

"We Stand Ready":*
The Role of the Black Church in
the Champaign, Urbana
Civil Rights Movement
from 1961-1965.

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(submitted to Afro 298D

as a supplemental item

to turned in report)

"We are willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to make the necessary sacrifices to become witness to changes that we know are important for all people of the community. We are not seeking to defeat or humiliate; we are seeking to replace injustice with justice" (1).

-Rev. J.E. Graves

April 7, 1961

Rev. J.E. Graves articulated this statement in 1961 during a civil rights campaign in Champaign, Illinois. The boycott and picket campaign placed public pressure on J.C. Penny's because of discriminatory hiring practices. The statement reflected the sentiment of many of those who were involved in the rallies, boycotts, sit-ins, pickets and mass meetings which were held to challenge institutionalized racism in U.S. society. This paper will study certain aspects of the civil rights movement in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois(C/U) from 1961-1965 in an attempt to provide examples of overall trends during this period of time. At this time, the Afro-American community in C/U developed and carried out far-reaching struggles against racial oppression. They challenged white society for equal access to jobs, schools, housing, restaurants, and city facilities and resources. At the center of this struggle were the black churches. Therefore, this study will target specifically the role of the black church in the C/U civil rights struggle.

In the early sixties, black churches provided an institutional foundation for organizing the Afro-American community and others who became involved in the struggle. It provided a core of ministers who were at the forefront of major civil rights struggles as well as being centrally involved in the organizations who coordinated and carried out those actions. The church also had a mass-based structure which could

mobilize financial, material, and human resources for the movement.

Black churches' support for liberation of Afro-Americans is not a new phenomenon. It is important to place the church's role in a historical context. Under slavery, Afro-Americans utilized religious organizations as an important component in building a mass-based movement for social change. Prior to the civil war, the black churches were generally the only institutions that Afro-Americans had access to. "Blacks were never equal partners in those economic, political, and cultural institutions (of the larger U.S. society) and in fact were systematically excluded from their decision-making processes... In short, the larger society denied blacks the institutional access and outlets necessary to normal social existence. The black church filled large part of the institutional void by providing support and direction for the diverse activities of an oppressed group." (2) In this role, it provided a framework for addressing both the spiritual and secular (non-religious) needs of its membership.

The churches also provided a forum for collectivizing ideas and resources of the Afro-American community to use on their own terms, distinct from the control of white society. In addition to addressing the day to day needs of its membership, the churches often were able to provide a meeting place to plan longer term strategies of liberation from slavery. The ministers themselves also played an important role. They were able to carry out communication between different sectors of the black community. They also consolidated their congregations around a view of social change through sermons, songs, testimony, and prayers while also mobilizing financial resources and people to carry out the

actions. Therefore, as a whole, there was potential to utilize the structure of the church to coordinate a movement for social change. On a case to case level, there existed many variables which influenced the extent to which the church was actually utilized. The amount of interference and repression by the dominant society, the outlook and attitudes of the ministers, and the the views of members of the congregation influenced the amount of involvement of specific churches in the liberation struggles of the community.

These dynamics were continued in later struggles. Black churches provided an institutional foundation for organizing the civil rights movement. "Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle." (3)

An examination of Champaign- Urbana provides an important contribution in comprehending the scope and impact of the black church on the civil rights movement, particularly in small northern urban communities. In the 1930's and 1940's, most of the approx. 3,000 Afro-Americans in C/U had originally migrated from Southern states like Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee. Increasing racial violence in the South combined with massive-scale industrialization of the Northern economy during WWII had a tremendous impact on mobilizing rural southern blacks to seek work in urban centers in both the South and the North. By 1968, there were over 8,000 Afro-Americans in C/U, who compromised

account 10% of Champaign's and 6% of Urbana's population (4). By the early 1960's, many of those who became involved in the leading the civil rights movement were no longer directly from the South but were either people who had migrated young and therefore grew up in the North or who were now one generation removed from the South.

The economic situation faced by blacks in small urban centers like C/U was bleak in the late 1950's and early 1960's. By 1959, there was only a small job market available to blacks in C/U. Unemployment was more than 15.6 % for Blacks in Illinois.(5) Of those employed, 71% were in the lowest economic strata of job occupations (unskilled and service) and 21% of the rest were in semi-skilled occupations. (6) There existed severe discrimination in regards to the types of jobs that were available to Afro-Americans. 51.1% of those employed were in jobs like janitors, waiters, cooks, housekeepers, parking attendants, and factory operatives.(7)

Although blacks had come North with expectations for a more humane and equal system, they experienced dramatically less.

Mary Alexander, a resident in Champaign for 60 years who was very active in the local leadership of the civil rights movement, described the changes she experienced in the North. "I came to Champaign (on June 21, 1936 from Tennessee) to find that the problem here actually was worse. In that in the South I knew where I stood. I knew where I could go and when. In the North you didn't know where you could go-at times you were turned away-many times I had gone into places and was turned away."(8)

The black ministers in C/U in the early 1960's were also generally

from the South. They came from similar social experiences as the rest of the black community. Rev. Earl Kennedy explained the conditions he faced after migrating North in 1937 from Alabama, prior to becoming a minister. "It was real bad...I went to work-got a job as a dishwasher. And this particular hotel(the Gladstone in Chicago Ill) that I worked in no blacks could go in...we couldn't sit down in the dining room..."(9)

The four leading C/U ministers who were vocal in encouraging their congregations to become involved in the 1961 struggle against J.C. Penny's came out of the working class movements of the 1940's. "All of them had left the South in their early years, all of them had worked while they went to school, all of them worked in industrial plants and came into contact with the CIO, two of them were CIO stewards, and all of them in one way or another participated in the protest movements that developed in the 1940's."(10) The experiences in organizing in the labor movement were combined with the experiences of organizing churches. For the civil rights actions, the ministers utilized their organizational skills to develop creative tactics which were highly responsive to the changing conditions of the movement. They also worked from a strong base from within the community which enabled them to mobilize wide-spread support.

The C/U civil rights movement experienced tremendous change in 1961. Prior to 1961, there existed one primary civil rights group. It was called the Council for Community Integration (CCI). CCI had formed in 1956 in response to a petition signed by 1500 C/U citizens who advocated non-discrimination in employment and who expressed concern over the Montgomery bus boycott and the exclusion of Autherine Lucy from the

University of Alabama."(11) Its leadership and membership was made up of primarily "white citizens connected with the academic community of the University of Illinois and lay and religious leaders in the Negro community. It was not a rank and file organization; it was a top level pressure group."(12) Some black community members were involved because at the time it was the only group functioning in the area addressing civil rights issues. Mary Alexander explained: "When I came to Champaign, I joined CCI. It was the only organization at that time that was active in Champaign"(13).

The perspective of the group was to achieve change without direct action struggle. CCI's newsletter described its own focus as being "directed mainly to white community leaders, both political and economic, to use their good offices to end discriminatory practices." (14) Frustration with the inadequacy of this approach in facing new situations reached its height in 1961, when the leadership of CCI discussed the approach to J.C. Penny's blatant disregard in hiring qualified black applicants. The University academics were not prepared to take action against J.C. Pennys. Mary Alexander explained the struggle within the group: "One meeting...I suggested that we demonstrate the day of the ribbon-cutting. The majority of the CCI, with just a few lay people, were university. No(the university affiliates said) we can't do that-we can settle it over the table. I will never forget-and I won't repeat what I said-but I jumped up from the meeting and said 'I am leaving this meeting. I will organize the demonstration' "(15) Mary Alexander and Rev. J.E. Graves led a group which split from the CCI in order to carry out a campaign against the department store. The new group brought together the leadership of various black churches, social

organizations, and other black community leaders. Although it remained unnamed until the completion of the "Picket at a Penny's" (at the advice of attorneys who sought to avert a law-suit against any one group) the new organization was the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association (CUIA). It reflected a similar structure and base of support to that of other Improvement Associations (like the original one in Montgomery-the MIA) who were coordinating local civil rights actions throughout the country at this time.

The CUIA represented a change in the civil rights movement. It coordinated the C/U community for action from within the black community. In 1961, it carried out a "boycott and picketing of a local store, organized and lead by local negro ministers and other leaders of the negro community, supported so far in an overwhelming manner by the Negro community." (16) The CUIA carefully planned the action. It coordinated the boycott to occur after an important election race in which groups within the black community supported and coordinated a campaign for city council candidate Kenneth Stratton. Regarding the action itself, CUIA systematically planned how to maintain a sustained action over a period of time that would protect the picketers and increase the number of participants. The group also sent people to apply at various businesses, schools, and realty associations to test their responses to applicants of different races and to determine the most effective targets of boycotts, pickets, and sit-ins.

The 20 day J.C. Penny demonstration, from April 6, 1961 to April

26, 1981 had a tremendous impact on the black community as well as the business community. It was reported that the picket achieved a nearly 100% boycott from the black community, and by the last weeks, it had seriously reduced the number of all customers. The action forced the department store to sign a settlement with representatives of the black community. The settlement agreed to hire at least one black employee. Many other department stores then followed suit which opened up an entirely new avenue of employment for the black community.

By this time, the impact was felt throughout the community. Members of congregations encouraged ministers who weren't involved yet to look into becoming involved. (17) CUIA mobilized mass meetings which called for full community involvement and support from both the white and black communities. Hundreds of people turned out at each meeting called. The meetings were held at various black churches throughout the community. Those ministers and churches most mentioned in sources included: 1) Rev. J.E. Graves- Mt. Olive Church, 2) Rev. A.W. Bishop-St. Luke's CME, 3) Rev. Williams-Salem Baptist Church, and 4) Rev. Charles Curry and Rev. Blaine Ramsey-Bethel AME. These ministers were among those mentioned as organizational leaders and rally speakers in a number of sources, and the churches were mentioned as locations of a number of organizational meeting places (18) The meetings were used to educate people to raise awareness of the issues that community was confronting and to provide a plan to involve people in the actions. It also was a place for fundraising, raising excitement and commitment, and allowing different community sectors to establish contacts and share resources.

Another organization functioned during this period of time which also worked to coordinate the church actions. The North End Ministerial Alliance (NEMA) was formed in 1958 by black ministers in order to address the common social, political and economic needs of their own community, which was not receiving adequate attention by the original association of all county ministers - the Champaign County Ministerial Association. NEMA included the ministers who have been previously mentioned as being involved with CUIA and many others. This organization still functions today to coordinate the actions of black ministers in monitoring the conditions in the North End (the primary black belt area of Champaign County) and carrying out actions in support of equal rights and community improvement.

Other organizations which haven't been named, but also played an important role in the C/U civil rights struggle included: Central Illinois Friends of SNCC, NAACP, Champaign County Urban League, Human Relations Council of the City of Champaign, and the Student-Community Interracial Committee. SNCC in particular was very active in campus-based issues as well as working with the community to organize students and community members to participate in mobilizations to the Mississippi Freedom schools and 100's of people to work on Southern voter registration drives and Washington, D.C. lobbying campaigns. (19) The ministers united with these other non-church related organizations in order to facilitate leading the various demonstrations in the early 1960's

An important relationship between SNCC and CUIA operated to lead an important campaign against the Champaign County Board of

Realtors in 1963. The campaign targeted the issue of anti-discrimination in access to housing. Students worked under the leadership of CUIA, while each group maintained its autonomy in carrying out other campaigns.

In support of the local needs of the C/U community, students participated in sit-ins against the realty association to protest realty association opposition to national civil rights legislation. In addition to the board's lack of support for fair housing legislation, the board's practice had a bad record in the area. Salem congregation's attempt to buy a house for Rev. Rowan was blocked by the director of the county realty association, who bought the home himself to prevent the church from owning the land. The association also many times blocked individual Afro-Americans from buying housing outside the North End area.

The actions against the realty board were carried out by a broad-based mixture of ministers, students, black community members, academic community members and their spouses, and high schoolers. The youth were the ones who sat-in and consequently got arrested, and the ministers and community members mobilized bail money, rallies, community support, and other actions to put pressure on the realty commission. This type of cooperation was repeated in boycotts against organizations like Coca-cola and Hammermill paper which had outlets in the area, and in opposition to segregated urban renewal programs. The controversy regarding Urban Renewal reached its height in 1965 because of civil right leaders concerns over the location and the types of plans proposed.(20) Pressure on the local government won resolutions in

1965, 1967, and 1968, regarding changes in housing discrimination practices in Champaign.

Housing discrimination affected more than just what house was available to people. "As a result of the housing patterns, schools are segregated until Junior High, with sharp increases in contact between Negro and white teenagers occurring at the high school level. This abrupt shift was an important factor in helping create and maintain tensions between Negro and white high school students, which for the past several years, occasionally erupted into open conflict." (21) Civil rights leaders carried out election campaigns, lobbying, and direct actions around the issue of school desegregation.

Access to equal educational resources was a long term campaign which continued to be an important issue, although generally not at the forefront of the news until the late 1960's when actions around school issues used more militant tactics. Yet, even in the early 1960's, "several organized citizen's groups ha(d) been urging broad changes in the school system to provide equal educational opportunities for all children." (22) Groups carried out tutoring programs, and in the mid-to late 1960's, protests in favor of bussing, desegregation of schools and resources, recruitment of black teachers and administrators into schools and head start programs, and new curriculum that deals with an accurate history of Afro-Americans. (23) The education issue was generally the first that people took action on. Mary Alexander explained: "I was working on the school issue before (others) cause as soon as my kids started in the schools I was working on the schools. I was working in the schools... I was all my kids roommothers... President of the PTA." (24) The

community was determined to make changes so that their children did not grow up under the same conditions that they were forced to.

The civil rights movement had an important impact in changing many of the legislative restrictions on the lives of Afro-Americans and other oppressed nationalities in the U.S. and in challenging the very foundation of the domination of the white economic, social, and political power structure over society. It taught important strategic and tactical lessons within the black community and more sharply defined the potential for providing leadership and defining a course for social change. It also demonstrated to other oppressed groups the power of a united community effort. "In a loud and clear voice the civil rights movement demonstrated to those groups that organized non-traditional politics was a viable method of social change, capable of bringing about the desired results far faster than traditional methods. Moreover, the civil rights movement provided excluded groups with concrete organizational (e.g. the SCLC, SNCC, NAACP) and tactical (e.g. sit-ins, marches, boycotts) models that they could follow in their struggle against oppression." (25)

Much of this ground was broken because of the institutional framework provided by the black churches. It provided a core of ministers which contributed strong leadership to the movement. It also provided a structure which was grounded in the black community which facilitated mobilizing material, financial, and human resources in the interests of the black community. But the framework only functioned for rapid social change when structures were developed that operated distinct from particular churches. Organizations like the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association utilized the resources

provided by the social base of the black churches, while also incorporating a broad variety of resources and ideas from other sectors of the society. Ministers themselves offered a perspective that was distinct from the religious sector. They brought with them their prior experiences. "The Negro ministers, after they left the shops for their spiritual calling, brought with them to C/U their training and experiences as workers and stewards in industrial plants organized in the CIO: and that when they sought to change the conditions of their existence in C/U they dipped into the reservoir of their trade union experiences and utilized its tactics." (26)

They also had a strong understanding of the black community. As a leader of a congregation, the minister was responsible for providing day to day guidance and for helping church members when necessary. The community came to him with the frustrations they had when denied access to facilities offered to white society. This allowed the minister to understand the interests of the community he represented and therefore was able to contribute to the development of creative strategies to change society.

Although important gains were made, many forms of oppression just altered the shape they took while still having a deep impact against oppressed communities. In 1971, a black community newspaper noted a devastating development. "The last 5 years have produced a deep scar in the life patterns of almost every young person in North East Champaign" (27) For example, "Centinei High School was closed down for two weeks in 1971 because of racist violence in the schools." (28) ^{Now,} In the 1980's, the Reagan administration has forced drastic billion dollar cuts in social

programs while simultaneously pumping covert billions of dollars worth of drugs into the urban communities. Youth today are often choosing to escape the deadening reality of their segment of U.S. society into a "medicated world" (29) of high powered drugs and TV.

The movement of the 1980's and 1990's has important lessons to learn from the civil rights movement. A successful movement is rooted in peoples' communities. From this solid base of support, utilizing the collective resources and perspectives of those involved, organizations of representatives from the various sectors of the community can then develop, coordinate, and lead creative approaches to the new tough challenges that lay ahead in the struggle to create a just and equal society.

6 Ibid, p.2. author quoted from Karsh, Dr. Bernard and Kennedy Downey, Black Employment in Campaign (Unpublished report from Campaign County Human Relations Commission, 1979) Karsh and Downey report unavailable from library 11/88

7 League of Women Voters, p.18

8 Oral interview with Mary Alexander on 12/9/88 (conducted by another student and myself)

9 Oral interview with Rev. Earl Kennedy, 12/8/88 (conducted by another student and myself)

10 Bindman, p.18

11 Council for Community Integration of Chicago (Urban/CCCI) Newsletter V 2 n 1 (Oct. 1962), p.2

12 Bindman, p.19

13 Mary Alexander

14 CCI V 2 n 1 (Oct 1962), p

ENDNOTES

- 1 statement by Rev. J.E. Graves to a Daily Illini reporter. Reported in April 8, 1961 issue of the Daily Illini.
- 2 Morris, Alson D. The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement. (New York: The Free Press, 1984), p.5.
- 3 Ibid., p. 4.
- 4 League of Women Voters of Champaign County, Ill. A Community Report Twenty Years Later: The State of the Negro in Champaign County. (Champaign, Illinois, unpublished report, 1968), p. 1
- 5 Bindman, Aaron Morris. Minority Collective Action Against Local Discrimination: A Study of the Negro Community in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. (University of Illinois Master's Thesis, 1961),p.1.
- 6 Ibid. ,p.2. -author quoted from Karsh, Dr. Bernard and Kenneth Downey. Merit Employment in Champaign. (Unpublished report from Champaign County Human Relations Commission, 1959) Karsh and Downey report unavaliable from library 11/88.
- 7 League of Women Voters, p.18.
- 8 Oral Interview with Mary Alexander on 12/9/88.(conducted by another student and myself).
- 9 Oral Interview with Rev. Earl Kennedy 12/8/88. (conducted by another student and myself).
- 10 Bindman,p.18.
- 11 Council for Community integration of Champaign-Urbana(CCI), Newsletter V.5 n.1 (Oct. 1962), p.5.
- 12 Bindman,p.19.
- 13 Mary Alexander
- 14 CCI, V.5 n.1, (Oct.1962), p.5.

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Daily Illini. Publ. in Champaign, Illinois. issues used: April 8, 1961, April 12, 1961.

Plain Truth. Printed in Champaign, Illinois. issue used: July 1971.

- 2-
- 16 Coorespondence from April 22, 1961 from Sandra Schwartz to Chicago CORE. Microfilm collection of CORE documents in University of Illinois Library.
 - 17 Daily Illini, April 12, 1961. Letter to the Editor by Rev. J.E. Graves.
 - 18 Information collected in a combination of newspaper articles, CORE letters, Mary Alexander interview, Bindman Thesis. I apologize if there are inadvertant omissions of names of ministers and churches involved. My intention was not to exclude any group but to present a comprehensive list of referernces. (I found many frustrations in researching this information in finding specific information regarding names and places so I wanted to attempt to correct the lack of specific information.)
 - 19 Central Illinois Friends of SNCC. Newsletter. (April 14, 1963, and April 14, 1964.)
 - 20 League of Women Voters .p.11
 - 21 Champaign Youth Coucill Demonstration and Research Project. A Community Program of Intergroup Activity for Youth. Final Report. (Champaign: Human Relations Commission, Oct. 1965).
 - 22 League of Women Voters, p.1.
 - 23 CCI, V.8 n.1 (Jan. 1967), p.3.
 - 24 Mary Alexander
 - 25 Morris, p.288.
 - 26 Bindman, p.124.
 - 27 The Plain Truth. A Community Newspaper of the Champaign Black Community. (July 1971), p.12
 - 28 Ibid., p.4.
 - 29 Prof. R. ... to AFRO 100 12/1/88 utilized this term in describing the drug problem in current U.S. society.

* TITLE PAGE QUOTE.

"WE STANDBY READY": Term utilized by Rev. J.E. Graves in 5/12/61 letter to the Editor.