

[ca. July 1965]

Commission on Religion and Race  
National Council of Churches  
475 Riverside Drive  
New York, New York 10027

## A CALL TO ACTION

In June of this year the General Board of the National Council of Churches passed, by a vote of 77 to 16, a policy statement entitled "Equal Representation is a Right of Citizenship." The Statement affirmed the Board's belief in these words:

"When the founders of our nation declared, 'All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,' they perceived and expressed a profound truth about the nature of man, which earlier generations had not the social experience or political opportunity to discover. In the Christian view man is a child of God who is loved by His Heavenly Father, and who is called to love his brother as a member of God's family. As such he is also a son of God who is of infinite value in God's sight and who, in obedient response to His will, values all other human beings as sons of God with dignity and the freedom of action of such sonship.

"If the right to vote is denied, or if the vote itself is diluted, then to that extent the membership of the voter in civil society is diminished and his political personhood is impaired. He becomes less of a "man" than his fellows, and loses to them some portion of his right to help determine his civic destiny. This is a moral question and ultimately a theological one, concerning which the National Council of the Churches of Christ may not remain silent."

The General Board was not engaging in idle speculation when it wrote those words, for the Congress of the United States has before it in this Session various resolutions which would seek to dilute the vote and a Congressional challenge which raises squarely the problem of the denial of the vote. THE COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND RACE IS, CONSEQUENTLY, ISSUING A CALL TO ACTION TO ALL CHURCHMEN ASKING THEM TO URGE THEIR CONGRESSMEN TO ACT UPON THESE TWO MATTERS IN THE LIGHT AND THE SPIRIT OF THE GENERAL BOARD'S STATEMENT.

### I. The Reapportionment Amendments and the Dilution of the Vote

### II. The Mississippi Challenge and the Denial of the Vote

The Constitution of the United States gives to each House of the Congress the sole responsibility of determining whether or not its members have been properly elected and are entitled to serve in the Congress. Throughout our history the Congress has been called upon time and again to pass upon the validity of one of its member's claim to his seat. In over forty election contests in the past, the House of Representatives has set aside election results because Negroes were excluded from the voting process either by being denied the franchise or by not having their votes counted honestly.

The House of Representatives has before it now a Challenge to the seating of all five of the Congressmen from the State of Mississippi.

The Challenge is based upon a massive amount of indisputable--and uncontradicted--evidence taken from cases brought by the Department of Justice, from reports of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and from hundred of depositions. This evidence proves that the Negro citizens of Mississippi were systematically excluded from the political and electoral processes of the State through the operation of unconstitutional registration and election laws and through the use of intimidation, terror, and violence.

The Challengers, members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, have scrupulously followed all of the procedures for filing challenges required by statute, and now the Challenges are under consideration by the House's Subcommittee on Elections.

THE COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND RACE FEARS THAT THE HOUSE WILL ATTEMPT TO IGNORE THE CRUCIAL ISSUES RAISED BY THIS CHALLENGE BY "BURYING IT IN COMMITTEE" AND, THEREFORE, CALLS UPON CHURCHMEN TO URGE THEIR CONGRESSMEN TO DEMAND THAT THE CHALLENGE BE BROUGHT BEFORE THE ENTIRE HOUSE, AND TO URGE THEM TO VOTE FOR THE UNSEATING OF THE FIVE CONGRESSMEN FROM MISSISSIPPI.

We are not asking that anyone else be seated in the place of these five Congressmen. If Congress votes to unseat them, then their seats would be declared vacant, and new elections, in which the Negro citizens of Mississippi would have to be allowed to vote, would be held.

Some people have argued that the Mississippi Challenge ought not to be pressed at this time. Rather, they say, we should let the Voting Rights Bill go into effect and see if that doesn't solve the problem raised by this challenge. While the Commission earnestly hopes that the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 will alleviate most of the gross injustices which underly the Mississippi Challenge, we believe it offers no excuse to the Congress to shirk the high Constitutional duty imposed upon it by the Challenge. There are, we think, four reasons for supporting the Mississippi Challenge now:

1. Whatever the Voting Rights Bill might do in the future, the Commission, after having examined much of the evidence presented by the Challengers and having read their brief, believes that the inescapable fact is that these present Congressmen were elected under a system that ruthlessly and unconstitutionally excluded over 90% of the Negro citizens of the State of Mississippi from the ballot. We support the Challenge, in other words, because it is right.

2. This Challenge is the fruit of the labors of countless Mississippi Negro citizens. It has been brought to its present stage at great cost. Some who have stood by this Challenge from the beginning have been jailed, some beaten, many lost their jobs. The Challenge is both a testament of courage and a declaration of determination on the part of many Negro citizens of Mississippi.

3. The House has a Constitutional duty to decide Contested Elections whenever they are properly brought before them. Regardless of the merits or demerits of the Mississippi Challenge, the House ought not

to shirk its Constitutional responsibility, however painful that might be. Here is a case where the old injunction, "Put your own house in order" must be taken literally.

4. By taking the route of the Challenge, the Mississippi Negro has witnessed to his belief that his just grievances can be overcome through the orderly processes of law. He is, in effect, fighting his battle for civil rights in the courts and not in the streets, in spite of the fact that all too often the courts of Mississippi have failed to "do justice" to the Negro. For us to fail to support this Challenge would be to contribute to his further disillusionment in the orderly processes of law.