

Considerations by
Southern White Students
of their roles in the struggle for
Democracy in the South

*A report on the findings of a workshop on the role of the white student in the students' struggle for racial justice.**

In November, 1960, the third in a series of workshops for college students involved in the integration movement was held at the Highlander Folk School. The workshop was specifically concerned with the place and responsibilities of white students in the current struggle for democracy in the South. It was held at the request of white students and to it came forty-seven whites and thirteen Negroes representing fourteen colleges and universities within the South.

As the workshop progressed, the wish was expressed that the ideas presented should have wide circulation as a contribution to the growing body of opinion on the subject of racial justice. The staff of Highlander assumed responsibility for exploring the possibility of published findings. A grant from the Phelps-Stokes Fund makes possible this pamphlet.

The report was drafted by three students of the University of the South. Their work is symbolic of the growing concern of white students for assuming a place of responsibility and participation in the rapidly expanding integration

Their findings are not expected to be universally acceptable solutions to a multitude of particular problems. They do, however, contribute a concise statement of student opinion on a series of particular problems confronting the white student involved in a concern that has captured the students of the early nineteen-sixties.

This report is, therefore, as important as a symbol indicating stance, as it is for substance suggesting solutions. It is significant both as symbol and substance.

HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL
March, 1961

BEFORE we discuss points brought out by the workshop about the role of the white student in the integration movement, it would be well to present a clear idea of the goals of the movement. A good starting point would be a precise distinction between integration and desegregation. Desegregation is a necessary step toward integration, but it is only a means to an end. It removes the ponderous obstacles of statute and pseudo-legality from the path of social integration, which involves every aspect of life. Integration is the ultimate goal of the movement. Desegregation is desirable only in that it makes the task of the movement more easily accessible.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

When custom changes, statute law often fails or becomes ineffectual, as has been seen in Nashville. Civil disobedience in the integration movement, as defined by the workshop, is the intentional violation on moral grounds of a

custom or a statute for a specific and pre-planned purpose. It is employed in three general areas: the violation of a law because it is unconstitutional, the violation of a law because it is unjust though constitutional, and the violation of a prejudicial custom.

Civil disobedience, as used in this sense, is the primary technique employed in dramatizing the injustices of a segregated society. That it is a potent force in influencing public opinion, has been effectively demonstrated in Nashville and other communities where students have been jailed as the result of demonstrations. Literally hundreds of angry telegrams have poured in to mayors, police chiefs, and even Governors from prominent white citizens. Mass meetings have been held in both the Negro and white communities protesting the police action.

An often-recurring question in the workshop was that of acceptance of whites into the movement who are not prepared to go to the extremes of civil disobedience. It was generally agreed that there is room in the movement for anybody who is sincere. Many important positions can be filled by those who prefer not to place themselves in the position of the "civil disobedient." Jobs such as circulating literature, writing public relations articles, organizing discussion groups, talking with fellow students, etc., are open to any sincere person.

It was agreed that it is impossible to divide people into two groups: those who will join in sit-ins, pickets, etc., and those who will not. Most people are willing to make sacri-

fices if they thoroughly believe in a cause and feel that their sacrifice is important to it.

Active and inactive participation can exist simultaneously, and are not mutually exclusive. The problem is to advance a person's sympathies and interest to the point at which he will be ready to join the active group.

Many students are sitting on the fence either because they have not yet made up their minds whether they approve of civil disobedience, or because they are not yet willing to risk physical injury or going to jail in such an undertaking. Such students might be encouraged to participate in civil disobedience by performing minor functions and by gradually being allowed to accept positions of increasing responsibility.

NOTES ON PASSIVE RESISTANCE

One issue which was not resolved in the workshop was the role and nature of passive resistance. While some considered it a tactic, others saw it as a way of life.

Not everyone who wishes to protest actively can be accepted. A group cannot afford to have a member who will blunder at a critical moment. A person with a chip on his shoulder or with a fiery temper would not only jeopardize life and limb of the demonstrators, but would set back public opinion of the entire movement. Good intentions are not enough for effective action.

A person who can be allowed to participate in non-violent action must subordinate himself entirely to the group. He must allow the group spokesman to speak for him in reply to all questions, and he must accept strict discipline at all times.

Many Negroes are wary of white participation in non-violent action. They feel they cannot accept responsibility for the treatment often inflicted upon whites who are jailed. Others remember times when they have been betrayed by whites who have declared their allegiance. They want to take all possible precautions against accepting persons who will report their actions to hostile groups.

The white may be reluctant to join demonstrations, feeling that somehow he might be inciting violence. He is not. It has been argued that the demonstrators are responsible for creating disturbances that, if they had not been present, would not have occurred. But, to go a step further, the demonstrators would have nothing to demonstrate about if the rights of the Negroes to be people had not first been denied by threat or force.

THE PROBLEM OF ACCEPTANCE

That the white is wanted in the movement was agreed on by all at the workshop. One Negro said that the cooperation shown between whites and Negroes in the movement gave a feeling that the goal was closer. The white is wanted most as a person, not as a white who is continuously conscious of the fact that he is white. Because the integra-

tion movement is essentially a Negro movement, started by Negroes and led by Negroes, the white person is wanted as just another human being, striving for a common goal.

Some whites who have tried to join the movement, feel they have been kept in the position of outsiders because they were white. They have felt they were considered second class citizens. Most of the Negroes at the workshop felt that although most white students might have to wait longer to be accepted than most Negroes, they *could* become members of the inner circle of policy-makers. This probationary period is necessary for any person, white or Negro, before he can become a member of the inner circle. The leaders must assure themselves that a prospective leader is completely trustworthy. To do this, they must know the person well. Even in the most progressive groups, the probationary period for the average white is a long one. Due to the lack of contact between the races, the white is a stranger to most members of the group. In addition, caution must be exercised because of the number of whites who have become informers. In some groups the white may not be accepted at all because of the innate distrust of the white person felt by many Negroes from their past experiences. Whites may also be resented because they do not have to endure the hardships of the Negro when they are not associated with the movement. The white who has been participating in a demonstration can walk freely into a segregated theatre or restaurant without being affected by the great burden of segregation he has just been fighting.

The feeling of exclusion experienced by some whites, however, might be due to their waiting to be asked to join the movement. An interested white student should *not* wait. He should make contact with a group and ask specifically, "What is there for me to do *now*?" Nobody is going to go around knocking on doors soliciting participation in a demonstration. Everyone who is working for the cause of integration is making a sacrifice, and anyone who is sincerely interested in helping must also make some effort.

THE UNIQUE ROLE

There are several areas in which the white student can make unique contributions to the movement; that is, areas in which a Negro could make little or no headway. Perhaps the most important thing he can do is to promote interracial social contact. This is not easy. It should be recognized that it is often difficult for Negroes to walk into a social function even when they have received personal invitations. It is well, when extending invitations, to use the approach "I'll pick you up in my car and we'll all go together." The invitations should be made personally when possible.

It was felt that social relations between the races should be in small groups. The value of repeated contact was stressed. It is considerably better to meet regularly, perhaps on a weekly or monthly basis, than to meet once and never again.

Student groups can invite noted Negroes to give talks on subjects of interest. For example, a Negro sociologist might explain the Negroes' position and feelings concerning the integration movement.

In other areas of participation, white groups can immensely help the movement by communicating with public officials and discovering their views on integration. An understanding of attitudes of public officials can be of great use to demonstrators in planning and organizing action.

White students on segregated campuses can petition the administration to take steps to integrate the school. They can also petition school authorities to integrate school-controlled facilities, such as coffee shops, recreation centers, gymnasiums, etc.

The college student has a much better opportunity to discuss the problems and aspects of desegregation and integration with fellow students on campus than he does later in life. Students have a willingness to discuss and argue rarely found in the adult world today.

The student newspaper is usually read by all students, and is often a powerful device. Letters to the editor and feature articles about various aspects of integration with which students have come into contact will reach many people who might not be willing to discuss the problem. Small college-town newspapers reach the people in surrounding areas, and might prepare the populace for integration of such things as the local library, theatre, etc.

It is clear that there is much that the white student can do if he wishes to help. We are faced with the problem of persuading him to help.

NOTES ON GENERAL INVOLVEMENT

It has been observed repeatedly that most students are more willing to take part in action on their own campus than elsewhere. They prefer to act in familiar surroundings.

There was a prevailing opinion that students are more suspicious of outside organizers and outside organizations than of on-campus groups. Letter names, such as NAACP, CORE, and SCLC, disconcert some students who are suspicious of seemingly mysterious and formidable organizations. A campus group, with student leaders, has a more favorable psychological impact upon students who are sitting on the fence. Campus organizations can receive help from CORE, NAACP, SCLC, and other national groups, by asking for it, without having to use the national label or by being formally affiliated with the national organization.

A petition, besides letting authorities know student attitudes, will also be an influence on all the students to whom it is presented. The person who signs a petition (to integrate the school gymnasium, for example) will have committed himself to a new line of thought and action. Anyone who sees such a petition and does not sign it, will have

come into contact with the movement indirectly and will probably want to find what it is all about. Naturally, there will be hostility, but many previously uninterested students may be attracted to the movement as the result of such a petition.

Most of the active members in the movement today started from just such a simple expression of sympathy. Each step forward makes the next step easier, until the stage of active participation is reached.

When organizing a campus group, one of the important things to bear in mind is the image which the group wants to create of its ideal member.

One dissuading influence upon a white student's decision to participate is the possibility that such participation might hurt him in the community. The Negro who goes to jail for violating some absurd law will not readily be excluded from or ostracized in his community when he gets out. But the white must be ready to face the consequences from his fellow whites.

It was pointed out that the Southern white college student, in most cases, rebels against the ideas of his parents when he actively supports the movement for racial equality. A similar problem is met by the average Negro college student. His parents have probably taught him, "Don't fight it." Both Negro and white youth should try to convince their parents that they are preparing for a new order of community relations.

When white and Negro groups join to picket a store or stage a sit-in, a feeling of cooperation is created to the extent that all former embarrassments and distrusts are overcome. Action is the best way to make lasting and strong interracial contacts.

NOTES ON ORGANIZATION

The proper structure of a group is vital to the success of its operations. Although the nature of student bodies and campus organizations differs greatly from school to school, there are a few fundamental rules which *must* be followed to ensure the security and stability of a group:

1. There should be little rotation of officers. In a movement as complicated and intricate as the integration movement, an officer who has thorough knowledge of his duties is invaluable. A public relations officer, for instance, must follow a specific plan of presenting the organization to the public and to the student body. A change in method of approach would be noted instantly by critics, and would be detrimental to the group.

The president of the organization usually has the responsibility of making contact with Negro student leaders. If a different person makes contact every week or month, the Negro organizations might be slower to respond, and might be a little wary of associating with such an unstable group.

2. A definite and pre-designated spokesman for an action

group should be appointed—one who is skilled in speaking to hostile strangers. He should anticipate all possible questions which might be asked by curious or belligerent strangers during non-violent action. All other participants should refer questions to the spokesman, and not attempt to answer for themselves questions for which the spokesman already has well-planned answers. Even when a group is not engaged in non-violent action, a spokesman is necessary to answer all questions on policy. Members should not attempt to answer on their own questions concerning new applications of group policy.

3. Another way to satisfy the curiosity of strangers during non-violent action is to place a white "outside observer" near the demonstrators, supposedly not connected with them. When a person asks what the demonstrators are doing, the observer answers the question, presenting the views of the group in clear and concise terms, so that the stranger will understand the position of the group without having to ask one of the demonstrators.

4. In deciding what course to take, a group must find out the facts about the particular area in which the group intends to operate and tailor group policies to this. Before taking even the preliminary steps in seeking the desegregation of a business establishment, it is necessary to find out from Negro leaders in the community whether the Negroes are really affected by the policy of this establishment. Subsequent action leading up to and including demonstrations must be considered in this light. In some

cases, the group might find that it could gain more by a quiet program to change public opinion than by the last resort of non-violent action.

A basic consideration in the formation of a group is the criterion of what constitutes a successful group. The prevailing opinion at the workshop was that a group is most successful when it has the most people doing constructive work for the movement. This conception of a successful group is in opposition to that which calls for a small group of totally committed people. There is room for the totally committed person in both conceptions, but the one group restricts its membership to such people, and the other does not.

It is the individual student's choice to determine what his role shall be.

THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Tim Carr

Robert Kauffman

Blanchard Weber