

a first step



toward school integration

FOREWORD

Can the method of non-violence that erased the color line in Montgomery's buses be applied effectively to schools? This pamphlet seeks an answer to that question, so urgent in southern communities where the Supreme Court decision of 1954 is not yet accepted.

CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) told the Montgomery story in *Our Struggle*, a pamphlet in which I described the year-long boycott of segregated buses.

In this pamphlet Anna Holden tells how a CORE group helped parents and children when—despite the violence of segregationist mobs—desegregation was begun in the Nashville schools in the fall of 1957. Alex Wilson, the newspaperman who was beaten by a Little Rock mob, wrote in the *Tri-State Defender* that the two groups which made integration possible in Nashville were CORE and the Negro PTA.

Since CORE was organized in 1943, its affiliated groups have worked steadily by peaceful means to end discrimination in restaurants, hotels, theaters, transportation and employment. Nashville was an important test of non-violent techniques in the schools. The outcome suggests that the same methods can be used in other southern communities where court-ordered integration is being thwarted by terrorism.

The key to success in Nashville was CORE's policy of backing up the parents—by visiting them and by escorting their children to integrated schools. If Little Rock had had a strong interracial group, Governor Faubus might have been checked without the use of federal troops.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Montgomery, Alabama
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A FIRST STEP

toward school integration

By Anna Holden

in cooperation with the Nashville CORE group

"I can tell you now that I was scared that morning," Dr. Isaac Miller admitted to Mrs. H. W. Watson, several months later. "I had just read the news about the Hattie Cotton School when you called and I knew they weren't kidding when they talked about blowing up schools."

Dr. Miller, a biochemist engaged in research at Meharry Medical College and an active member of the Nashville Committee on Racial Equality (CORE), had first visited the Watson family just before school opened on September 9, 1957. He knew that 6-year-old Barbara Jean Watson was one of the four Negro children enrolled for the first time in Jones Elementary School, North Nashville. "If there is anything I can do, just telephone," he told the Watsons.

On the second morning of school, Mrs. Watson needed help.

The day before, carloads of segregationists had raced through the streets, carrying Ku Klux Klan placards and Confederate flags, shouting insults at Negroes. Mobs had gathered at most of the seven schools where a few Negro children were entering the first grade under a gradual integration plan approved by the federal district court. A shower of rocks had injured a police inspector and a Negro mother at one school. Picket signs at another school were inscribed, "God Is the Author of Segregation" and "The Mayor Is A Rat."

John Frederick Kasper, the racist from New Jersey, seemed close to victory in his 2-month campaign to disrupt integration. During the latter part of August he had held meetings nightly, urging every white parent to boycott the schools. Kasper's collaborator was Fred Stroud, an ousted Presbyterian minister of Nashville who had organized a church of his own. The jubilant segregationists gathered on the steps of the state capitol Monday night to whip up their emotions for more chaos.

At 12:33 a.m. there was a rumbling explosion that shook houses over a wide area. A dynamite charge had partly wrecked the Hattie Cotton School—a white school where one Negro child was enrolled.

Linda Gail McKinley, the girl on the cover, is taken to Fehr School by Mrs. C. M. Hayes, chairman of the PTA Intergroup Relations Committee, and her mother, Mrs. Grace McKinley.



At breakfast time Mrs. Watson telephoned Dr. Miller.

"If I ever needed anybody, I needed somebody that morning," she recalled. "I had gotten a phone call threatening to set the house on fire if Barbara Jean went to school. I couldn't go off and leave the rest of the children alone. And I knew she had to go to school."

Mr. Watson had gone to his job as a shipping clerk. Barbara Jean was dressed and ready. Dr. Miller came promptly. He drove the child five blocks to her school. Then he took her by the hand and they walked through a crowd of jeering whites.

The same morning Mrs. Charles Martin, another CORE member, walked to the Jones School with her neighbor, Mrs. Myrtle Battle, and another first-grader, Charles Edward Battle.

"I have never had people look at me like that in my life," Mrs. Martin said afterward. "I mean, with hate, like they wanted to kill me. People from right there on my block. That was a long walk. When we got about two blocks from the school Mrs. Battle said, 'Think we'd better turn back?' I said, 'No, not now. We've come too far.' So we went on."

Mrs. Martin and her daughter Amelia, a college student, had urged Negroes in the vicinity to enter the neighborhood white schools.

In the Glenn School area of East Nashville the Reverend R. W. Kelley of Clark Memorial Church accompanied several children to school. Bob Schwerdtman, a graduate student at Fisk University, was another escort. Teen-age boys in the booing crowd got themselves photographed for the newspapers by standing behind Mr. Kelley, pretending to measure him for a coffin.

The Bomb that Went Wrong

The bomb that blasted the Hattie Cotton School did even more damage to the cause of the segregationists. The vast majority of Nashville citizens was outraged. The police stopped tolerating lawlessness. Anti-Negro pickets were ordered to disperse. Twenty persons were arrested in a single day for vagrancy, loitering, disorderly conduct or carrying dangerous weapons. Kasper himself was booked four times. City Judge Andrew Doyle told him:

"If any blood is shed on the streets of Nashville, it will be you and your kind that are responsible."

The crisis was soon reduced to manageable size. Kasper and his mobs were suppressed. The tide was turned because the police finally enforced the law and because a handful of Negro parents, staunchly backed by the Negro PTA, CORE, ministers and other forces of decency, persisted in sending their children to formerly white schools.

How CORE Operated

CORE became active in the school situation when the Nashville *Tennessean* published results of the August 27 registration of first-graders. The school board had estimated that 126 Negro children would be eligible for formerly white classes under the plan of gradual integration approved by the federal district court. But only 13 enrolled—and 6 of the 13 families immediately got threatening telephone calls.

Parents of 47 other Negro first-graders, most of them fearful, had requested transfers from the integrated neighborhood schools to the all-Negro schools where no white children were expected. This procedure was allowed by the court-approved plan, just as white parents in a predominantly Negro zone could transfer their children to a predominantly white school.

The remaining 66 Negro beginners were not accounted for. It was obviously important to find and help them.

CORE members decided on two objectives:

1. To support the 13 families already registered.
2. To increase the number of Negro children in integrated schools, if possible.

The group felt that any organization dedicated to the removal of racial discrimination could not ignore the challenge. The Negro PTA and a handful of individuals, primarily ministers, came to the same conclusion. All went to work, independently but similarly.

CORE's first step was to give its 11 members the names and addresses of the 13 Negro parents and children, a list of schools where Negro children were expected, and a special list of schools where the school board expected "difficulty." The members then paired off for work. Wherever possible, they formed interracial teams and chose schools in their own neighborhoods.

The members agreed to visit the parents of registered children first and then call on other families with eligible first-graders. The strategy was to concentrate on four school districts in North and East Nashville where some Negroes had enrolled but larger numbers were expected: Glenn, Fehr, Jones and Buena Vista. A team was also assigned to Liscomb, in South Nashville, where none of the expected five first-graders had registered. Each team was responsible for two to four enrolled families and as much additional visiting as possible.

To find unregistered families, CORE members made the most of established contacts. A friend in the school system supplied a list of Negro children zoned for one of the neighborhood schools. A community worker compiled a list of families with first-grade children in another district. When no list was available, CORE members inquired



James Fletche

Mr. and Mrs. Herschell Groves and their son Erroll talk with two CORE visitors, Mrs. Charles Martin and Anna Holden. This family never wavered. CORE's support was a big help, they said.

through friends or friends of friends—or walked up and down the streets, asking which families had first-graders. Some people were reluctant, however, to give even that much information. For example, a family in the Fehr district “seemed happy when we left the yard.” Although this family had been in the neighborhood for several years, they said they did not know where any children lived. Directly across the street the CORE team found four children.

Names and addresses of all families visited were turned over to the Negro PTA, which was also giving parents real support and preparing to escort children to school. There was hope at first that the white PTA would cooperate in preparing parents for integration. The president favored this step, but it was blocked—chiefly by the opposition of a school board member who was also a PTA member.

Visiting the Parents

Visits to parents began during the weekend of August 31. By this time all those with listed telephones were receiving threats continuously. Most of the anonymous callers warned of harm to the child or the parents if the youngster went to the white school where he had been registered. A White Citizens Council motorcade came to the house of

one family and stopped before moving on. A threatening note was left on the porch of another house.

Some families who had not registered were also threatened. A mother in the Buena Vista area was told by telephone that lye would be thrown in her daughter's face if she went to the white school. The mother wanted the child to enroll anyway but the father would not consent so she was transferred to a Negro school.

Stroud was holding nightly meetings in his church in the Buena Vista district. Yet a CORE team found one mother "so calm we wondered if she had any idea what sort of situation she might face when school opened." The situation was exactly opposite in another family whose child was withdrawn before school started:

The parent showed confusion and fear that the child might come to bodily harm, that the home might be damaged by vandalism, that the father might lose his job. Apparently there had been some on-the-job pressure. She said if she had felt the support of others who had first-grade children, as well as the support of groups like CORE, sooner, she might have been encouraged to send her child.

The Reverend Will D. Campbell of the Nashville office of the National Council of Churches visited parents during the first week of school. He reported:

I recall particularly the bravery in one mother's voice as she related to me, "My little girl likes it in school, her teacher and the other children, but she keeps telling me that the people outside make so much noise. She wants to know what they are doing there. What shall I tell her?"

My reply had to be that it would take someone with more wisdom than I have to explain to a 6-year-old child that the mob was outside because she was inside.

Other parents said their children were beginning to suspect why the mobs had gathered. Linda Gail McKinley, one of four Negro children in the Fehr School, was hit by a white woman on her way to school the first day. The next night, the McKinley tool shed was burned. Linda Gail had been friendly to a white CORE member on two visits before school opened but the child clung to her aunt's skirts when the same CORE member called during the mob demonstrations.

Robert Alden of the *New York Times* wrote:

It seemed to me, as an outsider, that calling a little girl filthy names or screaming at her "pull that black kinky hair out" was as great a crime as the dynamiting of a school.

A school can be repaired. The mind of a child, once scarred, can never be mended.



Wide World Photo

Irate segregationists exchange angry words with police at the Glenn School after officers had escorted three Negro children into the school.

Probably the greatest help given by CORE members was the simple act of calling upon a worried parent. Many parents held back on the initial visit. But when they saw that CORE had sympathetic understanding of their fears, the situation eased. They talked freely about their reasons for rejecting or accepting the white school for their first-grader. They spoke of Kasper and his followers. They mentioned whites in the neighborhood who had been friendly for years but now weren't speaking. They showed fear of mob violence and doubt of police protection.

To counteract these worries, CORE members emphasized their belief that the mob was in the minority. They told about the support that various organizations and individuals were giving to the school board. They explained why CORE was deeply interested and was prepared to accompany parents and children to school as long as might be necessary. They discussed the whole question of integration and the importance of positive action in the schools, especially since the board had taken the attitude that the initial venture was an experiment on which future plans would be based.

Some members felt that all of their visits were successful, but others cited cases where their influence was small. One visitor reported: "I think the fact that we were an interracial team, from the same organization, did more to influence them than anything else."

What the Visits Meant

The informational and educational value of the CORE visiting program was significant. A number of parents had hazy or erroneous ideas about the first step in integration. These were cleared up by the visitors.

Other families were in doubt as to what stand to take. "We encouraged them to assert their citizenship rights by going to the public school nearest them," the Reverend Mr. Kelley said.

The Reverend Mr. Campbell commented: "Very few of us feel strongly enough about anything to involve an innocent 6-year-old child. Only as these parents were led to see that the future of democracy was resting upon their own willingness or reluctance could they go through with what the situation demanded of them."

Mr. Kelley reported that more than one parent had said the family could not have stood firm if CORE members had not helped. Noting that only 10 percent of the 126 eligible Negro children had been enrolled in white schools on August 27, he commented: "If aid to these parents had not been given, Nashville would have failed to desegregate."

Dr. Miller summed up: "The visits served to strengthen those who had made up their minds to go through with the program, at a time when doubts were high, threatening phone calls numerous, encouragement from Negro neighbors slight, and the prospect of turning back very real."

Mr. Campbell said the visits meant a great deal to him personally. "I found them rewarding because I was able to tell these parents that a great many individuals, many of them white like myself, realized that they were actually carrying the ball for the rest of us."

Through revisits and telephone checks the CORE teams noticed drastic fluctuations in morale. Confidence waned and waxed, fear moved in and receded, determination faltered and took on new strength. Parents who seemed as solid as bedrock one day would be nervous the next.

Two actions by Federal Judge William E. Miller helped materially. On September 6 he ruled that the Tennessee school preference law was "unconstitutional on its face" and instructed the school board to proceed with desegregation as planned. On September 16 he made permanent a temporary injunction issued four days earlier, restraining Kasper and nine others from interfering with school desegregation.

Score Sheet

When school opened, 2 of the original 13 enrollees had been withdrawn—but there were 12 new parents ready to enter their children in the white neighborhood schools. Most of them had been undecided. One, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, president of the Nashville

NAACP, had been out of town during registration. He surprised the segregationists by taking his child to the Clemons School in South Nashville, where no Negroes were expected.

Four of the additional 12 families were recorded as having originally asked for transfers to Negro schools. Two of these parents said the white principal had asked them if they had come for transfers and, without waiting for answers, had begun to fill out the forms. The parents did not protest then, but decided they would revoke the transfers when school opened. After a week's deliberation Assistant Superintendent William H. Oliver turned down all four petitions for canceling of transfers. In contrast, fast service was given to Negro parents who were frightened by the mob demonstrations and sought transfers. One mother was able to arrange a transfer from Fehr School, by telephone, in no more than an hour.

CORE kept in touch with most of the 19 families who had entered first-graders in white schools. Only nine of these children remained when the first half of the school year ended. Most of the dropouts occurred during the tumultuous first three days of the term. Other children were withdrawn later for various reasons, such as traffic hazards and a health problem.

Community Attitudes

Despite Kasper's campaign, Nashville did not expect trouble until a few days before school opened. The city had witnessed successful desegregation in the parochial schools, several colleges, the public library, the municipal golf courses and the railroad station. Racial restrictions had been lifted by the local members of the League of Women Voters, the United Church Women, the American Association of University Women, the American Nurses Association and the National Association of Social Workers.

When Kasper, Stroud, the Ku Klux Klan and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government urged the school board on August 8 to call off desegregation, President Maclin Davis of the Nashville Community Relations Conference presented an opposing petition signed by 600 individuals and 17 organizations. Later 300 additional signatures were submitted. The Nashville Association of Churches encouraged a number of ministers to make appeals to their congregations the Sunday before registration.

Organizations that made positive stands before the board or cooperated in community-wide educational efforts included the American Association of University Women, B'nai B'rith, Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, League of Women Voters, Middle Tennessee Mental Health



Wide World Photos

Mrs. Cecil Ray and Cecil Jr. with Mrs. George Clinnard and her daughter Pamela at the end of the first day in the Jones School.

Association, Nashville Association of Churches, National Association of Social Workers, Council of Colored Parent-Teacher Associations, Council of Parent-Teacher Associations, CIO Council, AFL Trades and Labor Council, Nashville Ministerial Association, National Council of Jewish Women, Tennessee State Nurses Association, United Church Women and the Young Women's Christian Association.

Only two community organizations joined the segregationists in making public stands against integration during the crisis: the Kiwanis Club and the Men's Club of the Monroe Street Methodist Church.

During the first week of school the Reverend Mr. Kelley and Mr. Schwerdtman had several conferences with Assistant Superintendent Oliver (who has since succeeded W. E. Bass as superintendent). They tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the school official that the transfer requests of four parents—made in confusion and fear—should be revoked so the children could enter the white schools near their homes. Mr. Oliver told his visitors that board members and administrators had discussed the advisability of putting their names on the federal injunction list with Kasper and his troublemakers.

After observing the police during the first two days of school, several CORE members felt it had been a mistake to emphasize the promised protection. One pregnant mother, in desperation, picked up a shotgun to chase white ruffians out of her house.

Special Problems of Partial Desegregation

Partial desegregation creates special problems. CORE members reported the first-grade approach made it hard if not impossible for many families to take advantage of integration. Mothers with babies or pre-school children usually depend on an older child to escort the 6-year-old to and from school. Sending the children to different schools would require the mother to accompany the first-grader. She would then have to leave the very youngest at home alone, or else hire a baby-sitter twice a day. The problem is tougher when both parents have jobs.

Aside from the practicalities, some 6-year-olds quite naturally wanted to go to schools with their older brothers and sisters. More than one parent said, "If I could send all my children to the neighborhood school, they would go—but not the first-grader, alone."

Obstacles to Integration

School Superintendent Oliver has said several times that few Negroes are interested in desegregation. He points to the small number of Negroes who entered the neighborhood schools last September. Actually the Negro enrollment was small for three principal reasons:

1. Segregated housing means segregated schools. (The school board, after painstakingly redistricting the first grade zones, estimated that only 126 out of some 1,400 Negro first-graders would be eligible for enrollment in white schools.)
2. Fears of physical and economic reprisal kept many eligible families from enrolling.
3. Other families were reluctant to break with custom.

CORE members found keen interest in desegregation among the parents they visited. Most parents wanted to send their children to the white school nearby but were torn between the long-range advantages and short-range disadvantages. They feared mob action (particularly dynamiting), economic pressures and lack of acceptance in the school. They had little confidence in protection promised by the police department and city officials. Most felt the children would get along well but were dubious about the adults.

The Reverend Mr. Kelley listed eight responses from parents he had talked with. One or two of these reflect unstated fears:

1. "I have an older child in the Negro school and my first-grader needs his protection."

2. "I am not well, so I am keeping my child out of school the first week."
3. "The child is not well enough to go and register."
4. "We are planning to move to another community within Nashville."
5. "I don't want to make my child a guinea pig."
6. "When these folks get off the school grounds and quit threatening on the telephone, I'll send my child to the integrated school."
7. "I am going to send my child, but I am badly frightened."
8. "Please pray for me and my family."

Who Must Bear the Burden

In most communities, particularly those of the south, the job of desegregation is just beginning. In December 1957 the Reverend Mr. Campbell visited Dallas, which had been ordered to desegregate. He was told that of 500 potential Negro students perhaps no more than a dozen would enter white schools. The situation is all too typical.

"The future is not stumbled upon; it is created out of words and acts," Lillian Smith wrote in *Now Is the Time*. Those of us who want a society where all men are equal must now work for our goal.

In many southern communities school suits are in the courts or soon will be; signs are being removed in buses and are going down in railroad stations; local plants are covered by fair employment practice agreements written into federal government contracts.

Where a suit is filed, a sign goes down or a manufacturer signs a contract, there must always be a first one or two or ten to take advantage of the new opportunity. Technically, the burden of desegregating public facilities that violate constitutional guarantees rests on the defendants—the school boards, the park boards, the bus companies, the railroads. Practically, however, those who desire the change must bear the burden. The burden becomes lighter where the strength of others is felt.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. With cooperation, understanding and non-violence, we can make plans work for the benefit of all. This includes plans such as school desegregation which may be branded as unworkable.

2. Personal contact is the best way to give people a brighter outlook and a better understanding of citizenship. Face-to-face talks are better than telephone calls and letters, although the latter can help.

3. If we expect to build the kind of society we want, we must put forth effort ourselves. In the case of school desegregation we must be prepared to go through mobs, if necessary.

4. The interracial group has something especially valuable to contribute. It is a live demonstration that integration works.

SPECIFIC STEPS

1. Organize parents ahead of time so they do not feel they are alone. Strengthen them by bringing them together in meetings.

2. Begin work with the parents months before the day for registration and the opening of school. The more contacts, the more confidence and understanding, the less risk of their succumbing to intimidation.

3. Many of the parents affected by school desegregation do not belong to civic organizations or attend educational meetings. Go directly to them. Talk with them in their homes and reach them through small neighborhood meetings (half a dozen families can be brought together in a private house). Do not plan programs beyond their educational level or in places they are not accustomed to.

4. Be thoroughly informed so you can pass on information about general school procedures and desegregation plans, statements from civic leaders and organizations, and names of people who can assist parents in case of difficulties. In times of tension, routine procedures may look like discriminatory treatment—the omission of a birth certificate, for example, may appear an enormous problem. There are always people to turn to: Interested lawyers will be glad to write for birth certificates, political leaders can be called on to help with police protection. But the parents may need someone to suggest which persons to see or what steps to take. Keep in mind, also, that apparently routine procedures may mask discriminatory treatment.

5. Let school and public officials know you are interested and active and what your goals are. Let them know you are concerned about the plans they are making. This can be done through conferences, letters, attendance at school board meetings and hearings, and by being present when court cases are heard. If you are silent, they can say—truthfully—“Everyone who called or wrote or spoke out was against desegregation.”

6. Protest immediately any police laxness or softness toward agitators who are breaking laws. The police and city officials will not take firm steps unless they know the community is behind them. A citizen has a duty to demand action on neighborhood disturbances, illegal meetings and threats to lives. Even those who want segregation will often support a curb on lawlessness.

7. Take your place in troubled areas to give positive witness to your stand; encourage others to do so. People who are subject to threats, mob abuse and economic pressures do not want congratulations after the crisis is over. They expect those who share their convictions to stick with them when the going is rough.

8. Do not underestimate your own power and the power of your group. Of course it would be fine if the most important people in town were active workers for desegregation. But there is little chance that they will be, so the victory depends on you. The less important people are often better able to reach and influence the parents.

9. Invite every likely individual and group to work with you—but don't waste energy worrying about what the others are *not* doing. Certain groups and individuals should logically take the lead—the churches, PTAs, city and school officials—but when they do not, individuals in their ranks can always be recruited.

10. Concentrate on one project at a time if your organization is small, but support and encourage related efforts, such as voter registration and attempts to break down segregation in voluntary organizations, on buses and in other public facilities. Studies of other communities have shown that all efforts to break down barriers contribute indirectly to the success of school desegregation.

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"It may well be that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition is not the glaring noisiness of the so-called bad people, but the appalling silence of the so-called good people. It may be that our generation will have to repent not only for the diabolical actions and vitriolic words of the children of darkness, but also for the crippling fears and tragic apathy of the children of light."

--- Rev. Martin Luther King

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