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Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964

James F. Findlay

On June 19, 1963, John F. Kennedy introduced into Congress his first major piece of civil rights legislation. Slightly more than a year later a strengthened version of the bill passed Congress as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That landmark law marked the dramatic entry into national politics of the “second Reconstruction” in civil rights. As they struggled over the bill, politicians on Capitol Hill recognized that the American churches were playing an unusual and important role in the efforts to pass the legislation. Hubert Humphrey, the floor manager of the bill in the Senate, ultimately felt that the churches were “the most important force at work.” Humphrey’s colleague from Georgia, Richard Russell, essentially concurred, even as he acidly commented that in supporting civil rights “men of the cloth” had applied a “philosophy of coercion” similar to the “doctrine that dictated the acts of Torquemada in the infamous days of the Inquisition.”¹

The direct commitment of the churches in 1963 and 1964 to the national racial struggle was both a return to the activism of the early twentieth-century Social Gospel and something of a new departure. Indeed, throughout our nation’s history religious people often had participated actively in the political struggle—over issues of war and peace beginning in the colonial era, over the slavery question in the nineteenth century, over Prohibition in the 1920s. Since the twenties, however, the churches had tended to avoid large political agendas. Although liberal Protestant leaders like Reinhold Niebuhr expressed vigorous views on public issues, official church bodies, affected by the widespread uncertainties associated with the depression and World War II and by the conformity of the early Cold War years, were reluctant to get directly involved in politics. The deep commitment of the mainline churches to the racial struggle in 1963 ended all that, reviving the Social Gospel

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¹ *National Observer*, July 13, 1964, p. 1; *New York Times*, June 19, 1964, pp. 1, 16; *Congressional Record*, 88 Cong., 2 sess., June 18, 1964, p. 14300. For an example of reporters’ commentary about the churches’ involvement, see *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1964, sec. 4, p. 10. See also *Christian Century*, Sept. 11, 1963, pp. 1094–95.

tradition that demanded the church demonstrate its faith by active concern for the poor and the dispossessed.²

At the center of the churches' efforts to support the Civil Rights Act of 1964 stood the National Council of Churches (NCC). Established in 1950, the NCC absorbed into its capacious bureaucratic house the Federal Council of Churches, the principal Protestant ecumenical body of the early twentieth century and a major advocate of the Social Gospel. The NCC was always seen as a principal inheritor of the tradition of social activism that had animated liberal Protestantism in its early days.³ Thus in the 1950s, supporters of the NCC tended to sympathize with public efforts for greater equality. As the "ecumenical" racial revolution, cutting across all religious boundaries, gathered momentum in the late fifties and early sixties, it was all but inevitable that the National Council of Churches would get involved.

The changing attitude of the National Council toward racial matters in the early sixties symbolized the growing involvement of the mainline churches in the mushrooming civil rights struggle. Since its inception in 1950 the council had frequently issued public pronouncements against racial discrimination, and from the outset it also included a Department of Racial and Cultural Relations headed by a black clergyman, J. Oscar Lee. But too often the council's work on race relations justified the summary of an African-American critic: "race relations Sundays, prayer days, brotherhood pronouncements, conferences, seminars, workshops, statements, and resolutions . . . [in which] action was too often another matter."⁴

² Scholars have disagreed about the importance of racial issues to proponents of the Social Gospel. See David Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro* (New York, 1965), 53–54; and Ronald C. White, Jr., *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel* (San Francisco, 1990). There is no systematic historical treatment of the churches in American life from the 1930s to the 1960s, but see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 1055–96; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, 1988); Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York, 1985); Robert Booth Fowler, *Religion and Politics in America* (Metuchen, 1985), 26–45, 77–110, 140–66, 293–316; Robert M. Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York, 1985); Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York, 1987), 159–314. For further comments on the Social Gospel, see Donald Gorell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920* (Macon, 1988); and Paul Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer* (New York, 1988). On the Quakers, an exception to the churches' lack of political involvement before the 1960s and a group especially active in the fight over the 1964 Civil Rights Act, see Edward Raymond Wilson, *Uphill for Peace: Quaker Impact on Congress* (Richmond, Ind., 1975); Richard Taylor interview by James Findlay, June 18, 1985 (tape in James Findlay's possession); letters between Taylor and officials of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, scattered throughout Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

³ John A. Hutchison, *We Are Not Divided: A Critical and Historical Study of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, 1905–1938* (New York, 1941); Samuel McCrea Cavert, *The American Churches in the Ecumenical Movement, 1900–1968* (New York, 1968). Because of the historically central role of Protestantism in American life and because officials of the National Council of Churches (NCC) were the principal shapers and leaders in the lobbying efforts by the churches in 1963 and 1964, this article focuses on that organization's work. However, the three major faith communities—Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish—were all very active in the political work of 1963 and 1964. The "churches" that supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were essentially the liberal, "mainline" segments of the entire American religious community.

⁴ Anna Hedgeman, *The Gift of Chaos: Decades of American Dissent* (New York, 1977), 77–78. See also R. H. Edwin Espy interview by Findlay, Feb. 2, 1989 (in Findlay's possession); *Interchurch News*, June 6, 1960, pp. 1, 4; *ibid.*, Nov. 1961, p. 1; *ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1962, p. 1; *ibid.*, Nov. 1962, p. 1 (National Council of Churches headquarters, New York, N.Y.). *Interracial News*, published by the NCC throughout the 1950s, often epitomized the ap-

The rising tempo of racial agitation in the nation, dramatized by the tumult over the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi in late 1962 and massive black protests and boycotts in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, pressed the liberal churches toward more direct action. A new generation of national religious leaders, sensitized by the thrust of events and inclined toward activism, was emerging. No one symbolized better that new leadership than Eugene Carson Blake. In 1963 Blake was the stated clerk (the chief administrative officer) of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the northern, more liberal wing of American Presbyterianism. Long recognized as an ecumenicist, by 1963 Blake had become an outspoken advocate of church activism in support of racial justice, and he was becoming a major influence within the National Council of Churches. Blake attracted headlines when he and other nationally known religious leaders were arrested on July 4, 1963, after participating, all of them for the first time, in a sit-in protesting segregated public facilities at Gwinn Oaks Amusement Park in Baltimore.⁵

Other pressures for direct action by the churches were developing. In January 1963, the national Conference on Religion and Race convened in Chicago. It represented a major effort to focus the attention of the three primary faith communities—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish—on the most pressing domestic issue confronting the nation. The three-day gathering attracted several hundred church people, but rhetoric still outweighed the ability to mount concrete and effective programs of action. A “continuing” office of the conference was established in New York City following the meeting in Chicago, but funding, broad church support, and imaginative leadership failed to materialize, and it folded within a year.⁶ Although leaders of the Conference on Religion and Race failed in their ambitious objective to become major ecumenical spokespersons on matters of race, the gathering in Chicago in early 1963 and subsequent efforts to maintain the enthusiasms generated there pointed to the growing sentiments among church people that something should be done nationally to help African-American citizens secure long-denied basic rights.

Although the National Council of Churches had been an official sponsor and financial supporter of the Conference on Religion and Race from the outset, the top leadership of the National Council stood somewhat apart from those shaping the conference. In its earliest days the continuing Conference on Religion and Race

proach criticized by Dr. Hedgeman. Files of this newsletter are in folder 30, box 46, RG 6, National Council of Churches Archives (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia). On efforts by the mainline churches in the 1950s to express their growing concerns about race, see A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, 1985), 246–47.

⁵ *Interchurch News*, July, 1963, p. 3; *New York Times*, July 5, 1963, pp. 1, 44; *Christian Century*, July 17, 1963, p. 902. See also R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Eugene Carson Blake: Prophet with Portfolio* (New York, 1978), 77–105.

⁶ *New York Times*, April 25, 1964, p. 25; “Financial Statement through month ending April 30, 1963,” “Continuation Committee, 1963–64” folder, box 1, series 7, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Papers (Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis.); Galen Weaver, “Reports to the Continuation Committee, May 14–15, 1963, March 2, 1964,” *ibid.*; John J. O’Connor to Weaver, July 31, 1963, “Weaver (1963, 1964)” folder, box 2, *ibid.*; Mathew Ahmann to Weaver, July 23, 1963, Jan. 7, 1964, *ibid.*; Weaver to Robert Spike, July 14, 1963, *ibid.*

must have served as an implicit reminder that the well-established and much more influential NCC had not responded directly to the rapidly escalating racial crisis of the country. Even individual denominations under the council's umbrella seemed readier to adopt an activist stance. On May 20, 1963, the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., established its own Commission on Religion and Race to address racial problems in the denomination and in the country at large. The Presbyterians voted to fund their commission with a hefty first-year budget of \$500,000.⁷

The Conference on Religion and Race also highlighted the increasingly significant impact Martin Luther King, Jr., was making on the white churches. In the fifties and early sixties, other leaders in the African-American community had frequently addressed the people in the mainline churches. Two examples were Howard Thurman, dean of the chapel at Boston University during and after the time King was a student there, and Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College and a close friend of the King family, both of them urbane, sophisticated speakers and preachers. Nevertheless, by the early sixties the mainline churches looked less often to these men than to King.⁸

King represented a younger generation of black clergy whose direct action tactics were transforming the civil rights struggle in the South. King's willingness to engage in direct action and to preach powerfully to white churches about the consequences was immensely compelling. By 1963 he was without question the leading black interpreter of the civil rights struggle, in all its moral urgency, to white church people throughout the country.⁹

King was appointed to the steering committee that planned the Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, and he delivered one of the major speeches there. Scarcely two months after the conference, he penned from the Birmingham jails his famous letter. The letter was first published in its entirety in the widely read Protestant ecumenical weekly the *Christian Century*. King wrote from behind bars:

In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice I have heard many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular. . . . But the judgment

⁷ On NCC endorsement of the conference, see "Program Committee Summary," May 16, 1962, folder 3, box 46, Southern Regional Council Collection (Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University); Ahmann to Leslie Dunbar, May 24, 1962, *ibid.*; NCC, news release, "U.S. Religious Groups Call Conference on Religion and Race," June 21, 1962, *ibid.* On NCC financial support, see "Financial Statement, ending April 30, 1963," "Continuation Committee, 1963-64" folder, box 1, series 7, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Papers. The conference also turned to the United Church of Christ, not to the NCC, for its continuing executive director, Galen Weaver. "Newsletter," March 5, 1963, "Newsletter, March, 1963-February, 1964" folder, box 2, *ibid.*; *New York Times*, May 21, 1963, p. 18.

⁸ "Speaking Engagements, 1962-63," Howard Thurman Papers (Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, Mass.); Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York, 1971), esp. 241-64.

⁹ See boxes 36-47, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Mugar Library); and Secondary Correspondence, boxes 37-60, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Ga.). On King's impact on white churches, see John C. Raines, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and Moral Education," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (forthcoming).

of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century.

Words like these, coupled with his activism, made King a personal model for other clergy and by mid-1963 offered a not so subtle rebuke to the continuing inactivism of most white religious leaders.¹⁰

Events came to a focus in late May 1963. A group of black intellectual and cultural leaders in New York, fearful that racial violence might occur throughout the nation following the recent demonstrations in Birmingham, arranged a private meeting with Robert Kennedy to express their worries and to seek greater federal support for possible solutions. Kennedy brushed aside their entreaties. In the search for help, some participants in the meeting with the attorney general turned to friends in the National Council of Churches. The church people were simply "there" in New York, they were sympathetic, and perhaps their contacts and resources could make a difference.¹¹

The topmost leadership of the NCC was finally galvanized into action. On June 7, 1963, the General Board of the council announced the formation of a new Commission on Religion and Race (NCC-CORR) designed to allow America's premier ecumenical religious body to become fully and flexibly involved in the day-to-day struggle over civil rights. The new commission was to report directly to the General Board, not through the cumbersome existing bureaucracy. That arrangement gave the commission an unusual degree of freedom in decision making and planning. The commission also received substantial budgetary support — almost a half-million dollars for its first year of operation. Reflecting his rapidly growing role as a national spokesman for the churches on racial matters, Blake soon became the chair of the commission's governing board. The first meeting of the new body was held on June 28, 1963, in New York City; by that time the executive director of the organization, Robert Spike, a young though seasoned minister drawn from the national staff of the United Church of Christ, was already at work.¹²

¹⁰ Ahmann to Martin Luther King, Jr., May 3, 1962, folder 22, box 17, King Papers (King Center); J. Oscar Lee to King, June 22, 1962, *ibid.*; King to Lee, July 2, 1962, folder 29, *ibid.*; Ahmann to King, Jan. 24, 1962, folder 25, *ibid.*; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, pp. 767–73, esp. 772. King had been an editor-at-large of the *Century* for several years before 1963. The editor, Harold Fey, wrote King that the letter was "the most memorable article to appear in The Christian Century during my editorship." Harold Fey to King, Sept. 8, 1958, folder III-16, box 22, King Papers (Mugar Library); Fey to Maude Ballou, March 17, 1959, *ibid.*; Fey to King, July 6, 1962, May 22, 1963, undated postcard, folder 6, box 6, King Papers (King Center). On the creation of the letter, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988), 737–45. On King as a model, see for example Spike to King, Oct. 16, 1964, folder 34, box 17, King Papers (King Center). Spike was a key leader of the NCC's direct involvement in civil rights activities.

¹¹ On the black leaders' meeting with Robert Kennedy, see *New York Times*, May 25, p. 1; *ibid.*, May 26, 1963, p. 59; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 878–79; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, 1978), 356–60; and especially Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 809–13. The connections with the churches are documented in Jon Regier interview by Findlay, Feb. 8, 1987 (in Findlay's possession); Regier interview by Findlay, Feb. 2, 1989, *ibid.*; and Robert Spike, *Civil Rights Involvement: Model for Mission* (Detroit, 1965), 9–10.

¹² For the enabling resolution voted by the General Board of the NCC, see *Interchurch News*, June–July 1963,

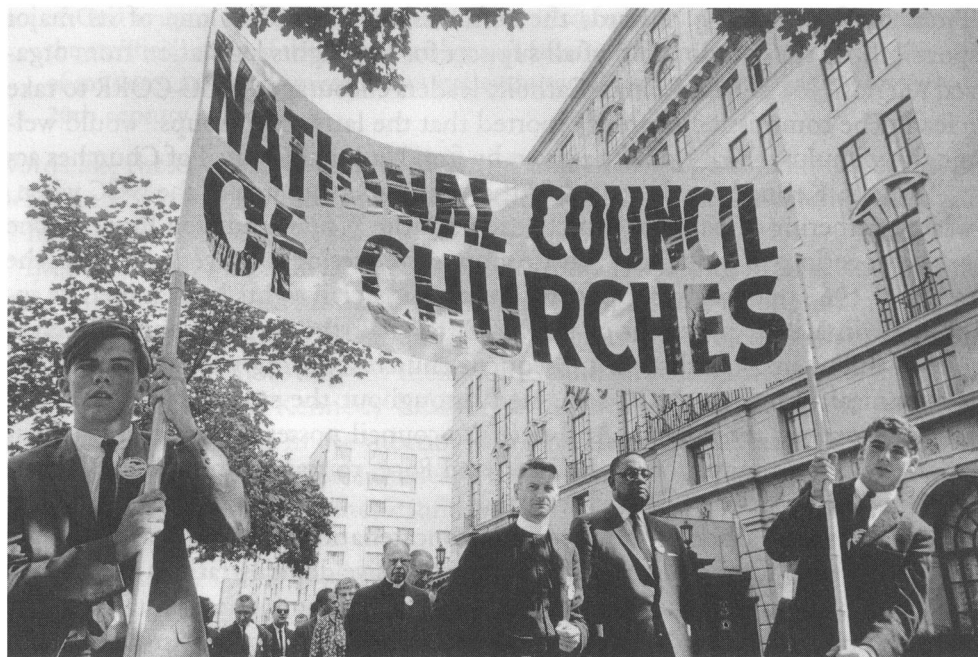
From its first meeting onward, the commission assumed as one of its major responsibilities the coordination of all support for civil rights legislation from organized religion. Jewish and Roman Catholic leaders encouraged NCC-CORR to take the lead. The commission heard it reported that the latter two groups "would welcome the stimulus which would be given by firm National Council of Churches action." John F. Kennedy underscored further this leadership role of the NCC when, at a large gathering of national church leaders at the White House on June 17 (one of several meetings of influential private groups the president convened early in the summer of 1963 to develop support for his pending civil rights legislation), he invited J. Irwin Miller, president of the NCC, to chair the meeting and to oversee efforts at follow-up.¹³ Although subsequent church lobbying was always couched in ecumenical terms, the NCC remained throughout the struggle over the Civil Rights Act *primus inter pares*. And now the council possessed an organizational weapon, its own Commission on Religion and Race, to transform informal leadership status into concrete plans of action.

Subtly yet with gathering momentum a concatenation of events was shaping a civil rights agenda for mainline church people. Massive demonstrations in southern cities, often orchestrated by black religious leaders; militant white resistance to the demonstrations; President Kennedy's televised appeal of May 1963 urging Americans to accept racial change especially because of the deep moral issues involved, followed quickly by his proposed civil rights legislation—all helped arouse churchgoers. Thus events in the South, presidential guidance, and church leadership—black and white together—were combining to create among church people a major commitment to social activism.

Successful lobbying has always relied on two key tactics, pressure applied directly on legislators in Washington and pressure applied from a distance by constituents at the grass roots. The National Council of Churches recognized that reality in early appointments to the commission staff. One was Dr. Anna Hedgeman, a shrewd, politically savvy African-American woman who had worked in Democratic party circles, both in Washington and New York City, and had run for elective office several times. One of the first tasks of the commission had been to coordinate the churches' somewhat belated effort to participate in the March on Washington. Dr.

p. 6. See also *ibid.*, Aug.-Sept. 1963, p. 5; National Council of Churches, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 28, 1963; folder 2, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers (Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.); Victor Reuther to Eugene Carson Blake, telegram, June 20, 1963, *ibid.*; "Report of the Executive Director to the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches," July 26, 1963, p. 4, folder 20, box 6, RG 11, NCC Archives. James Hamilton, personal appointments book, 1963 (National Council of Churches office, Washington).

¹³ NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 28, 1963, p. 3, Victor Reuther Papers; "Meeting of the President with Religious Leaders, June 17, 1963," verbatim transcript, pp. 15-21, "Civil Rights Meeting with Religious Leaders" folder, box 97, Presidential Office Files, Subjects (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass.). The promised "follow up" to this meeting by Kennedy's staff never occurred. See Louis F. Oberdorfer to J. Irwin Miller, June 20, 1963, box 23, Lee C. White Papers, White House Staff Files, *ibid.*; Miller to Oberdorfer, June 21, 1963, *ibid.*



March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Robert W. Spike, executive director of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches, marches immediately behind the banner. *Courtesy National Council of Churches.*

Hedgeman directed that effort to a very successful conclusion—an estimated forty thousand church people swelled the ranks of those who marched to the Lincoln Memorial in support of jobs and the vote for blacks on August 28, 1963.¹⁴

The involvement in the March on Washington was a first test of the churches' ability to organize widespread grass-roots support for specific aims and goals in the civil rights struggle. Although for many church people participation was primarily a powerful symbolic moral act, the political implications of going to Washington were also very clear. Church leaders were among those who met with President Kennedy immediately after the conclusion of the march and who lobbied congressmen before returning to their homes. Perhaps James Reston caught the sense of the moment best in words written just as the March on Washington came to an end: "If there is no effective moral reaction out in the country, there will be no effective political reaction. . . . While the politicians here are not saying much about the March, they are listening, and if such a mammoth demonstration, dramatizing the basic religious concept of equality, does not get an impressive response from the

¹⁴ For biographical information, see Hedgeman, *Gift of Chaos*, 3–90. On the NCC-CORR involvement in the March on Washington, see folder 20, box 6, RG 11, NCC Archives. On the march from NCC participants' perspective, see Spike, "Report of the Executive Director," Sept. 5, 1963, pp. 4–6, *ibid.*; and Spike, *Civil Rights Involvement*, 11–12. See also *Interchurch News*, Oct. 1963, pp. 1, 4; *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1963, p. 1; Blake and Spike to Walter P. Reuther, Aug. 16, 1963, folder 8, box 494, Walter P. Reuther Papers (Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs); and Spike to "Friends," with attachments, Aug. 2, 1963, *ibid.*



Preparation of sandwiches for the March on Washington.
Courtesy National Council of Churches.

churches, Congress could easily conclude that the nation was indifferent or worse.”¹⁵ Hedgeman and the Commission on Religion and Race set out to organize and coordinate NCC efforts to make certain that local people *did* respond to ensure passage of an effective civil rights bill.

By the second meeting of the commission in July 1963, its members were rapidly developing ideas for generating political pressures. Victor Reuther, member of the commission, Methodist layman, and brother of Walter Reuther, chaired a small planning group that proposed guidelines for lobbying that the churches followed until the civil rights bill was enacted almost a year later. Probably the most crucial of their early suggestions was to “concentrate our legislative efforts” on a limited number of “key States.”¹⁶ The commission quickly decided that meant paying spe-

¹⁵ *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1963, p. 20. The NCC-CORR widely distributed James Reston's column in church circles immediately after the March on Washington. See Hedgeman, *Gift of Chaos*, 89. See also *Interchurch News*, Oct. 1963, p. 1; and *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1963, p. 17. Politicians and other secular leaders also sensed the importance of the churches' involvement and the potential political benefits. G. Mennen Williams to Walter P. Reuther, Aug. 29, 1963, folder 10, box 494, Walter P. Reuther Papers; Ralph McGill to Walter P. Reuther, Aug. 30, 1963, *ibid*.

¹⁶ NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 28, 1963, p. 7, July 26, 1963, pp. 3–4, folder 2, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers.



Rep. Fred Schwengle, Rep. James C. Corman, Robert W. Spike, Clarence Mitchell, and Victor Reuther (left to right) at the conference held in Lincoln, Nebraska, September 4–5, 1963, to educate midwestern church leaders about the civil rights bill.
Courtesy National Council of Churches.

cial attention to the Midwest. In that region were large rural districts where labor unions and other traditional supporters of civil rights were weak, and except in the cities, the black vote there was negligible. Many congressmen from the area were uncommitted to civil rights legislation. In a region with deep religious roots, moral arguments pressed by church people might be especially effective. The targets were primarily Republicans, who possessed great strength in the region and whose support was essential to passing a strong civil rights bill. The area covered ranged from Ohio on the east to Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas on the west. This plan of action, eventually known as “the Midwest strategy,” evolved naturally out of discussions among people backing the civil rights legislation, as one participant remembered, “the way any good lobbying works.”¹⁷

¹⁷ *National Observer*, July 13, 1964, p. 1; James Hamilton interview by Findlay, March 15, 1985 (in Findlay's possession); Hamilton interview by Findlay, Jan. 9, 1986, *ibid.*; Arnold Aronson and Marvin Caplan interview by Findlay, Jan. 9, 1986, *ibid.* See also NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 26, 1963, p. 4, folder 2, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers; Report of the Legislative Committee, attached to NCC, Commission on Religion and Race, “Agenda,” July 26, 1963, folder 4, box 15, *ibid.*; Stephen Horn, “Periodic Log Maintained during the Discussions concerning the Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” p. 53, box 125, Miscellaneous Manuscript Collections (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). Horn was a legislative assistant to the Republican senator Thomas Kuchel, the co-floor manager of the civil rights bill in the upper house.

A second recommendation of the Reuther committee reflected the recognition that for many midwestern church people the civil rights issue was not a burning concern even in 1963. At the time one church leader noted "a kind of irony" in the fact that the fate of the bill might rest with such people.¹⁸ Thus Reuther's committee proposed that a nine-state "legislative conference" be held in the Midwest as soon as possible as a training session and educational device for church leaders throughout the region. The gathering was held in Lincoln, Nebraska, on September 4 and 5, 1963. The two hundred people attending heard theologians, congressmen from the Midwest, and a veteran lobbyist from Washington discuss "The Necessity for a Coalition of Conscience" to secure enactment of the civil rights bill. Within weeks of the conference in Lincoln, similar "Civil Rights Workshops" were held in churches in Columbus, Ohio; Denver; Indianapolis; and Minneapolis.¹⁹

In October the commission dispatched four-person teams, like circuit-riding Methodist evangelists, into Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, where critical congressional votes were located. The teams consisted of a minister to interpret theologically why voting for civil rights was important, a young black civil rights worker to speak personally about the effects of racial discrimination (like a participant giving testimony at an old-time revival?), a legislative expert to answer questions about the bill, and a contact person from the appropriate state council of churches. Speakers on this "breakfast and lunch circuit" urged people to initiate telephone, telegram, and letter-writing appeals to their congressmen and to join delegations being organized to visit their representatives in Washington.²⁰

In July 1963 Victor Reuther's planning committee made another suggestion to the Commission on Religion and Race; its implementation firmly established the churches' presence in Washington as well as in the hinterlands. This was to create "close working relationships with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights." The conference (LCCR) had been established in 1949 in New York City, chiefly by people seeking congressional enactment of a federal Fair Employment Practices Committee. By 1960 the conference had become the principal lobbyist for civil rights legislation, coordinating the efforts of over sixty church organizations, labor unions, and black and other minority group agencies. In July 1963 the LCCR moved its office from New York to Washington, thus suggesting both the significance of the legislation pending before Congress and the conference leaders' belief that the proposals could be enacted into law.²¹

¹⁸ Spike, *Civil Rights Involvement*, 14. Following an extensive trip through the region in September and October 1963, James Hamilton reported to the NCC-CORR that "the naivete and the lack of understanding and involvement [concerning the civil rights legislation] in the midwest are shocking." NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of Oct. 22, 1963, folder 8, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers.

¹⁹ NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of July 26, 1963, folder 4, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers; Spike to "Dear Friends," Aug. 14, 1962, folder 6, box 15, *ibid.*; James Hamilton to Anna Hedgeman, Oct. 31, 1963, "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder, office files (National Council of Churches office, Washington). The schedule of workshops can be followed in Hamilton, "Expense Statement," Sept. 26, 1963, *ibid.*

²⁰ The young black speakers, recruited from the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, were heavily involved in civil rights activities in the deep South. For a detailed analysis of the meetings in the Midwest, see report of Anna Hedgeman, NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of Oct. 22, 1963, pp. 1-3, folder 20, box 6, RG 11, NCC Archives.

²¹ NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of July 26, 1963, p. 3, folder 4, box 15, Victor

Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups, including the National Council of Churches, had worked with the LCCR from time to time at least since the mid-1950s. Most of the connections were "passive," consisting of "consultative conferences" and informal discussions, without active lobbying on Capitol Hill.²² The early informal contacts were possible in part because the churches were establishing offices in Washington to protect institutional interests there. The National Council of Churches, for example, opened a Washington office in 1953 under a part-time director, principally to insure the continuation of tax exemptions for clergy.

The Protestant churches' long commitment to a ministry to migrant laborers first caused National Council officials to begin thinking about lobbying overtly in Washington. NCC study groups had underscored the central importance of economic problems in migrant workers' lives, and they had concluded only federal legislation was likely to improve the migrants' wages, working conditions, and even the literacy of their children. By 1960 the NCC's Washington office had begun to work openly in support of such legislation. When the moment came, it was but a short step to begin supporting civil rights legislation as well.²³

A key participant in all of these developments was James Hamilton, who became the associate director of the NCC's Washington office in November 1958. Hamilton had already been in Washington for several years, principally as a law student at George Washington University. To finance his law studies, Hamilton had served as one of three doorkeepers in the House of Representatives, gaining the opportunity to observe national politics at very close range and to begin a long self-education in the intricacies of representing the churches' interests on Capitol Hill. In June 1963 Jim Hamilton became one of the first staff members of the council's Commission on Religion and Race. His work in Washington paralleled and was of equal importance to that of Anna Hedgeman in New York in coordinating the churches' support for the Civil Rights Act.²⁴

Hamilton (and thus the commission) became directly involved in the activities of the LCCR as soon as the latter group established its central office in Washington

Reuther Papers; Arnold Aronson and Marvin Caplan interview by Findlay, Jan. 9, 1986, (in Findlay's possession). See also the newsletter of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, *Memo*, July 25, 1963, box 1, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers; Marvin Caplan to Fielding Simmons, Dec. 24, 1963, *ibid.*; "Memorandum on the Principal Activities of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights from 1963 to July 1966," "Civil Rights Act of 1964, Background Material" folder, *ibid.*

²² Aronson and Caplan interview by Findlay; Lewis I. Maddocks to National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Washington Bureau, July 18, 1961, "LCCR-1961" folder, box 104, Washington Bureau, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); list of participating organizations, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, [1961], *ibid.*; "Program," plenary session, Consultative Conference on Desegregation, Sept. 16-17, 1957, "LCCR, 1957" folder, box 103, *ibid.*; news release, March 3, 1956, "LCCR, 1956" folder, *ibid.*; list of participants in meeting at Willard Hotel, Sept. 18, 1956, *ibid.*; Arnold Aronson to "Participants in meeting at Willard Hotel," Sept. 25, Oct. 11, 1956, *ibid.*; Roy Wilkins to "All Cooperating Organizations," Dec. 5, 1956, *ibid.*

²³ Hamilton interview, Jan. 9, 1986. The Federal Council of Churches apparently established a small Washington office in 1945, which reported to member churches about political issues. Cavert, *American Churches in the Ecumenical Movement*, 194.

²⁴ Hamilton interview, Jan. 9, 1986; NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 28, 1963, p. 1, folder 4, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers; NCC, Commission on Religion and Race, agenda sheet, July 26, 1963, *ibid.*; Hamilton, personal appointments book, 1963 (National Council of Churches office, Washington).

in July 1963. One of the first steps taken by Hamilton and the conference was to arrange for testimony by leaders of the three major religious communities in congressional hearings prior to the formal consideration of the civil rights bill. The churches also sent representatives to LCCR briefings on the civil rights legislation held at the nation's capital just before the March on Washington.²⁵ As debate on Kennedy's program began in the House in September 1963, the Leadership Conference convened weekly strategy sessions open to all of the organizations under its umbrella and held almost daily meetings with crucial Democrats supporting the bill. Hamilton attended most of those meetings and soon became one of the key figures within the conference.²⁶

Because of the complexity and protractedness of the debate in the House of Representatives, it was crucial that the Leadership Conference maintain a precise accounting of the voting of congressmen known, or even suspected, of supporting the conference's position. Soon the conference created an elaborate watchdog system, made up largely of volunteers, who sat in the House galleries, kept track of the votes of House members, and alerted their leaders when parliamentary emergencies arose. Conference lobbyists could then meet quickly with the floor managers of the bill to contain or minimize the difficulties. Hamilton was one of five Leadership Conference people present regularly throughout the debates to supervise the proper functioning of this system. The churches also provided many of the "gallery watchers" ("vultures" one frustrated congressional critic called them) who made up the human tabulating machine that appeared in the House gallery each day.²⁷

Hamilton also developed close linkages with church leaders outside Washington, chiefly through existing ecumenical state and local church councils, and with the widely dispersed network of denominational officials that supported all the NCC's

²⁵ Eugene Carson Blake of the National Council of Churches, Father John Cronin of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and Rabbi Irwin Blank of the Synagogue Council of America testified before a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee on July 24, 1963. The act of testifying was a new and significant expression of ecumenicity on a major public issue. For a verbatim text of the testimony, see folder 3, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers. For the Leadership Conference's activities, see "Report of the Legislative Committee," attached to NCC, Commission on Religion and Race, "Agenda," July 26, 1963, folder 4, *ibid.*; NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of July 26, 1963, p. 4, *ibid.*; Hamilton, personal appointments book, 1963 (National Council of Churches office, Washington).

²⁶ A close ally of Hamilton and the Leadership Conference staff was the Friends Committee for National Legislation, which in 1963 brought to Washington Richard Taylor, a political scientist then teaching at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to lobby on "human rights" issues. Although the Friends committee never officially joined the Leadership Conference, Taylor was involved in many of the latter's strategy sessions. The Friends Committee for National Legislation played a quiet, important, and still largely unknown role in the lobbying effort on civil rights in Washington. Taylor interview by Findlay, June 18, 1985 (in Findlay's possession); Richard Taylor to Aronson, July 18, Aug. 15, Sept. 23, Oct. 7, 1963, April 15, 1964, box 2, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers; Taylor to Marvin Caplan and Hamilton, Jan. 21, 1964, *ibid.*; Edward Snyder to Caplan, Feb. 3, 1964, *ibid.*; Caplan to Taylor, March 4, 1964, *ibid.*; special citation of Leadership Conference on Civil Rights to Taylor, June 11, 1964, box 1, *ibid.*

²⁷ Congressional Quarterly, *Revolution in Civil Rights, 1945-68* (Washington, 1968), 54-55. See also Charles Whalen and Barbara Whalen, *The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act* (Washington, 1984), 109; Hamilton to Grover Bagby, March 31, 1964, "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington). For the precise accounting of votes this system produced, see Aronson to Jean Graham, Feb. 24, 1964, box 1, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers. On the weekly strategy sessions of the Leadership Conference, see *Memo*, July 25, 1963, Jan. 13, Feb. 3, 1964, *ibid.*; and "Important! Read at Once!" n.d., "Correspondence" folder, *ibid.* For the "vulture" reference, see *Memo*, Feb. 11, 1964, *ibid.*

activities. Hamilton's office mailed five thousand such people regular information sheets on the legislation as it slowly made its way through the House and then on to the Senate. Occasional "immediate action memos" were sent to a more select list of Protestant leaders when critical votes in the House were pending. Thus in a relatively short time Hamilton, Hedgeman, and the NCC-CORR had fashioned out of the existing ecumenical church structure an effective system of grass-roots supporters able to respond quickly and specifically to the people in Washington who were monitoring day-to-day developments in Congress.²⁸

When the House approved a strong civil rights bill on February 10, 1964, there was only one *no* vote among the fifty-five representatives from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Eight of the twelve Congressmen from Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota, all Republicans, voted in favor. The exact relationship between those votes and church pressures cannot be measured precisely, but the results at least suggest that the religious groups had begun to make their political presence felt.²⁹

As couriers delivered the House-approved legislation to the Senate for further scrutiny and a final decision, the churches and their allies refocused their political energies on the upper chamber. Soon the senatorial opponents of the civil rights bill launched a filibuster, hoping to wear out the pro-civil rights forces by talking the measure to death. It was a classic southern maneuver on race-related issues. Closure (a vote to end a filibuster) had never been invoked in the Senate in an instance of civil rights legislation. It was difficult to achieve in any case, since it required a two-thirds vote of the Senate. These developments demanded from proponents stamina and an increasing volume of support as public pressure grew, especially in April and May 1964, to resolve the issue one way or another.³⁰

In responding to these challenges, the churches made use of tactics first learned while working for passage of the bill in the House. Hamilton and other commission staff members once again moved about the Midwest, particularly in Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota, holding workshops on the bill and on how local churches and individuals could exert pressure on their leaders in Washington to support a strong civil rights act.³¹ The mainline churches, usually middle-class and often possessing members who were well educated and politically aware, were in an excellent position to transform the entreaties of national church leaders into specific political pressures.

There are many indications that they did so. B'nai B'rith, a Jewish fraternal organization, gathered all the lawyers in Iowa who were members and as a group de-

²⁸ NCC, Commission on Religion and Race Minutes, meeting of June 28, 1963, p. 4, folder 2, box 15, Victor Reuther Papers; Hamilton to Carol Anderson, April 10, 1964, "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington); Hamilton to Spike, May 1, 1964, *ibid.*; "Digest of Civil Rights Act of 1963," n.d., *ibid.*; Hamilton to "Selected Denominational Officials," July 4, Oct. 10, 1963, "Immediate Action Memos, Selected Denominational Officials" folder, *ibid.*; Memo, July 1, Dec. 15, 1963, Feb. 1, 15, April 1, 15, 1964, "Memo" folder, *ibid.*

²⁹ For the votes, see *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 20 (1964), 82-83.

³⁰ Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 124-48; Memo, April 1, 1964, pp. 1-2 (National Council of Churches office, Washington).

³¹ Hamilton to Jay Moore, May 1, 1964, "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington); Hamilton, "Expense Statement," June 23, 1964, *ibid.* Hamilton and his associates also taped talks on civil rights issues by nationally known church leaders and circulated them widely in the areas visited.



Robert W. Spike and an ecumenical group of clergy and lay people meet with Sen. Hubert Humphrey on the steps of the Capitol in May 1964. *Courtesy National Council of Churches.*

scended on Bourke Hickenlooper, a very hesitant Iowa senator, to urge that he vote for the bill. One of the lobbyists was a former law partner of Hickenlooper's. Quaker professors from Earlham College in Indiana came to Washington and lobbied the senators from that state. A leading Quaker layman, president of a large national corporation with facilities in Kentucky, spent considerable time talking with the two senators from the Bluegrass State, John Sherman Cooper and Thruston Morton. Hamilton later recalled contacting a businessman in Omaha, a Methodist, who in turn prevailed upon his minister to go to the president of the largest bank in the state, also a parishioner, to buttonhole a reluctant Republican senator from Nebraska to vote for the Civil Rights Act. The list of such informal contacts and subtle pressures could be extended. They are a normal part of the political process, but not necessarily tactics used regularly by church people involved *as church people* in public life. Hamilton summed it up for a reporter in 1964: "[This] wasn't the church operating as a church, it was the church operating in lay fields, involving the business community, reaching into the power structure." These words demonstrate clearly how quickly representatives of the mainline churches learned the ways of applying sophisticated political pressures, of "reaching into the power structure."

It is easy to see why the more experienced lobbyists of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights from the labor unions and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) welcomed them as full partners in the task of securing comprehensive civil rights legislation.³²

Beginning in April 1964, the Leadership Conference orchestrated, state by state, the continual arrival in Washington of large delegations of private citizens who crowded into congressional offices to press again and again for support for the civil rights bill. Religious groups were prominent in nearly all the delegations.³³ But as the battle in the Senate neared final resolution, the churches also operated as an independent force. By late March all the major faith communities were sending large groups to Washington to lobby. The most dramatic example occurred on April 28, 1964, on the Georgetown University campus where an interfaith rally drew 6,500 people, "a religious expression of unprecedented scope on behalf of specific legislation." Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle, head of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, noted people had come from as far away as California to speak of "our deep religious convictions about the dignity of man and the rights of all men." The next day almost two hundred ministers, priests, and rabbis met with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House to dramatize the religious groups' presence in Washington.³⁴

On April 29, at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation just a block from the Capitol, the National Council of Churches initiated daily worship services that would not end until "a strong and just civil rights bill was passed." For six weeks the services continued, presided over by 125 Protestant and Orthodox church leaders invited to Washington to lead these daily "demonstrations." Surely the most imaginative effort of this sort was a round-the-clock vigil initiated on April 19 by Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish seminary students from all over the country. Held near the Lincoln Memorial and visible to thousands of motorists and pedestrians entering and leaving the city each day, the vigil continued uninterrupted until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in mid-June.³⁵

As the long struggle in Congress neared its climax in the late spring of 1964, the churches had exerted their influence at almost every level of the political process. In the final analysis, however, all the entreaties for racial change from religious

³² Taylor interview; Taylor to James Findlay, June 25, 1985 (in Findlay's possession); Herman Edelsberg to Nicholas D. Katzenbach, May 11, 1964, with attachments, box 28, Marshall Papers; Richard Taylor, "Congress Makes a Law: The Civil Rights Act of 1964," in *Cases in American National Government and Politics*, ed. R. J. Tresolini and Richard Frost (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), 97; John Pratt interview by Findlay, June 16, 1985 (in Findlay's possession); Hamilton interview, March 15, 1985. For Hamilton's statement, see *National Observer*, July 13, 1964, p. 18.

³³ Horn, "Periodic Log," 26A; *Memo*, May 4, May 11, May 18, 1964, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers. Many of the coordinators of the state delegations, usually volunteers, were ministers. See esp. *ibid.*, April 20, May 18, 1964.

³⁴ *Memo*, May 15, 1964, "General Correspondence on Civil Rights" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington); "Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Report on the Activity of the Council for Christian Social Action," Sept. 1, 1964, "United Church of Christ" folder, *ibid.*; *Bipartisan Civil Rights Newsletter*, March 17, 1964, "General Correspondence on Civil Rights" folder, *ibid.*

³⁵ Spike, *Civil Rights Involvement*, 14; *Memo*, May 4, June 19, 1964, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers; Horn, "Periodic Log," 199; *New York Times*, April 29, 1964, pp. 1, 29.

groups probably could not have succeeded if politicians perceived little support for the proposed new law in the churches in their districts at home. The National Council's Commission on Religion and Race and many of the national leaders of the liberal churches had worked hard to educate and to energize people at the grass roots. Did they succeed?

Letters church people wrote to the directors of the Leadership Conference offer hints of an answer. As the Senate debate over the bill reached its peak in April and May 1964, church people flooded the conference offices with requests for information, personal offers of help, or detailed descriptions of what had been done to organize local support or to prod congressmen.³⁶ Like church representatives at the national level, some local church leaders became expert political tacticians. Ernest A. Rueter, a campus minister at Purdue University in Indiana, wrote to Leadership Conference officials offering a steady stream of suggestions from December 1963 until the bill passed seven months later. Purdue was in the congressional district of Charles Halleck, the Republican minority leader of the House; Rueter organized people statewide to pressure Halleck to support the civil rights legislation.³⁷ The young cleric also headed the delegation from Indiana that came to Washington in May 1964 under Leadership Conference auspices. By that time Rueter was also providing advice and information about local networks of civil rights' supporters in Iowa, Nebraska, and other midwestern states. Thus in April 1964 the executive director of the Leadership Conference felt compelled to write Rueter's denominational superiors about the minister's work, stating that of the many people involved in the battle, "few have such a noteworthy record of accomplishment."³⁸

Equally revealing of grass-roots activity are archives of members of Congress containing constituent mail on the civil rights question written while the legislation was being considered. Even a limited survey reveals how widely and actively church people urged support for the pending act.³⁹ Hubert Humphrey, for example, almost

³⁶ See, for example, Caplan to Edgar Metzler, March 27, 1964, box 1, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers; Andrew Juvinall to Bagby, March 28, 1964, *ibid.*; Father James Stewart to Aronson, April 11, 1964, *ibid.*; Aronson to Rev. Mario Shaw, O.S.B., April 23, 1964, *ibid.*; Ruth Harrison to Aronson, Jan. 29, 1964, *ibid.*; Sister Mary Luke to Aronson, May 15, 1964, *ibid.*; Dan Asher to Aronson, May 21, 1964, *ibid.*

³⁷ Between September 1963 and mid-February 1964 (H.R. 7152 passed the House of Representatives on February 10), Ernest Rueter wrote Charles Halleck at least seven times, more than any other constituent interested in civil rights. Halleck responded regularly, even asking Rueter to help interpret his actions on the civil rights bill to a clerical constituent. Ernest A. Rueter to Charles A. Halleck, Sept. 24, 1963, box 74, Charles A. Halleck Papers (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington); Rueter to Halleck, Dec. 3, 1963, box 75, *ibid.*; Halleck to Rueter, Jan. 28, Feb. 4, 1964, box 76, *ibid.*; Rueter to Halleck, Jan. 30, Feb. 1, 4, 10, 1964, *ibid.*; Rueter to Halleck, telegram, Feb. 7, 1964, *ibid.*

³⁸ Caplan to King, Dec. 6, 1963, "Correspondence" folder, box 2, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers; Caplan to Rueter, Jan. 10, 23, 28, March 3, 5, 1964, *ibid.*; Aronson to Lawrence McVoy, Feb. 26, 1964, *ibid.*; Aronson to Gary Oniki, April 9, 1964, *ibid.*; "Re: Rep. Charles Halleck," memo, Dec. 6, 1963, "Civil Rights Act of 1964: Discharge Petition" folder, *ibid.*; Rueter to "Dear Fellow Citizen," Feb. 28, 1964, *ibid.* Work similar to Rueter's done by a church layman can be seen in Harry Reynolds to Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, May 12, 1964, "Correspondence" folder, *ibid.*; Caplan to Reynolds, May 19, June 17, 1964, *ibid.*

³⁹ Statements in the text are based on a survey of the archival records of five midwestern legislators: Senators Everett Dirksen of Illinois, Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa, and Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Representatives James Bromwell of Iowa and Charles Halleck of Indiana. Humphrey, the only Democrat, played an extremely significant part as co-floor manager of the civil rights bill in the Senate. Dirksen's support and that of other northern conservatives influenced by him assured achievement of cloture and the final passage of the act. Hickenlooper repre-

Table 1
Church-Related Mail about the Civil Rights Bill Received by
Selected Legislators

Legislator	Dates	Church Letters		All Letters	
		N	%	N	%
James Bromwell	7/2-10/31/63, 1/1-2/25/64	312	37	854	100
Everett Dirksen	1/1-6/30/64 ^a	52	39	132	100
Charles Halleck	8/29-10/1/63, 1/25-1/10/64	78	44	177	100

SOURCES: Boxes 3, 4, James Bromwell Papers (University of Iowa Library, Iowa City); boxes 1-3, 11, 23, 28, Alpha File, 1964, Everett Dirksen Papers (Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Ill.); boxes 73, 74, 76, Charles Halleck Papers (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington).
^a Mail from constituents to Dirksen is filed alphabetically within years. The file for 1964 is divided into six-month sections. This information is based on a sample consisting of all such mail from January through June 1964 filed under "A," "Groat-Hahne," "Rinaldo-Robson," and "Voakes-Walker."

literally overwhelmed by the volume of mail flowing into his office, in a few days in early April 1964, received letters from 67 individuals and petitions with 410 names attached favoring the legislation. Forty-two percent of the letter writers and forty percent of the petitioners, all of them identified clearly by letterhead or text, were church people. And we can assume that many others who did not identify their church connections were motivated by religious concerns. Roughly comparable figures emerged from an examination of the files of Senators Everett Dirksen of Illinois and Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa and Congressmen James Bromwell of Iowa and Charles Halleck of Indiana. (See table 1.)⁴⁰

The data take on added significance when one examines constituent letter writing to those midwestern legislators on comparable issues of moral import, both before and after the great legislative struggle over civil rights. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, nuclear testing in 1961-1962, the Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1963, the passage of Medicare in 1965, all produced voter response, but from much smaller numbers, among church people and the public in general.⁴¹ The Su-

sented a constituency in Iowa that epitomized the conservative, small-town and rural, overwhelmingly white and Protestant communities that political strategists had pinpointed for special attention by religious groups. Halleck was the minority leader in the House. Bromwell, a moderate Republican, was a member of the House Judiciary Committee, which played an important role in the deliberations over the bill.

⁴⁰ Figures are for the week of April 6-13, 1964. Untitled envelope, box 23.K.10.7B, Hubert Humphrey Papers (Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis). See also box 23.K.10.8F, *ibid.* A sampling of Humphrey's correspondence from comparable time periods up to the first week of June 1964 suggests the days in April were representative. See box 23.K.10.9B, *ibid.*; and box 23.K.10.10F, *ibid.* The archival collections of Dirksen, Hickenlooper, Halleck, and Bromwell possess almost all constituent mail addressed to them concerning the Civil Rights Act. Hickenlooper's mail from Iowa constituents (270 letters) was almost entirely from church people. See boxes 9, 9B, Legislative File, General, Bourke Hickenlooper Papers (Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Ia.). Because of the volume of mail and the means used in some congressional offices to organize the materials, the sampling methods did not produce exact equivalents, but the numerical results are suggestive.

⁴¹ The Voting Rights Act of 1965 serves as a useful comparison. It has generally been viewed as equal in historical significance to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and given its closeness in time, it might have provoked the same ele-

preme Court decision in 1963 abolishing prayers in the public schools provoked many church people to strong demands for legislative retribution. It was the only other issue that seemed to stir the midwestern faithful in such numbers and to such passion as the civil rights legislation of 1963–1964. But even that issue awakened intense response only in limited areas and seemed to represent church constituencies both politically and theologically more conservative than those activated by the racial crisis.⁴²

What kind of church people took the time to write about racial matters in 1963 and 1964? About half were ministers, priests, or nuns (very few rabbis). But lay people wrote, too, and signed petitions in very large numbers. Although Protestants were overwhelmingly in the majority, a significant number of Catholics also appeared, 15 percent or more. These facts underscore the ecumenical nature of the churches' political effort. From the first systematic planning of national strategy at NCC headquarters in New York City in June 1963, through the extended efforts at lobbying in Washington and the rapid creation of grass-roots support, the work had always been self-consciously cast in ecumenical terms, even though Protestants usually predominated.⁴³

These events were part of a wider surge of ecumenism that was affecting the American religious community and even worldwide Christendom in the early sixties. Pope John XXIII's irenic tendencies and the Second Vatican Council, which he convened in 1962, were indicators of the new ecumenical thrust. Another sign was the decision of the National Council of Churches in 1963 to admit for the first time Roman Catholic and Jewish representatives as regular participants in their

ments of the electorate to vigorous public support. But that law created little stir among midwestern letter writers. Constituent mail on the topic addressed to Halleck, Dirksen, and Hickenlooper (Bromwell had been defeated and Humphrey elevated to the vice-presidency) was far smaller in volume and included far fewer letters from church people than mail on the 1964 bill. See box 84, Halleck Papers; "Civil Rights, 1965, Constituent Correspondence" folder, box 10, Legislative File, General, Hickenlooper Papers; boxes 3, 39, 80, Alpha File, 1965, Dirksen Papers. Comments about constituents and nuclear testing, the Test Ban Treaty, and Medicare are based on material in "Nuclear Testing, 1961–62" folder, box 10, Bromwell Papers; "Test-Ban Treaty, 1963" folder, box 15, *ibid.*; boxes 76, 84, Halleck Papers; and box 39, Alpha File, 1965, Dirksen Papers.

⁴² People in Halleck's district were especially active regarding this topic. Between January 1 and February 10, 1964, more of his churchgoing constituents expressed themselves on this subject than on the racial issue, at a time when the Civil Rights Act was being fully debated and then given final approval by the House of Representatives. Voters in Bromwell's area of Iowa were far less vocal. See box 76, Halleck Papers; "Prayer, 1962–64" folder, box 12, Bromwell Papers.

⁴³ The absence of Jewish correspondents is not surprising in the heavily Protestant, small-town sections of the Midwest. Jews from urban areas did write occasionally to the congressmen. See Rabbi Jordan Taxon to Everett Dirksen, telegram, April 7, 1964, Alpha Series, Dirksen Papers; Halleck to Rueter, Jan. 28, 1964, box 76, Halleck Papers; Rueter to Halleck, Jan. 30, 1964, *ibid.*; Charles G. Workman to James Bromwell, Sept. 23, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers. The correspondence of the Leadership Conference, a national organization, included a larger proportion of letters from Jewish groups and individuals than did the papers of the five legislators from the Midwest. See especially box 1, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers. See also "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington); "General Correspondence on Civil Rights" folder, *ibid.* Catholic constituents often were connected to religious orders and Catholic colleges and seminaries. See Nano Byrnes to James Bromwell, July 11, 1963, *ibid.*; Marilyn Beales to Bromwell, July 19, 1963, *ibid.*; Sister Mary Marcellus to Bromwell, Dec. 14, 1963, box 4, *ibid.*; Sister M. Ignatia Manhart to Bourke Hickenlooper, March 2, 1964, box 9, Hickenlooper Papers; Sister Mary Redempta to Hickenlooper, May 22, 1964, *ibid.*; petition from the faculty, St. Joseph's College, Rensselaer, Indiana, Sept. 19, 1963, box 74, Halleck Papers; Rev. George C. Muresan to Halleck, Jan. 28, 1964, box 76, *ibid.*; Interracial Committee, Blessed Sacrament Parish, Lafayette, Indiana, to Halleck, telegram, Feb. 5, 1964, *ibid.*

policy-making bodies.⁴⁴ The political efforts of the churches in 1963 and 1964 both reflected these broad historical developments and gave added impetus to them.

Women were very evident among the letter writers. Catholic nuns who were school teachers and hospital administrators, Protestant and Jewish housewives by the dozens, and women who were national church leaders—all wrote their congressmen, signed petitions, or offered advice and support to the Leadership Conference in Washington. Anna Hedgeman did important organizing work through the Commission on Religion and Race, and women helped organize and staff the watchdog system in the galleries of the House late in 1963. Women have always played a prominent role in American religious communities, so it was not entirely surprising that they entered into the public contest over racial issues. Perhaps there were links between these events and the beginnings of the contemporary women's rights movement. There was, for example, a historic breakthrough in affirmative action for women included in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And surely when women participated so fully in the great national movement toward social justice for blacks, their experiences began to empower *them* to assert their own claims to equality.⁴⁵

Letter writers from the churches, having taken the time to compose lengthy personal notes, often provided thoughtful rationales in support of the pending civil rights legislation. In many ways, of course, their arguments resembled those made by civil rights supporters who were not church members. But there was one emphasis in the letters of church people that, while not unique to them, was sounded more insistently than any other. As one minister somewhat inelegantly expressed it, "I am supremely interested in a Civil Rights bill from the moral angle."⁴⁶ Perhaps because they *were* church people these writers were often able to perceive that dimension of the debate, to discuss it openly, and to use it as a powerful justification for support of the Civil Rights Act.

The arguments took a variety of forms. Some thought that as a moral issue the pending bill should transcend party lines. It was legislation that both Democrats and Republicans should support because it went "to the heart of every Christian and democratic principle we hold dear." Most supporters in Congress accepted this principle. A few of the writers pressed their reasoning even further and asserted that the moral demands upon "anyone who professes to be a Christian" meant they "had no other choice" than to support "the cause of civil rights." An executive in the Lu-

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1963, p. 69; *ibid.*, Dec. 2, 1963, p. 16. See also *ibid.*, June 4, 1965, p. 35; *ibid.*, July 25, 1965, p. 24; and *ibid.*, July 28, 1965, p. 72.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Gloria Smith to Hubert Humphrey, April 9, 1964, box 23.K.10.8F, Humphrey Papers; Mrs. Paul Ford to Humphrey, April 7, 1964, *ibid.*; Sister M. Monique to Humphrey, April 11, 1964, *ibid.*; Mrs. Paul Jones to Bromwell, July 26, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers; Mrs. Milton Randolph to Bromwell, Aug. 16, 1963, *ibid.*; Sister Mary Eugene to Bromwell, n.d., *ibid.*; petition from Women's Presbyterian Society, Northeast Iowa Presbytery, Oct. 15, 1963, *ibid.* On women's role in the "watchdog system" in the galleries of the House, see Hamilton to Bagby, March 31, 1964, "Correspondence, NCC-CORR" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington). On such development of an interest in women's equality among younger women who participated more directly in "Movement" activities in the South, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1980).

⁴⁶ J. Richard Wagner to Bromwell, July 15, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers.

theran Church–Missouri Synod, in a letter to Bromwell, put the argument almost as strongly but perhaps more persuasively:

Please work with all courage toward corrective civil rights legislation . . . [for] civil rights *are* a moral issue. The God of the Gospel is also the God of justice, and holds society and government responsible for equality under the law. If there are risks in granting these rights across the board, they are not as great as in not doing so. Furthermore, as I am sure you agree, when a thing is right we must take the risks of right action. Law and order, and the good common sense of men, will take care of the rest—if we deserve it!⁴⁷

Most lay people, however, eschewed the more formal ethical arguments and spoke instead out of direct experience and a “practical theology” grounded in that experience. Thus a woman in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, made her appeal to her congressman very concrete:

I have a feeling of sickness inside of me that comes from a realization of the suffering of Negroes and the guilt of whites. I share in the suffering and in the guilt. I write you, as my representative . . . to help me rid myself and my country of this suffering and this guilt. I feel that passage of the civil rights legislation . . . will make it possible for healing to begin.

Another person spoke with a powerful moral sense about Jim Crow practices and how they might be altered, in part by the new law:

[Jim Crowism] says that I cannot freely choose my own friends regardless of their color without suffering great damage to my reputation and job opportunit[ies] Civil rights legislation, long overdue, will assist all of us to move more freely among all kinds of people that we may develop [better] our own wits and character. . . . I would like to be treated “equal before the law” without this preferential treatment over those of another color. What I desire for myself I must desire for all to maintain my own sense of decency.⁴⁸

Some saw, read, or heard about dramatic events that stirred them. On September 11, 1963, a Methodist minister in the Midwest responded this way:

Life magazine carried a very dramatic story and pictures of the great Freedom March in Washington. . . . It was no doubt a long day for those people who came for many miles to join in the historic occasion. But it has also been a long day for the people present who represented the many generations of people who have been oppressed in America. Is it not about time for that day to end?⁴⁹

Still others wrote out of deeply felt and long-remembered personal experiences.

⁴⁷ Robert Bernhard to Bromwell, July 25, 1963, *ibid.*; John W. Briggs to Bromwell, July 28, 1963, *ibid.*; Arnold W. Bringewatt to Bromwell, Aug. 23, 1963, *ibid.* See also Ray E. Mills to Halleck, Sept. 26, 1963, box 74, Halleck Papers; and Barbara and Jon Yost to Halleck, Sept. 26, 1963, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Mrs. Myra Ervin to Bromwell, Aug. 28, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers; Oliver C. Hotz to Halleck, Sept. 8, 1963, box 73, Halleck Papers.

⁴⁹ Milton R. Vogel to Bromwell, Sept. 11, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers. See also Mr. and Mrs. Murl McDonald to Bromwell, Sept. 1, 1963, *ibid.*; Mrs. Robert Sedlack to Bromwell, Sept. 22, 1963, *ibid.*; Bert Davison to Bromwell, Sept. 22, 1963, *ibid.*; Workman to Bromwell, Sept. 23, 1963, *ibid.*; Sister Mary Eugene to Bromwell, n.d., *ibid.*

A man's direct relationships with African Americans in World War II—one "easily the best instructor" in an air force electronics school, another "an illiterate older teenager employed as a kitchen worker" in Louisiana who "liked to talk to me"—caused him to see that "Negroes vary in education, ability, and personality, but only as we white people do." The writer went on: "I feel guilty that I, like so many whites, have known about racial discrimination all of my adult life and have never tried to do anything about it." Thus he concluded that "especially in the light of recent events, the time has now come for all of us, you . . . and constituents back in Iowa like me to listen to our consciences on this greatest moral issue of our time" and support passage "of Civil Rights Bill H.R. 7152."⁵⁰

Clearly church people in many areas of the Midwest were deeply moved both by calls from their religious leaders to support the civil rights legislation vigorously and by the onrush of events. Evidence of this can be seen not only in the massive outpouring of letters to congressmen but also in the unprecedented political activity that stirred the churches locally.⁵¹ These activities began almost as soon as the House of Representatives began to consider the bill and continued until final passage took place ten months later. On Sunday mornings some ministers preached directly on the issue of race and then left time during or immediately after the service for people to write to Washington. In a wide variety of other local settings—in public forums, women's society gatherings, interchurch and interfaith meetings, even in a staff meeting at a small Catholic hospital, and eventually in public marches and demonstrations—people had the issues presented to them and then discussed. Action often followed, usually in the form of powerfully worded resolutions or petitions urging passage of the civil rights legislation. As early as July 1963, for example, nearly nine hundred members of Disciples of Christ churches in West Lafayette, Indiana, proclaimed that "segregation is an intolerable travesty upon the dignity of man" and urged their congressman to "promote legislation" to end the practice. In September 1963, Presbyterian ministers and elders meeting in Marshfield, Indiana, expressed to Charles Halleck their "deep concern with the unequal and often unjust treatment of our Negro brothers in our free society" and pressed Halleck to help pass "a strong civil rights bill" that "will help the Negro . . . to make his full contri-

⁵⁰ Burton G. Fox to Bromwell, Nov. 24, 1963, box 4, *ibid.* See also Richard H. Wilmer to Bromwell, Aug. 13, 1963, box 3, *ibid.* The Humphrey Papers contain similar letters. One man recalled how in 1914 as a student band member at the University of Nebraska he had to allow a black bandsman to bunk with him on an overnight train to a football game. The young African American "never touched me all night. [To do that] he must [have] balanced over the edge of the bed." The black student eventually became a lawyer. The letter writer concluded: "I think all this adds up to: Let us all be good neighbors to each other." Howard A. Savage to Humphrey, April 11, 1964, box 23.K.10.8F, Humphrey Papers. See also Ford to Humphrey, April 7, 1964, *ibid.*; Diane Schmitz to Humphrey, April 9, 1964, *ibid.*; George Savage, Jr., to Humphrey, April 11, 1964, *ibid.*; and Roland A. Duerkson to Halleck, Sept. 18, 1963, box 74, Halleck Papers.

⁵¹ Letters, petitions, and postcards in the Humphrey Papers from a wide array of people nationally indicate that the churches were very active outside the Midwest, especially in New England and the Middle Atlantic states and even in border areas like Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland. However, in Charles Halleck's district in northwestern Indiana civil rights seemed to affect people less than in other parts of the Midwest. The voters in Halleck's area were as concerned about Supreme Court rulings denying prayers in the public schools and about a proposed national park along Lake Michigan in northern Indiana as about the racial crisis. See folders covering September 1963 to February 1964, boxes 74 and 76, Halleck Papers.

bution to our American democracy.” Similar statements appear over and over again in congressional files.⁵²

A certain spontaneity suggested how unusual such efforts were for the people involved. A large gathering organized by local clergy in Delaware County, Iowa, in early September 1963, was described by a local politician as “quite unique” because none of the organizers “had ever been involved in a rally on a public issue so they were not quite sure how to conduct it, but they went ahead anyway.” Because no blacks lived in the area, they asked a Negro doctor from outside to be on the program. And at least in eastern Iowa a hint of the intensity of interest created can be gathered from the geographical origins of the hundreds of churchly petitioners—small towns like Clinton, Epworth, Postville, and Waukon, as well as larger cities like Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. Clearly some sort of political alchemy was at work within the churches at the grass roots.⁵³

Latent yet deeply held personal beliefs surfaced, pushing people into the political arena. Belief in equality before the law, awareness of the great gap between that ideal and current racial practices, and a sense of moral urgency to correct the injustices revealed were central concerns of midwestern church people as they wrote to their political leaders in Washington. Religious persons were especially sensitive to the clear ethical issues posed by the pending legislation. They (and others not so religiously inclined) were ready to support fundamental change in the law because they had come to realize it was simply the right thing to do. The fact that substantial numbers of Americans still were denied the right to vote and to have access to public accommodations because of their skin color was a moral contradiction that overcame, at least for the moment, any other hesitations or prejudices about race these churchgoers possessed. Nudged by individual conscience and belief, many were ready to write their congressmen and in some instances to go directly to Washington or to demonstrate at home in order to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act. A nun writing from Dubuque, Iowa, summed up much of this attitude: “injustice unremedied only breeds greater trouble. This generation can make a noble beginning—or it can, by negligence, hand a bigger and graver problem to a future generation. We hope you [her congressman] will urge coming to grips with the problem now.”⁵⁴

⁵² For quotations, see John J. Masterson to Halleck, July 25, 1963, and attached petition, box 72, Halleck Papers; and “The Ministers and Elders of the Crawfordville Presbytery . . . [a] resolution,” Sept. 16, 1963, *ibid.* Sedlack to Bromwell, Sept. 22, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers; Davison to Bromwell, Sept. 22, 1963, *ibid.*; Workman to Bromwell, Sept. 23, 1963, *ibid.*; Jack L. Zervas, Oct. 8, 1963, and attached petition, box 4, *ibid.*; petition from Clinton, Iowa, interfaith group, Dec. 5, 1963, *ibid.*; petition from Women’s Society, Northern Iowa Presbytery, Oct. 15, 1963, *ibid.*; Sister Mary Marcellus to Bromwell, Dec. 14, 1963, and attached signatures, *ibid.* Perhaps the most unusual petition among dozens in the Humphrey Papers was a statement signed by 350 missionaries in Japan, representing six mainline Protestant denominations, urging passage of the civil rights bill. Maurice E. Troyer to Humphrey, April 10, 1964, and attached petition, box 23.K.10.8F, Humphrey Papers.

⁵³ Petition from interfaith group, Clinton, Iowa, Dec. 5, 1963, box 4, Bromwell Papers; petition from Bethlehem United Presbyterian Church, Postville, Iowa, Dec. 7, 1963, *ibid.*; petition from First Presbyterian Church, Waukon, Iowa, Dec. 8, 1963, *ibid.*; petition from First Presbyterian Church, Iowa City, Iowa, Oct. 8, 1963, *ibid.*; Warren J. Conner to Bromwell, Feb. 17, 1964, *ibid.* There are many similar items in boxes 23.K.10.7B, and 23.K.10.8F, Humphrey Papers.

⁵⁴ Sister Mary Marcellus to Bromwell, Dec. 14, 1963, box 4, Bromwell Papers.

Intimately linked to these feelings and attitudes was the considerable effect of the national lobbying effort of the churches. The National Council had created a network that exerted pressure on Congress not only in Washington and on Capitol Hill but also from churches and synagogues a thousand miles westward in small places like Rochester, Indiana; Farley, Iowa; and Waseca, Minnesota. It is impossible to explicate the exact role church leaders in New York City and the nation's capital played in stirring people to political action in the Midwest and elsewhere. But surely the grass-roots effort would have been far less focused and effective without the early workshops and forums organized by Hedgeman, without the tens of thousands of "action memos" mailed by Hamilton and similar denominational leaders in the East to churches in the Midwest, or without the careful coordination and dispatching of delegations of church people from throughout the Mississippi Valley to Washington to press Congress to support the civil rights bill.

After extended debate throughout the spring of 1964, the Senate finally voted cloture with four votes to spare on June 10. On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. Senators Frank Lausche (Ohio), Everett Dirksen (Illinois), Bourke Hickenlooper and Jack Miller (Iowa), Carl Curtis and Roman Hruska (Nebraska), all considered doubtful supporters early in the battle, voted for cloture. All were of special concern to church groups. Of this group, only Hickenlooper voted against the bill at final passage, standing alone among the twenty-four midwestern senators of both parties in the final vote.⁵⁵ These results, like those in the House of Representatives, suggest that the "Midwest strategy," whether generated from the bottom up or from the top down or, most likely, through a combination of such forces, had strongly influenced the outcome.

Six days after the triumphant signing session at the White House, Hubert Humphrey wrote to Jim Hamilton of the National Council of Churches to express "deep appreciation for your splendid efforts during the civil rights debate in the Senate," and to assert that without the "unremitting support" of Hamilton and the Leadership Conference "this bill could never have become law."⁵⁶ Humphrey was correct in a sense, but his words oversimplified historical reality. To the senator the clearest evidence of the churches' presence was in the manifold forms of direct lobbying on Capitol Hill. The equally significant grass-roots support of the churches in his home state of Minnesota and throughout the Midwest (and elsewhere in the nation) was perhaps harder to recognize.

Moreover, the religious groups were only part of a broad coalition supporting the Civil Rights Act. The churches probably made their greatest contributions in the Midwest, and to a somewhat lesser degree in Washington. But the African-American community, organized labor, the Leadership Conference, and the politicians who

⁵⁵ On the final votes, see *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 20 (1964), 86. On maneuverings in the Senate before passage of the bill, see Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 194-229.

⁵⁶ Humphrey to Hamilton, July 8, 1964, "General Correspondence on Civil Rights" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington). For similar assessments, see Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 233; and Caplan to Robert Eschenbach, Feb. 23, 1966, "The Civil Rights Act of 1964: Background Material" folder, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers.

fashioned the congressional strategies that eventually succeeded were also essential participants. Clarence Mitchell, the shrewd NAACP lobbyist in Washington, later offered the following assessment of what happened:

I don't agree with those who make it appear that the church was the decisive factor. I think we needed everybody we had. . . . For example, when you get right down to the question of approaching individual congressmen, the labor groups have a great deal of know-how in this area. A man like Andrew Biemiller [the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations lobbyist] . . . is just indispensable. If we had, let's say, a leading archbishop or the head of the National Council of Churches but had not Andy Biemiller, I don't think we could have won. By the same token, I think if we had Andy without them, we couldn't have won. So they were all important in my judgment.⁵⁷

Mitchell was being gracious and diplomatic, but he also was historically accurate, and his words suggest the need to modify Humphrey's judgments a bit.

Many Protestants, usually more evangelical and more conservative theologically than most members of mainline churches, viewed the political activities of the mid-sixties with considerable doubt. They felt that the churches should focus their energies on purely spiritual tasks and "saving souls" and should let the secular world solve its own problems. This attitude reflected long-standing differences between the conservative and liberal wings of American Protestantism on the issue of direct church involvement in politics. Thus at the time the mainline groups paid relatively little attention to such arguments.⁵⁸

More intriguing, perhaps, were the reactions of the many conservative church people who did not summarily reject the idea of church involvement in the political process but who were inactive because they did not share dominant national attitudes on civil rights issues. A few were ministers in mainstream churches, unable to say much publicly about their conservative feelings. But they revealed themselves in letters to their Republican political leaders. One, who feared "federal control which is riding with the Civil Rights Bill," in June 1964 admonished Bourke Hickenlooper to "go to the [Republican national] convention and fight, fight that we might have a clear-cut choice at the next presidential election! (I don't need to mention names, do I?)." Supporters of Barry Goldwater for president feared that individual prerogatives of *whites* (especially small businessmen) might be circumscribed as the government moved to protect the rights of blacks. They expressed no overt racism, but they tended toward a moral insensitivity that ignored or lost sight of the deep-

⁵⁷ Clarence Mitchell interview by John Stewart, Feb. 9, 1967, transcript, p. 36, John F. Kennedy Oral History Program (Kennedy Library). For a similar assessment by a key staff member of the Leadership Conference, see Caplan to Eschenbach, Feb. 23, 1966, "The Civil Rights Act of 1964: Background Material" folder, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Papers.

⁵⁸ For hints of such attitudes, see Martin Hoyer to Hickenlooper, May 25, 1964, box 9, Hickenlooper Papers; C. D. Loehr to Hickenlooper, May 11, 1964, *ibid.*; James D. Bruton to Hickenlooper, May 25, 1964, *ibid.*

seated inequities and humiliations that African Americans had suffered for so long.⁵⁹

Such people were not in the majority politically in 1964, and within the churches they had no organization or advocates to represent their views on national politics. In part their interests in public affairs were just arising or yet to develop nationally. However, even as racial issues dominated public discussion, there was intense concern in some midwestern church circles that the Supreme Court had declared prayers in the public schools unconstitutional. That issue seemed to disquiet especially the independent, evangelical churches, not the more liberal, mainline religious groups. The not so shadowy outlines of the religious politics of the late seventies and eighties were taking on shape and substance more than a decade earlier.⁶⁰

Moreover, the mainline churches' deep involvement in racial issues in 1963 and 1964 provided conservative church people with a model showing how direct political intervention could achieve a specific legislative agenda. The tactics of the liberal churches were a double-edged sword, which could be used to advance conservative as well as liberal ends. It was not long before exactly that happened. Perhaps ironically, then, the political successes of the mainline churches in the 1960s served as a precondition for the emergence of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the Moral Majority in the 1980s.⁶¹

As we gain distance from and perspective on the decade of the sixties, the limits of the political achievements of the mainline churches in that era become more visible. The political power of the liberal religious community was never again mobilized so fully and effectively as it was in 1963 and 1964. Church people directly supported the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and other civil rights legislation.⁶² But their activities were not so organized and not so intense as in 1963–1964. James Hamilton's office continued to work closely with the Leadership Conference, but never again was there an attempt to organize grass-roots church support for a piece

⁵⁹ Rev. Barton G. Murray to Hickenlooper, June 24, 1964, *ibid.* See also, for example, W. La Roy Anderson to Hickenlooper, Feb. 18, 1964, *ibid.*; Frank E. Jacobs to Hickenlooper, April 18, 1964, *ibid.*; Ralph Draper to Hickenlooper, June 12, 1964, *ibid.*; Mrs. Richard C. Bross to Halleck, Sept. 18, 1963, box 74, Halleck Papers; Calvin K. Smith to Halleck, Sept. 18, 1963, *ibid.*; Austin Drewry to Halleck, Feb. 3, 1964, box 76, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ For concern about the outlawing of school prayer, see, for example, Karl E. Johnson to Halleck, Jan. 4, 1964, box 76, Halleck Papers; R. I. Humbert to Halleck, Jan. 15, 1964, *ibid.* There recently has been a renewed interest in church-state relations among political scientists and other scholars, probably generated by the development in the 1970s of conservative church involvement in national politics. Most of these studies ignore or pass quickly over the political activities of the mainline churches in the sixties and the possible connections between those activities and church-state issues in the Reagan era. See Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life*; Allen D. Hertzke, *Representing God in Washington: The Role of Religious Lobbies in the American Polity* (Knoxville, 1988); Richard P. McBrien, *Caesar's Coin: Religion and Politics in America* (New York, 1987); Kenneth Wald, *Religion and Politics in America* (New York, 1987). For earlier treatments, see Luke E. Ebersole, *Church Lobbying in the Nation's Capitol* (New York, 1951); and James L. Adams, *The Growing Church Lobby in Washington* (Grand Rapids, 1970).

⁶¹ On the reorientation in political concerns of the churches, reflecting a broader shift in the last twenty-five years in cultural roles and institutional power between the "established," mainline churches and more conservative, evangelical religious groups, see Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, 1987); and especially Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*.

⁶² See footnote 40, especially citations from the Bromwell and Hickenlooper papers. See also *Memo*, Jan.–June, 1965 (National Council of Churches office, Washington); Blake for NCC Commission on Religion and Race, teletypes, April 1, 1965, "General Correspondence on Civil Rights," *ibid.*; Hamilton to W. Garner Werntz, Aug. 16, 1965, *ibid.*; Hamilton to Mrs. Donald Frey, Aug. 16, 1965, *ibid.*

of legislation comparable to that mounted in 1963 and 1964.⁶³ The NCC-CORR turned to other projects and by 1967 disappeared entirely, its duties and staff absorbed by the existing bureaucracy as the sense of urgency surrounding its beginnings dissipated.

Perhaps a massive effort like that of 1963–1964 was not needed again because such a turning point is one of a kind; subsequent civil rights legislation required less effort precisely because the first victory was so decisive. But there are other explanations for the loss of momentum in the churches, related to deeper and more encompassing factors. The mainline churches succeeded in their political efforts in 1964 in part because the issues were so clear and unambiguous. The moral dimensions of the debate, especially, were very compelling. As the racial revolution deepened, however, the issues became more complex. The debates concerned jobs, housing, and the reallocation of national resources, fundamental economic and social questions that directly affected wider and wider segments of American society. Church people could no longer agree among themselves as to proper courses of action.⁶⁴

The documents suggest that even as the churches' political involvement blossomed, mass commitments in support of blacks could not be pressed too far. For some supporters of the civil rights bill, especially those in small towns in the Midwest, it was all a bit of an abstraction since they lived in communities without any blacks. Scarcely concealed fears of possible public disorders aroused even by the March on Washington in 1963 appeared in some letters from church supporters of the new racial legislation. The law-and-order issue subtly intertwined itself with the many expressions of racial good will in 1963 and 1964, waiting to burst into full public view a little later, when massive racial disturbances and unrest occurred.⁶⁵ The social and political changes associated with the Civil Rights Act might not directly affect middle-class mainline church members in any drastic way. Ending discrimination in public accommodations was not much of a personal sacrifice.

But by 1969 the churches were stung as deeply as the secular white community by the whiplash of the Black Power movement and specific demands from highly self-conscious African Americans. In May of that year James Forman's "Black Mani-

⁶³ Hamilton was the first chairperson of the "Compliance" committee, established by the Leadership Conference to assure follow-up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. NCC financial contributions to the conference, substantial in the midsixties, declined to a mere trickle and even disappeared briefly later in the decade. See Hamilton to Ann K. Davis, April 15, 1974, "LCCR, 1974, Correspondence" folder (National Council of Churches office, Washington).

⁶⁴ Polls have suggested a growing gap in attitudes on political and social issues between people in the pews and clerical leaders, especially those at the national level. But much of that data was gathered after the midsixties and reflects the divisiveness that began in the late sixties. At least in responding to the civil rights debate in 1963–1964, the clergy and laity of the mainline churches seemed closely attuned to one another. On the polls and the issues their results raise, see Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life*, 269–81. The data presented in this essay contradict the assertion that as advocates for the Civil Rights Act "church lobbyists and ministers . . . largely neglected to bring the laity along in their political witness" in Hertzke, *Representing God in Washington*, 31.

⁶⁵ Duerksen to Halleck, Sept. 18, 1963, box 74, Halleck Papers; Donald B. Orander to Halleck, Sept. 18, 1963, box 76, *ibid.*; C. P. Hunter, Jr., to Bromwell, July 8, 1963, box 3, Bromwell Papers; Bringewatt to Bromwell, Aug. 23, 1963, *ibid.*; Mr. and Mrs. Murl McDonald to Bromwell, Sept. 1, 1963, *ibid.*; Norma T. Speer to Bromwell, Sept. 20, 1963, *ibid.*; John M. Ely to Bromwell, Sept. 8, 1963, *ibid.*; Richard P. Walters to Hickenlooper, April 21, 1964, box 9, Hickenlooper Papers; Hoyer to Hickenlooper, May 25, 1964, *ibid.*; Bruton to Hickenlooper, May 25, 1964, *ibid.*; George L. Gallaher, June 29, 1964, to Hickenlooper, *ibid.*

festo," addressed to all of the mainline churches and demanding from them \$500 million in "reparations," met with widespread rebuff. The contrast between the mainline churches' enthusiastic embrace of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the early sixties and their rejection of the more militant Forman in 1969 could not have been clearer.⁶⁶ Moreover, by 1969 most of the mainline Protestant denominations were facing stiff internal challenges from militant black clergy and laity seeking greater autonomy within the churches. Those challenges, too, deeply eroded the earlier sense of consensus on race questions.⁶⁷ Thus in a brief span of five years the great ground swell of support within the mainstream religious groups for a national move toward improved race relations had crested and was ebbing away.

Demonstrating an idealism and a sense of moral concern stemming from their religious commitments, in 1963 and 1964 the mainline churches spoke out in a sustained and constructive way on the central dilemma of our national domestic life. But throughout their history, even in the heyday of the Social Gospel, the churches were enmeshed in the very system of racial discrimination that in 1963 and 1964 they criticized and hoped to change.⁶⁸ Soon they fell back into traditional ways or seemed paralyzed, especially in the late sixties, by tumult and confusion. In their actions church people for a short time led, but then simply did little more than reflect, the general course of the nation in race relations. As historians we can both understand why that was so and be sad that the story did not turn out differently.

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, May 2, 1969, p. 46; *ibid.*, May 3, 1969, pp. 1, 14; *ibid.*, May 5, 1969, p. 1; *ibid.*, May 6, 1969, pp. 1, 37, 42; *ibid.*, May 10, 1969, pp. 1, 15, 32; *ibid.*, Sept. 4, 1969, p. 1; *ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1969, p. 1; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (Maryknoll, 1983), 192–219. See James Forman, "Black Manifesto," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone (Maryknoll, 1979), 80–89. For numerous responses of mainline church people to Forman's proposals, both individual and denominational statements, see RG 3, folder 12, box 4, and esp. RG 5, folder 16, box 13, National Council of Churches Archives. Late in his life Martin Luther King, Jr., made more explicit his own radical criticisms of American society, but white America, including the churches, largely ignored that development. On King, see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 536–37, 563–64, 567, 581–82, 585, 595–96; and Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?" in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York, 1984), 228–42.

⁶⁷ On the effects of internal tensions in the late sixties within Protestant groups and institutions normally at the forefront of the struggle for racial change, see Charles Cobb, Sr., interview by Findlay, Nov. 22, 1988 (in Findlay's possession); *Newsletter*, Dec. 1966–Nov. 1969, folders 6–9, box 36, Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity Papers (King Center); Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, Board of Directors Minutes, Jan. 1966–Nov. 1969, folders 10–13, box 7, *ibid.*; folder 14, box 75, *ibid.*; folder 7, box 15, *ibid.*; Handy, *History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 259–314. This conflict and confusion over racial issues coupled with the tensions generated almost simultaneously by the escalation of the Vietnam War probably were key factors leading to the final demise of liberal Protestant cultural leadership in the late sixties and early seventies. See Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 3–172.

⁶⁸ See David Wills, "The Central Theme of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White," *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 5 (Fall 1987), 30–41.