown Albany dried up as shoppers stayed away for fear of getting involved in another demonstration or possible violence. The white leaders eventually agreed to unofficial talks on December 15, 1961 meant to end the impasse, but the talks collapsed without effect. One result was that William Anderson, on behalf of the Albany Movement and without consulting SNCC, contacted Martin Luther King Jr. for help. King arrived later that same day and assumed a leadership role that effectively sidelined the

³⁵² Charles Sherrod recorded by Alan Lomax, from “Freedom in the Air,” side B, FT-9649, in the Guy and Candie Carawan Collection #20008, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁵³ Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1971), 158. Quoted in Howard Zinn, “SNCC and the Albany Movement,” *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* II (Fall 1984), 23.

young SNCC organizers. Where King went, the media followed. Anderson and the Albany Movement's decision to involve him significantly raised Albany's public profile and, it was hoped, would bring pressure on whites to reform.

King was not able, however, to deliver these results as he was ultimately outmaneuvered by police chief Laurie Pritchett and the white Albany elites. Over a period from December 1961 to July 1962, 700 blacks were arrested and imprisoned, and King personally went in and out of jail three times, each time believing he had won concessions. The final time he even broke the Albany Movement's unofficial "jail not bail" rule when he agreed to be bailed out by a lawyer who was probably financed by a nervous Kennedy administration. He left Albany for good that July. The failure to win advances combined with King's seeming capitulation led to decline in movement morale and an increase in internal tensions.³⁵⁴

Civil rights movement historian Clayborne Carson, King's biographer Taylor Branch, and others, have argued that after King left Albany "the emotion and sense of hope were never recaptured." In their version of the Albany story, the black citizens of Southwest Georgia, left with nothing to show for months in jail, gave up the fight for civil rights, and returned to their lives little changed.³⁵⁵ However, by keeping the focus on Southwest Georgia rather than following King, one can see that the movement not only survived but

³⁵⁴ Looking back three years later, King regretted that he had chosen "to protest against segregation generally rather than against a single and distinct facet of it. Our protest was so vague that we got nothing, and the people were left very depressed and in despair." But, he did not regard Albany as a failure because "the Negro people there straightened up their bent backs: You can't ride a man's back unless it's bent. And what we learned from our mistakes in Albany helped our later campaigns in other cities to be more effective." (Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Playboy Interview," *Playboy Magazine*, January 1965. <http://www.playboy.com/arts-entertainment/features/mlk/04.html>, accessed March 3, 2009.)

³⁵⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 61-62.

achieved many of its goals, although over a longer time period than had been originally sought.

After the summer of 1962, when Martin Luther King, Jr. and the accompanying caravan of journalists left Albany, the movement there continued without him, with locals and remaining SNCC organizers addressing the ongoing issues of racial, economic, and educational injustice. Charles Sherrod continued to lead the local effort, building a network of county-based volunteers who registered voters, started new business ventures, and even ran political candidates. Up to now, this story of Albany and the Southwest Georgia Movement after King has been largely ignored by historians, and it directly challenges the assessment of Carson and others that the movement there collapsed after 1962. “Where’s the failure?” Sherrod demanded a few years later. “Are we not integrated in every facet? Did we stop at any time? What stopped us? Did any white man stop us? Did any black man stop us? Nothing stopped us in Albany, Georgia. Now, I can’t help how Dr. King might have felt, or ... any of the rest of them in SCLC, NAACP, CORE, any of the groups, but as far as we were concerned, things moved on. We didn’t skip one beat. We showed the world.”³⁵⁶

Historian Howard Zinn has written that social movements inevitably experience defeats along the way, but that their success can be judged in the eventual erosion of the old order, even if this occurs over a significant period of time.³⁵⁷ SNCC’s own standard held that when they withdrew from a community in which they had organized, that they left behind “a

³⁵⁶ “Charles Sherrod” in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 114; “Moving Forward by Recalling the Past,” *Albany Herald*, November 15, 1998; “Charles Sherrod” in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 114.

³⁵⁷ Howard Zinn, *You Can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 54.

movement with local leadership, not a new branch of SNCC.”³⁵⁸ Judged by this criterion, the civil rights movement in Southwest Georgia was an eventual success.

Sherrod and a few other volunteers carried on what became known as SNCC’s Southwest Georgia Project, bringing the kinds of activism and demands used in Albany to the other rural counties of the region, including “Terrible Terrell,” “Unworthy Worth,” and “Bad Baker.” By 1963, the Southwest Georgia Project had developed a multi-front approach to political and economic issues in all twenty counties of the region. But all did not proceed smoothly.

Sherrod tended to see the project as his own, and bridled under the supervision of the SNCC headquarters in Atlanta. For their part, SNCC leaders in Atlanta complained that Sherrod treated the project as his ‘little baby.’ At first they decided to avoid confrontation and simply stay out of his way, but by the fall of 1963, an Atlanta office staffer complained that Sherrod’s iron rule was “unhealthy psychologically.” He noted that many of the black SNCC staffers in the Southwest Georgia project had quit because they felt ignored by Sherrod. An Atlanta-based SNCC staffer pleaded for a pause in the project, to regroup and refocus, and hopefully, to remove it from the control of Charles Sherrod. He criticized Sherrod for behaving like a dictator, he alone deciding who would work where and when, exercising total control over finances, and essentially only pursuing actions that he himself oversaw. When group strategy meetings were held, other SNCC staff felt “that the policy is already made before the meeting and the meeting lasts as long as it takes for Sherrod to persuade the others to think his way.”³⁵⁹ Sherrod’s insistence on an interracial staff angered

³⁵⁸ Julian Bond, quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 62.

³⁵⁹ “Southwest Georgia,” undated report from fall 1963, author unknown, SNCC papers, microfilm, reel A-IV, frames 1010.

some other SNCC representatives, who worried that the Albany movement had acquired “an image of failure,” and blamed this partly on Sherrod’s insistence on employing white volunteers.³⁶⁰ By late 1963, SNCC staff in the Atlanta office were referring to the Southwest Georgia Project as a rogue program and refusing to send any new black volunteers to Albany for fear their talents would not be used, leaving behind locals and a few white SNCC volunteers including John Perdew, who was arrested for his civil rights work in Americus in 1963 and charged with sedition.³⁶¹

Sherrod, for his part, maintained that the Atlanta officers disrespected his authority and discounted the contributions he and the people of Southwest Georgia had made to the civil rights movement. The SNCC leaders, he complained, showed an “apparent indifference” to Albany’s needs. Sherrod angrily demanded to know if SNCC had forgotten what happened there. “The city was one of the first in the South to erupt with really massive demonstrations,” he wrote. “Techniques of protest we developed here spread across the nation. But now we are wondering. We are wondering if the pioneer role that the Albany people have played in the Struggle is still remembered.”³⁶²

Largely abandoned by SNCC leaders, Sherrod distanced himself from the organization and aligned himself with locals, before going in search of other sponsors. Sherrod did not actually quit SNCC, he just stopped going to national meetings in

³⁶⁰ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 194.

³⁶¹ “Southwest Georgia,” undated report from fall 1963, author unknown, SNCC papers, microfilm, reel A-IV, frame 1009. John Perdew was one of the “Americus Four” charged with sedition and threatened with execution in 1963. For more, see <http://www.civilrights.uga.edu/bibliographies/amicus/>. Accessed on February 19, 2010.

³⁶² SNCC papers, microfilm, reel XV, frame 32.

Washington or Atlanta, electing to stay in Albany. Sherrod's and SNCC's disagreements came to a head in late 1963 and early 1964. Preparing for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in late August of 1963, Sherrod petitioned the national office for funds to send several hundred Albany protest veterans to the capital by bus. The national office agreed only to pay half-fare for 100 of the 300 people who had signed up for the "Albany Freedom Train." Sherrod was angered that SNCC would not support the trip and questioned his superiors, claiming that he feared that the people of Albany had given too much already and had "nothing left." The relationship worsened still in 1964, when SNCC permanently "borrowed" some of the Southwest Georgia staff for work in Selma, Alabama. At the end of that year, SNCC moved its own headquarters from Atlanta to Mississippi. Only a few SNCC volunteers, and an assortment of young local recruits, continued to work with Sherrod in the counties of Southwest Georgia.

New Partners: Charles Sherrod and SIM, 1964-1965

In the fall of 1964, Sherrod briefly retreated from Albany to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in order to pursue a Master's degree in Sacred Theology. He was burned out by three years of near constant struggle in Southwest Georgia and took what he called "a movement sabbatical."³⁶³ Roy-Shields of Franconia College and later Isaac Simpkins of Miles College filled in as Project Director for the Southwest Georgia Project.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Charles Sherrod, oral history interview with author, June 8, 2009.

³⁶⁴ From untitled pamphlet in Maynard Moore collection, now in possession of author, undated but likely from the summer of 1967, 2. They were directors in name only. In fact, Sherrod recalled that even though Simpkins was supposed to be in charge, he had no actual authority there. When Sherrod returned to the area with five SIM seminarians in tow in the summer of 1965, he continued to run the show "as if nothing had happened." (Charles Sherrod, 1986, C-5047/59, in the Taylor Branch Papers #5047, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

SIM saw in Sherrod an experienced civil rights veteran who still retained his own commitment to the Beloved Community. Sherrod was also an exceptionally magnetic leader who was given to spontaneous singing that tended to unite whomever was close by. As one SIM volunteer recalled, “[he] started singing ‘Oh Freedom’ and for thirty minutes the auditorium really rocked. The charisma of Sherrod is incredible.”³⁶⁵ Together, Sherrod and SIM carried this commitment forward even as the emphasis on Beloved Community that had defined the early days of the civil rights movement was replaced elsewhere by other approaches, including a focus on independent black leadership.

Sherrod was also a pugnacious, charismatic leader who could be very convincing. In the Southwest Georgia region, SIM saw a community in which economic disparities and lack of electoral power now outweighed concerns over access to segregated public facilities. It was also a place where SIM’s traditional pastoral placement strategy had little chance of success. The established white churches in Albany and the surrounding counties had, for the most part, not actively engaged in the civil rights struggles of the early 1960s, and were unreceptive to hosting SIM students. Most of the large black churches were unwilling to continue to support the movement after King’s departure, especially after Mount Olive Church and two others churches that had been involved in the movement were burned to the ground.³⁶⁶ In the counties, most black preachers were unwilling or unable to participate, having, according to SIM, “too narrow and limited conceptions of the role of the minister and

³⁶⁵ Joseph Howell, “Civil Rights Diary,” summer 1966, copy in possession of author.

³⁶⁶ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 166.

mission.”³⁶⁷ These considerations called for new approaches to an activist ministry of reconciliation.

Sherrod saw in SIM a group of eager, optimistic, intellectual, hard-working seminarians who still harbored a commitment to the “Beloved Community” ideal he espoused. By the time he left for New York, Sherrod was down to a few local volunteers and was in a constant search for new hands to help with the work. John Chappell, a former SIM participant and a strong supporter of Sherrod, suggested that part of Sherrod’s motivation for attending Union Seminary and for getting involved in SIM was to raise funds and recruit new volunteers for his Southwest Georgia Project. At Union, Sherrod was indeed successful in finding, if not steady funding, a constant stream of volunteers willing to test new ideas of ministry by working outside of church structures and directly within the local communities of the Albany area.

He formed a civil rights discussion group at Union, and began to sow the seeds of interest for a group that would later travel south with him. A number of Union students recall Sherrod at that time as a magnetic character full of intensity and with many stories about his time in the movement. Many of the students had participated on the fringes of the civil rights movement, but here was one of the legendary student leaders in the flesh! One recalled hearing Sherrod spontaneously break out into a freedom song in the seminary hallway and thinking that he wanted to learn what was behind such optimism. He got his chance when Sherrod, in early 1965, proposed to the Student Interracial Ministry that it oversee a special SIM summer project in Southwest Georgia.

³⁶⁷ “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” August 1966, 10. SIM, UTS: 4A:1:f9.

Sherrod's proposal came just as SIM was evaluating its first five years and considering whether to continue its approach of placing white seminarians in black churches and vice versa. Although it had placed eighty-nine students from twenty-nine seminaries in ministries from coast to coast, the students who were now coming into the seminaries had lived with the civil rights movement for four years and many wanted to take a more active role than serving a church of another race.³⁶⁸ The violent reception to Freedom Summer signaled a change in the mood of the movement away from idealism and the Beloved Community and toward frustrated calls for immediate action and black independence. Just down the road from Union Seminary, Harlem erupted in flames of riot in mid-July 1964, ushering in the first in a series of "long, hot summers."³⁶⁹ By September, the civil rights movement and the nation had been changed significantly, and the seminarians wondered how effective their earlier strategies would remain going forward. At the same time, they were continuing to question the traditional roles of the professional ministry and, even more broadly, of the place of the church in society. Seminarians articulated a need for "a more responsible and effective approach on the part of SIM and the church to the larger social problems of the day."³⁷⁰ It was with this in mind that Sherrod proposed that SIM send seminary volunteers to work with him on the Southwest Georgia Project.

Sherrod's story of his own background and his ideas of church renewal found a welcome reception with SIM. "I bring many scars," the twenty-nine year old wrote, "mostly internal, to this discussion, twenty years or so of experience with segregation. ... I am a

³⁶⁸ "The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry," 6-7. SIM, UTS: 1F:1:f9.

³⁶⁹ Among many other references, see "All the Long Hot Summers," *TIME*, June 2, 1980.

³⁷⁰ "The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry," 8. SIM, UTS: 1F:1:f9.

victim as well as a product of this church and this society. But the church is also a victim and, as an institution, as a group, as individuals, it too must be saved.”³⁷¹ The students in SIM, who yearned to solve racial problems *and* change and renew the church, eagerly endorsed the proposal. Perhaps in Southwest Georgia they would learn “how a self-conscious church, moving into this new dimension of self-understanding, could now best fulfill its mission in the world.”³⁷²

Five students accompanied Sherrod back to Albany at the end of May 1965. According to long-time volunteer Edward Feaver, the project sought “to force seminarians out of their conventional manner of living and out of their intellectual, ivory-tower theological security; to ... help to develop local leadership and making a direct attack upon the racial separation of the United States; to engage seminarians in economic, political, and social issues for the purpose of discovering how these relate to the church; to attack the established manifestation of the church in the South and the confining image of the clergy; to work with and not for the people in Southwest Georgia.”³⁷³

Charles Sherrod served as the Project Director and Reverend J. Oscar McCloud, who had left Raleigh by this time and was pastoring a church in Atlanta, was the Project Supervisor. After the first students spent the summer of 1965 in Albany and the surrounding counties, twenty more seminarians joined the project in the summer of 1966, and twelve completed full intern years in 1966 and 1967. By 1967, the Southwest Georgia Project formally parted ways with SNCC and that year described itself as “partially staffed and

³⁷¹ Charles Sherrod, “For the Student Interracial Ministry – a Proposal.” SIM, UTS: 4A:4:f4.

³⁷² “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry,” 9. SIM, UTS: 1F:1:f9.

³⁷³ Edward A. Feaver, “Taking All the Money and Giving All the Jesus,” *Skandalon*, Vol. 1, Fall 1966, 3. UTS, SIM: 2A:1:f8.

partially funded by the Student Interracial Ministry.”³⁷⁴ In total, forty-four Student Interracial Ministry volunteers served with the Southwest Georgia Project from 1965 to 1968, contributing the bulk of the project’s staff during that time.³⁷⁵ The Student Interracial Ministry and the Southwest Georgia Project came to regard each other as partners, and several former SIM participants became long-term members of the Georgia staff, staying on in the area for periods ranging from one to ten years.

At Work in the Fields of the Lord – 1965-1968

The program’s initial call for volunteers promised that they would be “bound together by a common faith and concern” to “constitute an involved Christian community, working directly with the existing civil rights groups in the area, and struggling together with the meaning of Christian faith in this situation.” Ministry students would participate as laymen in local churches and in addition would be involved in whatever community activities were most pressing, possibly including voter registration and working in freedom schools or community centers. Students were offered a summer stipend of \$300, urged to bring their own cars for transportation in the largely rural area, and required to have a bail contact capable of posting \$500.³⁷⁶

Although the number of volunteers and their impact within local communities were both large, Sherrod envisioned that the SIM organization would act in such humility and

³⁷⁴ Charles Sherrod, Jack Quigley, and David Hawk, “A Proposal for the Maximum Ministry of the Gillespie Seldon Institute,” undated some time in 1967, p.6, UTS: 4A:4:f3.

³⁷⁵ The project was through 1967 still nominally a SNCC program, but isolated from the national office and led, in the opinion of some, autocratically, by Sherrod. In real terms, however, according to its resources, personnel, and mission, the Southwest Georgia Project was more a SIM than a SNCC program for its final three year.

³⁷⁶ “S.I.M. in Southwest Georgia,” program advertisement, undated. UTS, SIM, 4A:3:F7.

concert with both the handful of SNCC volunteers still working there and with the local people as to leave few footprints in Southwest Georgia. “In Albany we work with the Albany Movement, in Terrell with the Terrell County Movement, etc. If there is an operation requiring a joint effort from ten counties or twenty we just add to it. We are not to be called ‘SIM’ nor do we announce ourselves as preachers or even a group of seminarians. Rather, we are known only as ‘some more students’ who have come to live and work and suffer and share among the people of Southwest Georgia.”³⁷⁷

Sherrod’s choice of words carried in them the echo of an earlier Christian activist experiment in Southwest Georgia. Most of the SIM volunteers were aware of the history of Koinonia Farm and made at least one visit to the pioneering Christian interracial community during their time in the region. One of Koinonia’s first volunteers, Martin England, explained that the farm’s goal was “to mak[e] a witness in the dirt as real farmers, not as professionals or as ministers going to tell people how to live on a farm in Georgia.”³⁷⁸ For these missionaries, joining in the work and poverty of fellow farmers was an important symbolic part of their work and of the demonstration that they made for others that such work was not only for the poorest and blackest, but for all.

However, the truth of it was that the SIM volunteers, like the Koinonia volunteers, were more than simply additional workers, they were undertaking an undercover ministry of sorts. They had different motivations for being there and asked different questions than secular students and volunteers would have. The first five white seminarians who served

³⁷⁷ “1966 Report, Student Interracial Ministry,” 78. SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f10.

³⁷⁸ Quoted in Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 80. For the definitive analysis of Koinonia Farm as a location of prophetic Christianity, see Tracy Elaine K’Meyer, *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South: The Story of Koinonia Farm* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 2000.

during the summer of 1965 were based in Albany but worked extensively in “Bad” Baker County. This was Sherrod’s first foray into that fabled territory where one of the worst of backcountry Southern sheriffs, L. Warren “The Gator” Johnson, ruled with fear and an oft-used pistol.

Janet Vrchota, a Methodist Union student, lived and worked with black tenant farmers in the Baker area. She was struck not only by their poverty, but also by their seeming acceptance of it – a willingness to wait “for a better home up yonder” that she suggested came from the influence of black church theology. Not only were jobs and programs and farm subsidies needed, she concluded, but the people themselves had to be fundamentally reoriented toward fighting for their own best interests.³⁷⁹

Ed Feaver concluded that one had to actually experience the Southern situation – the “racial injustice and irrational adherence to the status quo,” the hatred toward blacks and white volunteers coming from even the most moderate of whites – in order to truly understand it and its importance to the current mission of the Church. Feaver felt that the experience had offered him the chance to see how both the black and white churches, in their silence, had crippled black social and spiritual development. But he also saw how much good the church could do if and when it risked speaking out. Feaver reflected that experiencing the faith of poor Southern blacks made him feel that his own beliefs and ability to forgive seemed somewhat hollow by comparison, but it also made him see “life emerge out of death; hope out of despair.” To a would-be minister like Feaver, the work in Southwest Georgia imparted a new appreciation of how to work with rather than lead a congregation. It also helped him understand the workings of poverty and the every day realities of the poor –

³⁷⁹ Janet M. Vrchota, “Final Report, Summer 1965: SIM in Southwest Georgia,” UTS, SIM, 1C:1:f4.

lessons that could equally well be applied in a northern urban congregation and in the farmlands of the South.³⁸⁰

The Southwest Georgia seminary students concluded that one need not have a church to have a ministry, nor need one be an ordained minister to minister to the needs of the people. Asked to define the proper role of a minister in this context, Joe Pfister commented, “the answers to these questions cannot be found by remaining within the walls of church structures. They cannot be found in the roles of the white minister and his all white congregation or the black circuit preacher with his hit and run method. The ministry is the getting of the Message across to the people, ...expressing it everywhere: in politics, in economics, in social life and even in the churches. This ministry cannot be contained by the structures of the churches, but it may be able to use them. This ministry may in fact undermine the church structures and break open a whole society in order to save the message it bears.”³⁸¹

Many in the project distinguished between the Church as institution and the church as community, and some even likened their experiment to that of the early Christians just after the death of Jesus, an intentional community “of faith that binds us together.”³⁸² The Koinonia Farm experiment had described itself in much the same way in the 1940’s, although it was more consciously separate from society and disdained direct political engagement.

³⁸⁰ Ed Feaver, *the Grain of Salt*, October 12, 1965. Vol. 19, No. 3, 1.

³⁸¹ Joe Pfister, “The Meaning of Ministry,” *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, January 20, 1967, 3. UTS, SIM, 2B:1:f7.

³⁸² Joe Pfister, “The State of the Project,” *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, April 15, 1968, 8. Collection of Joe Pfister.

For the second phase of the new partnership, the summer of 1966, Sherrod set higher goals for SIM in Southwest Georgia. He arrived with twenty seminarians, all but one of whom was white. The plan was that the SIM volunteers would partner with the SNCC and local workers, forming a new and smoothly functioning team. However, both at the time and subsequently, there was some confusion as to who exactly the SIM students were and for whom they were working. The name Student Interracial Ministry meant little to the locals “and less to fellow workers in other civil rights groups.”³⁸³ Those who have written previously about Southwest Georgia assumed that everyone with Sherrod was a SNCC worker and did not differentiate the seminarians, who had their own specific set of motivations for being there, from other volunteers. Local and national media coverage variously described the Southwest Georgia Project as a SNCC program, a SIM program, and an independent entity. The uncertainty can partly be attributed to SIM’s own approach to the project as “under cover work” within the local movements, and SIM’s 1966-67 annual report identifies both the 1965 and 1966 projects as SIM students joining a SNCC program.³⁸⁴

The Methodist Church, in a move reminiscent of that of the NCC in reaction to the David Jones case, tried to distance itself from SIM – which both the Methodist Church and the Methodist Student Movement had earlier supported – after the project was identified with SNCC and its recently articulated demands for Black Power. J. Edward Carothers, Associate General Secretary of the National Division of the Methodist Church, argued that rather than

³⁸³ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, August 2, 1966, No. 5, 1, UTS, SIM, 2B:1:f3. The Southwest Georgia newsletters are not contained in the SNCC records, only in the SIM records at Union Seminary, where there is a nearly complete run from June 15, 1966 through July 3, 1967. Some additional information can be found in the SNCC newsletters “News of the Field,” located in the SNCC papers at the King Center in Atlanta, which contain blurbs on all of the regional projects and only brief updates on Southwest Georgia.

³⁸⁴ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, August 2, 1966, No. 5, 1, UTS, SIM, 2B:1:f3; “1965 Report, Student Interracial Ministry,” 19. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f9.

SIM working with SNCC it was the other way around, “that two or three SNCC people were to work with the 23 SIM people. In any case, SIM wasn’t working for, under or by the direction of SNCC.” Carothers faulted a “loosely written news release” for falsely implying an alliance between SNCC and SIM, and went on to extol the virtues of SIM’s interracial efforts as “the right way of getting at an enormously difficult problem. We should take hope in the ministry when students in theological schools think up and carry out such notable enterprises.”³⁸⁵

Carothers may have spun the facts to separate his institution from the controversial Black Power movement, but an accompanying news item in the magazine didn’t help his case, as it largely contradicted his account of the SIM-SNCC relationship. Instead it reported that SIM’s original plans to work in Georgia “at the invitation of SNCC were dropped as a result of an unforeseen change in the SNCC policy in May 1966, and SIM participants worked independently under the supervision of a project director appointed by and responsible to SIM.”³⁸⁶ While both articles stressed the eventual separation of the two organizations and the ultimate independent status of SIM, discrepancies point to what was likely scattered damage control by both SIM and the Methodist Church in relation to Black Power.

Black Power and White Volunteers: Tensions Rise Between SNCC and SIM.

³⁸⁵ “Comment on SNCC, SIM, and MUST,” and “SIM Internships,” *The Methodist Woman*, November, 1966. UTS, SIM, 2A:1:f13.

³⁸⁶ “Comment on SNCC, SIM, and MUST,” and “SIM Internships,” *The Methodist Woman*, November, 1966. UTS, SIM, 2A:1:f13.

Charles Sherrod had damage of his own to control, as his plan to bring in a large group of white volunteers angered his half-dozen black SNCC colleagues still working in Southwest Georgia. The black SNCC workers had largely embraced their organization's move toward becoming an all-black organization and they questioned Sherrod's insistence on continuing to work with white volunteers. Sherrod tried to reassure black SNCC workers that the white seminary volunteers would "not sabotage the movement" since they would not hold leadership positions but instead would be immediately teamed with a black team leader.³⁸⁷ Sherrod's claims eased few fears, however, and the contest within SNCC in Southwest Georgia over the appropriate role of white volunteers in the local movement remained unresolved. By the end of the summer, the enmity between the two groups was reaching its peak; the SNCC volunteers had not been paid in a month, the rent was overdue, and the electricity and phone had been cut off in the office they shared with the SIM workers. The Student Interracial Ministry project stepped in and paid the bills, but this did little to alleviate tensions.³⁸⁸

The SIM and SNCC students spent endless hours meeting in SNCC's steamy second-floor Albany office, agonizing over what Black Power meant for their fieldwork and "what to

³⁸⁷ Charles Sherrod, "For the Student Interracial Ministry – a Proposal," 3. UTS: 4A:4:f4. Sherrod's commitment to an interracial movement was rooted in the ideal of a Beloved Community but was also based on the practical realities, both of life in the South and of the particular struggle for civil rights. He found it useful to have white allies since both whites and blacks would often look to whites to lead. As Sherrod put it, "We are using the system. The system way is where white is right. I use this example: Who do they look at when you come to a door and you start talking about voter registration or about coming to a mass meeting? The white peoples. All right then. So you won't come to the meeting? Well, come because the white boy says so! I don't give a damn why you come to the meeting, just bring your black ass to the meeting! That's all I want, for you to be at the meeting." (Charles Sherrod, oral history interview with author, June 11, 2009.)

³⁸⁸ "Southwest Georgia Newsletter," August 2, 1966, No. 5, 2. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3. According to the newsletter, SNCC's financial troubles in Albany were a direct result of whites withdrawing support from the national organization following Stokely Carmichael rise to leadership.

do with the whites.”³⁸⁹ This problem seemed particularly acute in the case of a newly married SIM couple, Joe and Embry Howell. No provisions had been made for housing any of the SIM volunteers in the summer of 1966, and it turned out to be particularly difficult to find a poor black family able and willing to take in a white volunteer couple. So the Howells were shuttled from house to house, sleeping on floors for a night at a time, until they finally ended up sleeping in the SNCC office. It was hot and filthy. Another volunteer recalled sleeping on top of his desk to stay away from the rats. The Howells too were engaged in hours of debate about their proper place in the movement, and Joe Howell recalls the SNCC workers expressing that “even having white people on the scene is patronizing. White people should be working in their own communities and changing the way white people treat black people. Don’t come down here and lord over us in terms of ‘helping’ black people. Black people have to help themselves.”³⁹⁰

Sherrod agreed that black people needed to help themselves, but he also defended his decision to bring the white volunteers. He did this in two ways, first by appealing to the integrated power of the Beloved Community, and second by arguing for the practical advantages of having white volunteers involved. White volunteers brought with them, Sherrod believed, the psychologically persuasive power of their skin color and he was not above using that to his advantage. “They have to understand,” he said in 2009, “that if they come down here, anytime they come down here, in the movement context, we, blacks, need to be in charge, we need to have the last word on what’s going to reflect on us or what’s going to move us or what’s going to hurt us in some way or what’s going to help us in some

³⁸⁹ Joe Pfister, oral history interview with author, November 29, 2006.

³⁹⁰ Joe Howell, oral history interview with author, November 27, 2006.

way. We need to have the last word on it.” Sherrod also dismissed the notion of the Beloved Community being simply an ideal and a not a practical solution, and one that lacks great power because it is rooted in love. “It ain’t so soft, it’s got strength behind it, it had meaning in it. And there is love, there’s love on top of it, there’s love beside it, there’s love on the bottom of the community. It’s based on love. But while I love my child, I’ll whip his tail.”³⁹¹

While the atmosphere could often be contentious, volunteers recall that SIM and SNCC workers did collaborate together in the field with little actual difficulties. Even so, the presence of so many white volunteers likely contributed to the final disassociation of Sherrod from SNCC. Later that year, Sherrod effectively broke the relationship for good when he sought financial support from the SNCC central committee for even more white student volunteers. His request was unanimously rejected and the remaining SNCC workers withdrew to Mississippi, Atlanta, and other locales.³⁹² Sherrod continued on without SNCC, further cementing the bond with SIM and seeking other sources of funding. The Howells were taken in by the Hope family in Baker County and put to work staffing a new Head Start daycare center.³⁹³

Sherrod had his own take on Black Power. His aim was not separatism but power sharing with whites, and he felt that integration as a goal unto itself was meaningless. In order to develop Black Power to the point of an equal sharing, the pat assurances of the Church would have to be turned into concrete action.³⁹⁴ Or, put in ‘Sherrodian’ terms: “The

³⁹¹ Charles Sherrod, oral history interview with author, June 11, 2009.

³⁹² Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 190.

³⁹³ Joe Howell, oral history interview with author, November 27, 2006.

³⁹⁴ Edward A. Feaver, “Taking All the Money and Giving All the Jesus,” *Skandalon*, Vol. 1, Fall 1966, 5-6. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f8.

white man is no longer going to get away with affirmations of Christian love toward his poor black brother. He is going to have to prove these affirmations by relinquishing some of his power and wealth.”³⁹⁵

Set apart from the national apparatus of SNCC, Albany was once again a local struggle. Now with Charles Sherrod as a sort of transplanted local, the movement there remained firmly rooted in both nonviolence and interracialism, and undergirding both of these, a deep Christian ethos.

An Ongoing Program of Change in Southwest Georgia

Focusing on the Second and Third Congressional Districts, the Southwest Georgia Project conducted economic, cultural or political projects in twenty of the twenty-three local counties. Sherrod delineated a strategic approach in which church reform and reinvention was an integral part. Sherrod tailored goals to individual communities, but broadly speaking they included registering voters and building political participation; using mass meetings, political campaigns, and cultural events to build black unity; trying to create new opportunities for black economic participation; and using the influence of the church to accomplish racial reconciliation. Sherrod supported these broad goals with a series of specific plans.

In the political arena, voter registration remained the primary activity of SIM volunteers throughout their involvement in the Southwest Georgia Project. Volunteers also worked on political campaigns, a strategy first put into action by SNCC for the 1964 C.B. King congressional campaign. A two-part strategy developed during that campaign – the first

³⁹⁵ Feaver, “Taking All the Money,” 7.

African American congressional campaign since Reconstruction – involving voter registration and candidate-specific campaigning. In early 1964, Don Harris, a white SNCC worker based in Americus, noted that there were 56,531 unregistered blacks of voting age in the Second Congressional District. He reasoned that the King candidacy could serve two goals – new black voters could be used to get King elected, and King’s candidacy would be used to attract and enroll new voters.³⁹⁶ The C.B. King campaign did help kick-start voter registration drives in the more distant counties, but only in a limited way.³⁹⁷ In Albany though, 500 blacks registered between King’s announcement on April 4 and the close of registration, and in Tifton County, 350 new voters registered.³⁹⁸

Volunteers frequently met with violent resistance and Sherrod often selected white volunteers for voter registration work, often putting them purposely in harm’s way. He had used this strategy since his first involvement in the Albany Movement, explaining in a 1963 report that “I knew that the Justice Department and the media and the country would not consciously let anything happen to them white kids.”³⁹⁹ Even after the murders of white volunteers during Freedom Summer in Mississippi and of Jonathan Daniels, a white

³⁹⁶ Don Harris report, undated, SNCC papers, microfilm, Reel 10, frame 1.

³⁹⁷ C.B. King attempted a second run for Congress in 1966. SWGA workers obtained a total of 7,400 signatures, 1,600 more than necessary, on petitions to place King on the ballot. Sherrod, along with SIM interns Jim Romberg and Ed Feaver, delivered the petitions to the Secretary of State in Atlanta on the final day they were due, but the Secretary of State refused to accept the petitions on the grounds that they had to be turned in by the candidate himself. King was thus not included on the ballot. The volunteers wrote in the *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter* (No. 6 and No. 8) that their work was not in vain, however, as the canvassing brought them into new areas, giving them a chance to enroll new voters and spread the word about political involvement. Many black voters even wrote in former governor Ellis Arnall, a progressive, in the gubernatorial race rather than vote for either of the segregationist candidates running. The write-in campaign muddled the election results and resulted in a court battle, making a point about the potential of black voting power in the state.

³⁹⁸ Peter de Lissovoy, “Gambler’s Choice in Georgia,” *The Nation*, June 22, 1964.

³⁹⁹ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 165, citing SNCC papers, microfilm, Reel 2, frame 19.

seminarian in Alabama, Sherrod continued to employ SIM volunteers along the frontlines.⁴⁰⁰

Jan Vrchota, a white Union student, was shifted from relatively peaceful Albany to Baker County in June 1965 when black SNCC volunteers there, including Sherrod, reported threats and intimidation from Sherriff L. Warren “The Gator” Johnson and his deputies. Vrchota wrote that the project deployed her and other white volunteers in Baker County in the belief that if the whites were beaten or jailed, this would prove far more newsworthy than abuse of blacks, and such publicity would both help the cause in general and perhaps ease harassment.⁴⁰¹ The threat of violence was so great that Vrchota lived with one black family only for a week, and after that moved nearly every night.⁴⁰²

Violence, against citizens and both the white and black volunteers, was not uncommon. In “Terrible Terrell” County, where the project consisted of house-by-house canvassing, voter registration, and the running of a citizenship school, blacks attempting to register to vote were met with threats and reprisals, and on December 8, 1963, the private home that housed the citizenship school was shot up, bombed, and partially burnt down.⁴⁰³ Four years later, on August 19, 1967, the Southwest Georgia Project’s house in Albany was burned down by six white men, destroying both working and living spaces and all records and equipment.⁴⁰⁴ No one was every prosecuted for the crime.

⁴⁰⁰ For more on Daniels, see Charles W. Eagles, *Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Huntsville: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

⁴⁰¹ Jan Vrchota final report. UTS, SIM, 1C:1:f4.

⁴⁰² 1965 Report, 11-12; Menzel report, 3. UTS, SIM, 1C:1:f4.

⁴⁰³ “Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals,” December 27, 1963, p.17. SNCC papers, microfilm Reel A-IV, frame 360.

⁴⁰⁴ “Help the Southwest Georgia Project,” undated memo, Maynard Moore papers, now in possession of author. Also, Joe Pfister, “Building: Long Range Style,” *Skandalon*, Vol. 4, 1968, 12. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

SIM volunteers were also arrested repeatedly on trumped up charges, ranging from the arrest of seminarian Joe Pfister on suspicion of burglary to numerous traffic offences.⁴⁰⁵ They were the subjects of harassment ranging from name-calling and bottle throwing to the burning of their headquarters in Albany. Pfister and others were followed and chased several times on the back roads of Southwest Georgia. SIM intern Ed Feaver had his car run off the road and ended up in the hospital. Several of the interns recall homes they were staying in being shot at or stoned. Though the interns joked in their newsletter about Pfister's crime spree or the automotive injuries they suffered, the humor masked the serious danger into which all had put themselves. But the seminarians insisted it would be a mistake to focus too much on the difficulties they faced in light of the near constant harassment and danger to which the general black population was subjected.

Volunteers also met with significant resistance from potential black voters largely due to fear of reprisals. Their jobs, homes, and credit were on the line, and they had spent lifetimes steeped in a culture of repression from which breaking away proved very difficult. One organizer reflected that, "You cannot come around and break a world in two. You cannot forget the force of two hundred years."⁴⁰⁶ Working in Cairo, the county seat of Grady county, Willie Hall and SIM student Ed Feaver were continually frustrated to find that blacks regarded voting "as white folks business," but understood that it was not in the interest of blacks to vote if the only candidates were white segregationists. In search of assistance, volunteers in Baker County applied for, and in December 1966, received Voter Education

⁴⁰⁵ See, for example, Pfister "burglary" arrest described in *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, October 9, 1966, No. 6, 3-4; Charles Wallace traffic arrest described in *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 29, 1966, No. 3, 1-2; Ed Feaver traffic arrest described in *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, July 15, 1966, No. 4, 1. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3.

⁴⁰⁶ Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 60. Quoting SNCC papers, microfilm, Reel 178.

Program funds from the Southern Regional Council for a three-month program of voter registration and education, with the goal of registering 400 new voters.⁴⁰⁷

Each county in Southwest Georgia had a locally appointed voting registrar whose job it was to administer literacy tests and register new voters. Registrars in the region were all white and certain ones had reputations for finding ways to fail blacks taking the literacy exam or otherwise exclude would be black voters. According to law, the federal government could assign federal voting registrars to areas suspected of unfair registration practices, but the Southwest Georgia Project had been lobbying the government for federal voting registrars since 1962 without success. In 1964, Sherrod even drove a group of local residents, including three middle-aged Baker County women and a group of youths, to Washington D.C. to the petition the Department of Justice in person.⁴⁰⁸ Throughout 1966, Project staff and local people kept this pressure on the Department of Justice, which continued to disavow that voting discrimination was an issue in Georgia.⁴⁰⁹ In April of 1967, after being requested for more than five years, registrars finally arrived in Lee and Terrell counties, but they may as well not have made the journey. The registrars set themselves up in an office over the Leesburg farm bureau and announced that they were open for business, but they made no effort to go into the county to meet with any of the eighty-nine percent of blacks who still remained unregistered. And since the few blacks who dared come to the registration office

⁴⁰⁷ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, December 13, 1966, No. 9, 3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3. It was estimated at the time that Baker had a black population of about 65%, but only 20% of blacks were registered voters. The Voter Education Program was funded by the Taconic, Field, New World, and Stern Brothers foundations at the private urging of the Kennedy brothers. Robert Kennedy especially hoped to turn the tide of the civil rights movement away from demonstrations and toward “quieter” voter registration work. The program ran between 1962 and 1968.

⁴⁰⁸ Janet M. Vrchota, “Final Report, Summer 1965: SIM in Southwest Georgia,” SIM, UTS, 1C:1:f4.

⁴⁰⁹ *News of the Field*, No. 5, March 23, 1966, 1. SNCC papers, microfilm.

were not met with any resistance, the registrars claimed that blacks were under no undue pressure. Sherrod fumed that when his pleas for voting registrars were at last answered, the federal government sent “blockheaded, bumbling, insensitive fools.”⁴¹⁰ Having affirmation of the government’s insincerity in pursuing fair voting, the project rededicated itself to handling voter registration and education work by itself.⁴¹¹

This was not the only incident in which a federal program was seemingly stifled by the pervasive climate of white supremacy. For example, the Baker County Community Action Panel, which addressed poverty cessation, was required to be interracial. The Panel board members, however, were all white, and even included the notoriously corrupt and allegedly murderous sheriff Warren “The Gator” Johnson.⁴¹² Joe Pfister concluded after the meeting that the federal anti-poverty program was simply replicating the system of white supremacy that kept blacks and poor whites out of power.⁴¹³

Black farmers were mobilizing too, trying to elect some of their own to the county boards of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service [ASCS] that were charged with regulating crop allotments, setting prices, and administering cash loans and assistance in education and purchasing fertilizer. The ASCS controlled services to farmers, and had historically failed to represent the interests of black farmers. According to one SIM intern, the ASCS was powerful because it determined which farmers got to grow which crop, which meant it could either make or break an individual farmer. White farmers had traditionally

⁴¹⁰ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, April 15, 1967, No. 12, 3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f9.

⁴¹¹ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, April 15, 1967, No. 12, 3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f9.

⁴¹² *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, July 3 1967, No. 13, 3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f9.

⁴¹³ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, July 3 1967, No. 13, 3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f9.

been granted all the allotments for soybeans, the most valuable of local crops.⁴¹⁴ Each county in Georgia had a number of local community ASCS boards, which then elected the three members of the county ASCS board. Up to that time, there had never been a black member of a community board, let alone a county board, in any of the 159 Georgia counties.

During the summer of 1966, black farmers got on the ballots in four counties – Worth, Clay, Baker, and Sumter – and used mass organization and block voting to achieve one successful result, the election of L.B. Johnson in Worth County.⁴¹⁵ The Southwest Georgia Project continued to organize black farmers in advance of the ASCS elections the following year, and on September 22, 1967, nine black candidates were represented on ballots in famously repressive Baker County, although it would be a few years more before a black farmer was elected to the board.⁴¹⁶

With the support of the Southwest Georgia Project, black candidates ran for other local offices as well, many for the first time in the region's history. Many of these early political campaigns, however, were hampered by a pervasive fear of white backlash, lack of funds, and their own inefficiency. It would take much time and effort to wrest political control away from whites in parts of Southwest Georgia; however, there was no doubt that progress was being made as black people were running for office and voting in unprecedented numbers.

While voter registration was a strong focus of the entire project, each county had its own issues and a SIM volunteer would often work on a variety of them. In Cordele, in Crisp

⁴¹⁴ Joe Howell, oral history interview with author, November 27, 2006.

⁴¹⁵ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, October 9, 1966, No. 6, 2-3. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3.

⁴¹⁶ "A.S.C.S. Elections and You," *The Other Side: Southwest Georgia News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1967, 1. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f10.

County, for example, blacks were struggling with open accommodations, which were still restricted even though now guaranteed under federal civil rights legislation. Within a week of their arrival in 1967, several of the SIM volunteers made national news when they helped stage a swim-in with black youths at a state park about eight miles from Cordele.⁴¹⁷ A white mob attacked the interracial group as they attempted to desegregate a swimming pool in the state park. The whites beat some of the black youth and threw bottles before overturning a SIM volunteer's car.⁴¹⁸ Some of the older children ran back to town and alerted the SNCC and SIM volunteers who had been attending the wedding of two of the SNCC workers. The SNCC workers armed themselves and set off for the state park to help the children. Police had been notified ahead of time of the potentially incendiary situation, but only five officers arrived and none tried to stop the white mob. Instead, the police arrested the black organizer of the "swim-in," a twenty-six year-old local barber and garbage man named Clemmie Gaston – who also hosted two of the SIM students -- on a charge of causing malicious mischief and, when his truck grazed a sheriff's thumb, with assault with intent to murder.⁴¹⁹

Later that evening a large crowd of black folks, angered at the attacks and the arrest, gathered in downtown Cordele at an intersection in which two black-owned gas stations stood on two corners, facing two white-owned gas stations on the other side of the street. As the black crowd grew restless, a well-armed white mob began to arrive in pick-up trucks at the two white-owned gas stations that faced them. Georgia state troopers stood by but did not intervene. After a while, Charles Sherrod called a mass meeting in a nearby church just to

⁴¹⁷ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 15, 1966, No. 1; *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 22, 1966, No. 2, 2. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3

⁴¹⁸ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 29, 1966, No. 3, 1. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3

⁴¹⁹ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 29, 1966, No. 3, 1. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3

clear the streets and try to release some of the tension. But the meeting could not last forever and once the crowd had reassembled, a restless black teenager threw a bottle at a passing car. The car turned into one of the white gas stations and a few minutes later, the whites opened fire. Larry Mamiya recalls diving into the doorway of a black social club that was behind one of the two black-owned gas stations. He could hear bullets hitting the wood above his head and remembers thinking, “those aren’t warning shots, they are trying to kill us.” He sheltered in an apartment while the shooting went on for three nights and three days. Mamiya contends that the white mob’s real goal was to destroy the black-owned gas stations in a hail of gunfire and so leave the white gas stations with a monopoly.⁴²⁰ Less than a month later, a second attempt to desegregate the pool was met with a Ku Klux Klan rally at the state park.⁴²¹

The Southwest Georgia Project, under Sherrod’s leadership, early on recognized that equality for blacks would partly be achieved through black economic independence and power. In 1964, the project laid out a series of economic objectives, including developing black-owned businesses and using boycotts to pressure white-owned businesses to adopt fair pricing and hiring practices.

Plans for each year were tailored to each of the counties and to the cities of Albany and Americus. Occasionally, the Southwest Georgia Project attempted a countywide approach, though it often took years of development at the county level before a successful regional program could be realized, and often the eventual program differed significantly from the original plans. For example, initial plans for a region-wide pecan farming and shelling cooperative, the Rural Areas Development program, were tabled by late 1963 over

⁴²⁰ Larry Mamiya oral history interview with author, June 6, 2009, Albany, Georgia.

⁴²¹ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, July 15, 1966, No. 4, 1. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f3

concerns about a lack of planning and technical expertise.⁴²² Instead, the project put forth more immediate political goals aimed toward improving the conditions of area farmers. Sherrod and his colleagues lobbied the counties to create positions for Negro County Agents and focused their efforts on electing black members to the ASCS boards.⁴²³

SIM students within the Southwest Georgia Project also confronted the lack of affordable housing in the counties.⁴²⁴ Summer student David Hawk worked with members of the Crisp County Movement in Cordele to organize tenants in the Sunset Homes housing project. They formed the Sunset Homes Improvement Association, with local barber Clemmie Gaston – the same man who had been charged with assault at the swim-in – as chairman, to protest rent increases, charges for “free” services including garbage collection, unlawful evictions, and abuse and intimidation of residents.⁴²⁵ Hawk worried that little would be accomplished because “a trained sense of hopelessness is partner of the economically oppressive system.”⁴²⁶ It was clear to SIM workers that in order for blacks in Southwest

⁴²² The Rural Areas Development project and other unsuccessful efforts can be seen as the forerunners of the ambitious New Communities, Inc., cooperative farm project created by Charles and Shirley Sherrod and others in 1969. New Communities, Inc. was a cooperatively owned community land trust, modeled on the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* of Israel. It comprised 5,700 acres of cropland jointly occupied and farmed by 800 rural families, the vast majority of them black. New Communities was the largest black-owned farm in the United States and lasted for 17 years before collapsing under the weight of its mortgage. TaRessa Stovall, “Charles Sherrod: Passing on the Blood and Pulse of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Aspire*, Albany State University, summer/fall 2007, 13; Unpublished autobiography of Bob Swann, Chapters 19 and 20, collection of the E.F. Schumacher Society, http://smallisbeautiful.org/about/biographies/swann_autobiography/swann19.html and [/swann20.html](http://smallisbeautiful.org/about/biographies/swann_autobiography/swann20.html); Ed Feaver oral history with author; Joe Pfister oral history with author.

⁴²³ SNCC papers, microfilm, REEL A-IV, frames 366-367.

⁴²⁴ Two of the interns would later go onto careers in the public housing sector -- Ed Feaver as Director of the Department of Health and Social Services in Florida, and Joe Howell as a developer of affordable housing communities in Washington, D.C. and Maryland.

⁴²⁵ “The Southwest Georgia Project: A Prospectus,” 1967, 11. SIM, UTS, 4A:4:f5.

⁴²⁶ “The Southwest Georgia Project: A Prospectus,” 12. SIM, UTS, 4A:4:f5.

Georgia to advance they had to overcome not just material challenges but the psychological obstacles that were the inheritance of centuries of oppression.

Education lay at the root of the project's plan to help undo this damage, but school reform, like much of the progress in Southwest Georgia, moved in fits and starts. In Cordele in 1966, over 500 junior and high school students boycotted classes in protest of poor school conditions, which consisted of such deprivations as lack of bathrooms, broken windows, and poor ventilation. Protests were met in April of that year by a Ku Klux Klan rally.⁴²⁷ Baker County, for its part, earned the distinction in 1966 of being the first county in the southern United States to lose federal school funding for refusing to comply with its own desegregation plan.⁴²⁸ In an attempt to regain federal funding, the school board transferred 60 black students to the formerly all-white school, but no black teachers were sent to the school and no whites were sent to the black school. After the beating of a black student in October, the black students walked out of the formerly all white school *en masse*.⁴²⁹ In November, black students boycotted the formerly all-white school in Crisp County to protest their verbal and physical mistreatment; however, the students found little support from their parents who feared economic reprisals.⁴³⁰

Change did come more quickly in the towns than in the rural counties. In 1966, the Albany school board voluntarily desegregated grades seven through nine, as well as the court-ordered lower grades, meaning that 587 blacks would go to integrated schools in

⁴²⁷ *News of the Field*, No. 6, March 30, 1966, 2. SNCC papers.

⁴²⁸ *News of the Field*, No. 7, April 6, 1966, 2-3. SNCC papers.

⁴²⁹ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, November 7, 1966, No. 7, 1; November 28, 1966, No.8, 1-2. SIM, UTS, 2b:1:f5.

⁴³⁰ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, November 28, 1966, No. 8, 2-3. SIM, UTS, 2b:1:f5.

1966.⁴³¹ Hoping to stimulate progress in the rural areas as well, in April of 1967, interns helped to create a weekly Freedom School in Baker County, attended by about seventy locals, where they taught about black historical persons and events including Adam Clayton Powell and Black Reconstruction. Project workers also targeted educational reform at the youngest levels. Following the lead of SNCC in Mississippi, they built and staffed Head Start programs, one of the few ways in which local people could avail themselves of federal development monies. One such program was established in Baker County in 1966.⁴³²

The seminary interns did not ceaselessly toil in the Georgia heat, however; one SIM volunteer recalled that Sherrod was particularly good at recognizing that movement workers could not labor incessantly, but needed some time off and relaxation to ease the pressure. He also insisted that votes and jobs alone would not sustain the black community, and to that end planned a slate of drama, musical, and dance programs, and workshops in photography, painting, and writing “to allow the black population to experience and enlarge their own culture.”⁴³³ One evening program in August of 1966, organized by SIM’s Joe Pfister, featured local storytellers, the Albany Freedom Singers, a SIM volunteer talking about

⁴³¹ *News of the Field*, No. 11, April 27, 1966, 3-4. SNCC papers.

⁴³² *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, December 13, 1966, No. 9, 4. SIM, UTS, 2b:1:f6. A facetious report from one of the program’s six SIM volunteers, Don Steffa, demonstrates how a sense of humor could aid survival in a tense situation like that in Baker. Steffa reported on the activities of the children in Head Start but filled his report with civil rights movement language, describing the job of herding pre-school children as “organizing independent black power.” Steffa reported that, “Leaders here have emphasized that the L.P.s (little people), must be organized. They must be organized to play games, eat lunch, and go to the bathroom. The L.P.s are powerful. They are independent. They neither listen to nor obey us.” He went on to describe daily school sessions as “mass meetings,” to refer to juice and cookies as a “Freedom Snack,” and to lament the difficulties of convincing all the L.P.s of the wisdom of non-violence. “There have been several cases of biting ... [and] there have been a few casualties: one large beetle, of drowning, and two goldfish, of unknown causes.” Each day ended with a “Freedom Nap” and then a “Freedom Ride” home. (*Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, June 29, 1966, No. 3, 2. SIM, UTS, 2b:1:f3.

⁴³³ “1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 13. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

African history, and local teenagers performing James Baldwin's "Blues for Mister Charlie."⁴³⁴ The following academic year, Sherrod and the Southwest Georgia Project proposed that SIM sponsor an "Indigenous Theatre Project," not dissimilar to that of the Federal Theatre Project groups created by the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration.⁴³⁵

In addition to taking occasional breaks and engaging local culture, the seminary volunteers had to find other ways, often spiritual, to sustain themselves. Joe Pfister reported that taking a long-range approach to social change was one way to avoid frustration and so remain committed to the often frustrating work of social change, but that the volunteers needed to find personal rewards as well. "I can't think of any other work to which society offers less social rewards," he wrote, "than in community organizing in the Movement. So the rewards must come from Movement groups themselves." Pfister and his colleagues attempted to keep each other committed and sane by playing music, studying, and working together toward "a common sense of purpose which extends beyond the immediate goals. It is a style of concern for all men and women. To my understanding it is the style of a group who would be obedient disciples of Jesus Christ."⁴³⁶ At least some of the SIM volunteers in Southwest Georgia, then, understood their work as akin to that of the early Christian church. Even though much of their work was focused on "secular" concerns like voting rights, the volunteers understood themselves to be the "church" gathered to do the work of God.

⁴³⁴ "Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter," August 2, 1966, No. 5, 1. SIM, UTS, 2b:1:f5.

⁴³⁵ "Proposal for an Indigenous Theatre Project in Southwest Georgia sponsored by the Student Interracial Ministry," undated, Maynard Moore papers, now in possession of author.

⁴³⁶ Joe Pfister, "Notes from Southwest Georgia: Building Long Range Style," *Skandalon*, Vol. 4, 12. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

Beyond the Plans: Southwest Georgia's Campaign for Hearts and Minds

The work of the SIM participants in the Southwest Georgia Project from 1965 through 1968 reflected Sherrod's growing understanding that it was, as he put it, time to "dig in for the long haul."⁴³⁷ In his view, the days of marches and protests had passed, and immediate short-term goals had now to be replaced by a long-term struggle to build and consolidate community power. Other activists came to the same conclusion, among them Bayard Rustin and Saul Alinsky, who operated, then and earlier, in other regions according to similar beliefs. As Joe Pfister, who all told would spend ten years working with Sherrod and the Southwest Georgia Project, reflected, "The poor and disenfranchised people of this country will not be given their 'freedom' but will have to make themselves powerful enough to demand it.... The project has a great task of educating people to politics and economics in order to create a united group as a political force."⁴³⁸

As time would reveal, Sherrod and Pfister had a remarkably good understanding of both the deep roots of a vastly complex social situation and of the difficulties that lay ahead in shifting the economic and social power structure. However, they may not have fully appreciated at the time just how long the struggle would be. Sherrod found few individuals willing to accompany him on the entire length of this journey. His wife Shirley Sherrod, a local girl, and others from Albany found they had little choice but to stay and fight. Joe Pfister and a few other volunteers made long-term commitments, but even they left eventually. And the majority of movement activists moved on after spending a summer or year in the Albany area. This was true for the leaders as well. Martin Luther King, Jr. never

⁴³⁷ Joe Pfister, "Notes from Southwest Georgia: Building Long Range Style," *Skandalon*, Vol. 4, 11. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

⁴³⁸ *Skandalon IV*, 11-12. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

returned to Southwest Georgia after 1962; SNCC left Sherrod there to mind the fort but was otherwise occupied; and even SIM turned out to be only a temporary visitor to the bottomlands.

Pfister suggested at the time that to survive the project would need a structure that encompassed both a long-range perspective on the movement and a generous understanding of what constituted progress. Project workers would also require some other way of drawing personal reward and meaning from the work, perhaps through the development of community ties or through communal study, or they would burn out and soon leave.⁴³⁹

Finding such sustenance was difficult in the face of little perceivable progress and in light of daily reminders of white power, including Ku Klux Klan rallies, recalcitrant voting registrars, and murderous sheriffs. The “long haul” did not offer the same potential for excitement that the confrontations and promised paradigm shifts in race relations provoked in the first years. It also did not have as its basis the clear moral logic of those earlier years or of the other social movements that followed and which competed for followers. Joe Pfister put it well when he said that the time had now come to move from “the glory of the summer” and into “the gloom of the winter.”⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ *Skandalon*, Vol. 4, 12. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

⁴⁴⁰ Feaver, “Taking All the Money,” 7. After the SIM project end in the spring of 1968 and Sherrod reorganized the project as the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education. The organization has been overseen by an all-black Board of Directors since 1974. Today the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education celebrates itself as an all-black project devoted to addressing social, economic, health, and education concerns in black communities, it publicly gives no acknowledgement to its beginnings as an explicitly interracial, religious-based effort to reform not just the lives of blacks in Southwest Georgia, but the very nature of the church and society itself. See: <http://www.srbwi.org/sponsors.html>, accessed on January 24, 2009. Joe Pfister returned to Union to finish his degree but then came back and stayed another seven years in Albany. But he no longer went out into the field to do community organizing or voter registration, saying that he felt it was no longer his place to do so. Later he supported the local activists by operating a printing business that published movement publications. Sherrod continued to organize in the counties of Southwest Georgia, though he spent much his time in the 1970s and 1980s working on the New Communities project. He also got involved in local

Conclusion: The Church Struggling to be Reborn

Set next to its sweeping goals of revolution and reconciliation, what was actually realized in Southwest Georgia was much more modest. Although some important electoral and economic advancements were begun under the auspices of the Southwest Georgia Project, SIM volunteers reckoned that, from their point of view, the exposure to black people and Southern culture that resulted in the shattering of “middle-class myths,” was both “the primary aim of the summer project” and its most successful result.⁴⁴¹ This exposure was not merely challenging but also threatening to many students’ assumptions about social equality, their roles in society, and, especially, their roles within the church and white America. As Feaver wrote in his first *skandalon* article, confronting the system was no longer theoretical but it had become for all of them an unceasing demand. But the volunteers also learned the depths of the system’s roots and its hold on Southern life. For many, it was quite a burden of discovery – to find out just how bad the system was and how urgently massive change was required, while at the same time seeing how nearly impossible creating that change was likely to be.

For many seminarians, their experience in Southwest Georgia was akin to a foreign cultural exchange, albeit at home in America and wrapped in a mission-like package. It provided a fascinating learning experience unto itself, regardless of the political or social

politics, getting elected to the Albany City Council in 1976, and serving until 1990. See: “This Far by Faith,” http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/charles_sherrod.html, accessed on January 25, 2009.

⁴⁴¹ “1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 13; Feaver, “Taking All the Money,” 6.

implications of the work. Many students remarked in their summer reports that the experience had been “life changing” or “one of the best things that ever happened to me.”⁴⁴²

Locals, too, obviously gained from the sweat equity these volunteers, and this mutual benefit, then, is perhaps another way in which the Southwest Georgia Project differed from SIM’s congregational placements. In the majority of congregational placements, in which white seminarians served black churches, the most noticeable benefit was the life experience and, in some cases, racial awakening experienced by the white students. This had the potential to seed great change in the future as those young ministers embarked on various careers in and out of the pulpit, but it had less obvious immediate impact. The congregations of the black churches had been led and preached to by whites before and would do so again. In the few cases where black ministerial students led white congregations and lived as equals in white communities, such as with James Forbes’ ministry to Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, the change wrought within the white community was larger and more obvious. In Southwest Georgia, by approaching ministry outside the strict definition of preacher and congregation, both parties stood to benefit more obviously and immediately. White students serving in the area could experience their cultural awakenings while the black communities could benefit materially from the fieldwork of the student, whether he or she was registering voters, picking cotton, or running a printing press.

The Southwest Georgia project gave seminarians the chance to try out another definition of ministry, working outside of the institutional church while still doing “church work.” With the nation experiencing waves of social protest and reorder, theologians and some mainline Protestant church leaders were struggling to determine just what their work should be in order to remain relevant, or even to survive at all. The Southwest Georgia

⁴⁴² See, for example, Joe Pfister report in “1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 84.

Project was an “experiment, at some considerable risk.”⁴⁴³ Not only did it test the traditional role of the clergy leader, but it did so in an explicitly interracial, and very public, way, and in the context of a particularly repressive stronghold of white supremacy in the Deep South.

Sherrod wrote, “We acknowledge that the church is the means by which God chooses to save the world, but also acknowledge that the church has need of renewal and reconstruction in function, in our minds, in the world, and in the Scriptures.”⁴⁴⁴ The decision to work outside of church structures was based on both logistical and theological concerns, although it was not always clear which came first or was stronger. Numerous ideologies, practical concerns, and crises seemed to be warring in the same space. Did work have to be done outside of the church because there was no place within the church due to its inherent resistance? Or had the institutional church outlived its usefulness, calling for new definitions of ministry and new ways of defining the church itself? And were these, in fact, new ways, or a reconnection to the church’s historical purpose?

One answer is that SIM clergy *had* to go outside of the church walls for there was no place for them within. Pushed outside the church, they would “stand as a witness to the responsible role which the Southern church must now assume if it is to become involved in the solution of the country’s racial problems.”⁴⁴⁵ In contrast to this purely logistical answer was a more theological argument about the true nature of the church itself, and the need to recover its historical roots and mission. In this argument, the Church with a capital ‘C’ was a

⁴⁴³ See, for example, “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” August 1966, 9-10. SIM, UTS: 4A:1:f9.

⁴⁴⁴ “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” August 1966, 1. SIM, UTS: 4A:1:f9.

⁴⁴⁵ Ed Feaver, “1966 Report: The Student Interracial Ministry,” 79. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

mere institution but *the church* was “the fellowship, both visible and invisible, of those committed ‘in Christ,’ to each other and to the world.”⁴⁴⁶

For Sherrod, as for many of those who participated in SIM, *church* was the experience of brotherhood and of reconciliation, not the structures of building or even scripture. Sherrod was often eloquent on the subject, and quoting him in some length here affords a sense of both his goals and the language he employed to describe them:

“Let me bear witness before you that I have seen the church, moving, surging and falling, struggling to breathe, eager to learn the truth; I have seen it in stinking jail cells packed with people, singing and sweating people, brought about before the Pilates of this day; I have seen the church under the stars praying and singing in the ashes of a burned down church building, in the winter shivering under a tent in the open country, in a home where people cried together without speech but with a common understanding; I have seen the church in a pool room. I have seen with my eyes whites protecting blacks with their bodies and blacks bleeding to shield whites from whites.

I have seen ministers lead their congregation from Sunday service to the City Hall to condemn the state. I have heard ministers with three grades of education put Ph.D.s to shame. I have seen men share their bread until the last was gone. I have seen a band of rugged brothers willing to risk death for each other if need be. I have seen the strength of fellowship among those who formally refuse the fellowship of the church. Somehow I think this life must be shared for it to be comprehended; we do have something to offer but there is probably much more to be received. This is an experiment in truth to find the truth.”⁴⁴⁷

Calls to reform the church and the plans for how to approach the work on the ground in Southwest Georgia were often made using traditional Christian metaphors of death and rebirth. Noting that the goal of the project was to stimulate local self-sufficiency, entrepreneurialism, and leadership, Sherrod declared, “We as a staff are born to die.”⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ Ed Feaver, “1966 Report: The Student Interracial Ministry,” 79; Also quoted in “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” 10.

⁴⁴⁷ The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment that Worked,” 4.

⁴⁴⁸ “The Southwest Georgia Project: A Prospectus,” 6.

Another time he wrote, ““The task before SIM as it understands itself is as a participant in helping the churches die that the church might be reborn.”⁴⁴⁹ He hoped that his community organization program would be the shortest lived such program in history, for he wished the local people to take it over immediately from the outside professionals. He believed that only through the death of one way of organizing and thinking and sharing power would other methods be newly born. Pfister, too, predicted that South itself would not change without the Church changing and that the church “will be one of the last things to change.”⁴⁵⁰

One common way of making such change seem both appealing and possible was to invoke it not as a radical departure from church business as usual but as a return to the true path as practiced by Jesus and the prophets. “The prophets were the heretics of their day,” Sherrod wrote in a local newspaper. “The Church, the real Church, has always been made up of people who refuse to accept things as they are.”⁴⁵¹ Another writer agreed, exhorting readers to “turn to your New Testament. There is no word for ‘congregation.’ For three hundred years there were no buildings that they called churches. The early Christians were on the move, taking the Gospel to the poor, the needy, the enslaved, the captive, in all the highways and byways. This was the church: a fellowship of mission, changing as it became necessary, moving according to where the need was, preaching one to the other and being the church, not having church.”⁴⁵² Reporting back to the seminary in 1965 from Albany, Sherrod

⁴⁴⁹ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 1. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

⁴⁵⁰ “1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 86.

⁴⁵¹ Charles Sherrod, “The Revolutionaries and the Church,” *The Other Side: Southwest Georgia News*, Vol. 1, No. 2, August 1967, 4.

⁴⁵² “What is the Church?” *The Other Side: Southwest Georgia News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 1967, 4.

wrote: “The churches are in for a shocking century – at least that is my hope. It will be the century in which the churches died and the church was born again.”⁴⁵³

As we shall see in the following chapters, while the Southwest Georgia Project may have been unique in deed, in substance it was but one of the numerous ways in which the church struggled to reinvent itself in the 1960s. Risto Lehtonen, General Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation during the middle and late 1960s, described his generation’s quest to challenge and change the Church as “a storm,” that would continue to wreak havoc in theological thought and institutional structure into the present day.⁴⁵⁴ The fumbling attempts of SIM and the Southwest Georgia Project were but raindrops in this greater downpour.

The Student Interracial Ministry declared that it put seminarians into the world “at those places where decisions must be made and the tactics for revolution formulated.”⁴⁵⁵ Southwest Georgia was certainly one of those places. The call to *reconciliation*, for so long the goal fostered by SIM, was now joined, if not replaced, by a call to social and economic *revolution*. The Student Interracial Ministry project had entered a new phase.

⁴⁵³ “From the Gator’s Stronghold,” report by Charles Sherrod, September 16, 1965. SIM, UTS, 1C.1.f6.

⁴⁵⁴ Risto Lehtonen, *Story of a Storm: The Ecumenical Student Movement in the Turmoil of Revolution* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 5.

⁴⁵⁵ “The Story of the Student Interracial Ministry: An Experiment That Worked,” 10.

PART THREE

**“LIVING COMPLETELY IN THIS WORLD”
INTO THE CITY AND BACK TO CAMPUS**

CHAPTER SIX

Seminarians in the City: Embracing Urban Ministry, 1967-1970

“It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, 1944⁴⁵⁶

“Not all laymen approve, but many tolerate the activism of their clergymen as long as they talk and act in the name of peace, reconciliation, and love. In growing numbers, however, clergymen have been turning to a kind of social action whose watchwords are conflict, power, and self-interest. As they have moved into this new area, they have found the ground less sure, the directions less well-marked, and predictably, the response less tolerant. The results thrill, confuse, distress, and anger, often all at the same time.”

– William C. Martin, *Christians in Conflict*, 1972⁴⁵⁷

Winds of Change in the Mid-1960's: A Revolution at Hand?

From the country soil of Southwest Georgia grew the change that carried the Student Interracial Ministry further and further outside the walls of the institutional church and into the often turbulent streets of America's cities. When the SIM student leaders took stock of their progress in 1965, they saw that their project, initiated in 1960 and 1961 to place seminarians in congregations across racial boundaries, had helped open minds and lines of communication within black and white congregations. However, beginning in 1964, the

⁴⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953 ed.)

⁴⁵⁷ William C. Martin, *Christians in Conflict* (Chicago: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1972), 1.

Southwest Georgia Project pushed SIM in a new direction, away from addressing racial problems primarily within the structure of the church itself to using what it termed the “self-realizing church” as a philosophical and physical base from which to reach out into the community.⁴⁵⁸ The effects of this new direction on the communities around the churches were now more obvious, as SIM joined efforts to increase electoral participation and provide new economic opportunities. These efforts, moreover, took place within the context of rising calls within the civil rights movement for Black Power, the federal government’s War on Poverty, and the increasing influence of the student movement and anti-war movement on and off of university campuses. By 1965, SIM saw urban America as the natural direction for the organization’s next steps. In the words of one former intern: “That’s where it was happening.”⁴⁵⁹

The demands of southern African Americans for equality and against racial and economic injustice reverberated in the large northern and midwestern cities to which many blacks had migrated earlier in the century. But the marches of the early part of the decade now seemed like past events and frustration grew with the each passing year. Demands for justice turned strident and sometimes violent, and starting in Harlem in 1964, urban protests turned into riots, a phenomenon that spread westward across the nation over the next several years, peaking in 1967, with 163 separate events. Rioters invoked a rhetoric of revolution, but it was also heard frequently in the civil rights movement, the student movement, and in the churches as well. The intensity and frequency of violent uprisings provided, according to

⁴⁵⁸ William C. Martin, *Christians in Conflict* (Chicago: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1972), 1.

⁴⁵⁹ John Stumme, oral history telephone interview with author, December 9, 2008.

historian Thomas Sugrue, “seemingly irrefutable evidence that the revolution was at hand.”⁴⁶⁰

The sense that a rupture with the past was imminent pervaded discussions at churches and seminaries. George Walters, one of the SIM student directors, wrote from Union Seminary in a 1967 magazine article that talk of church renewal, once the preoccupation of Protestant liberals at mid-century, already seemed passé. “At this point in history, nothing short of the complete revolutionizing of the church may be adequate as an image. It is not simply an institutional task, nor simply a task for the clergy in their pulpits, seminaries, or experimental centers. It is a task for all of them and must be done all together.”⁴⁶¹ Religious beliefs and structures that had long seemed stable now threatened to crumble away to nothing.

Seeking to define what revolution meant in and for the churches, *The National Catholic Reporter* convened a group of churchmen, civil rights leaders, community organizers, and scholars in a Detroit hotel room for several days in late 1967. The ensuing “Conversation on Revolution” covered many of the same issues and questions with which SIM was contending. The group discussed revolution as it applied to education, students’ rights, Black Power, church renewal, and economic reform. Intended to demonstrate the points of connection between the various movements and strategies, the sometimes heated discussions instead highlighted the cross purposes at which many of the participants found

⁴⁶⁰ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 325.

⁴⁶¹ M. George Walters, “Theological Education: Crisis and Task,” *skandalon*, Vol. 3, Spring 1967, 5. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

themselves. This was especially the case with two of those present, Saul Alinsky and Ivanhoe Donaldson.

Saul Alinsky, the secular son of Russian Jewish immigrants, pioneered the modern practice of community organizing, founding the Industrial Areas Foundation and working primarily with Catholic Church partners in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods beginning in the 1930s. Ivanhoe Donaldson was the leader of SNCC's New York chapter, and an advocate of Black Power and Black Nationalism. SIM students worked with both Alinsky's organizations and with SNCC and Black Power groups, and Donaldson's and Alinsky's conversation illustrates some of the issues seminarians faced in the field.

In Ivanhoe Donaldson's view, black people in America could not achieve their goals under the existing social, economic, and political systems, but had to disrupt those systems entirely. "There's a difference between being an ethnic group seeking power to participate as normal individuals in an ongoing society, and it's another thing when an ethnic group is also radical in its politics and begins to have revolutionary overtones. It means it doesn't want just to participate in that society; it's looking for radical change in that society."⁴⁶² He seemed to propose a version of the commonly heard sentiment, reflecting past white control and a desire to replace old white leaders with young black ones, 'it's our turn now.'

Alinsky responded by arguing that such demands for absolute revolution were merely an "escape hatch" from the real work of addressing systemic problems, which he suggested could only be done through organizing people at the grass roots level and working within existing institutions. He predicted that a revolution in the economic and social order would not be achieved through completely dismantling current structures, but by steady work to

⁴⁶² "Conversations on Revolution," *The National Catholic Reporter*, February 28, 1968, 5.

reform current structures from within. “Those who talk about revolution [always] start with revolution,” Alinsky said, and they leave out “all the stages that are essential in getting the power. Without the organization, all of this stuff becomes abstract rhetoric.”⁴⁶³ Instead, he recommended a practical approach of working within the neighborhoods and through community networks and leaders, primarily from local churches, in order to build a new, locally-controlled base of power.

Versions of Donaldson’s and Alinsky’s conversations, pitting the idealistic against the pragmatic, took place throughout the country in the latter half of the 1960s and were a constant at the seminars and within SIM. Neither approach offered a perfect solution; the former offered vision without organization, while the latter offered organization without vision, and neither seemed sustainable.⁴⁶⁴ SIM eventually developed a hybrid approach that combined a Social Gospel-style belief in the divine injunction to create the Kingdom of Heaven with a Christian Realism assessment of human limitations, both of the social structures humans create and the human potential to transform these structures. This assessment often led them to adopt practical grassroots strategies.

Some few SIM students, notably Steve Rose, who wrote prolifically on the subject of the changing church in his journal articles and in *The Grass Roots Church*, first went through the idealistic stage, then moved on to a pragmatic approach. Even while demanding revolutionary levels of change, most participants called for employing strategies that could be achieved gradually and realistically within existing constraints by building on alliances and institutional structures. Conflicts still arose, however, between ideals and strategies in a

⁴⁶³ “Conversations on Revolution,” 5.

⁴⁶⁴ Mike Miller, “The 60s Student Movement and Saul Alinsky: An Alliance that Never Happened,” *Social Policy*, Winter 2003/Spring 2004; vol. 34, no. 2/3, 109-110.

continuous process of self-examination that informed the SIM planning sessions. Would SIM continue to work for racial reconciliation through small-scale congregational reform? Would it call for a wholesale re-tooling of the church and society? Or would it follow up the work it had begun in Southwest Georgia by turning to the economic and racial needs of the so-called secular city, and with or without a specifically articulated spiritual purpose or framework? And how should it respond, as an organization founded on the ideal of interracialism, to the recent calls from the Black Power movement for blacks and whites to work separately within their own communities? In the end, in translating a religious prescription to “do good” into specific economic, cultural, and political programs, SIM students and many other religious believers combined idealism with pragmatism.

A pragmatic, humanistic approach can be a sustaining ideology unto itself, but for those in SIM and other Christian Progressives, the Protestant church provided a belief system that justified and emboldened them to initiate change. The battleground into which Christian Progressives ventured in the late 1960s was that place in which modern problems seemed to be at their most persistent, America’s struggling cities.⁴⁶⁵ This chapter uses SIM’s experiments in urban ministry as a lens through which to view the ways in which members of the mainline churches in the mid-1960s tried to adapt revolutionary rhetoric into a workable program for change in the urban setting. The result was a belief in Christian mission without the promise of an eventual Kingdom of Heaven on earth, a kind of Social Gospel minus the millennialism. The urban projects developed by SIM and other groups of Christian Progressives attempted to find meaningful and effective roles for an activist church during a time of vast social change.

⁴⁶⁵ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 325.

SIM in the Secular City: The Ideas Behind a “New” Urban Ministry

Theologian Harvey Cox introduced the term “secular city” to the national dialogue through the title of his surprise best seller in 1965. Called “hands down, Protestantism’s most discussed book” by *The Christian Century* magazine, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* sold nearly a million copies and stirred much discussion in a nation eager to understand the implications of its racial and spiritual crises.⁴⁶⁶ Once a subject for discussion only in seminaries and Sunday schools, theology had spilled out into the streets. Cox’s thesis, which was built upon the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, challenged the common notion of the modern industrial city as a soulless metropolis in which technology and modernity had replaced basic beliefs and value systems. In contrast to Arthur Schlesinger’s argument that modern society would outgrow the need for religion, Bonhoeffer had argued that as the world came “of age,” it was not jettisoning religion but adapting it for its current purposes. By departing from strict Biblical interpretation, modern Christians, he wrote, had been freed to practice the spirit of Christianity apart from outdated ritual. Harvey Cox agreed that modernity and changing religious practices did not spell the end of religion, but he also argued for further theological and spiritual engagement with worldly concerns. “The secular,” he claimed, “is not outside the realm of action or God’s presence.”⁴⁶⁷ Christians need not lament secularization, he wrote, for it did not equate to secularism, which itself served as a kind of substitute religion. Rather secularization, for Cox, represented an opportunity to authentically apply Christian thought since it was the “liberation of man from

⁴⁶⁶ Walter E. Ziegenhals’ *Urban Churches in Transition* (1978) includes a bibliography of forty-four publications about urban ministry, and many more have been written since. See, Ziegenhals, *Urban Churches in Transition* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1978), 195-201.

⁴⁶⁷ Rodney L. Petersen, “Training Prophets,” *Religion in the Secular City: Essays in Honor of Harvey Cox* (Trinity, 2001), 30.

religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one.”⁴⁶⁸ According to this view, Christians living fully in the secular world were more free to practice the demands of their faith. In the urban context, this meant addressing the ills and needs of the city and its occupants.

The ideological turn to the cities and to economic concerns reflected what Cox termed a national shift in mood at mid-decade.⁴⁶⁹ The first five years of the 1960s had seen major legislative advances for African American rights and pushed race issues to the fore of the nation’s conscience and consciousness. Some parts of society joyously embraced these changes, others resisted or ignored them, and some regarded the true work as having just begun. In the church, all of these reactions could be seen at once. Within the same denomination some congregations fled to the suburbs and others recommitted to staying in the inner cities, where they tried to adapt to declining membership, connect to new populations, and respond to community need for social change. This latter group was a small minority in the over-all church population and yet it represented a continuity of engagement with urban mission on the part of the mainline churches, one that dated back to the Social Gospel movement. The churches’ turn to the cities in the late 1960s, then, was not a radical departure but the re-embracing of a tradition of urban social service that had quietly persisted since the nineteenth century.

The Church’s re-embrace of urban ministry was in part a result of legislative gains in the civil rights arena. After the passage of civil rights legislation, racial inequities that fell outside of strict legal control became more obvious, and the plight of economically

⁴⁶⁸ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 15.

⁴⁶⁹ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 1. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

disadvantaged blacks was thrown into greater relief.⁴⁷⁰ White religious leaders ensconced in the urban North were suddenly more aware, or forced to address, the conditions of the inner cities. Religious activists saw the potential of the impersonal city to endanger human relationships, and countered with an urban offensive that would spread Christian values while providing substantive relief efforts.⁴⁷¹ Spurred on by the example of Saul Alinsky in Chicago, both Protestant and Catholic churches adopted community organizing as the most important single strategy for urban mission, and the SIM project embraced urban ministry with gusto in both the North and South.⁴⁷²

The Student Interracial Ministry Project Turns to the City

The Student Interracial Ministry turned its attention to the urban situation in the fall of 1965, having spent its first five years modeling integration and interracialism within the church. It celebrated the small victories it achieved, that “here and there a church called a minister or accepted some members on an inclusive basis.”⁴⁷³ At the same time, the seminarians acknowledged the limits of their and other religious efforts at the level of the individual church, noting that “many other congregations only shrank back in fear, threw up private property signs in front of their doors, and posted the police on the front steps during worship.” The student organizers concluded that their current approach could guarantee only limited returns, and they laid out a new plan for urban ministry in mid-1965 based on their

⁴⁷⁰ Daniel Callahan, ed. *The Secular City Debate* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 1-2.

⁴⁷¹ Daniel Callahan, ed. *The Secular City Debate*, 1-2.

⁴⁷² Robert V. Kemper and Julie Atkins, “The World As it Should Be: Faith-Based Community Development in America,” in Stanley Highland, ed. *Community Building in the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2005), 71-100.

⁴⁷³ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 1. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

belief that “SIM’s philosophy had to change.” They modeled the urban projects on their program in Southwest Georgia, which although decidedly rural, shared many of the same economic and social justice concerns found in the urban centers.⁴⁷⁴

The Southwest Georgia Project, under the leadership of Charles Sherrod, combined the idealistic vision of the Beloved Community with pragmatic goals and strategies. It modeled an approach to ministry that questioned traditional church and clergy boundaries and pastoral roles, and encouraged interracial cooperation not just within the church but through political campaigns, voter registration, and business development. The SIM students believed that applying a similar strategy in the urban context would serve to “humanize the social, political, and economic structures that deny and distort human dignity and freedom.”⁴⁷⁵ The students also felt “called” to serve in the urban setting, where sixty-one percent of the population now lived. They agreed with Gibson Winter who had recently argued that in fleeing urban centers for the suburbs, mainline churches expressed “an illusory hope for escape from the responsibility for shaping the metropolis.”⁴⁷⁶ Rather than fall for this illusion, SIM’s students embraced the responsibility that they felt urban ministry demanded of them.

In September 1966, SIM leaders met in Chicago to outline a new series of urban-based projects in which students would serve with both local churches and existing community organizations, some of them secular. They argued that “problems of poverty, segregation, and unequal opportunities have reached crisis proportions,” and that the urban

⁴⁷⁴ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 1. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

⁴⁷⁵ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

⁴⁷⁶ Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

setting seemed the natural strategic “step in the growth process” of the Student Interracial Ministry.⁴⁷⁷

Charles Sherrod, director of the Southwest Georgia Program and still studying at Union Seminary, proposed to the Chicago meeting that SIM develop a series of urban programs which embraced non-traditional pastoral work, especially group ministries, and that created more opportunities for seminary students to engage with contemporary problems. Sherrod proposed a four-fold overall direction: “Toward Black Power; Toward the death of religion and the life of the church; Toward social change and change in personal values; Toward living.”⁴⁷⁸ Maynard Moore, SIM’s field coordinator, translated Sherrod’s vision into more concrete planning language, producing an agenda that called for the development of independent black economic projects, that re-envisioned seminary training to include long periods of urban ministry, and that attempted to put church people and their religious ethics to work in a way that directly benefitted urban populations.

Ever the minister, Moore couched his plan within a series of questions: Where does economic and political power reside, how does the system work, and how do we bring about redistribution of wealth and power? How can the student/teacher relationship be redefined, what new curriculum structures and teaching methods can be devised, and what is the seminary’s relationship to education in general? How can an adequate doctrine of the church be recovered, and how can we redefine the relationship between the church and the laity? Moore returned to the project’s founding concern, reconciliation in race relations, when considering the development of future projects. Of this goal he asked: What does

⁴⁷⁷ “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

⁴⁷⁸ “National Committee, Student Interracial Ministry: Summary of Discussion on Aims and Purposes, March 10-11, 1967, New York, New York, 1. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f10.

reconciliation mean in relation to power and equality, what is the role of whites in the Movement, and what is the church's new role in the freedom revolution?⁴⁷⁹ Moore's questions reflect that the project found itself, at that moment, operating according to an older model that needed to be adapted to be functional. In contrast to the project's founders' vision that the two races would find healing if only they understood one another, Moore's concerns reveal a greater understanding of the forces – economic and political power – that determine how a society functions and whether or not it will change. Moore's framing also implied a critique of the institutional church and challenged it to responsibly wield its own political, economic, and moral power.

Both Moore's and Sherrod's documents were discussed at the National Committee meeting in March of 1967, and were distributed, along with summary comments of the ensuing discussion, to current and past participants, advisors, and to seminaries that might contribute students. The National Committee urged further discussion on the issues, noting that no resolutions had been reached, but also that the SIM mission and structure needed to be redefined in order to establish a "common point of departure" for those involved.⁴⁸⁰

That departure point would be somewhere in the urban complex. The students argued that not only were the urban poor in dire straits, but so too were the urban churches – both "dying their slow and painful deaths."⁴⁸¹ They wrote that the church, by virtue of its

⁴⁷⁹ "National Committee, Student Interracial Ministry: Summary of Discussion on Aims and Purposes, March 10-11, 1967, New York, New York, 1-2. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f10.

⁴⁸⁰ "National Committee, Student Interracial Ministry: Summary of Discussion on Aims and Purposes, March 10-11, 1967, New York, New York, 2. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f10.

⁴⁸¹ "SIM in the Urban Situation," 2. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13. Mainline churches at mid-decade related to the inner city in one of three ways: by fleeing from a traditional urban parish into the suburbs, by conducting the occasional mission foray from the suburbs back into the bad-dark-dirty city" with a Christmas basket, or by remaining in the city with membership numbers deflated by suburban outmigration, and trying to survive in an environment where "problems of poverty, segregation, and unequal opportunities have reached crisis

independence and power, as well as its central ethos of responsibility, should be *the* engine of urban social change. But how should the church go about doing this? The seminarians acknowledged that this question would not be answered easily for it ran “deeply through the whole meaning of theological education, the Christian stance for life, the meaning of a congregation in mission, God’s will, [and the] purpose and destiny for the city and for urbanites.”⁴⁸²

The students drew both on Social Gospel ideas and their hard-won experience in Southwest Georgia to argue that a church bent merely on sustaining itself missed its fundamental purpose, that of a mission of service, and of potential renewal and reconciliation. They argued for a redefinition of the church as mission first, with the form of the church secondary. Religious reformers in SIM hoped that through experiments in urban ministry, some answers might be revealed. As the SIM leaders put it, “the dual encounter with Black Power and the tremendous problems of the urban world, north and south, has demanded that new directions be taken.” Furthermore, they added, “there is no longer time to wait. The world does not stop for the church to get ready to serve it.”⁴⁸³

Over the next several years, the Student Interracial Ministry added to its continuing program in rural Georgia by establishing a host of urban ministry projects across the country. The project did not regard urban as meaning the North, and it launched programs in Richmond, Oakland, and Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Indianapolis, Indiana; Baltimore, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Jackson, Mississippi;

proportions.”⁴⁸¹ However, SIM pointed to the genesis of a “fourth column” of urban ministry, proposing that all of the congregations of a given urban *and* suburban area should be responsible for the totality of the area and its various concerns.

⁴⁸² “SIM in the Urban Situation,” 3. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f13.

⁴⁸³ “Accent on Responsibility: Student Interracial Ministry Prospectus,” 2. SIM, UTS, 1G:1:f3.

Kansas City, Missouri; New York City, Buffalo, and Richmond, New York; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Charleston and Kingstree, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C.⁴⁸⁴ Whereas SIM had once focused entirely on interracial pastoral placements, by 1966 it had fifty-five summer students and twenty-four more year-long students working in Southwest Georgia, in historically black colleges in Atlanta, and in its new urban projects. By SIM's final year, 1967-68, all eighty-four student participants, thirty-six summer and forty-eight year-long, were working in urban ministry projects.

Before rolling out the larger series of city-based projects, the Student Interracial Ministry first launched its urban efforts on two regional fronts: in the Upper South with an interracial team in Richmond, Virginia, and in the then current civil rights battleground of the urban Midwest, Chicago. In both cases, SIM developed projects that tapped into the rich heritage of mainline Protestant urban mission, partnering with established as well as new church-based urban experiments and with secular partners. In the case of the Richmond project, SIM followed a traditional pattern of urban ministry, working within an inner-city church and ministering to the needs of its immediate neighbors. Although urban ministry of this kind was in some ways a new frontier for the progressive church of the 1960s, in others it was a return to the Social Gospel and settlement house approach of earlier in the century. The SIM students in Richmond and other cities drew on the ready examples of Jane Addams' Hull House and the East Harlem Protestant Parish. If efforts such as these can be described as civil rights movement work through Christian Progressive mission, then SIM's project in Chicago, which teamed two seminarians with the SCLC and the Chicago Freedom Movement, might be considered mission work through the movement. However, personnel, strategies, and ideologies were all in transition and neither the Richmond nor the Chicago

⁴⁸⁴ "1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry," 45-67. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

project retained a fixed approach; in truth, though one was primarily mission-based and the other movement-based, both used and borrowed from each approach. Their stories help explain both these approaches and the fluid conditions in which they were employed.

Putting Rhetoric into Action: SIM's Urban Plans Take Shape in Richmond

The Richmond project teamed Carol Lucas, a black Presbyterian who had just graduated from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, with Keith Davis, Jr., a white Lutheran from Nebraska and a student at Lutheran Seminary at Maywood. The two worked with Robert Hare, the white minister of an all-black, inner-city church, First United Presbyterian. Hare was the same minister who, by participating in efforts to desegregate public facilities in Raleigh, North Carolina, while an associate chaplain at North Carolina State University in early 1963, had aroused the ire of Jesse Helms who had used his television position to help run Hare out of town. Black ministers in Raleigh who had come to know Hare through the civil rights movement helped connect him with the church in Richmond, where he became the first white minister freely elected by the members of a black Southern church.⁴⁸⁵

Most travelers to Richmond at that time snaked through the city on the shiny new Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, unaware of the urban chaos that lay just off the exit ramps in the city's Jackson Ward. This was First United Presbyterian's neighborhood, and it was choked with crumbling slum housing, much of it without water or electricity. The congregation had originally been founded as a mission of the Presbyterian Church, USA in 1890 and the proud brick and stone Victorian church at the corner of Monroe and Catherine

⁴⁸⁵ Robert Hare, oral history with author, November 23, 2009.

Streets was completed three years later. In 1963, however, a bootlegger sold booze two doors down from the church and a brothel operated with impunity further down the block. A few of First United Presbyterian's members still came from the neighborhood, but a large portion of them had moved on to a couple of other, nicer working class neighborhoods which ringed Jackson Ward. The congregation had even purchased its minister a home in one of these outlying neighborhoods, not wishing to subject him to the immediate area.⁴⁸⁶ The neighborhood problem that was perhaps most obvious in the early summer of 1967 when the seminarians first arrived, though, was the hundreds of children of all ages running wild in the streets and alleys with no camps or schools or other programs to occupy them.⁴⁸⁷

Carol Lucas recalled that the local boys complained that “‘there ain’t nothin’ to do around here, nothin’ to do at all, man. Nowhere to go but the streets, man!’ And the streets were where they lived. They had very unhappy home lives ... [and] were school dropouts at the tenth grade, had been in trouble with the police on countless charges, and were generally distrusted and feared by the entire community.”⁴⁸⁸ On his first evening in the neighborhood, Davis was chased down and accosted by a group of teenage boys, who released him only when he calmly introduced himself by saying, “Hello, I’m Pastor Keith. Is there anything I can do for you?” Davis always wore his clerical collar after that, with the hope that this outward sign of his religious affiliation would protect him.⁴⁸⁹

Hare set Davis and Lucas the task of bringing the wayward boys back into the fold of the community. The two interns won a grant from the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to

⁴⁸⁶ Robert Hare, oral history with author, November 23, 2009.

⁴⁸⁷ “Student Interracial Ministry Press Release,” SIM UTS, 2A:2:f5.

⁴⁸⁸ “1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 7-8. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

⁴⁸⁹ Edgar R. Trexler, “He’s Safe on the Streets,” *The Lutheran*, September 28, 1966, 6.

institute summer recreational programs. Absent “a public blade of grass for probably 20 or more blocks,” they used an asphalt school playground and the streets themselves.⁴⁹⁰ One day, while seeking help setting up for an arts and crafts session, Carol Lucas struck up a conversation with some of the young men who regularly loitered near the church. This casual conversation led the young ministers into an informal outreach program to the local street gang, the Chandeliers. Soon the gang members were stopping by the church, which most had not been inside of in at least a decade, to play chess and checkers and drink Kool-Aid, which culminated in the ministers and the gang members collaborating to refurbish the church basement as a recreation room. A church member taught the boys how to level the old foundation, put up studding and drywall, and paint the new walls.

The basement project went so well that Lucas and Davis asked the boys to help them turn an abandoned barbershop near the church into a community recreation center. The gang members cleaned and painted the space, negotiated for a jukebox, and built a ping-pong table. (Davis noted wryly that the men who sold him a suspiciously discounted pool table were Lutherans.) The boys themselves established the center’s rules, which included a ban on using profanity, and created a cleaning schedule. The recreation center did not operate without a hitch however. One morning, after he and the gang had spent the day before putting up walls in the new clubhouse, Davis was woken from his bed by the leader of the Chandeliers who admitted that all the sheetrock they had just hung in the new clubhouse had been stolen. Davis helped him take it down again and return it to its rightful owner.

Despite the hurdles, the bi-racial team of Davis and Lucas felt that they had begun to find their mission through service to a previously abandoned constituency; a group that was

⁴⁹⁰ “Student Interracial Ministry – 1966,” 7-8. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11.

reachable simply by plugging in a jukebox and offering some basic respect. They called their project “Shepherd of the Streets,” though this necessitated explaining to the boys what a shepherd was. The boys accepted the name, but mostly referred to the place simply as “the center.” The center served a mostly secular purpose in the community, and Davis noted that “we only casually mention the church and preaching. We share Christ, we don’t dispense him.”⁴⁹¹ Instead of a heavier-handed mission approach, the students elected to just make a the center a place kids would want to hang out, and if religious folks were there as well, then perhaps that example would rub off.

Carol Lucas had grown up in Laurinburg, North Carolina, where she had been active in her Presbyterian church and in the United Presbyterian Youth. She and Davis made an effective, if unlikely, team, although they often fell into traditional gender roles, Davis playing football and pool with the boys in the gang while Lucas played house with and tended to the needs of the girls. In one instance, when one of the girls from the center was arrested, Lucas acted as pastor, parent, and counselor all in one. The girl refused to give the police officers her name or address; instead she would only give them the address of the church and Davis, Lucas, and the Reverend Hare’s names. Davis and Lucas decided together that Lucas would go down to the station, where the girl was released into her custody. Lucas’ explanation was that “the church was the only place the girl was assured of help,” but it seems obvious that she and Davis had also succeeded in establishing trust with the kids in Jackson Ward.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ “1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 7-8. SIM, UTS, 1C:2:f11; Trexler, “He’s Safe on These Streets,” 9.

⁴⁹² “Student Interracial Ministry Press Release,” SIM UTS, 2A:2:f5. *The Lutheran* magazine ran an edited version of this press release as a story in its September 28, 1966 edition under the byline Edgar R. Trexler and with the title, “He’s Safe on These Streets.” In the article, Trexler focuses entirely on Davis and the brave and

Davis remarked at the time that the recreation center “is almost like their church – a place of freedom, joy, and fellowship,” though he added that “the center can never and will never be a substitute for the church, but it is an effective and relevant means of spreading the Gospel of Christ. The youth know that we care. Now we’ve got to help them understand that God cares, and that Christ died on that cross they put in the window.”⁴⁹³ For Davis, the SIM program was his missionary work and the Jackson Ward his mission.

Lucas would stay on as an intern throughout that academic year, and was joined again the following summer by Davis and four additional SIM interns, two from Union Theological Seminary and one each from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond and the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville. Davis remarked in a 1966 magazine article that “by the end of my two summers there, I was being introduced by the members of a Negro gang as their ‘brother.’ The fact that I came back a second summer was significant to them.”⁴⁹⁴ The students continued to develop Shepherd of the Streets, although by that time the original pool table had worn out and the gang members had purchased a replacement. The students also added a playground, a tutoring program, and a street ministry project.⁴⁹⁵

Chicago: A History of Church Involvement in the Urban Environment

In the vast midwestern city of Chicago, the churches and religious organizations had been ministering to the special needs of its inner city neighborhoods since before the turn of

peculiar nature of his mission in a black neighborhood, ignoring the essential team and interracial nature of the ministry. In the one mention of Lucas, she is referred to erroneously as Carol Jones.

⁴⁹³ “1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 7-8. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

⁴⁹⁴ Trexler, “He’s Safe on These Streets,” 7.

⁴⁹⁵ “1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 55. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

the century. The Second Presbyterian Church began operating its Bethel Seaman's Mission in the early 1840s and the YMCA erected its first American building, the 3,000-seat Farwell Hall, in Chicago in 1867. Chicago was also home to a great number of mission aid societies, which offered a potent mixture of revivalist religion and basic necessities like shelter and warm clothes. Mission churches coordinated organizations with names like the Chicago Home for the Friendless and the Protestant Orphan Society. Like projects only increased in number and services offered after the Great Chicago Fire of October 1871 left 70,000 residents without homes. The missions and benevolent societies were joined in 1889 by new, non-church based efforts aligned with the Settlement House Movement, based on England's Toynbee Hall. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Chicago's Hull House, which grew to be the second largest settlement house in the country and perhaps its best known. At Hull House, progressive reformers lived among the city's immigrants with whom they worked, addressing such issues as literacy, unemployment, disease, and crime.

Seminary students were important contributors to Chicago's mission movement and, later, to Social Gospel ventures like Hull House, and they also created their own projects in the city. One Chicago Theological Seminary student started the Newsboys and Bootblacks Mission in the 1860s, reaching out to the large population of boys working the city streets.⁴⁹⁶ By the 1890s, Chicago, Garrett, Presbyterian, Baptist, and McCormick seminaries all had fieldwork programs in the city, which became known as one of liberal Protestantism's urban bases. The city was also the birthplace of a large part of America's experiments with social work and community organizing in the 1920s and 1930s, much of it originating from the University of Chicago. Saul Alinsky began his neighborhood organizing in the Back of the

⁴⁹⁶ Clinton E. Stockwell, "A Sketch of the Church's Urban Ministry, 1620-1990 (with Particular Reference to Chicago)," 1991, 7. Copy provided by author.

Yards area while a researcher at the University, and throughout his career worked primarily through the city's Catholic churches. Following World War II, the universities, seminaries, and individual ministers launched a number of new projects in the city, including McCormick Seminary's Institute on Industrial Relations that trained students for ministry among the working class.

Experiments in urban mission increased in Chicago in 1960, most notably with the hiring of Donald Benedict as director of the Chicago City Missionary Society. Benedict was a Union Seminary alumnus and a co-founder of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, and subsequently led similar efforts in Cleveland and Detroit during the 1950s. Benedict's arrival was followed by the establishment of the Westside Christian Parish, the Westside Organization, and in 1964, by the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission, a mission project based at the First Congregational Church and sponsored by the National Council of Churches. According to *TIME* magazine in 1965, the training center's mission was "plucking the scales from churchly eyes." It apparently did this so successfully that it "earned a reputation as one of the liveliest and most provocative missionary experiments in the U.S."⁴⁹⁷ Each clergy member who studied at the center began by taking "The Plunge," which consisted of having to live for four days in the Chicago slums on a total of eight dollars. Afterwards, most clergy worked with one of the many local labor or civil rights organizations. Those who created the Urban Training Center believed that while God was at work in the world of the inner city, the traditional church structures were ill suited to prepare clergy to embrace such work. At least some in the traditional liberal power structure agreed,

⁴⁹⁷ "School for a New Creation," *TIME*, Friday, November 19, 1965, accessed at Time.com on November 3, 2008.

and the Ford Foundation awarded the Urban Training Center a \$600,000 grant in 1965 to expand its ministerial fellowship program.⁴⁹⁸

In 1965 and 1966, the SCLC and Martin Luther King, Jr. responded positively to the invitation of Chicago leaders to join their struggle. King and his colleagues were eager to prove that the strategy of nonviolent protest would work beyond the South. Under the nation's watchful eyes, their decision to make Chicago the base for their new urban strategy re-invigorated the many local efforts. The Chicago organizers, representing organizations such as the United Packinghouse Workers, Saul Alinsky's Woodlawn Organization, and the Westside Organization, had united under the banner of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, or CCCO, directed by Al Raby.⁴⁹⁹ The CCCO had emerged out of the local fight against school and housing segregation, a struggle that had led in 1961 to the NAACP suing the Chicago School Board over racially discriminatory policies, and over the next year, to a number of public demonstrations related to the suit. The Chicago Urban League, the NAACP, the Parent-Teacher Associations and other groups involved in the fight pooled their resources and formed the CCCO, which led a series of school boycotts and public protests throughout 1963 and 1964.⁵⁰⁰ Raby invited King to Chicago in 1965 in the hopes that his presence would provide an additional spark to a movement that despite numerous rallies and public demonstrations had accomplished little.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁸ "School for a New Creation," *TIME*, Friday, November 19, 1965, accessed at Time.com on November 3, 2008.

⁴⁹⁹ Gordon K. Mantler, *Black, Brown, and Poor: Martin Luther King Jr., The Poor People's Campaign and its Legacies*, dissertation (Duke University: Department of History, 2008), 72.

⁵⁰⁰ Mantler, 73-74.

⁵⁰¹ Ewell J. Reagin, "Footnotes," in *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 2. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1. Reagin was a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School and an early volunteer in the Chicago Freedom Movement.

Reverend James Bevel, who had been an early SNCC stalwart before shifting to the SCLC in 1961, led the advance troops in Chicago, preparing the ground for King. Bevel served as Project Director of the Westside Christian Parish, an inner-city ecumenical church project based on the East Harlem Protestant Parish, and used the congregation as a launching pad for the Chicago Freedom Movement. The Chicago Freedom Movement operated as a partnership between the SCLC and a coalition of local organizations to address slum conditions and, primarily, tenants' rights. Bevel also worked closely with community organizers, including his close friend and fellow SNCC founder Bernard Lafayette, with whom he had attended American Baptist Seminary and been involved in the Nashville sit-ins.⁵⁰² The Chicago Freedom Movement was launched on July 10, 1966 when King declared Chicago "now an open city" during a rally of almost sixty thousand people, drawing the nation's attention to Chicago and King's new urban campaign.⁵⁰³

Student Interracial Ministry interns Bruce Christie and Ewell Reagin, respectively students at the Chicago Theological Seminary and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, began working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the newly established Chicago Freedom Movement in the spring of 1966. Christie described SCLC and the churches as fighting a modern day Battle of Jericho, "hoping to tumble the walls of the reservation: discrimination, exploitation and poverty in a major northern metropolis."⁵⁰⁴ The two seminarians understood that the Chicago movement and the SCLC

⁵⁰² Profiles of James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette, Jr., Chicago Freedom Movement's "Fulfilling the Dream" website, <http://community.middlebury.edu/~cfm/>. Lafayette became the director of the Poor People's Campaign in 1968.

⁵⁰³ Ewell J. Reagin, "Footnotes," in *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 2. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵⁰⁴ Bruce D. Christie, "Early Reflections on the Chicago Movement," *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 4. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

regarded each other as providing mutually beneficial opportunities. Chicago's activist leaders believed King's presence would rekindle the flame of their struggling movement. King and the SCLC, for their part, had aspirations for theirs to be not just a southern but a national movement. According to Christie and Reagin, the SCLC leaders hoped that Chicago would be "the spearhead and laboratory for a unified nation-wide movement."⁵⁰⁵

Christie and Reagin's major job was to observe the movement and report on it to seminary students, which they did through a self-published newsletter that they founded immediately upon arriving in the city. They described the many different projects based at the Warren Avenue Church, including efforts to form tenants unions, Bernard Lafayette's "End the Slums" campaign for tenants' rights and open housing, and Operation Breadbasket, a selective buying campaign whose goal was increased hiring of minorities by businesses serving them. Masterminded by King protégé and seminary student Jesse Jackson, and staffed by a small group of fellow seminarians and ministers, Operation Breadbasket targeted businesses that had fewer than twenty percent black employees. The project was modeled on successful boycotts carried out through churches by the Reverend Leon Sullivan in Philadelphia in 1959. Both campaigns also harked back to a long history in the African American community of wielding economic power through selective buying campaigns.⁵⁰⁶

Writing as seminarians experiencing the Chicago Movement from the inside, Christie and Ewell remarked repeatedly on its religious nature, even its explicit theology as expressed by King and others in SCLC. James Bevel told them that *the* theological issue for the movement was "is the Negro a man or not," meaning that if all men were indeed brothers and

⁵⁰⁵ *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 1. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵⁰⁶ Mantler, 79.

worthy of equal respect, then there could be no excuse for unequal treatment based on race.⁵⁰⁷ Christie also saw the civil rights movement and the attention to the black inner city as both the central animating force of ecumenical cooperation in Chicago and the engine that could possibly “save the city as a form of culture.” He wrote that “the Christian who meets the viciousness of the city must be one of faith in the power of redemption NOW and not in the bye and bye!” He also predicted, presciently, that race issues and the Church’s response to the civil rights movement would shape redefinitions of modern ministry and ministerial training.⁵⁰⁸

Violence moved through the city of Chicago in several waves during the summer of 1966. On July 11, the city’s Westside area spontaneously erupted into three days of rioting. Originating with a report of ice creams stolen from a stalled truck and disagreements between black residents and police over children playing in the spray of fire hydrants, the disturbance was led for the most part by young gang members. The violence left two black residents dead as the CCCO and the SCLC desperately tried to get the area under control.⁵⁰⁹ King met with some of the young men and found that they were frustrated over a number of concerns ranging from lack of recreation places for blacks to police harassment, but that their most pressing concern was with the lack of job opportunities. He also learned that they had no faith that anything would change by working within current systems.⁵¹⁰ Mayor Daley, who was in a standoff with King over the open housing demonstrations, used the occasion to

⁵⁰⁷ Ewell J. Reagin, “Footnotes,” in *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 2. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵⁰⁸ *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 2, August 8, 1966, 5; *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 4, September 1, 1966, 3. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵⁰⁹ Branch, *At Cannan’s Edge*, 502-503.

⁵¹⁰ Mantler, 76.

blame the minister for inciting Chicago's blacks. Invoking the familiar accusation of outside agitation, Daley announced that "some other forces are using these people."⁵¹¹ Whites also reacted to predominantly black marches through white districts with violence and vitriol, to the point that King declared that "I have never in my life seen such hate. Not in Mississippi or Alabama. This is a terrible thing."⁵¹²

Christie and Reagin worked primarily with one effort of the Chicago Freedom Movement that summer, the Union to End Slums. Modeled on a trade union "in the early '30s," the Union organized each slum building, with each building represented by a Union Steward, each block by a Chief Steward, and each ten blocks organized into a local union. The seminarians wrote that the slum union structure served two purposes – to provide a ready channel through which tenants could file grievances and band together, and to provide "a ready army for mass movement."⁵¹³ The Union to End Slums brought approximately twenty-five community groups under the direction of the Warren Avenue Congregational Church and mobilized them against one particularly abusive landlord in late July and early August. They tried a range of approaches from simple negotiation to threatening to picket. Community pressure eventually led the landlord to return to the negotiating table and culminated in the nation's first collective bargaining agreement between a tenants' rights union and a landlord.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹¹ Branch, *At Cannan's Edge*, 504.

⁵¹² Branch, *At Cannan's Edge*, 511, quoting *Jet*, August 25, 1966.

⁵¹³ Bruce Christie, "Early Reflections on the Chicago Movement," in *Chicago SIM Newsletter*, No. 1, July 18, 1966, 5. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵¹⁴ John Fike, "EGPCO: Where is It and Where is It Headed?" *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 3. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

The Chicago Freedom Movement thought it had won another victory when Mayor Daley finally agreed to sit down at the negotiating table in August. Both sides still harbored misgivings when they signed the Open Housing Summit Agreement on August 26, 1966, but Chicago's organizers hoped that they had won open housing reforms at the cost of promising to end demonstrations.⁵¹⁵ This was the hopeful, cautiously victorious atmosphere in which Christie and Reagin wrapped up their SIM work in Chicago in 1966. However, by the time the next set of SIM interns arrived in the fall of 1967, Martin Luther King and the SCLC had already left town and Daley had not followed through on the promises of the Summit Agreement. Both movement insiders and outside media observers reported that King and the Chicago Movement had failed. The seminarians who continued to work in Chicago, however, told a different story. Their work was difficult, they reported, but not only did it continue, it continued on a number of new fronts.

Christian Progressive Optimism Meets Urban Reality

The Student Interracial Ministry continued to run its Chicago Urban Project for the next two years, playing a small but significant role in the Freedom Movement there by providing fifteen seminarians to work on a range of projects. They would find their faith tested by encountering entrenched poverty and power imbalances that seemed to require more than racial cooperation and reconciliation could provide. The first step in combating the problems of the inner city, including its spiritual ones, was understanding them.

More than forty years after taking the “plunge” sponsored by the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission, SIM alum Marv Dunn recalled it vividly and cited it as having a great impact on his life, giving him a “sensitivity to the plight of the homeless” and the

⁵¹⁵ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 521-522.

urban poor.⁵¹⁶ As part of their orientation week in Chicago, Dunn and the other SIM students were given a few hours of information about life on the streets, provided with a set of old clothes and the requisite eight dollars, and sent out to spend the better part of a January week on the Chicago streets. Dunn was so young looking he couldn't even shelter in bars. He ended up spending most of his time in bus stations and all-night movie theaters and was eventually able to cadge a few dollars from a Lutheran minister. One white priest who was on Dunn's "plunge" was beaten up by black gang members on the Southside and "was quite prophetic about the fact that he had begun to understand some of the pain that the black community goes through."⁵¹⁷

SIM students in Chicago came to their own moments of clarity in ways far removed from the intense experience of the urban plunge. Clare Hammann, who worked with SIM in Chicago for the academic year spanning 1967 and 1968, learned about racial inequality within the freedom movement itself when she participated in the founding sessions of the School for Community Organization, created under the auspices of still another experimental urban organization, the Center for Radical Research. The Center was founded in the Englewood neighborhood by veteran organizers as a way to unite the labor, student, and civil rights movements. The new project attempted to reorient urban activists toward poor people's power, hoping to create a mass movement of the oppressed that would not be stymied by traditional racial divisions. But racially-based fault lines could be seen even at the inception; Hammann said the School was seen as the "black half" of the Center for Radical

⁵¹⁶ Marvin Dunn, oral history telephone interview with author, November 29, 2008.

⁵¹⁷ Dunn, oral history, November 29, 2008.

Research, and that the two projects were not integrated, either racially or organizationally.⁵¹⁸

Another SIM intern, Peter Kamuyu, was impressed with a different organization which started in Englewood that summer, the School for Human Dignity, an alternative summer school for five to twelve year-olds, structured around a program of black pride and African and African-American history and culture.⁵¹⁹ Though these projects shared a common heritage in Chicago's inner city churches, their daily rhetoric and programs felt far divorced from traditional Christianity.

John Fike spent his year with the Chicago Urban Project working with one of the larger and more successful groups, the East Garfield Park Community Organization, or EGPCO, which had helped lead the Union to End Slums the previous summer. Fike described the work of 1966 as "novel, fascinating, and glamorous" by comparison to that during 1967. By that time, EGPCO was embroiled in the "hard, grinding, continuous work of incarnating the movement into organizational structures," work which "is neither glamorous nor novel."⁵²⁰ Among its specific goals for 1967 were the renewal of the collective bargaining agreement, the creation of a consumer union, the opening of new bank branches, and the establishment of a fair pricing agreement with the Madison-Kedzie Retailers' Association, a group which represented 150 businesses with branches in the inner-city.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Clare Hammann, "A School for Organizers," *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 1.

⁵¹⁹ Peter Kamuyu, "The School for Human Dignity," *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 2-3. George Hahn, "More on Woodlawn's School," *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 5-6.

⁵²⁰ John Fike, "EGPCO: Where is it and Where is it Headed?" *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 3. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵²¹ John Fike, "EGPCO: Where is it and Where is it Headed?" *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 3-4. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

Fike's experience with EGPCO in 1967 and 1968 illustrated the fragility of social reform organizations during this time period. He described the local movement as hampered by in-fighting and lack of agreement within and between organization's over appropriate goals and purposes. Fike, who was also not a local organizer or Chicago native, revealed his impatience through complaints about "outsiders," most notably federally-funded VISTA volunteers and representatives from other organizations "not dedicated to being grass-roots," as well as the disinterest of Warren Avenue Church members in continuing the local struggle.⁵²² However, SIM intern Ben Booker was more charitable, writing that the disenchantment of church members was quite understandable since "even church people tend to resent 'outsiders' using their church facilities as extensively as they are used here."⁵²³ Perhaps the overuse of Warren Avenue was the result of an active pastor, or perhaps it was indicative of the paucity of organizational infrastructure in the Chicago inner city upon which a movement could be based.

A dozen SIM interns worked with the Church Federation of Greater Chicago during the 1967-68 year, including five married couples and two singles, from five different seminaries. Among them were Marv Dunn, a student at Garrett Theological Seminary, and his wife Ardys Dunn. Though husbands and wives were considered a team and both listed as SIM interns, in truth Ardys had little involvement in SIM. Marv served his internship at Olivet Methodist Church and worked closely with a new church coalition group, the Chicago Action Ministries. Dunn also spent some time working as one of very few whites involved

⁵²² John Fike, "EGPCO: Where is it and Where is it Headed?" *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 4; Ben Booker, "The Role of Warren Ave. Church," *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 6. VISTA was founded in 1965 as Volunteers in Service to America and continues as AmeriCorps. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

⁵²³ Ben Booker, "The Role of Warren Ave. Church," *Chicago Urban Project Newsletter*, No. 1, July 13, 1967, 6. SIM UTS, 2B:1:f1.

with the Garfield Organization, a black militant organization in the West Garfield neighborhood. Marv worked closely with another SIM intern, Lutheran John Stumme, but recalls little interaction with the others in SIM's Chicago Urban Project. In fact, it seems that it was a cohesive project in name only, and was little more than a geographical grouping of the kind of internships SIM had arranged for the previous two years. Dunn's assignment in Chicago differed from the usual seminary fieldwork in that it encompassed "a multi-pronged approach; it wasn't just the church, it was the Chicago Action Ministries, which was a coalition of churches, and it was the Garfield Organization."

Marv Dunn had grown up in the Methodist Church, and become involved in the civil rights movement while in college. He joined the Selma to Montgomery March on its last day, staying on to register voters in Montgomery. He had been impressed by the numbers of clergy involved in the march, and cites this as "part of the reason I went to seminary." Dunn had gone to seminary as what he calls "a trial," to see if he would feel called to a career in the ministry. He was supported by a Rockefeller Foundation grant for those considering such a career. The SIM project was a good opportunity, he says, to do something different for one year of seminary while remaining involved in the movement. His work in Chicago was part church ministry and part neighborhood organizing, much of it low-level but important work like envelope stuffing. He also participated with in a seminarians' study group in which they read and reflected on theology. At Olivet, he helped run a youth group and conducted the occasional service. He and the other SIM interns were in Chicago when, following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, the city "went up in smoke."⁵²⁴ Dunn says the most important thing he learned from his SIM semester in Chicago was that "individual salvation

⁵²⁴ This individual had been arrested with Stumme, Dunn, and other Garfield members earlier that year, thus gaining entrée to the group.

wasn't going to change the world," that the world's problems were too complex to be solved by reconciliation alone.⁵²⁵

Chicago was a center of "social and political ferment," and according to SIM's blueprint for its work in the city, "in the midst of this ferment, sometimes at the forefront of it, there has also been a restive searching for responsible religious forms – of belief, of action, of organization." Encountering resistance from some quarters within the church and from the Daly political machine had "not stopped this many-centered drive for a humanly acceptable city, and it has not killed the dream of a coherent, common humanity."⁵²⁶ From SIM's point of view, Chicago's experiments in social change provided the perfect setting for students to explore "what it means for the church to be the church at the grassroots level in the twentieth century," which meant "humanizing all social structures."⁵²⁷

By 1967 the SIM project had, in effect, adopted a strategy of social change known as "congregation-based community organizing," developed by Saul Alinsky in the 1950s.⁵²⁸ Congregation-based community organizing involved one-to-one conversations within church communities, leading in turn to a congregational commitment to improving social conditions,

⁵²⁵ Marvin Dunn, oral history interview with author, November 29, 2008. Dunn's focus shifted away from the ministry and toward more general sociological interests. When he returned to seminary, rather than continuing to prepare for the ministry, he took sociology courses at Northwestern, in preparation for pursuing a Ph.D. in Sociology. But prior to starting graduate school, he spent nine months of 1968 and 1969 in a Volkswagen van with a group of a dozen Methodist seminarians, traveling to Bolivia and Brazil to study the church and social change, the first stirrings of the liberation theology movement. He later taught sociology for ten years until Lewis and Clark College, in Portland, Oregon, "got rid of me for my politics." He moved into computer support, spending the next twenty years at Reed College and California College of Arts and Crafts, but remained involved with Latin American political and social justice concerns.

⁵²⁶ "Chicago Metropolitan Project of the Student Interracial Ministry," SIM, UTS, 4B.1, 1.

⁵²⁷ "Chicago Metropolitan Project of the Student Interracial Ministry, SIM, UTS, 4B.1, 2.

⁵²⁸ Benjamin Ross, "Congregation-Based Organizing," *Tikkun*, January/February 2007, Vol. 22, Issue 1, 55.

and then the creation of networks of urban congregations for the purposes of serving contemporary urban residents.

SIM, the Church, and Community Organizing Beyond Chicago

Close to its home base at Union Theological Seminary, SIM launched the Northern Urban Project in New York City in 1966 but suffered one of its first failures. In some ways, the project was not a new venture at all, but rather an intersection of the new civil rights movement priorities with a traditional part of Union Theological Seminary's mission in its community. As described earlier, Union had a long history of involvement in mission to its neighbors, primarily through Riverside Church and the East Harlem Protestant Parish, which served as both training center and laboratory for generations of seminarians. For the Northern Urban Project, SIM planned to join forces with East Harlem Protestant Parish founder George Webber's new project, the Metropolitan-Urban Service Training program.⁵²⁹ The SIM-MUST program was to include five white students working in Black and Puerto Rican inner-city churches and five black theological students in congregations with a majority of white members, however the joint effort never materialized, placements did not pan out, the students rarely met, and by the end of the first semester the project voted to voluntarily disband. Maynard Moore, SIM's National Coordinator, reported in September 1967 that the only things that could be salvaged from the wreck of the Northern Urban Project were lessons about "how not to operate an urban project."⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ "1965 Report: Student Interracial Ministry," 21. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

⁵³⁰ E. Maynard Moore, "Report to the SIM National Committee," September 1, 1967, 2. SIM UTS, 1A:2:f6.

In Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood, two white students, one an American man and the other a German woman, and two black male seminarians from Haiti, composed a ministry team that was at once interracial, inter-faith, co-educational, and international. They worked with the Fells Point Methodist Parish, which offered church services, and also youth groups, recreation, counseling services, and social services including a literacy program and a family planning clinic.⁵³¹ MacDonald Jean, a Haitian student at the Episcopal Seminary of the Caribbean, was assigned as an assistant pastor at all-white Rogers Memorial Methodist Church. In words that echo those of Robert Seymour in Chapel Hill when recalling James Forbes ministry in 1962, Rev. Carl Hickey in Baltimore wrote of Jean in 1967: "Perhaps the greatest ministry Mac performed was simply being present in the church and the community. His presence was a sign to the Negro community that this church is open. His presence was a sign to the white (and often bigoted) community that this church is Christian and not a social club. His presence caused the church members to ask basic questions about their own membership, such as: [Do we] embrace strangers? Is the church open to all people whatever their race? Many of the answers that emerged changed lives."⁵³² Therefore, while SIM may have shifted to more specifically target urban problems, it continued to attempt stimulate racial reconciliation within communities and among individuals.

The urban ministry program continually challenged the seminary students to confront the historic role of the mainline churches in America's cities. In North Carolina, a five-member, co-educational and interracial team from Union Theological and Southern Baptist

⁵³¹ For more on mainline church involvement in birth control and abortion resources, see David Cline, *Creating Choice: A Community Responds to the Need for Abortion and Birth Control, 1961-1973* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵³² "1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry," 53. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

Theological seminaries and from Johnson C. Smith University worked with three churches in a newly formed ecumenical organization, the Charlotte Urban Ministry. Their work there illustrates how students learned from the urban mission experience, and in turn sought to educate and renew the institution of the church. One white, Baptist student, Jerry Welch from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, wrote in 1966 that renewed inner-city ministries were a step in the right direction but that the churches also “need to be led into a discussion of what part they have played in the exploitation of the Negro and other residents of the inner-city. If the church is concerned with finding an answer to the problems of racial tensions, poverty, slums and other problems of the inner-city, it must not begin with a program and easy answers, but rather, with a question: What part have we played in the creation of this suffering and isolation?”⁵³³ His question would be repeated – and explosively answered– two years later in James Forman’s *Black Manifesto* and its demands that the white churches pay reparations for the sins of slavery and segregation.

The final two team-ministry projects were employed in Charleston and Kingstree, South Carolina, and individuals worked in Houston, Chicago, and New York City. The interracial team model that Keith Davis and Carol Lucas had created so successfully in Richmond was also replicated in Buffalo, New York City, and Baltimore. In Buffalo, a group of three SIM students, two black and one white, two male and one female, from three different seminaries, joined an existing urban ministry project working in poverty-stricken inner-city parishes. The three SIM students joined seventeen others in running day camps, organizing neighborhoods around issues of local concern, and covering pastoral duties. In one instance, Harold Nicol, a black seminarian from Union Theological, worked side-by-side with the Reverend Wayne P. Daugherty, Protestant Chaplain of the Cooperative Urban

⁵³³ “1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry,” 57-58. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

Ministry, to serve the residents of the Commodore Perry Housing Project. The Cooperative Urban Ministry, a congregation without a church building, ministered directly to the 5,000 residents – fifty-five percent white and forty-five percent black – of the Perry homes. Nicol took on three main projects during his summer: working in an ecumenical vacation bible school, assisting the local Catholic parish to organize a softball league in the Perry projects, and doing house-to-house organizing under the auspices of a local affiliate of the War on Poverty.⁵³⁴ Nicol and the other SIM students' work in Buffalo illustrate that not only were some churches actively addressing inner city problems, but they also had influenced government programs and were, in some cases, working directly with government agencies.

Black Power and SIM

Student Interracial Ministry interns taking on urban ministry in 1967 and 1968 were almost by definition encountering expressions of the Black Power movement, and they worked through the complex implications of the Black Power ideology just as they had done since the strategy was first enunciated in Mississippi in 1965. White seminary students responded with reactions that for the most part varied from intellectual support of the idea to confusion as to the new proper role for white supporters to embrace of it as the next step in the freedom movement to frustration at feeling unappreciated or underutilized. Black participants in the project, including Southwest Georgia project leader Charles Sherrod,

⁵³⁴ "1966 Report: Student Interracial Ministry," 50-52. SIM UTS, 1C:2:f11.

embraced the central idea of Black Power but many times imbued it with personal meanings and adapted it to fit a particular cultural space.

The definitions of Black Power were, and still are, manifold, running the gamut from the ideology of self-esteem and advancement championed by Booker T. Washington to complete black separatism, and they could encompass either nonviolent or violent means to accomplish their objectives. The idea of Black Power was nothing new but the phrase was given political *gravitas* when adopted as a guiding principle by SNCC leaders Willie Ricks and Stokely Carmichael in 1966.⁵³⁵ Carmichael, later Kwame Ture, defined Black Power as “a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community ... to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations.” He also said that Black Power would help build “a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created.”⁵³⁶ Proponents of Black Power added their voices to the clamorous call for revolution not just in society, but within the Church.

Tim Kimrey, spending a summer working with the Student Interracial Ministry on the Southwest Georgia Project in Cordele, Georgia, wrote in 1966 that the goal of any good community organizer is to work him or herself out of a job, and having done so within the civil rights movement, white activists should now step aside whether or not blacks wanted them to stay. “The fact is” Kimrey wrote, “that black revolutionaries do not need the white man in the role he has traditionally played. He is useless, at best, in the field. At worst, he is

⁵³⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969, eighth edition, 2006), 5; Peniel E. Joseph, editor, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

⁵³⁶ Stokely Carmichael obituary, *The New York Times*, November 16, 1998. Accessed at New York Times online on January 30, 2009.

repressive and a real hindrance to the revolution.”⁵³⁷ Kimrey had grown to believe that the civil rights movement had shifted into a new phase in which it required sole black leadership.

Not all white activists were as ready to leave the interracial phase of the movement behind. Those who belonged to the religious tradition of interracial cooperation for social change, both whites and blacks, continued to call for cooperation. On July 31, 1966, “an informal group of Negro churchmen in America,” who were affiliated with the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches, ran a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* that affirmed the need for Black Power, but also called for both black and white Americans to “work together at the task of rebuilding our cities.”⁵³⁸ The ministers consciously employed the religious language of reconciliation in support of both Black Power and interracial cooperation in the urban setting.

“Getting power necessarily involves reconciliation,” they wrote. “We must first be reconciled to ourselves ... as persons and to ourselves as an historical group. However, if power is sought merely as an end in itself, it tends to turn upon those who seek it. Negroes need power in order to participate more effectively at all levels of the life of our nation.” But reconciliation “with our white brothers” must be based on “the firm ground that we and all other Americans *are* one. Our history and destiny are indissolubly linked. If the future is to belong to any of us, it must be prepared for all of us, whatever our racial or religious background. For in the final analysis, we are *persons* and the power of all groups must be wielded to make visible our common humanity.” The ministers’ letter is but one example

⁵³⁷ Kimrey, “Black Revolution and White Revolutionaries,” 4. A year after writing that, however, Kimrey had rejected his own advice and was back to working on an interracial project, this time with SIM’s new urban project in Richmond, California.

⁵³⁸ “‘Black Power:’ Statement by National Committee of Negro Churchmen,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 1966, E5.

from that significant moment when some within the Black Power movement, the white churches, and the black churches had the opportunity to stand on common ground.⁵³⁹

The erosion of that common ground was interpreted by some not as a loss for the civil rights or Black Power movements, but simply as the natural next steps in their evolution. George Walters, who was deeply immersed in SIM and in ecumenical and urban development projects in the United States and abroad, argued that the interracial phase of the civil rights movement graduated to a new phase with two components, black people continuing to lead what had now become the Black Power phase of the movement, and white people focusing on the movement concerns of their own race or heading toward new social justice pursuits. Walters himself went from SIM to working with the Ecumenical Institute and Fifth City, an urban ministry, economic development, and intentional living project in Chicago, to a lifelong career in community organizing in developing countries. In 1966, Walters joined the Mississippi Freedom March, during which SNCC first articulated its calls for a movement based in the idea of Black Power. Of that moment, he recalled that the rifts or the strategies chosen going forward weren't what was most important about the discussions over Black Power and the future of the movement. Rather, what struck him as most meaningful was the determination and defiance of the group *to go forward*. As he recalled,

⁵³⁹ One could argue, however, that common ground could be achieved through working separately toward the same goal, as George E. Riddick of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, a partner in SIM's Chicago Urban Project, suggested in a 1966 paper entitled "Black Power: A Christian Response." He wrote that the most urgent task for the Church in responding to Black Power was first to re-conceptualize its mission in the world. Philanthropy without mission had been discredited, he claimed, as had the possibility of employing anything other than an ecumenical and inter-faith approach. Moreover, he wrote that the Church should not expect or need the approval of the Black Power movement in pursuing an urban mission agenda. In other words, black power was a response to the crisis of the inner cities and the urban mission of the church was a parallel and complimentary response.

‘Cause if you’ve said ‘no’ to the way certain things are, even though you’re unclear about how you’re going to get there, you do know what you want the end result to be. And if this community marching down the street here, of Christians and Jews and whites and blacks and atheists and militants and non-violent and everything else you could think of, could stand for one moment with one voice, then you actually have a vision of the future being manifest. Many times this movement has had that moment. It’s those moments that have defined whether or not it’s all worth it, what the real difference might be. [But] you have to move on from experience and event to the hard work. From the moment of sensing that we can all be one, as Martin [Luther King] so well characterized more than once in his magnificent speeches, to becoming one, that’s where the blood, sweat, and tears set in, the hard work.⁵⁴⁰

Those like Walters who were steeped in modern theology believed that the process of achieving redemption and reconciliation would take mankind through a series of steps and the adoption of various ideological lenses through which to view contemporary circumstance. Thus, interracialism might be appropriate in one circumstance and black separatism in another, as long as the work toward reconciliation and redemption continued.

Foremost among the religious applications of Black Power was the Black Theology movement led by future Union Seminary professor James H. Cone not long after SNCC’s articulations of Black Power in 1966. The legal advances of the civil rights movement, writes historian Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, “dismantl[ed] the pervasive legal underpinnings of racial subjugation, but expressed no concern over the psychological consequences of being black (or white) in a virulently anti-black society.”⁵⁴¹ Cone saw the Black Power movement as offering a corrective expression to this psychological damage, and determined that it was undergirded by a specific theology.

⁵⁴⁰ George Walters, oral history interview with author, October 23, 2006.

⁵⁴¹ Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2.

Black theology emerged as a North American version of liberation theology, an international theological movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s that focused on the promise of redemption for the poor and suffering of the world and the practical application of faith in order to remedy poverty and injustice. Liberation theology interprets the message of Jesus Christ not as providing a blueprint for social order, but as a spark to disrupt the social order, encouraging unrest and righting social inequalities. Cone applied his black theology of liberation to the experience of black Americans under white oppression. He wrote in his seminal 1969 work *Black Theology and Black Power*, “Black Power means black people taking the dominant role in determining the black-white relationship in American society.” Further, he argued that not only was Black Power not antithetical to Christian doctrine, but by demanding that past injustices be righted by tipping the power balance toward eventual equilibrium, it was the “central message” of Christianity to twentieth century America.⁵⁴²

Cone rooted his black liberation theology in the Gospel of Luke’s version of Jesus as fundamentally concerned with freeing the oppressed. Cone argued that God enters human affairs through Jesus Christ and “takes sides with the oppressed.” The oppressed, for their part, have good reason to welcome this version of a savior, for those who have nothing “recognize their utter dependence on God, and wait on him despite the miserable absurdity of life.”⁵⁴³ Cone wrote *Black Theology* from a position of anger and frustration at both the oppression of blacks in America and the failure of scholars to write of such oppression

⁵⁴² James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969, eighth edition, 2006), 1.

⁵⁴³ James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), chapter one, need page.

objectively. *Black Theology* was published in 1970, the same year that Cone became an Assistant Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary.

Students in SIM encountered some of the central ideas of black theology, and interpreted them through their own field experiences and their attempts to understand how faith and the church could aid black empowerment. For example, John Robinson, a SIM student who worked in Southwest Georgia in 1966, responded to his experiences of black church worship by questioning whether impoverished and disenfranchised black citizens would be better served by a theology of liberation, rather than of promises of glory in the hereafter. “Is the pie in the sky bye and bye Christianity of so many Black preachers the answer to the Black man’s lot? Personally I tend to find the idea of a white, Christ-Savior repulsive for a non-white people. I do not discount the importance of love and brotherhood to religion. However, far more important to the Black man is a religion which would first of all heighten his sense of self-respect and identity on this earth, a religion which would discourage him from turning the other cheek to the prejudice, oppression, and injustices of racism. In short, the Black man needs a religion of EMANCIPATION.”⁵⁴⁴ Robinson and others experienced the need for liberation theology even if they did yet have a name for it. Along with the people of Southwest Georgia, they understood how a greater degree of freedom increased expectations and demands for more, even in the context of religious belief.

Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement

⁵⁴⁴ “Student Interracial Ministry: 1960-68,” Union Timeline, <https://www.utsnyc.edu/Page.aspx?pid=767>, accessed August 5, 2009.

The Student Interracial Ministry sought to understand how its members, most of whom were white, religiously faithful anti-racists, would operate in the new world shaped by the Black Power movement.⁵⁴⁵ Scholarly and popular depictions of Black Power often cast it as causing waves of urban violence and the end of the Civil Rights era, even while acknowledging its grounding in a commitment to encouraging black pride and black self-determination. This is partially due to the conflation, in both public memory and historical renderings, of Black Power with one of its most visually vivid representations, the Black Panther Party. For others, Black Power remains a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the collapse of civil rights movement networks. According to religious historian James Findlay, for example, the failure of liberals to reform the Church in the 1960s resulted from internal struggles over Black Power, the formation of black caucuses within mainline denominations, the issuing of the Black Manifesto, and the National Committee of Black Churchmen forming within in the NCC itself.⁵⁴⁶ Recently, a spate of new works on Black Power has challenged the ‘good’ civil rights movement versus ‘bad’ Black Power movement duality by connecting Black Power to a long history of black resistance to racial injustice and support of black economic self-help.⁵⁴⁷ This so-called “Long Black Power Movement” thus

⁵⁴⁵ The story of the evolution of the Black Power movement and its effects on other contemporary social movements is still debated by scholars. It is not our purpose to review the various conflicting analyses in depth; however, it is necessary to examine some aspects of the development and influence of the Black Power movement in order to understand how SIM and similar organization were affected by this phase in the development of the civil rights movement.

⁵⁴⁶ Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 4, 202.

⁵⁴⁷ These new histories of Black Power disrupt the premise of a ‘good 1960s’ versus a ‘bad 1960s’ by depicting the black power movement not as representative of a new revolutionary ideology, but as part of a continuum of Black activism. They position the Black Power movement as a late phase of the civil rights movement, and suggest that it was a natural outgrowth of that movement and not a separate entity. In this interpretation, Black Power’s radical expressions were “far from a decisive break from a more hopeful era; rather, they were the direct results of a troubled and contested, but no less heroic, past.” (Peniel E. Joseph, editor, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi) Joseph suggests that by positioning the Black Power Movement as the bogeyman that quashed the civil rights movement, we

depicts the militant black power groups of the late 1960s not as an aberration or a foil to the heroic struggles of the civil rights movement, but rather, as historian Peniel Joseph puts it, as different branches of the same tree.⁵⁴⁸

Working for racial justice within racially distinct groups may indeed have been necessary for the advancement of a certain brand of black independence, but it carried a price. Historian Jeffrey Ogbar notes that integration “was a one-way street that assumed that majority white was normative and desired.” In order to demand equal inclusion in society, Black Power proponents “rejected the idea that white people’s acceptance was necessary.” For some, equality and independence meant distancing themselves from the need for white approval, which in turn meant distancing themselves from whites.⁵⁴⁹ The recent reexamination of Black Power suggests that, at least in the first half of the 1970s, black organizing and activism increased as a result of the influence of Black Power politics.⁵⁵⁰ But, as the civil rights pioneer Bayard Rustin warned in 1966, organizing and politics based solely in the black community could only go so far. Citing the example of the eighty Southern

prevent it from being understood as a reasonable alternative tactic in the civil rights struggle. Joseph’s approach, however, privileges the study of the roots of Black Power as a means to clear its tarnished name. It does not give equal weight to the later, more violent history of the movement, and does not adequately engage with the results of the rejection of interracialism and the ejection from the civil rights movement of white leaders and allies.

⁵⁴⁸ Peniel E. Joseph, editor, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4. For more on the “Long Black Power Movement” see also William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (UNC Press, 2004); Tim Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (UNC Press, 1999), and Charles M. Payne and Adam Green, editors, *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950* (NYU Press, 2003). Historian Van Gosse also currently has a work in progress on the Long Black Power Movement in which he suggests that the roots of the movement could be traced to the first act of resistance of an enslaved African in America, perhaps the first slave to jump of a slave ship.

⁵⁴⁹ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 187.

⁵⁵⁰ Joseph, *The Black Power Movement*, 8.

counties that held elections in 1966, he argued that even if blacks were to elect “eighty sheriffs, eighty tax assessors, and eighty school board members [it] might ease the tension for a while in their communities, but alone they could not create jobs and build low cost housing.”⁵⁵¹ Looked at this way, black power could only take a community so far, since communities did not exist within total racial isolation from one another, and a multiracial world demanded multiracial solutions.

Charles Sherrod espoused a commitment to interracialism when summarizing his own commitment to working with whites in Georgia: “Whatever the solution to the problem of race in our country,” he said, “it’s got to be a black and white one. And if it is going to be a black and white solution, at the end, then going toward the solution has also [to be integrated.]”⁵⁵² Although Ogbar correctly explains the ideology behind blacks-only organizations and Joseph helps modify the declension narrative of Black Power *vis a vis* the civil rights movement, one could reasonably argue that they and other historians need to look more critically at the long-term effects that discontinuing historic interracial alliances had on a range of social justice movements such as those to which SIM was committed.

A Moment When They All Stood Together

One voice from within SIM also spoke to that moment, which the black clergy leaders had delineated, when Black Power and interracial alliances stood side by side in the freedom movement. George Walters, of the Student Interracial Ministry, was one of several project members who participated in the Mississippi Freedom March. A white man well over

⁵⁵¹ Bayard Rustin, “‘Black Power’ and Coalition Politics,” *Commentary*, Vol. 2, September 1966.

⁵⁵² Charles Sherrod, oral history interview with author, June 8, 2009.

six feet tall, he was made a parade marshal, assigned to walk along the outer edge of the demonstrators in order to keep the peace between the demonstrators and the crowds watching and jeering them. During the eight days of the march he was privy to SNCC's Willie Ricks' speeches on behalf of black power, stayed up late into the night in a little tent discussing this philosophy with Stokely Carmichael, and spent many hours walking beside and talking with Martin Luther King, Jr. and "Andy" Young. Walters explained later that the way the media portrayed the in-fighting between the two groups, dubbed the non-violent Freedom movement folks and the Black Power folks, "you would have thought there was open conflict with overt battles raging twenty-four hours a day, while the reality was, 'though there was conflict, most of it was a healthy dialogue seeking clarity on all sides.'"⁵⁵³

If such clarity were to be reached, it would mean overcoming prejudices on all sides. Bill Troy, another SIM student, also participated in the march and remembers a black organizer warning the crowd not to trust any whites with a Southern accent. Troy, a native of Tennessee, was at that moment preparing to spend the night in the big communal tent the marchers shared. He recalled that he "just went over and crawled up in the corner of the tent, got in my sleeping bag, and never said a word the rest of the night."⁵⁵⁴

The moment may not have been a comfortable one for whites, but Walters remembers the march not as the time when a rift opened in the civil rights movement, but rather as a special time when all the various parts of the movement were still together. He says that he knew even then "that this event was going to be a memorable event. It was part of making the difference and building the sense of courage and camaraderie in a movement that was

⁵⁵³ M. George Walters, "The Mississippi Freedom March and Issues Raised for the Movement," 8. SIM, UTS, 1H:1:f7.

⁵⁵⁴ Bill Troy, oral history interview with author, October 5, 2009.

still struggling to put itself together. Its factions were there, but at that moment, its factions were all together.”⁵⁵⁵

They would not remain so, and that moment of common purpose and possibilities was soon lost. And while there certainly is, as Joseph claims, continuity between early black freedom struggles and late 1960s and 1970s black radicalism, there was also an enormous change that took place when, at black insistence, whites left SNCC and other formerly interracial organizations. The important story of the continuity of the black freedom struggle needs to include an understanding of the interracial civil rights movement and the distinct change wrought by the growing influence of a rhetoric of Black Power, even where black separatism was not demanded.

SIM, Black Power, and the Black Manifesto

If one sees 1968 as the point in time when the optimism and momentum of the interracial civil rights movement dissipated, there were several years between Stokely Carmichael’s adoption of the Black Power slogan during the Mississippi Freedom March in 1966 and this end point. In this transitional period, and even in the earlier years of the movement, a number of efforts were made to find a middle ground, where blacks and whites could perhaps work largely separately but toward the same basic goals. An early and oft-repeated strategy during this transitional period was for blacks to stay focused on the black freedom movement within black communities while whites tried to raise understanding and support within white communities. White activists, with the encouragement of their black former partners, turned to efforts like SNCC’s White Folks Project and the Southern Student

⁵⁵⁵ M. George Walters, oral history interview with author, October 23, 2006.

Organizing Committee, both of which were meant to organize white communities on behalf of the movement.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee did not adopt black power as its guiding ideology until the mid-1960s, but even at its founding there existed competing strains of those who felt that the freedom struggle should only be pursued within an interracial context and those who felt that whites and blacks should work separately within their own communities. So, even though efforts like the White Southern Students Project and the White Folks Project did not demonstrate much success, when SNCC did become an all black organization, white organizing seemed one of the few obvious other alternatives for whites who wanted to remain active in the movement. Another was for them to adopt a less active role, but to support black movement leaders from behind the scenes, often financially. More commonly, however, white activists moved on to other issues such as fighting against the Vietnam War

Students in the SIM project struggled with the same issues on a more personal level as they undertook to define the implications of the Black Power movement for their ministry and for their future organizing careers. To read their writings is to glance inside the thought processes of deeply concerned whites trying to ascertain a path across a precarious fault line. White SIM students were for the most part understanding of the historical roots of and the need for black power, and in many cases they were willing to find a new role for themselves. As Tim Kimrey wrote in 1966 after working with the Southwest Georgia Project in Cordele, “Any way you cut it, Black Power says No to the traditional involvement of the white man in this struggle for social change. It is not so much that Black Power is an ideology which excludes the white man from the ranks of the revolution; there is simply no ideology to hold

black and white together in any viable kind of cohesive grouping, as, for instance, non-violence did in the early 1960s.”⁵⁵⁶

For those whites who did affirm Black Power, George Walters suggested they would go through their own period of transition. “For a time it is possible they must decide to be the *least*. The one who will be a man of faith may have to [be] willing to be used and abused – by choice to die for black power.” For Joe Pfister, who worked on in the Southwest Georgia project after a focus was placed on sole black leadership, it simply meant supporting the black men her worked with and being happy to let them lead and to take the seat in the back for himself.⁵⁵⁷

Proponents of Black Power confronted the white Church most directly in the spring of 1969. James Forman, on behalf of the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC), interrupted a Sunday communion service on May 4 at the Riverside Church in early May in order to read “The Black Manifesto.” Forman had been the executive secretary of SNCC from 1961 to 1965, and currently served as its International Director for SNCC. He had become increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of change produced by the civil rights movement.

Forman and the Black Economic Development Conference demanded that American churches and synagogues pay five hundred million dollars as reparations to black people, based on a computation of “15 dollars per nigger.” The Manifesto, first unveiled a week earlier, on April 26, in Detroit, included plans for the establishment of a Southern land bank

⁵⁵⁶ Tim Kimrey, “Black Revolution and White Revolutionaries,” in Union Theological Seminary Field Education Interns’ writing packet, 1966, p. 3. Possession of Mac Hulslander.

⁵⁵⁷ M. George Walters, “Black Power and the Church,” *skandalon*, Vol 1, 1966. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f9; Joe Pfister, oral history interviews with author, November 15, 2006 and November 29, 2006.

from which to create black cooperative farms, black publishing houses and television networks, a thirty million dollar research institute, a center for training community organizers, a project for sponsoring international black businesses, and an 130 million dollar black Southern university.⁵⁵⁸ Having occupied the pulpit at Riverside Church Forman called for “sustained guerilla warfare” in America’s streets and noted that the money would be collected “by any means necessary.”⁵⁵⁹ Albert Cleage, formerly a pastor in integrated churches and later the founder of both the Black Christian National Movement and The Shrine of the Black Madonna, called Forman’s reading of the Black Manifesto from the symbolic home base of liberal Protestantism “one of the truly beautiful moments in the Black man’s dismal captivity in America.”⁵⁶⁰ In a different take, sociologist Charles V. Willie commented of the Manifesto that, “The prophetic comes to us sometimes in preposterous wrappings. It presented us with the uncomfortable task of sorting out the meaningful from the foolish.”⁵⁶¹ Despite dismissing Forman’s theatricality, Willie still acknowledges his prophetic stance.

Forman demanded that Riverside Church immediately donate sixty percent of its investment income to the BEDC. He then visited the New York City headquarters of the Lutheran Church in America, and tacked a copy of the Manifesto to the front door, together with a “bill” for fifty million dollars. Forman next visited the New York Archdiocese to

⁵⁵⁸ Black National Economic Conference, “Black Manifesto,” *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 13, No. 1, July 10, 1969, <http://www.nytimes.com/articles/11267>, accessed on November 18, 2008.

⁵⁵⁹ Sugrue, 437; Lawrence H. Williams, “Christianity and Reparations: Revisiting James Forman’s ‘Black Manifesto,’ 1969,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, February 2005. Accessed through <http://findarticles.com> on November 18, 2008.

⁵⁶⁰ Quoted in Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 436.

⁵⁶¹ Charles Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 112.

demand that Roman Catholics pony up their two hundred million portion of the receipt.⁵⁶²

Forman's supporters, most of them students at Union Theological Seminary, dramatized their demands that the Manifesto be taken seriously by occupying the offices of the Presbyterian Church USA in the InterChurch Center on Riverside Drive. Forman also returned to Riverside Church for its next Sunday service, despite the fact that the church had gotten an injunction against further disruptions. Instead of attempting to read the Manifesto again, he arrived clad in a bright blue African robe and stood silently in front of his pew for the full length of that morning's sermon.⁵⁶³

Churches responded with a mixture of empathy and outrage. The Interreligious Foundation of Community Organization initially endorsed the manifesto, then quickly withdrew its support under pressure from its Board of Directors.⁵⁶⁴ Forman responded by raising his demands from half a billion to three billion dollars. A number of churches, denominational bodies, and ecumenical organizations however took Forman's demands seriously, and in some cases, made large donations. The Interreligious Conference for Community Organization, a group that funded religiously based urban development projects, approved the Black Manifesto, and recommended that its member religious organizations support the request for reparations. In all, church congregations donated about \$300,000 directly to the BEDC in the first year after the demand, and an estimated one hundred million dollars was allocated by religious organizations toward other social justice programs and

⁵⁶² "A Black Manifesto," *TIME*, May 16, 1969.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,902585,00.html>, accessed on November 18, 2008.

⁵⁶³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 436.

⁵⁶⁴ Williams, "Christianity and Reparations."

efforts at providing “reparations.”⁵⁶⁵ Many donors, however, chose to sponsor efforts other than Forman’s and the BEDC. The Manifesto prompted intense conversations within the national board of the Episcopal Church, for example, and the board eventually donated \$200,000, but chose to give it to the mainstream National Committee of Black Churchmen. The General Board of the National Council of Churches pledged \$500,000 toward black economic development, with “tens of millions of dollars” to follow. The Presbyterian Church responded to the Manifesto with a pledge to raise \$50 million dollars “for general works against poverty.” The Catholic National Association of Laymen called upon the Catholic Church for a yearly 400 million dollar donation to black-controlled organizations. The World Council of Churches created a \$200,000 reserve fund for “oppressed people,” and requested more than \$300,000 from members.⁵⁶⁶ The churches, thus, did not pay reparations as such, but in supporting mainstream, trusted black institutions, they nevertheless acknowledged the spirit of the Manifesto while sidestepping some of its more radical demands.

For its part, Riverside Church refused to donate directly to Forman’s organization, but Pastor Ernest Campbell took the issue seriously, delivering a response sermon, “The Case for Reparations,” on July 13, 1969.⁵⁶⁷ In this sermon he affirmed the existence of systematic racial discrimination and outlined the scriptural justifications for reparations. Under Campbell’s leadership the church created The Riverside Fund for Social Justice, a three-year,

⁵⁶⁵ Amy Kedron, in “Freedom, Reparations and the Black Manifesto,” citing *The National Catholic Reporter* estimate that churches contributed about \$127 million.

⁵⁶⁶ The donated amounts are per Jerry K. Frye, “The ‘Black Manifesto’ and the Tactic of Objectification,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, September 1974, 68-69, quoting sources including *Christian Century*, *Commonweal*, *Christianity Today*, *TIME*, and R.S. Lecky and H.E. Wright, eds. *Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism, and Reparations* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969).

⁵⁶⁷ The Riverside Church Congregational Profile, www.theriversidechurchny.org/about/files/TRCCongregationalProfile.doc, accessed on November 18, 2008.

\$450,000 grant for “work among the poor” in New York City as “restitution” and “penance” for the Church’s complicity in slavery and racism.⁵⁶⁸

Conclusion: Inventing the Revolutionary Church for the Modern Age

When SIM’s founding generation based their project on the biblical idea of reconciliation, they laid out a clear mandate for the organization in terms that its seminary student members understood. Seven years later, amidst calls for renewal and change and revolution, what was needed, indeed what was expected, was much less clear. Students proposed revolution but they didn’t really know what this would look like or mean. Even calls for Black Power could founder on their imprecision. When Ivanhoe Donaldson was asked to define what Black Power meant and what its promoters wanted, he responded that they wanted no part of the white power system, “we want something entirely different.” George Walters of SIM added that “Black Power does not mean taking over white power, but replacing it with something far more just and humane.”⁵⁶⁹ What that something was, however, was not clear.

In its urban projects, however, SIM attempted to define the actions of a revolutionary church as a combination of mission and movement. It often employed what seemed traditional tactics – urban mission, community organizing, and economic development – but while their tactics may have looked familiar, they argued, the ideological and physical

⁵⁶⁸ The Riverside Church Congregational Profile, www.riversidechurchny.org/about/files/TRCCongregationalProfile.doc, accessed on November 18, 2008; Amy Kedron, “Freedom, Reparations and the Black Manifesto,” <http://www.reparationsthecure.org/Articles/Kedron/BlackManifesto>

Accessed on November 18, 2008; Sugrue, 436.

⁵⁶⁹ M. George Walters, “Black Power and the Church,” *skandalon*, Vol 1, 1966. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f9.

contexts in which they applied them made them “revolutional.” SIM’s leaders in 1966 and 1967 wrote that a revolutionary church that addressed the problems of the inner city and the concerns that resulted in expressions of Black Power was on the brink of being created out of the urban environment. The new church, one of them wrote, would not simply evince “a concern for slums or schools or hospitals, but [would lead] a grassroots ecumenical movement embodying regional strategies to attack with power the pervasive complex of interlocking metropolitan problems.”⁵⁷⁰ If he was a bit verbose, he nevertheless decently described the goals of the urban projects that SIM created in its last years. The Student Interracial Ministry then, was by the late 1960s, reimagining itself as a form of the church itself.

Theologians described two forms of the church, gathered and scattered. The gathered church, represented by denominations and congregations, was merely the form taken when members of the believing community came together for worship. But that larger believing community, the church scattered, was also a form of the church. Ed Feaver, who served several years with SIM in Southwest Georgia before returning to help manage the project in its final year, reasoned that “as a scattered community, the members are involved in all aspects of life – economic, political, social, cultural – for the purpose of creating a society in which all men treat each other with love and respect.”⁵⁷¹ One could be a minister of this new church, revolutionary and scattered, through engaging social justice concerns. The SIM students thus provided a prophetic reinterpretation of their own role and that which they projected for the church and ministry.

⁵⁷⁰ W. Marshall Jones, “The Revolutionary Church,” *skandalon*, Vol. 2, 2. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f9.

⁵⁷¹ Edward A. Feaver, “The Death of Religion and the Rebirth of the Church: An Introduction,” *skandalon*, Vol. 2, 3. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f9.

The race crisis that produced the Student Interracial Ministry at the start of the 1960s had turned some within the church inward, questioning their own institutions and beliefs. Now, as the decade wound toward a close, SIM students and their Christian Progressive colleagues at the liberal seminaries further experimented with what it meant to be a minister in this new church when they turned their attention to seminary training, producing a number of experimental models. It is to their concerns and the explosive environment of the seminaries in the late Sixties that we now turn.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seminaries in the Storm: Educational Reform, Union Theological Seminary, and the Final Years of the Student Interracial Ministry

“When students consider the problems of the future – the threat of glutted populations and a world of dirty skies and oily oceans, the continuation of insane political priorities, the military oppression of powerless peoples for the material gain of people already bored with their wealth, and, always, the possibility of nuclear or biological warfare – they turn to the seminary as the most accessible institution to attack these issues. It is in this context that students demand changes in curriculum, changes in investment policy, changes in governance procedure and changes in the very definition of education and ministry which characterize a theological school. It seems to many students that if the seminary itself cannot come to terms with these issues, then why bother with a vocation in the church; the same frustrations and the same rigidity will be encountered there as well.”

– Christopher Queen, National Council of Churches, 1970⁵⁷²

“We live in a time of theological confusion and uncertainty which has accented rather than transformed the contemporary crisis of fear, apprehension, and pessimism about the future. The sustaining hope of early Christians is almost nowhere to be found.”

⁵⁷² Christopher Queen, “Student Initiated Change in Theological Schools,” in John Biersdorf, ed. *Ministry in the Seventies* (New York: IDOC, 1971), 17.

– Rev. Charles Shelby Rooks, Fund for Theological Education,
1970⁵⁷³

Positioned with one foot in the university and one in the church, seminaries in the late 1960s found themselves buffeted by turbulent winds of change in both spheres. The dissatisfaction with the status quo that swept through college and university campuses and spawned a “movement of movements,” welled up within the seminaries as well.⁵⁷⁴ Seminary students joined a variety of causes, but they also battled close to home, protesting against injustices they perceived within their own institutions. They occupied campus buildings and demanded that the seminaries take responsibility for their roles in society. The students also parlayed their newly acquired knowledge of the art of protest into demands for greater intellectual autonomy, insisting on institutional reform and questioning many of the assumptions of theological training. Already reeling from new theological movements and the need to train ministers for a world that at times seemed a moving target, the seminaries found themselves vulnerable to attack from within.

By the end of the 1960s, talk of crisis, change and renewal had become a mantra among critics of the Church and within the seminaries. “The truth is,” Charles Shelby Rooks, an African-American minister and the director of the program that administered the Rockefeller Grants to support would-be ministers, wrote in 1970, “Everywhere one goes in theological education today the word *crisis* is heard – from the lips of faculty, administrators, trustees, students, and alumni. In fact the word has become [a] conventional description of

⁵⁷³ Charles Shelby Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” *Theological Education*, Autumn 1970, 16.

⁵⁷⁴ Van Gosse. “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, editors (Blackwell: Malden Mass., 2002).

seminaries.”⁵⁷⁵ Indeed, as Rooks went on to detail, there was not one but a series of crises – pedagogical, theological, spiritual, financial, and organizational – affecting the seminaries by the start of the 1970s. The theological crisis was at the center of this maelstrom, and was connected in some way to each of the others. In Rooks’ opinion, so much theology was in doubt and so many new approaches, not to mention new religions, were on offer that an era of theological confusion now reigned which “accented rather than transformed the contemporary crisis of fear, apprehension, and pessimism about the future.”⁵⁷⁶

Chief among the factors that had chipped away the solid footing of traditional Christian understanding and training for ministry was what Rooks called the “crisis of insensitivity” to others. W.E.B. Du Bois had written in *The Souls of Black Folk*, of the common insensitivity to the suffering of others, that “men knew so little of men.”⁵⁷⁷ Seminarians of the late 1960s and early 1970s “made the eradication of this insensitivity [their] passion.”⁵⁷⁸ This desire underlay much of the turmoil on seminary and other educational campuses, and fueled support for the civil rights and Black Power movements, calls for curricular reform, demands for the responsible use of financial assets, and protests against the war in Vietnam.

Seminary enrollment peaked during 1967-1968, and Union Seminary enrolled an all-time high 793 students. The influx of new students could be attributed in part to the role the seminaries served as a “safe haven” for those seeking an educational deferment from compulsory service in Vietnam. According to Marv Dunn, who participated in SIM and

⁵⁷⁵ Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 16.

⁵⁷⁶ Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 17.

⁵⁷⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961 edition), 165, as quoted in Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 18.

⁵⁷⁸ Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 18.

attended Chicago Theological Seminary during 1967 and 1968, “everyone there was hiding from the draft.”⁵⁷⁹ In addition to the higher enrollments, seminaries across the country saw the average age of incoming students steadily rise during the decade as more people chose the ministry as a second vocation. A substantial proportion of women entering the ministry were doing so later in life, after having raised families, and men were also switching to the ministry from other careers.⁵⁸⁰ Proportions of minority and female seminarians also rose steadily during the 1960s, with women comprising ten percent of all seminarians in 1972.⁵⁸¹ As the decade progressed, a larger, older, and more diverse student body had more and more varied personal experiences to draw upon when assessing their education and determining the future role of the ministry.

A 1969 National Council of Churches’ study on student-initiated change in theological schools found that the pace of political and social change on campus during the 1960s accelerated as the decade proceeded, due to “the intensification of long-dormant feelings” and the advent of intersecting social change movements. The study found that at Union Theological Seminary, for example, more students were directly involved in social action or reform efforts in the final two years of the 1960s than had been involved in the previous eight years combined.⁵⁸² Like secular campuses, seminaries during this period were home to student unrest and occasionally dramatic clashes. Students occupied administration buildings at Andover-Newtown, Chicago, McCormick and Union Theological Seminaries in

⁵⁷⁹ Marvin Dunn, oral history interview with author, November 11, 2008

⁵⁸⁰ Jesse H. Ziegler, *ATS [the Association of Theological Schools] Through Two Decades: Reflections on Theological Education, 1960-1980* (Vandalia, Ohio: self-published, 1984), 17.

⁵⁸¹ Ziegler, *ATS Through Two Decades*, 18.

⁵⁸² Queen, “Student Initiated Change in Theological Schools,” 48.

the latter years of the 1960s. The chapel of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, was bombed in 1969 and seminarians at Boston Theological Seminary made national news when they used the school chapel to harbor a G.I. sought by authorities on charges of being AWOL from the U.S. military.⁵⁸³

Brought together in intense discussion by a series of events on and off campus, the Union Seminary community engaged in intensive introspection and self-critique. It began to deal systematically with what the National Council of Churches study called “a crisis of faith in the seminary’s integrity at many levels,” including its relationships to its neighbors, its relationship “to the needs of the Church and to the Christian tradition,” and its own policies and curricula.⁵⁸⁴ Although self-analysis and concern with mission may have been nothing new for seminaries, the level of engagement – by both students and faculty – and the potential to radically restructure the institutions, had never been seen before.

In previous chapters we have seen how clergy initiated change both from the pulpits and through new forms of ministry within and outside the Church. In this chapter I examine the seminary as a place where student movements, theology, and social activism intersected during the late 1960s, and look at how one such institution – Union Theological Seminary, the home sponsor of the Student Interracial Ministry project – responded and adapted.

Student Movements at Union Theological Seminary

The decade of the 1960s and into the early 1970s was a period of rapid social change, including “the proliferation of inter-related issues” and a series of social justice movements

⁵⁸³ Christopher Queen, “Student Initiated Change in Theological Schools,” in John Biersdorf, ed. *Ministry in the Seventies* (New York: IDOC, 1971), 17.

⁵⁸⁴ Queen, “Student Initiated Change in Theological Schools,” 48-49.

that often motivated and informed one another. Students at Union Theological Seminary, from the early days of the sit-in movement, were among the first to join each phase of action.⁵⁸⁵ As students of theology at the country's leading liberal seminary, they were predisposed toward cultural criticism and activism. Union's relationship with the progressive Riverside Church and its location in the New York metropolis also contributed to the seminary's tendency to attract "activist students from better colleges and universities."⁵⁸⁶ These movements had spawned a number of creative responses at Union Theological Seminary through the years, ranging from the Student Interracial Ministry to the Seminarians' Civil Rights Vigil at the Lincoln Memorial during 1964 to a later vigil against the Vietnam War and in support of President Johnson's peace efforts.⁵⁸⁷

Union students also helped spark an international justice movement in 1965 when they devised a program of protests and bank withdrawals to highlight American financial complicity in South Africa's apartheid regime. Students quickly garnered support from faculty and administrators and generated coverage by the *New York Times*. Although Union's

⁵⁸⁵ Queen, "Student Initiated Change in Theological Schools," 48. The quote is from the 1969 National Council of Churches report.

⁵⁸⁶ David Langston and William McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary, 1963-1969* (New York: National Council of Churches, Department of Ministry, 1971), 23.

⁵⁸⁷ Students were not the only activists on seminary campuses, and a campus like Union Theological Seminary could boast a long heritage of socially active professors and administrators. At Union, some of the younger professors participated in teach-ins and other events that supported student activism. Administrators were more reserved in public, but were also often personally supportive. A few of the senior scholars actively participated in the civil rights movement, even while not committing the institution itself to this cause. SIM adviser Roger Shinn, a professor of social ethics, was arrested in an early freedom ride and was arrested again while protesting the arrest of a SIM student in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1963. (Union Theological Seminary Timeline, 1960-1979, <http://www.utsnyc.edu/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?&pid=760>, June 16, 2008.) Robert McAfee Brown was also a Freedom Rider. Union Seminary President John Bennett, and professors Brown, William Sloane Coffin, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel all participated in the student-led Lincoln Memorial civil rights vigil and other demonstrations. (Langston and McKeown, "The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary," 1-2.) Bennett and his wife Anne even missed their own retirement party at the seminary when they were arrested and detained during an anti-Vietnam War protest in Washington D.C. (Leon Howell, "Ethical Engagement – Theologian John Coleman Bennett," (obituary) *Christian Century*, May 24, 1995.)

own board refused to divest, within a year the campaign had grown sufficiently to move off campus, and in 1969 the South African government announced it was no longer receiving support from that particular banking consortium.⁵⁸⁸ Divestment as an anti-apartheid strategy gained popularity, especially in American educational institutions and proved slowly effective over the next twenty years.

The Student Interracial Ministry program, and specifically its Southwest Georgia Project, was the catalyst for most of the subsequent social justice work at Union in the 1960s.⁵⁸⁹ The campus was electrified in 1965 when Charles Sherrod, who had married only twenty-four hours earlier and was accompanied by his new wife Shirley and two carloads of SIM volunteers and local Georgia folk, pulled onto the Union Campus in an old Cadillac and a Chevy that had been dubbed “The Honeymoon Express.” The Sherrods and the Southwest Georgia contingent presented their field reports to SIM committees and the Union faculty and student body. It was the first time that those resident at the Union campus had a chance to hear in person from the Georgia workers, and they caught their infectious excitement for the program.

The presentations stimulated a number of conversations among faculty and students as to how fieldwork in combination with regular seminary work could be used to better train students to be “responsive to the needs of people in society.”⁵⁹⁰ David Langston, a 1971 graduate of Union, wrote, “It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Southwest Georgia Project on student activism at Union Theological Seminary. Most of the student

⁵⁸⁸ Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 3-6.

⁵⁸⁹ Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 3-6.

⁵⁹⁰ *Southwest Georgia Project Newsletter*, October 9, 1966, No. 6, 3, 1-2. SIM, UTS, 2B:1:f4.

leadership and a few very influential faculty had been deeply influenced by its model of informed activism and readiness for personal sacrifice that often meant going to jail.”⁵⁹¹

Faculty members reported that the students who had gone to Southwest Georgia beginning in 1965 returned to the seminary campus deeply affected by the experience, and they too began openly questioning both the form and content of the seminary education system. The Southwest Georgia veterans formed “an important nucleus for change” on the campus.⁵⁹²

Reform efforts at Union in the later 1960s and into the 1970s were informed by the general direction of the student movement toward more demands for autonomy, growing critiques of the university as a culture, and concern with the military industrial complex and the war in Vietnam. Students and faculty joined public protests and demonstrations at nearby Columbia University, but they also called for changes to the seminary’s curriculum that would reflect both more concern with the state of the world and more responsiveness to individual student’s interests and learning styles. Following the 1968 student unrest at Columbia, classes at Union ground to a halt amidst demands for immediate change. Over the next several years, these demands were translated into various pedagogical experiments and expansion of the curricula, especially to reflect interest in women’s and black studies.

Training Seminarians During a “Crisis of Faith”

At the start of the decade, most seminaries were relatively quiet places of study and reflection. After mid-decade, however, these same institutions were filled with students who questioned not just literal interpretations of the bible, but also the importance of many basic religious traditions. Seminary students resented being handed a package of learning in

⁵⁹¹ David Langston e-mail to author, June 15, 2008, in possession of author.

⁵⁹² Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 1.

lectures and wanted to discover truth for themselves in relation to their own lives and the concerns of the day.⁵⁹³ The 1969 National Council study gave examples of a number of specific seminary experiences that might convince a student that his or her seminary was ignoring potential practical applications of theology. One example was of a Christian Ethics course that did not address the Vietnam War.⁵⁹⁴

On the other hand, so many theological fads had come and gone, Charles Rooks wrote in 1970, that much of the traditionally taught theology had been upended without replacement. Charles L. Taylor, who retired in 1967 after a decade at the helm of the American Association of Theological Schools, worried that amidst the all the seeking and questioning God himself may have gotten lost, and that without a basis of renewal, the search would become both frustrating and meaningless.⁵⁹⁵ Religious critics linked the spiritual crisis in the nation to the instability of the seminaries and their willingness to engage nontraditional pedagogy. With prayer and reflection being inadequately replaced by temporary experiments in liturgy and worship, Rooks said, the “meaning, purpose, and vitality” of Christian practice had drained out of the seminaries.⁵⁹⁶ The result of these myriad crises, according to one observer, was “that our whole life as Christian educational institutions is being called into account today in dramatic and sometimes painful ways.”⁵⁹⁷ Seminaries, once simple training academies for the parish ministry, suddenly found themselves questioning their basic purpose and direction.

⁵⁹³ Lee Bailey, “Editorial,” *The Tower*, Union Theological Seminary Alumni Magazine, Fall 19668, 2.

⁵⁹⁴ Queen, Biersdorf, ed. *Ministry in the Seventies* (New York: IDOC, 1971), 17.

⁵⁹⁵ Charles L. Taylor, “Sources of Renewal,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1967, 319-320.

⁵⁹⁶ Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 17.

⁵⁹⁷ Rooks, “Crisis in Theological Education,” 19.

The Death of God movement, which gained brief national attention in 1966, came to symbolize for some how far off track Christianity and the seminaries had gone. Death of God theologians proposed that God either no longer existed or still existed but the theologies and liturgies that had previously communicated God to the people were no longer effective. If there had been any doubt that the nation was unaware of its religious crisis, that was answered on April 6, 1966 when *TIME* magazine ran an all black cover with a bold red headline reading “Is God Dead?” It was the first time the magazine had failed to feature a picture on its front cover.⁵⁹⁸ While the Death of God school had few followers after around 1968, it served as a symbol of the scope of the crisis in the seminaries and churches, in which even the basic presumption of faith had been destabilized. What this meant caused alarm that echoed from the academy to the White House. The philosopher Susanne Langer commented in 1964 that society and the churches were experiencing a transition out of an age dominated by Christian thought, and into a new era that was as yet undefined. “We feel ourselves swept along in a violent passage from a world we cannot salvage to one we cannot see; and most people are afraid.”⁵⁹⁹

Students and faculty in the seminaries of the late 1960s understood their pivotal role in relation to the crisis of faith and the future of ministry, and proposed and auditioned a number of reforms for religious education. The result was a period of experimentation that, although it produced little lasting change, did continue to stretch the definitions of church

⁵⁹⁸ “Is God Dead?” *TIME*, April 8, 1966. The movement’s foremost practitioner, Thomas J.J. Altizer, a professor of religion at Emory University, claimed that God had died during our own historical period – for how could a living God tolerate the condition of the world. According to him, this did not undermine the fundamental truths inherent in Christianity.

⁵⁹⁹ Susanne Langer, *Philosophical Sketches* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964 edition), 141.

and ministry. Union Theological Seminary, and its experimental project, the Student Interracial Ministry, found themselves at the center of many of these discussions.

Most prescriptions for change in the seminaries addressed at least one of three key components: the structure of the educational system, the theological context in which ideas were presented and debated, and the theological content of this material, especially how it related to the contemporary world. Religious studies scholar Martin E. Marty said of the many proposed seminary reforms that the institutions were “in a buying mood concerning what to do where they are.”⁶⁰⁰ A number of different ideas for seminary education reforms were on offer during the last years of the 1960s. These came from students, professors, and administrators alike. Proposals were many and various but they were united by a common desire to make ministry and the church better connected to contemporary social and economic concerns.

Many of the proposals reflected a desire to reduce the authoritarian role of the pastor and create a more democratic lay leadership. Six seminarians from Yale University published one such plan in the journal *Christianity and Crisis* in 1967. One of the six, George Rupp, would go on to a distinguished career in higher education, including serving as president of Columbia University from 1993 to 2002. Accusing traditional seminaries of perpetuating a professional caste “with an ostrich view” of the world around it, the Yale students claimed that ministry should be the responsibility of the whole parish. Education for ministry, then, should be adapted to serve not only a professional clergy, but a “priesthood of all believers.” Boundaries between clergy and laity would be broken down and each member of the church would treat his or her chosen vocation – be it law, medicine, teaching, or city planning -- as a

⁶⁰⁰ Martin E. Marty, “Response to Professor Cox – II,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1967, 281.

priestly mission, enacting “how to be the Church in the world.”⁶⁰¹ The role of the laity and the continued authority of the clergy were debated not just among seminarians, but within the churches as well.⁶⁰²

From his vantage point as national coordinator of SIM and president of the InterSeminary Movement, Maynard Moore urged that educators embrace the time of change – “between the times,” he called it – and experiment with transitional models “as temporary phases through which theological education for the future and new forms of ministry can be molded.”⁶⁰³ Moore proposed approaching theological training as mission in an article,

⁶⁰¹ “A Prescription for Seminaries,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1968, 629-631. The Yale seminarians offered two suggestions for new courses of study, a fourteen-month “Core Program” and a one-year training program in the problems of urban life. The Core Program was to be further separated into twelve months of biblical and theological study, augmented by one month of study with lay and secular cultural leaders, and one month of study of non-Christian religions. Like several of the other proposals, the Core Program dispensed with both lectures and grades, preferring group learning, discussion, and self-guided study. Following their fourteen months in the Core Program, students would then be sent in groups of ten or twelve for one year of work in an urban training program in a large American city. Students would undertake volunteer or secular employment, become active lay members of a local church, and join each other in intensive weekly seminar discussions. The end result of the Core and urban programs, the students hoped, would be to depose the clergy class from its throne and engage a wider variety of people in both faith and the world, thereby increasing numbers, and renewing both the church and society. The proposed Core Program and its urban training program bore a startling resemblance to the Student Interracial Ministry’s urban projects, indicative not of plagiarism but of the common direction pursued by progressive seminarians at the end of the decade. (“Prescription,” 631-632.)

⁶⁰² The recognition of the pastoral role of the laity and the de-mystification of the ultimate authority of the pastor were fodder for numerous sermons, speeches, journal articles and books during the latter years of the 1960s and into the 1970s. Reuel L. Howe’s 1967 book *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* is representative of the genre, but it is only one of many. (Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967). See also Glenn Richard Bucher and Patricia Ruth Hill, eds., *Confusion and Hope: Clergy, Laity and the Church in Transition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). Howe was the Director of the Institute of Advanced Pastoral Studies and the book is based on his Princeton Seminary Alumni Lectures delivered in 1965.) Howe maintains that the church need not go out into the world because it is already in the world, encourages the translation of word into action, decries the “monological” nature of the typical sermon, and recommends its replacement by “dialogical preaching” that involves both the professional clergy person and the laity. According to Howe, one cannot discuss the church’s mission in the world or call for its reform without recognizing and also reforming the role of laity, for the laity are “the true ministers of the church because they live in the world where the church’s mission is.” The professional, parish-based minister’s job is to train the laity and direct them as they disperse this ministry. Howe added that the means by which the laity would be “trained” to minister in the world needed to be created, but that the development of such a strategy should come from within the church because, “We can no longer afford to leave this part of the church’s ministry to chance.” (Howe, 109, 103.)

⁶⁰³ E. Maynard Moore, “Theological Education for a Revolutionary Church,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1968, 609.

“Theological Education for a Revolutionary Church,” published in the same issue of the same journal as the Yale students’ piece. Moore, too, called for seminaries to be reconceived. They should not simply be places for the training of parish ministers, nor should they be solely, as H. Richard Niebuhr had suggested in his 1956 study, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, the “intellectual center of the church’s life,” where theological problems were studied and critiqued but not acted upon. Like the Yale students, Moore wanted to see seminary training move beyond this theoretical-practical dichotomy. Instead, he encouraged seminaries to embrace new patterns of mission and ministry in which they would serve as training centers not just for professional pastors but for “the entire church.”⁶⁰⁴ To accomplish this, he advised that both the church and the seminary needed to be fundamentally restructured. Focusing on the curricular content would be useless unless the basic reasons for being a minister, and for training one, were reconceived. As long as seminaries continued to see their goal as training parish ministers – for a church and world that Moore claimed no longer existed – curriculum revision would have little effect. Instead, he wrote, “*the entire seminary, conceptually and physically, must overhauled from inside out*, in much the same way as the church must be renewed only from the bottom up.”⁶⁰⁵

In 1968, at the time Moore wrote, there were approximately 160 separate Protestant theological schools, which was too many physical structures, he argued, to reasonably maintain. Indeed, seminary bankruptcies and closures were increasingly common in the late 1960s. Moore suggested collaborating with rather than competing with urban training centers and university departments of religion by “downsizing” the current number of seminaries and

⁶⁰⁴ Moore, “Theological Education for a Revolutionary Church,” 605, 608.

⁶⁰⁵ Moore, “Theological Education for a Revolutionary Church,” 605-607. Emphasis in original.

relocating scholarly resources to about 20 major ecumenical university centers. Moore argued for a reevaluation of the role of the laity and of the relationship between clergy and laity. The seminaries, he wrote, had for too long propped up and promoted “the illusion of the minister as a holy man with a special status apart from the laymen.”⁶⁰⁶ Repositioning the non-professional minister would be one aspect of what the SIM project called a “functional ministry.”⁶⁰⁷

Along with these plans for changing the context in which theology was taught and learned came numerous suggestions for revisiting the very content of theology programs. John C. Bennett, president of Union Theological Seminary, preferred only moderate change, arguing in 1966 that the traditional disciplines of church history, Bible studies, and systematic theology could certainly be taught differently and more effectively, but they should still form the basis of both theological education and participation in social struggles. Bennett argued that each generation does not get to re-invent Christian faith, rather it interprets and applies traditions to the realities of its time. He noted that in revolutionary times the Bible and belief in God are seen in revolutionary terms, but they still remain relatively fixed, and should continue to be at the core of seminary training.⁶⁰⁸ Bennett’s approach, however, was as optimistic with regard to the power of traditional religion as it was blind to the stringent demands of seminary students for radical change.

Contemporary times were so different than those that had produced our traditions and institutions, argued Richard Shaull among others, that the current generation was convinced

⁶⁰⁶ E. Maynard Moore, “Student Interracial Ministry Evidences Concern for Reform in Theological Education,” 1. Maynard Moore papers, now in possession of author.

⁶⁰⁷ Moore, “Student Interracial Ministry Evidences Concern for Reform in Theological Education,” 2.

⁶⁰⁸ John C. Bennett, “Theological Education and Social Revolution,” *Theological Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 1967), 286-287.

of the need to completely overhaul the structure of society and saw little in theological and cultural traditions which they wished to retain. Simply arguing that universal truths would hold fast because they were universal truths was not enough, Shaull argued, and educators would need to enter this revolutionary world “and deal with the crucial issues *as they arise there*.”⁶⁰⁹ In other words, biblical and theological traditions were not in themselves enough, but needed to be put in conversation with the contemporary situation, a subject to which theologian Harvey Cox devoted much attention. Cox claimed that a church-world dialogue was beside the point, since the church is itself a part of the world, not apart from the world, or put another way, “church and world are *not* static categories [and] the people of God are part of both church and world. This ongoing dialogue in, not with, the world provides the only viable context for theologizing and for theological education.” As to content, Cox called for the embrace of a multiplicity of viewpoints and sources of education, “a riotous variety of theological styles and positions,” but offered little in the way of concrete proposals.

SIM and Theological Education

Suggested change in theological education varied from Bennett’s rather conservative approach to Shaull and Cox’s calls for more radical reinventions. The Student Interracial Ministry project, standing at the crossroads of the seminaries and social action, entered into these discussions by producing a number of working papers and mission statements that reflected its approach to seminary training. In order to engage other seminaries nationwide in the discussion, in 1966 SIM introduced a new magazine, *skandalon*, which would cover

⁶⁰⁹ Richard Shaull, “Response to President Bennett – I,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1967, 291, 293; Harvey Cox, “The Significance of the Church-World Dialogue for Theological Education,” *Theological Education*, Winter 1967, 272.)

contemporary issues of specific relevance to seminarians. The journal's name was taken from a word used in the New Testament to mean a snare, stumbling block, or something that arouses prejudice, although it is often used in a positive light to refer to something that is a "good hindrance" that causes the wicked to stumble.⁶¹⁰ Indicative of how seriously seminarians regarded the crisis in the modern church, the magazine's original title prior to publication was *Church in Revolution*.

SIM published four issues of *skandalon* in 1967 and 1968, along with three working papers on theological education that were distributed to seminaries along with the magazine. *Skandalon* was meant to spark discussion within American seminaries by bringing the lessons learned by SIM volunteers over seven years in the field to a larger audience of socially concerned seminarians.⁶¹¹ The project also distributed reading lists of suggested books along with its working papers. These included works by Liston Pope, C. Vann Woodward, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and also a large number of recent books – over eighty in all – about the crises in the church and the seminaries.

The first two issues of *skandalon* and the white papers concerned Black Power and urban ministry, and the editors proposed that the first two topics would help to illuminate the third, the crisis in theological education and the necessity for its reform.⁶¹² The three working papers were prefaced, in true seminary style, with a "Prolegomenon," the Greek term for a formal essay that introduces a larger interpretive work. The authors considered the working papers themselves to be just the introduction to a conversation to be played out on seminary

⁶¹⁰ Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, http://www.antioch.com.sg/cgi-bin/bible/vines/get_defn.pl?num=1964, accessed on January 28, 2009.

⁶¹¹ "Working Papers on Theological Education," 2. SIM, UTS, 1G:1:f7, f8.

⁶¹² "Working Papers on Theological Education," 1. SIM, UTS, 1G:1:f7, f8.

campuses, and to this end SIM provided a list of suggested questions for discussion. George Walters and a group of other SIM students crafted the third working paper, “The Transition Model Seminary,” during the spring of 1966.⁶¹³ The paper was also distributed to faculty at Union and Princeton seminaries, to the National Council of Churches, at the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago, and within leadership boards of various denominations.⁶¹⁴

In the working paper on theological education, Walters and his colleagues declared that serious questions were being raised regarding the future of seminary training in relation to mission and “the movement.” Among these questions were the very definition of a theological education, curriculum content and goals, practical relationships to other academic disciplines, and the “nature and duration” of student work outside the seminary walls.⁶¹⁵ The relationships of clergy and laity and of other forms of graduate education to the seminaries were also considered for discussion.⁶¹⁶ Walters predicted that change would not come easily, but would require courage on the part of those who would abandon the existing structures “to experiment boldly and radically,” without being assured of what would replace them. The world needed another new breed of preachers, Walters and his colleagues contended, “trained revolutionaries who will lead and train others in alleviating the present crisis and in creating

⁶¹³ Walters drew on the ideas in this working paper for an article in *skandalon*, and Maynard Moore would package many of the working papers ideas in his journal article, “Theological Education for a Revolutionary Church.”

⁶¹⁴ “The Transition Model Seminary,” 1G:1:f8, 1C.2.F6.

⁶¹⁵ “Working Papers on Theological Education,” 4. SIM, UTS, 1G:1:f7, f8

⁶¹⁶ The working paper itself does not seem to have survived but what has is the *skandalon* article, a series of press releases supporting the working papers and the magazine issue’s publication, reading lists for further study, and several drafts of a proposal, apparently based on the working document and ensuing discussions, for “A Transition Model One Year Seminary Aimed at Having a Revolutionary Impact Upon the Seminaries for their Restructuring and for the Redefinition of the Nature and Purposes of Theological Education.” (In the later draft, this title was shortened to “The Transition Model Seminary: A Project Proposal for SIM.”) George Walters, Douglas Renick, James Crawford, John F. Chappell, and Wayne Marshall Jones, “A Transition Model One Year Seminary Aimed at Having a Revolutionary Impact Upon the Seminaries for their Restructuring and for the Redefinition of the Nature and Purposes of Theological Education,” SIM, UTS, 4B.1:f2.

the necessary new structures.”⁶¹⁷ Walters wrote that most of these clergy members who would take such roles had already been driven from their congregations. He hoped the seminaries could be changed before they too eradicated these necessary radicals.

The Student Interracial Ministry’s major contribution to discussions about seminary education, however, was the composition of its own program, a model for an intensive fieldwork experience that might stretch outside the boundaries of the traditional congregation. Across the country, more and more seminaries accepted and adopted this type of extended fieldwork as part of theological training, until by the early 1970s it had become a routine and expected part of the seminary experience.

Curriculum Change at Union Theological Seminary

John Bennett, who had been president of Union Theological Seminary since 1964, supported the civil rights movement and was pleased by Union’s contributions to it. At his inauguration ceremony, held at Riverside Church on April 10, 1964, he had even proclaimed that the “American form of the world-wide social revolution is very close to Union Seminary,” and he committed himself to “do all that I can to help our students prepare to participate in it wherever they are.”⁶¹⁸ A scant three years later, however, having been buffeted by the winds of change at Union, Bennett was not as enthusiastic about a revolution within his seminary. Bennett’s term was marked by changing social mores but also by conflicts over theology and how to teach it. In 1967, Bennett strongly urged the preservation

⁶¹⁷ M. George Walters, “Theological Education: Crisis and Task,” *skandalon*, Vol. 3, Spring 1967, 8. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

⁶¹⁸ Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 260-262. Quotations from *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, part 2 (May, 1964), 406-407.

of current seminary curricula, and warned students not to become “too self-righteous” or “oversimplify complex issues” as they attempted to adapt the church and seminary to their perceptions of the world’s needs.⁶¹⁹

Bennett did encourage students to be, as he said, “alive and sensitive, with a capacity for moral outrage, with a sense of the importance of political action, with a willingness to stand up and be counted, even if they go too far for my own circumspect self.”⁶²⁰ He was, however, less flexible when it came to student calls for reform of the theological curriculum. Although he acknowledged that scripture would always be interpreted based on the context of the times, he insisted that seminary training continue to be based on bible study, church history, and systematic theology. However, even while arguing strongly against radical curricular reform, Bennett recognized that the curriculum was vitally linked to an agenda of social concerns. In this respect he was not very different from many other college and university administrators of his day.

Despite Bennett’s objections, Union did experiment with curricular change beginning mid-way in 1966 academic year. Responding to complaints from both students and faculty, Bennett created a special committee to study the curriculum. The new committee was composed of both the faculty Committee on Instruction and the members of the Student Cabinet Curricular Committee. Although there was some disagreement as to Bennett’s intentions, the notion of according student members of a committee equal standing with faculty was itself an unprecedented step. While some reformers saw him as truly concerned about the curriculum, others understood the committee to be Bennett’s attempt to distract and

⁶¹⁹ John C. Bennet, “Theological Education and Social Revolution,” *Theological Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 1967), 286, 289.

⁶²⁰ John C. Bennet, “Theological Education and Social Revolution,” 289.

isolate some of the younger and more outspoken members of the faculty. In any case, two concrete results emerged from the collaboration: the establishment of a an Educational Policy Commission with both student and faculty members, and the adoption, after serious amendments, of a “syllabus unit,” which replaced courses in theology with self-guided study and a series of three competency exams, as an optional way to satisfy the B.D. course work requirements. Since the syllabus unit was passed with much opposition and then only as an option rather than as true structural change, many on campus regarded it as a failure. However, the syllabus unit in many ways helped to inform the development and work of the Union Commission that, several years later, secured more successful changes to the curriculum.⁶²¹

The Columbia University Student Strike and Union Seminary, Spring of 1968

Much of the turmoil and change at Union Seminary was related to the strike at Columbia University in the spring of 1968. President Bennett had correctly predicted three years earlier that the war in Vietnam would eventually precipitate major campus unrest and “serious crises at Union and at other seminaries, as well as in colleges and universities.”⁶²² The Columbia strike evolved out of two separate issues, one related to the war and free speech, and the other to the rights and freedoms of the school’s black neighbors. Students demanded the right to free speech after six student activists were placed on probation, without a hearing, for protesting Columbia’s relationship with a military think tank. At approximately the same time, concerns developed regarding Columbia’s construction of a

⁶²¹ Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary, 1963-1969*, 7-8.

⁶²² Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 273.

gymnasium with facilities for university affiliates, but with separate facilities for their Harlem neighbors. Between 700 and 1,000 students staged protests and occupied five buildings on the Columbia campus between April 23 and April 30, 1968.⁶²³ The protests were led by Columbia's chapter of Students for a Democratic Society and the Students Afro-American Society.

The president of the Columbia University Student Council at the time of the strike was also a seminarian, enrolled in a joint degree program between Columbia and Union Theological Seminary. Daniel E. Pellegrum had only recently been appointed to replace several other officers who had quit the Student Council in protest. As many as half of all Union students became involved in the strike, either as protestors, as representatives of Union on the Columbia Strike Coordinating Committee, or as non-violence "officers" invited by the Columbia Protestant Office to help model non-violence during demonstrations. Some of the seminarian non-violence officers wore clerical collars, many for the first time in their lives, in an effort to identify themselves as ministers and keepers of the peace. About 100 Union Seminary students were there in the early morning hours of April 29, 1968, when New York City riot police stormed the occupied campus buildings and arrested 711 people.⁶²⁴ Among the 147 injured was Daniel Pellegrum, who was struck in the head with a nightstick while attempting to block a police advance with his body.⁶²⁵ Union Seminary students also reacted to the Columbia strike on their own campus, especially by demanding reforms in the seminary's culture and its curriculum.

⁶²³ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 274.

⁶²⁴ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 274.

⁶²⁵ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 274; Langston, email to author. Pellegrum is the long-time director of Pathfinder International, a not-for-profit reproductive health organization.

One Union student in particular, one of the non-violence counselors, became part of the history – and mythology – of the Columbia strike when he had his photograph taken by a *TIME* magazine correspondent. Earlier in the day on April 28, 1968, some hours before the riot police arrived, a group of counter-demonstrators, mostly Columbia athletes, had circled the Low Library in a cordon two deep in an effort to prevent protestors from reaching the building and supporters from bringing supplies to those already there. A group of about forty students, including two or three Union students, attempted to break through this cordon with boxes of food for the protestors. For a moment the athletes and the protestors traded shoves, shouts, and a few blows, then the protestors retreated to hurl food over the athletes' heads to students waiting on the window ledge above. In those few tense moments of thrown punches and shouting, a group of the Union nonviolence coaches attempted to intercede. It was one of these students who was pictured in *TIME*, standing between the two factions, wearing his clerical collar, and seemingly about to be clobbered by both sides.⁶²⁶

Another joint-degree student, Ted Kachel, was a key player in Union's support of the Columbia demonstrators and came to be the leading voice for curricular reform at Union in the immediate aftermath of the strike. At a seminary-wide meeting on May 1, the rest of that week's classes were canceled by popular vote, with the time to be used to discuss reform efforts.⁶²⁷ Ted Kachel and visiting Dutch Jesuit student Ton Veerkamp, who had been a student at the Free University of Berlin, became the major leaders of what was to be called the "Free University," a reform experiment that lasted a scant two weeks but which eventually led to more substantial changes at Union Seminary. On May 2, students elected

⁶²⁶ Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary, 1963-1969*, 11.

⁶²⁷ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 274.

Kachel to chair the Free University and he selected a small volunteer committee to begin planning. The next day they announced plans for three task forces that would study educational policies, decision making, and public relations.⁶²⁸ While the latter had to do with Union's politics and its neighbors, the first task force was devoted to the curriculum and pedagogical structure. SIM's Ed Feaver, recently returned from the Southwest Georgia Project, contributed key ideas to the Kachel committee.

According to a later survey of faculty and students, most students saw and understood the Free University at Union and the Columbia strike as "dealing with similar issues." For some faculty and the administration, on the other hand, "there was little readiness to see Union's problems in the same light" as Columbia's. This latter viewpoint became more entrenched the closer the interviewers got to the president's inner circle. President Bennett himself admitted that he did not know how the transition between the strike and the Free University occurred because "we did not have great grievances here. I think the rhetoric at that time rather exceeded the grievances."⁶²⁹

Despite the administration's insistence that all was well within the seminary walls, it clearly was not, and the faculty and administration, although often divided by deep theological and philosophical differences, voted to suspend classes and see what emerged from the experiment. The two weeks of the Free University system were defined by a seemingly endless series of exhaustive and exhausting meetings that continued to what would ordinarily have been the last day of the spring semester, May 15. At the final meeting, the task force on decision-making proposed the creation of a thirty-six-member Union

⁶²⁸ Langston and McKeown, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 11, Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 274.

⁶²⁹ Langston and McKeowen, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 13-14.

Commission, composed equally of members of the student body, the faculty, and the board of directors.

The Union Commission and the Core Experimental Education Groups, 1968

After studying the seminary for a year, the Commission proposed the creation of a project called the Core Experimental Education Groups. Although developed independently of the core group idea of the Yale students, they were similar in concept and both drew on a common lexicon and ideas then in circulation about pedagogical change. The Core project created small groups of students who met together with faculty advisers to create their own course of study for one year. The Free University, which student activists called “unquestionably one of the significant events in Union’s educational history,” came to a close with the creation of the Core groups, a radical experiment in theological study.⁶³⁰ The first full-time Core group was advised by a charismatic British instructor of theology, Jeffrey W. Rowthorn, who served in this capacity for two years before moving up in the seminary, first to chaplain and later as a dean.⁶³¹ While several other Core groups were advised by lecturers, they lacked the kind of leadership Rowthorn provided, and which students felt was necessary for keeping a self-guided program on track.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Langston and McKeowen, *The Student Movement at Union Theological Seminary*, 13. While the former Union faculty member and historian of the seminary Robert Handy characterizes the Core groups as gradually disappearing after two year due to expense and lack of student interest, nevertheless, the interest of the many of the original participants not only did not wane, but continues to the present time. Some dozen Union alumni, including David Langston, still gather every summer for what they call their “Core Reunions.” Forty years on they are still debating educational reform. At least one of them has devoted much of his more than 30-year academic career to developing new pedagogical strategies, and as mentioned previously, George Rupp, who as a Yale seminarian called for radical structural and curricular change, went on to the presidency of Columbia University.

⁶³¹ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 276.

⁶³² Langston, e-mail to author.

Change at Union Theological Seminary did not come without a price. Public perception of Union Theological Seminary after 1968 was that of a place in turmoil. Enrollment, which had recently peaked, now started to drop off, and continued to fall precipitously year by year through the 1970s.⁶³³ As Union historian Robert Handy puts it, “Union had long been highly regarded as a leader in church life and theological education in such areas as critical scholarship, preparation through field experience for urban ministry, ecumenical leadership, and civil rights. Now it was involved in the crises of the liberal causes for which it had long stood.”⁶³⁴

John Bennett retired as president in 1969, and new president J. Brooke Mosley inherited an institution in philosophical and administrative disarray. As a young activist Episcopal Bishop willing to step onto the storm lashed decks of Union Seminary, Mosley was hailed for his bravery by *TIME* magazine, which added that “few prudent men would walk lightly into a university presidency today.” The writer suggested that Mosley’s parish background and his success in building an inner-city ministry in Cincinnati equipped him well for Union’s current concerns with urban ministry and its relationship to its own neighbors in Harlem.⁶³⁵ *TIME* also predicted that Mosley’s greatest challenge would be providing clear direction for a seminary divided into two camps; one that sought a continuation of the tradition of academic excellence through general adherence to the curricular status quo, and one that called for pedagogical experiments toward a more direct involvement in society at large. Mosley would be immediately faced with a challenge that

⁶³³ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 291.

⁶³⁴ Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 292.

⁶³⁵ “Union Finds a President,” *TIME*, April 13, 1970.

touched on issues important to both camps, Black Power, the appropriate response of the white churches, and its impact on campus.

When James Forman delivered the Black Manifesto in May 1969 during a service at Riverside Church around the corner, the student body at Union Theological Seminary had just voted overwhelmingly to approve a new governance structure and significant curricular changes. It was still awaiting approval by the faculty, staff, board, and the alumni council, when some seventy-five to eighty Union students, in sympathy with Forman's demands, occupied the administration building for four days, then successfully demanded that the board of directors allocate more than one and a half million dollars for black projects, including \$25,000 directly to Forman's BDEC.⁶³⁶ The protest may have had specific demands related to black economic and educational improvement, but it was also the culmination of a host of issues that one student activist appraised as having grown "directly out of a fundamental difference in philosophy that divided the students from Union's faculty and administration."⁶³⁷ These differences would result in the loss of the institution's new president, but it would also point in the direction of embracing a diversity of theological, racial, and gender views going forward.⁶³⁸

President Mosley retired as Union's head after four years, his tenure marked not by new cohesion but by retrenchment and an ever-wider chasm between campus factions. Union

⁶³⁶ Stephen C. Rose, "Putting it to the Churches: Reparations for Blacks?" *The New Republic*, Vol. 160, No. 25, June 21, 1969, 19-20.

⁶³⁷ Per e-mail correspondence between author and David Langston, November 26, 2008.

⁶³⁸ Tracy's comment: Ending is much too abrupt. No real conclusion, story just ends. Need to step back and relate this reaction on the part of white church folk to the manifesto to the larger question of how to be engaged in a revolution; how to engage in particular in the world shaped by black power; what interracial role is there at this point? Need to in the conclusion pull out your interesting point about how historians need to recognize the negative impact of the loss of real interracial connection and cooperation.

Theological Seminary had been the largest and most distinguished interdenominational divinity school in North America for most of the twentieth century, but when it opened its doors for the new school year of 1972, it was now only the sixth largest. Mosley had lost students and wracked up a budget deficit of several hundred thousand dollars. He admitted to *TIME* magazine that for several years the Seminary “has lacked a clear focus.”⁶³⁹ One of the few victories that Mosley could point too resulted directly from the campus turmoil of the late 1960s and especially from the concerns highlighted by the demands of the Black Manifesto. From that period onward, the level of student participation in campus affairs and in social concerns off-campus remained high. Fieldwork, modeled on the SIM approach, was instituted as a requirement and helped take many students outside the seminary walls and into the community.⁶⁴⁰ And in the first half of the 1970s, in particular, Union led the way nationally among seminaries in creating a racially and sexually diverse learning environment.

The End of the Student Interracial Ministry

The Student Interracial Ministry did not last long enough to see those advances in the 1970s. It came to an end during the dramatic 1967-1968 school year. Even as it began its ambitious slate of urban projects in 1967, it was already in serious financial straits. The project’s economic difficulties were largely unrelated, however, to the turmoil in the streets or within the seminaries. Rather, SIM was a victim of its own success, having grown so large so quickly in the previous year that it found itself in the fall of 1967 unable to support itself going forward.

⁶³⁹ “The State of Union,” *TIME*, October 9, 1972.

⁶⁴⁰ Handy, *The History of Union Theological Seminary*, 269, 291-292.

The project's major goals remained unchanged from previous years – to reform theological education, revolutionize the idea of what being a church meant by experimenting with clergy and lay roles, reshape social structures through political involvement, and achieve reconciliation in race relations. The major difference between SIM's approach in 1967 and its earlier programs was that by the late 1960s it now saw itself as a network that would work together with and coordinate the efforts of "existing ecumenical and interracial action ministries across the country in a common thrust of purpose."⁶⁴¹ However, SIM still had the financial resources of a small student organization, not a national network, and it did not survive under the weight of its new responsibilities.

Maynard Moore, it will be recalled, had been hired as SIM's National Coordinator in May 1966, and he spent the next sixteen months crisscrossing the country, visiting all the SIM students at their work placements and churches and urban ministry projects to raise interest, and recruiting additional students at seminaries and colleges. By January of 1967, he had received 170 separate requests for full-year SIM interns from churches, urban development projects and other potential hosts. That same month he pitched the SIM project before the national conference of seminary field education directors and began an intensive recruiting trip that took him to fifty-six seminaries. The project's new regional administrative structure was also put to use, with regional coordinators in the Northeast, Midwest, and Southwest doing additional recruiting. Sixty students went into the field that summer: fifteen students in Southwest Georgia, three with the Delta Ministry in Mississippi, and the remainder in dedicated urban projects in Chicago, Staten Island, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Raleigh, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Richmond (California), and Los Angeles.

⁶⁴¹ "Summary of SIM procedures," 1967. SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f6.

The project ran out of money early that fall. Under the administration of George Walters in New York, SIM had brought in \$43,000 in support during the first nine months of 1967, funding the program through the summer and into September.⁶⁴² However, by September 1, it had received and spent nearly all of the money it had raised for the entire year. Facing expenses of \$5,000 per month through May 1968, it only expected an additional \$5,000 in incoming revenue.⁶⁴³ In addition, J. Oscar Lee, who had been SIM's chief adviser at the National Council of Churches since the project's inception, announced he would be leaving the Council at the end of September to take a new position with the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

While the SIM officers tried to find a solution to their money woes and assurances that they would not be put out of their National Council-owned offices in the InterChurch center, word of their perilous position gradually became clear to their students scattered around the country. John Stumme, who was working in Chicago's West Garfield neighborhood that year, noted in his diary in September that the SIM Chicago project was having trouble getting off the ground because it had no money. The project limped along, although Stumme and the other interns in Chicago remained unpaid for most of the school year. On June 16, 1968, Stumme returned to his journal to note that he been paid only \$1,000 of a promised payment of \$1,750, but that "they have promised to pay me \$600 more [and] this will be satisfactory to me."⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴² E. Maynard Moore, "Report to the National Committee," September 1, 1967. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f10.

⁶⁴³ E. Maynard Moore, "Report to the National Committee," September 1, 1967. SIM, UTS, 1B:1:f10.

⁶⁴⁴ John Stumme, "log" entries for September 28, 1967 and June 6, 1968. Possession of John Stumme, Chicago, IL.

The national SIM office attempted to solve its financial crisis by decentralizing the organization, splitting it into its regional subcommittees and separate urban projects, and so save money on centralized administrative overhead. But it was too little too late. By late October, the project was appealing directly to its students past and present for help paying its current interns' stipends, a figure amounting to some \$45,000. Edward Feaver, the Finance Director, admitted, "We do not have this money."⁶⁴⁵

Moving On

The students who directed SIM were also distracted by other concerns – the war in Vietnam, jobs, and their own lives and families. Ed Feaver became more and more involved in draft resistance, Maynard Moore returned to Chicago to finish a graduate degree, and George Walters was supposed to be running the Chicago Urban Project but was instead becoming more and more involved in Joe Matthews Ecumenical Institute project. Others went in different directions, expected and unexpected. John Collins was a minister in the Methodist Church for forty years and is currently retired in New York State. Jane Stembridge is a published poet living in North Carolina. George and Carol Walters spent their careers working in international economic development, including long stays in India. Steve Rose moved to Sturbridge, Massachusetts in the late 1960s to become a journalist and has continued to publish numerous works of theology, although his ideas continue to change. J. Oscar Lee moved on from his Raleigh church to work as part of an interracial team ministry,

⁶⁴⁵ Ed Feaver, letter to SIM alumni dated October 21, 1967. SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f12.

Ministries in Areas of Racial Tension, sponsored by the Board of Christian Education of the United Presbyterian Church from 1964 to 1969. In 1969, he moved from Atlanta to New York to head the United Presbyterian Church's Commission on Religion and Race, and later became Associate General Secretary for the Latin America and Africa sections of the church's Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations. Maynard Moore also worked within his denomination and rose to the leadership of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, but he has also been a consultant in financial resource development and management for nonprofit organizations for more than twenty-five years. Ruth Brandon, who was Ruth Minter when she spent several tours with SIM, worked in Africa for many years and is now an Association Minister working with eighty-nine churches in rural Ohio. Bob Hare, who hosted SIM urban ministry interns in his church in Richmond, Virginia, was arrested in 1969 in Ohio for referring women for illegal abortions; the case was eventually thrown out after the Roe v. Wade decision, and he currently directs a ministry training program for inmates in Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Ed Feaver directed the Department of Health and Human Services in the State of Florida. Joe Pfister ran the Southwest Georgia Project's print shop for about ten years, then moved to North Carolina, where he currently practices acupuncture.

At the end of the 1960s, Union Seminary, like many institutions of higher learning, was reeling from the multiple storms then raging in society – civil rights concerns, moral questions relating to the Vietnam War, a burgeoning women's movement, American economic support of a repressive regime in South Africa, the imbalance of wealth in American society, and the demands of the Black Power movement for electoral and economic self-control. Of paramount concern at Union Seminary was the Church's role in

response to these fundamental social issues. Participation in the civil rights movement, educational reform efforts, and protests against the Vietnam War shared a common theme: the students insisted that institutions be held responsible for their policies and practices. Students demanded that their universities and seminaries take responsibility for their contributions to the war, to institutionalized racism, and to the economic deprivation of large segments of society. When Forman delivered the Black Manifesto, for example, students responded that it represented an opportunity for institutions to step up to their responsibilities.

Historian Michael Friedlander has argued that the Vietnam War displaced civil rights as the major social issue for Protestant clergy, and that the Black Power movement hastened this shift.⁶⁴⁶ But from the point of view of a seminarian at Union Theological in 1969, the war and Black Power were just links in a chain of concerns that were central to a changing American culture. At Union, the students did indeed tend to focus on one issue at a time, but they also saw civil rights, economic empowerment, curriculum reform, students' rights, the war in Vietnam, financial investments in South Africa, and other issues as all linked. As Maynard Moore wrote from Chicago on September 30, 1967, "The demands placed upon those committed to social change become all the more urgent as the opposition consolidates its position, and those who are aware of the issues camouflaged by the daily headlines must rededicate themselves to the deepening struggle. Those of us who have been involved in the Student Interracial Ministry should be awake and alive to the new imperatives, for we have

⁶⁴⁶ Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet. Charles Marsh in *God's Long Summer* (8) also argues that Black Power "killed" the beloved community ideal.

participated, if only in a small way, in a much larger effort to involve the church in the battle for human dignity.”⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁷ E. Maynard Moore, letter announcing formation of SIM Alumni Committee, September 30, 1967. SIM, UTS, 1A:2:f6.

AFTERWORD

Joe Pfister grew up in Northern California in the 1940s and 1950s. He attended the University of California, Berkley, joined the Student Christian Movement, and studied psychology. Thinking he would eventually pursue a career in counseling, perhaps with a spiritual component to it, he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in 1964. Once there he found he was less interested in psychology than in the urban ministry work that was taking place in nearby Harlem.

He recalled: “I did my field work in East Harlem at the East Harlem Protestant Parish [with] Bill Webber. Well, it was a big eye-opening thing for me, [being] middle-class, well fed. I worked with a junior high school class, and they were all kind of street kids, [including a] fourteen-year-old girl with a baby. They were good kids and the two of us working with them, we just sort of decided, ‘Okay, what we’re going to do is to get them some exposure to other things in the City of New York.’ Because they had this little narrow, two or three-block area, that was their block, that’s where they hung, they knew this. Of course, [it was] laced with drugs and whatnot. So we took them on the subway to go to the Cloisters or went downtown to let them see, ‘Okay, this is also New York. You might relate to this at some point.’ That was probably our major accomplishment. We taught Sunday school and stuff, but that wasn’t nearly as interesting as the trips we took.”⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, this and subsequent quotes from Joe Pfister in this section are from: Joe Pfister, oral history interview with author, November 15, 2006.

That same fall, as he was getting his first experience of urban ministry and the problems of the inner city, he met Charles Sherrod, who recruited him to come down and work in Southwest Georgia with him. “Charles was doing an STM, a Master's in Sacred Theology. He was taking a break. He had been a field coordinator for SNCC and all kinds of crazy stuff had happened, so he was taking a little time off and studying and came to Union. And while he was there, he was recruiting students to come down and volunteer. A bunch of us thought it would be great.” Pfister was eager to do civil rights work and had already dabbled in a small way. He had participated in the activist YWCA at Berkley, and had worked on a voter registration drive his senior year and supported a fair housing amendment to the California constitution. When he got to Union Seminary he befriended several female students who had just returned from Freedom Summer in Mississippi and he drove down to Jackson in a Volkswagen Beetle with them in October 1964 to help support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. That was the first time that the native Californian had ventured into the American South. It wouldn't be the last.

Pfister and several others convinced the Union Theological Seminary administration to let them do their fieldwork intern year with the Southwest Georgia Project. Pfister recalled that “there was some resistance at first, sort of rooted in the seminary and the more traditional way of doing it, and the concepts of community organizing were only starting to get recognized.” Pfister and five others spent the academic year 1966-1967 as interns working with Sherrod in Albany and the surrounding counties. Pfister and another intern, Jim Romberg, lived with a sixty-five year-old one-armed black farmer named Terrell Ford in Worth County. Ford had fourteen children, all of whom went to college, but was divorced and living alone at the time; he enjoyed having the two interns for company. “He was a

dynamo,” Pfister recalls. “He’d get you up at dawn, work you to death.” The interns tried to help Ford pick cotton and butterbeans on the farm, “but of course us with our two hands were about half the speed of him going up and down the rows.”

When they weren’t on the farm the interns spent their days that first fall working with the Worth County Improvement Association, whose major focus at the time was making sure that elderly black citizens received the welfare benefits to which they were entitled. They also registered voters and supported black youth in their unsuccessful attempts to integrate the local school system.

Pfister received his ordination in a Presbyterian church in Albany. “I wasn’t interested in being a church pastor, but I managed to get ordained under the category of ‘evangelist,’ which is a little bit weird, because I wasn’t doing anything which you’d actually call evangelism. [After I was ordained I was] able to say, “Reverend So-and-so is supporting this,” and that [gave] us the weight of the church. I don’t know how much effect that actually had, [but] that was the thinking, it would be helpful. That was as close to any traditional ministry that I did there. Occasionally someone would want me to do a prayer, you know, or say something. Our job was to pretty much stay in the background, so I tried to avoid as much of that as possible, but everyone now and then, they want you to do it so you just do it.”

As the Christmas of 1966 approached, the SIM interns were sitting in Ford’s farmhouse one day making vacation plans. Pfister, Romberg, and a third white SIM intern, Ed Feaver, decided they would take the car Feaver’s parents had loaned him – an old Cadillac they nicknamed the Great White Whale – and drive across country. They would drop off Ed in Oklahoma, drive on to Seattle where Jim had a girlfriend, and then Pfister

would finish off the trip solo to his parents' house in Berkeley. As soon as he heard the plan, however, Mr. Ford "jumped up and said, I want to go too! Here's a man who had never been north of Greenville, South Carolina, never been south of Jacksonville, Florida, and never been west of Birmingham, Alabama. That was his entire parameter. But his oldest son lived in Berkeley, and he wanted to go out. He of course hadn't seen him for many years. And I said, Should we call him up and make sure it's okay? No, [Mr. Ford said,] I want to surprise him."

They drove across the country together, the three white seminarians in their twenties and old Mr. Ford, the one-armed farmer. They took the southern route because the White Whale's heater did not work, dropped off Ed Feaver in Oklahoma and then went on through New Mexico before deciding to take a side trip into Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. More than forty years later, Pfister still easily recalls Mr. Ford's reaction when they got out next to the snow-covered lip of the Canyon: "Old Mr. Ford, he looks at this thing, the man who had never been west of Greenville, he looks at this thing, and he just looks out over the canyon, and he just shakes his head. And he says, 'I know Jesus must be in this somewhere,' he says. Then we get back in the car and drive across onto L.A." A week or so later, after successfully uniting Mr. Ford with his son Buford, they drove back across the country again to Worth County, Georgia.

At the end of that year, Sherrod asked if one of the interns would stay over for continuity. Pfister recalls thinking at the time, "God, I'm going to be staying here much longer than I [planned!] I'll do it." Pfister stayed a second year, went back to Union to finish his degree, then returned to Southwest Georgia, where he stayed for another seven years. For Pfister, the experience, even over all that time, was a form of ministry in action. "I look at it

[as] this was my ministry, to be among the people and help them with what they needed help with. I considered it my ministry.” He left Georgia for North Carolina, where he lives on a farm. Over the years, he has run printing presses, served as a hospital chaplain, and practiced acupuncture.

The Student Interracial Ministry project set out to create social change and promote racial healing through interpersonal connections while forcing the institutional church to be more racially inclusive. The students worked throughout the civil rights movement as well as inside the church and the academy. By the end of the 1960s, however, a project that had started out based in churches was trying to reinvent the meaning of church itself, embracing instead of congregations and denominations an idea of a “revolutional church” that adhered to the individual. For them, “the church is those people who see themselves as mission, doing whatever is necessary, deciding to die to shatter present barriers to the possibilities of the future.”⁶⁴⁹ For others in the project, as for many others in their generation, institutional church attendance was just one part of their quest for authenticity, an ingredient in the larger group of influences upon their personal choices and paths.

Many of the individual participants in SIM felt personally changed by the process of having served with it; over and over former participants interviewed forty years later spoke of the transformative effect of their brief time in the project on the future course of their life and work. For many, that work took place outside of the church, and it led them to lives outside of the church as well. Perhaps twenty-five percent of the seminarians who worked with SIM went on to careers in the ministry. The rest, for the most part, took one of three paths: pursuing academic careers, going into government or non-profit social justice work, or doing something seemingly unrelated to their religious training. While nearly all of the

⁶⁴⁹ Walters, “Theological Education: Crisis and Task,” *skandalon*, Vol. 3, Spring 1967, 7. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

veterans of the project whom I interviewed seem to have retained some level of belief or faith, a pursuit of the authentic, the majority has moved away from the institutional church.

Religious historian Charles C. West has argued that the late-1960s student rebellions, such as those that took place at Columbia University and at Union Theological Seminary, undid the Student Christian Movement's traditional commitment to the churches' evangelical mission. Their faith shaken in institutions, including the government, the church, and the academy, students withdrew from the ecumenical movement and from lives in the ministry, diminishing the ranks of the latter and depriving the former of the next generation of leaders.⁶⁵⁰ SIM's George Walters, writing from within this community in 1967, saw the situation similarly but from a different angle; seminarians like himself should not be blamed for rebelling against a defunct system, he argued, rather the churches were at fault for not recognizing and encouraging the efforts of their young ministers to save them. Would-be reformers, Walters wrote, "are at best ill-supported by the church that sent them out there and at worst lambasted for abandoning the institution which begat them, accused of hating the church rather than encouraged in their efforts to be the church."⁶⁵¹

Joe Pfister and old Mr. Ford, in their unusual companionship and their willingness to walk in each other's shoes, demonstrated one way of being the church. They also demonstrated that the "church" and the civil rights movement could be one and the same. As Pfister remarked: "the workers in the Movement need to have a common sense of purpose which extends beyond the immediate goals of gathering the community together and the long range goals of gaining power for the powerless. This sense of purpose includes these goals,

⁶⁵⁰ Charles C. West, "Introduction," in Risto Lehtonen, *Story of a Storm: The Ecumenical Student Movement in the Turmoil of Revolution*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), xvi.

⁶⁵¹ Walters, "Theological Education: Crisis and Task," *Skandalon*, Vol. 3, Winter 1967, 7.

but it also includes the building of a style of sharing, of serving one another as brothers and friends.”⁶⁵²

As the 1960s unfolded into the 1970s, carrying this particular Christian Progressive vision forward would prove to be a challenge, although not an insurmountable one. The mainline churches continued to persist, although shaken and shedding members, but religion remained central to American life thanks to two forces that gathered strength at the fringes, the continuing quest of those searching for the authentic and the evangelical revival of the 1970s, and gradually shifted toward the center. The result, as *TIME* magazine’s God-o-meter attests, is that religion is playing a greater role in American life than it ever has. The question remains, as it did at the founding of the Church and as it did for Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s, not “whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be.” And now, as then, “the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists for love.”⁶⁵³

⁶⁵² Joe Pfister, “Building: Long Range Style,” *skandalon*, Vol. 4, Fall 1967, 12. SIM, UTS, 2A:1:f10.

⁶⁵³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

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