

## Stories from Our Past: Presbyterians and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Fred Heuser

In 1986, I made a routine visit to the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America's headquarters at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. The purpose of the trip was to reconnoiter many of the church's offices, assisting staff with records questions and facilitating the transfer of office files—which in those days were paper based—to the archives in Philadelphia.

Toward the end of the day, I wandered into an office that contained what in those days we called media materials—"reel to reel" tapes of various sizes, cassettes, audio records, and recording equipment. Stacked neatly on the shelf were "reel to reel" magnetic tapes labeled by subject, date, and event.

I picked up a box at random and discovered the words, "MLK GA, 1958." Another box I glanced at contained the words, "MX, 1963." I had no idea what the contents contained, but decided to take them back to the archives where that would be resolved. As I left that room, I entered what had been a library or resource center used by the staff. Filled with books, I began to peruse the shelves, looking for anything that might be incorporated in our library in Philadelphia. I picked up a volume entitled, *Stride toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story*, a title I recognized by its author: Martin Luther King, Jr. When I opened the book, I found this inscription:

To Dr. Eugene Carson Blake—in appreciation for your genuine good will and great humanitarian concern. MLK, Jr.

I wondered how this autographed book came to rest in this place and why Eugene Carson Blake, a name I recognized in Presbyterian history, became its recipient from its famous author.

When I returned to Philadelphia the next day, some of my questions were answered. The tape with the title "MLK GA" was indeed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. During a General Assembly breakfast meeting in 1958, Dr. King was the keynote speaker. And the other tape, "MX 1963," was Malcolm X, the militant assassinated in 1965, who also had spoken before the General Assembly.

I have long since forgotten what both men said on those nearly fifty-year-old tapes, and indeed, their words may no longer be audible. But their presence at our General Assembly during that time symbolized the church's concern with the growing movement for civil rights in this country during the 1950s and 1960s. Eugene Carson Blake, who was the Stated Clerk during this time, knew Martin Luther King, Jr., and indeed would demonstrate his commitment to civil rights by his actions several years later in a Baltimore amusement park.

The tapes and the book evidence our denomination's growing concern for civil rights in a country torn apart by racism. But the records generated by sessions, presbyteries, and

other governing bodies contain the story of our church's role in that historic movement. That story is a complex one. Today, I will focus on a few of the folks of the faith and their journey during those tumultuous years.

It is important to understand that the names of those Presbyterians whom I will be speaking about today are unlikely to be found in history books. With a few exceptions, they achieved little notoriety, unlike many of their contemporaries whose names are also associated with the struggle for civil rights. Their actions during this most tumultuous period in our history are duly recorded in a variety of documents from the time. Those records are preserved and made accessible at the Presbyterian Historical Society [PHS]. So the stories I share today are from the PHS archives, where it has been our mission since 1852 to “collect, preserve, and share the story” of the American Presbyterian and Reformed tradition.

One of those individuals was William Watkins, a Presbyterian minister who in 1962 was the pastor of the Crerar Memorial Presbyterian Church, a predominately African-American congregation on the south side of Chicago. On August 28, 1962, he was among approximately seventy-five clergypersons and others who participated in a civil rights prayer vigil in Albany, Georgia, that resulted in their arrest. Watkins was involved with the Albany Movement, an effort to gain equal rights for African-American citizens of Albany.

Watkins' papers document the emerging civil rights movement. But the story they chronicle is more than a local crisis in a small, southern town. In August of 1962, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. sent a telegraph inviting clergypersons and others to “stand with the people of Albany as they strive for freedom.” In it he wrote, “Albany is not a local situation but a crisis in the national life of this democracy. When citizens are denied the right to pray and picket, when churches are burned for their use as voter registration centers, our nation suffers greatly.”<sup>1</sup>

The actions of Watkins and others did much to change the fabric of America during those tumultuous times. And their story has shaped what it means to be a Presbyterian today, some forty years afterward.

### **Overview of the civil rights movements**

During the 1950s and 1960s, Presbyterians—like Americans in general—had to come to terms with the racism that had been deeply embedded into American society since the country's founding. That racism assumed a new level in the years following the American Civil War. Despite the inclusion of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments into our constitution, by the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of “separate but equal”—in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case in 1894—had become a part of the American mindset and legal landscape. Ironically, a Presbyterian lawyer had challenged that concept of legal segregation. In 1896, Associate Supreme Court Justice John M. Harlan

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<sup>1</sup>William Watkins Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society archives (PHSA).

had argued against the majority decision in the Plessy case that the constitution was colorblind.<sup>2</sup>

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

As early as 1946, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) adopted the concept of "non-segregated church in a non-segregated society." During the 1950s, both the PCUSA and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) did away with their segregated synods. Many Presbyterians supported the peaceful protests, such as those eventually led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers. But many did not. American Presbyterians remained divided over the struggle for civil rights. Both the PCUS and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) in the early 1960s created vehicles for helping deal with racial and ethnic issues among Presbyterians and in society. In 1963, during the famous March on Washington in which King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, Presbyterians from both north and south were among the more than 200,000 gathered that day. In 1964, the UPCUSA elected its first black moderator, Edler Hawkins; a decade later, Lawrence Bottoms was elected as the first black moderator of the PCUS. Over the next eight years, Presbyterians in both the UPCUSA and the PCUS would continue to engage the culture, supporting the efforts of those who sought to bring about racial justice and equality.<sup>3</sup>

## II

It is hard to comprehend Presbyterian involvement in the struggle for civil rights from any one perspective. Like any movement that involves social change, there were various perspectives that reflected the work of individuals, organizations, and diverse governing bodies. Individual Presbyterians, congregations from throughout the country, presbyteries, and the General Assembly were caught up in the turmoil of the times. Ecumenical organizations, like the National Council of Churches of Christ, and various local and regional organizations were involved with the struggle.

One source that captured those diverse perspectives was *Presbyterian Life*, a bimonthly publication that documented the church's growing involvement in this great struggle. In the pages of *Presbyterian Life* (PL) the temper of the times and the growing concern for racial justice within the Presbyterian church and the ecumenical community were manifest.

In a special report, "Troubleshooters of the Racial Crisis," that appeared in the June 1, 1962 issue, PL chronicled the ministry of two UPCUSA ministers. J. Metz Rollins, an

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<sup>2</sup>James H. Smylie, *American Presbyterians: A Pictorial History*. *Journal of Presbyterian History*, vol. 63, numbers 1 & 2, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup>James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), pp. 129-130.

African American, and John H. Marion, a Caucasian—both born and educated in the south—had a special ministry of preventing or solving problems that arose out of the racial tension. In 1958, both men began their ministry in Nashville, Tennessee. Their mission was to make it clear that the UPCUSA advocates “a non-segregated church and a non-segregated society.” Their mission was to work with individual church members, pastors, congregations, synods and other groups in the community. In 1960, Metz was arrested for his involvement in lunch counter sit-ins. A year later, in February of 1961, he was physically assaulted by a group of white teenagers for attempting to intervene in a physical confrontation between the two groups.

Both men visited “during the last four years,” PL noted, “places that read like a table of contents for a book about the desegregation movement: Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte, Little Rock, Montgomery, Tallahassee.... In these places they have consulted with citizens’ groups and ministers’ organizations, addressed mass meetings or visited demonstrators in jail.”

“They blow a lonely horn,” PL noted. “But its clarion call is loud and clear, and they are heard.” It is the “clear voice of Jack to a jailer in Brownsville, Tennessee who stands guard over another clergyman. It is the loud reminder of Metz as he goes silently to jail with a group which has sought to be served at a southern restaurant.” “When the history of the American racial crisis of the mid twentieth century is written, it will have much to say about the Church.” A lot of it will be unfavorable. But, the story concluded, it cannot be said that the church was not there. For it is there in the person of these two ministers whose message resembles that of the prophets Amos and Micah.<sup>4</sup>

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

It was not long after Ogden led those children toward Central High that a committee from his church requested that he find another position, “not within months, but within weeks.” This was not the end, but only the beginning of the pain their Little Rock witness brought to the Ogden family. And the Ogden story was not at all uncommon.<sup>5</sup>

But not all churches, like the one Ogden pastored, responded to their pastor’s involvement in the civil rights movement with disdain. In Birmingham, Alabama, the ministry of Dr. James Gregory at Birmingham’s Woodlawn Presbyterian Church

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<sup>4</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, June 1, 1962, pp. 21-23, PHSA.

<sup>5</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, November 1, 1962, 18-20; 40-41, PHSA.

succeeded in doing things that many would think impossible in the city that became a symbol in the struggle for racial justice. In his first year in that church, he preached a sermon on race relations without alienating his congregation. “I have always preached on race relations (on Race Relations Sunday) and I see no reason why I shouldn’t this year. The problem certainly has not gone away – rather we in the South are faced with a showdown and we are going to have to be ready.” Later, when the city commission moved to close Birmingham’s parks rather than obey a court order to integrate them, it was the session of the Woodlawn Presbyterian Church—one of the very few religious groups in the city—to petition the commission to keep the parks open.<sup>6</sup>

During the tensest moments of the Birmingham, Alabama’s racial crisis, eight of the city’s clergy prepared a “public statement that called the demonstrations unwise and untimely and questioned the presence of “outsiders.” While in the city jail, the chief “outsider,” the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., penned a lengthy and considered reply to the statement. His response, known as the Letter from the Birmingham’s Jail, offers one of the clearest written extant answers to those questions. The editors of *Presbyterian Life* recognized the historic significance of King’s response and published generous excerpts from it in the July 1, 1963 issue.

King’s eloquent response was both a justification for the demonstrations in Birmingham, as well as an important sociological, if not theological, treatise on what we today would call “human rights.” PL captured the essence of that spirit that became a “call to arms” for human rights:

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.... We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure.... Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily... (and) groups are more immoral than individuals.

“I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate,” King wrote. “I have almost reached the conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White citizen’s Council-er – or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice.”

King was especially critical of the religious community both in Birmingham and elsewhere:

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause.... I had hope that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.... So here we are, moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.... In my deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity

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<sup>6</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, November 1, 1962, 41-42, PHSA.

of the church...the body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.... I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if it does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future... We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.<sup>7</sup>

The theme of freedom resonated again one month later when more than 200,000 individuals descended upon the Lincoln Memorial in the famous March for Jobs and Freedom. If the events in Birmingham rocked the conscience of America, the March for Freedom stirred the souls of Americans across the nation. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that “now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.”

The March on Washington brought together a “coalition of consciences”—labor unions, specific civil rights groups, and the religious community in an unprecedented display of public action. The pledges made by the religious community—American Jewish Congress, the Roman Catholic Church, and the National Council of Churches—were considerable. Speaking on behalf of the National Council of Churches and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Dr. Eugene Carson Blake’s words spoke to the heart of the issue:

I wish indeed that I were able to speak for all Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians as I speak on behalf of full justice and freedom for all born or living under the American flag. But that is precisely the point. If all members and all ministers...were indeed ready to stand and march with you for jobs and freedom for the Negro people, together with the Roman Catholic Church and all the synagogues of America, the battle for full civil rights and dignity would be already won.

“We do not...come to this Lincoln Memorial in any arrogant spirit of moral or spiritual superiority to set the nation straight or to judge or to denounce the American people in whole or in part,” Blake stated. “Rather, we come—late, late we come—in the reconciling and repentant spirit in which Abraham Lincoln once replied to a delegation of morally arrogant churchmen. He said, ‘Never say God is on our side, rather pray that we may be found on God’s side.’”<sup>8</sup>

Several months later, in that same city in which King was incarcerated, tragedy again struck at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

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<sup>7</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, July 1, 1963, 9-12; 35-36, PHSA.

<sup>8</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, October 1, 1963, 7-9, PHSA.

In a poignant editorial in the October 15 edition, PL addressed this most recent tragedy. “On an ordinary Sunday in Birmingham, Alabama, six Negro children were murdered, and some piece of the American dream died with them. What safer place can there be to send one’s children than to Sunday school? Yet it was while they were having a recess between their lesson (on The Love That Forgives) and the time of assembly for worship that three fourteen year old girls and one of eleven years, died by dynamite.”

After describing the events following the tragedy and criticizing the white religious community of Birmingham for its complacency and complicity, PL concluded with the statement, “The question in the fall of 1963 seems to be: How many more innocents must die before it will be safe to send one’s children to Sunday school?”<sup>9</sup>

The events of Birmingham galvanized both the church and the American nation. In its wake, ordinary citizens of diverse religious persuasion (or not) responded to the events of that year. It has been suggested that because of its actions, the Ku Klux Klan actually did more to strengthen the civil rights movement than deter it.

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

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

Eugene Carson Blake had been highly visible in the struggle for civil rights. In the 1950s and 60s, Blake became known as an ardent supporter of the U.S. civil rights movement. While Stated Clerk, he was instrumental in integrating the workforce in the national Presbyterian offices. As president of the National Council of Churches in Christ and member of the central committee of the World Council of Churches, he joined in planning the churches’ support for civil rights.

On the Fourth of July 1963, Blake was one of nine religious leaders arrested near Baltimore, Maryland, as they demonstrated for the racial desegregation of an amusement park. A famous picture of Blake, with his customary straw hat peering with a smile on his

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<sup>9</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, October 15, 1963, 4-5; 46-47, PHSA.

face from inside a police wagon, made the national news. The following month, he represented the National Council of Churches in Christ in the leadership and on the podium of the historic March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his speech known for the refrain, “I have a dream.” In his own remarks, Blake spoke on behalf of predominately white churches:

I think 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 have been at best followers, certainly not the leaders. If I am asked why we are here today, I will gladly answer. I will be considerably embarrassed, however, if I am asked why we are so late.

The presence of Overture 22 at the General Assembly that convened in June of 1964 was problematic for the UPCUSA. If the assembly concurred with it, it would have repudiated the Stated Clerk himself, the General Assembly pronouncements about race for the past several years, and the denomination’s fledgling Commission on Religion and Race. While few believed the overture would be approved by the assembly, its existence provided an opportunity for the church to again speak out on the subject of race.

Instead of responding to the overture with a vote of “no action”—as had been recommended by the bills and overtures committee, the assembly instead commended Blake for his courageous action and witness in the arena of race relations, affirmed his right and his duty as Stated Clerk to speak and act in consonance with the pronouncements and actions of the General Assembly. The assembly’s message to those Presbyterians who had supported Overture 22 was crystal clear. Upon the final passage, Blake was given a thunderous standing ovation. PL provided a closing editorial comment in its June issue: “Overture 22 did not... provide the expected excitement of debate and parliamentary maneuvering. It provided a “quite different excitement... and passionate support of a man whom the General Assembly said is a great, brave, and good Stated Clerk.”<sup>10</sup>

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

The Civil Rights Act also attempted to deal with the problem of African Americans being denied the vote in the Deep South. The legislation stated that uniform standards must prevail for establishing the right to vote. Schooling to sixth grade constituted legal proof of literacy and the attorney general was given power to initiate legal action in any area where he found a pattern of resistance to the law.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, June 1, 1964, 6, 32, PHSA.

<sup>11</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, May 1, 1964, 7-8, PHSA.



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

In a Mississippi courtroom (1964), nine Presbyterian ministers stood trial on charges growing out of a civil rights demonstration in Hattiesburg. The nine were part of a larger group of clergy and civil-rights leaders who had been pressing for voter-registration rights for Forrest County's 7,000 voting-age African Americans. They were found guilty and handed down the maximum penalty—\$200 fine and four months in jail. They were from Presbyterian churches in Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Illinois.<sup>12</sup>

The fifty-two Northern clergymen—thirty two of whom were Presbyterian ministers—were joined by Jewish rabbis and Episcopalian, Methodist, and Disciples of Christ clergy, along with one Unitarian. They found themselves in the company of civil rights legends—Charles Evers (brother of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers), James Farmer of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and others. Presbyterian minister Gayraud Wilmore summed up the feelings of many who came to Hattiesburg: “We came to Hattiesburg to encourage and strengthen the Negro community in its struggle for freedom—especially for the right to vote; to awaken the white community to its responsibilities under God and under the law of the land... The situation (here) is extremely difficult if not perilous. There is much, much more to be done.”

One local Hattiesburg man watched as the parading ministers encircled the redbrick courthouse. Shaking his head in disbelief, he stated, “Those preachers—I just can't understand them. It don't make sense to think they are all insincere... I just can't understand how us in Mississippi can look so wrong to everybody else in the country.”<sup>13</sup>

Seven hundred miles north of Hattiesburg, at First Presbyterian Church in Charleston, Illinois, more than 600 people gathered for what was dubbed the “Hattiesburg Day.” Located in central Illinois in a conservative, agricultural “heart of the Bible belt” area, no one section of the country had sent more ministers to Hattiesburg than this part of the state. The events of that day were deemed historic, as Presbyterian ministers from Hattiesburg, Mississippi—who staunchly opposed the presence of outsiders—were invited to discuss the issues that divided both the nation and their town with fellow ministers from Illinois. At the heart of these discussions was whether the church should be involved in non-spiritual issues. One southern minister asserted, “We do not believe that it is our calling as ministers to be running hither and yon at the beck and call of professional agitators and demagogues or ambitious members of an ecclesiastical hierarchy meddling in problems which other people probably understand far better.” The “invasion” of Hattiesburg by “Northern clergymen were seen as a prostitution of the church for political purposes.”

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<sup>12</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, April 1, 1964, 26-29, PHSA.

<sup>13</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, February 15, 1964, 32-33, PHSA.

One of the speakers that day was the Reverend John Cameron, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in Hattiesburg. He spoke movingly of the effect of the presence of “friendly white men...marching with them.” “The fear that pervaded our community before your ministers came,” he noted, “is gradually abating and only because you are continuing to come. We need you desperately.”<sup>14</sup>

Others came from their homes to places in both north and south to make a statement about justice. The Reverend Bruce Klunder was one of them. Klunder laid down his life for his friends. On April 7, 1964, Klunder, a twenty-seven year old United Presbyterian minister, was crushed beneath a bulldozer on a school construction site—not in Birmingham or Hattiesburg, but in Cleveland, Ohio. His death, officially ruled an accident, occurred as he joined a non-violent protest against de facto school segregation.

Klunder was not an outside agitator. A quiet, unassuming young man, he resided in Cleveland, where he was active at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant and the YMCA. He had a passionate interest in civil rights, headed the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and had led a restaurant sit-in in Sewanee, Tennessee in 1962. He was married, with two young children.

Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA, delivered an address at Bruce Klunder’s memorial service conducted at the Church of the Covenant. He stated:

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

Klunder’s death continued to polarize the Cleveland community. Some saw his death as an inevitable result of the breakdown of law and order. Others viewed his activism as an act of love, in fulfillment of Christ’s great commandment. Klunder is one of forty individuals listed as a civil rights martyr on the national Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>15</sup>

The June 4, 1964 issue of PL contained an article entitled, “Remember Chester.” The story described events in Chester, Pennsylvania during a five month period in which police, demonstrators, and local community groups sought to prevent that city from becoming what some were already calling “The Birmingham of the North.” Indeed, James Farmer, leader of CORE, remarked that he had heard no stories regarding police brutality, arresting procedures, hearings, high bail that matched the stories he had heard in Chester.

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<sup>14</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, April 1, 1964, 26-29, PHSA.

<sup>15</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, September 15, 1964, 6-9; 39-40, PHSA.

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

But unlike Birmingham, the religious community spoke with one voice in calling for reconciliation and change. A tri-faith commission, established to be a reconciling force in Chester, represented Quakers, United Presbyterians, and Episcopalians of Delaware County. Presbyterian ministers Donald G. Huston and D. Evor Roberts joined with the Episcopalian Bishop of Pennsylvania and the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, along with others to meet with Governor William Scranton to win his intervention in order to prevent further bloodshed in Chester.<sup>16</sup>

The struggle for civil rights has never ended. What began more than fifty years ago continues to this day. Interestingly enough, the editors of *Presbyterian Life* more than four decades ago understood that. In the December 15 (1964) issue—published during the year the Civil Rights Bill became law—they included a comment from a reader of PL. Her letter to the editors “insisted on her devotion to equal rights for all people, but hoped rather plaintively that the magazine would not find it necessary to deal with the subject all of the time. “She is not alone,” the editors replied. “Civil rights leaders, Negroes and whites, politicians, clergymen, social workers, doctors, school boards, and teachers are equally sick of the subject...but not sick enough to do the bold and good things necessary to solve the problems that injustice and discrimination create. For (all of those involved), the happy day to look for is the day when there will be no further need for a civil rights movement.”<sup>17</sup>

Since those turbulent days more than forty years ago, the struggle for freedom continues. Our understanding of that struggle is rooted in our history. Arthur Schlesinger once noted, “History is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As persons deprived of their memory become disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been and where they are going, so a nation denied a conception of the past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.” What is true for a nation holds true for a church as well. “The longer you look back,” said Winston Churchill, “the farther you can look forward.”

In the past half century, the American nation and the Presbyterian church have been greatly impacted by the civil rights movement. In the end, that history must be both a guide and the domain, not so much for historians, but for our people.

I began my presentation with anecdotes about tapes and a book. Had I not stumbled upon these raw materials of history and had not the pages of *Presbyterian Life*, diaries,

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<sup>16</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, June 4, 1964, 6-8, PHSA.

<sup>17</sup>*Presbyterian Life*, December 15, 1964, 27, PHSA.

clippings, photographs, and letters compiled by those involved in the struggle for civil rights been preserved, the story of our church's involvement in that great struggle would have been lost. And with that loss, the memory of our church would have been impaired.

The Presbyterian Historical Society, as our church's national archives, has, since 1852, preserved our history from the fires that consume and the folly that forgets. Oscar Wilde once noted, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it." Without the raw materials from our past, that cannot happen. And with the loss of our identity—as a church or a nation—we will wander aimlessly into the future, disoriented and disabled.

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