

IN THE BASEMENT OF THE CHURCH: SHARED SPACE, SHARED IDEAS
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Abstract: *"In the Basement of the Church: Shared Space, Shared Ideas" calls attention to the fact that there was more going on in the basement of the church than the teaching of biblical Sunday school lessons and highlights the work of Sunday school youth in civil rights efforts in America during the 1930s and 1940s. The civil rights activism of Sunday school youth was primarily done through alliances first with the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) and later the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The alliances formed between these groups in the 1930s and 1940s produced a radical religious thought among African-American youth, the remnants of which were articulated in a more aggressive youth activism of the 1950s and 1960s.*

In 1887, Reverend J. M. Henderson descriptively noted an architectural design that was ideal for progressive church activity. In that description, Sunday school classes and other extracurricular activities were assigned to the basement of the church. "The basement," Rev. Henderson wrote, "forms a commodious Sabbath school room, also is used for entertainments, classes, etc."¹ Sunday schools were a seedbed of activity out of which many community ventures germinated to assist and support those living in the community. Sunday school workers taught African-Americans to read, write and aspire to a higher academic education. These Sunday school leaders were educators, theologians and activists that became involved in social and political justice activities, as well. The merging of Christian beliefs and black activist thought created a black activist theology of education for African-American communities in the South. A majority of black activist teachings in the black church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed the lead of accommodationist leaders. By the mid-twentieth century, a younger increasingly radical group of grassroots leaders in African-American communities professed a more aggressive ideology that filtered into the black church in the late 1930s and 1940s, not only through church leaders, but from the bottom up as young people through church youth organizations formed alliances with secular militant youth movements. Sunday school youth shared alliances with secular, religious, liberal, working class, middle class, black and white youth organizations. This diverse coalition created space for teaching a radical interpretation of scripture and produced a radical religious thought among African-American youth, the remnants of which are articulated in 1950s and 1960s youth activism.

During the 1930s, African-American youth were appalled at the judicial racism shown towards such young men as Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys. This decade also brought economic hardship and unprecedented unemployment for all Americans, a result of the Great Depression, but increasingly so for black Americans. Small educational budgets for African-American children in the South, the continued practice of lynching, and the prevalence of *de jure* segregation in the South and *de facto* segregation in other parts of the United States fostered a new generation of outspoken advocates for racial equality in America. A partial response to these events by black youth activists was the creation of two youth groups - the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) and the Youth Council of the NAACP (Youth Council) - under the auspices of their national governing bodies, the National Negro Congress

(NNC) and the National Advancement for the Association of Colored People (NAACP), respectively. SNYC and the Youth Council ultimately set a precedent for African-American youth protest movements in later years. Both organizations recruited youth into their organizations and shared meeting space with Sunday schools, along with public schools, college campuses and other community organizations.

Southern Negro Youth Congress

A Southern Negro Youth Conference was called for on February 14, 1937 exactly one year after the establishment of its parent body, the NNC. The primary purpose of a National Negro Congress was to develop a united movement for racial progress.² The NNC's philosophy was that legal fights were not effective (an indirect reference to NAACP legalistic tactics) without the execution of nationwide strategies and tactics through methods of mass demonstration such as parades, picketing, boycotting, mass protest, the mass distribution of propaganda literature, as well as legal action.³

At the behest of a young man named Edward E. Strong, the youth section of the NNC gathered in Richmond, Virginia for a Southern Negro Youth Conference on February 13 and 14, 1937. SNYC sought to attract young people who were engaged in occupations in which the labor unions already existed, as well as the Unemployed Councils, Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and the nascent union of sharecroppers and small farmers. The delegates, too, included a category of organized church youth that included the Baptist Young Peoples Union (BYPU), an entity of the National Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board.⁴

The attendance of the BYPU members at SNYC was an indication of dissension from traditional church polity. The SNYC was not well supported by leaders in the black church due to the militant strategies, tactics and Communist Party affiliation of key leaders in the Southern Negro Youth Congress as well as the national body. The Sunday School Board's support of SNYC, however, did not come from denominational heads but was embraced by youth participants of the BYPU and Sunday school leaders such as Reverend W. H. Jernagin, president of the National Baptist Sunday School Convention and vice president of the National Negro Congress. Despite philosophical differences, BYPU members found mutual ground in uniting with the SNYC. Sunday school scholars of the BYPU formed a grassroots alliance between the church and SNYC surrounding issues to eradicate racial discrimination in education, labor and politics in the South. Those Sunday school youth were inspired from the very start of SNYC to become actively involved and participate in what seemed to be a radical movement by many of their pastors and church leaders. Sunday school youth were inspired in part, because Communist Party members developed a healthy respect for the youths' religious beliefs. Communist Party members learned that the Negro church had a rich history of revolutionary traditions with such outstanding leaders as Richard Allen and Gabriel Prosser. From these understandings, they began to depict Jesus as one who associated with common working people and who, because of those associations, was wanted by authorities for sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy, and conspiring to overthrow the government – in short, a revolutionary who was subjected to similar anti-Christian, like anti-Communist, persecution.⁵

SNYC placed the concerns of youth, in organizations such as the Sunday school, at the forefront of a neo-radical movement protesting racial injustices particularly in the South while fighting to win first-class citizenship in America. Adopting this militant ideology was the only way that the "Negro church" would remain, according to SNYC delegates, a viable institution in African-American communities.⁶ Additionally, Communist Party affiliates transformed the

historical Jesus into a revolutionary Jesus suggesting a new, radical interpretation of a key figure in the Christian faith that identified SNYC philosophies with Christian youth theologies.

The life of the Southern Negro Youth Congress was short-lived, only existing approximately eleven years until 1949. SNYC headquarters were housed in Birmingham, Alabama where in the 1940s Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor harassed SNYC members and its affiliates. Finally, a combination of emerging McCarthyism (the “Red Scare”), “Bull” Connor and investigations by the FBI into SNYC’s affiliation with the Communist Party brought the Southern Negro Youth Congress to an end. By the time of its demise in 1949, the group had not scratched the surface in terms of support for SNYC. Nor did the BYPU and other religious youth organizations garner much support from their church leaders. Those few ministers in the South who dared to be identified at all with any seemingly militant movement lent their support to a pre-existing protest organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Youth Council of the NAACP

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was the outgrowth of a conference held on February 12 and 13, 1909 at the behest of prominent black and white Americans including W. E. B. Du Bois. The original platform of this organization denounced segregation in America, called for equal educational opportunities for all and a strict enforcement of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution. National headquarters were designated for New York City and the first branch set up in Chicago spread to other cities.⁷

There were many calls, from its inception, to organize youth chapters of the NAACP for young people to live out the ideals of the NAACP and to be the bridge to carry those ideals into the future. Those calls were answered on July 1, 1936 when Juanita E. Jackson formed the first Youth Night at the 27th Annual Conference of the NAACP in Baltimore, Maryland, approximately five months after the NNC formed its own youth group in Chicago, Illinois.⁸

The fact that the NAACP was a secular organization with a diverse racial/ethnic composition did not deter young members of religious organizations from uniting in solidarity with their activism. Instead, church youth groups discovered shared ideas, values and common objectives with those of the Youth Council. The objectives of the Youth Council included informing youth about political, social, educational and economic problems which confronted African Americans; initiating programs in the fight to end lynching, injustices in the courts, segregation and discrimination based on race and color. They also organized to secure the right to vote, obtain equal opportunities in all fields of employment, and to develop a knowledge and appreciation of the history of achievements, and contributions of the “Negro” to American culture.⁹ Youth Council members strategized to fulfill their purpose by collaborating with many Christian churches and organizations. Propaganda meetings were conducted in churches, lodges and clubs to awaken the interest of youth in the Association and its program.

NAACP branches in the South stumbled along at best prior to World War II. Belonging to the NAACP was risky business and almost always prompted retaliation, particularly economic retaliation, by the white community. Those who were less vulnerable to economic retaliation were those blacks who did not rely on white Americans for their livelihood, especially a growing black middle-class that included business owners, doctors, dentists, lawyers and ministers. Young people, as well, still dependent upon their parents had no fear of economic reprisal from the white community. There was not a national surge of ministers in the South joining the NAACP in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, with urgings from the NAACP national office in New

York City and northern ministers, several local neighborhoods in the South had at least one minister willing to lead a “radical” grassroots black protest movement out of his church. One push to involve ministers in the South was put forth by a northern urban minister, the Reverend B. Julian Smith, General Secretary for the General Board of Religious Education of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Rev. Smith invited Mrs. Ruby Hurley, national secretary of the NAACP Youth Council to participate in a national youth conference of Sunday school superintendents held on July 13-18, 1948 in Chicago, Illinois.

National Youth Conference Of Sunday School Superintendents, July 13-18, 1948

Speakers talked about God, the Bible as the word of God and living a Christian life. God was presented as the Father in relationship to humanity in three terms: 1) individualism – God loves the individual; 2) universalism – if God loves each person then God loves all people; 3) personal religion – each man or woman answering God’s love with the same love, love for each man or woman. Conclusively, if God loves all humanity as sons and daughters then humanity must love each other as brothers and sisters. Jesus, as the concrete example of personal religion, saw all humankind not in terms of what they once were, but in terms of what they might become. References to the Prodigal Son, the adulterous and Samaritan women were used as biblical illustrations of the possibilities of change - what one had once been and what they essentially became.¹⁰ It placed black Americans, at least in theory, on equal footing with white Americans.¹¹

Others used Christian ideals as a frame of reference and built on those ideals to offer practical activities and daily solutions for political activism. One speaker quoted Matthew 20:26-28: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to take first place among you must be the servant of all; for even the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve.”¹² The quote constituted the greatness of service as a call for youth to be in service against racism as race prejudice was “undemocratic and un-Christian.”¹³

Parishioners were asked to join with other organizations such as the NAACP to urge members of the church to vote, sponsor forums where congregants would receive information about channels through which citizens could obtain action from local government agencies, instruct people in financial planning, provide temporary relief, offer employment counseling, and work for the full integration of church members into American life. Southern youth were specifically addressed and encouraged to remain in school and do their best to absorb all of the knowledge possible as well as encourage parents and friends to pay their poll taxes and go to the polls every election day to vote so as to be represented and have a voice in government. Conclusively, those leading discussions at the Sunday school conference went to the very core of the Christian faith while advocating for the service of Sunday school youth and youth leaders by reminding them that the church had taught them based on the scriptural text in the synoptic gospels to “love thy neighbor.”¹⁴ The practical results of love were to administer to a woman or man’s personal needs which would also afford the church a better opportunity to minister to his or her spiritual needs.¹⁵

The teachings of Jesus were presented as “radical” thereby portraying Jesus, a central figure in the Christian faith, as a political activist. Introducing Christian doctrine in the context of better race relations meant that young people who were listening were to act with dignity and respect and act worthy to be treated with dignity and respect; they were to love their enemy with a hope that the enemy would one day see them not as what they once were – slaves and second-class citizens – but what they were striving to become –first-class citizens with all rights of citizenship in a democratic society.

Post *Brown v. Board of Education*

For ten years or more following the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, most public schools remained segregated and segregation in the South remained the social status quo. African-American youth and parents in local communities steadfastly protested. Oftentimes those protests were unwelcome and met with backlash from white extremist groups in response to overt actions by black Americans against racism in that region. A well-known and classic example is the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. In the week prior to the bombings, public schools in Birmingham were integrated by court order. Sixteenth Street had been one of a handful of black churches willing to participate in the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) headed by the militant and flamboyant Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth (the Birmingham branch of the NAACP was outlawed in May, 1956). The first meeting, held at Sixteenth Street, was called specifically to recruit youth and was designed to revive a flailing protest movement in the city of Birmingham. On May 2, 1963, hundreds of youth dispersed from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and two other churches singing protest songs and carrying picket signs towards downtown Birmingham. Thereafter, mass meetings grew to thousands and overflowed sanctuaries in black churches.¹⁶

While attendance at mass meetings increased, and sanctuaries were filled, it was clear to their white adversaries that it was the unity of young people that re-fueled and energized the black protest movement in Birmingham. White segregationists retaliated against black youth and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for their courage to protest. They began to employ several scare tactics as the first day of integrated schooling in Birmingham approached and because of the church's participation in those youth protests. It was common knowledge that youth gathered, if at no other time in churches, on that one hour on Sunday morning at Sunday school and it was during that hour on September 15, 1963 that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was attacked. The following day the Washington Post headline read, "Blast Wrecks Sunday School, Rioting Follows." The following day the United Press account of that event stated: "A dynamite bomb hurled from a passing car blasted a crowded Negro church today, killing four girls in their Sunday school classes and touching off street fighting that killed another youth. . . . Damage to the sanctuary itself was not nearly as severe as 'in the basement.'" ¹⁷ In the days after the church bombing Negro students entered three Birmingham schools without incident.¹⁸ Yet, revenge against the church for those youth who participated in the Birmingham movement against school segregation had felt its full repercussions. Sunday school space was viewed by white supremacist groups as "militant" space and a threat to the southern segregationist culture.

Sunday school students learned many lessons over time in the basement of the church. They learned to read, to write and the basics of Christian theology. Sunday school students also learned that they could transform communities. And, it was their responsibility to join with diverse members of other organizations like the National Negro Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to change African-American life in the South. Sunday school participants sat alongside others in a militant fight for justice discussing, strategizing and becoming educated in nonviolent tactics in order to eradicate the culture of social difference that was the reality for African-American people in the first half of the twentieth century. Prior even to the mass protest movement of the 1960s, Sunday school scholars prayed, sang freedom songs, marched and demonstrated so that their generation and those that followed would have the right of first-class citizenship in a country that African

Americans helped to build. Black activists were invited into Sunday school auditoriums and classrooms to lay the foundation for a new “radical” black activism among young people that continued to flourish and set a precedent for a national civil rights movement that evolved in the 1960s and later. Sunday school scholars crafted the teachings and principles of Jesus into a militant, black activist theology of education so that Americans would honor the democracy and freedom ascribed to all citizens in the U.S. Constitution and for which African Americans, alongside white Americans, fought to protect.

¹ Rev. J. M. Henderson, “Progressive Church Architecture,” *Christian Recorder*, December 1, 1887.

² Lawrence S. Wittner, “The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 885-886; Bates, 135.

³ National Negro Congress, *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress* (Chicago: National Negro Congress, 1936), microfilm, p. 11.

⁴ Linn Shapiro, interview with James Jackson, October 19, 1992, box 14, folder 26, James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, 1917-2004, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York.

⁵ Robin D. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 135.

⁶ All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, *Official Proceedings* (Richmond: Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1938), microfilm, p. 95.

⁷ “Platform Adopted by the National Negro Committee,” *Papers of the NAACP Part 1*, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York, NY [hereafter cited as *NAACP Papers*], microfilm, reel 1, frame 60; “Report of the Planning Committee on Permanent Organization,” *Ibid.*, reel 1, frame 28; Daniel W. Wynn, *The Black Protest Movement* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1974), 22-23.

⁸ Juanita E. Jackson, “The N.A.A.C.P. Challenges Youth,” *NAACP Papers Part 19: Series A*, microfilm, reel 2, frames 2-3.

⁹ “For the Full Emancipation of the American Negro: How to Organize a Youth Council of the NAACP,” *Ibid.*, reel 1, frame 70.

¹⁰ The story of the Prodigal Son is in the Bible, Luke 15, the adulterous woman is found in John 8 and the Samaritan woman, John 4.

¹¹ J.O. Myers, “New Testament Teachings on Personal Religious Living,” *NAACP Papers Part 19: Series C*, microfilm, reel 5, frames 240-241.

¹² M. L. Darnell, “The New Testament Teachings Regarding Race,” *Ibid.*, reel 5, frame 244.

¹³ Mrs. Sadie G. Mays, “Present-Day Trends in Race Relations,” *Ibid.*, reel 5, frame 246.

¹⁴ “Love thy neighbor” is a portion of text taken from three gospels known as the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The full text is found in Matthew 22:37-39, Mark 12:30-31 and Luke 10:27.

¹⁵ Harold D. Snell, “Group Action in Preparing for and Securing Equal Economic and Political Opportunities,” *NAACP Papers Part 19: Series C*, microfilm, reel 5, frames 228-229; R. Edward Reid, *Ibid.*, reel 5, frames 230-231.

¹⁶ Alfred Duckett, “‘Little Child Shall Lead Them,’” *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1963, national edition; Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁷ “Blast Wrecks Sunday School, Rioting Follows,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, September 16, 1963.

¹⁸ “Negroes Enter Birmingham Schools Despite Bombings,” *Chicago Defender*, September 17, 1963, daily edition.