

Recollections: The Black Revolt and the United Presbyterian Church, 1963-1973

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I have chosen the title carefully. What follows are shards of recollections from my brittle memory bank and those I have raided, tape recorder in hand, of four African American Presbyterian ministers who were with me at the forefront of the United Presbyterian response to the crisis in the nation during a critically important decade. The reader will not find unassailable proof of the accuracy of these recollections in the official records of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A (UPCUSA). However, several living persons will confirm the trustworthiness of what is asserted here. Four of such persons are mentioned by name in an acknowledgment section at the end. The reader, as usual, must decide what is to be trusted and what to question. I dare to believe that the Holy Spirit guided my recording of these memoirs and the Holy Spirit, according to Scripture, is the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17).

In this essay, I join scholars Nathan Wright, Jr., James H. Cone, and James Gesehwender in describing what happened between 1963 and 1973 as a “black revolt” or a black rebellion.¹ There is a difference between a revolt and a revolution. Black people did not change the political and economic hegemony of white people in the United States during this period, nor did they dismantle the machinery of government and bring into existence a new social contract. But for one exceptional period, beginning with a spectacular boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, sporadic but persistent resistance to racial discrimination by African Americans, led to significant changes in the way blacks and whites regarded themselves and each other. Consequently, this nation experienced unprecedented gains in the long struggle for racial justice. Near the center of the whirlwind that this sometimes-violent, sometimes-non-violent black revolt stirred up, with frequently improbable effect, was the well-heeled, upper class, and almost totally white UPCUSA.

I have attempted to set down here something of what I and others recall of those days, when a few of us, with the blessings of God and the imprimatur and financial support of the UPCUSA, took this historically conservative but ethically sensitive and unpredictably conscientious denomination into the vortex of the of the most serious social upheaval in the United States since the Civil War.

I

One summer day in 1963, Bryant George, an ordained minister and member of the staff of the Board of National Missions in New York, and Edler G. Hawkins, pastor of the St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in the Bronx and a member of the Board of Christian Education, came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to persuade me that God and the black constituency of the church wanted me to quit my doctoral studies and my job as Assistant Professor of Social Ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary to come forthwith to New York City and assume leadership of the new UPCUSA Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR).

I talked it over with my wife, Lee, and prayed about it for a few days. It was a flattering opportunity, proffered by no less than the Dean of black Reformed clergy, albeit in sonorous tones that made it sound more like a draft than an invitation. I understood immediately that my personal self-interest as a fledgling scholar and family man would be in serious jeopardy, but though I first tried to resist them I believe that the Lord wanted me to relent. That June, with a dubious but graciously cooperative wife and four children, I relocated in Rocky Hill, New Jersey—just outside of Princeton—and became the executive director of the yet unassembled Commission on Religion and Race.

I remember that the realtor took a poll of the neighbors of the house we sought to rent to see if anybody had objection to a black stranger coming into the community, until I called the absentee owner in California to lodge a complaint and finally wrested the house keys from the realtor's nervous hands.² During that first year, the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, one of the earliest congregations for blacks in the denomination (founded in 1845), became our sanctuary from the loneliness and disaffections we felt in our new surroundings.

Before the autumn leaves began to fall I opened an office and hired a secretarial and professional staff at the Interchurch Center in New York City, and the new Commission on Religion and Race was launched in heavy seas. The first meeting, under the chairmanship of Marshal L. Scott of McCormick Seminary, was held in New York on July 24, 1963. The second, symbolic perhaps of serious intentions, was held in October in Birmingham, Alabama. Our first staff meeting took place on August 27, 1963 on the eve of the March on Washington. I met with my two associate directors--J. Metz Rollins and Robert J. Stone--the night before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his famous "I Have A Dream" speech. That morning Bryant George took down a delegation of UPCUSA officials from New York to participate in the march, and Dr. Blake gave his penitential address in behalf of the churches, "Late We Come, But We Have Come." It was my title, not his.

Two things are important to note. First, that CORAR was the first denominational response to the call of the National Council of Churches (NCC) for its member churches to create programs more or less patterned after the commission that was authorized by the NCC General Board in June 1963. Secondly, that these new programs were to be the showcases of the Protestant response to the crisis in the nation and, therefore, free from the customary bureaucratic oversight and red tape.³

The CORAR was an almost exact replica and practically a sub-unit of the NCC CORAR. The Rev. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA General Assembly and perhaps the most prominent Presbyterian minister in the nation, was the architect and chairman of the NCC CORAR. In those days Blake, Kenneth G. Neigh, John Coventry Smith, and two or three other powerful Presbyterian men exercised extraordinary influence in the highest echelons of the NCC. After helping to finance the interdenominational commission, they simply turned around at the 1963 UPCUSA General Assembly to create a counterpart commission with a three-year mandate and an unprecedented budget of a half million dollars.

Other denominations followed suit, but with the possible exception of the United Methodists and the United Church of Christ, there was an important difference. A number of prominent

pastors and executives of the black denominations grumbled that Dr. J. Oscar Lee, who for many years had been the only African American staff person of the NCC and whose responsibility was for NCC race relations, had been passed over when the General Board appointed a young white UCC pastor, Robert Spike, as the NCC CORAR executive. Dr Lee and his associate, Dr. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, a well-known Harlem politician and distinguished leader of Church Women United, expressed to me on several occasions their bitterness in being subordinated to an unknown white man as soon as their office was restructured to lead the new Protestant march toward freedom.

In contrast, the UPCUSA CORAR was created by the General Assembly following an exciting address to the Des Moines Assembly by a black minister, Edler G. Hawkins, filling in for Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been invited but was jailed in Birmingham. Not only did Hawkins later become co-chairman of our commission with Marshal Scott, but the majority of its members were well known black Presbyterian leaders in their respective communities, and--for icing on the cake in those days--a black seminary professor and former staff member of the Middle Atlantic Student Christian Movement and the Department of Social Education and Action of the Board of Christian Education, was called to be its executive director.

I knew from the beginning that our commission had more money, a broader mandate and to the expectation that it would catch up with Dr. King, partly for the purpose of demonstrating to the rest of the nation the interracial character and the pragmatic efficacy of the Reformed response to the crisis.⁴ It was our task to show that though we had come late (for our church had been, on the whole, unenviably derelict in race relations)⁵ we had come indeed in 1963, and unless God in heaven countermanded our General Assembly's solemn directives, we would not be turned back.

II

At our first staff meeting, J. Metz Rollins, Robert J. Stone, and I divided up the country into three regions for our field responsibilities. Rollins, who had seen hard duty in the trenches of Tallahassee and Nashville (where he co-directed the first Presbyterian racial justice field office with a white minister, Jack Marion),⁶ took the South and border states. Stone took the Midwest, and I was assigned the Far West. As it turned out, Stone did his most significant work with the Ministers' Project that he and I set up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in the spring of 1964, and I roamed the cities where rioting and civil unrest occurred between 1964 and 1968, counseling with our presbytery staffs and deploying our resources to meet emergencies, most notably in Rochester, Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. Bryant George, who was always someone I relied upon, remembers my calling his office and talking with him in the midst of a fire fight with the police inside a housing project during the Newark riot, with bullets flying around the exposed telephone booth.

Rollins developed an important relationship with the two "Negro synods"--Catawba and Atlantic--which included all the coastal states between Northern Virginia and Florida, with a few black churches farther west.⁷ We were rarely in the same places at the same time, but all three of us marched with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and between Memphis and Jackson, Mississippi.

I no longer remember how Bob Stone and I came to a parting of the ways. Early on I felt that Bob was forced on me by Hawkins, before he became the co-chair of the commission. Hawkins told me that he wanted me to bring Stone on the staff. He had received strong support from Bob in the Presbytery of New York and expected his support in his second and successful drive to become the first black moderator of the church in 1964. I was glad to accommodate him. Stone's background and orientation, however, were directly opposite mine. He had been a big city pastor, embroiled in the politics of the Presbytery of New York, and committed to the radical style of the East Harlem Protestant Parish that was duly celebrated by white liberals during that period. Perhaps most importantly, Stone was a private person who kept his own counsel and carried on relationships, unbeknownst to me, with Bob Spike of the NCC CORAR, with Bob Beech, a Presbyterian minister from Illinois who we hired to direct our program in Hattiesburg; and with the charismatic Bob Moses of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in Hattiesburg

I, on the other hand, had only a brief three year period as an installed pastor in a small town in Pennsylvania, had been labeled a "communist troublemaker" by the pastor of the Westminster Church of West Chester, because of a disreputable movement I led to desegregate the elementary schools of West Chester, and was leery of white clergy who presumed to know more about black people than we knew about ourselves. After all, a fellow pastor had complained about me to Donegal Presbytery in 1951 and tried to get presbytery to cut its support of my salary as the pastor of a mission congregation.

I mentioned my uneasiness to Hawkins who pretended not to notice. The great man who personified the bold leap forward of the church in 1963 remained silent on the subject and responded to my complaint with a furtive shrug. So when I had enough of being undermined by the Reverend Robert J. Stone, I fired him. Soon after I hired a younger and more congenial white minister, Reverend Bill Cox, so we would continue to be an interracial staff. For the record I want to aver that I always respected Stone's knowledge of the urban mission and his indefatigable energy in helping us to coordinate with Spike in the Mississippi Summer Program of 1964. He and I had some good moments together. But we came out of different perspectives about the management of the racial justice agenda, and I simply could not trust what he was doing behind my back. I am sorry that Bob Stone is no longer living and cannot tell his own side of this story.

III

Kenneth G. Neigh, the General Secretary of the Board of National Missions of the UPCUSA, was undoubtedly the person most responsible for moving the denomination from its pronouncement-making posture as a Middle America, education-oriented, status quo institution in race relations, to a action-oriented, politically astute, and black power conscious movement that would join Dr. King in the rural byways, the inner-city streets, and the halls of Congress to fight for civil rights. Because he came out of the close-knit family of church officials who were synod executives and was smart enough and tough enough to control that cabal of lordly regional executives, Neigh was arguably the most powerful man in the church. Less physically impressive, theologically artful, and homiletically eloquent than Blake, he was more powerful in executive authority, and had the monetary resources (both personal and professional) to back it up.

Bryant George, a top staff person under Neigh, remembers that Neigh was the only national board secretary who attended the great ecumenical and interfaith Conference on Religion and Race, in Chicago in January 1963, and probably the dynamo of the unprecedented action that proceeded from the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communions that sponsored it. Neigh and John Regier, his Presbyterian counterpart at the NCC, came back from Chicago with the idea of establishing national commissions on religion and race, beginning with the National Council. George, who knew Neigh better than anyone in the church today, recalls:

When Ken spoke he spoke with eighteen synod executives behind him. That was strength. When John Coventry Smith, general secretary of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, spoke, he spoke pretty much by himself. When Bill Morrison, general secretary of the Board of Christian Education spoke, he too spoke by himself. But when Ken said, "We will put adequate power and money behind this new Commission on Religion and Race," he knew not only that his Board, but the field staff of the Board of National Missions would go along with him and that the other two program boards would have to go along too. In Des Moines these three board secretaries and their board chairmen got together in Ken's hotel room in the middle of the night and committed their respective boards to fund CORAR and it was Ken who brought them around to that decision. Morrison could have vetoed it because he had the least amount of interest and money, but he had to come around.⁸

Although our office was in New York City, the commission was initially "housed" with the Board of Christian Education (BCE), which occupied the old Witherspoon Building in downtown Philadelphia. The BCE also had a field staff, but nowhere near as powerful as the Synod executives under Neigh. The powerhouse of Christian Education was in its Department of Social Education and Action (later the Office of Church and Society) where the social pronouncements of the General Assembly originated. It continued to be one of the main levers of the policies the church needed for its social mission throughout the civil rights era. I felt that William A. Morrison, General Secretary of the Board, became rather cool on our work because the mandate at Des Moines made us a quasi-independent entity that sometimes seemed to compete with Christian Education, though the work of Clifford Earle, Margaret Kuhn, Ben Sissel, Howard Maxwell, Dean Lewis, and Clarence Cave was indispensable for CORAR's effectiveness. They were all my friends and CORAR counted on them for social policy research and logistical advice.

In those first four years of CORAR, our three person staff was augmented by the virtual inclusion of cognate staff from all three of the boards. The General Secretaries and, not infrequently, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, attended most of the commission meetings and brought their point people. Christian Education staff persons like Clarence Cave, H. Ben Sissel, and Dean H. Lewis were familiar faces at our augmented staff meetings in New York and made a large contribution to everything we did in the first four years. Edler Hawkins had come to the commission from Christian Education, as did Furman Templeton, executive of the Urban League of Baltimore who took Gene Blake to the Jim Crow amusement park outside the city where he was arrested on July 4, 1963. Some of the most active members of the Commission and later the Council on Church and Race were Reginald A. Hawkins, a dentist and clergyman from Charlotte, N.C.; David Freeman, a lawyer from New York; Ben Reist, a professor of theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary; Gladys Cole, a leader of Presbyterian women in one of the black presbyteries; Eugene S. Callender, a minister and an N.Y.C. housing

administrator; Jim Jones, black pastor of Westminster in Los Angeles and president of the United Presbyterian Interracial Council (PIC); and Mattie Grisby, an executive for the United Negro College Fund. These were not people to be manipulated by a fast-talking and imperious staff. They were mature, experienced actors in the civil rights movement in their own locales and they held our feet to the fire at every meeting.

IV

What were the day-to-day activities of the Commission on Religion and Race? To answer this question one ought to begin with the marching orders it received from the Des Moines Assembly in May 1963. Our daily job was to fulfill that extraordinary mandate. It reads in part:

The time has come for The United Presbyterian Church to act with the boldness and purposeful courage that matches the eloquence of our words. The time is here to demonstrate the obedience we profess, lest time and opportunity pass us by, and God choose not to use the present Church as an instrument through which to work his reconciling purpose in his world. *Therefore, the 175th General Assembly:*

1. Requests the Board of Christian Education, in cooperation with the Counseling Committee on Church and Society, to reconstitute the present Committee of Eighteen as “The United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race”; and, in order clearly to make this commission the focal point for our denomination’s concern for race relations and for liaison with interfaith and ecumenical efforts to meet this crisis, to appoint to the membership of the commission persons of specialized competence and experience, including the strongest Negro and other minority leadership of our communion and the chief executive officers from the Board of Christian Education, the Board of National Missions, the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, and the Office of the General Assembly.
2. Requests the Board of Christian Education and the Board of National Missions to accelerate and extend the coordination of work already well started, by fully coordinating present approaches and programs in race relations through the Interboard Commission and within a single comprehensive strategy to be designed by the United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race.
3. Requests the Commission on Religion and Race, working through the Counseling Committee on Church and Society, immediately to design a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for the United Presbyterian Church’s approach to race relations.⁹

The action of what came to be known as the “Race Assembly” concluded by charging the commission to report to the next assembly through the assembly’s Standing Committee on Church and Society. This gave us direct access to the highest governing body in the church. The four specific matters that the report should contain had to do with progress in interfaith efforts to improve race relations; racial restrictions still remaining in all congregations and other units of the church; presbytery actions and programs in civil rights; and the “total augmented program” carried on as a result of the comprehensive strategy.¹⁰

In order to fulfill these directives the assembly requested that each of the three program boards appropriate \$100,000 from General Funds and that the General Council provide \$200,000 from the 1965 General Mission Program. All of these funds were to be assigned to and distributed

by the BCE, except those appropriated by the Board of National Missions (BNM) for projects considered part of the common strategy of CORAR. It was expected that this \$500,000 budget would be renewed after the first three years. The commission was supposed to use a considerable portion of its budget to support the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches and other ecumenical and interfaith efforts. I believe that a careful study of what the Protestant churches of the United States invested in racial justice work between 1963 and 1970 will show that the lion's share came from the coffers and the policy-making bodies of the UPCUSA. We were in the vanguard of the effort of American Protestantism to "catch up with Dr. King."

This mandate provided a template for the day-to-day activities of the staff. The development of a "comprehensive strategy" for the whole church required endless meetings at 475 Riverside Drive and in various other places across the nation. We had the task of negotiating changes in old policies, creating new agendas for action, setting boundaries of authority of one judicatory from another, or between judicatories and the national boards and agencies, and providing ample monies for local and regional initiatives.¹¹ We met regularly with Bob Spike and his NCC staff in interdenominational sessions for coordinating activities with the Episcopalians, United Methodists, United Church of Christ, the American Baptists, and the American Friends Service Committee. When Spike resigned in January 1, 1966, to direct a new program at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, I did double duty for a short time as the interim chair of the NCC's CORAR staff.

It is difficult to convey today a sense of the charged atmosphere that the Interchurch Center exuded in those days. The air in 475 Riverside Drive was filled with the electricity of a war-time command center. This, we thought, was where "it was happening." It was as if we were all on the cusp of a historic breakthrough in interracial and interethnic relations, encouraged particularly by the ability of the religious establishment finally to exert effective power on the political, economic, and social structures of the society. I don't know if anyone else in the Upper West Side of Manhattan felt the excitement we felt at "the God box," but for us almost everyday—even if most of them were spent in meetings—was a new adventure in which God was using us to awaken the sleeping giant that was the Church of Jesus Christ.

At the 1964 General Assembly, held in Oklahoma City from May 21 to 27, CORAR made its first report. It showed that we had been engaged in extensive field work as well as meetings and that the mandate was being implemented with ardor and dispatch. In the autumn of 1963 a series of sixteen area conferences were held to assist presbyteries and synod staffs to mount more vigorous programs of religion and race. Forty-six committees or commissions in the middle judicatories were reported to be involved in "racial matters," and twelve of them had employed or were in the process of employing staff to carry on the work according to a "comprehensive" or church-wide, coordinated strategy that we designed by November 1963. All but one of those professional staff persons were being assisted by allocations from the budget of the national commission.¹²

The activities of that first year were not limited to causes associated mainly with the black civil rights movement. The commission established a project with the Yaqui Indians in Arizona and began conversations, later carried on by my successors, Gilbert Marrero and Jovelino Ramos,

with Spanish-speaking church members in the western states. I am, however, the first to acknowledge that one of the principal failures of CORAR in its first four years was the relative lack of money and staff time given to the civil rights of Native American and Spanish-speaking people. By contrast, in cooperation with the black synods CORAR sponsored a large scale voter registration drive and gave direct financial aid to black clergy who were suffering reprisals from local police and white citizen councils because of their leadership of civil rights activities.¹³

We also worked in close cooperation with the office of Church and Society in lobbying and encouraging letter-writing to Congressmen and Senators for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voters Rights Act. Our staff made its greatest impact in 1964-65 in Mississippi, with the Hattiesburg Ministers Project. During the summer of 1964, Bob Stone and I rented a house across the street from the headquarters of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)¹⁴ and had its rooms outfitted with cots and bunk beds to accommodate scores of Presbyterian ministers (and a few lay persons) whom we lured down from the North to conduct voter registration drives, walk in protest picket lines, visit and encourage black young people and their families in the face of hostile town officials and white extremist groups.

We hired Robert Beech to manage that project, and he and Stone deserve most of the credit for keeping it on target and staying within the purview and programmatic goals of COFO. Without having exact figures I would guess that somewhere between 200 to 300 UPCUSA clergy joined us for periods as long as seven days to three or four weeks and worked on projects with us.¹⁵

It was hazardous and controversial direct action, but the Lord was with us. I was in and out of Hattiesburg, flying down from New York to New Orleans and renting a car at the airport to drive up to Hattiesburg, staying there a few days at a time. I remember one night when a car full of mean-looking white men with guns kept circling our dormitory-headquarters and finally chased me several miles into the country as I tried to sneak back to the airport for my return trip. Miraculously, I was able to outrun them in the dark. When it came to overt hostility from the local thugs I suspect that the white clergy volunteers faced more challenges than we black staff persons. As far as controversy is concerned, I shall never forget receiving plaintive telephone calls to my home in the middle of the night from distraught wives of the volunteers, clerks of session, and chairmen of trustee boards, demanding to know what I had done with their loved ones who, in many cases, had left to go to Hattiesburg without consent of wives or churches. Needless to say, a few of these pastors lost their pulpits in consequence of the Ministers Project. Still unforgettable is the time when I led a group of our pastors in a voter registration protest line around the Forrest County courthouse when, after an angry warning, the sheriff arrested the whole group. By pre-agreement with the volunteers I stepped out of the picket line at the last moment in order to arrange bail bonds and the services of an attorney who was available that summer in anticipation of just such emergencies.

We turned over the Hattiesburg Project to the NCC in the summer of 1964 because it was too large and exposed for one denomination. Since the National Council was carrying on similar efforts in Canton, McComb, and Greenwood, Mississippi, it seemed sensible to add the mission in Hattiesburg to the sponsorship of the interdenominational agency, especially in view of the generous contribution the Presbyterians were making to its budget.

V

It was inevitable that the Commission on Religion and Race would be disconnected from administrative oversight by the Board of Christian Education and placed directly under the Board of National Missions. The reasons are complex, both negative and positive with respect to what the officialdom of the church intended. During those early years the staff traveled across the nation, making financial commitments, meeting with secular agencies, invading governing bodies in ways that angered some church people in the field. I knew that we were pushing across long established boundaries and practices, but I tried to go as far as we were able in order to be the “focal point” of the church’s concern for racial justice in a disorderly and rebellious time.

Of course, the commission’s primary focus was not education, but action. When it became evident that its major venues were in the cities where unemployment, poor schools, segregated housing, and dying urban churches were the crux of the problem, General Assembly placed us directly under the BNM partly as a way of reining us in. But that was like throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. Under the more forthright custody of Kenneth G. Neigh, David Ramage, and Bryant George¹⁶—and now enjoying the solo chairmanship of Edler G. Hawkins (Marshal Scott having resigned by then)—the new program upset many and gratified a few. Announcing the inauguration of the new Council on Church and Race (COCAR) in 1967, Neigh made clear that he was not backing down one inch from his forthright support of our style of work.

In many circles these days there is retrenchment or outright falling away in racial concerns. Let me make it very clear, therefore, that the reorganization of the United Presbyterian Church’s work in racial matters is the opposite of that unfortunate trend. The new arrangement has been completed in order to strengthen and broaden the Church’s efforts. . . . It [the Council on Church and Race] continues . . . as a national program—with both the freedom and the responsibility to speak to the Church and the nation in matters of race. The Council and its representatives will continue to make public statements on critical issues, and to map out appropriate programs and projects.¹⁷

CORAR became the COCAR at the 179th General Assembly (1967) in Portland, Oregon. It was at this assembly that the UPCUSA made a commitment to the Black Power movement that was more radical than anything that had been promulgated by the NAACP, SCLC, or any black denomination.

Whereas, we cannot escape either the reality of the dominance of oppressive white power or that the cry of black power is a legitimate cry from a powerless people rising out of a sense of futility, frustration, and bitter experience; and Whereas, Christians of all races have failed to understand their brothers in Christ; Be it therefore resolved that the 179th General Assembly (1967):

1. Encourages United Presbyterians to view the phenomenon of black power within the context of the white power we exercise, seeing in it both the legacy of a frustrated aspiration and the promise of a newly assertive self-identity.¹⁸

The new COCAR was prepared for the climate change in the black community that provoked

the call for responsible power. One of the first things we did, after Dr. King met the massive resistance of northern-style white racism in Chicago in 1965, was to give more time and attention to closing ranks with the historic black denominations and the pastors of strong black congregations in the urban ghettos of the North and West. When Benjamin Payton, a black Baptist preacher-scholar, succeeded Robert Spike as head of the NCC CORAR staff in December 1965, I immediately indicated to him the readiness of our Presbyterian staff to work more closely with the NCC Commission in claiming the positive content in the demand for Black Power by clarifying its nonviolent and constructive implications.

The times were favorable for a militant counterpart to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the North, and Payton and I worked together to create the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (later to become the National Committee of Black Churchmen) and to promulgate a theologically cogent concept of Black Power with full-page ads in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* on July 31, 1966.¹⁹ The statement and Payton's leadership of the NCC staff did more to radicalize the black church during this period than anything I am aware of. When the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC), gathered for its first national convention in St. Louis the next year, it had clearly become a battering ram against the gates of white complacency and a major goad for black Christian solidarity in urban America.

While Esther Henderson, Bill Cox, Oscar McCloud, Sophia La Russo, Earl Larsen and others continued to carry on the regular staff assignments, Metz Rollins and I became deeply embedded in the new movement of black pastors, church executives, street people, and scholars.²⁰ To the astonishment of some, we openly, and not without a modicum of secret pride, represented the overwhelmingly white UPCUSA in circles where it had not been and would not have been welcome in those days.

We believed that it was critically important for our church to undergird NCBC as a new strategic initiative among prominent black clergy and lay persons in the North who understood and fostered Black Power as a legitimate, theologically sound, and sociologically constructive force for the advancement of African Americans. We refused to accept the assumption of some Black academics, secularists, and Black Muslims that "Christianity is the white man's religion" and that the white church could only sell black people down the river. Although Ben Payton soon dropped out of the new organization, I went forward with Rollins and other black Presbyterian clergy and lay leaders to give strong backing to this interdenominational coalition of black churchmen (before women rightfully challenged our blatant sexism). I finally persuaded Rollins to become its executive director working out of Convent Avenue Baptist Church in Harlem. His salary and pension were continued by the Council on Church and Race. At the same time we were also paying the salary of Hosea Williams, one of King's top lieutenants.

Thus, when the Black Manifesto crisis came in 1969 and church offices at the Interchurch Center were "liberated" by followers of James Forman (who even "sat in" my office on the eleventh floor) COCAR viewed the tactic as a prophetic demonstration against white Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish complicity in slavery and the continuing oppression of masses of non-whites at home and abroad.²¹ No one thought of calling the police. Indeed, COCAR got Forman invited to address the 1969 Assembly in San Antonio, where he presented his demand for reparations from American churches and synagogues. Of course we knew that our church could

not be coerced by angry threats from bearded, pipe-smoking prophets, but we—that is the black and Hispanic staff and our white allies—believed that something good and wholesome could come out of a nonviolent confrontation that expressed the will and purpose of God. My mind, in those hectic days, kept going back to Revelation 2:5, “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

Although Forman’s Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) did not get the money he demanded from the Presbyterians, partly as a result of his prophetic witness COCAR became one channel through which the church increased its commitment to grassroots organizations and the Emergency Fund for Freedom, which financed bail bonds, grants in aid to freedom fighters, and created an atmosphere of affirmative action which produced the Presbyterian Economic Development Corporation (PEDCO) and the Program for the Self-Development of People. Once again the UPCUSA stepped out in front of many other denominations to empower African Americans and other minorities to catch their own fish and eat them. Before and after the San Antonio Assembly several millions of Presbyterian dollars flowed into black businesses and economic programs through the BNM, PEDCO, Self-Development, and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), the parent body of BEDC that Forman used to sponsor his Black Manifesto. If it can be said that Black enterprise blossomed even in the midst of unprecedented civil disorder in the urban centers, both black and white denominations deserve some of the credit, and not the least among them was the UPCUSA.

VI

As a veteran of the 371st Combat Team of the 92nd “Buffalo” Division in Tuscany and the Po Valley during the Second World War, I knew that it made little sense for a large and heavily-burdened main body of troops to move forward without a highly mobile reconnaissance patrol out on the perimeter collecting intelligence about the nature of the terrain, the position of the enemy, and risking occasional fire fights to test his strength. From 1969 to 1973, the staff of the COCAR played that role, perhaps too well. The decisions to support the Black Economic Development Conference, the constructive parts of the Black Manifesto in 1969, and in 1971 to recommend a grant of \$10,000 to help ensure a fair trial for Angela Davis, an avowed communist freedom fighter, fall into that category. They were strategic risks allowing the astonished church to move forward into terrain as unfamiliar to white middle class Presbyterians as Klan-controlled territory in Mississippi or the bayou parishes of Louisiana. There continues to be controversy about whether the benefits were worth the costs. I believe that they were.

The General Assembly, on our recommendation, established the Emergency Fund for Freedom in 1970 and over \$65,000 was allocated to synods and presbyteries to assist persons within their bounds who sought justice when and where it was in short supply.²² The UCLA philosophy professor Angela Davis was such a person. An articulate black woman and an affirmed Marxist, Angela was not the only one dubious about her chances with an often biased judicial system. She went underground after a shoot-out in a Marin County, California, courthouse in which a judge and the two Jackson brothers, Soledad Prison inmates, were killed. For two months she was on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list. It seemed at the time that everyone in America was speculating about where Davis might be hiding while COCAR and other liberal

groups that were involved with grassroots organizations like the Black Panthers were suspect. I remember that one black Presbyterian missionary, back home and assigned to us, told about being called by her anxious father in the middle of the night and asked over the telephone, “Lillian, are you hiding Angela Davis?”²³

Angela was finally captured in a Manhattan motel and was incarcerated for sixteen months before being tried for murder and conspiracy. Although there was considerable doubt in many quarters that she could ever receive justice in Reagan’s California, she was finally acquitted in June 1972. When St. Andrew Presbyterian Church of Sausalito, California, requested a grant to support her legal defense COCAR responded affirmatively and disbursed \$10,000 from its emergency funds for legal defense. Eugene G. Turner, then Director of the Office of Ethnic Church Affairs of the Synod of the Golden Gate, was in close contact with Davis and her lawyers and handled the transfer of the funds from New York to the Marin County congregation which passed it on to Davis’ lawyers.

A tidal wave of outrage broke out across the church in 1971. In her brilliant monograph on the church and the Black Power movement, Amy L. Miracle wrote about the effect on the Presbyterian public when it learned of the grant from the news media:

Presbyterian Life reported that the volume of mail sent to the Moderator, the stated clerk, *Presbyterian Life*, and others was “altogether without precedent” and “overwhelmingly negative about the grant. Of the over 10,000 letters received concerning the issue, letters opposing the grant outnumbered letters supporting the grant in a ratio of 70 to 1. The most striking quality of the letters . . . was the strong emotions of the writers.

A sample:

“What on earth is happening to our Presbyterian Church? How stupid can the Assembly Council get anyway?”

“It would indicate that the United Presbyterian Church is supporting Communists, murderers, and kidnapers”

“I am furious, indignant, and ashamed—and I am seriously considering leaving the Presbyterian Church.”²⁴

The response of many African Americans to the hand wringing of conservative white Presbyterians was almost as emotional. Some said, “If the church is so furious and ashamed about legal defense money which its Council on Church and Race was duly authorized to donate to ensure a fair trial for a radical black woman prisoner in an atmosphere of hysteria, then why don’t we just give white folks back their measly \$10,000 and make the grant from our own personal resources?”

A month after the 1971 General Assembly voted to “communicate to COCAR its serious question concerning the propriety of allocating \$10,000 to the Marin County Black Defense Fund,” some of us, with Bryant George taking the lead, called twenty black Presbyterian clergy on the telephone and raised five hundred dollars from each of them overnight. We then called a

press conference to reimburse the denomination. In presenting the check to the BNM, Robert Pierre Johnson, the first black executive of the Presbytery of New York City, said that the reimbursement indicated clearly that “the days of white paternalism are over. Black men and women can stand on their own feet, and will insist upon their dignity and self-determination.”²⁵

The Angela Davis debacle brought to light for many black and white Presbyterians that their national staff, and particularly the staff of COCAR, was far out in front of the denomination, establishing beachheads in the secular world that were highly threatening to the conservative wing of the church. The council was shaken by the clamor of some for its head, and I resigned in 1972, without any pressure whatever from my superiors, to accept a call from the School of Theology of Boston University to succeed Preston N. Williams as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Social Ethics. The program on Church and Race, it must be said, did not falter in its determination to give leadership in the places where the fires burned the hottest on the battlefield.²⁶

The courage of my successors notwithstanding, financial and policy retrenchments were inevitable. The Laymen’s Organization, conservative clergy, and the reality of diminishing revenues presaged by 1971 the *de facto* repudiation of the freedom of action and other prerogatives of the national staffs of the boards and agencies. Roger Granados, Gilbert Marrero, Jovelino Ramos, Otis Turner²⁷ and others in New York, and later in Louisville, undertook a valiant continuation of the witness of COCAR and its programmatic successors that was chastened but unabated. Today, of course, racial justice programs in all denominations have shrunk to dimensions that would have been unacceptable in the 1960s.

With the exception of the two Reformed Synods that separated from the established Church of Scotland to form the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1858, the Reformed family of churches as a whole have been laggard in the racial justice field. Before the Civil War they were usually more concerned about saving the souls of blacks than liberating them from the evils of slavery and white supremacy. After the war both the Southern and the Northern churches made a signal contribution to the education of the freed people and the training of black churches in “decency and in order,” but little else to empower them. The fullness of time came for the northern Presbyterians in the 1960s when they entrusted to their African American brothers and sisters leadership in the struggle for racial reconciliation and liberation. Both blacks and whites have benefited from this belated fraternity. Blacks have been “infinitely the richer in body, mind and spirit”²⁸ because of this church, and the Presbyterian Church has been more neighborly, more pragmatic, more radically involved in human liberation to the glory of God.²⁸

I wish to acknowledge, with heartfelt thanks, the cooperation of four Presbyterian ministers who permitted me to interview them and then read the entire manuscript, making emendations and helpful suggestions, which I’ve tried to incorporate, though not perhaps to their satisfaction. The Rev. Drs. Bryant George, formerly of the Board of National Mission; Oscar McCloud, formerly of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, Eugene G. Turner, most recently of the Office of the General Assembly, and J. Metz Rollins, my closest associate in CORAR who, after a stint with NCBC, succeeded Edler Hawkins as pastor of St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in the Bronx.

I received, thanks to Margery Sly, Deputy Director of the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, copies of several precious documents. The generosity of the Society in making these available stimulated my wilting memory. Many thanks also to Jim Anderson, the librarian of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., for assistance in using their excellent collection

¹ Nathan Wright, Jr., *Black Power and Urban Unrest* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967); James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969 Reprint Edition, 1989); James A. Gesehwender, ed., *The Black Revolt* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

² It would be an unfair omission not to mention that the white owner told me to go back to the real estate office without delay because he was about to call the manager and dress him down on the telephone. He said that he didn't care if we were purple, green, or polka dot!

³ James F. Findlay, Jr. writes "This meant that the commission bypassed all of the normal bureaucracy in gaining quick approval of its plans and programs. It was one way the National Council indicated to church people nationwide that the principal ecumenical body of mainstream Protestantism was serious in its support of substantive racial change." *Church People in the Struggle, The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 173.

⁴ The United Presbyterian Church of North America, which merged with the northern Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. in 1958, consistently favored an anti-slavery position that dated from before the Civil War and should be given some credit for the advanced position on racial justice that seems to have characterized the new united church after the 1958 union.

⁵ Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966) 17-28.

⁶ It was called the "Ministry in Areas of Racial Tension" and Oscar McCloud later served with Marion until 1969. The BCE funded it from 1958 through the early 1970s. It was an early and pathfinding ministry for those days.

⁷ It was the all-black Catawba Synod that presented an economic development plan to help blacks in North Carolina and Southern Virginia. Their agitation at the 1970 Assembly, with strong support from COCAR, caused the Board of National Missions and the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations to respond indirectly to the Black Manifesto by creating the Program for the Self-Development of People, which in ten years had created new jobs, businesses, schools, and communities for blacks to the tune of more than \$20,000,000. *Minutes of the (1980) General Assembly, Part I*, 181.

⁸ Interview with Bryant George, August 3, 2006. In addition to the three boards, the Presbyterian Foundation participated in the initial funding of CORAR.

⁹ *Minutes of the 175th General Assembly (1963) of the UPCUSA, Part I. Journal*, 141-142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹ In terms of internal house cleaning nothing the commission did was more effective than a survey of the employment, purchasing, and investment practices of the boards and agencies conducted by Walter Greene, a black consultant who had been a fair employment Compliance Officer for one of the big auto companies in Detroit. The 1964 Greene Report was not roundly applauded, but in keeping with the G.A. mandate, it brought some of the church into compliance with the requirements of integration and non-discriminatory business management.

¹² *Minutes of the General Assembly of the UPCUSA, (1964) Part I. Journal*, 327.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁴ COFO comprised part of the field staffs of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, the NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, all of which were based in Mississippi.

¹⁵ I do not remember any clergy from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (the “southern” church”) in Hattiesburg, but that denomination was not absent from the struggle. Some of its pastors paid a high price for daring words and deeds. The denomination itself chose a different style from the UPCUSA in contributing to the civil rights movement.

¹⁶ Ramage and George were in charge of the urban work of the BNM and deeply involved in funding grassroots movements, the Head Start Program in Mississippi, and community organization inspired by the implacable Saul Alinsky of the Industrial Areas Foundation.

¹⁷ *The Minutes of the General Assembly (1968) Part II. Reports*, 174.

¹⁸ *Minutes of the (1967) General Assembly, Part I*, 398-339. The whole statement deserves to be read because it resounds with the unmistakable accents of the black caucus of the denomination at the time, and show how much some leaders of this 95% white church trusted its black leadership and why the General Assembly remained committed to them in the Black Manifesto crisis of 1969.

¹⁹ See the full statement in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One, 1966-1976* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) 19.

²⁰ The adjunct staff persons working closely with us in relating to the black churches, community organizations, and NCNC, were Clinton Marsh, Clarence Cave, Robert Newbold, Claude Kilgore, Edgar Ward, and Leroy Patrick. All were ordained Presbyterian clergy.

²¹ See the full text of the Black Manifesto in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. I, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 27-36.

²² *Minutes of the General Assembly (1971) Part I*, 536.

²³ Reported by Dr. Lillian Anthony, formerly of the Louisville staff, at a meeting of Presbyterian civil rights veterans at a conference in Washington, D.C. in 2002.

²⁴ Amy L. Miracle, "Strange Bedfellows: The United Presbyterian Church and the Black Power Movement," BA thesis, Princeton, Princeton, N.J., 1985, 89-90.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 90-91. It is important to note that Assembly voted down two amendments to restrict COCAR's administration of the Emergency Fund for Legal Defense and that the three General Secretaries of the program boards and William P. Thompson, stated clerk of the General Assembly, all strongly supported the legal defense actions of COCAR and its staff.

²⁶ I attribute the refusal of the General Assembly to accept amendments that would have slapped down the Council and its staff to the strong support we received from William P. Thompson, Stated Clerk, and a highly respected trial attorney.

²⁷ Hispanic and African American staff persons who took over the reins of COCAR and the units and programs that succeeded it in the years since 1972.

²⁸ From Dr. Leland Stanford Cozart, the first black president of Barber-Scotia (Presbyterian) College, who was the first to make the point that I am making here by paraphrasing his original statement about what the church and African Americans have given to each other.

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