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STUDENT INTERRACIAL MINISTRY: A VENTURE IN RECONCILIATION

by *The Reverend John Collins**

(This article is an appraisal of a program which, in the opinion of its founders and supporters, represents a unique and significant breakthrough in the field of race relations within the church.)

Let us begin in this way . . .

The sleepy Alabama town was dark and quiet. Only the streetlights and a telephone booth lamp burned in the courthouse square. To the young white seminarian from Chicago, every white person walking in the square was a potential Klansman, or a surly, Yankee-hating redneck. He kept expecting people to guess who he was and become angry with him. He was as acutely self-conscious of his alienness as if a neon sign on his back had declared "I am a Yankee." He had arrived to serve for the summer as the assistant minister of a small AME Zion church in the town, and although he did not know it, he was more scared than the people he was coming to minister to, and more prejudiced toward Southern whites than they toward him. He didn't know, but he would learn.

For those interested in contributing to the Student Interracial Ministry or for theological students interested in participating, write the Student Interracial Ministry, c/o Dr. J. Oscar Lee, Executive Director of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations, National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, New York 27, New York.

Let us also begin in this way . . .

The little drama had reached its climax. The white father, waved his fist in the face of the young Negro pastor that his eight-year-old son had met in the playground and brought home "to meet my folks." The father shook his fist and said angrily, "We don't want no nigger preachers hangin' round our kids — you're not welcome here."

These two incidents are related because both occurred in connection with an unusual Christian venture — The Student Interracial Ministry. The first incident really happened. The second was a play — a role play. Its interest stems from the fact that the white father was played by a Negro and the young Negro pastor by a white seminarian. The role play was part of the orientation received by fifteen seminary students last June prior to their dispersion across the nation to serve as summer assistant pastors, the white students in Negro churches and the Negro students in white churches. How this unusual venture got its start, what its student sponsors believe it can accomplish and, most to the point, what has been the experience of its 30-odd participants in its three-year history — these are the concerns of this account. In the two and one-half years since it was conceived in the minds of a few students at Union Theological Seminary in New York, the Student Interracial Ministry (SIM) has progressed from the dream and experiment stages to an established and well-organized program. The students have always planned and executed the program, although growth, the demands of stability and clerical workload

have led them to obtain guidance and assistance from organizations interested in its work. Its participants have served churches in every Southern state except Arkansas, Virginia and Louisiana. Students have also served churches in New York, Connecticut and the District of Columbia.

Its work is reconciliation in Jesus Christ. The following excerpt from the Statement of Purpose, drafted by the first three students at the end of their summer's work, and still the program's basic guide, makes this clear:

"To sum up . . . we conceive the essential purpose of this program as follows: By providing various . . . communities with interracial team ministries, to witness to the concern of the Church for the problem of human relations . . . and to further the work of reconciliation between the white and Negro races . . . and the redemption of segregated communities, which tasks are one aspect of the reconciling and redeeming work of Jesus Christ our Lord."

HOW IT BEGAN

SIM was sparked by the sit-ins. In the spring of 1960 students everywhere were moved, in an atmosphere of prevailing apathy, by the action of Negro students in the South, the last place where many would have looked for a renewal of social concern in America's universities. At Union Theological Seminary it was no different. At an open meeting of the student body it was suggested that some jobs in the South be obtained for Union students, so that they might interpret to the entire student body the significance of the events then occurring in the South. At the Raleigh Conference in April, 1960, where the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was formed, contact was made with students from the Interdenominational Theological Center, a Negro seminary in Atlanta. Arrangements were made for three Union students to assist three ITC students in their summer pastorates in Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee. At the close of the summer all were agreed that the experience had been extremely valuable, and the Statement of Purpose was drawn up as a guide and incentive for future growth.

During the school year 1960-61 a committee of interested students, largely from Union, was formed, and Dr. Roger Shinn agreed to act as adviser. During the course of the year relationships were established with the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations of the National Council of Churches, which made the project an integral part of its program. The Inter-Seminary Movement has given valuable support. In retrospect, the thing that stands out from that year is the persistent faith which the committee brought to its work in the face of continuing uncertainty and discouragement. As late as the middle of April, and despite a great deal of recruiting and solicitation on a nationwide basis, there were only two or three students committed and less than \$2000 dollars in the till. Prayer was more than a perfunctory ritual at meetings and many hours were spent in discussing the theological basis of the project. Even in the frequent disagreements there was a pervading and deep sense of our unity in Christ. The Christian knows that all

* The Reverend John Collins was one of the three students who participated in the Student Interracial Ministry Project during the

in an unusually direct way. By June 10, when the Orientation Conference convened at the Fellowship Center of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen near Asheville, N.C., there were fourteen participants from five seminaries and sufficient funds to provide each student with \$300 to cover expenses over and above the room and board which the receiving churches would provide. Three of the students were Negro, and they served churches in New York, Connecticut and North Carolina. The remaining eleven white students served churches in Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, North Carolina and Georgia.

The academic year 1961-62 brought a number of changes. As is often the case with new ideas, a few persons had to go it alone the first year, demonstrating that the idea would work. In the second year a few denominations and one foundation backed the project with money, and the third year the number of sources increased, although finances were touch and go up to the last minute. A major aim of the Committee was realized in this third year with the shift from what had been largely a Union Seminary program to one of national scope. In the summer just ended, fifteen students participated, representing thirteen seminaries, including a number in the South. They served churches in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina and the District of Columbia. Two white churches in North Carolina were served by Negro students. Denominational participation has been widespread, with students usually working in a church of a denomination other than their own. Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, and National Baptist have had the largest representation. Other communions represented have included Lutheran, AME Zion, Southern Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ and Church of the Brethren.

EXPERIENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Much of SIM's significance lies in the fact that it is carried out within the framework of the Christian community. It is at once a mute confession of the sin of our dividedness in the Church, and at the same time it is the Church witnessing in its own Body, truly as a lamp set upon a hill, to our essential unity in Christ.

SIM's approach, in terms of the overall struggle for human dignity, is mainly in the nature of a quiet pioneer, or sometimes, a follow-up. Its participants are not generally "shock troops" in the same sense as those who participated in the Freedom-rides, sit-ins, voter registration projects, law suits and the like. Just as each group has its own role to play, so SIM is concerned with grace, with reconciliation, with opening lines of communication where none have existed and with reopening those which have been temporarily cut off. Where confrontation has been made physically possible by sit-ins and the like, SIM attempts to move in and bring about confrontation in depth. How well it succeeds is best testified to by the statements of the participating students themselves.

Tennessee: "One of the women in the congregation (told me) that she felt my presence had helped to erase certain bitter reactions she had had to white people. If the rest of my summer had been fruitless, I feel that merely what happened to her and to me would have fully justified it."

Raleigh, North Carolina: Speaking from his experience, another student was "convinced that the reconciliation that occurs within the Christian community is the deepest and most permanent of reconciliations."

Chapel Hill, North Carolina: A Negro student said "One thing has become increasingly clear and it is that real understanding requires genuine confrontation. Mere contact has not been productive of deepened understanding. I feel that my working at this (white) church in a leadership role has been a vital Christian witness to the larger Chapel Hill Community."

Nashville, Tennessee: A southern white girl reports "I am now living with a young couple of the church in a lovely new split level house with more of the luxury extras than we have at home. This is the Negro community white southerners never see and generally don't know exists."

Houston, Texas: "I feel like I am viewing life through a

Atlanta, Georgia: "Now the Negro is impatient, like a new shoot in the spring. It must grow. And the white race is impatient, like the ocean. Somewhere in the middle I stood this summer, trying to plant a cross on the beach."

Many students feel that they receive much more than they are able to give. Again and again, we are told of a deepening of the spiritual life, a new understanding of the Christian faith, a gift of community, a new discovery of self, an appreciation of the meaning of persons.

Alabama: "What to say about my summer? That I learned a little bit about what it feels like to be denied the chance to be a complete person, and pretend it doesn't matter anyway? That I learned a little bit about life, and courage, and acceptance? That I found that the people in a Negro church in a small town in Alabama had more to teach me about the Gospel than I them? That I have prejudices about the Negro I never knew I had? All of these things are true. But perhaps the first thing to be said is that I found warmth and friendship and good times."

Mississippi: "As the assistant minister of (a Negro Baptist church) I have learned what it means to fear, what it means to begin to live the fulness of Christian existence. . . . In the face of such fear, I found myself thrown back upon my basic Christian confession. . . . I found that in my daily living there was a new confidence, enthusiasm, and concern for the spiritual well-being of the ones I served. . . . At the moment, I find a sense of the presence and power of God's Spirit a richer and more central factor in my faith-made-manifest than previously."

Some white students, particularly those serving small or rural Negro churches have noted administrative and organizational deficiencies. But most of them perceived something of a deeper significance. One student concluded: "All in all, I had a deeper sense of real community and less of pretentious piety than I have felt in any other church group; I didn't experience the intolerable tension which the usual 'white' prayer group invariably produces."

Much discussion and thought go into continually re-defining the basic purpose of the evolving program. While the interracial aspect has always been a central element, equal importance has always been given to providing a good summer parish experience. Unless there is the sound and genuine experience, quite apart from all considerations of race, of living and ministering in a Christian community, which is the main job of the Christian in any age or place, the other aspects are built on a false foundation. So it is that a student in Raleigh could observe that: "As of now, I believe my relationship to these people is as it would be with any assistant pastor and the members of his church. . . . We (my wife and I) have come to feel more at home with the Negroes than with the whites. We have lost all consciousness of a difference between us and the Negro. Of course, our eyes notice the color but we take no notice of it; we are not aware that we are living among Negroes until we stop and think about it."

Much of the students' time is spent in normal church and pastoral duties. One Southern white student in Atlanta reported on a Negro youth fellowship which defied all stereotypes: "We have emphasized the study of avowedly secular books in the light of the Christian gospel. So far we have studied Sophocles' *Antigone*, Djalil's *The New Class*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Macbeth*. For recreation we have dancing following our Thursday night study meeting, weekly swimming parties, and picnics. . . . For the middle of August we are planning a work-worship retreat to harvest grapes at Koinonia farm, Americus, Georgia."

A Negro student in a white Southern Baptist church in North Carolina found he was swept up in the usual round of church activities: "My work began with sharing leadership of Daily Vacation Bible school. I was also given major responsibilities for a Student Bible Class and Supper-Seminar which are held each Sunday afternoon for students of the University. I also attend meetings of the Baptist Student Union on the campus. . . . In addition I have spent a great deal of time doing pastoral calling, attending church committee meetings, and

Statements such as these are profound and even radical in their implications. In the depth experience of coming to know persons of another race as *persons* first, one sees their Negro-ness or white-ness as simply an attribute of their personality among many, and not a very important one at that. This is overcoming barriers in the deepest sense. The roots of prejudice go deep in all of us, and are not rooted out by joining a picket line or attending a rally. The white person who goes out of his way to be nice to Negroes and vice versa is just as "prejudiced" as the one who goes out of his way to be nasty, because his special treatment carries with it the implications that Negroes are somehow "different." When one lives and argues and plays and prays with people for three months, he cannot help but begin to see past the color of their skin into their personality. He becomes aware also of how deeply rooted and subtle are his own prejudices. This is quite threatening, since man resists change at the deepest levels of his person, and perhaps it partly accounts for the difficulty SIM has experienced in recruiting students. A chaplain at a Southern seminary was asked why students from the school had not applied for SIM when the school had a number of students who had walked picket lines. He replied, "Well, you know, it's relatively easy to go out and walk a picket line for a couple of hours — you can do it without giving much of yourself; but to deeply involve yourself in people's lives for three months — that is a different matter." For one student the high point of the summer came at the end of a day when he and his minister had exchanged some rather heated words over their work together. As they sat on the back porch of the small parsonage in the soft Alabama twilight, the minister commented, "You know, you're the first white person that treated me the way I want to be treated — as a person."

Of course, given the situation, there have been many incidents which fall into the more spectacular categories of "direct action" and the like. But the significant thing is that these are seldom instigated by the student; he is there to serve as an assistant pastor and to involve himself fully in the life of the congregation. Where this life includes participation in the struggle for human dignity (and it almost always does), he participates in these activities, not as an outsider, or organizer, or director, but under the supervision of his pastor and lay-leaders. Most SIM participants have been white students in Negro churches and the program has taken pains to avoid any tinge of paternalism or "missionary work among the Negroes." The device of assigning the student as an assistant pastor puts things in their proper context at the outset. A young Negro preacher in the program was introduced at the district conference of his denomination as "the only Negro minister in Alabama with a white assistant."

Segregationists are always anxious to show that Negroes are unable without outside motivation to initiate and carry out protest activities, and SIM students are instructed to avoid action which would play into this device. This point is illustrated by the case of the student in a large South Carolina city who was walking home from court with some young people from his church. The young people had been angered by the delay in the trial they had been observing and which dealt with a segregated library. They decided to go downtown and sit-in at a lunch counter, the first sit-in in that particular city. The white student was faced with a dilemma. He had been trying to organize an interracial ministerial alliance and was having some success. This kind of action would surely set back his efforts. On the other hand, what would it say to these young people, still not sure he was really "with" them in their struggle, if he declined to go along? He decided to go along, but to be as unobtrusive as possible. The next day his picture was in the papers, which reported that he had directed the whole thing and had brought in two carloads of Negroes from another city to conduct the sit-in! The student referred to in this incident is now serving two rural white churches in a Deep South state. His experience with SIM will exert a lasting and significant influence on his ministry.

Bomb threats and threatening phone calls have been routine with many SIM participants. One Negro minister in Alabama was urged by a few members not to receive a white student, lest

church refused to accept the student he would resign. The student came, nothing happened, and the congregation discovered a new self-confidence. In a church in Mississippi many members refused to attend church while the student was present. The student recalls, "Almost daily, as (the minister) and I walked into Negro and white business establishments, visited homes, etc., we encountered looks of shock and fear from both races. . . . Fear of the unknown, the imagined, and the disapproved, seemed to reign in the hearts of the people so often. I was not immune to this fear. I felt it when I was told that my hotel room had been searched, that citizens were complaining about my presence to the mayor, and the first evening when I first grasped the fact that every moment I resided in the pastor's home I was deliberately violating a state law. Hence, I learned what it must mean to live in constant watchfulness, to cast one's faith on the arm of One greater than any institutional protections; and I learned that never to have lived any other way is to have one's will to struggle . . . corroded, perhaps irrevocably, before one reaches maturity."

While the student does not instigate direct action, his presence often provides occasion or stimulation for the church to do new and significant things. One white church with a Negro student held an integrated Vacation Bible School in a State Park which up to that time had been segregated. A white student was assigned to assist a group of Negro laborers initiate action under the Federal Executive order forbidding discrimination in hiring by firms with government contracts. Almost all students have received the valuable experience of attending and participating in weekly meetings of local NAACP chapters, NAACP youth councils, voter registration groups, Councils of Human Relations, and other groups which provide an insight into the day-to-day struggle against segregation in all its forms. In several cases, pastor and student have made a practice of visiting lunch counters each noon to keep pressure on those still segregated and to encourage local Negroes to use those establishments which have agreed to integrate. In several cases, new avenues of communication with the white community have been opened. In at least two cases, groundwork by a SIM participant led to the subsequent establishment of an interracial ministerial alliance where none had existed before. In other cases, results were less dramatic, but significant. One white minister of the "moderate" camp opposed the idea of the SIM upon the student's arrival. During the summer there were several interracial contacts which included a bull session into the wee hours between white and Negro ministers who had never spoken to one another before, though they served in the small Alabama community. In September the white minister confided to the student, "I was mistaken. Your presence here has been good for our community; I can see that we can move faster than I had thought before."

After a month on the job, a student in Atlanta just prior to school desegregation reported: "I am amazed at the lack of communication which we have all heard about, and at the misunderstanding of both groups with the intentions of the other, so I am trying to arrange for meetings of both (our) college and high school groups with (white) groups." Several such meetings were held.

In 1961 two students, one white and one Negro, served two churches in a Southern city. They worked closely, and an excerpt from their joint report follows: "The third very significant thing which we did this month was to hold an interracial youth fellowship on four consecutive Sunday evenings. . . . For most of the Negro youth this was the first time they had ever met white youth under such an open and honest atmosphere. Possibly the one most significant thing about these meetings was that they gave the Negro students who are being transferred to previously all white schools a chance to meet some of their prospective classmates."

Despite the pressure and the seriousness, most students find a good deal of humor in their summers. One wrote of the difficulty he and his parishioners had in deciding which of two ice cream places to patronize. One had separate service windows for Negro and white, but a common drinking fountain; the other served all customers at one window, but had sep-

the place which served everyone at the same window, and then drinking from the "wrong" fountains.

A participant from England, making his visit to the South, reported his arrival in Memphis as follows: "I arrived on the morning of June 16th and telephoned the church. . . . Having some difficulty in making myself understood to the deacon at the other end, I finally took a taxi and turned up. This initial difficulty in communication was a bit shattering, but I soon discovered that the deacon in question was unusually unintelligible even to the initiated. In fact, the matter of difference in speech proved to be no major difficulty."

In Atlanta, a white student working in the church pastored by Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., found that his regular Sunday preaching assignment coincided with the visit to the church of the white candidates for mayor in their quadrennial bid for Negro votes. In his sermon he observed, to the obvious satisfaction of the congregation, that it seemed that the only time white politicians showed an interest in Negro aspirations was just before elections.

One student learned that not all Negroes in the Deep South are docile, or even, for that matter, non-violent. On his first night in a small Alabama city, his host observed the student's apprehensiveness. "Don't you worry about anything," he was urged. "You wouldn't be here unless you wanted to and unless I wanted you. Nobody is gonna fool with you. I got a rifle in there with a thousand rounds, and I ain't gonna shoot no bear."

Perhaps one of the most confused participants was a student of Chinese ancestry working in a Negro church who was never sure, when he participated in various activities with his parishioners, whether he was defying segregation or complying with it.

Courage, fear, pathos, understanding, frustration, disillusionment, humor, spiritual growth, personal maturity, new friendships, excitement, new cultural patterns — all these are woven into the colorful web of a summer's experience with SIM. The basic purpose is reconciliation — to oneself, one's brother, and one's God. And the basic thesis is simply the faith that if persons previously estranged are permitted to come together and know one another intimately within the Christian community, something good and infinitely important will occur. And how does this occur? "Not by might, nor by power (nor with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power), but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." (Zech. 4:6; 1 Cor. 1:17)

NEGRO CHURCH RESTORATION FUND

New York, N. Y. Sept. 25 — The National Council of Churches announced today that jointly with the Georgia Council of Churches it will welcome gifts to help build new churches for Negro congregations in Georgia whose churches were damaged or destroyed by recent burnings.

Contributions for this purpose are invited from all concerned Christians in all parts of the country, said Dr. Roy G. Ross, Council General Secretary, in making the announcement.

The gifts will be transmitted to the affected congregations

with utmost speed, he said, so that reconstruction work can be planned and completed without any delay.

"While obviously carried out by hoodlum elements which unhappily exist not only in Georgia but in all states, the burning of these Negro churches is not only a flagrant violation of human rights, it is an act of blasphemy," Dr. Ross declared.

"In addition to love and respect for God, men have responsibility to love each other and to respect each other's God-given rights. It is but a small step from intimidating one group of persons to intimidating all," he said.

"We wish to commend all those in Georgia and other parts of the South who are raising funds to rebuild the churches. We invite Christians in all parts of the country to join in these efforts to restore to these congregations their houses of worship. By so doing every Christian will assert his conviction that violence and intolerance have no place in our democratic society," he said.

Gifts may be sent to the National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, New York 27, N. Y.; or to the Georgia Council of Churches, 63 Auburn Ave. N.E., Atlanta 3, Ga. Each should be designated as a gift to the Negro Church Restoration Fund.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editor:

It has recently and happily come to my attention that the material for one of the discriminatory situations upon which I report in the March-April 1962 issue of *INTERRACIAL NEWS SERVICE* — the problem of social discrimination — was based on a survey on discrimination against Negro patrons in east-side New York restaurants which had been carried out in 1950 by the Committee on Civil Rights in Metropolitan New York.

The Chairman of that Committee, Mrs. Edna Merson, informs me that the educational action program undertaken by their Committee, following this survey, involved many conferences with and letters to restaurant associations and individual owners. All associations and many individuals offered pledges of cooperation. These pledges were substantiated by a re-check, where discrimination dropped from a high of 42% to a low of 10%. The New York State Commission Against Discrimination had then been given jurisdiction over places of public accommodation, so this important civil rights committee turned its attention to housing.

This story of effective remedial action by aroused citizens will encourage others throughout the land, I hope, to confront head-on problems of social discrimination in our society.

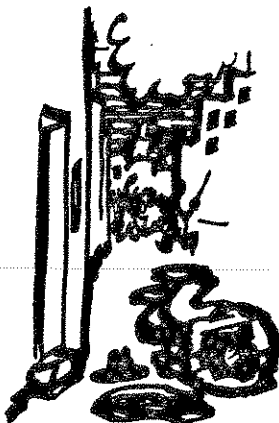
Sincerely Yours,
RABBI ARTHUR GILBERT

The matter in these pages is presented for the reader's information. Unless so stated, it is not to be construed as reflecting the attitudes or position of the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations or of The National Council of Churches.

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE
CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE U.S.A.
DEPARTMENT OF RACIAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS
475 Riverside Drive New York 27, N. Y.

Return Requested



AN INDIVIDUAL WHO WOULD NOT KILL, BECOMES A KILLER WHEN VENOM STIRRED IN THE CALDRON

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