

12-2021

Sympathy and Disfavor: The Brethren in Christ Church and Civil Rights, 1950-1965

David Weaver-Zercher
Messiah University, dzercher@messiah.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed/13

Recommended Citation

Weaver-Zercher, David, "Sympathy and Disfavor: The Brethren in Christ Church and Civil Rights, 1950-1965" (2021). *Biblical, Religious, & Philosophical Studies Educator Scholarship*. 13.
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed/13

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society. This content is freely provided to promote scholarship for personal study and not-for-profit educational use.

Sympathy and Disfavor: The Brethren in Christ Church and Civil Rights, 1950-1965

By David Weaver-Zercher*

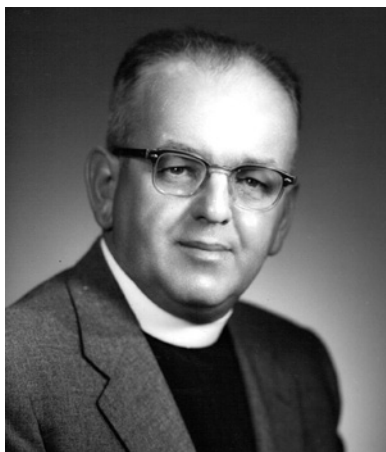
In May 1957, six leaders from Anabaptist-related churches participated in a Mennonite Central Committee-sponsored learning tour of the American South.¹ In addition to visiting Birmingham, Atlanta, and other southern cities, the group spent a day at Koinonia Farm, a Christian agricultural cooperative located near Americus, Georgia. Founded by Clarence Jordan in the early 1940s, Koinonia Farm sought to defy the region's white supremacist assumptions by building a Christian community in which blacks and whites could live, work, and worship together. Among



Koinonia Farm, Americus, Georgia, circa 1955. Photo courtesy of Koinonia Farm.

* David Weaver-Zercher is Professor of American Religious History at Messiah University, Mechanicsburg, PA.

¹ "MCC News and Notes," *Evangelical Visitor*, June 3, 1957, 14. The other men were David Habegger (General Conference Mennonite Church), Clarence Lutz (Lancaster Mennonite Conference), Paul Peachey (Mennonite Church), J. Harold Sherk (MCC Peace Section), and Burton Yost (General Conference Mennonite Church).



John N. Hostetter, editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*, participated in a Mennonite Central Committee tour of the American South in 1957. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

the tour's participants was John N. Hostetter, former pastor of the Clarence Center (NY) Brethren in Christ Church and current editor of the denomination's periodical, the *Evangelical Visitor*.

A few weeks after the trip's conclusion, Hostetter recounted for Brethren in Christ readers what he had seen and heard. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship, Hostetter explained, and that was the goal of the farm's residents. Indeed, this brave interracial community aspires to develop "a New Testament type of Christian brotherhood" where there "are no distinctions of economic status, social prestige, color, or creed," a goal made all the more audacious

by the community's location on land previously used for lynchings. The community's approach to race is often met with violence, said Hostetter, a reality that afflicted his mind one night as he lay awake in a Koinonia guesthouse. Finding sleep was difficult, he said, for "I found myself listening for gunfire as cars came by on the highway." Hostetter's mind was further troubled by the fact that many of the local terrorists were churchgoers. Some, he said, were leaders in their local congregations.²

In the spring of 1957, the American Civil Rights Movement was fast gaining momentum. Building on the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and inspired by the success of the Montgomery bus boycotts in 1955-56, some African-American families were making plans that spring to integrate previously all-white public schools. One of their first efforts in that regard would take place later that year in Little Rock, Arkansas, where the Little Rock Nine would gain lasting renown for integrating the city's fortress-like Central High School. In other words, even as Hostetter and his fellow Anabaptist leaders were spending restless nights

² John N. Hostetter, "Koinonia," *Evangelical Visitor*, June 17, 1957, 2, 13.

at Koinonia Farm, families in Little Rock were strategizing with NAACP lawyers on how to secure the educations their children deserved to receive.

How did the Brethren in Christ Church respond to the Civil Rights Movement and, more generally, to the aspirations of their black American neighbors in the 1950s and 1960s? How did it respond to the call by Martin Luther King Jr. and other black leaders urging their white brothers and sisters to join them in their cause? To say that the largely rural, largely northern, and overwhelmingly white Brethren in Christ Church didn't respond is not too far from the truth, though it's not entirely true. Many Brethren in Christ leaders were troubled by de jure segregation in the South, and by racism more generally, and some leaders made their disgust clear in their speaking and writing. A few went even further, expressing their heartfelt support for the efforts being taken to correct these injustices. As for the denomination as a whole, in June 1963, just a few months before the March on Washington, the Brethren in Christ General Conference passed a lengthy resolution that lamented America's long history of "racial prejudice" and expressed "sympathy" for the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.³

That said, the response from the Brethren in Christ Church was neither vigorous nor sustained, more half-hearted than full-throated. In many ways it echoed the response of other white evangelical churches that the Brethren in Christ aligned themselves with in the 1950s, often against more theologically liberal Christian traditions. Even as it expressed sympathy for the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, the Brethren in Christ Church, in a second official statement on the matter (adopted in 1964), registered "disfavor" for activist means of protest that, in its view, were overly assertive and threatening to law and order.⁴ Committed to the popular evangelical notion that social change is best and most faithfully advanced through the conversion of sinful individuals, and steeped in an Anabaptist view of nonresistance that shrank from coercive political strategies, the Brethren in Christ Church remained a largely silent observer of the most important

³ "Statement on Race Relations," *Minutes of the Ninety-Third Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church*, Article XV, June 12-17, 1963, 45-46.

⁴ "Racial Question," *Minutes of the Ninety-Fourth Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church*, Article XXI, June 10-15, 1964, 73.

social movement in twentieth-century America.

This article, the first of two on the Brethren in Christ response to the Civil Rights Movement, picks up the story in the early 1950s and runs to 1965, that is, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and about the time that Martin Luther King Jr. was extending his anti-racist work to America's northern cities. The second article, which will appear in the April 2022 issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, picks up the story in 1966, when urban uprisings were becoming commonplace on the American landscape, and when a younger generation of Brethren in Christ church members began asking a new set of questions about the proper response to America's racial divide.

The Brethren in Christ Church and race, circa 1950

Despite its deeply rooted commitment to evangelism and its professed openness to new converts, the Brethren in Christ Church in North America was not much more diverse in 1950 than it was at its founding in the late 1770s. White persons of Western European ancestry, many of them Swiss-German, constituted the overwhelming majority of nearly every Brethren in Christ congregation in the United States and Canada, an ethnic predominance that was even more pronounced in the domains of congregational and denominational leadership. Most Brethren in Christ congregations were located in rural areas of the Northeast and Midwest—in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Kansas—which, more than many regions of the United States, were largely white in their racial composition. In states where the Civil Rights Movement gained early momentum, and in the Deep South more generally, there were no Brethren in Christ congregations at all.⁵

Even the denomination's urban missions were not significantly interracial in the decades leading up to 1950. By the middle of the twentieth century, the Brethren in Christ Church had established or absorbed

⁵ According to the "Church and Sunday School Statistical and Financial Report, 1950," there were approximately 135 Brethren in Christ congregations in the United States in 1950. Of that 135, nearly 75 percent were located in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, or Kansas. The only congregations that might be considered southern were nine in rural Kentucky, two in rural Virginia, and an urban mission in Orlando, Florida.



Rachel Flowers, in a class at Messiah Bible School, circa 1918. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

urban missions in at least 10 American cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, Buffalo, San Francisco, Dayton, and Detroit. These mission endeavors often brought Brethren in Christ people into contact with ethnic and religious others—Catholics, Jews, and newer European immigrants—but they rarely brought them into contact with African Americans who, for the most part, lived in other parts of these segregated cities and who, before World War II, were often a small minority of each city’s total population.⁶ The Brethren in Christ were not averse to having African Americans take part in their ministries. In fact, the founding charter of Messiah Bible School, issued in 1907, invited applicants for admission “irrespective of race,” an openness that led to a handful of black students in the school’s first decades.⁷ Still, their ministries were not developed with African Americans in mind. In a full-page *Evangelical Visitor* feature on the denomination’s urban missions, published in 1937, C. N. Hostetter Jr. writes about “city folk” and “city masses,” but except for noting the presence of Jews near the Chicago Mission, he doesn’t mention

⁶ One of few exceptions was the conversion of Rhoda M. Scott, who was baptized by Solomon G. Engle at the Philadelphia Mission in 1907. For Scott’s favorable account of her contacts with the Brethren in Christ (“... their treatment of me tells me they are children of God, and I love them all”), see her letter to the editor, *Evangelical Visitor*, September 2, 1907, 9. Scott’s way of identifying herself at the beginning of her letter reveals the uniqueness of her situation (“I am the colored sister who was baptized. . .”).

⁷ The entire line reads “irrespective of race, color, sex, creed or faith, who believe in the deity of Jesus Christ.” See *Minutes of the Incorporating Board of the Messiah Bible School and Missionary Training Home*, as Authorized by the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church (Harrisburg, PA: Press of Hill News, 1907), 14. In 1916 Rachel H. Flowers became the first African American student to enroll at Messiah. See Christina Thomas, “The Life of Rachel H. Flowers (1900-1988),” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 43, no. 2 (August 2020): 168-202.

⁸ C. N. Hostetter Jr., “Rural and City Missions of the Brethren in Christ,” *Evangelical Visitor*, August 28-29, 1937, 47.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



A Brethren Christ tent revival in rural Kentucky, circa 1920. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

the ethnic or racial makeup of those being encountered or evangelized.⁸

It's possible that the most sustained interactions between Brethren in Christ church people and African Americans before 1950 occurred in Kentucky, where the denomination started a number of rural missions beginning in the 1920s. According to historian Carlton O. Wittlinger, an early tent meeting conducted by missionaries Albert and Margie Engle attracted a number of black attendees, who stood outside the tent while whites occupied the seats inside.

The Engles found this arrangement troubling, but when they invited the African-American listeners to join the whites gathered under the tent, the white congregants threatened to boycott subsequent services.⁹ Once they perceived the challenge of integrating their mission work, the Engles chose to acquiesce to the region's reigning racial orthodoxy—and, in a move that would be repeated at the denomination's Chicago Mission four decades later, they decided to concentrate their ministry on the local white community.

There were, of course, Brethren in Christ people who encountered black and brown people on a daily basis, and who oriented their ministries to

⁹ Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 534.

them. Beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Brethren in Christ Church sent missionaries to both India and Africa where, with the support of colonial authorities, they succeeded in building mission stations, making converts, and starting Brethren in Christ churches. Missionary reports from these regions, which appeared regularly in the *Evangelical Visitor*, acknowledged racial differences and often made one, two, or all three of the following points: (1) God loves people of all races equally, and all people are therefore equal in God's sight; (2) colonized people's desire for independence is understandable, but their spiritual well-being matters more than their political circumstances; and (3) it is often helpful for Euro-American whites to be in charge of the church, the government, and other social institutions, because supposedly "less civilized" people are frequently unprepared to assume such significant responsibilities. In other words, Brethren in Christ missionaries at midcentury saw it as white people's responsibility to "lift" nonwhites to the degree that they would one day be able to run the institutions that whites had put into place. In some cases, Brethren in Christ missionaries used the phrase "black chauvinism" to describe the desire of black Africans to achieve independence from white authorities prematurely.¹⁰

The paternalistic view of black Africans that sometimes appeared in the *Evangelical Visitor* was complemented by the exoticization of North American blacks. References to specific black individuals do not appear often in the *Visitor* in the early 1950s, but when they do, they're almost always presented in one of two ways: as inspiring models of Christian devotion (usually black women and children) or as sources of comic relief (usually black men). On the spiritual inspiration side, we find the story of Chloe, who was "always singing the praises of her Lord and telling others who would listen about him"; the story of the black cleaning woman who handed over her meager earnings to support African missions; and the

¹⁰ Arthur M. Climenhaga, "A Review of Missionary Essentials," *Evangelical Visitor*, October 13, 1952, 12. For another critique of Africans pushing too quickly for their independence, see A. R. Brown, "Think Black If You Can," a piece first published in the *South African Pioneer* and reprinted in the *Evangelical Visitor* at the request of Brethren in Christ missionary Ruth Hunt (*Evangelical Visitor*, August 2, 1954, 11). Writing about Nyasaland (now Malawi), Brown says "the mass of the people in these parts [are] illiterate, unthinking, irresponsible; and so many of the few educated ones self-centered," a racist perspective that goes unquestioned in the *Visitor* and thereby passes as expert opinion.

story of Teddy, a boy from a troubled home who converted to Christianity and prayed for the ability to resist temptation.¹¹ On the comic relief side, African-American men are sometimes used to illustrate a notable lack of self-awareness, for instance, the black deacon who ended his prayer by saying, “Use me, O Lord, use me in thy work—specially in an advisory capacity.”¹² In other cases, the humor is less focused on the black person’s simplemindedness and more focused on his or her inability to master the English language. For instance, a May 1950 issue of the *Evangelical Visitor* included this stand-alone blurb: “It is said that an old Negro, in reading a well-known hymn which contains the line, ‘Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,’ mistook the word ‘sense’ and gave this odd version: ‘Judge not the Lord by feeble saints.’” A few years later, another “old Negro” shows up in an article about the importance of reading well, warning that “de fine print [can] take away all dat de big print gibbs you.”¹³ Vignettes such as these did not originate with Brethren in Christ writers (they were borrowed from other sources, typically other Christian publications, and incorporated into the *Visitor* by editor John N. Hostetter), but they no doubt shaped and reinforced Brethren in Christ people’s views on African Americans. Combined with the missions-rooted narratives on the need for African uplift, they signified a genteel white supremacy that perceived white culture as superior to black culture, whether in Africa or America.

In all of this, midcentury Brethren in Christ leaders fell closely in line with other white evangelical leaders in the American North, who recognized blacks as spiritual allies, even as they demonstrated disdain toward black people and their communities. To be sure, some white evangelicals, especially in the South, viewed blacks with far greater disdain: as inherently inferior to whites and grave threats to the social order, views they propagated to justify Jim Crow laws, anti-miscegenation statutes, and other forms of racial oppression.¹⁴ The Brethren in Christ, like many

¹¹ Roy J. Wilkins, “Good Footing,” *Evangelical Visitor*, July 24, 1950, 14; Harry Rimmer, “Ungrudging Giving,” *Evangelical Visitor*, Feb 2, 1953, 7; Mrs. E. E. Shelhamer, “A Colored Boy’s Victory,” *Evangelical Visitor*, October 16, 1950, 14.

¹² “Short Furrows,” *Evangelical Visitor*, February 18, 1952, 14.

¹³ *Evangelical Visitor*, May 1, 1950, 12; L.B.W., “Sound Speech in the Pulpit,” *Evangelical Visitor*, October 12, 1953, 11.

¹⁴ For a few examples, see Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity with Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 132-134.

white evangelicals in the North, resisted such blatant assertions of white supremacy; in fact, and as we will see, they often condemned them. Nevertheless, they sometimes advanced racially prejudiced critiques and participated in racially condescending activities that sought to remedy the problems they perceived in black communities. Had the Brethren in Christ Church avoided these more subtle forms of racism, it would have been a truly exceptional white Christian denomination. Alas, it was not.

America's "race problem" and the Brethren in Christ, 1937-1950

Midcentury Brethren in Christ people were well aware that African Americans had long been oppressed by white Americans, and they knew that this oppression continued. They tended to locate the mistreatment of blacks in the American South—de jure segregation, lynching, and other openly racist actions—but they were nonetheless conscious of the fact that America's racist history contributed to ongoing inequalities in other regions of the United States, including places closer to home.¹⁵ The questions facing the denomination's leaders at midcentury were twofold. First, was the "race problem" something the largely northern, largely rural Brethren in Christ Church should concern itself with? And second, if this problem was a Brethren in Christ concern, what should be the denomination's response?¹⁶

Given the denomination's sectarian history, it is tempting to think that early twentieth-century Brethren in Christ church leaders would see America's race problem as a worldly matter that lay outside the church's purview. This, however, underestimates the responsibility the Brethren in

¹⁵ For one example of locating racist behavior in the South, see [George Detwiler], "Miscellany," *Evangelical Visitor*, August 21, 1911, 2. In this piece the *Visitor's* editor decries the lynching of a black man that recently took place in Coatesville, PA, noting that Pennsylvania had theretofore been "free from the guilt" of lynchings that "have disgraced so many other states of the Union."

¹⁶ The phrase "race problem" is problematic, for it suggests that racial difference was the problem and/or that both races were equally culpable for whatever problems, conflicts, or controversies were being considered (e.g., tensions between the races, racialized poverty, or interracial marriage) or, even worse, that the presence of black people in America was itself the problem. In fact, the problems that existed were almost all rooted in the racist assumptions and actions of white people, both past and present. Still, at the time, all of this was gathered under the banner of the "race problem," so I'll also employ that phrase. Although I do not typically enclose the phrase in quotation marks, it may be helpful for readers to do so in their minds, since the phrase is almost always referencing its historical usage.

Christ felt toward the fallen world, and particularly toward those it considered downtrodden or spiritually lost. In a 1938 *Evangelical Visitor* editorial titled “The Race Problem,” editor V. L. Stump excoriated Southern whites for their racist laws and for their racial prejudices more generally, telling his readers that the racism found in the South, “even among so-called Christian people,” was offensive to God.¹⁷ Stump then broadened his brush to censure all of America, reminding his readers that America as a whole had never given blacks the same opportunities it had afforded whites:



Vernon L. Stump served as editor of the Evangelical Visitor from 1919 to 1943. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

From the moment he is born into the world, there are many obstacles and disadvantages that lie in his [the colored boy’s] pathway. When we think of the terrible outrages that have been perpetrated upon the colored race by the white man, it staggers our imagination to even think of the great and sweeping condemnation that a God of justice will have to pass upon the white race on the great day of final reckoning.¹⁸

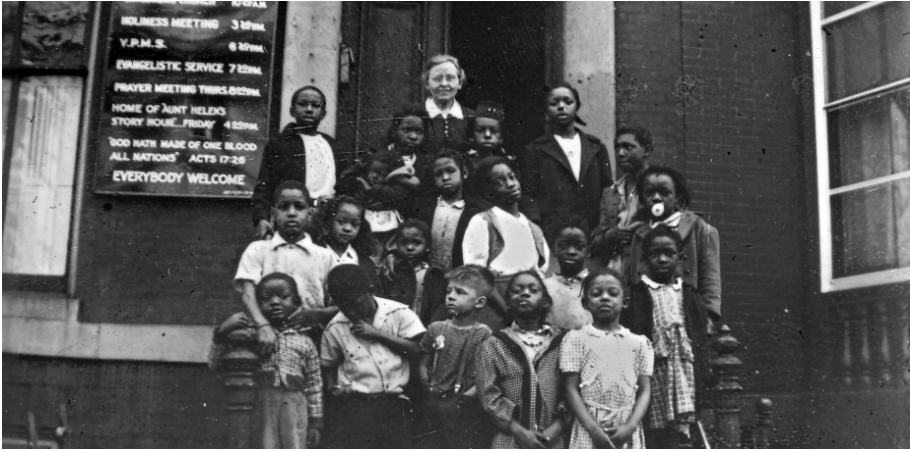
Having warned his readers of God’s coming judgment, Stump concluded his editorial with two specific suggestions. First, educational and employment doors should be opened as widely to African Americans as they were to white Americans; second, the Christian church should undertake to “minister to the great spiritual needs of that so-called Samaritan race within her borders.”¹⁹

Stump’s suggestions for solving America’s race problem may have been specific, but they were not structurally oriented or politically engaged.

¹⁷ V. L. Stump], “The Race Problem,” *Evangelical Visitor*, March 14, 1938, 83.

¹⁸ Stump, “The Race Problem,” 87.

¹⁹ Stump, “The Race Problem,” 87.



Julia Shelhamer with children at her Free Methodist mission in Washington, D.C., circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary, B. L. Fisher Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Although he mentioned an anti-lynching bill that had recently been considered by Congress, he did not advocate its passage; and while he spoke in favor of increasing educational and employment opportunities for blacks, he did not propose any legislative means for securing those opportunities. Indeed, Stump's use of the passive voice with respect to increasing these opportunities ("the negro . . . should be given an open door") begs the question of who was responsible for opening that door. The answer, it seems, would be the good-hearted Brethren in Christ people who were reading Stump's editorial, the same people who, in Stump's view, should undertake to preach the gospel to black Americans, just as the denomination had decided 40 years earlier to carry the gospel to black Africans.

Stump was succeeded as the *Visitor's* editor in 1947 by John Hostetter, who was more likely than Stump ever was to award his editorial space to others, including non-Brethren in Christ writers. In 1950 Hostetter reprinted a short opinion piece by Julia Shelhamer, a Free Methodist evangelist who wrote under the moniker "Mrs. E. E. Shelhamer," a reference to her more renowned husband.²⁰ Shelhamer's editorial "Why Help the Negro?" echoed Stump's editorial on many points, not least by warning its

²⁰ For biographical information on the Shelhamers, see "Shelhamer Family ARC2008-003 – Finding Aid" (2012), 3-5, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/findingaids/38>.

readers about God's coming judgment on white America. "We may expect God to punish us for all that we have done or permitted to be done against the Negro," wrote Shelhamer, who added, "Nothing but an atonement on our part will cause God to look this way in love." Simply asking God for forgiveness wasn't enough, wrote Shelhamer, because God "never forgives until proper conditions are met." Shelhamer proceeded to outline what she called "fitting atonement" for whites having tolerated the oppression of African Americans for so long: donating time or money for "the Christian education and the evangelization of the children and grandchildren of our former slaves" which, perhaps unsurprisingly, was an endeavor Shelhamer had recently undertaken in a Washington, DC neighborhood.²¹

These two editorials, published in the *Evangelical Visitor* 12 years apart, in 1938 and 1950, both preceded what is typically seen as the American Civil Rights Movement. When composing their editorials, neither Stump nor Shelhamer could foresee the rallies, marches, sit-ins, or boycotts that would come to dominate the news in the 1950s and 1960s. Neither writer had to weigh whether such activities were appropriate for Christians to undertake, and neither had to wrestle with the question of civil disobedience. But they did consider the reality of racial oppression, as well as the fact that racial oppression violated God's moral law. More than that, they both advanced the idea that God's judgment would fall not only on those who perpetrated racial injustices but also on those who turned a blind eye to them. Finally, they both concluded their considerations of America's racial caste system with the call to minister to the spiritual needs of blacks, an approach to America's race problem that would become the favored approach of the Brethren in Christ Church through much of the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Addressing America's race problem in the 1950s: Soul-saving missions as the solution

The urban missions started by the Brethren in Christ Church during the first half of the twentieth century were not located in African-American

²¹ Mrs. E. E. Shelhamer, "Why Help the Negro?" *Evangelical Visitor*, January 9, 1950, 16. Nine months later another article by Shelhamer appears in the *Visitor*, this one touting her ministry's first convert, an African-American boy named Teddy. Mrs. E. E. Shelhamer, "A Colored Boy's Victory," *Evangelical Visitor*, October 16, 1950, 14.

neighborhoods, which means that the church's earliest urban missionaries rarely came into contact with blacks. But the Great Migration, which saw six million blacks flee north between 1916 and 1970 (often in fear of their lives), changed America's northern cities in significant ways, and so too the neighborhoods in which the denomination's missions, and a few of its churches, were located.²² In 1953, Brethren in Christ workers at the Detroit mission held a children's Bible hour in which most of the 140 children in attendance were black.²³ A few years later, other Brethren in Christ churches (in Canton, Ohio, and Stowe, Pennsylvania) reported that black children were attending their Sunday school classes, typically without their parents.²⁴ By 1961, workers at the church's Chicago Mission were reporting that their neighborhood was undergoing a demographic transformation, and photographs from the mission began to include children of color.²⁵

The interracial interactions at the Brethren in Christ church in Canton, Ohio, were unique, at least in this respect: unlike the other Brethren in Christ ministries serving African American children—in Detroit, Stowe, and Chicago—Canton's Valley Chapel congregation was not a mission church, but was instead an established Brethren in Christ congregation. According to a congregational history published in 1966, many of the church's earliest members migrated from Pennsylvania to Ohio in the 1850s.²⁶ Therefore, by the time African Americans began moving into the surrounding community in the late 1920s, the congregation had been in existence for nearly 75 years. According to Valley Chapel historian Elsie Catherine Bechtel, these newly arrived "Negro families" were welcomed by the congregation, but they "were hesitant about attending."²⁷ Soon,

²² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

²³ "God's Love Mission, Detroit, Mich.," *Evangelical Visitor*, Missions Supplement, December 7, 1953, IV-V.

²⁴ Tom and June Arndt, "Serving for Three and One-Half Years," *Evangelical Visitor*, August 27, 1956, 14; "Stowe, Penna.," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 28, 1958, 13.

²⁵ "Preaching the Gospel in the 'Inner-City Areas,'" *Evangelical Visitor*, August 21, 1961, 9. A photograph of the mission's Bible school participants, which includes four or five dark-skinned children, appears on the issue's cover.

²⁶ Mary K. Stoner, *Valley Chapel Centennial, 1866-1966: A Research Project* (n.p., n.d.), 10-13.

²⁷ Elsie Catherine Bechtel, "Today and Tomorrow: Cultural Changes," in Stoner, *Valley Chapel Centennial*, 51.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



Barbara Anthony Jenkins teaching a Sunday school class for young married couples at Valley Chapel in Canton, Ohio, circa 1965. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

however, a few African-American children began attending the church's Sunday school, and even more came to its vacation Bible school when it was launched in the 1940s. By the early 1950s, African American adults had also begun attending Valley Chapel, so that by 1966 approximately a quarter of the congregation's 40 adult members were black. "Becoming an interracial church has been a thrilling experience," wrote Bechtel in the closing pages of the congregational history. "It is true that the impact on the racial problem has perhaps been small . . . , but the local result has been unequivocally good."²⁸

That a few Brethren in Christ congregations now included black members is, for our purposes, less significant than this: some Brethren

²⁸ Bechtel, "Today and Tomorrow," 55. One photograph in the Valley Chapel Centennial booklet shows a black woman teaching a Sunday school lesson, with at least one white man in the class, a photo that gives credence to Bechtel's claim that many of the congregation's lay leaders were African Americans, 53-54.

in Christ Church leaders believed that the development of conversion-oriented urban missions, targeted specifically at blacks, was the best way to solve America's race problem. In early 1958, a committee appointed by the denomination's Home Mission Board met to consider "a Gospel Work among American Negroes," an initiative enthusiastically supported by the board's chair, Atlantic Conference bishop Henry A. Ginder.²⁹ According to a report written by the board's executive secretary, Albert H. Engle, the committee included no people of color, though it claimed to have considered input "from various [Negro] contacts."³⁰ In any case, the committee produced a six-point report that began with this assertion: "Evangelization of the American Negro would help solve one of the major social problems confronting our nation." The report does not define the nature of that problem, but it's telling that the words "racism," "segregation," and "discrimination" never appear. The report's preamble does note, however, that blacks have been moving north and, more significantly, that blacks in Philadelphia, who now constituted a quarter of the city's population, "are responsible for 60 percent of the crime." The source of that claim is not identified, but it's clear that the Brethren in Christ committee members, like many other white evangelicals at the time, associated crime with the "inner city" and the "inner city" with blackness.³¹ In their telling, the nation's race problem pertained not so much to white racism and its insidious effects as it did to blacks' spiritual deficiencies, namely, their lack of "a sense of [moral] responsibility."³²

²⁹ Albert H. Engle, "Report of Home Mission Board Relative to Conducting a Gospel Work Among American Negroes," *Evangelical Visitor*, April 7, 1958, 8. A few years earlier, the Home Mission Board had decided to start a mission in New York City, a decision that came to fruition in 1957 when Mary Wenger moved to the Bronx. Wenger's outreach was more focused on Jews than African Americans, however. See Richard K. MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches of New York City* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 117-122; and "New York City," *Minutes of the Eighty-Seventh Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church*, Article XXVII, June 12-17, 1957, 91.

³⁰ Engle, "Report of Home Mission Board," 8. This was the same Albert Engle who, with his wife Margie, did missionary service in Kentucky from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. See Albert H. Engle, *Saved to Serve in Kentucky and Elsewhere* (Mechanicsburg, PA: W & M Printing, 1977).

³¹ Aaron Griffith, *God's Law and Order: The Politics of Punishment in Evangelical America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 87-93.

³² Engle, "Report of Home Mission Board," 8.

One other feature of the committee's report demands our attention: the fear expressed in it that Catholics, communists, and liberal Christians were making inroads into the African-American community to a degree that white evangelicals were not. "For obvious reasons increasing attention is being given to the Negroes by Roman Catholics and Communists," said the report, which also noted "there has been a decided swing among Negroes from Evangelicalism to Modernism."³³ These fears, justified or not, echoed the concerns of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), an interdenominational organization that sought to advance the fortunes of America's evangelical churches, and which the Brethren in Christ Church had joined nine years earlier. The echo effect is not hard to explain: the report's preamble notes that the committee had learned about the pressing need for urban missions from materials provided to them by NAE officials. "Evangelical groups have been slow to aggressively help the Negroes in this country," the report lamented, repeating an NAE talking point. It was therefore the responsibility of groups like the Brethren in Christ Church to present "a soul-saving Gospel" to American blacks, just as it had to black Africans in Northern and Southern Rhodesia. As for the leader of such a work, the person "should have real love for all people," though apparently the idea of securing a black minister for outreach to African Americans was not seriously considered. Rather, the designated leader "should understand the Negro, and be 'as one of them.'"³⁴

Eighteen months later, in July 1959, the board reported that a "mission among the Negroes" had been started in Brooklyn, New York.³⁵ The choice of Brooklyn was hardly random: two African-American members of the denomination's Hanover (PA) congregation, Carl and Martha Ginton, had moved to Brooklyn in the previous year, and they were eager to see a larger Brethren in Christ presence in their community. In fact, the Gintons took the lead in finding a meeting space for Sunday services, a former storefront church only four blocks from their home.³⁶ In the meantime,

³³ Engle, "Report of Home Mission Board," 8.

³⁴ Engle, "Report of Home Mission Board," 8.

³⁵ Albert H. Engle, "Mission Among the Negroes," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 13, 1959, 9.

³⁶ MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches*, 125. The church was located at 984 Bedford Avenue.



Carl and Martha Ginton at the Brooklyn Brethren in Christ Church, with Sister Cartwright to their left, July 1959. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

received confirmation of Merritt's appointment as pastor of the new Brooklyn mission. "Our goal is that the Lord may prepare some Negro Christian to take over the responsibility," wrote Albert Engle in Robinson's letter of appointment, but until that time, Robinson would be in charge.³⁷

The mission's first formal gatherings, which took place on Sunday, July 12, 1959, offered a glimpse of both the joys and the challenges that lay ahead. Morning

Bishop Henry Ginder looked for someone to give leadership to the mission, eventually hiring the young, white Merritt Robinson. When Ginder first met Robinson in August 1958, Robinson and his wife were Mennonite mission workers in the Bronx, with some experience working with African Americans.³⁷ Sensing that they were unhappy in their current roles, Ginder convinced them to cast their lot with the Brethren in Christ, and in June 1959 they



Pastor Merritt and Esther Robinson at the Brooklyn Brethren in Christ Church, July 1959. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

³⁷ For information on the Robisons, see MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches*, 91-96; 121-122.

³⁸ Albert Engle to Brother and Sister Robinson, 19 June 1959; V-36: Brooklyn Brethren in Christ/Pilgrim Chapel, Box 2.1, Folder: "Brooklyn, 1959-1967," Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives (hereafter, BIC Archives). In fact, when Robinson was replaced in 1961, the new minister was another white man, Harold Bowers; see MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches*, 128-129.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



The dedication service at the Brooklyn Brethren in Christ Church, July 12, 1959. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

Sunday school was a disappointment, with only 17 in attendance, and absolutely none from the neighborhood. Even the Glintons were absent, perhaps because they were preparing lunch for the white Brethren in Christ dignitaries who had traveled to Brooklyn for the day.³⁹ The afternoon dedication service went better, with about 30 people in attendance, about half of them black, and attendance at the evening service was even higher. A photograph taken during the afternoon dedication service shows a healthy mix of black and white faces—though, to be clear, the white faces are mostly out-of-town guests. The mood throughout the day appears to have been upbeat, celebratory, and, on the Brethren in Christ side, a bit self-congratulatory. The scripture text for the evening sermon, preached by Samuel Lady, was Acts 8:26-39, the story of Philip the Evangelist explaining the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch.⁴⁰ Now, nearly two thousand years later, Lady seemed to imply, the gospel was once again being carried by Christ's

³⁹ The Brethren in Christ leaders in attendance that morning included Henry Ginder, Samuel and Lois Lady, and S. Eugene and Anna Mae Witter. Lady was the pastor, and Witter was a lay leader, at the Hanover Brethren in Christ Church, where the Glintons had attended before moving to Brooklyn. Also in attendance was Harold Thomas, a white Mennonite pastor who worked with the Robinsons in the Bronx, and Thomas's wife, Dorothy. Henry A. Ginder to Albert Engle, 14 July 1959; V-36, Brooklyn Brethren in Christ/Pilgrim Chapel, Box 2.1, Folder, "Brooklyn, 1959-1967," BIC Archives.

⁴⁰ Merritt and Esther Robinson to Interested Friends, July 1959; V-36, Brooklyn Brethren in Christ/Pilgrim Chapel, Box 2.1, Folder, "Brooklyn, 1959-1967," BIC Archives.

evangelists to people with dark skin. Whether Lady imagined Philip the Evangelist to be “white” in the sense that he was white is hard to say, but one has to wonder what Carl and Martha Glinton were thinking as they listened to Lady’s sermon. Who were they in the story, the evangelist with a Greek name or the African without a name?

Whatever the Glintons were thinking that evening, and whatever good eventually came from a Brethren in Christ presence in Brooklyn, it’s unlikely that the establishment of a white-led church in a black section of Brooklyn contributed anything to the civil rights of African Americans. Surely when Martin Luther King Jr. and other black ministers urged their Christian brothers and sisters to join them in their struggle against racism, this wasn’t what they had in mind. Much less did these black civil rights leaders think that African Americans, long oppressed by their white neighbors, needed white Christians above all to teach them how to live socially responsible, spiritually rich lives. Granted, when Albert Engle cited the encouragement the Home Mission Board had received from blacks to establish a Brethren in Christ presence in African-American neighborhoods, he was not being untruthful (they had almost surely consulted with the Glintons), but it’s unlikely the board did systematic research in that regard.⁴¹ Rather, the board identified the tools it had at its disposal—good-hearted Brethren in Christ people with evangelistic impulses, a few African Americans living in an urban neighborhood who loved the Brethren in Christ, and the conviction that the gospel could transcend cultural divides—and it decided to use those tools to respond to America’s race problem, however unsophisticated its analysis of that problem might have been.

That said, the Brethren in Christ men and women who sought to build integrated churches in Brooklyn, Canton, and elsewhere, who ate fellowship meals with their black sisters and brothers, visited black residents in their homes, and welcomed blacks into congregational leadership roles, enjoyed glimpses of the beloved community that King imagined for all of America, and which the Brethren in Christ Church claimed was possible through Christ.⁴² As Tobin Miller Shearer has argued in his history of Mennonites

⁴¹ In fact, there were two black Brethren in Christ couples that had moved to Brooklyn. See “Report of Committee for Study and Recommendations Concerning Developing an Aggressive Negro Work,” Box V-36-2.1, Congregations, Brooklyn, NY; Folder, “Brooklyn, 1959-1967,” BIC Archives.

⁴² From the beginning, Carl Glinton served as both the treasurer and Sunday school superintendent of the Brooklyn congregation. See MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches*, 126.

and black civil rights, such “daily demonstrations” of interracial Christian community should not be taken lightly or dismissed as mere sentimentalism.⁴³ In a nation where racially diverse churches are still rare, the attempt to build interracial churches in the 1950s and early 1960s was both courageous and countercultural—and also pleasing to the white Brethren in Christ people involved in the work. “It is a God-given love that brings the Valley Chapel Congregation together without prejudice for race or color,” wrote two white church



David H. Wenger, pastor of Valley Chapel, engaging in home visitation, 1955. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

members in 1956, just months after the *Visitor* had reprinted an article lamenting the segregated nature of America’s churches.⁴⁴ Two years later, in a report from the Stowe (PA) congregation that highlighted its summer Bible school, the congregation’s reporter exuded, “We had no problem on integration, since very near half of the enrollment was made up of fine colored children.”⁴⁵ The same issue of the *Visitor* included a photograph of a home visitation in Canton, Ohio, with a black woman sitting on a couch between two white women, and with Valley Chapel pastor, David H. Wenger, sitting nearby with Bible in hand.⁴⁶ To be sure, compared to what John Hostetter had seen at Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farm, these Brethren in Christ attempts at ameliorating America’s race problem were both modest and socially conservative, with no apparent critique of the violent forces

⁴³ Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Shearer argues that interracial gatherings “in the intimate spaces of living rooms and sanctuaries” have too often been overlooked in the larger story of the American Civil Rights Movement, xxi.

⁴⁴ Tom and June Arndt, “Serving for Three and One-Half Years,” 14; L. C. Hartzler, “America’s Greatest Hour of Segregation,” *Evangelical Visitor*, April 23, 1956, 16.

⁴⁵ “Stowe, Penna.,” *Evangelical Visitor*, July 28, 1958, 13.

⁴⁶ D. H. W., “Valley Chapel, Canton, Ohio,” *Evangelical Visitor*, July 28, 1955, 13.

that had pushed American blacks into opportunity-deprived ghettos in the first place. Nonetheless, these evangelistic mission experiments did authenticate the denomination's claim that, in Christ, racial divisions should be challenged and could be overcome—at least to some degree.



The Chicago Mission, founded in 1894, was relocated to this building on Halsted Street in 1908. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

The Chicago Mission and the challenge of integration

Before leaving this particular Brethren in Christ approach to solving the nation's race problem, it's important to briefly consider the story of the Chicago Mission in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Founded in 1894, the Chicago Mission was the first urban mission founded by the Brethren in Christ denomination.⁴⁷ Located on Chicago's south side, first on Peoria Street and eventually four

blocks east of Peoria, at 6039 Halsted Street, its early years did not involve ministry to, or even much contact with, African Americans, who weren't yet residing in that Chicago neighborhood.⁴⁸ By the mid-1950s, however, the neighborhood's demographics were changing, an evolution rooted in Chicago's status as a Great Migration destination. Thus, even as the Brethren in Christ Church was imagining new outreach possibilities in Brooklyn, it was presented with the opportunity to build Christian fellowship with blacks in a Chicago neighborhood in which it had been located for over 60 years. The way forward was not clear, however, for reasons that had everything to do with America's racial divisions and, more precisely, with the anti-black racism that ran white hot on Chicago's south side.

⁴⁷ E. Morris Sider, "Sarah Hoover Bert," *Nine Portraits: Brethren in Christ Biographical Sketches* (Nap-panee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 16-45.

⁴⁸ Sider, 24-26. The mission moved to Halsted Street in 1908.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



In 1960, all the officers of Christ's Crusaders at the Chicago Mission were white. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

In June 1960, the denomination's Board for Home Mission and Extension ordered an evaluation of the Chicago Mission's future, an evaluation triggered, at least in part, by the neighborhood's changing demographics. The five-person evaluation committee, which met at the Chicago Mission and included the mission's superintendent, Carl J. Carlson, considered six options for moving forward, the first of which was to continue a mission program "for whites."⁴⁹ "The present constituency and friends in the area have expressed much interest in this," the committee noted in the meeting's minutes, without further elaboration on the virtue or vice of continuing to operate a de facto whites-only mission. The second option considered by the committee pushed in the opposite direction: make the mission more racially inclusive which, the committee noted, would "lead to a Negro mission." In other words, the evaluation committee had no confidence that the Brethren in Christ could build and maintain a racially integrated mission on Halsted Street, because the presence of too many blacks at the mission would result in an exodus of the mission's white constituents.

⁴⁹ "Report of Committee Concerning Chicago Mission," Secretary of Home Ministries Box, Urban Study file, BIC Archives. Members of the committee were Andrew Slagenweit (chair), Carl Ulery, Carl Carlson, Richard Brinehl, and Albert Engle. All quotations from this paragraph are from the report.

The committee's pessimism in this regard was based on conversations Carlson had had with the current mission clientele: "Those now attending [services at the mission], including many from the South, have reported much negative reaction" to the prospect of racially integrated services, the minutes noted. The committee appears to have felt caught, acutely aware of the racist attitudes of its current white constituents, some of them recent converts, and afraid of doing something that would lead those constituents to distance themselves from the mission's spiritual offerings. Given the lack of "white churches" in the area, it asked, what would happen to "the 100 or more [white people] now attending?"

As we consider the committee's dilemma, it's important to note this distinction: the Chicago Mission was primarily a mission, offering food, clothing, and Christian programming to a largely non-Brethren in Christ (or newly Brethren in Christ) clientele. It was not a more traditional Brethren in Christ congregation, as was, for instance, Valley Chapel in Canton, Ohio. The Chicago Mission personnel felt constrained to serve as many people in the neighborhood as possible, and they believed that trying to offer their ministries on an integrated basis would never succeed in bringing many (white) people through their doors. Given that assumption, they believed they faced an either-or choice: continue a missions program that served whites, or transition into a mission that served blacks. It's clear that the committee evaluating the mission's future wasn't entirely comfortable with those racially segregated alternatives, which is why it floated some other options, such as relocating the mission, or perhaps starting a Brethren in Christ congregation in a different area of Chicago where the racial dynamics would be less fraught. The committee went so far as to visit other neighborhoods in southwest Chicago to evaluate possible sites for a new Brethren in Christ church.⁵⁰

In the end, the evaluation committee recommended the easiest path forward, though in retrospect it was not the best path: to continue running

⁵⁰ "Report of Committee Concerning Chicago Mission." The report does not identify the areas of the city the committee visited, other than to say they were "areas in the southwest portion of the city and adjoining suburbs," including areas that were predominantly Roman Catholic. It's likely the areas it considered for starting a new Brethren in Christ church were majority white, though the minutes don't explicitly say that.

the mission “as we have been,” that is, by continuing to privilege its white constituents and, at some point down the road, “consider the advisability of developing a Negro mission.”⁵¹ In other words, the Brethren in Christ mission administrators conceded that its soul-saving, conversion-oriented ministry in Chicago was not powerful enough to cast the racism out of the hearts of the white people it had been serving; and, moreover, that it was better to maintain the racially compromised status quo, privileging needy whites, than it was to launch out in a different direction, which would orient its ministries to blacks. Six years later, in 1966, with the neighborhood increasingly transformed into a black neighborhood, Brethren in Christ mission administrators tried to reverse course, but by then it was too late.⁵² Two years later, in 1968, the Chicago Mission was no more, a casualty of the denomination’s backwards thinking and, more specifically, of the urban uprisings that affected the neighborhood in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.⁵³

We’ll return to a consideration of the Chicago Mission in the next issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*. At this point it’s sufficient to acknowledge the implicit racism that infected the Brethren in Christ Church’s approach to America’s race problem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the one hand, Brethren in Christ church leaders saw the “soul-saving gospel” as the solution to this problem, which to them meant converting African Americans in Brooklyn and elsewhere to a Brethren in Christ form of Christianity. When it came to sharing the gospel with white people on Chicago’s south side, however, they expressed little hope that this gospel would succeed in eliminating their white constituents’ anti-black prejudice. In other words, the solution to America’s race problem, in their view, was changing the hearts of blacks, not changing the hearts of whites.

⁵¹ “Report of Committee Concerning Chicago Mission.”

⁵² For this change of course, see Wilma I. Musser, “Carl and Avas Carlson and the Chicago Mission,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 16, no. 2 (August 1993): 204-205. I will tell more of this story in the next issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life* (vol. 45, no. 2, April 2022).

⁵³ “Report of Committee Concerning Chicago Mission.” The report does not identify the areas of the city the committee visited, other than to say they were “areas in the southwest portion of the city and adjoining suburbs,” including areas that were predominantly Roman Catholic. It’s likely the areas it considered for starting a new Brethren in Christ church were majority white, though the minutes don’t explicitly say that.



In 1965, the junior girls' class at the Chicago Mission, taught by Moody Bible Institute student Karen Mahoney, included African-American girls from the neighborhood. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

Given this analysis of an approach to solving America's race problem, it's hardly surprising that the denomination didn't succeed in converting their Chicago Mission into a ministry that their black neighbors would warmly welcome.

Responding to the Civil Rights Movement: The larger Protestant context

Taking the gospel to American blacks in northern urban neighborhoods may have been the Brethren in Christ Church's primary strategy for addressing America's race problem, but Brethren in Christ people were well aware that other Americans, including some Christians, were adopting more politically assertive strategies to advance black civil rights. By the time the Home Mission Board launched its "mission among the Negroes" in 1959, Rosa Parks had refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama (1955); Martin Luther King Jr. had been named chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1957); and the Little Rock Nine had sought to integrate Little Rock's Central High School (1957). On

the other side of the struggle, the Southern Manifesto, opposing school integration, had been signed by one hundred members of Congress (1956); Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth's Birmingham parsonage had been bombed (1956); and the governor of Virginia had shuttered public schools in his state to forestall their integration (1957). As for religious responses to the civil rights cause, Christian leaders, congregations, and denominations were all over the map—some vehemently opposed to the civil rights agenda, some enthusiastically supportive of it, still others taking a moderate stance that affirmed black civil rights in word but did little in deed to advance them.

As for the churches and denominations that aligned themselves with the NAE, most of them, like the NAE itself, could be found in the moderate middle: opposed to many aspects of Southern-style segregation, sympathetic to African-American calls for equal treatment under the law, but unwilling to give much support to the Civil Rights Movement. In his book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, published in 1947, Carl F. H. Henry had urged evangelical Christians to shape American society in God-honoring ways, but while many white evangelical leaders were convinced by Henry's arguments, they, like Henry himself, did not interpret that to mean the kind of engagement that King and other civil rights leaders were now undertaking.⁵⁴ Many white evangelicals took a route similar to the one taken by evangelist Billy Graham, who believed he could transform the culture by demonstrating the absence of racial prejudice in his own life and by presenting a winsome conversion-oriented message to any who would listen. Toward that end, Graham famously removed the ropes separating whites and blacks at his southern revivals, a practice he began in 1953; a few years later, in 1956, Graham was calling racism a sin and criticizing racial separation in America's churches.⁵⁵ He even condemned white Christians for allowing "secular influences such as the military, sports, and television [to do] more to combat racial prejudice than many churches."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ R Miles S. Mullin II, "Neoevangelicalism and the Problem of Race in Postwar America," in *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith*, ed. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22-28.

⁵⁵ Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 123-124.

⁵⁶ Graham, quoted in Wacker, *America's Pastor*, 124. This quotation appeared in an article Graham published in *Life Magazine* in October 1956.



Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham in New York City in 1957. Graham was opposed to segregation, but he was not a strong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement.

Still, despite these gestures condemning racism, Graham refused to endorse the Civil Rights Movement and the tension-raising, in-the-streets methods it was using. The solution to America's race problem, said Graham, would not come through demonstrations or even through legislation. "It has to come from the hearts of the people," he said. "That's the answer to the race problem."⁵⁷

This view—that an apolitical, conversion-oriented solution to America's race problem was best—was broadly embraced in the upper echelons of NAE leadership, which thereby helped to maintain the racial status quo in at least three ways. First, it affirmed the perspective that, when it came to black civil rights, the church should not "inject itself into politics" by "lobbying

⁵⁷ Graham, quoted in "Graham Speaks at N.Y. Meeting," *News and Courier* (Charleston, SC), April 7, 1964.

in Congress or state legislatures.”⁵⁸ Speaking out against racism was well and good, said a *Christianity Today* editorial in 1964 (probably penned by Carl Henry), but ministers should never let political concerns get in the way of their primary calling, which was to “proclaim the great Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ Truth be told, white evangelical leaders did not always hew to this apolitical line—it was no accident that the NAE staffed offices in Washington, DC, where they could lobby for policies they believed would advance their goals—but most of them, fearful of losing popular support, looked hard for reasons to avoid politicking on behalf of black civil rights.⁶⁰ Second, NAE leaders frequently registered concern over tactics taken by civil rights activists, tactics that sometimes included breaking laws they found unjust. Third, NAE and other evangelical leaders looked askance at federal authorities advancing or enforcing certain kinds of integration. This anti-statist perspective among white evangelicals, which can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s, grew ever stronger in the years between *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁶¹ Clyde W. Taylor, the NAE official whose advice had shaped Brethren in Christ thinking on urban missions, expressed this anti-statist sentiment in a memo he distributed to NAE field representatives in February 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was being considered by Congress. “Integration is basically a privilege that must be earned,” wrote Taylor, anticipating federal policies that would seek to redress racial inequalities. “It is equally as wrong and unconstitutional to force integration as it is to force segregation,” Taylor continued, who assured his readers that he and other NAE leaders would push Congress for assurances that the Civil Rights Act would “not be construed to mean forced integration or the correction of racial imbalances.”⁶²

⁵⁸ “Evangelicals and Public Affairs,” *Christianity Today*, January 17, 1964, 24. Although *Christianity Today* was not an official NAE publication, the leaders and constituents of the two organizations overlapped to a significant degree.

⁵⁹ “Evangelicals and Public Affairs,” 24.

⁶⁰ Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-21.

⁶¹ Randall J. Stephens, “‘It Has to Come from the Hearts of the People’: Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Race, and the 1964 Civil Rights Acts,” *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 3 (August 2016): 577-578.

⁶² National Association of Evangelicals, Office of Public Affairs, “Pro and Cons of the Civil Rights Bill,” February 6 1964, 1-2; National Association of Evangelical Records, Series 5, Executive Director Files, Subseries 2, Clyde W. Taylor, Box 52, Folder 11; Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.



(L-R) Clyde Taylor, C. N. Hostetter Jr., Everett Graffam, Arthur Climenhaga, and Billy Graham at a 1967 gathering of the National Association of Evangelicals. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

It's hard to know how much ordinary Brethren in Christ people were privy to these NAE perspectives, though if they were reading the *Evangelical Visitor*, they would have read numerous civil rights-related news blurbs generated by the NAE-sponsored Evangelical Press Association. Nearly every issue of the *Visitor* in the 1950s and 1960s included at least half a page of news blurbs, many of which carried "EP" bylines. Only some of these news items pertained to civil rights, but the ones that did would have reminded Brethren in Christ readers that, even as Martin Luther King Jr. and other "integrationists" were pushing their political agenda, white evangelicals were doing their part in solving America's race problem, by condemning racism, starting ministries in black neighborhoods, and in a few cases, integrating their churches.⁶³ When these EP-generated news reports mentioned public demonstrations, they sometimes criticized them for being counterproductive or even responsible for the violence that resulted.⁶⁴

⁶³ For references to integrationists, see "Dr. King Says Integrationists to Ride Again," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 10, 1961, 16; and Larry Ward, "Religion in Review—1962," *Evangelical Visitor*, January 7, 1963, 3.

⁶⁴ For instance, "Eternity Criticizes Evangelicals, Liberals on Racial Stands," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 6, 1964, 16; "Billy Graham Compares Rights Struggle to Civil War Crisis," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 20, 1964, 16.

The EP news blurbs that appeared in the *Evangelical Visitor* stood in contrast to those that came from another fraternal source, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Founded in 1920 to provide relief to famine-stricken Ukrainian Mennonites (the Brethren in Christ Church joined MCC in 1940), the interdenominational Anabaptist organization devoted most of its resources in its early years to providing material aid, but even then it saw the value of meeting with government authorities to advance its goals.⁶⁵ In the early 1960s, MCC began giving food and clothing to blacks in the American South who had lost jobs as a result of voter registration activity and, at about the same time, began exploring other ways to overcome America's racial divide. Most significant in this regard, MCC appointed an African-American couple, Vincent and Rosemarie Harding, to oversee a racial reconciliation project in Atlanta, one feature of which was a Voluntary Service unit that provided volunteer workers to black-led organizations and churches.⁶⁶ In addition to overseeing the unit, the Hardings were authorized by MCC to make connections with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an African-American civil rights organization led by Martin Luther King Jr. and based in Atlanta. Between 1961 and 1964, the *Evangelical Visitor* carried no fewer than nine articles about the Hardings' MCC-related work, providing Brethren in Christ readers with added ways to think about a Christian response to America's racial problems.

Two articles in particular stand out. The first, an MCC news release published in the *Visitor* in August 1962, tells of Vincent Harding's recent arrest in Albany, Georgia, about two hundred miles south of Atlanta.⁶⁷ The MCC report notes that Harding and six other blacks had been arrested in front of Albany's city hall for leading a prayer service without a permit. According to the report, Harding's prayer focus was that Albany would be spared from violence, but the content of Harding's prayer vigil is less significant than where he led it: Harding had taken his Christian commitment into the streets, to the steps of Albany's city hall, making his concerns public in a way that

⁶⁵ For this history, see Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, Stranger: The Mennonite Central Committee Experience* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 30-41.

⁶⁶ For a consideration of the Hardings' work, see Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators*, 98-129.

⁶⁷ "Harding Arrested at Albany, Ga., City Hall Prayer Service," *Evangelical Visitor*, August 20, 1962, 14.



Vincent and Rosemarie Harding in Atlanta, Georgia, circa 1961. Photo courtesy of MCC U.S. Archives, Akron, PA.

many white evangelicals (white Anabaptists, too) would have found problematic. Two months later, in October 1962, the *Visitor* published a lengthy address Harding had given at a recent MCC Peace Section meeting in Kitchener, Ontario. In the address, titled “The Christian and the Race Question,” Harding recounts his thoughts as he sat in Albany’s jail, one of which was to write a letter to his “Mennonite brothers and sisters,” urging them “to come down to Albany to share the experience with me.” Harding proceeds from

there to present a detailed biblical argument on why racism is wrong, and why Christians ought to fight it with vigor. Although he doesn’t identify specific types of political activity to be undertaken, he accuses Mennonites of being like the Laodicean church in the book of Revelation, that is, “insipidly lukewarm on the challenge of racial brotherhood and human justice.” Yes, he conceded, some Mennonite groups have issued statements condemning racism, but by and large Mennonites “are too prosperous and too well thought of in our communities to identify ourselves with the cause of a persecuted minority.”⁶⁸ Again, Harding doesn’t identify specific forms of protest that are needed, but it’s clear that he, like Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (written six months later), finds white Christian moderates to be maddeningly unhelpful.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Vincent Harding, “The Christian and the Race Question,” *Evangelical Visitor*, October 15, 1962, 6-7, 12.

⁶⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, 766-773. “I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent and secure behind stained-glass windows,” 772.



Vincent Harding being interviewed by David Augsburger, host of the Mennonite Hour radio program, in 1963. Photo courtesy of MCC U.S. Archives, Akron, PA.

It's hard to know what Brethren in Christ readers thought of Harding and his call to vigorous action on behalf of black civil rights. There are no responses to Harding's address in the pages of the *Visitor*, no letters to the editor, no comments from the editor himself. But by 1962, it was becoming clear to Brethren in Christ leaders that the denomination needed to do more than start urban missions to address America's race problem. It needed to take an official stand against racism and, at the same time, make a considered statement about the propriety of the Civil Rights Movement and its means for fostering change. The denomination's first statement on that topic would come in 1963, less than a year after Harding's unflinching call to action appeared in the *Evangelical Visitor*.

Two denominational statements on black civil rights, 1963 and 1964

The year 1963 was a landmark year in the battle for black civil rights. The SCLC's Birmingham campaign, which was met with fire hoses and police dogs, and which spurred King to produce his classic case for civil disobedience, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," took place in April. In June, President John F. Kennedy introduced a civil rights bill, just days after Alabama governor George Wallace had stood himself "in the schoolhouse door," blocking black students who were seeking access to the University of

Alabama. In August 250,000 people descended upon the nation's capital for the March on Washington, a gathering that culminated in King's "I Have a Dream" speech. In September four black girls died when white terrorists bombed their Birmingham church as they prepared for a Youth Day service. President Kennedy was assassinated two months later, passing his dimly-lit civil rights torch to the nation's new president, a white southerner, Lyndon B. Johnson. The passage of a civil rights bill was everything but certain.

In the midst of all this, in June 1963, the Brethren in Christ held their annual General Conference, at which they adopted the first of two statements on civil rights (the second was adopted the following summer). The 1963 statement, drafted by the denomination's Peace, Relief, and Service Commission and titled "Statement on Race Relations," acknowledged America's long history of racial injustice, cited the efforts of black Americans to gain equal treatment and equal opportunity, and declared that the denomination was "in sympathy with these aspirations of the Negro race." It further noted that it wished to offer its "moral support" to blacks in their ongoing efforts to gain those rights.⁷⁰ Then came a large, ambiguous caveat: the denomination could support civil rights activities only "to the degree that these efforts are made in accordance with Christian principles."⁷¹ It was a truism, of course, that the denomination could support activities only if they aligned with Christian principles, but the precise meaning of that phrase was not clarified in the statement itself.⁷² The statement praised "the policy of non-violence which has been employed by certain Negro leaders," but it said nothing about particular strategies for exposing injustice and/or attaining civil rights, such as the civilly disobedient approaches that Vincent Harding had undertaken, and which King had recently written about in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." What about public marches, sit-ins, or pray-

⁷⁰ "Statement on Race Relations," *Minutes of the Ninety-Third Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church*, Article XV, June 12-17, 1963, 46.

⁷¹ "Statement on Race Relations," 46. Members of the Peace, Relief, and Service Committee that drafted the statement were E. J. Swalm, C. F. Eshelman, Kenneth B. Hoover, Paul E. Engle, Clair Hoffman, Henry F. Landis, Ross Nigh, and C. N. Hostetter Jr.

⁷² In a retrospective on the 1963 General Conference, A. D. M. Dick, a longtime missionary to India, made this observation about the denomination's statement on racial equality: "One might have wished that this proposal be more unequivocal and concise in its recommendations." A. D. M. Dick, "Impressions of General Conference, 1963," *Evangelical Visitor*, July 22, 1963, 4.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



A business meeting at the 1963 Brethren in Christ General Conference at Niagara Christian College. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

ins that sought to shed light on the evils of American racism? What about writing letters to one's representatives in Congress, or otherwise politicking for changes to America's laws? These modes of civic engagement were not addressed in the 1963 statement, which concluded by encouraging Brethren in Christ people to do only three things: (1) recognize "the principle of equality of all men"; (2) commit themselves to live by that principle; and (3) demonstrate spiritual concern for people of other races who might live in their towns and neighborhoods.

One year later, in June 1964, the denomination convened its next annual conference, and once again it passed a statement on America's race problem, only this time it focused on the practices of civil rights activists. Harkening back to the 1963 statement, the 1964 statement (this time drafted by the denomination's Board for Administration) recommended that the General Conference "reaffirm her stand on racial equality," but unlike the 1963 statement, it spent no time acknowledging the aspirations, let alone the grievances, of their black American neighbors. Instead, it lamented the "ever-increasing tension between [the white and black races]," a tension that has "resulted in demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, and law violations." The statement then proceeded to take a stand, one that condemned these publicly assertive activities without qualification: "We look with disfavor

on the above mentioned public manifestations which tend to incite mass hysteria resulting in ignoring civil law.” Brethren in Christ people should not participate in those sorts of actions, the statement continued, but should instead “exhibit a spiritual poise, Christian dignity, and truthful calmness,” and thereby offer a “testimony [to] godliness”—a testimony that, by implication, civil rights demonstrators did not exhibit.⁷³

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which the denomination’s 1964 statement rejects Vincent Harding’s analysis of America’s race problem, as well as his call for a vigorous response from white Christians. It is also difficult to overstate the degree to which this 1964 statement falls in line with the “white moderate” perspective that King so roundly condemned in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written just one year earlier. From its denunciation of “tension” (which King found necessary for change to happen) to its assignment of equal responsibility for America’s race problem to whites and blacks; from its allocation of blame for “mass hysteria” to the civil rights demonstrators to its unquestioning regard for civil law—in all these ways, the 1964 statement placed the Brethren in Christ Church squarely in the white moderate camp, professing support for black civil rights but condemning many of the means for attaining them. The rhetoric of the denomination’s statement was surely purposeful and likely effective (who could possibly choose “mass hysteria” over “Christian dignity” and “truthful calmness”?), but it was also disingenuous, and the implication that the Civil Rights Movement was creating America’s racial tension was both simplistic and racially biased. In contrast to the more effusive, open-ended support for black civil rights in the 1963 statement, the 1964 statement closed the door to assertive activism, informing Brethren in Christ people that forceful civil rights activism is, by definition, unChristian.

Why denominational leaders felt the need to offer these clarifications in 1964 is not entirely clear, though the simplest answer is probably the right one. In a report on the 1964 General Conference published a few weeks after its close, California-based minister Eber B. Dourte noted that the denomination’s new civil rights statement “was a necessary declaration,

⁷³ All quotations in this paragraph are from “Racial Question,” *Minutes of the Ninety-Fourth Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church*, Article XXI, June 10-15, 1964, 73.

since more and more of our people are being confronted with making a choice of participation or nonparticipation in this kind of activity.”⁷⁴ In other words, as the 1960s ran their course, and as the Civil Rights Movement began moving north, more and more Brethren in Christ people needed to decide whether to participate in public demonstrations or not. This was particularly true of the church’s young people, who watched as other young Americans took to the streets in support of black civil rights. In light of all this, Brethren in Christ pastors were likely looking for guidance, perhaps as a way to stay true to their denomination’s views, perhaps as a way to avoid taking a stand on their own, and perhaps both. As it turned out, the clarification set forth by the denomination came down on the conservative side of the equation, that is, the law-and-order side—or, as the statement suggested, the “truthful calmness” side.

That the denomination would land on this side of the equation was not a foregone conclusion, but it is not particularly surprising. Not only was the Brethren in Christ Church overwhelmingly white and therefore reluctant to challenge a comfortable status quo, it had two theological streams pushing it away from civil rights activism. The first stream was the Anabaptist stream, more specifically, a separatist Anabaptist stream that advocated nonresistance—turning the other cheek—as the proper response to evil. The history of Anabaptism is complicated in this regard, of course, and there are certainly resources to be found in the Anabaptist tradition that support a more assertive response to the world’s evils. But most Brethren in Christ leaders in the 1960s were committed to traditional understandings of nonresistance. Whereas Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi before him, argued for the virtue of nonviolent resistance, most Brethren in Christ leaders were still beholden to traditional, non-activist notions of nonresistance.⁷⁵

In addition to being shaped by traditional Anabaptist views on nonresistance, the Brethren in Christ Church’s approach to civil rights was influenced by its alliances with other white American evangelicals.

⁷⁴ Eber B. Dourte, “General Conference—An Evaluation,” *Evangelical Visitor*, July 20, 1964, 4.

⁷⁵ For King’s commitment to nonviolent resistance and the influence of Gandhi on him in this regard, see Martin Luther King Jr., “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), 90-107.

Many Brethren in Christ leaders looked to the NAE for guidance on public issues (recall that the Home Mission Board had used NAE materials in its deliberations on urban missions), and it would be naïve to think that the NAE's stance on the Civil Rights Movement did not have some effect on the content of the denomination's 1964 statement. Indeed, just three months prior to the July 1964 meeting of the Brethren in Christ General Conference, the NAE passed a statement on civil rights at its annual convention. In addition to advocating "the transformation of the individual" as the "biblical solution" to the problem of racial prejudice, the statement called upon white evangelicals to desegregate their largely segregated churches. But when an amendment supporting "reasonable demonstrations" was offered from the convention floor, it was voted down.⁷⁶ A few weeks later *Christianity Today* published an editorial titled "Civil Rights and Christian Concern," which noted that some white evangelicals wished to "exercise their right to protest" alongside other civil rights activists. The editorial writer conceded that evangelicals were "free" to engage in public protests, but he immediately cast aspersions on the protests that were taking place around the country. "Restraint in demonstrations and respect for law are urgently needed," he wrote. "Extremism and threats of violence will only impede the processes of legislation."⁷⁷ Once again we see the classic white moderate response: calling on civil rights activists to show restraint, urging them to respect the law, associating their protests with extremism, and pinning the problem of violence on the protesters. From there it is only a small step to the Brethren in Christ statement of 1964.

A look ahead

If Brethren in Christ leaders thought the denomination's 1964 statement on "the racial question" would end discussions about a proper Brethren in Christ response to the Civil Rights Movement, they were soon disappointed. On the one hand, the racial tensions the statement deplored were not going away, and in some ways they were only intensifying. Beginning with South

⁷⁶ See Frank E. Gaebelein, "Evangelical Action in Chicago," and "N.A.E on Civil Rights," both in *Christianity Today*, May 8, 1964, 49-50.

⁷⁷ "Civil Rights and Christian Concern," *Christianity Today*, May 8, 1964, 28-29.

Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts in 1965, and continuing every summer through the remainder of the 1960s, urban uprisings set cities ablaze, the kind of unrest that would eventually lead to the closing of the denomination's Chicago Mission in 1968.⁷⁸ In addition to the press of national events, denominational leaders felt the pressure of a handful of younger members who didn't find the passive, socially conservative philosophy behind the 1964 denominational statement convincing. Always in the minority, but nonetheless assertive and articulate, some of these younger Brethren in Christ members—among them John K. Stoner and Ronald J. Sider—would eventually help to catalyze a progressive movement in the wider evangelical world.⁷⁹ In the meantime, they would make common cause with a handful of allies in denominational leadership roles, a reality we'll consider more fully in the next issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*.

In 1965 these younger, more vigorous voices had not yet emerged, and the denomination's commitment to the soul-saving approach to the race problem continued to be strong.⁸⁰ Still, questions about the effectiveness of this approach, and about the church's ability to address social issues more broadly, afflicted some people's minds.⁸¹ The inability of the 1964 statement to settle things is nowhere clearer than an article that appeared in the *Evangelical Visitor* in August 1964, about two months after the conclusion of the 1964 meeting of the General Conference. Titled "You and the Race Problem," the article appeared on the Crusaders page of the *Visitor*, which means it was aimed at the magazine's youthful readers. "Have you wondered where you fit into the problem of race relations?" the article begins, before quoting large sections of the denomination's 1963 statement on race relations. The church's 1964 statement, which condemned assertive involvement in the civil rights cause, is nowhere mentioned. Instead, the author offers seven suggestions for action, suggestions he or she lifted from

⁷⁸ In some respects the Chicago Mission as originally conceived closed in 1966, but the Brethren in Christ Church continued to use the facility for ministry purposes until 1968, when it leased the property to Young Life. In 1971, after a fire ravaged the building, the building was razed. See Musser, "Carl and Avas Carlson," 205-207.

⁷⁹ David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 152-169.

⁸⁰ See for instance "Boys' Work—New York," *Evangelical Visitor*, March 1, 1965, 11.

⁸¹ See for instance John N. Hostetter, "Concern or Protest: Which?" *Evangelical Visitor*, April 12, 1965, 2-3.

another Anabaptist-related publication, the MCC-produced *I-W Mirror*.⁸² None of the seven suggestions is particularly radical, but taken together, they offer a much more positive assessment of the groups that were fighting racial injustice; and one suggestion in particular encourages young people to decide “to what extent you can support or join them in education or action for common goals.”⁸³ Again, this sort of advice is hardly radical, and it surely falls short of what Vincent Harding was advocating in 1962. Nonetheless, in its circumvention of the denomination’s 1964 statement, and in its encouragement to young people to decide these things for themselves, the article implies there’s a place for Brethren in Christ young people who think a more activist approach in the fight for racial justice is the more faithful approach. In the coming years they would have a chance to make their case.

⁸² The *I-W Mirror* was a periodical that included reflections by and about the men and women who served in the I-W program, an alternative service program for U.S. conscientious objectors that ran from 1951-1973.

⁸³ “You and the Race Problem,” *Evangelical Visitor*, August 31, 1964, 8, 12. The article is attributed to “Page Editor,” but the page editor is not identified elsewhere in the issue. It’s possible it was Paul Hostetler, who is listed in later issues of the *Visitor* as the *Crusaders* page editor.