RECALLING ALBANY ARRESTS FORTY YEARS LATER

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The smiles were warm as we drove up in front of a Methodist Church in the city of Albany, Georgia. It was a hot summer day in early August, 1962. I was wearing a clerical collar, and the congregation was expecting a guest minister while their pastor was on vacation. "You must be our preacher this morning," a friendly woman gushed as I emerged from the car. "We want to welcome our church."

I grinned a bit nervously, then introduced myself as a Methodist pastor visiting from New York City. When the driver of the car, a local resident and an African-American, joined me and we made our way toward the front steps, the friendly atmosphere abruptly turned into fierce antagonism. Lay persons of the congregation quickly locked arms and formed a wall at the entrance to the sanctuary. When I extended my hand to the scowling man before me, he snapped: "I wouldn't shake hands with the likes of you."

Two policemen on motorcycles had followed us to the church, radioing our position as we traveled through the city. As we began to climb the steps, one officer shouted: "Do you want them arrested?" We were not interested in forcing the issue that morning and reluctantly returned to the car. One goal had been to participate in Sunday worship. Another was to test the openness of churches in the community. A third was to make a statement to fellow Christians that there was something seriously amiss about professing love for God while exhibiting such bigotry toward one's neighbors.

The 'Albany story' is complex with several chapters and many nuances. The year, 2002, marks the 40th anniversary of one small part of the chronicle. Later that same month, in front of Albany's City Hall, the largest imprisonment of clergy in American history was to occur.

Albany is deep south, the heartland of cotton and peanut country. That area of Georgia had been a hotbed for Ku Klux Klan activity and infamous for lynchings, and past World War II segregation was rigidly maintained. When our integrated group tried to enter the city library, its facilities suddenly closed.

When we sought to play tennis in the city's "colored park," the black attendants were ordered to take the nets down. We were turned away at restaurants, refused rides in taxis, and assailed along the streets. As I walked with a black minister, a bystander thundered: "How can any respectable 'nigra' hang out with such white trash?"

The city of Albany was a major battlefield during the civil rights strug-
gle of the 1960s. The struggle initially was led by field operatives of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who recruited many students from the all-Black Albany State College. Their efforts aroused the African-American community, and the broad-based Albany Movement was formed, intent on confronting harsh discrimination in every area of local life. Among other objectives, the Movement called for an end to segregation, a halt to rampant police brutality, employment of Black bus drivers, inclusion of Blacks on juries, and increased voter registration.

The local officials responded with dogged resistance. Hundreds of demonstrators were jailed. Appeals to President Kennedy and the Justice Department proved ineffective. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who had voiced criticism of the Freedom Riders the previous year, urged that "local leaders talk it out."

The Kennedys were caught between a concern for civil rights and pressing political considerations. In 1960, despite the "Catholic issue," the electorate of Georgia had voted for John F. Kennedy by a comfortable margin over Richard Nixon.

As the Albany Movement became thwarted, frustration and division threatened. Its leadership decided to invite in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., hopeful that he would both solidify the Black community and bring national attention to the struggle. Soon after his arrival, King was imprisoned.

One response was that nearly 100 clergy picketed the White House, asking to see President Kennedy to urge him to speak out on the crisis in Albany. Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, explained that the President was unavailable. He was in his living quarters and not in his office.

A question then was posed to the picketing clergy. Were there any present who could travel to Albany to attend Dr. King's trial? Two of us who volunteered were friends already. Israel Dresner and I had been imprisoned together on an all-clergy Freedom Ride the previous year in Tallahassee, Florida. He was a Reform rabbi in New Jersey. I was serving a largely black congregation on West 104th St. in Manhattan.

A few days later Rabbi Dresner (Si) and I were at the Albany jail to see Dr. King. The scene before us was memorable. The weather was unbearably hot and humid. There were three cells in the black section of the jail, each designed to house one or two inmates. The cells to the left and right were crowded with young people, one with females, the other with males, most of them students from Albany State College. In the middle cell were King and Ralph Abernathy, his principal lieutenant.

As soon as we entered, the youth began to belt out one of the many spirited battle songs of the Albany Movement: "O, freedom, O, freedom, O, freedom over me. And before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be Free!" More than anywhere else during the civil rights struggle, freedom songs were front and center in the Albany campaign.

The singing was powerful and inspirational. But how were we going to
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talk with Dr. King? He motioned us forward. He wanted to speak into our ears. "They're singing like that," he explained as he nodded toward two white officers nearby, "so that they won't hear what we're saying." Our conversation was brief. We explained that we had come to attend his trial the following day.

The trial was a farce. The judge obviously had decided the verdict and sentence before he arrived in court. King was treated with flagrant disrespect, scolded and denigrated, always addressed as Martin. Later we were pleased to hear that we had quietly integrated the courtroom for the first time in its history.

Dr. King soon was released from jail. The reason given was that someone had anonymously paid his bail. What more likely happened is that city officialdom thought it wiser to free him, with the hope that he would leave town. Dr. King stayed, and during the week that followed Si and I were privileged to engage him in conversation, sometimes over fried chicken, sweet potatoes, and collard greens that routinely appeared from homes in the black community. For the first time we became aware of his incisive and often satirical wit.

The same week was filled with other unforgettable events. That Saturday, for example, we spoke at a SNCC voter registration rally at the Shady Grove Baptist Church in nearby Lee County. The next Tuesday night that church burned to the ground. Lightning was given as the official explanation. The following Saturday, we addressed a similar gathering at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church in 'terrible' Terrell County. Two weeks later that church was destroyed by fire.

As we were returning to Albany from the Terrell County meeting late in the evening, we were tailgated along a dark, dusty road by gun-waving, screaming vigilantes whose vehicle kept bumping against ours. Si and I confessed alarm. Could we be gunned down out there in the heart of rural Georgia? We suggested to the Black driver that he go a little faster. "Can't risk that," he explained. "Probably the country sheriff is in that car, and he would love to arrest me for speeding." If we were lucky, the driver continued, they were "chasing us out of the county." We were relieved when the stalkers turned around as we reached the county line.

There were, of course, white people in the south who were working from within to end discrimination. The Albany paper, which staunchly supported segregation, had given coverage to our arrival in the city. Soon there was a telephone call for me at the Mt. Zion Baptist church where we spent some of our time. It was from the newly-appointed minister of a prominent, white Methodist church, one of the six in town. He wanted to thank me for coming. "I can't do that publicly," he went on. "If I did, I would have to leave Albany tomorrow. Some of us are fighting this battle from within." He asked to speak to a local person, then made arrangements to meet me behind a grove of trees a short distance out of town where he gave me a worm personal welcome. There was other evidence that many southern whites played
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a different but positive and important role during that tumultuous time.

The Albany Movement was not yet showing satisfactory results. As Si and I prepared to return north, Dr. King had a request. Would we recruit clergy for a prayer pilgrimage to Albany? He followed that up with a telegram expanding upon the event. "I extend a call to all those who would bear witness to the prophetic faith of our Judeo-Christian tradition," the telegram said in part, "to stand with the people of Albany as they strive for freedom." The prayer pilgrimage was set for Tuesday, August 28.

It was a difficult time of year to reach clergy. Most seemed to be away, on the last leg of their summer vacations. In New York, recruitment headquarters were set up at Grace Methodist Church where I was serving as pastor of the English-language congregation. (Services were held there in Spanish and Japanese as well.) Rev. Norman Eddy of the East Harlem Protestant Parish contacted Rev. Don Benedict of the Chicago Missionary Society and relayed King's request. Si Dresner contacted rabbis. An attempt was made to enlist Catholic priests, but we were told that canon law made their participation impossible, that they could not enter another diocese without the permission of that diocese's bishop. Perhaps more significant, Vatican II would not start until the following month, September 1962, and only later did priests feel free to become involved in such interfaith efforts.

Over eighty from the north appeared in Albany, roughly half of them members of a Chicago interfaith delegation. We were addressed by Dr. King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who cautioned us on two counts. If we did not have $200 in cash with us, do not participate. The Albany Movement and SCLC were in no position to furnish bail. If we had been guilty of any felonies, do not participate. They would be seized upon and magnified to besmirch the entire group. A few chose not to be arrested.

The time had arrived for our witness. Our plan was to line up along the curb in front of City Hall, careful not to obstruct traffic. We would remain two hours, somewhat risky in the early afternoon on a hot summer day in south Georgia. We would read from the scriptures and offer prayer. Everyone seemed resolute but tense. Would we be stopped before we reached City Hall? Would the large crowd that had gathered nearby initiate any kind of violence? Would Police Chief Laurie Pritchett have us arrested, or maybe let us stand and wilt under the blazing sun?

It was 2:00 P.M. As we filed out of Bethel AME Church to waiting cars, we sang, "We Shall Overcome." Soon we were lined up, as planned, facing City Hall. Reporters yelled out questions, but we did not answer. We were there to pray. There were exactly seventy-five of us, 54 Protestant ministers of various denominations, nine rabbis, and twelve lay people, including Catholics from the Chicago area.

Norm Eddy led in prayer. Rev. John Collier, an AME pastor from Newark, N.J., read from the passage in Galatians 6 about bearing one another's burdens. Chief Pritchett ordered us to leave. When no one moved, he
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accused us of coming, "to aid and abet the law violators of this city" and told us to "go back to your homes and clear your own cities of sin and violence." Rabbi Richard Israel, Jewish chaplain at Yale, offered another prayer. The Chief gave a second warning. "You've had your prayer meeting. Now move!" When we stood firm, he said to the police: "All right. Take them in, boys." As we were led away, the crowd that had gathered broke into loud cheers and applause.

We were put into a double line the length of the alleyway alongside City Hall, which also contained the city jail. Perhaps it was here that we experienced our greatest sense of conviction and unity. The police began to book us from the back of the line. We sang throughout the process. As persons were confined to cells within, those of us still outside could hear them sing: "Come by here, my Lord." The nineteen African-Americans were booked separately. So were the six women. As the line shortened, the command was heard: "Take all the rest of the n-----s now!" Eventually only five of us were left. We formed a prayer circle until we were herded inside.

There were far too many of us for the Albany city jail, so we were dispersed to other facilities in the area, singing as paddy wagons carried us in various directions. The last to be booked ended up in the Dougherty County jail, filthy and overrun with rodents and vermin, where there were twenty-seven prisoners and bunks for eighteen. Twelve of our fellow inmates were southern whites, none of them very friendly. One, a Methodist, quickly informed me that he and other Georgia Methodists were in the process of having my ministerial credentials withdrawn. He obviously wasn't aware of the overwhelming support I would receive from my Conference, including a monetary gift from my bishop toward my expenses. The man offered no explanation when I asked him why he had been incarcerated.

As we had agreed in advance, after a prison fast we each paid our $200 bail and were released. Some left the following day. Others remained a little longer. We were never called back to Albany for trial, and over twenty years later I heard that the city was refunding the bail money. I wrote, and a city check for $200 soon arrived without comment.

It has been suggested by some that the civil rights movement in Albany ended in failure. Dr. King himself stated that "I failed to do what I had hoped to do." However, within a year the public library, closed for twelve months because of integration attempts, reopened on an integrated basis. In the fall of 1963 the first black students entered Albany High School. And soon the city commission had removed all segregation statutes from its books. Perhaps of greatest importance, the black community had liberated itself into a pride and purpose that it had not known before.

I have returned to Albany several times over the years. There is a new City Hall. Much more important, segregation has disappeared. The current mayor, elected with the votes of many African-Americans, predicts that he will be the city's last white mayor. The majority of city commissioners are black, as are the Chief of Police and the Superintendent of Schools. The old
Mt. Zion Baptist Church now serves as a Civil Rights Museum. Balanced against signs of progress is continuing 'white flight' to neighboring Lee County. Racial discrimination and conflict have diminished, but serious challenges remain.

Our prayer pilgrimage was a footnote in the total story of the civil rights movement. We had the advantage of journeying for a short time into the deep south, then, returning to the security of our homes hundreds of miles away. I had the added blessing of the enthusiastic support of my African-American congregation. The principal heroes, of course, were those who endured and resisted oppression year in and year out, most of whose names will be forgotten. We met many of them in Albany, black men and women who stood up against evil, who crowded the churches to welcome us, who walked until their feet hurt, and who resolved to make America live up to its profession of "liberty and justice for all."

Chief Prichett (Left) & Northern Churchmen in Albany

Dispersed – in the name of decency.
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Religion: Act of Belief

In trying to bring integration to Albany, GA., the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and his Negro followers have had plenty of armchair support from Northern whites. Last week came more impressive backing—an act of belief. Asked by Dr. King to join a prayer vigil in Albany, 75 Protestant, Jewish and Catholic laymen and clerics submitted to arrest and jail for praying on behalf of the cause of desegregation.

Shortly after 2, one muggy afternoon last week, a convoy of cars drove up Pine Street in downtown Albany, “This looks like the Yankee preachers,” murmured one bystander. Led by the Rev. Ralph Lord Roy, pastor of Manhattan’s Grace Methodist Church, the group lined up in single file outside City Hall. The Northerners included 54 protestant ministers, nine rabbis, six Roman Catholic laymen, four Protestant and two Catholic women active in church affairs; all but 19 of them were white.

“All Right, Reverends.” A Negro minister from Newark began to read from St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Up stepped Laurie Prichett, Albany’s coolheaded, hard-as-nails police chief. “All right, reverends,” he said. “I want to know what your purpose is.” Answered the Rev. Norman Eddy of Manhattan’s interracial East Harlem Protestant parish: “Our purpose is to offer our prayers to God.”

“You have come to aid and abet the law violators of this city,” the chief shot back. “Go back to your homes. Clear your own cities of sin and violence. Disperse - in the name of decency.” Rabbi Richard Israel of Yale University’s Hillel Foundation began to read from the Old Testament. Once more the chief asked them to disperse. Then he turned to his police officers, gave a sharp order. “All right, take them to jail.” The crowd cheered.

The 75 leaders, charged with disorderly conduct and creating a disturbance, were locked up in four of the Albany area jails. Some fasted - perhaps after glancing at the prison fare of cornbread, beans, greens, and fat back. By weeks end, all but 19 ministers were released on $200 bond and went home.

“To Bear Witness.” For most of the prisoners, the prayer crusade fulfilled a desire, as one of them put it, “to bear witness to a belief in morality and justice.” Emily McLees of the United Methodist Church’s Board of National Missions pointed out that on a recent trip abroad, people kept asking her if Dr. King was still in jail (he isn’t). “This made me realize,” she said, “how concerned other colored peoples are about our racial problems.” Added Lutheran Pastor L. W. Halverson of Chicago: “we didn’t come here to be holier than thou. We have a serious problem of our own up North. But we are answering the call of a group of churchmen for help.” Pastor Roy, who promises to drum up recruits for another crusade if King wants one, found the affair “an opportunity to stand up for what we feel is right.”