THE CITIZENS FORUM ON INTEGRATION:
“UNDERGROUND” METHODIST RESPONSE
TO THE BROWN DECISION

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In the course of conducting research for a dissertation, “The Gospel According to St. Mark’s,” which focused on a deaconess-run settlement house established in the French Quarter during the Social Gospel era, I delved into the history of the school desegregation crisis in New Orleans, precipitated in November 1960, when the first black children entered two formerly all-white elementary schools.1 The pastor of the St. Mark’s Methodist Church, Lloyd A. “Andy” Foreman, and his wife, Nyra, broke the white boycott of William Frantz Elementary by leaving their daughter Pamela in kindergarten.

A number of histories have been written about school desegregation in New Orleans, and throughout the materials are sprinkled occasional references to a “group of Methodist ministers” in the city who supported integration in the years between the Brown decision in 1954 and the integration of public schools in 1960. Foreman had not been in New Orleans very long before the crisis occurred, and he had no knowledge of what group the authors might have meant.

After conducting many interviews, I discovered the elusive group, the Citizens Forum on Integration (CFI). In fact, it was not made up solely of Methodist clergy, but Methodist pastors chaired the group, and since the names of other members were never made public, it was apparently identified in the minds of many with The Methodist Church.

This article considers the involvement of two Methodist pastors who served as the first and second (and apparently the only) chairpersons of the group, the Reverend Mr. John Winn and the Reverend Dr. Clarence Snelling. Winn and Snelling worked on the project with James Dombrowski, a former Methodist minister who was investigated by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) just months before the creation of the CFI. The organization which Dombrowski headed, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), was branded subversive by HUAC, which rendered Winn’s and Snelling’s public participation in the CFI even more potentially dangerous than it otherwise would have been.

Race was the defining issue for Methodists in New Orleans in the 1950s and the handing down of the Supreme Court’s decision on *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* on May 17, 1954, was undoubtedly the single most polarizing event of the decade. The next day, the morning newspaper, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, quoted both the Governor of Louisiana and the president of the local school board promising that there would be a significant lag — probably years — before actual change would occur in the New Orleans public schools. Time would prove them correct. Other officials were also quoted, but the most blatant foreshadowing of what would become the South’s campaign of “Massive Resistance” to integration was offered by United States Representative F. Edward Hebert. Referring to Supreme Court decisions in 1832 that could have prevented the Cherokee removal from Georgia, Hebert said, “I am reminded at the moment of what Andrew Jackson told the chief justice of the supreme court, ‘You have handed down the decision. Now let’s see you enforce it.’”

In the same *Times-Picayune* story, the superintendent of local Roman Catholic schools offered a distinctly different response. The Very Reverend Monsignor Henry Bezou said the decision was in accord with what he had expected, “on the basis of natural justice and the clear intent and purpose of the Constitution of the United States.” At its next meeting, the archdiocesan school board (which included Bezou and Archbishop Joseph Rummel) unanimously adopted a statement approving “fully” of the court’s action and deeming it in accord, “with Christian social principles affirming the equality of all men and the rights of all men to serve God in this world and to share equally in the blessings of the beatific vision in heaven.” The board maintained that within its own “religious and educational framework,” integration had operated “satisfactorily and peacefully.” They expressed hope that integration would prove to be, “a pattern for better and more enlightened relationships on all sides.” It is thus ironic that when the time came, the Catholic system failed to integrate concurrently with public schools and provided a satisfactory, all-white alternative for thousands of parents who wanted to avoid integration. Catholic schools integrated two years later than public schools.

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2 "Segregation Void in Public Schools" and “Kennon Is Calm on School Edict,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 18, 1954, 1. The article notes that Hebert lamented, “Why can’t people be sensible and realistic even if you are a member of the supreme court.”

3 "Segregation Void in Public Schools" and “Kennon Is Calm on School Edict,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 18, 1954, 1.


In June 1954, the *Times-Picayune* reported that the New Orleans Council of Churches had passed a resolution deeming *Brown*, "consistent with the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ" (although they applauded the court's decision not to call for immediate implementation). The Council asked Louisiana legislators to exercise "clear and calm judgment and Christian good will" so that the matter might be resolved "in accordance with the ideals of our Christian faith."6

The legislators were clearly not persuaded to do so, or else they had quite different pictures of what "Christian good will" might look like than the Council of Churches. Governor Robert F. Kennon and most other state and local officials were extremely vocal in their opposition to the ruling and frequently stated their intention to do everything they could to insure that integration of Louisiana's public schools would never take place. Their rhetoric and the machinations they used to try to prevent integrating Louisiana schools have been well documented.7

In the face of all the opposition to *Brown*, it took great courage for any white southerner to speak out for the principles of racial equality or for the strategy of school integration, and those who did so were branded "traitors" to their southern heritage, and often much worse. However, some white integrationists were perceived as being even further outside the mainstream of southern life than others. These individuals included the people who supported the Southern Conference on Human Welfare (SCHW) and its offshoot, the SCEF. The history of these important organizations has been discussed in several sources.8

In her examination of the work of Methodist women toward changing racial attitudes in the United States, historian Alice Knotts credits the "economic and racial social critique" offered by the white radicals of the SCHW network with influencing the leaders of the Methodist women's society toward racial tolerance. In reality, the influence between the SCHW/SCEF and Methodism flowed both ways. The Executive Director of the SCEF organization was James Dombrowski, a former Methodist minister who had left the pulpit and chose to live out his deep commitment to the Social Gospel as Director of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and then as director of the SCHW and later its offshoot, the SCEF.

Other influential Methodists were also involved with SCEF. For instance, Albert Barnett, a New Testament professor at Scarritt College who had profound influence on the lives and theological understandings of several deaconesses who in turn helped shaped the Methodist community in New Orleans, was a member of SCEF's Board of Directors. Barnett had earned his divinity degree at Emory University in 1921. His college studies overlapped with those of Dombrowski, who graduated from Emory in 1923, and it seems possible, if not likely, that they knew one another there. Certainly, they were friends in later life and Barnett was one of the more active members of SCEF's board.

Dombrowski, whose biographer chose the subtitle, "An American Heretic," for his life story, was a Christian Socialist. He studied at Union Theological Seminary with Socialists Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry F. Ward. While Niebuhr had significant differences with Social Gospel theology, Ward was a prominent Social Gospel thinker (and critic) and a founder of the Methodist Federation for Social Service (later the Methodist Federation for Social Action, or MFSA), the most activist arm of the Methodist Church outside its women's organizations, and one usually regarded as a classic Social Gospel phenomenon. Dombrowski felt that Harry F. Ward was a "pivotal influence" on his life.

Dombrowski's own 1936 book, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America*, examined the lives of several influential Christian Socialists. He criticized a number of Social Gospel leaders for not taking the economic and social critique of the Social Gospel far enough and his work subtly collapses the Social Gospel with Christian Socialism. Further, in 1932, he had

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helped lead a European tour organized by the international secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Among other stops, the group spent two weeks or so in the USSR. Dombrowski was detained by customs agents on his return to the United States because, while in Moscow he had purchased several posters which the agents deemed "seditious." Influenced by Harry Ward and perhaps also by Depression-era conditions at home, Dombrowski was impressed with what he saw in the USSR and believed that Russia demonstrated that socialization of resources offered hope for humankind.\(^{13}\)

On the national scene in 1954, coverage of race-related events was sharing newspaper space with the decline of Senator Joseph McCarthy's influence in Washington, DC. However, McCarthy's personal political demise by no means ended the Red Scare and the legacy of distrust and suspicion which he helped to create. Opponents of civil rights for black citizens often used the Red Scare to further their own agendas. A United States Senator from Mississippi, James Eastland, was a master of this tactic. One writer said, "Supporting both McCarthyism and the Citizens' Councils, Eastland used his position on the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee to exacerbate the fears of white southerners by investigating alleged subversives."\(^{14}\) As a man who was willing to call for an investigation into alleged Communist influence on the Supreme Court itself regarding the \textit{Brown} decision, Eastland found Dombrowski, with his avowed belief in Christian Socialism and his former trip to the USSR as evidence, a perfect target.

In March, 1954, Senator Eastland personally conducted HUAC hearings in New Orleans on Dombrowski and other SCHW and SCEF supporters, such as Clifford and Virginia Durr. Virginia Durr's relationship to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who was her brother-in-law, may have been an underlying cause of Eastland's crusade. Protests to the head of the Senate Judiciary Committee, including one signed by Eleanor Roosevelt, May McLeod Bethune, and Harry F. Ward, were unsuccessful at stopping Eastland's witch-hunt. Considering the lengths to which the Senator went to paint integrationists as Communist supporters, one witness at the hearings concluded that, "Eastland saw a Red behind every black." The SCEF organization was branded a subversive, Communist-leaning group.\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\)Frank T. Adams, \textit{James A. Dombrowski}, 45-49.


Accusations of supporting Communism continued to dog the SCEF and to limit its achievements for years to come. In 1963, Dombrowski was arrested by New Orleans police, and his and the organization’s papers were seized. He entered a lawsuit regarding his arrest and eventually saw the United States Supreme Court issue the 1965 *Dombrowski v. Pfister* ruling, which said that the Louisiana Subversive Activities Criminal Control Act was unconstitutional because its provisions created a “chilling effect” on free speech.16 However, in March 1954, no such ruling existed to lessen the damage the Eastland hearings inflicted on SCEF and on the lives of the individuals who were investigated.

It was less than two months after the Eastland hearings when the *Brown* decision was handed down. Dombrowski, in conjunction with Rabbi Julian Feibelman of Temple Sinai in New Orleans, immediately began to organize a group to support integration in New Orleans public schools. Feibelman admired Dombrowski. However, the Rabbi later wrote in his autobiography that he limited association with him because everything Dombrowski or SCEF “touched was doomed at once to failure.” He attributed this not to the charges of Communism, but rather to the fact that SCEF was “completely identified with integration.”17

Feibelman was correct about the public identification of SCEF with that cause, and certainly, SCEF had made no attempt to hide its views. One tactic the Louisiana Legislature employed to avoid school desegregation was the passage of constitutional amendments which would make integration illegal. From time to time, advertisements appeared in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* urging citizens to pressure their legislators and the governor to resist integration, often headlined with the phrase, “Uphold Segregation!” One advertisement which urged the public to vote for an amendment that required racially segregated public schools was actually sponsored by the state’s Joint Legislative Committee and its chairman, state Senator W. M. Rainach.18 Dombrowski’s organization placed a large advertisement in the July 6, 1954 issue of the *Times-Picayune*. The design was quite similar to the segregationists’ ads, but its headline read, “Uphold Integration!” The three column by thirteen-inch ad featured positive quotes from the statements on the *Brown* decision issued by the Archdiocesan School Board, the New Orleans Council of Churches, and the Rabbinical Council of New Orleans. Styled as an appeal to the governor and state legislators, “to uphold the law of the land and the laws of God and of conscience,” it contained a form which could be cut out and sent to the governor or to one’s senator, asking that they, “take steps to comply with the ruling of the Supreme Court con-


cerning segregation in public schools.” Small print at the bottom stated that the advertisement was sponsored by the “Southern Conference Educational Fund, Inc., Aubrey Williams, President; Dr. James A. Dombrowski, Director, 822 Perdido Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.”

Since Williams did not reside in Louisiana, Dombrowski was the obvious target for local reaction. His willingness to place the advertisement so soon after the Eastland hearings, which were traumatic for all concerned, is a tribute to his commitment and courage.

However, recognizing that a group which was not already so closely identified as pro-integration might be more effective at swaying public opinion, Dombrowski and Rabbi Feibelman organized the Citizens Forum on Integration (CFI). Feibelman had also become publicly associated with the cause, and it was decided that it would be beneficial to have a chairperson who did not have a high profile in the city. The person chosen was a Methodist clergyman, the Reverend Mr. John M. Winn.

Winn had grown up as a member of the Algiers Methodist Church in the West Bank section of New Orleans. After graduating from Tulane University, Winn attended seminary at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He was ordained by the Louisiana Annual Conference in 1953. In June 1954, Winn was appointed to Felicity Methodist Church in New Orleans and thus moved back to his home town.

Winn’s grounding in Christianity had led him to believe that segregation was not in keeping with the tenets of the faith. He was recruited to participate in the CFI by Feibelman, and came to admire Dombrowski tremendously. Since he had moved back to New Orleans in June, he was not familiar with the Eastland hearings which had occurred in March. By the time he realized exactly how controversial his actions would prove to be, he had already become so deeply involved, and was so impressed with Dombrowski as an individual, that he did not withdraw from the CFI, nor from SCEF, which he had also joined as a member of the Board of Directors.

“[Dombrowski] was a person who was regularly vilified, but he was the politest, kindest person you’d ever want to meet. He was a real example of Christian nobility, and I can’t recall anything he was coercive about. When I realized what hot water I could get into, the fact that he was such a genuine person made me want to stand with him,” Winn said.

As noted above, the references to the CFI in the various histories of the period, such as The Second Battle of New Orleans, include no names of individuals affiliated with it, and indeed, the names of participants were deliberately never mentioned in conjunction with many of its activities. Winn likens the group to “an underground movement,” noting, in understatement,
that "it was not popular" for white citizens to be associated with the drive for integration.23 Because of the ever-present threat of continuedHUAC harassment, and because support for integration was so generally unpopular, the group did not even have a membership roster. Clarence Snelling said that this was a deliberate strategy in case the FBI or some other agency should demand to see the list of members. A list which did not exist could not be produced. Each time a business meeting was held to plan a public event, a piece of paper was circulated, and those persons who were willing to be listed publicly as individual sponsors of that particular event would sign the paper. The group was not in actuality comprised solely of Methodist clergy. With the rabbi, it also included the pastor at First Unitarian Church and several non-clergy members of the social work faculty at Tulane University.24 However, since two Methodist clergymen, Winn and Snelling, served as the first and second chairpersons of the group, and since only a few leaders' names were revealed, it must have appeared to many as though the group consisted mainly of Methodist ministers.

One of the first activities the CFI conducted was a petition drive to urge the New Orleans School Board to make immediate plans to integrate the schools. Dombrowski circulated the petition and it garnered around 180 signatures. John Winn was with the group that presented it at a School Board meeting on September 12, 1955 and his name was mentioned in the front-page newspaper story about it. Feibelman and local activist Rosa Keller spoke for the petition on that occasion. Keller, who had been raised as a Presbyterian, and who had learned a great deal about prejudice through her marriage to a Jewish man, later talked to historian Kim Lacy Rogers about what happened at the meeting. "They practically threw us out of the place, and such howling and screaming you never heard . . . . This is very unsettling when grown people behave like that. It was very frightening," she said. Feibelman received threatening calls and letters as a result of the ensuing press coverage, and Keller was castigated by acquaintances and ostracized even by her friends for sometime thereafter.25

Winn was interviewed on television about other CFI activities that year, and since his family did not yet own a set, he went to a parishioner's home to watch the coverage. Almost fifty years later, he still feels a sense of gratitude, relief, and even some surprise, that he was not asked to leave the Felicity congregation at the time. Other public events the CFI sponsored in 1955 and 1956 were more consequential than the petition. Winn recalled that "the point of the Citizens Forum" was to take advantage of experience other

cities had gained in implementing integration in their schools. He said their rationale was, “It’s just a matter of time. Nobody knows what ‘deliberate speed’ means, but it’s coming, so we would be crazy if we didn’t find where there’s a laboratory of experience in the country. What other cities have peacefully and successfully made the transition from separate to integrated schools?”

The first speaker from such a city brought to New Orleans by the CFI was a pastor from St. Louis, the Reverend Mr. Allen Hackett of Pilgrim Congregational Church. “This guy was one of the most articulate people that I had ever heard,” Winn recalled. The CFI wanted the meetings to be held in a public school building, “for symbolic purposes,” and permission had to be obtained from the School Board. “The board refused, so we threatened a lawsuit and they acquiesced,” Winn said.

Hackett spoke on December 15, 1955, at Rabouin School on Camp Street. The New Orleans Times-Picayune noted that the Young Men’s Business Club had tried to organize a boycott of the meeting because of the involvement of SCEF and that the School Board had initially refused the use of the building because of the club’s objections. Despite the obstacles, Winn said, “This first Citizens’ Forum made a big splash.” He recalled:

[Hackett] was interviewed on television and we had a large crowd at the school. Most of them were people who were opposed to what we were doing, and most of them were loud and abusive, and there was a lot of press coverage, which to be honest with you, was exactly what we wanted, because we wanted to keep the public eye on, and have the newspaper report on, what other communities had done peacefully to bring this about. And we brought a succession of speakers, but none of the men was nearly the rousing success that the first one was. The television time became less available, but they were always covered in the papers.

The Picayune story on the first forum was accompanied by a photograph of Hackett at the podium, flanked by a panel of persons who offered questions after his presentation. One of the panelists was Clarence Snelling, who was then appointed to the Wesley Foundation at Tulane University, and his photograph thus appeared as a participant in the event. Snelling became the chairperson of the CFI after Winn was assigned to begin a new church in Metairie, a New Orleans suburb, and urged to curtail his involvement with SCEF by church officials who feared it would hinder the progress of the new congregation being planted in what was essentially a white-flight community. Snelling recalled that the District Superintendent, “was not a bad man, but . . . [he] was a political animal, and the . . . cabinet did not want preach-

ers to get involved in race relations. They were being very, very cautious, and so John had to make a decision — either he was going to build the church, or he was going to be in SCEF.”

Snelling was the son of a Methodist deaconess, Virgia Mae Hahn, and the grandson of Susan Elizabeth Murph Snelling, a driving force behind the establishment of the Memorial Mercy Home-Hospital for unmarried mothers. After the birth and adoption of the babies, Snelling’s grandmother, Susan, would help the women find jobs. She eventually obtained training that let her teach young women the skills necessary to become Licensed Practical Nurses. Snelling says she also wrote the first law regarding adoption passed in Louisiana and lobbied the legislature for its enactment in the 1920s. Snelling’s grandfather, the Reverend Dr. John G. Snelling, was also a Methodist minister, and after he rotated off a stint as a Presiding Elder, he asked “to be part of the work with the women.” Snelling said. His grandfather persuaded three Annual Conferences to take the home-hospital work on as a joint project, and he was assigned to the nearby Louisiana Avenue Methodist Church.

In part because he lived with his grandparents while he attended Tulane University, Snelling views them as “a strong influence” on his life. He recalls that his grandmother’s commitment to racial justice had led her to resign from the Daughters of the American Revolution because the New Orleans chapter protested an invitation to singer Marian Anderson, who was Black, to perform at their headquarters in Washington, DC in 1939. Just as a number of white deaconesses and students at Scarritt College joined the NAACP in Nashville in the 1930s, a number of white Methodists in New Orleans in the 1950s decided to join the NAACP to express solidarity with black New Orleanians. Snelling was among this group. However, the white people were discouraged by the NAACP from joining. Dr. Prince Taylor, who was then editor of the version of the Christian Advocate published in New Orleans by the all-black membership Central Jurisdiction, served as a “wonderful advisor” for the CFI. It was Taylor who explained to Snelling that “[w]ith the FBI and southern conservatives maligning every integration organization that came along as being a communist front, the Urban League and NAACP wanted to be very cautious not to get real practicing communists into their groups. They knew how to screen blacks. They didn’t have the network to screen whites, and therefore, they did not want white members during that period.”

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The intention of the NAACP to distance itself from Communism is easily seen in its own press releases and announcements from the period. For instance, amid its other business at the annual meeting held in October, the state-wide NAACP adopted a resolution condemning Communism and calling on the local branches, “to be constantly on the alert for attempts of communists and their sympathizers or supporters of any totalitarian system to infiltrate and gain control of any units of our organization.” In keeping with that goal, the NAACP returned Dombrowski’s dues, which he faithfully sent for many years, refusing ever to accept him as a member. White liberals were thus forced to stand alone, even without the unqualified support of the mainline black organizations that worked for integration.

Not surprisingly, since there were so few white people willing to expose themselves to the dangers involved in promoting civil rights, Snelling and Dombrowski became close friends. Snelling joined the board of SCEF. He recalled one particular SCEF/CFI project in New Orleans, a petition to the mayor asking that the city government appropriate funds to train police officers and public service employees, such as bus drivers and streetcar conductors, on how to handle race relations. The petition also called for a major education effort targeted at the entire population of the city, preparing New Orleans residents for integration, “instead of spending all our taxpayers’ money on lawyers to fight the inevitable.”

Four men presented that petition: Dr. Samuel Gandy, the Chaplain at the Methodist-related and historically black Dillard University, who later became Dean of the Howard University School of Theology; Rabbi Feibelman; the Episcopalian chaplain at Tulane University; and Snelling. They went to the mayor’s office about two o’clock, hoping they had waited late enough so that the story would not be carried in the afternoon paper. “But lo and behold, they put a box on the front page that said, ‘Group Presents Petition on School and Bus Integration.’ The last line said, ‘The group included the Rev. Clarence H. Snelling, Jr. (continued on page so and so).’ The rest of the story and the other three names were buried somewhere inside, and mine was on the front page.” Snelling’s father owned an insurance agency in Denham Springs, a town near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the Ku Klux Klan “attacked his office” and burned a cross in front of his house that night. “Every time my name was in the paper that happened, and he lost a few customers,” Snelling said.

Snelling felt that his position as minister at the Wesley Foundation at Tulane University kept him somewhat insulated from negative reactions within the churches to his activism. “My board was ‘second-hand’ — it had ministers, students, graduate students, and a number of laypeople, but the

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majority were members of the WSCS, and you could nearly always count on the women. So I was protected, and I thought I had an obligation to be active.” Even at the campus ministry, however, he found he was not immune to repercussions. Each spring his board met to consider asking the District Superintendent that Snelling be reappointed. “Every spring,” he recalled, “the conversation took a little longer.” When it took an hour in 1958 for the board to decide to keep him, he, “got disgusted waiting in my office for them to decide I should still have a job.”

Snelling had a fellowship application on his desk, and while he waited, he filled it out. He was awarded a Danforth grant and went to Drew University for doctoral work. When he left for New Jersey, he had to resign from the SCEF board because the rules stated that only residents of the South could serve. However, he did not give up his relationship with SCEF. “They’d use me for fund-raising in the East. Jim [Dombrowski] would come up and take me to some party in Connecticut, and I’d make a speech about what SCEF was doing in the South, and people would write checks.” He also spoke at a large fund-raiser at the Waldorf each year, where he met Eleanor Roosevelt and other luminaries. For two years, Snelling served as master of ceremonies at the event, where $10,000 to $12,000 would be raised. He “made a pitch for money,” led folk songs like “If I Had a Hammer,” and introduced Martin Luther King, Jr. as the speaker one year and Fred Shuttlesworth the next. “We raised a bunch of money,” he said.

His departure also signaled the end of the CFI. “It went out of existence after the year and half I chaired it,” Snelling recalled. “We had at least six, maybe ten, of these public forums, and Jim really felt that we had done what we had intended to do.”

Conclusions

As New Orleans moved toward the horrible confrontations of the 1960 school desegregation crisis, white mainstream society found the threat of having to make real change in the order of things, including the public schools, becoming increasingly real. Methodist liberals were, correspondingly, increasingly unable to avoid choosing sides in the conflict.

In his important book, *The Social Gospel in the South*, which deals in part with the work of the women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South toward racial understanding and equality, John Patrick McDowell notes that Southern Methodist women were influenced, “by an interplay of religious and cultural factors.” This is a profound observation, rather than the self-evident statement that it might appear to be, and its relevance to this discussion deserves elaboration.

Many social scientists regard religion as the primary "glue" that holds cultures together, in part because shared understandings of how the universe functions tend to create shared values for living. Meting out punishment to individuals who step outside the boundaries of culturally accepted behavior is not merely tolerated by religious authorities, but is oftentimes considered to be their particular responsibility. There has been an undeniable tendency on the part of the church, at least since the 4th century, to maintain the status quo and to discourage, if not punish, those who agitate for change.

More specifically, the assertion of historian Samuel Hill that Protestant churches in the South were vital to the maintenance of segregation is no doubt accurate. Hill suggests that the phenomenal success of organized Christianity in the region was linked to its use as a tool for "sanctifying" white supremacy. Now that this aspect of "southernness" is no longer quite so prominent, Hill has questioned whether it will be possible for churches to "tie their attractiveness to other features of life . . . and thereby preserve . . . [a] role in the society."\(^{42}\)

Yet while assessing the "interplay" of religion and culture and acknowledging that the two can often seem almost indistinguishable (as when the adjective "God-given" is applied to the phrase "southern way of life," used as a euphemism for segregation), it is important to remember that Christianity also has a history of serving as a catalyst for positive social change. With regard to racial conflict in the American South, it is easy to discover tens of thousands of individuals who were pleased to use Christianity as a tool to sanctify the culture of segregation, and it is also possible to discover courageous followers of Christ, such as Jim Dombrowski, who felt they had to step outside the bounds of the institutional church in order to live with integrity. It is far less easy to discover, and finally to name, those individuals who chose the more uncomfortable stance of living, what they believed to be faithful Christian witness with its spoken or implied critique of the church's submission to cultural values, while still remaining, at least to some degree successfully, inside the framework of the institutional church in the South. They did, however, exist.

I believe that the Brown decision was a catalyst that forced these Methodists to distinguish and eventually to make a clear choice between their Christian convictions and their cultural backgrounds. These individuals, including Winn, Snelling, and the Methodist women discussed in my dissertation, helped bring about change in the New Orleans of the 1950s.

Acting as a very small minority within a deeply racist culture, they were committed to racial justice and took significant risks to try to bring it about.  

Regarding the post-Brown era as a whole, John Winn, who assumed early leadership of the CFI despite the professional risks associated with the position, said, “Those were exciting days — there was no lack of definition, if you were interested in being defined.” Discussing some of the apparent failures of nerve on the part of liberals, such as the one that kept Archbishop Rummel from integrating Catholic schools when he had said that he would, Winn explained:

> What salved the liberal conscience in that day . . . is that they agreed in principle with the concept of integration, and it was almost like, that’s what we can contribute. If we can get the better part of society or a local community to agree in principle that it’s right, then those other doors will open. And so that was the position that [liberals] were always taking, they were agreeing in principle."

The stories of Winn, Snelling, and others who took courageous public stands supporting the principle of integration — stands which their cultural backgrounds would not have led them to in the absence of their theological beliefs — need to be celebrated and need to be included in our assessment of Methodism in the turbulent era of Civil Rights.

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43 The Women’s Society of Christian Service (WSCS) and its predecessor organizations in New Orleans, along with various Methodist deaconesses, had been working quietly for racial understanding and equality since as early as 1917, as documented in my dissertation (Ellen Jeffery Blue, “The Gospel According to St. Mark’s”) and as reflected in Snelling’s comment that he “could nearly always count on the women” (Clarence H. Snelling, Jr., interview by author, New Orleans, La., Jan. 19, 2001).