EASTER IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI, 1964

CARTER DALTON LYON

On the day culminating Holy Week in 1964, the steps of white Methodist churches in the capital city of Mississippi’s closed society once again became a key battleground in the struggle for equal rights. At the state’s largest Methodist church, Galloway Memorial Methodist, two Methodist bishops—one of whom was African American—presented themselves to a group of awaiting ushers in time for the eleven o’clock worship service. Less than a mile away, seven white Methodist seminary professors joined two local black students seeking to attend an Easter service at Capitol Street Methodist Church. Their efforts capped off a ten-month-long church visitation campaign led by students and faculty at nearby Tougaloo College who, on some occasions, were accompanied by out-of-state ministers and laypeople. In the preceding months, integrated teams sought to overcome the barriers of segregation by attempting to worship and engage in dialogue with white Christians at the city’s all-white Protestant and Catholic congregations. Ushers at most of the churches routinely barred their entry, citing recent votes by their lay boards to maintain a racially-exclusive attendance policy.¹

Though local activists envisioned the campaign as a church community-wide effort, their focus—as well as the attention of Methodists nationwide—turned more squarely on the reality of racial discrimination within The Methodist Church when police stepped in to arrest three students at Capitol Street Methodist in October, 1963, and continued to make arrests after ushers barred the entry of African Americans from white Methodist churches in the succeeding weeks. By Holy Week, 1964, police had made thirty-two arrests, two-thirds of which occurred at Galloway and Capitol Street Methodist churches. The weekly showdowns in front of Methodist churches highlighted the problem of racial segregation in local congregations and within the structures of The Methodist Church itself, a reality that activists hoped would finally spur an end to the policy of voluntary desegregation at the General Conference of The Methodist Church due to convene in Pittsburgh less than a month after Easter Sunday.

Feeling that a breakthrough in the Jackson church visit campaign might

¹ Integrated groups presented themselves for worship to at least 22 Protestant and Catholic churches Jackson, Mississippi, from June 9, 1963, to March 29, 1964. The city’s Episcopal, Catholic, and Unitarian churches consistently admitted the groups, while the Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ churches visited by the groups turned them away. Groups were admitted to some Lutheran and Presbyterian churches while being turned away from other churches within the same denomination.
occur on the holiest day on the Christian calendar, the local organizer of the effort, Rev. Ed King, chaplain at Tougaloo College, decided to once again ask out-of-state Methodists to join students in seeking worship on Easter Sunday. In early March, he placed a call to friends at a Cincinnati meeting of the Methodists for Church Renewal (MCR), a group striving to keep up pressure on Methodist leaders for the total desegregation of the denomination. The group formed the previous November in Detroit following what they felt was an inadequate response by the Council of Bishops to the October arrests in Jackson.² At the MCR meeting, members recognized that most ministers needed to be at their own church on Easter Sunday, so they decided to solicit faculty members at theology schools to make the trip to Jackson instead. Dr. Jeffrey Hopper, who was at the MCR meeting, stepped in to organize the Easter witness and contacted friends at Methodist seminaries throughout the country to send representatives to Jackson. A native of northern New Jersey, Hopper was an assistant professor of theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio.³

With just a few weeks to prepare, Hopper enlisted three more colleagues on the faculty—native Southerners all—to join him, Dr. Vann Bogard Dunn, Dr. Paul M. Minus, and Dr. Charles Everett Tilson. Dunn was the dean of the school and was technically a minister within the Memphis Annual Conference. He had grown up in western Kentucky, but his real racial education came in the army and as a driver in Europe during the war, when the perspective from abroad caused him to re-evaluate the notion that the country was a model for democracy. After attending Duke Divinity School on the GI Bill, he served as pastor in various churches in Kentucky and in Tennessee, most recently at a church in Jackson, Tennessee, where he had organized a set of unprecedented interracial meetings in the late 1950s.⁴ Unlike the other ministers, Dunn had a personal connection to the Methodists in Jackson, which helped explain his involvement. Officially, his affiliation was with the Memphis Annual Conference, which put him under the supervision of Bishop Marvin Franklin, who at the time oversaw Western Tennessee in addition to the two white Mississippi conferences.⁵ Dunn’s participation would therefore be the first witness directly involving a

---

² Martin Deppe, “Panel #3: Methodists for Church Renewal and the Pilgrimage to Pittsburgh” (Church Desegregation and the Jackson, Mississippi, Witness, First Methodist Church, Chicago, Illinois, October 4, 2008); Arthur Jeffrey Hopper, telephone interview with the author, September 10, 2008; “Methodists for Church Renewal, Volume 1, December, 1963,” Box 9, Folder 437, Ed King Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH); Ralph Lord Roy, “Methodists: Crisis of Conscience,” The Nation, March 16, 1964, 265.
³ Arthur Jeffrey Hopper, Westerville, Ohio, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), September 10, 2008.
⁴ “Van Bogard Dunn Interview, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Oral History Conducted by Rev. Dr. Paul Grass in Winter 1994,” from the private library of Rev. William H. Casto, Jr., Ph.D., Professor Emeritus Methodist Theological School in Ohio.
⁵ Gerry H. Dunn, Delaware, Ohio, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), November 6, 2009; Susan Dunn, Charleston, South Carolina, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), November 6, 2009.
minister within Bishop Franklin’s jurisdiction.

Dr. Paul Minus, an assistant professor of church history at the school since January, grew up in Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina. Like other ministers who participated in the Jackson witness on previous weekends, he credited the Methodist Student Movement in college and in graduate school with exposing him to a lot of the social ferment around him. Out of Yale Divinity School, he became a chaplain at Florida State University in the midst of that school’s integration and took part in several local civil rights marches. Though set to affiliate with the West Ohio Conference, Minus was technically still a member of his home conference, the South Carolina Annual Conference.6

The fourth member of the team from Methodist Theological School in Ohio was the school’s professor of Old Testament, Dr. C. Everett Tilson, a respected scholar and preacher in the denomination. Tilson was from Seven Mile Ford, Virginia, in the southwestern part of the state. After receiving his graduate degrees at Vanderbilt University and setting up Belle Meade Methodist Church in Nashville, he joined the faculty at Vanderbilt Divinity School. While there, he organized several race relations conferences, including one where he invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak, and became involved with several liberal-leaning organizations, such as the Highlander Folk School in nearby Monteagle. In 1958, at the suggestion of Rev. Will Campbell and other friends, he wrote Segregation and the Bible. In the book, which he based on lectures he often gave to students, Tilson directly confronted the alleged Christian defense of segregation, rebutting the arguments used by many segregationists to defend racial barriers through passages in Scripture. He left Vanderbilt for Methodist Theological School in Ohio in 1960, shortly before the Vanderbilt Divinity School expelled one of his students—James Lawson—for allegedly being the ring-leader for civil rights protests in Nashville.7 According to Hopper and Minus, the decision to ensure that three of the four volunteers from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio were Southerners was deliberate. Not only were they not agitating in the sense that they were Methodist ministers merely trying to uphold the principles and laws of the denomination, but they recognized that the chief dismissive label affixed to the visiting ministers was that they were outsiders.8

After solidifying the team from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Hopper and the others decided to try to enlist faculty members from

---

6 Paul Minus, Claremont, California, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), September 18, 2008.
8 Jeffrey Hopper, Westerville, Ohio, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), September 10, 2008; Paul Minus, Claremont, California, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), September 19, 2008.
other schools. They believed that the Easter witness would be much more meaningful if it included Methodist theological teachers from other parts of the country. With just nine days to go, Hopper and his colleagues placed calls and wrote to people they knew at Methodist and interdenominational seminaries, asking them to consider sending a delegation or electing someone on the seminary’s behalf to come to Jackson.\(^9\)

The faculty at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, met in official session to send a representative and Dr. David James Randolph volunteered to make the trip. As Randolph later recalled, the move was unusual on the part of the seminary, for the faculty had never been that involved in direct action before. Yet all of them understood what was at stake, that a positive resolution to the situation in Jackson could be a turning point for Methodism and the civil rights struggle overall.

For Randolph, the decision to step forward was a natural product of the work he did locally and a genuine conviction that he had a moral obligation to answer the call for help. Though aware of the burden of segregation since his childhood in Maryland, the real defining moment in his thinking on how his faith related to race was an experience while at Boston University School of Theology in the early 1960s. While serving a church in Lowell, Massachusetts, a fire swept through a nearby tenement and he had to perform the funeral for a mother and her children, all of whom were black. Inferior housing caused the fire, and Randolph immediately connected the dots between racism and the housing policies. Moreover, he determined that “if the resurrection meant anything, it seemed to have to mean relating faith to the tragedy.” He continued working on local housing issues while serving an inner city and integrated parish in Wilmington, Delaware, before he accepted a position at Drew. Randolph saw his decision to come to Jackson as just the logical extension of what he was doing at home. Like the other ministers who made the journey who were married and had young children, he remained committed to the idea that his witness would ultimately benefit his family and help achieve an inclusive church and truly open society.\(^10\)

Two more Methodist faculty members answered the call to participate in the Easter witness in Jackson. Dr. Henry B. Clark, an instructor in church and community at Union Theological Seminary in New York, agreed to join the effort as a representative of his school’s faculty. Clark was a native of Reidsville, North Carolina, just north of Greensboro, and was officially “on trial” with the Western North Carolina Annual Conference. With Clark participating, now five out of the seven ministers grew up in states south of the Mason-Dixon line. Dr. Tyler Thompson, a renowned professor of philosophy of religion at Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, became the final member of the team. A few of his former students already

---


\(^10\) David James Randolph, Albany, California, interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), February 13, 2009.
took part in the church visit campaign and Thompson accepted the invitation from another former student and his cousin, Jeffrey Hopper. Unlike his colleagues in the Easter witness, Thompson knew first-hand the experience of being incarcerated. At the outset of World War II, Japanese troops captured him while he was doing missionary work in Singapore. Thompson ended up spending three years in a Japanese concentration camp during the war.\footnote{11 “Evanston Prof Arrested at Church Door,” \textit{Chicago Tribune} (March 30, 1964), 10.}

The ministers arrived in Jackson separately on Good Friday and Saturday. As on previous weekends, the out-of-state teams sought out meetings with local black and white church people before proceeding with attempted visits on Sunday. On Friday evening, Bishop Marvin Franklin met with Rev. Ed King and Dr. David James Randolph. Randolph later reported to his colleagues only that the bishop and his wife entertained them graciously.\footnote{12 David James Randolph, “A Report to the Dean and the Faculty of the Theological School of Drew University,” April 2, 1964, 1, Everett Tilson Private Papers.}

On Saturday morning, the seven visiting ministers met with Dr. W. J. Cunningham, senior pastor at Galloway, and a few professors from the local white Methodist school, Millsaps College. Tilson told an assembly of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio when they returned that Cunningham was clearly a man in torment. Cunningham had considerable ability and a firm theological grounding, but he was “caught in conflict between a conscience that he cannot forget on one hand and a culture which he dares not oppose on the other.” He recognized that something must be done to overturn his church’s exclusion policy, but when the group asked him what he proposed to do, he admitted that if he did anything, his congregation would immediately expel him. Cunningham’s predecessor, Dr. W. B. Selah, had stepped down from Galloway ten months earlier after ushers turned away black students during the first Sunday of the church visit campaign. Cunningham told the ministers that his only hope was for a change in leadership, a new bishop and district superintendent.

The group also met with two Millsaps professors, who gave examples of harassment and intimidation that they had faced in their daily lives in Jackson. One professor explained how he just signed a contract for the next year that included a promise to leave after that, while the other one described how he and his family had lived in Jackson for twelve years but now concluded that it was “impossible to rear his children in the Christian tradition in this environment.”\footnote{13 Van Bogard Dunn, Jeffrey Hopper, Paul M. Minus, and Everett Tilson, “Report on Trip to Jackson, Mississippi, Easter 1964,” transcript, 1964, Methodist Theological School in Ohio Library.}

The visiting ministers then secured a meeting with Dr. J. Willard Leggett, Jr., the district superintendent of the Mississippi Conference. Leggett invited three Jackson pastors, including Rev. Seth Granberry of Capitol Street Methodist and Rev. Charles Duke of Broadmeadow Methodist, one of the more outspoken pro-segregationist ministers in the city, to reinforce his views in the discussion. Tyler Thompson later wrote the he and the others
“were intent on a reconciling mission through a biblical and theological witness.” They met for an hour and half, but the meeting almost broke up at least five times within the first ten minutes because Leggett at first refused to thrash out any of the underlying issues that brought them together. Tilson recounted that he and his colleagues received a “liberal theological education” from Leggett and the others, for it was liberal “in the sense that we were exposed to ideas in which we’d never heard before.” The four Jackson ministers in the meeting “espoused a segregationist theology and policy” and Tilson concluded that “on any fair assessment of racism that they are confirmed racists.” The visiting ministers asked one of them whether there was any incompatibility between the Gospel and segregation, and he resolutely said no. The Jackson minister went on to tell a story about how he regretted preaching once in a black church and came away from the experience with the belief that blacks and whites maintained fundamentally distinct temperaments. Thompson recalled that the meeting came to a climax when Leggett assured the delegation that if anyone, including Bishop Franklin, came “to any of their churches with a ‘nigra’ he would be turned away—and if he persisted he would be arrested.” Paul Minus remembered that the discussion ended with Leggett leading the group in prayer, asking God to help them realize that they should not do what they planned to do the next morning.14

After the discussions with various local white Methodist ministers, the seven visiting ministers met to decide whether or not to follow through with the visits the next day. They talked about what it meant to be ministers of reconciliation, with a passage from Second Corinthians—that God in Christ reconciled the world unto himself and entrusted Christians to proclaiming the message of reconciliation—at the forefront of their minds.15 They hoped to advance this message of reconciliation and to instill upon their Jackson colleagues the need for an inclusive church in the state. The visiting ministers tried to point out that “decisive leadership by the church could have far-reaching consequences in healing racial strife and bringing about justice to the area,” given the significant role that Methodism had in the community and the positions of authority that Methodists maintained in government and business. Yet these discussions made it clear to them that there may in fact be men of good will in Mississippi Methodism, but the leadership “was in fact sponsoring and defending a program of planned segregation of persons of other races from public worship, contrary to the primary counsels of Christian faith, the Methodist Discipline, and the official statement of race by the bishops of the Methodist Church.” The ministers talked about what the resurrection meant to mankind if churches maintained closed-door policies


15 II Cor. 5:16ff.
and they ultimately decided that Easter Sunday was the most appropriate day to testify to their belief in the Incarnation.\textsuperscript{16}

Saturday evening, the visiting ministers concluded their discussions with local church people by meeting with a group of black ministers and laymen. Tilson reported that these men were “determined to take whatever steps [were] necessary to secure freedom for their fellow human beings.” They described all the pressures that they and their families endured and told how they remained anxious to receive all the outside help they could. Tilson concluded that the black church in Jackson was a fitting example of a “transforming church” in distinct contrast to the “conforming church” of white Methodists in Mississippi. He saw that the black Methodists were “remarkably free,” for they recognized that “the larger church was not the governor of Mississippi, not the bishop of white Methodism in Mississippi, but was Jesus Christ.” For Tilson, Jackson’s black churches were much like early Christian churches described in the New Testament, for they were people who were in captivity but they were not really captives because of the freedom they had in Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

While the visiting ministers were in consultations with their Jackson colleagues, the Tougaloo activists learned the news that they had been hoping to hear since at least December, that a few Methodist bishops were coming to Jackson to participate in the church visit campaign. King received word that Bishop James K. Mathews of the Boston area and Bishop Charles F. Golden of the Nashville-Birmingham area of the Central Jurisdiction decided to attempt to attend Galloway Memorial Methodist on Easter Sunday. Golden’s jurisdiction included the black Methodist churches throughout Mississippi. The two bishops talked about coming to Jackson in the weeks after the November meeting of the Council of Bishops, and intended to join in the December 8 witness, but they called it off when they were unable to convince other bishops to join them. Moreover, Mathews and Golden wanted to give the Jackson churches a few months to implement the anti-segregation statement made by the Council of Bishops.

The Tougaloo activists understood that negotiations were taking place behind the scenes during the winter, including meetings between Bishop Marvin Franklin and Bishop Golden. Those discussions proved fruitless and Golden suggested to Bishop Mathews that they attempt a visit on Easter at Galloway. Mathews later wrote, “I could do no other than agree.” The two men knew each other since the late 1930s, when they attended Boston University together. They served together on the staff of the Board of Missions and both became bishops in 1960. They arrived in Jackson on Saturday and

\textsuperscript{16} David James Randolph, Albany, California, telephone interview with the author in Oxford, Mississippi (telephone), February 13, 2009; David James Randolph, “A Report to the Dean and the Faculty of the Theological School of Drew University,” April 2, 1964, 1, Everett Tilson Private Papers.

\textsuperscript{17} Van Bogard Dunn, Jeffrey Hopper, Paul M. Minus, and Everett Tilson, “Report on Trip to Jackson, Mississippi, Easter 1964,” transcript, 1964, Methodist Theological School in Ohio Library.
spent the evening formulating two statements, one that they would leave with Galloway and release to the press if the ushers admitted them and one if the church turned them away. They deliberately made the decision not to alert the press beforehand, hoping for a quiet witness without fanfare.\(^{18}\) Even though ushers at Galloway barred all the integrated groups since the regular visits began in June, 1963, the men held out hope that the circumstances of the day and the sight of two of the denomination’s bishops—one of whom happened to be African American—would make church officials more conscious of the immorality of their closed-door policy.

At Galloway Memorial Methodist Church in Jackson, Bishops Mathews and Golden arrived shortly before the eleven o’clock worship service. The minutes of the church’s official board noted that the attendance for the service was “a possible record” of 1,100.\(^{19}\) The bishops ascended the front stairs and identified themselves to a group of ushers. They noticed stewards of the church guarding all of the other entrances and three policemen standing nearby. Nat Rogers, the chairman of the official board, spoke for the ushers and explained the policy of the church, that they could not admit African Americans at this time. Mathews later said that Rogers seemed almost apologetic. The bishops then asked Rogers if they could see the pastor of Galloway, Dr. W. J. Cunningham. Rogers said that they could not go inside, but told them that he would try to locate Cunningham and bring him to them. Rogers found him and Rev. Clay Lee, the church’s associate pastor, in a corridor near the sanctuary and told them that there were two bishops outside asking for admittance. Cunningham later wrote that this was the first time that Rogers or any usher alerted him to the presence of an integrated group seeking entrance into the church before a service. Cunningham told Rogers to “let them in on my responsibility.” According to Cunningham, Rogers predicted “dire consequences” if the ushers let the bishops inside and remained resolute that they would not admit the bishops.

Meanwhile, Mathews and Golden stood outside talking with the ushers, who tried to explain to them that the bishops just did not understand the problem and that they should have given the church more advance notice of their visit. Bishop Mathews responded by saying they merely wanted to worship, so what would have been the point in giving advance warning? The bishops shook hands with a few church members who came up to them, expressing how glad they were to see them. Mathews later described the behavior of most of the members as courteous, but did write that some onlookers were particularly hostile in their comments. When they could hear the church service beginning and it became clear that Cunningham was not coming outside, the bishops handed the ushers one of their two prepared


written statements and left the church. Mathews later wrote that the outcome of the visit was truly a surprise, for despite the previous attempts, he felt “that when the issue was sharply put, as we tried to do on behalf of all Methodism, they would respond in terms of faith rather than in terms of traditional social mores.” Barred from a white Methodist church, Mathews and Golden celebrated Easter at a black Methodist church nearby, Central Methodist Church.  

The statement, which the bishops released to the press and reprinted in full in The Christian Century a few weeks later, summarized their intentions that day. Mathews and Golden opened by appealing to the fundamentals of faith, saying, “A Christian’s desire to participate in public worship—especially on Easter—should neither occasion surprise nor require explanation.” They acknowledged that they were well aware of Galloway’s closed-door policy before ushers turned them away, but remained committed to common Methodist practice and principles and the conviction that as Methodist bishops, they were responsible “to the whole church for the whole church.” They argued that Easter was a particularly appropriate day to proclaim these beliefs, for the day offered “not only victory over death but infinite possibility for renewal of individuals and of churches and of society.” They were now “deeply concerned for the witness of the whole church before the world” and prayed that all would come to “fully know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering.”

As ushers at Galloway turned two Methodist bishops away from Easter services, the seven seminary professors left the Tougaloo campus to pick up two African American men—Robert Talbert of McComb and David Walker of Jackson—on their way to Capitol Street Methodist. Talbert was a twenty-two year old activist whom McComb police arrested in 1961 when he and two others tried to sit in the white section of a waiting room at the Greyhound bus station. The ministers went over their strategy for their visit, that they would have one spokesman, Dr. Van Board Dunn, who would speak softly.

---


They discussed how they needed to remain dignified and polite throughout the witness, that they could not do anything that others could interpret as constituting a disturbance. They decided that if and when an officer from the church asked them to leave the premises, they would decline to do so. Tyler Thompson wrote a few weeks later that they reasoned at the time that they “had to say No to the church’s assertion of the right to turn us away.” The church had the power to do so, but the group felt that “we would have to deny that it had the right” and “would take the consequences.”

Before leaving the Tougaloo campus, Rev. Ed King warned the ministers that they might encounter a Citizens’ Council roadblock on the way downtown. People in two cars did bring them to a halt, but evidently seeing no black passengers, allowed them to proceed. The professors stopped by the offices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to pick up Walker and Talbert and then King led the group in a meditation, reading from Psalm 122. Exiting the COFO offices, King pointed out Deputy Police Chief J. L. Ray, who was across the street in a police car. Then about five police cruisers passed by, one of them with a police dog in the back. Dunn saw this as “a deliberate attempt of course to intimidate the Negroes and of course to intimidate us.”

The integrated group of nine arrived at Capitol Street Methodist about fifteen minutes before the eleven o’clock service. They noticed as many as a dozen police officers around the church that began to converge behind the ushers when they sighted the group. As the team approached the front steps of the church, a set of ushers hastily ran down and one of them told the group to stop and not come any further. The ushers then formed a line across the stairs and Talbert, Walker, and the seven ministers reciprocated by spreading out along the sidewalk and the grass. After a member of the team appeared to try to walk around the line of ushers, James Cox, the spokesman for the ushers barked, “No end runs!” Van Bogard Dunn, speaking for the group, announced, “We are Methodist Christians who would like to worship the Risen Lord with you in this church today.” Cox responded, “You aren’t going to integrate this church. The policy of the official board of this church is to deny admission to all Negroes. You can stand here all day, but you aren’t coming in this church.” Recognizing the opening, Dunn asked, “Do you mean we can stand here?” The usher clarified, saying, no, they must move on. When Dunn asked why they could not just stand there, Cox explained, “No questions and no answers. If you don’t move on at once, I will ask the police to put you under arrest.” Dunn restated the desires of the group to worship at the church. Cox then turned to one of the policemen behind him and gave him unambiguous instructions, saying, “Officer, take them away.” The officer walked up to Dunn and asked him if he understood what the usher

was asking, and Dunn said yes. The policeman then announced to the group that “if you don’t move on, I will place you under arrest.” Dunn replied, “I guess you’ll have to arrest us,” and the officer declared that they were all under arrest. As the nine waited for the patrol wagon to come around, Dunn asked the arresting officer if he would have arrested them without being requested to do so by the usher. The policeman answered that no, he would not have arrested them unless the usher called for his intervention.²⁵

The arrest of the seven seminary professors and the two black laymen on Easter Sunday were the first in front of Jackson churches since mid-December and brought the total to forty total arrests since early October. When they arrived at Jackson City Jail, officers told them that the city was charging them with disturbing divine worship and trespassing, though authorities later dropped the trespassing charge. Officers then interviewed them and asked each if they had ever spent time before in jail. Tyler Thompson’s response provided some poignancy to the moment. He said yes, that he spent three years in a Japanese internment camp.

The professors later stressed that overall, the officers treated them quite well, though they heard comments by jailors that suggested to them that black prisoners did not fare as well. Tilson told a reporter from the New York Times that he and the other professors received better treatment from the police than from leaders of the Methodist Church in Mississippi. They passed the time sharing stories, particularly Dr. Thompson’s experience which most of them knew little about. The professors received dozens of telegrams from family and supporters and welcomed a few visitors, including Dr. Lee Reiff, a professor at Millsaps and a member of Capitol Street Methodist, and two local Catholic priests. One of the priests was Father Bernard Law, who had told Tilson that he read his book, Segregation and the Bible, several years before. Law was editor of the Mississippi Register, the periodical for the Diocese of Natchez-Jackson, and had family in Vicksburg. The other priest attended a seminary near Delaware, Ohio.²⁶


²⁶ Van Bogard Dunn, Jeffrey Hopper, Paul M. Minus, and Everett Tilson, “Report on Trip to Jackson, Mississippi, Easter 1964,” transcript, 1964, Methodist Theological School in Ohio Library; David James Randolph, “A Report to the Dean and the Faculty of the Theological School of Drew University,” April 2, 1964, 2, Everett Tilson Private Papers; “A Statement Prepared by Van Bogard Dunn, A. Jeffrey Hopper, Paul M. Minus, Jr., and Everett Tilson,” Jackson, Mississippi, Box 1444-2-6, Folder 11, Administrative Records of the Division of World Peace of the General Board of Church and Society, GCAH; Tyler Thompson, “Another Pilgrimage to Jackson,” The Christian Century (April 22, 1964), 512; “Seven Methodist Clerics Assail Their Church After Trial in South,” New York Times (April 1, 1964), 26. Though he never openly defended the church visitors, the editorials of Father Bernard Law often criticized the failings of the Protestant white church community in civil rights era Jackson. Father Law left Mississippi in the late 1960s and later became Archbishop of Boston.
On Monday, March 30, the nine appeared before Municipal Court Judge James L. Spencer, who heard arguments and testimony for about two hours. The professors and their lawyer, R. Jess Brown, tried to establish that they did not disturb public worship, for they never raised their voices or made threatening gestures. They tried to point out that no one congregated near them during their attempted visit. Moreover, they could see no possibility that people inside the church could hear them or know what was occurring outside. In fact, the arresting officer testified that he saw no evidence of a disturbance of the peace. For Judge Spencer, however, the issue was not whether or not there was a physical or vocal disturbance. Instead, the central question as he saw it was whether or not a congregation had the right to worship in their own manner. He explained that “this country has not reached the station where a group of persons who seek to worship in the way they want to, have to be told by someone else to do it this way or that way.” He concluded simply that “a congregation has the right to worship in the way it desires without someone coming from Illinois or from any other place to tell a congregation to do it any other way.” Spencer looked at the nine and told them that they knew what the attendance policy of the church was before they tried to worship there and that the police arrested others on earlier attempts. He added that “just as you gentlemen feel equally strong about certain issues, so too this congregation and other persons have strong feelings.” He declared them guilty of disturbing divine worship, sentenced each to six months in jail, and ordered each to pay a $500 fine.

Consistent with the logic used since the first trial in October, the city attorneys articulated—and Spencer reaffirmed—that the disturbance of public worship came by the mere presence of African Americans seeking to worship at an all-white church. The race of individuals, not their actions or words, constituted the disturbance.

As the seminary professors and two laymen remained in jail, Cunningham grappled with the realization that his church barred two of his denomination’s bishops from worshipping on Easter Sunday. A few hours after the incident, he met at the home of one of his lay leaders and let his emotions pour out. When he regained his composure, he explained that the stress had become too unbearable and told the church official that he intended to step down. He described the “double tragedy” of the reality at Galloway, that here was “a minister not near retirement age and without an appointment, and a large and potentially great church unable to find a suitable pastor because of its racial discord.” The lay leader persuaded him to stay, but a meeting the next morning only discouraged him further. Bishop Marvin Franklin came to his office and told him how outraged he was that Cunningham allowed ushers to turn away two of his colleagues from worship. He told Cunningham that “if they had been admitted, he would have stood by [him].” As Cunningham later wrote, this was the first time Bishop Franklin ever mentioned Galloway’s

---

admission policy and certainly the first time he ever intimated publicly or
privately that the official board should open the doors.28

Later in the week, Cunningham wrote Bishop Golden to tell him how
distressed he was and to clarify that he specifically requested that the
ushers seat him. He described his dilemma, that since arriving at Galloway
in September that had been trying to work with a few laymen he trusted
to arrive at an effective strategy and was choosing to remain at the post
because “there is need, need that we all come into conformity with Methodist
principle and law and, above all, the spirit of Christ.” He urged the bishop
to “not lose faith in us” and to keep the church in his prayers. Cunningham
concluded by inviting Golden to meet with him and a few laymen during
his next trip to Jackson.29 Bishop Golden wrote Cunningham back, saying
that he and Bishop Mathews were not trying to make his task more difficult.
Golden explained, though, that the two had “a higher commitment to make
our own witness on the basis of our own convictions.” He affirmed that “the
action of your official board is completely out of line with Methodist policy
and practice and has usurped authority which belongs to the pastor of a local
church in our Methodist system.” He accepted Cunningham’s request to
meet at a later time, but hoped that Galloway would change its admission
policy before next month’s General Conference.30

Bishop Golden received other letters from Mississippi Methodists
expressing astonishment of what occurred on Easter Sunday in Jackson.
For instance, J. P. Stafford, the lay leader of the Mississippi Conference
since 1948, explained to Golden that the incidents were the results of the
conference’s “weak leadership and cowardly vacillation when a firm decision
would have changed the picture.” Without naming particular individuals, he
pointed to the “unholy alliance of leading church officials with the Citizens’
Council.” The real tragedy of the situation with the Mississippi Conference
was that he and other lay people “have been forced to stand against the
ministerial leadership we had hoped to follow.”31 Golden wrote him back,
saying that Stafford’s letter was “one of the most meaningful among the
many [he] received.”32

If the seminary professors and bishops came to Jackson to gain a first-
hand understanding of the situation and to help clarify the predicament
facing the Methodist Church, they left the state’s capital city following their
release on March 31 with the feeling that the central question before the

---

28 Cunningham, Agony at Galloway, 56-57.
29 W. J. Cunningham to Charles F. Golden, April 7, 1964, Box 1553-6-4, Folder 3, Correspondence 1960-1964, Peter Murray Collection, GCAH.
30 Charles F. Golden to W. J. Cunningham, April 15, 1964, Box 1553-6-4, Folder 3, Correspondence 1960-1964, Peter Murray Collection, GCAH.
31 J. P. Stafford to Charles F. Golden, March 30, 1964, Box 1553-6-4, Folder 3, Correspondence 1960-1964, Peter Murray Collection, GCAH.
32 Charles F. Golden to J. P. Stafford, April 15, 1964, Box 1553-6-4, Folder 3, Correspondence 1960-1964, Peter Murray Collection, GCAH.
General Conference in Pittsburgh was now straight-forward. In reports to their colleagues at the theology schools and in an essay Tyler Thompson published in *The Christian Century*, the professors reiterated the crucial issue, that delegates needed to reconcile the stated beliefs of the church, that the House of God was open to all, with the reality of racial discrimination in local congregations. Methodist churches in Jackson not only forbade African Americans from attending worship, but at least one church continued to seek the arrest of people trying to worship as an integrated group.

Though the exclusion policies of individual congregations were just symptoms of the overriding problem of segregation throughout the structures of the church, the continued recalcitrance of Jackson Methodist laypeople and local authorities to align with Methodist principles highlighted the need for conference delegates to take a definitive and binding position on the desegregation of the denomination. The ten-month-long campaign and the recent shocking incidents at churches in Jackson, particularly the rejection of two of the church’s bishops from a worship service on the holiest of days, underscored the fallacy of gradualism. Some churches, left to their own timelines and procedures, remained uninterested in fulfilling the appeals from their fellow Methodists, regardless of a visitor’s status. The bishops and seminary professors, their colleagues on previous efforts, and their supporters throughout the denomination recognized that the time for volunteerism had passed. God, they decided, chose Jackson to point out the cancer within the church and it was now time to extirpate it once and for all.

A month after the arrests and the barring of the two bishops on Easter Sunday, Methodists convened in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for their quadrennial General Conference. Of the many issues on the table before the assembled delegates, the problem of racial segregation within the denomination was the center of attention. The Jackson church visit campaign had exposed the discriminatory practices of certain congregations, yet also revealed that the Methodist Church was seemingly powerless to force these congregations to open their doors under current church law. The Methodist

---

33 The legal status for those arrested on Easter Sunday and the others during the course of the Jackson church visit campaign remained unsettled for another two years. In the mean time, each of the 37 lived with the possibility that he/she might face further incarceration if the city decided to bring the cases up for trial. In November, 1966, the Easter arrestees and others secured dismissals in return for signing a release freeing the state, the city, and the churches from potential unlawful arrest suits. The city’s decision to agree to a dismissal resulted from a vigorous effort by the attorneys for the defendants and various Methodist leaders to seek such a result, but also reflected a change in the racial climate in Jackson. Following another round of visits and the resignation of Dr. W. J. Cunningham from Galloway Memorial, Galloway and Capitol Street Methodist Churches had rescinded their closed-door policies in early 1966.

Church provided no official sanction for the type of local segregation that the white Jackson churches practiced, but the absence of any measure that would ensure compliance or punish wayward congregations provided individual churches the space they needed to maintain exclusionary policies. On one level, therefore, church people who joined in the campaign and other Methodists wanted the delegates to amend the Methodist Discipline to make clear that churches and programs within the denomination were open to all, regardless of race. Yet the related but larger concern for most liberal Methodists was speeding up the termination of the officially sanctioned segregated body of the denomination, the Central Jurisdiction.

The previous two General Conferences had begun to move toward dismantling the Central Jurisdiction, but a principle of volunteerism had prevailed at both meetings. Churches and annual conferences could transfer out of the Central Jurisdiction into their appropriate geographical jurisdiction at their own pace. Ahead of the start of the 1964 General Conference in Pittsburgh, the team commissioned by the 1960 General Conference to study the issue further and make recommendations for the next meeting—the Committee of Thirty-Six—announced that they advocated a reaffirmation of the principle of volunteerism. The Central Jurisdiction’s own commission, the Committee of Five, countered that they would present the General Conference with a series of memorials that would eliminate all racial barriers and vestiges of racial discrimination in the church.35

While delegates convened in the Pittsburgh Civic Arena in official session beginning April 26, members of Methodists for Church Renewal, young people from the Methodist Student Movement, and Tougaloo students and others involved in the Jackson church visit campaign maintained a picket and handed out leaflets to testify once again that racial segregation was contrary to Methodist teaching and the Christian faith. On one of the days, activists erected a wall with a sign that read “Volunteerism” that physically separated black from white protestors.36 On another day, a leaflet they distributed was entitled “Where We Begin” and began with an open letter to delegates from Rev. Jim Lawson, Jr., of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Inside the leaflet were photocopies of two documents contrasting the “Claim” with the “Practice” at Capitol Street Methodist Church. Under “Claim” was a copy of a visitor’s registration card from the church, which stated that Capitol Street “has extended a warm and friendly welcome to all who have sought to worship and serve God here.” Under “Practice” was a photocopy of the New York Times article from Easter Sunday detailing the

35 For an excellent contrast of the competing visions of the Committee of Thirty-Six and the Committee of Five ahead of the 1964 General Conference, see the following essays written by the groups’ respective chairmen, Charles C. Parlin and Dr. W. Astor Kirk. “Methodism’s Symbol of Racial Segregation,” Concern (April 15, 1964), 7-9.
36 Ralph Lord Ray, “MCR, Pittsburgh, and the Future,” May 15, 1964, 1, Box 2135-5-4, Folder 6, Methodists for Church Renewal, Methodist Federation of Social Action, GCAH.
arrest of the seven seminary professors and laymen at the church. Later in the week, over a thousand Methodists joined the daily protestors in an all-night program they called a “Living Memorial” at Smithfield Street Methodist Church. The evening began with a “Southern-style Freedom Rally” with hymns and Freedom Songs led by Bernice Reagan of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Attendees then heard from a variety of ministers and laymen, including Rev. Ed King, Dr. Everett Tilson, Bishop Charles Golden, and Bishop James Mathews. The next morning, the “Living Memorial” marched outside to greet the delegates arriving for day’s session. Leading the procession was Tougaloo student Austin Moore, who held a charred cross that white supremacists had recently burned on the school campus.

Despite these pleas, delegates to the General Conference overwhelmingly voted to affirm the Committee of Thirty-Six’s report, effectively prolonging the policy of voluntarism in the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction for another four years. Later, delegates attempted to clarify the church law regarding admittance policies, changing the Methodist Discipline to read “all persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, to participate in its programs, and to be admitted into its membership anywhere in the connection.”

Church visit campaign activists were initially jubilant, feeling that Jackson’s white Methodist churches would now no longer be able to close their doors to black visitors. However, they soon realized that the wording of the new policy—particularly the inclusion of the word “eligible”—left plenty of wiggle room for churches to remain all-white. As Bishop John Owen White of Atlanta pointed out, the word “eligible means that they are free to go and should be admitted,” but it did not mean that it “makes it binding on them

---

37 Where We Begin (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Methodists for Church Renewal, 1964), 1-4, Box 2135-5-4, Folder 6, Methodists for Church Renewal, Methodist Federation for Social Action, GCAH.
39 Later at the conference, some delegates—led by Dr. W. Astor Kirk—tried to find other ways to ensure the prompt elimination of the all-black jurisdiction. He proposed an amendment to the unification proposal with the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) that specified that the merger of the two churches would not include the all-black jurisdiction. Many EUB ministers, including several Chicago-based pastors who participated in the Jackson witness, were determined not to permit the union until the Methodist Church desegregated. Dr. Kirk’s amendment passed narrowly. The proposal still needed the approval of regional conferences and merger meetings slated for 1966, so the earliest the merger—and thus the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction—would occur was 1968. This was the same target date for the Methodist Church to voluntarily eliminate the Central Jurisdiction, but Dr. Kirk’s amendment was a new directive to challenge the principle of gradualism. See “Real Questions,” Social Questions Bulletin, May-June 1964, 37.
to be let in.”

The Tougaloo activists and their allies began to reflect upon the Methodist General Conference and acknowledged their disillusionment that the outcome fell well short of their hopes. The church visit campaign had failed to unlock most of the white church doors in Jackson and the top-down relief they hoped would come from the Pittsburgh meeting never materialized. In fact, it would be another two years before Galloway Memorial Methodist and Capitol Street Methodist Churches changed their policies to regularly admit black visitors. Despite their frustration, they remained strangely satisfied that they had given the city’s white Methodists churches—and the entire white church community of Jackson—a chance to be relevant and to apply basic Christian teachings to the most pressing social crisis of their lifetime. The activists also had other concerns, for most of them were already busy making preparations for the Mississippi Summer Project, “Freedom Summer” as it would later be remembered, due to commence in June. As Rev. King later wrote, it “was good that the effort had been made” to confront white Christians with the immorality of segregation, but now “we waited for the burning crosses and bombs that we knew would come.”

41 “Methodist Racial Resolution Argued,” *Jackson Daily News* (May 7, 1964), F2. Delegates had already approved a report by the denomination’s Committee on Christian Social Concerns that stated that the Methodist Church “was nothing less than an inclusive Church” and that Methodist churches were open to all regardless of race. But these measures constituted the policy of the Methodist Church, not the law, as the *Jackson Daily News* assured its readers. See “Methodists Adopt Integration Policy, But It Lacks Teeth,” *Jackson Daily News* (May 5, 1964), 5.