

Fall 1963 Mississippi Life "Church"

The White Church was the guardian of the soul of the Closed Society. The White Church gave strength to the segregation system yet the white church was also the place where the white moderates might have had the best chance to stand and support change. The Church, in both white and Black communities, had more status and influence in Mississippi than any other state in the land. Here the failure of the white moderates is most clearly seen. In the fall of 1963 it became clear that there was almost no hope for support for moderate, gradual change towards an interracial society, towards justice, towards decency even in the white church. If there was no hope in the white church--then there was no hope in the society.

Many white ministers had left the state voluntarily to avoid "causing" trouble. Others who became too moderate in their sermons or conversations were advised to leave--and most did so quietly. Some (in every denomination, Jewish to Southern Baptist) refused to leave "graciously" and were removed from their pulpits by their congregations or church authorities and forced to leave the state. In January of 1963 a group of 28 young Methodist ministers signed a "Statement of Conscience" in the wake of conversations and examination after the Ole Miss riots. Within a few months over half of these had been forced to leave the state; most of the rest soon followed. Yet their statement had been one of great moderation but did question the sacredness of segregation.

On the Sunday before the murder of Medgar Evers in June, a group of Jackson blacks

and Tougaloo students had attempted to attend the morning worship services at several Jackson white churches. Every church turned them away. (Several prominent white ministers tried to persuade their congregations to open the church doors. Persuasion failed and several ministers resigned or were forced to leave their pulpits.) These church visits had been attempted several times during the rest of the summer. On the Sunday night after the Birmingham Church bombing a group of Tougaloo Movement students thought that this would be a good time to worship at a "white" church; thinking that if white Christians were ever going to respond to their consciences and the teachings of their churches it would be at such an hour. Again the church doors were closed.

Two weeks later another attempt was made by an interracial group of three coeds from Tougaloo to attend the Sunday morning service at the Capital Street Methodist Church on "World-Wide Communion Sunday," a time the Methodist Church stresses openness. The students were convinced that if black and white people in Mississippi were ever going to start talking to each other about the problems of the state, it could never start unless some white moderates made the beginning. The students assumed that these moderates might be reached at their churches--since there was no other way to communicate with them. The white moderates would never see mass demonstrations. Their press and TV distorted all black news. And there were no interracial meetings of any sort at which the hint of communication was possible. On this particular Sunday the students were followed to the church by a Jackson police car. At the church they were, once again, turned away as ushers blocked the door. But the students started conversations with the guards and other church members, asking why the Christian church was not open to all Christians, asking why Christians could

not worship together, beginning to talk about why black people in Mississippi were now protesting so many things, always appealing to the religious teachings and conscience of the whites they faced. And on the steps of that closed church the closed society began to experience some honest interracial conversation and communication.

The students did not try to argue the whites into opening the church doors--but the students did ask many questions for which there were no easy answers. A Black coed and long-time Movement leader, Bette Poole, asked a white man a question right out of Mississippi Sunday School teachings, "But what would Jesus do?" And the poor man replied, "Leave Christ out of this. What does He have to do with it, . . ." and then his voice trailed off into mumbling as he realized what he was saying. But still he stood fast, blocking the doorway to the church of Christ. Before such communication could continue the white police moved in and stopped the conversation. Although the white church did not ask for police help, the officers arrested the three coeds, and jailed them.

There had never been any question of blacks forcing their way literally into a segregated white church. But their persistent presence and attitude were forcing their way into the white conscience. The police state responded by direct intervention into the business of the church. The local minister and the white Methodist church officials of the state always maintained that they had never asked for anyone to be arrested at their church. But they were too frightened of the state to condemn or even protest what the police had done and perhaps satisfied that the police had removed the troubling presence for them.

Bette Poole and the other two girls, Ida Hannah, black, and Julia Zaugg, white, were held in the jail without bond and then given a quick, secret trial early the next morning

before we could get any vital legal help to them. They were convicted of "trespassing" and "disturbing public worship" and given a total fine of \$1,000.00 and twelve months at hard labor on the county prison farm. This was the heaviest punishment given in Mississippi for any civil rights offense--and just stressed the importance of the closed church for the closed society. No white church officials from Mississippi even appeared to beg for a more lenient sentence.

But the national Methodist Church was informed of the affair. The Board of Missions and the Women's Division of the church sent the three thousand dollars of bond money needed to release the coeds so their cases might be appealed. Ministerial friends of mine in Chicago contacted me and offered to help. The following week the church visits were resumed, with Stanley Hallett, a white minister, walking up to the doors of the same church with the same three coeds. This time all four were arrested. The matter of the police actually jailing blacks for just knocking on the doors of white churches became a topic of conversation and soul searching for white church people throughout the city and many parts of the state. This was a heavier price than most people expected to see paid for the preservation of their white churches.

Now whenever white people came to church they knew they might see blacks and even northern ministers, white and black, being turned away from their churches and might even see arrests in front of their very eyes. The white good people had not wanted to see anything. Protest demonstrations like mass marches were never seen by many white people, certainly not the moderates. Now there were police cars, paddy wagons, sometimes even officers with dogs, standing guard in front of every major white church in the city of

Jackson. Inside the churches and in the homes of church people the major issue of Mississippi, race, was discussed--and in such a way that many people had to admit doubts about their own feelings.

The white churches remained closed and the visits and arrests continued. By the following Easter (when a black and a white Bishop were turned away, but not arrested, at one Methodist church) about fifty church arrests occurred. The white Christians went through a kind of agony. But traditional racism-- and the new fears of the police state--won out. Segregation remained the rule, although some whites in almost every church did find themselves arguing against the arrests and in favor of integrating the churches. Family and friends would say, "But if a little integration is allowed in the churches, why isn't it alright in the schools, the lunch counters, and everywhere else?" And those who tried to explain that couldn't. Those who held to the whiteness of the churches were right in their opinion that a start towards change in the church meant a start towards change, eventually, in the whole society.

(If, if, if that start could have begun in the churches in the fall, or winter, or spring of 1962, before the massive intervention of the "outside agitators" in the 1964 "Freedom Summer" the state of Mississippi might have found ways to begin to save itself, gradually, moderately, without violence, chaos, and turmoil--and more fear and hatred. But by the time of the very first church arrest, when the white churchmen could not stop or even protest the unwanted intervention of the police, the opportunity for the good people to respond in moderate ways was over. Christmas, Easter, and a few other times offered new chances for the white moderates to respond to the cry of the Black students, appealing to a common

Christian faith, to talk, to work, to worship together as a sign that white and Black might live together. The failure of the white church to respond, to express its own faith, to follow its own teachings, made clear the hopelessness of moderation. Soon the flaming cross on the hill replaced the brass cross on the altar; the three boys buried together in the red earth of Neshoba County replaced the three girls jailed for trying to worship at a white church.)

One extreme symbol of the police state that had been built in this Bible Belt country was the attitude of white police towards black churches. One late October morning the police marched into the Tougaloo College chapel building during the worship service. Two brown-shirted deputy sheriffs came up to the chapel doors and demanded to see President Beittel and me. The student ushers explained that the service had already begun and asked the police to wait and see us when the service ended, only about twenty more minutes. One usher invited the officers to be seated in a pew and worship with us. The men pushed open the church doors and noisily entered the sanctuary. I was reading a scripture lesson and could see the police in the back of the church. I then asked the congregation to bow their heads and began leading the morning prayers.

The officers obviously recognized me behind the pulpit—but they headed first for Dr. Beittel. He was also easily recognized because of his bright white hair and his seat in the very first pew. The church was silent except for my voice so the heavy steps of the police rushing down the aisle were heard by every one of the several hundred students and teachers present. The startled Dr. Beittel was brusquely handed a piece of paper by the police; then one of them began moving towards the pulpit, waving his paper, ignoring my prayer and loudly saying, "Hey, King, take this summons!" I ended the prayer as the policeman cast his

document down on the open pulpit Bible. The paper slid off the Bible and down to the floor. The congregation was shocked and now beginning to buzz with whispers. I nodded to the organist and announced a hymn. The choir began to sing, the congregation stood and joined the hymn of faith as the storm troopers walked back down the central aisle. The officers left off the final touch--all they needed to do was click their heels, extend their arms, and shout "Seig, Heil!"

(The legal papers the police had brought were orders for the two of us to appear in county court that very day, immediately. We both ignored the summons because of the style in which it was delivered. For some reason we were not arrested. And, naturally, although our own students and sympathetic outside ministers were being arrested weekly and convicted of things like "disturbing worship" and "trespassing" on church property, neither of the storm troopers, the only ones who had literally disrupted a church service, was worried about arrest.)

The power and essence of what remained of the faith of the white Christians of Mississippi were manifest in the locked churches, the jailed blacks who attempted to worship there, and the contempt white police showed for black churches. In such a situation there is no place for the moderate. And, within a few months, Mississippi became the church burning center of the world. Starting in the spring of 1964 black churches were bombed and burned at the rate of at least one church a week for over a full year. Thus did white Mississippi fight the powers of atheistic communism" which was always seen by them as the true source of the Civil Rights Movement.