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Council of Bishops meeting

The Council of Bishops of the Methodist Church gathered for annual meeting ~~at~~ in Detroit, Michigan, in mid-November. Over a hundred Methodist ministers, many of whom had been directly involved in the Jackson church-arrest situation, also gathered in Detroit to press the church leaders for a strong condemnation of the church arrests and a clear declaration of an open church worship policy for all Methodist churches. ~~The~~ The ministers were sure that the long established teachings of the church did provide an open church policy; but wanted the Bishops to make the matter totally clear. Bishops from every Southern state ~~were~~ were in attendance, as well as Bishop Marvin Franklin, head of the white church in Mississippi.

The Council of Bishops responded by issuing a very strong and very clear statement declaring that ~~open~~ "the Methodist Church is an inclusive church"¹⁴ and making clear that churches could not be segregated and that local church officers had no authority to even take votes on such matters as closing the church doors. The Bishops ~~also~~ condemned police action of arresting persons ~~at~~ attempting to worship. ~~and then~~ A further stand in favor of the rights of public protest, demonstrations, and, even, the right "to agitate... in an orderly way."¹⁵

The Southern Bishops, including Franklin of Mississippi, approved the statement of their fellow Bishops. At first we in the Movement, northern ministers and those of us at Tougaloo, thought something significant had happened. So many white Methodists in Jackson might have followed their Bishop if he acted with firmness, as the Bishops of the Catholic and the Episcopal churches had done. But Bishop Franklin, and ~~of~~ some other Southern bishops, returned from Detroit to play ~~the~~ traditional Southern political legalistic word games of interpreting the statement of the Council of Bishops as implying no need for any change or any action.

Franklin refused to circulate the statement to the ministers and other church leaders in Mississippi. So we began a policy of handing out mimeographed copies of the statement of the Methodist Council of Bishops to churchgoers at Methodist churches. The Bishop did write about the statement and the crisis of the arrests~~of~~ of Negroes and visiting ministers/~~in~~^{at} his churches in ~~his~~ his weekly column in the Mississippi Methodist Advocate. His own inaction on the one hand and then the strong action in favor of the segregation status quo, for that is what his message amounted to, is very typical of this man and of many

Mississippi churchmen. To the confused white churchmen of Mississippi he wrote:

The desire of myself and the overwhelming majority of Methodists in Mississippi is for good and improved relations among all races. There was a time when Negroes and white worked more cooperatively in church affairs.

Such a statement about some prior time of good race relations was made frequently by the Bishop and by other ministers. In this particular statement the Bishop leaped immediately, in the very next sentence, to the outside ministers, as if this was the immediate and only cause of bad race relations.

The coming of white Methodist preachers from other sections is seriously hurting the kind of race relations we should have, and making it far more difficult to cultivate the spirit of love and goodwill which are fundamental to improved ~~xx~~ relationships.

This, too, was a very popular idea with white churchmen, the idea that first you increased goodwill, then you could have improvements in race relations. It was the ecclesiastical equal of the popular idea that that people should be totally educated out of all their prejudices before the first move towards actual change in segregation patterns was made.

I told the Council of Bishops that the coming

of these preachers to Jackson is hurting and not helping. I heard of one who came, and in his town it was said a Negro cannot stay overnight. I know of no such place in Mississippi.

The Council made a pronouncement on ideas and ideals in race relations. Not every one favored all that was in it. It should not hurt to study what was said.

No, no harm in study, but please do not be upset and take this as anything serious, it's' it's just "ideas and ideals" and does not apply here. So, as this man had often done in the past, he diluted ^{a message} ~~words~~ from the national church that might have helped his people--because it would have upset his people.

There was some desire to criticize one of our Jackson churches by name. I made an earnest plea against that and it was not done.

So, this quiet man ~~did~~ could make an "earnest plea" and be persuasive about some things.

The message calls upon our Methodists to treat people as people, and I reckon that is in keeping with St. Paul's utterance, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free."

I "reckon" that the ushers were just ~~reacting~~ treating people as people and those twenty or more people arrested had nothing to do with the church; that must have been strictly police business.

Race relations must be of the spirit and should ever be based on justice, righteousness, kindness, and goodwill. The methods used now are hurting.

Let us earnestly and prayerfully face all the tensions of our day and strive to find what Christ would have us do.¹⁶

Any white minister or laymen in the Mississippi Methodist Church who had taken any kind of stand in favor of church integration was deserted--or worse--by the Bishop in this statement. Any churchman whose conscience had been troubled by the closed doors and the police arrests must have wondered what was wrong with himself now that the Bishop had spoken.

There were very few people who ever got to read the full text of the statement from the Council of Bishops. Police arrested some of our people who tried to distribute copies at the churches. The Bishop had no comment on this.

Almost every group of visiting Methodist ministers had talks with the Bishop. I sat in on many of these--as well as having some private conversations with the man. He had some things to say that--anywhere else but Mississippi--would have been amazing.

He agreed with those Mississippi ministers who peace and harmony and good will, who wanted the church to stay out of

controversial issues like race relations because they were controversial. (It always seemed to me that the men who said this and sincerely meant it were always pro-segregation and in favor of the status quo; they did not mind the church taking stands for very specific political action and legislation to maintain prohibition in Mississippi.) The Bishop agreed that there were racial problems in the state and things would certainly be much worse by the fall of 1964 when public school desegregation might start. He certainly did not think the church should become involved on either side of the segregation issue until after it was settled. Some months or more after the public school desegregation battle was over would be the appropriate time to begin to talk about the ideal of opening the doors of the churches to all people. Of course, the Bishop assured everyone, he was doing all he could to accomplish that goal. Churches had not closed their doors now because of prejudice against Negroes, why that would not be Christian, but because of community tensions and because everyone knew that the agitators who came to the Methodist churches were not sincere in desiring to worship, but only wanted publicity and to cause trouble. No Methodist church in Mississippi, in this sense, therefore was segregated.

The Bishop told several of us that he was a tired man and people did not understand what a hard task he had. He looked forward to his retirement the next summer but until that time he would fulfill his duty to God and to the Church. In his own words he described his job as that of Captain, ~~of~~ the Pilot of a great Ship, the Mississippi Methodist Church, and he was chosen and set aside to guide that Ship through all treacherous water, including the terrible storm of racial controversy. But he would not give up his post and he would let no harm come to the Ship while he was Captain. His job, his only duty, was to bring the Ship safely into harbor, to rest ~~at~~ anchor.

He told ~~us~~ some of us that we did not understand ~~of~~ the racial situation in Mississippi, that race relations were better in Mississippi than anywhere else in the world, that Colored people were happy in their place in Mississippi and always had been. When some Chicago ministers argued this point and quoted local Black students and Black ministers the Bishop dismissed this as merely a few agitators, not the good colored people he knew and loved in Mississippi. Then he gave us an almost incredi~~ble~~-ble example. The Bishop's first wife was dead and he had recently remarried. His second wife owned a large plantation

in the state where there were many Negro workers. The Bishop told us of how he enjoyed his visits to the plantation and how "my wife's ^{rahs} Nigrus" are so happy and tell the white ~~folks~~ people that they have nothing to do with the civil rights agitators, how "my wife's ^{Nigrahs} ~~Nigrus~~" tell me how much they love their own church." And so on and on. We were all silenced as the Bishop repeated the amazing phrase, "my wife's ^{Nigrahs} ~~Nigrus~~" several more times. It was not just the possessive way or the mispronunciation of the words~~/~~. It was the Bishop's total unawareness of the historical parallel that each of us as Methodist ministers immediately thought about. In 1844 the national Methodist Church in America had had a~~x~~ terrible ~~argument~~ argument over slavery that produced a division and separate northern and Southern churches. This was a kind of prelude to the national division of the Civil War. And the specific matter that caused the slavery debate and church division was the remarriage of a Southern Methodist Bishop, after the death of his first wife, to a woman who owned a plantation (in Georgia, not Mississippi) and ~~slaves~~ owned many slaves. Methodist church law and teaching was technically against slavery. But the only strong point of church doctrine was that

no Methodist Bishop could own slaves. This had always been observed until this particular time. Northern church members insisted that this Southern Bishop had to emancipate his slaves in order to remain Bishop. That Southern Bishop refused to emancipate any of his wife's slaves. What his wife did with "her-nigrahs" was not the business of any northern Methodist abolitionists or agitators. And so the Methodist Church became the first American denomination to divide over the racial issues; reunion came only in 1939--with the segregation of the Negro churches being the Southern price for that reunion. Here were northern Methodist ministers (and one Mississippi minister, me) being told by a Southern Bishop that "my wife's nigrahs wouldn't know how to worship, wouldn't be happy in a white church anyhow, so it really isn't a problem."

None of our meetings with Bishop Franklin even approached the level of dialogue. We made a few points and then just listened to him. He was very angry at the criticism he received in the northern press--church and regular news sources. He especially resented the implications that he had not done all he could to help "the 28" and other ministers

whose pro-integration stands caused them trouble in Mississippi. The Bishop insisted that he had done everything needed to help these men. Chicago ministers (and I) several times kept asking "Why didn't you take a stand-- in favor of freedom of the pulpit, in favor of an open church, in favor of ~~a~~ law and order at Ole Miss~~?~~" And, finally, "Why don't you take a ~~a~~ public stand against the police arrests at your churches if your really mean what you say, that you do not want to see anybody arrested? Bishop, why don't you take a stand?"

The Bishop replied, "I may go to ~~Hell~~ Hell for it, but I will not take a stand."¹⁷