

Interracial Ministry in North Carolina

What it was like for a southern white church to have a Negro assistant on its staff one summer.

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† IN the March 16, 1962, issue of this magazine readers were introduced by Stephen C. Rose to the Student Interracial Ministry, the creative movement wherein young seminarians spend the summer as assistants to ministers of churches whose members are wholly or predominantly of another race than their own. As one who had participated in the project as a student, Mr. Rose wrote from the "sending" viewpoint. Now, as pastor of a southern white church which has participated by welcoming a Negro seminarian to its summer staff, I can testify to what it can be like on the "receiving" end.

My first contact with the movement came one morning late in May when I answered the telephone in the office of the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, which was organized four years ago in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and—until we are able to build on our own property—carries on in facilities offered by the University of North Carolina.

The caller got right down to cases. "Can you make a place for a Negro on your church staff?" he asked, and proceeded to explain that the ministry he represented is designed to bring Negroes and whites together in leadership of the local church.

I waited a moment before replying. "I cannot answer for our congregation," I finally said. "But it sounds like an opportunity we ought to consider." After I put the receiver back on its hook I wondered whether I should have been at all encouraging; I was not sure that our people were ready for such a move.

A New Situation

The time was short, so events had to move quickly. I learned that our prospective guest's name was James Forbes, that he had just been granted the B.D. degree, that he was a member of a Pentecostal church, and that he hailed from Raleigh, North Carolina. That last bit of information was providential, for southerners are sensitive to the intrusion of "outsiders" where anything having to do with race is concerned. But what about Forbes's Pentecostal background? Would that prove a stumbling block for our Baptist congregation?

We had faced the racial issue before. Four months after the congregation was organized a Negro freshman at the university had applied for membership and been received. That first step had proved a traumatic experience, even though all were convinced that we had acted in the right. Later two more Negroes joined the church, and several others regularly attend our worship services. But the proposed arrangement posed a new situation: we would

be receiving a ministry from a Negro, not simply offering it to him.

At a called meeting of the deacons only two reservations were voiced—whether there would be enough work during the summer to warrant adding *anyone* to the staff, and whether we could afford the financial cost. One deacon did say he was "less than enthusiastic" about the proposal, but he agreed to stand with the others in recommending to the church council that we enter into the program.

Approval from the council followed immediately. We arranged for Mr. Forbes to live with two white students in the church's activities house, and several families promised to play host to him at mealtime. The recommendation then went to a congregational meeting for final consideration. It was adopted with one negative vote and several abstentions. So the Rev. James Forbes came to Chapel Hill.

'Feeling Each Other Out'

It happened that on the day our new assistant was introduced to the congregation more guests than members were present. Chapel Hill was host to 300 high school students at a state choral clinic, and they made up our choir that Sunday. When Forbes walked forward to be received "under watch-care," along with a white student making the same request, disbelief could be read on many young faces.

Vacation church school was the first responsibility assigned to Forbes. Immediately the children fell in love with him; they couldn't stop talking about "Jim," as they called him at his invitation. One mother told me that her young son had served notice that he would not attend vacation church school another year, but then he met Jim and nothing could keep him away. The children's acceptance naturally predisposed their parents in Jim's favor and almost every day he was asked to someone's home for dinner. Many of his hosts had never before had a Negro in their home except as a servant, but if there was awkwardness in the new relationship it failed to show itself.

I made a special effort to prepare Jim for the gamut of response he would meet in the church and the community at large. I sensed that though he knew he was officially accepted he was apprehensive about the reaction of individual members to his presence. There was an initial period of "feeling each other out" in relationships that were as new and strange to him as to anyone else. We decided that it would be wise for Jim to establish personal ties with our members before taking over major leadership responsibilities. So he and I together visited in the homes of the parish. He sang in the choir, taught a class in the church school, attended all meetings of the diaconate, council and committees. I apologized for not being able to make full use of his

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ability at once, and I kept reminding him that the fact of his presence was in itself of incalculable importance.

Unprecedented Participation

Observance of the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday in July seemed a good occasion to have Jim share the service with me. So he and I walked into the sanctuary and took our places together. He read the Scripture and offered the prayer of thanksgiving. Then, standing together behind the table, we served the elements to the congregation. As we did so I felt the miracle of reconciliation as I have seldom felt it before, and it was apparent that the worshippers shared my feeling. In the witness of our standing side by side the Word was preached, and the singing of "Who loves my Father as a son is surely kin to me" resounded like a hearty Amen. Most of the people in the church that day had never seen a Negro and a white man sharing in a situation of this kind, and their appreciative comments afterwards suggested that this experience satisfied a hunger of which they had been unaware.

Forbes's leadership those months brought about unprecedented participation in our Sunday evening ministry to summer school students. He was invited to give two lectures at the Baptist student center on the campus. As he prepared his material on the assigned topic, "Social and Political Movements in the Negro Community," he complained that every Negro is expected to be an authority on everything that has to do with race. Students on the campus sought him out.

Inevitably, perhaps, there were regrettable incidents. The chairman of one of our committees invited Jim to lunch with him at an establishment he mistakenly believed to be "open"; as a result, they inadvertently staged a sit-in! My wife, confident that he would be welcome, asked him to go with our family to the community Fourth of July celebration. But it turned out that he was the only Negro present, and we were embarrassed on his account when teen-agers taunted us with "Nigger-lovers!"

Such incidents, however, made our people more aware than they had ever been before of how restricted is the world in which the Negro lives. Jim's presence confronted them with the need to think twice before suggesting that he join them for this or that occasion, lest they create a crisis in the larger community. They began to understand in a more personal, direct way what it means to be a Negro in a southern town. As their color-consciousness lessened through their friendship for him, they were increasingly incensed by customs of the community which they had theretofore taken for granted.

The genuineness of the congregation's warm response to James Forbes was put to a test during my month's vacation. The diaconate and the church council asked him to assume responsibility for both pastoral and administrative leadership during my absence, and the pulpit committee invited him to take his turn at preaching along with other ordained ministers in the congregation.

welcomed his visit to the hospital's maternity wing and expressed deep appreciation of his prayer of thanksgiving for their child—though the nurses stood in the hall outside, shocked that a Negro minister should be calling on a white woman. Another family—recently come to the city from Mississippi—turned to Jim for support in the crisis that arose when both husband and wife were unexpectedly hospitalized. In talking about that situation with me later Jim said, "I could have wished for you, but I would take nothing for their looking to me; I have never felt so completely a person!"

A Vital Witness

The community as a whole was not aware of the interracial nature of our summer ministry. We were glad that it escaped the notice of the press, for wide publicity might have generated unpleasant repercussions. Two groups in town were, however, very much aware of what was happening in our church: the Negro community and the foreign students on the university campus. The local Negroes were obviously proud of all James Forbes and his ministry symbolized; the students from overseas saw in his acceptance evidence of a new south in the making.

Our summer activities were climaxed by a retreat at the beach attended by 60 members of the congregation. Jim led a discussion group and conducted the evening vesper services. A football team from Columbia, South Carolina, happened to be on the grounds for preseason practice, and they asked permission to join in our final worship service. When Jim stepped forward to conduct the service they were obviously surprised, but no one was anything but cordial.

Realizing that this was Jim's last weekend with our church, members of the group at the retreat made the final meal a time for informal testimony to him. A recurring theme was "Your coming has been the best thing that has ever happened to us." Some expressed the wish that there were some way to continue the relationship on a permanent basis. In the weeks that have followed I have continued to hear such sentiments from members of the congregation, and I have yet to hear a dissenting opinion. I have been particularly gratified that people who early in the summer were apprehensive about the ministry speak of it now with unqualified praise.

And what of James Forbes's response? In the following excerpt from his midsummer report to the sponsoring agency he spoke for himself:

This is very much like the work I would be doing if I were working in a church predominantly of my race, but because most of the members of this church are white I have had an opportunity to approach my work from a slightly different perspective. . . . One thing has become increasingly clear, and it is that real understanding requires genuine confrontation. . . . I feel that my working at this church in a leadership role has been a vital Christian witness to the larger Chapel Hill community.

A vital Christian witness indeed it has been! And though his own Pentecostal church has assigned James Forbes to a congregation in Wilmington, North Carolina, Binkley Memorial Baptist will continue to regard him as a member of its larger fellow-