

Churches Involved In Racial Problems

By LOUIS CASSELS
United Press International
"Organized religion has thus far played a relatively minor role in the struggle for racial justice in America."

Those words were written, by this reporter, a little more than six months ago.

They are no longer true.

Today, churches and synagogues are deeply involved in the fight against discrimination.

Protestant, Catholic and Jewish organizations are working together to muster public support for passage of civil rights legislation.

Ministers, priests and rabbis are marching alongside Negroes in non-violent demonstrations against segregation. Some have gone to jail.

In Washington, Chicago, Detroit and many other communities, tri-faith councils have been established to promote equality of opportunity in employment and housing.

Issued Pastoral Letters
During the past few weeks, at least 30 Catholic bishops have issued pastoral letters attacking

segregation as an unchristian denial of the dignity which God has conferred on every human creature.

The presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church has appealed to all Episcopalians to walk picket lines, give money to Negro organizations, and otherwise demonstrate the church's identification with those who are victims of oppression.

The United Presbyterian Church has created a "Commission on Religion and Race" to stir Presbyterian laymen into emulating the example of their chief executive officer, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, who was arrested July 4 for participating in a protest against segregation.

The Synagogue Council of America has set up a "task force" of rabbis, who are available for picking duty and protest marches.

The National Council of Churches is urging white Christians — both clergy and laymen — to join the "March on Washington" which Negro organizations have scheduled for Aug. 28.

List is Lengthy

The list could run on and on. A similar ferment of activity is under way in many religious organizations besides those named. Not all of their white members are happy about it. In fact, some are quite vocally unhappy to see the church "taking sides" in a social revolution.

Religious leaders are well aware that commitment to the Negro cause may cost churches and synagogues a few members and a great deal of financial support.

They say, however, that the time has come for religious institutions to pay whatever price is necessary to demonstrate the sincerity of their conviction that God created all men, regardless of race or color, with equal rights and dignity.

This "damn-the-torpedoes" spirit was expressed in a recent statement by the general board of the National Council of churches. It said:

"Now is the time for action — even costly action that may jeopardize the organizational and institutional structures of the church."

What is the Cause?

What caused church and synagogue leaders to move suddenly from timidity to bold action on racial problems?

Three factors seem to have contributed.

One was the National Conference on Religion and Race held in Chicago last January. It was the first time in history that Protestants, Catholics and Jews had met together to examine their role in race relations. They went away from the meeting with a deep sense of shame about the past record, and a joint determination to prove that religion is neither indifferent nor irrelevant to what they called "America's number one moral problem."

Close on the heels of the Chicago meeting came the demonstrations against segregation in Birmingham, Ala. The already-sore consciences of many white Christians and Jews were sharply pricked by the spectacle of Negroes being doused by fire hoses, attacked by police dogs, and herded into jails.

Negro Patience Exhausted

The nationwide wave of demonstrations which followed Birmingham was the clincher. Religious leaders realized that Negro patience was exhausted, and that it was no longer a question of whether racial barriers should come down rapidly or gradually, but a question of whether they would come down peacefully or violently.

"Birmingham and what followed has confronted the nation with a near-revolution by Negro citizens," said Mathew Ahmann, executive director of the National

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