

CHURCHES STILL LAGGING ON RACE,  
SYMPOSIUM TOLD IN MISSISSIPPI

By Jerry Demuth  
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JACKSON, Miss. (RNS) -- Mississippi churches failed to lead during the violence-filled struggles of 1964's freedom summer and, so firmly a part of Mississippi culture, they still are laggards in the fight for racial equality.

That was the portrait painted by a group of the state's religious leaders at a four-day symposium on freedom summer and the changes made since then.

The problem, according to Mississippi Episcopal Bishop Duncan Gray, is rooted in the fact that Mississippi has so many churches, with people selecting a church with which they agree.

"Churches are so much a part of the culture that they have no independent base from which to speak to that culture," Bishop Gray declared at a session on race relations and religions in Mississippi held on the Millsaps College campus.

The symposium, which attracted hundreds of students, educators, officials, and former civil rights workers, rotated between predominantly white Millsaps and predominantly black Tougaloo College.

When the Mississippi church finally did begin to set on racial issues in late 1964, it was not an action it decided to take on its own, said Father Harry Bowie, a black Episcopal priest in McComb, Miss. "It was cajoled and coerced into a position of leadership only when something forced it to take stand," he observed. That included the murder of three civil rights workers and the fire-bombing of 42 black churches in 1964, Father Bowie observed.

"A distinction must be made," he continued, "between the power of the church as an institution and the power of the Gospel to motivate individuals, to make them stand up and take positions of leadership. But," he lamented, "as the individual stood up, the church as an institution lagged behind."

Father Bowie's superior agreed, stating, "Federal pressure, economic expediency and legal action, rather than the moral leadership of the church, brought change."

Rabbi Perry Mussbaum, who was the rabbi at Beth Israel congregation in Jackson from 1954 until his retirement in 1973, added more gloom to the assessment of passive church behavior.

"I want to emphasize a point that's been ignored by many people here," he said of those who were the first to move on racial justice issues. "We were the leaders of minority religious groups. We had no power base community-wide, no social and economic prestige."

But some signs of hope and progress were cited.

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After the 24-member Committee of Concerned came together and oversaw the rebuilding of the 42 fire-bombed churches, "an improvement in race relations became noticeable," explained the Rev. William P. Davis who chaired that group while serving as head of the Mississippi Baptist Seminary. And the Mississippi Religious Leaders Conference, which is still functioning, has brought a "new spirit of trust, understanding and cooperating," he said.

The 73-year-old Mr. Davis, who is now retired, held up a copy of a recent publication of the Southern Baptist Convention's home mission board. The color cover photograph showed a black minister and a white minister co-serving communion at an inter-racial service.

Placing past church behavior in the context of a strictly segregated society, Bishop Gray maintained that the state's churches "did play a more important role in Mississippi than the evidence would indicate. The only relation I had with blacks," he said "was through the church."

White Mississippians, he remembered, did meet blacks on an equal basis at church services and conferences. Still he had to admit, "these cases were rare."

But even meetings between clergy of the same denomination could be strictly unequal, destroying the spirit as much as did any indignity or violence faced by a civil rights worker or a black seeking to register to vote, according to a recollection by Father Bowie, who told of how important it has been for him to become an Episcopal priest, a dream that began when he was seven.

In January, 1965, while in Natchez, Miss., he went to the local Episcopal church for communion, he remembered. "I bowed my head and waited. As the priest approached me I could tell he was trembling but he finally placed them after in my hands and put the cup to my lips."

When leaving the church he was called into the priest's study. "My face glowed" Father Bowie related. "I thought here he was wanting to meet a priest from another parish."

But the Natchez priest ignored the hand Father Bowie offered him, bluntly stating, "I gave you communion only because you are a priest. But I don't want to see you in my church ever again."

White clergy often fear their own congregations when having contacts with blacks, even black clergy, the Rev. James F. Mcree, a black United Methodist clergyman from Brookhaven, complained. Some of his white clergy friends, he said, will talk to him privately. "But not talk to me publicly when members of their congregations will see them."

Although the two black clergymen on the panel had more pessimistic views of what the church has done, or not done, and where it is today, than did the five whites, Bishop Joseph Brunini of the Jackson Roman Catholic Diocese, admitted, "even today many blacks still look upon the church as a white man's church."

However, ending the final presentation of the panel, Father Bowie reminded his fellow clergy: "Never overlook the power of the church."