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CME Church in the Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

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THE CHRISTIAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE MEMORY OF THE
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church is a historically black church rooted in the South that was established in 1870. The church had been viewed historically as an “old slavery” church, due to its close relationship to the White Methodist Episcopal Church (formerly Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS)). The history of the denomination encouraged the view that CME churches and schools had not been active in the Civil Rights Movement. Closer research into the denomination’s archives from 1954, when the church changed its name from “Colored” to “Christian” up to the 1970s, when the movement transitioned, challenges that interpretation. From the individual activist leaders across the South, to CME-affiliated historically black colleges associated with the black student movement, and the work of members of local congregations, the CME church can be shown to have been at the forefront of the movement. By focusing on three groups—CME leaders, church affiliated colleges, and a local congregation—this thesis argues that activism took many forms. Narrowly defining what constitutes civil rights activism risks overlooking important figures in the movement and failing to acknowledge the struggles individuals and church communities faced in the struggle to end disfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation. Understanding the role of the CME church in the Civil Rights Movement calls for expanding the meaning of the word activism to include acts of defiance and courage less well-understood.

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CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF THE CME CHURCH AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

On March 17, 1965, a famous photo of a man marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., James Forman, Ralph Abernathy and John Lewis was taken.¹ The photograph, shown in *Figure 1*, is associated with the marches that took place during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, as it shows activists and leaders of the movement in solidarity. Reverend Jessie L. Douglas Sr., who is labeled in the photo as an “unidentified white man,” appears to be white, but he is not.² He was a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) board for many years. He helped organize citizens for marches, including the 47-mile-long Selma-to-Montgomery march. His voice carried tunes that set the tone for many of Dr. King’s soul stirring sermons and speeches. The efforts on behalf of Reverend Douglas Sr., of the Christian (previously Colored) Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, played an important part in the American Civil Rights Movement.

¹ Robert Fikes, “Jesse L. Douglas Sr. (1930-),” *BlackPast*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/douglas-jesse-l-sr-1930/>.

² Tim Funk, “Charlotte Man Recalls His Days with Martin Luther King Jr.,” *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 2015, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article9261413.html>.



Figure 1: From left to right: Ralph Abernathy James Forman, Martin Luther King Jr., Jessie L. Douglas Sr., and John Lewis around the State Capitol in Montgomery in protest of unfair treatment of African Americans and voter discrimination.³

Douglas is symbolic of the CME Church. His skin color as well as his activism within his own community, embodies the history of the CME Church. Founded under the leadership of the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) in 1870, the CME Church historically has been labeled the “old slavery” church because of the close relationship between the two Methodist denominations.⁴ However, once the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s became visible, the CME Church distanced itself from their white counterparts in denominational beliefs and became more socially active within their communities. At first glance, one may assume that all black churches were on one accord and visibly engaged in the

³ The photograph was taken by Spider Martin in 1965. <http://www.spidermartin.com/image-gallery/sqyas2jg06imqc0gfct0rx2xh83me5>.

⁴ Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, rev. ed. (Memphis: The CME Publishing House, 1996), 17.

fight for equality for black Americans. However, the reality is more complex. For any number of reasons, particularly the threat of white violence, not all black congregations played an active or visible role in civil rights activities in their local communities.⁵ In the 1960s rural South, black congregations were threatened if they harbored civil rights workers engaged in voter registration activities. City congregations also faced threats and acts of violence. The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, an act of white supremacist terrorism, in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday, September 15, 1963 is embedded in the memories of black congregations.⁶ Four members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter planted sticks of dynamite inside the church and four young girls died in the explosion (one girl, Susan Collins survived, but was permanently blinded). The church had become a center for civil rights meetings and rallies and a target for white supremacists. Although the public anger over the bombing likely influenced the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the message that violence followed activism resonated throughout the black religious community.⁷ In spite of events like this, even when their churches were not the locations of rallies and speeches, the work of individual church members and their participation in organizations formed outside the church fueled the movement. Like members of other black religious denominations, members and individual parishioners in the CME Church, and the organizations they established, were integral to the success of the movement. The story of this

⁵ L.H. Whelchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 214. L.H. Whelchel was a pastor at Metropolitan C.M.E. and taught at CME affiliated Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama during the 1960s.

⁶ S. Willoughby Anderson, "The Past on Trial: Birmingham, the Bombing, and Restorative Justice," *California Law Review* 96, no. 2 (April 2008): 471-504.

⁷ Arthur Osgood, "Racial Tensions Mounts in Birmingham After Four Killed in Church Bombing," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, September 16, 1963, https://www.newspapers.com/clip/25054421/alabama_newspapers_front_page_the_day/.

Southern black Methodist denomination is one that must be told in order to fully understand the outcome of the Civil Rights Movement.

Methodism emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century in the Church of England as a part of the Evangelical Awakening largely due to John Wesley (1703-1791). Wesley grew up in the Church of England under his parents, Susannah and Reverend Samuel Wesley. John was the 15th of 17 children and having grown up in the church, he was “preserved miraculously for a special purpose.”⁸ He was well educated and in 1727 graduated from Oxford with his master’s degree. In 1735, as Wesley and his brother Charles sailed to America to complete missionary work in Georgia, their faith would be tested by a group of Moravians while at sea. Admiring the Moravians, Wesley noted how they placed an emphasis on “structuring their common life to recover the communal spirit of apostolic Christianity.”⁹ Wesley found their spirituality attractive and he became appreciative of their “strict sense of Christian discipline.”¹⁰ After reflecting upon their trip, and with further counsel from a Moravian named Peter Bohler, the brothers adopted the principles of the Moravian religion.¹¹ Although the brothers never officially separated from the Church of England, Methodism had arrived in response to the spiritual awakening that both brothers had undergone. From there, Wesley began to gather like-minded preachers and held worship services; the first annual conference was held in London on June 25, 1744.¹² Methodism

⁸ Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2005), 37.

⁹ Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79.

¹⁰ Hammond, *John Wesley in America*, 83.

¹¹ Ibid, 80.

¹² Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 77.

would make it to the American colonies by way of Robert Strawbridge, from County Leitrim, Ireland. Strawbridge immigrated to Fredrick County in the state of Maryland as early as 1753 and would begin preaching from his home. By 1764, Strawbridge began attracting followers and the rise of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in the North America was fully underway under way.¹³

The CME Church is one of three African American denominations closely associated with Methodism. The other two black Methodist religious denominations were founded in northern states by free blacks as they broke away from the white churches in the early 19th century: African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church (1816) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church (1821). The AME Church was the first denomination in the United States to be founded on racial rather than theological distinction and became the first independent Protestant denomination established by black people.¹⁴ Free black Methodists who were also a part of Sharp Street Church in Baltimore, Maryland, broke away under the leadership of Daniel Croker, after experiencing racial problems.¹⁵ In New York, black members of John Street Church broke away from the congregation and wanted to start a church of their own. In 1796, the church became organized and by the 1800 had been named Zion due to its significance in the Bible.¹⁶

¹³ Frederick E. Maser, "Robert Strawbridge: Founder of Methodism in Maryland," *Association of Methodist Historical Societies*, (January 1966): 5-6, <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/1426>.

¹⁴ Clarence E. Walker, "The A.M.E. Church and Reconstruction," *Negro History Bulletin* 48, no. 1 (January, February, March 1985): 10.

¹⁵ Lakey, *History of the CME Church*, 90.

¹⁶ Lakey, *History of the CME Church*, 85.

Under the leadership of James Varick, who was holding meetings separate from the white church as early as 1780, the AMEZ church began spread across the North.¹⁷

In 1844, the MEC would eventually split over the issue of slavery. Methodist clergy were not allowed to own slaves, and this would be an issue for Southern slave owners who were a part of the MEC. Wanting to maintain control over their property without being disciplined, Southern Methodist clergy established the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) in 1844.¹⁸

Although enslaved blacks across the South converted to Methodism under the MECS, the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the end of the Civil War (1865) encouraged freedmen to establish churches independent of white oversight. Reconstruction granted the newly freed slaves' citizenship with civil rights seemingly guaranteed by three new Constitutional amendments. Freedmen became very active in forming their own churches and giving their ministers moral and political leadership roles within their newly established communities. In a process of self-segregation, a vast majority of black churchgoers left white churches so that few racially integrated congregations remained.¹⁹ AME and AMEZ churches in the North sent missionaries to minister to Southern freedmen and establish churches in the former Confederate states.²⁰ In April of 1863, shortly after the Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation came into

¹⁷ James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Or, The Centennial of African Methodism* (New York City: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), 163.

¹⁸ Eugene Portlette Southall, "The Attitude of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Toward the Negro from 1844 to 1870," *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 4 (October 1931): 359-370. In 1844, the MEC split of the issue of slavery, forming the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South. The two churches reunited in 1939 to create the Methodist Church (MC). In 1968, the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church (UMC).

¹⁹ Katherine L. Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991).

²⁰ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 108-114.

effect, MEC Minister C.C. Leigh asked for assistance in missionary work in the coastal areas of South Carolina.²¹

The denomination that was the product of free black Southerners leaving white churches was the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. Organized in 1870, this black Methodist denomination, emerged by way of different circumstances than the AME and AMEZ church groups of the North. Unlike the AME and AMEZ churches, the CME Church started with the full support of the all-white MECS. Recognizing that, in the wake of Reconstruction, the MECS was in jeopardy of losing its ties with the newly free black Methodists who were now being recruited by Northern black Methodist churches, the MECS helped to fund and fully support the organization of the CME Church.²² Rather than joining AME or AMEZ churches that were spreading their membership into the South after the Civil War had ended, the Southern black Methodists now had a church home that aligned with the doctrine they were already accustomed to under slavery. By granting people of color their own church, the MECS was able to align themselves with the CME church and maintain control over the operations of this newly founded denomination.²³ This was both beneficial and conflicting for the CME church. On one hand, the CME Church was granted church property that previously belonged to the MECS. This would allow the newly founded church to organize and increase its membership. However, the formation of the CME Church led to problems with the AME church. AME churches were

²¹ Larry E. Rivers and Canter Brown Jr., *Laborers in the Vineyard of the Lord: The Beginnings of the AME Church in Florida, 1865-1895* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 22.

²² James S Thomas, "The Rationale Underlying Support of Negro Private Colleges by the Methodist Church," *The Journal of Negro Education* 29, no. 3 (Summer, 1960): 257.

²³ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 17.

heavily recruiting the formerly enslaved colored Methodists. Once the CME church began to increase, tensions would rise between the AME and CME churches over the closeness of the CME church to the MEC church.²⁴

Initially the CME and MECS groups were inseparable. Some of the first bishops within the CME Church were biracial: a product of ministers within the MECS and formerly enslaved women of African descent.²⁵ Often, the first CME Church meetings took place on property that belonged to the MECS. The CME Church and MECS regularly attended the Annual Conferences of one another. Essentially, the CME Church made few decisions without the input or permission of the MECS. However, over time, as the CME Church expanded, the relationship between the MECS and CME Church changed. Given the connection between the black church and the civil rights efforts of African Americans, the role the church played during the Civil Rights Movement and its relationship to nonviolent social change halted the association between the MECS and CME Church. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a social revolution that forced members of the CME Church to act in ways that distinguished them from white Methodism. The CME church that had been established through the help of its white Methodist “brethren” in 1870, used its resources to organize non-violent demonstrations to combat racism against African Americans across the U.S nearly one hundred years later.²⁶

²⁴ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 138-143.

²⁵ Glenn T. Eskew, “Black Elitism and the Failure of Paternalism in Postbellum Georgia: The Case of Bishop Lucius Henry Holsey,” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (November 1992): 638-639.

²⁶ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 37.

The CME church was organized just a few years after the end of the Civil War on December 16, 1870, in Jackson, Tennessee, by "...Negroes who while slaves, had been members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South."²⁷ With the full support of their white sponsors in the MECS, these freedmen were seeking to form an organization that would allow them to establish and maintain their own polity. During Reconstruction, they sought to ordain their own bishops and ministers, while being officially endorsed and appointed by the white-dominated body. Thus, the close relationship that the MECS and CME denominations share is deeply rooted in the legally instituted enslavement of Africans and African Americans that existed in the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries.

On December 21, 1870, William Henry Miles and Richard Henry Vanderhorst were ordained as bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the General Conference of the MECS held in Memphis, Tennessee. Because the leaders of the AME and AMEZ churches broke away from the MEC without permission, the ordination of Bishop Miles and Vanderhorst made them the first officially recognized bishops of color within the Methodist doctrine in the U.S.²⁸ Led by former slaves, now bishops, the black members of the MECS made the decision to form their own denomination as an acknowledgment and acceptance of the MEC religious heritage. Unlike the AME and AMEZ churches, "CME stressed its religious history with the MECS, all while acknowledging cultural and racial differences."²⁹ Although the appointment of these two bishops and the founding of the CME church signified the exodus of the African American Methodists

²⁷ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 15.

²⁸ Ibid, 125-126.

²⁹ Tara Mitchell Mielnick, "Christian Methodist Episcopal Church " *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, October 8, 2017, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/christian-methodist-episcopal-church/>.

away from the MECS, it represented a cooperative transition on behalf of both groups.³⁰ It was in the best interest of the white leadership within the MECS to urge the colored Methodists not to join the AME or AMEZ. Bishop Miles and Bishop Vanderhorst, two of the first ordained bishops within the CME Church, were members of the AME and AMEZ church prior to the CME Church being organized.³¹ Despite heavy efforts to enlist these Southern freedmen by the AME and AMEZ churches, the CME church began to increase its membership within the first few years of existence and the MECS was cooperative in overseeing the newly established church.³²

The AME and AMEZ churches often shamed the CME church and its close relationship with the white MECS. This led to the church being identified as the “old slave” and “Democratic” church.³³ Although the CME church remained the smallest of the black Methodist churches during the first fifty years of its establishment, many former slaves related more with the CME ministers and leaders. As ex-slaves consciously broke away from the white churches and refused to join northern-based separate African American churches, “the creation of CME churches represented one of the first institutional foundations of racial segregation in the South.”³⁴ From its inception, the CME Church abstained from political activity. This decision was made for many reasons, but principally it reflected the recognition that white MECS churches owned the religious property of the CME churches. As CME congregations sprouted across the South, the MECS made their property available to the newly established CME Church

³⁰ Mielnick, “Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.”

³¹ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 235-235.

³² Mielnick, “Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

in the form of land on which to construct church buildings. Wanting to keep that property given to them, the CME church avoided the appearance of engagement in political activities or demands for social equality. The church felt that if it stayed out of political activities, then their relationship with the MECS would remain on good terms.³⁵

Deeply rooted in the foundation of the CME church was the idea of educational advancement. The church founded schools across the South, including twelve colleges. The four well known institutions being Lane College (Jackson, Tennessee), Paine College (Augusta, Georgia), Texas College (Tyler, Texas), and Miles College (Birmingham, Alabama). At one point, all the CME affiliated colleges were funded primarily by the MECS. CME congregations grew from 1870 to 1880, with a total of 78,000 colored members. By 1890 church membership totaled 103,000 members spreading to middle class black communities in the states across the south. By 1945, eighteen states had established at least one CME church.³⁶

The pressure amongst churches to respond to the racial climate ran at an all-time high as black people looked to church leaders for guidance as civil rights tensions mounted in the 1950s. The climate put the CME church in an odd position. The church that had once looked to white leadership for guidance, resources, and financial support was now faced with challenging white supremacy. Despite the close relationship between the black and white denominations, the CME church produced Civil Rights leaders who opened doors, and provided resources for advancing civil rights claims. CME churches supported the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s by providing meeting sites and voter registration centers across the South. Students attended

³⁵ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 120, 208.

³⁶ Mielnick, "Christian Methodist Episcopal Church."

CME colleges and participated in non-violent marches and boycotts. At the start of the movement, in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the CME Church changed its name from the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (1954). This change would represent the shift that had taken place within the denomination.³⁷

When examining the history of the CME Church, little has been written on the denomination within the Civil Rights Movement. In 1898, Charles Henry Phillips, the 8th Bishop of the CME Church, wrote the first official history of the church.³⁸ It wasn't until 1972 that Bishop Othal Lakey, long regarded as the authority on the CME Church, published *The Rise of "Colored Methodism": A Study of the Backgrounds and Beginnings of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church*³⁹ and followed that with *The History of The CME Church*, in 1985.⁴⁰ *The History of the CME Church* became the standard denominational reference on origins of the church. Lakey explores the reasoning behind the decision to create a new denomination rather than join existing historically black churches. He correlates the church's connection to slavery and their masters as the deciding factor in the creation of the now 148-year-old denomination. He addresses the "accommodationist" and "old slavery church" stereotypes that have been

³⁷ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 537-595.

³⁸ Charles Henry Phillips, *The History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America: Comprising Its Organization, Subsequent Development, and Present Status* (Jackson: Publishing House C.M.E. Church, 1898).

³⁹ Othal Lakey, *The Rise of "Colored Methodism": A Study of the Backgrounds and Beginnings of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church* (Carlsbad, Crescendo Publishing, 1972).

⁴⁰ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*.

associated with the church noting their proximity to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Lakey concludes that, “in getting their own church, they were simply getting their just due.”⁴¹

Although Lakey does briefly address the CME Church in the Civil Rights Movement,⁴² it is Raymond R. Sommerville’s *An Ex-Colored Church: Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970* that provides the most direct link between the denomination and civil rights. Sommerville follows the CME church through the cities of Nashville, Birmingham, Memphis, and Atlanta, to show how the CME Church became involved in the movement. He emphasizes the idea that the church was influential in the Civil Rights Movement. He makes the argument that for far too long the CME church’s history has been overlooked and taken out of context in comparison to the AME church. He links the history of the denomination to their participation in the Civil Rights Movement and discusses the tensions between the denomination’s hierarchal leadership and acknowledges the presence of the local church leadership.⁴³

This history of the CME Church during the 1950s and 1960s, shows that the denomination produced civil rights activists and leaders, utilized their church facilities to hold community meetings, and provided spaces for black college students to openly discuss race related issues and organize nonviolent campaigns. An examination of the CME Church through the post-World War II Civil Rights Movement raises several more important questions: What constitutes activism? Can a congregation be considered “activist” without being at the center of civil rights events in the community it serves? In what ways was the CME Church able to

⁴¹ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 17, 199.

⁴² Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 578-574.

⁴³ Raymond R. Sommerville, *An Ex-colored Church: Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004).

produce active participants within the movement? Did individual civil rights actions transform the CME Church?

The relationship between the Methodist church and the Civil Rights Movement is one that must be further researched in order to fully understand what the movement meant for those involved. Black Methodist churches produced leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and the churches became a symbol of strength for the black community. From the 1950s until the early 1970s, members within historically black religious denominations aligned themselves with newly established Civil Rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The historiography of the Civil Rights Movement embraces several methodologies and disciplines: biographical examinations of leaders and leadership; autobiographies/memoirs; organizational histories; social histories of women, labor, and local initiatives; and religious history.⁴⁴

The historiography of the civil rights movement had “become not only an important area of research, but also a dominant theme for researchers in the 21st century.”⁴⁵ Although some can argue that the civil rights movement started in 1619 when the first Africans arrived in Virginia, most historians agree that the 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education* case represented the starting point for the modern civil rights movement.⁴⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, historians wrote about the

⁴⁴ For more on the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement see: John Ditmer, “The Civil Rights Movement,” in *The African American Experience: An Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Arvarh E. Strickland and Robert E. Weems, Jr. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 352-361.

⁴⁵ Walter B. Hill Jr., “Researching Civil Rights History in the 21st Century,” *The Journal of African American History* 93, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 94.

⁴⁶ Ditmer, “The Civil Rights Movement,” 352.

events of national significance during the movement. August Meier's "On the Role of Martin Luther King" article in *New Politics* released in 1965 was one of the first scholarly attempts to discuss the movement through the biography of King.⁴⁷ With the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, much of the attention to the movement centered on the work of the Southern Baptist preacher. Of the many worthy contenders David L. Lewis's 1970 biography of Martin Luther King, was one of the first to take on the task after King's assassination in 1968.⁴⁸ By the 1970s, scholars began looking at the institutions that King and other activists were attached to during the movement like SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).⁴⁹ Autobiographical accounts by activists who were attached to these organizations would impact the way scholars addressed the discussion on the civil rights movement.⁵⁰ The memoirs from James Forman, the executive secretary of SNCC in *Making of Black Revolutionaries* in 1972, gave a record of the events that took place in the streets, meetings, churches, jails, of the 1960s civil rights movement. Together these accounts give perspective on leadership during the movement, which the CME Church played a significant role in.⁵¹ Members of the CME Church were committed to the fight for Civil Rights and joined organizations that Dr. King and other activists created to help change laws.

⁴⁷ August Meier, "On the Role of Martin Luther King Jr.," *New Politics* (Winter 1965): 52-59.

⁴⁸ David L. Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1970). Also see: Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (New York City: Simon & Schuster).

⁴⁹ Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 92.

⁵⁰ Ditmer, "The Civil Rights Movement," 353.

⁵¹ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

Many assumed that the struggle for civil rights was “primarily a political movement that secured legislative and judicial victories.”⁵² It was not until the emergence of the fundamental methodologies of social history, which were beginning to redefine the field of African American history, that historians adopted new approaches and methods for interpreting Civil Rights.⁵³ Along with this new social history written from “the bottom up” came emphasis on the literature coming out that focused on the minority and women.⁵⁴ In 1979 *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* by Sara Evans takes years of research, interviews with women, and uses her own personal experiences to explore how the political stance of women enabled them to join forces to support their own cause. Using her personal experiences and stories centered other important women crusaders in the civil rights movement, Evans highlights key moments where women were underrepresented politically and discusses the role of southern women with deep religious convictions in the interracial civil rights movement of the early 1960s that impacted the struggle.⁵⁵

Writing in the 1980s and 1990s, historians once again wrote firsthand accounts, looking to reinvent scholarship on the historiography of the Civil Rights movement. They questioned whether the movement could be properly understood as a coalition and suggested that the “focal point for investigation should shift to local communities and grass-roots organizations.”⁵⁶

⁵² Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991): 456.

⁵³ Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 456-457.

⁵⁴ Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America*, 91.

⁵⁵ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York City: Alfred Knopf, 1979).

⁵⁶ Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 457.

Historians began to conduct local and regional studies like William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights* that discussed the effect that the sit-ins in North Carolina had on the national movement.⁵⁷ In 1986, Aldon D. Morris traced the role of black community led organizations that provided the real power behind the movement in his book, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. He is one of the first historians to expand upon the role of the black church in promoting social change. The well-known leaders such as King and Malcolm X would now be in conversation with the role of the women and men who initiated protests in small towns and cities across the South.⁵⁸ Stories of women in the CME Church during the movement, shows how impactful women were despite being marginalized and underrepresented.

Another example of this shift within the historiography is John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1994), which traces civil rights by organizations and the local people who risked their lives daily for equality. He includes the roles of black Americans in the workforce as sharecroppers in advancing the struggle for equality.⁵⁹ Also, in 1994, we see where the role of religious denominations came to the center of the discussion of the Civil Rights Movement with *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946 to 1983*. Joel Alvis focused on the relationships and tensions in the Presbyterian Church, U.S. By the time of the civil rights movement, the church was actively involved in ecumenical activities despite its

⁵⁷ William Henry Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁵⁸ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

⁵⁹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994). For more on the connection of the black church to the local civil rights movement see also: Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

regional isolation, and that involvement created unease throughout the denomination. His institutional history traces how the church shaped and was shaped by its regional culture and explores the denomination's own cultural struggle to determine what role race issues would play in the definition of being Presbyterian.⁶⁰ In 1998, Donald Edward Collins' groundbreaking work on the white Methodist Church helped to explain the other side of the movement. In *When the Church Bell Rang Racist*, Collins interviewed fifty-five Methodist preachers and tells the story of the Alabama-West Florida Methodist Conference and reactions to the civil rights movement. He looks specifically at the years from 1952 to 1969, at a time when very few white Methodist ministers supported the Civil Rights Movement and concludes that leadership within the Conference did not want to integrate.⁶¹ Movements throughout the CME Church on the local level helped to create change in cities across the South.

As mentioned earlier, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 is one of the most important events of the civil rights movement, mainly due to the outcome in the courtroom. This case marked a new wave of Southern activism, particularly concerning voter registration.⁶² Richard Kluger's *Simple Justice*, is a detailed history of the litigation leading up to the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board* and its aftermath. The book gives the reader the legal drama, detailing how corrupt the laws of segregation were and how a team of black

⁶⁰ Joel Alvis, *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946 to 1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

⁶¹ Donald Edward Collins, *When the Church Bells Rang Racist: The Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998).

⁶² Strickland and Weems Jr., *The African American Experience*, 355.

lawyers were able to successfully make a change in the judicial system.⁶³ In 1999, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* by William Henry Kellar discusses school desegregation in Houston, Texas, involving the Houston Independent School District focusing on the years 1954-1960.⁶⁴ Cases dealing with segregation and the courtroom began to flourish in the 1990s, starting in Virginia with Robert A. Pratt's *Color of Their Skin* (1992). In his book, Pratt traces the history of the Richmond public schools from segregation to desegregation to resegregation, many years after *Brown v. Board*.⁶⁵ Scholars who wrote on the group of nine African American students enrolled in Little Rock Central High School in 1957, otherwise known as the "Little Rock Nine" began to publish more work. One of the nine students, Melba Pattillo Beals, gives a firsthand account of what went down in her book, *Warriors Don't Cry*, as she details how they were able to come together in unity and influence change during such a rough time in the state of Arkansas.⁶⁶ The CME Church changing its name from Colored to Christian, shows how committed the denomination was in the judicial fight for black people to be accepted as citizens, even within religion.

Finally, as historians moved into the 1990s and 2000s, we began to see more studies on religious denominations and their response to civil rights issues.⁶⁷ Joel Alvin's *Religion and Race* (1994), gives a detailed account of how Southern Presbyterians dealt with frustration from

⁶³ Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

⁶⁴ William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ Robert A. Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia, 1954-89* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992).

⁶⁶ Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York City: Washington Square Press, 1995).

⁶⁷ Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America*, 99.

within during the civil rights movement.⁶⁸ Alvin places the dilemmas of the church from the 1940s through the 1980s, and how the church's Confederate history shaped its beliefs during the movement. Another example of tracking a religious denomination through the Civil Rights movement is Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr.'s *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (2000). This study looks at the cooperation amongst black and white Episcopalians during the 1950s and 1960s as they went on to create Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity.⁶⁹ Lastly, the book that contributes the most to the discussion of the CME Church in the Civil Rights Movement was released in 2004 by CME Minister and scholar Raymond R. Sommerville titled *An Ex-colored Church: Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970*.⁷⁰ In this book, Sommerville debunks the notion that the denomination was not involved in political activities concerning the struggle of black people. He points out that despite the history of the CME church and its history of dealing with race related issues in the community, it was the CME Church that changed its name from "colored" to "Christian" shortly after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case. He tracks the denomination alongside the movements of Dr. King and the SCLC and claims that the CME Church was involved in both the local and national levels of the movement.

For years the CME Church has been overlooked in the memory of the Civil Rights Movement. The CME church's activity between the 1950s and 1960s indicates the significant contributions to the local and national civil rights movement in America. By identifying how this

⁶⁸ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946 to 1983* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

⁶⁹ Gardiner H. Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

⁷⁰ Sommerville, *An Ex-colored Church, Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970*.

denomination responded on both national and local scale, will help historians to understand the entire civil rights movement from both the black and white perspective. Many of the forgotten activists and organizations who risked their livelihood for the greater commitment to progress in the black community belonged to the CME Church.

Chapter 2 focuses on four unique men whose influence spread across the South. Their work uplifted the lives of many African Americans during the civil rights movement, and each man was a leader in the CME church: one as a leader within the United States government, two of them as urban ministers and the fourth as a college president. Chapter 3 shows how CME affiliated colleges, both students and faculty members, played a role in the Civil Rights Movement. The events that take place at Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama and Paine College in Augusta, Georgia played a significant role on the national black student movement that was occurring at college campuses during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Chapter 4 discusses the role of Carter Tabernacle CME Church in Orlando, Florida during the Civil Rights Movement. Carter members were a part of the local Civil Rights Movement in Orlando, Florida despite the history of racial violence in the Central Florida area. Chapter 5 outlines the national, student, and local movements that the CME Church became a part of, while discussing where the church fits in the memory of the movement and why the church is active within the movement. Altogether, this contributes to the larger historiography of the Civil Rights Movement and includes the once forgotten CME Church history and its contributions.

CHAPTER 2: FOUR ACTIVISTS

Leaders within the Civil Rights movement are influential figures in the promotion and implementation of political freedom and the expansion of personal civil liberties and rights. They are often the face of political groups and organizations that seek to ensure the ability of all members of society to participate in the civil and political life of the state. The civil rights movement in America “produced, among other things, many black national leaders.”⁷¹ They became the spokesperson on practically things dealing issues dealing with the rights of freedom, justice, and equality for blacks. To be sure, these were men and women who America's promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They often differed, however, in approach and style.

Historians frequently associate civil rights leadership with high-profile activities such as the creation of organizations dedicated to fulfilling the promises outline in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution. Black ministers were often at the helm of these organizations and black churches provided the physical spaces for rallying support and the people who boycotted businesses, protested segregation, and marched. Activism was defined by physical space and presence at highly charged events of protest. The activist narrative does not include the CME Church. Focusing on four CME ministers challenges the activist narrative.

From its founding in 1870, the CME Church avoided political issues and participation in social action. This position became established within the denomination most likely because the church wanted to stay in good relations with MECS, who, in return for what whites perceived as

⁷¹ Jacob U. Gordon, “Black Males in the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, (May 2000): 43.

responsible behavior, transferred portions of their church property to the newly established CME Church and provided other assistance in organizing separate church services.⁷² In 1910, forty years after the CME Church was founded, soon to be bishop, Randall Albert Carter counseled the CME Church in its relationship to Southern whites: "... it is better to stay on friendly and amicable relations with the best white people of the South." Adding that, "The Colored Methodist Church in its close relations with the M.E. Church, South, holds the key to the racial situation in the South."⁷³ Leaders of the CME Church felt their survival was dependent upon their relationship with the MECS.

Over time, the role of the CME preacher became the voice of the church.⁷⁴ Despite the history of the CME Church, the work of individual leaders had a tremendous impact on the Civil Rights Movement. CME ministers played a role in a variety of Civil Rights organizations in cities across the South. These men led campaigns for social justice and political rights and participated in marches. Although mass meetings were held at black churches across the South during the 1950s and 1960s, very few churches opened their doors and provided organizations with a place to converse with the community. Out of the 400 black churches in and around Birmingham in 1963, only sixty were actively involved and willing to provide a space for meetings.⁷⁵ Every black congregation weighed the potential costs and benefits of civil rights activism. If Birmingham's statistics are applicable across the South, most churches declined to take a frontline position in the struggle for equality. Was the frontline the only form of activism?

⁷² Othal Lakey, *History of the CME Church* (CME Publishing House, 1985), 208.

⁷³ Lakey, *History of the CME Church*, 578.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 286-290.

⁷⁵ L.H. Welchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St.Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 214.

Were important changes made outside the spotlight of marches and boycotts? These questions are particularly relevant in the case of the CME Church because of the historically close affiliation between the CME and the MECS denominations. CME congregations that did speak out publicly on political activities did so at considerable risk to their longstanding association with white Methodists and support for their congregational and educational institutions. Did CME Churches remain on the sidelines of the Civil Rights Movement, or did they engage in efforts that have gone largely unrecognized? Should historians be looking at less visible forms of activism to understand the scope of the Civil Rights Movement?

In placing the CME church in the discussion of participation in the Civil Rights Movement, four men stand out as examples of leaders who devoted their time and resources to accomplish the goals of ending legalized racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination in the United States on behalf of African Americans. Channing Heggie Tobias, Bishop Henry C. Bunton, Dr. Lucius H. Pitts, and Reverend Jesse Douglas Sr. of the CME Church exemplified the importance of religious leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. Their leadership highlights the broad fight for civil rights as their contributions focused on distinct institutional and public areas of reform.

Channing Heggie Tobias fought for civil rights long before the other three in his prominent roles in progressive organizations of the early twentieth century. Henry C. Bunton led the largest CME denomination in the city of Memphis, Tennessee (1953-1962). He was deeply rooted in the black community and traveled the world as a CME preacher for over fifty years, involved with organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC. Lucius H. Pitts served as president at Miles College near Birmingham, Alabama, from 1961 to 1971. Pitts worked together with the

Miles student government in order to organize nonviolent protests across the city. Known to many as the “unidentified white man,” Jesse Douglas Sr., former president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and pastor of First CME Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was very active within the Civil Rights Movement. Ironically, his light skin brought him to national attention on several occasions as he marched with Dr. King. The religious and activist leadership of these four men provides a lens for understanding the role CME ministers and educators played in shaping the Civil Rights Movement and encouraging support for public activism.

Channing Heggie Tobias

One of the first outspoken leaders on civil rights issues within the CME Church was Channing Heggie Tobias (1882-1896). Prominent civil rights and religious leader, Tobias, was secretary of the Colored Department of the National Council of the Young Men's Christian Association (1911-1946), the first African American to serve as director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund (a nonprofit fund established in 1911 by the will of New York philanthropist Caroline Phelps Stokes), and on the Board of Trustees of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and later became its chairman in 1953. Tobias was heavily involved with the CME Church. He received his BA from Paine College in 1902 was ordained in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in 1911. Tobias was one of the 15 people appointed by President Truman to serve on the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights (1945-1948). Their report, “To Secure These Rights” is one of the founding documents of the Civil Rights Movement (1947). Acting on the report, Truman issued Executive Orders 9980 and 9981, which

desegregated the federal work force and the armed services.⁷⁶ Tobias went on to launch the Fight for Freedom Fund to eliminate state-imposed racial segregation by the time of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation while chairman of the NAACP and his leadership paved the way for other CME Ministers to join the fight.⁷⁷ Tobias paved the way for other CME Ministers to actively engage in social issues concerning black people in America.

Henry Clay Bunton and Activism at the Highest Levels

Henry Clay Bunton was born October 19, 1903 in Coker, Arkansas. He was the sixth of eleven children born to the sharecropping household of Isaac Washington and Sarah Lue Noland (both descendants of slaves). By the time Bunton turned twenty, he made the decision to join the CME Church. In his commitment to the church, Bunton adopted the values and principles that had sustained the denomination. Education was a top priority especially for men like Bunton who felt called to the ministry. Despite a late start, Bunton attended CME affiliated Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama, at age of twenty-two, enrolling in the sixth grade. By 1925, Bunton joined the ministry and five years later he would become an ordained elder within the CME Church. By the time Bunton was twenty-nine, he had graduated from high school and pursued two years of courses at Miles College; he then dropped out to become a fulltime

⁷⁶ Garth E. Pauley, "Harry Truman and the NAACP: A Case Study in Presidential Persuasion on Civil Rights," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 219-220.

⁷⁷ "Dr. Channing H. Tobias "Defender of Liberties,"" *The Crisis* 87, no. 10 (December 1980): 566.

pastor.⁷⁸ The CME Church provided the training for Bunton's ministry and in return Bunton committed to the growth of the CME church and represented the church across the world.⁷⁹

Because traveling from church to church was a common practice within the Methodist doctrine, Bunton like many other CME ministers, got his start by "riding the circuit" to serve rural churches throughout Alabama.⁸⁰ Bunton pastored a number of congregations, including Miles Chapel, at Miles College, the place that launched his educational career. From Alabama, Bunton went on to pastor in several urban churches in the East Florida Conference. In 1938, while ministering at St. James CME church in Tallahassee, he resumed his college instruction at Florida A&M College and earned his bachelor's degree in 1941. From St. James, Bunton was sent to minister Carter Tabernacle CME Church, named after Bishop Randall Albert Carter, in Orlando from 1941 to 1943.⁸¹

After traveling the world, representing the CME Church through education and ministry, Bunton was moved to Memphis, Tennessee in 1954. He would take on the challenge to perform pastoral duties at Mount Olive Cathedral CME church, "one of the largest and most prestigious churches in Memphis."⁸² During his residence in Memphis, Bunton became active in the struggle for civil rights and would soon become a household name in the city. Bunton served as the host-

⁷⁸ Raymond R. Sommerville, *An Ex-colored Church: Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 96.

⁷⁹ Miriam DeCosta-Willis, *Notable Black Memphians* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), 64.

⁸⁰ Lakey, *The History of the CME Church*, 268.

⁸¹ Martha Scott Lue, *These Stones: Pleasant Hill/Carter Tabernacle* (Maitland: Xulon Press, 2006), 172-173.

⁸² Henry C. Bunton Biographical Data (1975), *Henry C. Bunton Papers*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York). In 1952 the church moved to its current place and became a cathedral. The land provided for the cathedral to be built was bought by the church from the white congregation of First Baptist Church. The cooperation of the segregated churches made national headlines See: Sommerville, *An Ex-colored Church, Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970*, 82.

pastor of the 1954 CME General Conference. The outcome of this conference, led by the efforts of Bunton, forever changed the CME Church and their stance on race related issues. Years prior to the conference, the church had already come to disagreements over a name change. The debate was over the new social identity that some leaders felt should be reflected in the name of the denomination. Bunton argued that the term “Colored” did not represent the modern CME Church’s. Bunton wrote a piece for the *Christian Index* titled “‘Colored’ a Hate Sign’ Yes!” in which he expressed his concerns regarding the need for a name change. “When one suggests the idea of replacing the word ‘Colored’ with ‘Christ’ it is not to discredit the work of the fathers” he wrote, “it is to honor the fathers proving that we cannot build on the foundation laid by them but can see the necessity of pulling baby clothes off an adult institution.”⁸³ Although some opposed, on the same day (May 17, 1954) that the United States Supreme Court made its ruling that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, the CME Church approved a motion changing the name of the church from “Colored” to “Christian. The CME church did not consider themselves to be “colored” people, as that name was only given to distinguish themselves from the African Methodist Episcopal Churches in 1870.

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded in 1957, Bunton was at the forefront. He was a charter member and served on both the Board of Directors and the Executive Board until 1962. Bunton was a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and assisted in planning for King when he visited Memphis (King had been visiting Memphis and helped to

⁸³ Sommerville, *An Ex-colored Church, Social Activism in the CME Church, 1870-1970*, 83.

organize the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968.⁸⁴ In addition to his work with the CME, he served as president of the Ministers and Citizens League and president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Memphis and Shelby County.⁸⁵ Bunton continued the ongoing dialogue between the CME and other black Methodist denominations, with a goal of union between the three Methodist groups. Bunton's work, both as bishop of the CME Church and as a civil rights leader promoted the church as active in racial and religious progress.⁸⁶

Jesse Lee Douglas Sr. and Color

Looking back at the history of the CME Church, much attention has been given to the skin color of the ministers, a fact that has contributed to perceptions of the church as marginal to the Civil Rights Movement. The first two bishops, William Henry Miles and Richard H. Vanderhorst, were light-skinned. When the MECS granted the former slaves their own church, they quickly ordained Miles and Vanderhorst as the first bishops within the CME Church, to maintain control over the black Methodist population who had not joined the AME or AMEZ. It was not until the Election of 1902, that the church would entertain the idea of advancing a dark-skinned minister to the position of bishop. Although he was highly intelligent and well-spoken, Charles Henry Phillips had been denied a chance in the two previous elections because of his unpopularity amongst ministers and allegedly due to skin color. Phillips was elected in 1902,

⁸⁴ Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 237.

⁸⁵ Jonathan Chism, *Saints in the Struggle: Church of God in Christ Activists in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 59-61. The Ministers and Citizens League started in 1955 and was an attempt for African American community leaders to partner with churches and get their members to vote. See Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 153. The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Memphis was made up of 100 black ministers.

⁸⁶ Henry C. Bunton Biographical Data (1975), *Henry C. Bunton Person Papers*.

however from 1902 to 1910 there were four “bright” bishops to one “brown” bishop. As the years went by the “color line” issue disappeared as a thing of the past.⁸⁷

As the CME church approached the Civil Rights Movement, there was one minister who stood out from the rest. Jesse Lee Douglas Sr. was born August 19, 1930 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Governor Huey Long ran the state of Louisiana, where racial segregation was law and the Great Depression was ravaging the country, especially the South. Although Jesse’s skin color may have looked white to most, Jesse was black and his life was shaped by experiences common to southern blacks. His father, William, was a disabled veteran from World War I and his mother, Isabella, was a cook for a white family. His mother was also light skinned and often took her son with her when cleaning and tending to the children of white families. Jesse could recall his mother working in “white folks’ kitchen for \$6 a week.⁸⁸” Watching his parents struggle and work tirelessly for little pay, young Jesse knew early on that blacks were treated unfairly. Placed into the Louisiana school system in the 1930s, Douglas attended all black schools where the students were often given the damaged books handed down from the better-off white schools. In school, Jesse was the source of controversy due to his skin color. He was teased by many students who called him “old white boy” and “old albino.⁸⁹” Until he reached his teens his blonde hair and skin complexion enabled him to live a double life as both a black and white child.

⁸⁷ Lakey, *History of the CME Church*, 80.

⁸⁸ Jesse Douglas, “Jesse Douglas Full Version MPEG 4,” interview by Reverend Jacotron Patts. *The Park Church*, YouTube, published on Aug 30, 2013, video, 16:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHHzGUcgrro&t=843s>.

⁸⁹ Douglas, interview.

Although his family was poor, Jesse knew the value of education and he grew up participating in extracurricular activities like drama and had a love for singing in the choir. Jesse first attended Dillard University and then transferred over to CME affiliated Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee where he received a bachelor's degree, before earning his degree in Divinity from Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Douglas, who was 27 years old when the SCLC was founded under the leadership of Dr. King in 1957, began to get involved with the black student demonstrations that were happening across the South. While in Atlanta, in 1960, he along with other area students, acted to desegregate a cafeteria frequented by state government employees. Later, Douglas would lead a sit-in protest that resulted in arrests and the lawsuit *Douglas and Reynolds vs. Vandenberg*, filed on behalf of the students by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), effectively ended racial separation at "all facilities at the Atlanta capitol building."⁹⁰ Atlanta became the center for SNCC activity. Home to a sizable black professional and middle class and five historically black colleges and universities, civil rights activists became attached to the city of Atlanta. The organization held its second conference in Atlanta and chose the city as its headquarters.

It was in Atlanta, that Douglas showed his commitment to helping African Americans gain equal rights. Although Douglas was a firm believer in the non-violence movement, he was often able to escape getting arrested during the protests in Atlanta due to his light skin color. In 1962, Douglas married Blanche Y. Gordon and moved to Montgomery, Alabama, to pastor the First Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. The following year he was elected as the

⁹⁰ Newsroom, "Weekend Filled With Events for Black History Month," *Cornelius Today*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.corneliustoday.com/weekend-filled-events-black-history-month/>.

4th president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an organization founded in 1955 in response to the Montgomery Bus Boycott under the direction of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the years, King and Douglas would develop a special friendship that would last until King's untimely assassination in 1968. When the Public Accommodations Bill of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, Douglas and Dr. King were among the first to see if hotels would respect the law and allow them to rent a room. Douglas was a witness to Dr. King getting punched by a member of the American Nazi Party. Douglas can even be heard singing at the beginning and the end of an LP record the SCLC released featuring King reading his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."⁹¹

Douglas's tenure as the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) president from 1963 to 1966 included a collaborative effort with SCLC to register black voters that was met with resistance from state officials, unprovoked violence from Alabama state troopers, and deadly attacks on civil rights volunteers. Douglas would prove his value to the civil rights movement through his skillful, behind the scenes coordination of logistics that sustained the 18-day, 54-mile Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965. On March 17, Douglas, King and John Lewis led a crowd to the Montgomery County courthouse where they negotiated protocols for protest demonstrations with city officials. It was here that Douglas was given the title "the unidentified white man." "I wasn't noticed as much as people of color were," Douglas recalls. "Even as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), they didn't think I was a black man. They thought I was a white sympathizer." In order to realize the importance of

⁹¹ Tim Funk, "Charlotte Man Recalls His Days with Martin Luther King Jr.," *The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 2015, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article9261413.html>.

Douglas and his contributions to the march, it must be understood that not everyone came out alive. One person who responded to Dr. King's call to help with the Selma to Montgomery March was Viola Liuzzo. Viola came from Michigan to help drive people who had participated in the march as part of the MIA transportation committee. She was assassinated on the road once her attackers saw that she was a white woman riding in the same car as an African American.⁹²

Douglas's dedication to the church did not end in Montgomery. His pastorate services included John Wesley and Garner Chapel in Phoenix City, Alabama; First C.M.E. Church and Jamison Memorial C.M.E. Church in Kansas City, Missouri; and the Carter Metropolitan C.M.E. Church in Detroit, Michigan. Douglas traveled in West Africa, Jamaica, Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean Islands. In 1972, he spent two weeks traveling throughout Nigeria, West Africa, visiting several university campuses, cities and towns. He also spent four weeks traveling throughout Ghana, West Africa, while living on the campus of the University of Ghana. Douglas was the recipient of numerous awards including an Honorary Doctorate of Law degree from Union Baptist Theological Seminary in Birmingham, Alabama, and the Annual Bronze Award from the Southern Beauty Congress for outstanding civic and religious contributions to the Birmingham community.⁹³ Douglas's visibility as an activist in SCLC, SNCC, and MIA is like that of other recognized civil rights leaders. Unlike them he is often ignored or misidentified and his association with the CME Church has been lost in the larger civil rights narrative.

⁹² Candice Duvernois, "An Unidentified "White" Man," *The Mint Hill Times*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.minthilltimes.com/featured/an-unidentified-white-man/>.

⁹³ History Committee of St. Luke C.M.E., "St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal Church: Celebrating the Scroll of Life, 1909-2002," *eBlack Campaign-Urbana*, accessed June 19, 2019, <http://www.eblackcu.net/portal/items/show/1273>.

Lucius H. Pitts and Miles College

Lucius Pitts served as president of Miles College (1961-1971), where his life would ultimately affect not only the students on campus, but the history of the city of Birmingham, Alabama. The students and faculty of Miles, under the leadership of President Pitts, played a critical role in the Birmingham Civil Rights movement that transformed a deeply segregated city and helped change the entire country.

Lucius Holsey Pitts was as born February 28, 1915, in James, Georgia. His father, Eugene Pitts was a tenant farmer and his mother Katherine Daniels, were both members of their local CME Church. He was named by his father who had a great love for CME Bishop L. H. Holsey, the presiding Bishop of Georgia when Lucius was born. Growing up in the CME Church, young Lucius was licensed and ordained into the ministry at the age of sixteen. He went on to receive his undergraduate degree from CME affiliated Paine College in 1941, a graduate degree from Fisk University in 1945, and undertook further graduate studies at Atlanta University, Peabody College, and Case Western Reserve University.⁹⁴

Like the CME Church, success at any CME affiliated school was dependent upon the cooperation between white leadership and the black faculty and students. Lucius Pitts represented a new era in which black college presidents were the acknowledged leaders in black college communities. Although Pitts was not the first black president at Miles, he became president at a tumultuous time for the school and city of Birmingham. Under Pitts, Miles College

⁹⁴ Lucius Holsey Pitts, Biographical Note, *Special Collections*, Collins Callaway Library, Paine College, Augusta, Georgia, https://www.paine.edu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=6fa2c7c8-99de-4648-9f57-b80344799370&groupId=16381.

emerged as a place where strategies were developed, and hundreds of foot soldiers were recruited.⁹⁵ This legacy of leadership in the Civil Rights Movement made a permanent mark on the school, increasing its prestige and serving as a tool for the recruitment of students. Pitts had little choice but to become involved with the movement, as students began to protest on campus, and Birmingham became a center for civil rights activity in the 1950s and 1960s. Organizations and activists within the movement began to focus their attention to the city of Birmingham and its politics.

Pitts, like previous Miles president Dr. William A. Bell, was a graduate of Paine College, but unlike his predecessor, Pitts "was strongly committed to civil rights," a former Miles student stated.⁹⁶ Bell had expelled the Miles students who were involved in demonstrations in the latter part of 1960, the early part of 1961. Dr. Pitts was just the opposite as the students were meeting in Pitts' home in putting together strategies and campaigns in order to peacefully protest. Pitts often spoke publicly, stating his position on the matter of the racial climate surrounding the college campus. In 1962, his leadership role at Miles put him in a tenuous position since the financial support for the school came from the white beneficiaries who were not pleased with the activities they saw on the campus. He encouraged the students to engage in social activism, but he also negotiated a meeting between the white business community of Birmingham and the students advocating for change. When asked about the black students at Miles College and their decision to participate in nonviolent demonstrations Pitts stated, "Either you accept the young

⁹⁵ Jesse Chambers, "Miles College Role in Civil Rights Movement Has Created A Permanent Legacy," *AL*, July 7, 2013, https://www.al.com/spotnews/2013/07/miles_college_role_in_civil_ri.html.

⁹⁶ Jesse Chambers, "Miles College Role in Civil Rights Movement Has Created A Permanent Legacy," *AL*, July 7, 2013, https://www.al.com/spotnews/2013/07/miles_college_role_in_civil_ri.html.

people and their efforts to be a part of the freedom movement or you stand still and let them run over you.”⁹⁷ Pitts also made Miles a refuge for whites who were sympathetic to the movement, including some of the students at Birmingham-Southern College who faced harassment by Chief of Police Bull Connor for attending interracial meetings. "No one was going to arrest you at Miles," a student said.⁹⁸ Biracial groups could meet and talk on common ground at Miles College.

Although Pitts would eventually leave Miles and become the first black president at his alma mater Paine College, his legacy is associated with his time at Miles. He was perhaps the single most important figure in making Miles College a center of activism. Pitts seemed to be efficient at working both sides of the table, strategizing with black students and compromising with the city's white business owners. One of the last accomplishments of his presidency at Miles occurred when he persuaded, a white man, Dr. John U. Munro to resign the deanship at Harvard College in order to join his faculty as director of freshman studies. They had, become friends in Birmingham in 1963, and Dean Munro would eventually begin his tenure at Miles College in 1967. This would embody the principles that Pitts represented. The unity between Pitts and Monroe, and the idea that black and white people can work together is what Pitts wanted to accomplish.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Howard K. Smith, "Miles College, Birmingham, Al. May 26, 1963 Miles President Lucius H. Pitts on ABC News Howard K. Smith News and Comments Program," clip from *CBS Reports: Who Speaks for Birmingham*, <https://vimeo.com/57097202>.

⁹⁸ Chambers, "Miles College Role in Civil Rights Movement Has Created A Permanent Legacy."

⁹⁹ *The New York Times*, "Lucius Pitts, Educator, Is Dead; President of Paine College, 59," *The New York Times*, February 27, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/27/archives/lucius-pitts-educator-is-dead-president-of-paine-college-59.html>.

Tobias, Bunton, Pitts, and Douglas collectively exemplify the actions of CME church leaders on behalf of civil rights as bishops, college presidents, and ministers in municipal congregations. For some, the work began before the U.S. Supreme Court decision that often defines the advent of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Their education and church leadership positions brought them into contact with leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Their actions demonstrate the risks associated with public support for civil rights—risks that were both personal and institutional. Finally, their association with the CME Church positioned them to act as mediators to bring together blacks and whites to find resolution without violence.

CHAPTER 3: BLACK STUDENT MOVEMENT

Black student movements emerged at schools across the United States during the Civil Rights Movement. Black student movements flourished as college students questioned the goals and actions of more established civil rights organizations and changed the direction of these movements. To trace the origin of the black student movement in the 1960s we must understand why the movement suddenly fell into the hands of the youth. The church became a destination for student leaders and activists to get out their messages of nonviolence and community participation, while college campuses across the nation were becoming institutions of protest.¹⁰⁰

The struggle of social and political rights had been kept alive through the efforts of working class blacks, who, historically, struck for higher wages and better working conditions, protested the lack of rights in the South through migration north, and faced the most brutal repercussions when whites retaliated against their efforts to secure their economic, social, and political rights. As the Civil Rights Movement advanced in the post WWII years, black college students moved to the vanguard in public actions, first within the organizations led by ministers, lawyers, and well-known black public figures. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was led by city ministers, but it was the working class of Montgomery who boycotted the buses. In Tallahassee, college students at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) organized the boycott and refused to ride the buses. Their religion professors inspired their non-violent action and students soon found their own voices and the Black Student Movement was born.¹⁰¹ By 1959

¹⁰⁰ Larry O. Rivers, "A New Social Awakening": James Hudson, Florida A. & M. University's Religious Life Program, and the 1956 Tallahassee Bus Boycott," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 95 (Winter 2017): 331.

¹⁰¹ Rivers, "A New Social Awakening," 332.

the victorious Cuban revolution encouraged students everywhere to embrace the idea of revolution. The following year, as the United States elected a new president, students across Southern college campuses realized that they could also create change within their own communities.¹⁰²

On February 1, 1960, four brave freshmen at A&T College in Greensboro, North Carolina, took a seat in at a segregated lunch counter downtown.¹⁰³ In a matter of days, the idea leaped to other cities in North Carolina. Very quickly, the idea of sit-ins spread to cities all over the South. The events that took place Greensboro, led by students, and had an outstanding effect on universities across the South. The idea of militancy and unity amongst college students began to spread like wildfire, and the events in Nashville, Atlanta, and Texas are examples of this. The emphasis on the sit-ins expanded to include local libraries, museums and art galleries. The physical spaces shaped the methods appropriate for each demonstration and ranged from wade-ins to stand-ins, kneel-ins and other forms of nonviolent direct action. When the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was formed in 1960, it served as an ad hoc coordinating committee for local centers of action.¹⁰⁴ In the early sixties SNCC provided the movement with a center for non-violent direct action against racial discrimination. From 1960 to 1963, much of the organizational membership came from black southern college student dropouts.¹⁰⁵ Some of the leaders of the organization included James Foreman, Fannie Lou

¹⁰² Muhammed Ahmad, "On the Black Student Movement," *The Black Scholar* 9, (1978): 3.

¹⁰³ Anthony M. Orum, Arnold Rose and Caroline Rose, *Black Students in Protest: A Study of the Origins of the Black Student Movement* (Washington: American Sociological Association, 1972), 45.

¹⁰⁴ Howard Zinn, *SNCC, The New Abolitionists* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1964), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization," *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 1 (September 1977), 14.

Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, Ruby Doris Robinson and Ella Baker. Baker was more in sync with the students of the movement and felt that the movement should be centered on group activism rather than one individual leader.¹⁰⁶

The student movement at Miles College is an example of how the CME colleges became institutions of protest for its students. Miles College, founded in 1898, is in metropolitan Birmingham within the corporate limits of the City of Fairfield. It was chartered as Miles Memorial College, in honor of Bishop William H. Miles, and in 1941 the name was changed to Miles College.¹⁰⁷ The founders of the institution saw educated leadership as the paramount need in the black community. Miles, which is fully accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and accredited by Commission on Colleges for the awarding of Baccalaureate Degrees, is the only four-year institution in historic Birmingham designated as a member of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).¹⁰⁸ Miles served a critical role in the African-American community and its success became dependent upon the black community within the city. Through decades of segregation, when most state schools were off-limits to blacks, Miles provided a way for students to continue their education and improve their economic prospects. Generations of students, many of them the first in their families to attend college, found Miles to be a nourishing place, both socially and intellectually, where the school's faculty pushed them to succeed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Aprele Elliott, "Ella Baker: Free Agent in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (May 1996): 598-599.

¹⁰⁷ Lakey, *History of the CME Church*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 87-90.

¹⁰⁹ Tara Mitchell Mielnik, "Christian Methodist Episcopal Church," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, October 8, 2017, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/staff/tara-mitchell-mielnik/>.

In the post-WWII years, the social climate around the city began to influence the success of the Miles College. Beginning in the late 1960 and climaxing in the critical year of 1963, the students and faculty of Miles, under the leadership of President Lucius Pitts, played a critical role in the civil rights movement in Birmingham, a movement that transformed a deeply segregated city and helped change the entire country. In order to understand what happened in Birmingham we must understand the cooperation between the faculty and staff at Miles College. Unlike Paine, during the height of the mass student movements across the nation, Miles was led by a black man.

Pitts served as president of Miles College from 1961 until 1970, where his life would ultimately affect not only the students on campus, but the city of Birmingham, Alabama as well. In the 1950s and 1960s, the city of Birmingham came under the national spotlight for activity during the Civil Rights Movement. The racially motivated bombings to the houses of black families KKK members earned Birmingham the nickname "Bombingham."¹¹⁰ Looking at Paine College, the spirit of interracial cooperation meant white leadership over the black student body. Lucius Pitts represented a new period for the school in which black college presidents were the acknowledged leaders in communities where there was a black college. Although Pitts was not the first black President at Miles, he became president at a tumultuous time for the school and city of Birmingham. Under Pitts, Miles College became a space for protest and activism. This legacy of leadership in the civil rights movement had made a permanent mark on the school,

¹¹⁰ Charles E. Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America": City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 101. For more information on the violence that took place in the city of Birmingham see Glenn T. Eskew, "'Bombingham': Black Protest in Postwar Birmingham," *The Historian* 59, no. 2 (Winter 1997), 371-390.

increasing its prestige and serving as a tool for the recruitment of students. Pitts had little choice but to become involved with the movement, as students began to protest on campus, and national news agencies spotlighted the city.

Activism at Miles was not solely the result of the efforts on the campus by Pitts. The movement got a boost from the presence of older students who had served in the military or spent time in the North and gotten glimpses of life without segregation. Frank Dukes is an example of this. Dukes became the President of Miles College's student body in the early 1960's. Having served his country in the United States Army, he returned to his hometown Fairfield to and in 1959 he enrolled at Miles under the GI Bill. With his military mindset, inspired by the student led protests in North Carolina, Dukes began urging students to publicly voice their opinions and take a stand to the segregation laws in Birmingham. Dukes formed an Anti-Injustice Committee at the college and began formulating demands, including the desegregation of public buildings and businesses and the hiring of African Americans in stores and government departments. Dukes and his committee met with Sidney Smyer (president of the Birmingham Realty Company), James Head (founder of James A. Head & Company, a distributor of office and institutional furniture and supplies), Emil Hess (owner of Parisian, one of the most successful retail family clothing store chains located in the southern United States, Roper Dial (member of the Birmingham Country Club) and other white business leaders.¹¹¹

Dukes and the committee organized what became known as the Selective Buying Campaign at downtown stores in early 1962. The meetings would be held at the home of Dr.

¹¹¹ Miles College Centennial History Committee, *Miles College: The First Hundred Years* (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 89.

Pitts. Because boycotts were illegal at the time, Dukes proposed to start "selective buying" to demonstrate their frustrations peacefully. The plan was to cause a 50 percent decrease in in shopping amongst black people, causing the stores to run out of business or change the way they do they business. The group worked closely with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Their plan was effective, and the lack of funds being spent shopping at the white owned stores and the bad publicity about the plans for demonstrations in the streets scared off an of white shoppers.¹¹²

The Selective Buying Campaign was a part of Birmingham Campaign, started by SCLC in 1963, to bring attention to the integration efforts of African Americans in Birmingham, Alabama. The campaign was led by Martin Luther King Jr., James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth and other prominent Civil Rights activists. Organizer Wyatt Tee Walker joined Birmingham activist Shuttlesworth and began what they called Project C, a series of sit-ins and marches intended to provoke mass arrests.¹¹³ Thirgood Memorial CME Church held mass meetings on April 5th and on Easter Sunday, April 14th during the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights' Birmingham campaign. The Easter meeting transformed itself into a march toward the Birmingham Jail where Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy were serving sentences for parading without permits.¹¹⁴

Campaign organizers offered no bail in order "to focus the attention of the media and national public opinion on the Birmingham situation."¹¹⁵ King would go on to write the "Letter

¹¹² Miles College Centennial History Committee, *Miles College*, 71.

¹¹³ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 261.

¹¹⁴ Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 246.

¹¹⁵ S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2001), 108.

from Birmingham Jail". This was his response to the to eight politically moderate white clergymen who accused King of agitating residents and not giving the incoming mayor a chance to make any changes. King's arrest attracted national attention and the nationwide coverage pressed the Kennedy administration to intervene and King was released on April 20, 1963.¹¹⁶

In addition, although Connor had used police dogs to assist in the arrest of demonstrators, this did not attract the media attention that organizers had hoped for. SCLC organizer James Bevel devised a controversial alternative plan he named "D Day" that was later called the "Children's Crusade" by Newsweek magazine. This called for students from Birmingham elementary schools and high schools, as well as Miles College, to take part in the demonstrations. The effort by students was a success and they made the national headlines.¹¹⁷ This showcased another example of the cooperation between the President of Miles College the student-led organizations, and activists throughout the city of Birmingham, we see where Miles became a space for students to protest and receive support from its faculty. Miles students were an essential part of the Birmingham events.

In Augusta, Georgia, the students at CME affiliated Paine College were taking matters into their own hands. Despite efforts to "obtain the model standard of cooperation" already established by Paine College, this notion would be challenged during the Civil Rights Movement. During the movement, Paine students were active in advocating for social change. In early 1960 the Paine College Steering Committee, made up of student leaders from campus

¹¹⁶ Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 194.

¹¹⁷ Robert Gordon, "Waves of Young Negroes March in Birmingham Segregation Protest," *The Washington Post*, May 3, 1965, 1.

organizations, met regularly to coordinate and organize local student demonstrations. In March 1960, Paine students initiated the direct-action phase of Augusta's Civil Rights movement when they organized sit-ins at area department stores. Students filed a lawsuit in 1960 against the city of Augusta and the bus company that served it for their policy of requiring segregated seating on buses. One of the students, Silas Norman Jr., led the protest. Norman was one of the eleven students arrested on May 2, 1960 for refusing to yield their seats while protesting. That same year, Norman was named one of five plaintiffs in the *Taylor v. City of Augusta* lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court challenging segregated seating policies. On February 13, 1962, judges ordered the abolition of various city ordinances, state laws, and Georgia Public Service Commission rules that allowed segregation on public buses. This would be the first ruling in Augusta of this magnitude.¹¹⁸

Although a small number of stores desegregated before negotiations concluded, Augusta experienced little integration prior to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Racial tensions continued to simmer after the passage of federal legislation, however, and ultimately reached a boiling point in May 1970 when race riots erupted throughout the city. Although progress was being made and segregation laws were being abolished, the violence would continue to erupt in the city of Augusta. The fight for Civil Rights was not small, short, or simple process. This was a long and lengthy struggle for African Americans to be treated as equal citizens. The fight for full implementation of civil rights law continued long after 1965.¹¹⁹ Five years after the Voting

¹¹⁸ Tracey McManus, "Civil rights activist, former Paine College chairman Silas Norman Jr. dies at 74," *The Augusta Chronicle*, July 20, 2015, <https://www.augustachronicle.com/article/20150720/NEWS/307209899>.

¹¹⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1235.

Rights Act, the city of Augusta experienced first-hand the ongoing battle for equal justice. The two-day Augusta riot of 1970 was a community reaction to the death of a young black child imprisoned in the city jail. ¹²⁰ The riot was a response to the Augusta police force's repeated use of brutality against the black residents. Charles Oatman , a sixteen-year-old mentally-challenged man, was sent to the Richmond County Jail for the killing of his five year old niece, and was later found dead in his jail cell. ¹²¹ Police stated that Oatman had died after falling from out of his bunk after a card game, but rumors swirled that the 16-year-old had been beaten to death by officers. Sunday night before the riot began, about 200 black citizens gathered in a park and then marched to the jail after hearing that the Oatman had been brutally beaten. ¹²² Originally, Sheriff E.F. Atkins reported that Oatman had fallen from his cot and hit his head and on Monday morning officials announced that charges had been filed against his two cellmates whom were black. This led to the beginning of a two-day riot which resulted in the death of six black men (Charlie Mack Murphy, William Wright Jr., Sammie L. M'Cullough, James Stokes, John Bennett, and Mack Wilson) the injury of 62 individuals, the burning of at least 20 downtown buildings and property damages estimated to be more than \$1 million.” ¹²³

Race would play the biggest factor in the immediate aftermath of the shootings. The policemen were the only white people present during the shooting. According to the black

¹²⁰ Stacey Eidson, "The Augusta Riots: 45 Years Later," *Metro Spirit*, May 2, 2015, <http://metrospirit.com/the-augusta-riots-45-years-later/>.

¹²¹ James T. Wooten, "Witnesses to Augusta Riot Say 3 of 6 Killed Were Bystanders," *New York Times*, May 17, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/05/17/archives/witnesses-to-augusta-riot-say-3-of-6-killed-were-bystanders.html>.

¹²² Wooten, "Witnesses to Augusta Riot Say 3 of 6 Killed Were Bystanders."

¹²³ Eidson, "The Augusta Riots: 45 Years Later."

witnesses on the scene, three of the six men that were killed were innocent bystanders. They also believed that the policemen did not fire in self-defense and that the victims were unarmed. A report from *The New York Times*, just days after the killings, stated that the orders to shoot the black men were given by a white police captain, James G. Beck, who was disliked by the Augusta black community.¹²⁴ The police stated that a former member of SNCC and a member of the Black Panther party tried to organize the community and avoid a violent outcome, however these efforts were unsuccessful.

Due to the violence that erupted in the city, the National Guard was called in to help calm the city and restore order. Students at Paine were outraged by the killing of the six black men. The National Guard sent to protect the citizens of Augusta ended up causing the most problems on campus. Populist Democrat and Governor of Alabama, Lestor Maddox, came to prominence as a devoted segregationist when he refused to serve black customers in his Atlanta restaurant, in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Maddox, dispatched 1,200 National Guard troops to the city and later said the violence was “the work of the Black Panthers.”¹²⁵ After the killings Maddox had this to say to the students at Paine:

If they shoot at our guardsmen and firemen, they had better be prepared to meet their Maker. We have the trucks, personnel and guns to do the job. I’m in constant contact with the people down there and I’ll go there and do whatever is necessary.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Wooten, “Witnesses to Augusta Riot Say 3 of 6 Killed Were Bystanders.”

¹²⁵ Southern Regional Council, “Augusta Georgia and Jackson State University: Southern Episodes in A National Tragedy,” *Southern Regional Council, Inc.*, (June 1970): 38. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED050662.pdf>, ERIC.

¹²⁶ Southern Regional Council, “Augusta Georgia and Jackson State University,” 7.

The events that took place at both Paine and Miles were of huge significance to the movement. Students at Miles had the support of their president and faculty to protest on the campus at their own risk. Paine College students were met with defiance and were discouraged from peacefully protesting, but still were able to invoke change within the city. The ongoing efforts of Paine College students brought change on the campus and the city of Augusta. In addition, the Miles students protested at a critical period in the Civil Rights Movement, whereas the Paine students protested after the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the death of Martin Luther King Jr. The events that took place at Miles and Paine represented a shift within the CME Church that pointed away from the established history with the MEC. The students had certainly moved the church much farther away from its historic roots and were beginning to take action against their white counterparts. The students at Miles and Paine pushed the CME church beyond where it was comfortable. Like their peers across the South at other colleges and universities, they demanded change now. Although, the denomination was closely aligned to the MEC, students at these CME affiliated colleges were able to protest and have a direct impact on their communities.

CHAPTER 4: A LOCAL CONGREGATION AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

As Civil Rights historiography has shown, CME ministers, educational leaders, and students played a critical role in advancing the cause. To understand the activism for equality, however, the actions of ordinary people at the local level must also be explored. By focusing on the impact of a single church, the lesser known individuals can be brought to the spotlight, giving a more complete history of the movement that includes unheard voices. Although most of the CME Churches did not support opening their doors for political purposes, some members stepped outside the church and become involved in political activities. Carter Tabernacle CME in Orlando, Florida, provides a case study of a congregation that navigated the intersection of denominational history and social activism.

Carter has been a fundamental part of every significant historical undertaking in Orange County, with a location that has witnessed the transformation of the city. As the city moved into the 1960s, Carter became more visible in the public eye. As racial tension reached an all-time high across the South, the church became a place where blacks organized and orchestrated ways to advance social and political equality in the face of white terror and violence. Carter exemplifies how black churches were able to influence the decisions within the community despite the threat of violence. Members at Carter participated in marches within the community, sat at lunch counters, and helped put an end to segregation in the school system and the workplace. After moving to Selma, Alabama, one former member helped to organize the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. If the congregation did not host civil rights events, the church,

nonetheless, fostered courage and dignity in individual members that sustained them in their efforts to overturn disfranchisement and segregation laws and practices.

Congregations like the one at Carter Tabernacle ministered within a violent racial climate. Some states and counties were particularly terrifying places for African Americans and had dramatically higher rates of lynching than others. Between 1877 and 1950, the report, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” counts well over 4,000 examples of “racial terror lynchings” in twelve southern states. The Equal Justice Initiative describes these incidents as violent, public acts of torture that were tolerated by elected officials and designed to intimidate black victims.¹²⁷ Florida had one of the highest statewide rates of lynching in the United States. Out of the twelve states analyzed, Florida ranked fifth, with 311 terror lynchings within its borders. Florida ranked first in lynchings per capita, with 0.594 lynchings for every 100,000 residents.¹²⁸ Of the 25 counties across the South with the most lynchings, Florida had six: Orange (34), Marion (30), Alachua (19), Polk (19), Columbia (17), and Taylor (17).¹²⁹ The memory of racial violence resonated through black communities and across generations. The actions that individuals and congregations took to advance civil rights occurred within the context of that memory.

The years 1919 and 1920 were characterized by racial violence everywhere in the United States. The so-called Red Summer of 1919 witnessed race riots across the country, most notably

¹²⁷ Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” 3rd Edition, 2017, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

¹²⁸ Ray Downs, “Florida Lynched More Black People Per Capita Than Any Other State, According to Report,” *Broward New Times*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.browardpalmbeach.com/news/florida-lynched-more-black-people-per-capita-than-any-other-state-according-to-report-6470940>.

¹²⁹ Downs, “Florida Lynched More Black People Per Capita Than Any Other State.”

in Chicago, Elaine, Arkansas, and Knoxville, Tennessee. The following year, racial violence resurged in association with the election of 1920. As historians of the era note, several factors account for the renewed violence: economic progress made by African Americans in the 1910s placed them in competition with whites and made their successes more visible, the actions of black soldiers in World War I made it difficult to deny their rights as citizens and more threatening to continuation of the entrenched racial hierarchy constructed by whites, and the addition of women to the voting rolls with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 brought racial tension to elections everywhere. As Paul Ortiz observed a 1920 statewide effort by African American organizations to register black voters and cast their ballots on Election Day set the stage for racial confrontation.¹³⁰ The memory of the Ocoee Massacre was carried by the fleeing black community to towns throughout Orange County and beyond. Thirty years later as the Civil Rights Movement gained traction, survivors and their descendants lived in the black communities within Winter Garden, Apopka, and Orlando. They remembered the white rage that could follow black exercise of rights of citizenship.¹³¹

Settlements, established by whites to house black workers, became thriving communities through the efforts of their black residents. As the white population within the Orlando began to thrive, the black population also increased. In Orange County, white employers established early African American settlements to provide separate but nearby housing for black domestic help and grove laborers. Two African-American towns established independent, black-governed,

¹³⁰ Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 101.

¹³¹ Tana Mosier Porter, "Segregation and Desegregation in Parramore: Orlando's African American Community," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (Winter 2004), 290-291.

incorporated towns—Eatonville and Goldsboro. The history of the two towns provided a lesson in use of black agency and a cautionary tale. In 1881, black residents moved from Maitland and established Eatonville on nearby land donated by a Maitland resident. The move enabled them to remain close to their workplaces in Maitland and, once the town was incorporated, provided a model for black governance and black business development. More than a century later, Eatonville continues to act a model for community action for preservation in defiance of “development” and “gentrification.”¹³² If Eatonville stood as the example of what was possible, Goldsboro provided a particularly frightening example of how precarious independent existence was in the South. Goldsboro was initially established west of Sanford as a community for railroad workers, similar to other worker-communities of the period. William Clark, a black store owner, carpenter, and the brother of one of the founders of Eatonville, encouraged the people living in Goldsboro to seek incorporation of their town. In 1891, Goldsboro was incorporated as a town and remained self-governing for the next twenty years. In 1911, Forrest Lake, a powerful Sanford banker and state lawmaker, carried out a scheme to dissolve the charters of Sanford and Goldsboro and establish a new charter that would incorporate Goldsboro into Sanford.¹³³ The history of the two towns offered African Americans hope for the future and confirmed the racial barriers to independence.

In both independent communities and those that existed within larger white towns, churches played an important role in African Americans forming their own spaces. Because of the actions on behalf of CME church members, African Americans were able to enter white

¹³² Gramond Mcpherson, “Making Our Voices Heard: Power and Citizenship in Central Florida's Black Communities” (Master's Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2019), 84-85.

¹³³ “About Us,” *Goldsboro Museum*, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://goldsboromuseum.com/about-us/>.

dominated spaces and bring real change to the Central Florida community. In 1880, former slaves established Orlando's first African American community, Jonestown, near what is now Orlando's Greenwood Cemetery, along east South Street. The name was inspired by early residents Sam and Penny Jones, who settled along the banks of Fern Creek.¹³⁴

Orlando's black religious community included several historically black denominations. In 1880, Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church started near the corner of Robinson and Division Streets. According to Orlando historian Tana Porter, "In 1872, Ebenezer United Methodist Church met in a home on West Jackson Street; the Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist organized near Terry and Pine Streets in 1896; and three years later, Shiloh Baptist formed."¹³⁵ Carter Tabernacle CME Church, the second CME Church within Orlando, was established in 1916. Just as African Americans were beginning to establish strong religious communities in Orlando, education became a major concern for residents now raising their children in these new spaces. Although Florida law required that white and black children attend separate schools, it was no secret that the white schools provided a better learning experience than the black schools.¹³⁶

From the 1920s into the start of the Civil Rights Movement in 1954, Central Florida became a home to many members of the Ku Klux Klan and they often terrorized and even killed African Americans. In 1920, just before the November election, 500 robed and hooded Klansmen rode through the streets of Orlando to intimidate African Americans brave enough to

¹³⁴ Martha Scott Lue, *These Stones: Pleasant Hill/Carter Tabernacle* (Maitland: Xulon Press, 2006), 83.

¹³⁵ Tana Mosier Porter, "Segregation and Desegregation in Parramore," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 82, No. 3 (Winter 2004): 293.

¹³⁶ Porter, "Segregation and Desegregation in Parramore," 294.

attempt to vote. In addition, the Klan sent threatening letters to registered black voters. Klan leaders in Southern cities like Atlanta, visited Orange County and delivered speeches to crowds of supporters. Local Klan members burned crosses at events and making appearances at schools. In 1923, Orlando Cherokee Klan No. 9 was the host to the first statewide klonvocation. In 1934 Orange and Polk County Klansmen beat a group of labor organizers; one of the organizers went missing and was never found. The Klan ruled the Central Florida region, often having the support of the local police departments. In the 1940s, the Klan continued to engage in activities to discourage black voters from voting by making their presence known as they marched in parades and burned crosses.¹³⁷

The 1950s would be filled with more killings and violence by the KKK. Founder of the first branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Brevard County, Florida, Harry T. Moore and his wife, Harriette Vyda Simms Moore, were the victims of a bombing of their home in Mims, on Christmas night 1951. The bombing was later traced to four Klansmen from Orange County as effects of his murder was felt throughout the city of Orlando.¹³⁸ The Klan made their presence felt all throughout Central Florida, and the threat of violence for African Americans was at all-time high heading into the modern Civil Rights era.

Using Carter Tabernacle as a case study, we see that the church had members that participated in the movement and different locations that witnessed the transformation of the

¹³⁷ Ibid, 300.

¹³⁸ Ben Green, *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

city. In 1916, three families organize Pleasant Hill Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. They first affiliated with Mt. Olive CME Church and later decided to establish a new church in the groves of Pepper Hill. Eventually the church needed to expand and its increase in members caused the church to move to 912 West Bentley Street in 1924. Pleasant Hill changed its name to Carter Tabernacle Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in honor of Bishop Randall Albert Carter in 1928.¹³⁹ Located in the heart of the black Orlando community, the membership grew to approximately 300 members by 1935. Carter was the “second largest CME congregations in the state of Florida,” a young Henry Clay Bunton who pastored at Carter from 1941 to 1942 recalls.¹⁴⁰ Significant activity by Carter Tabernacle members in the movement for equality amongst African Americans became more visible to the public as the 1960s approached.

Allen Burnett, a member of Carter since 1939, joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which organized boycotts and picketing of Winn-Dixie on South Parramore Avenue and Orange Blossom Trail in the early 1960s over the grocer's refusal to hire black cashiers. Burnett would take part in protests throughout the city, leading to the hiring of 16 black workers at the Winn-Dixie, one of which included Allen himself. Theresa Walton, who started as a nurse at Orlando General Hospital in 1945 when black patients were relegated to the basement, became the first black head nurse at the hospital and is also a member of Carter Tabernacle.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Lue, *These Stones*, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Lue, *These Stones*, 173.

¹⁴¹ Jeff Kunerth, “Carter Tabernacle Parallels Growth of Orlando's Black Community,” *Orlando Sentinel*, February 26, 2013, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2013-02-26/news/os-black-history-church-20130223_1_new-church-church-street-first-church/2.

Thelma Dudley, a Jones High School English teacher and member of Carter, was transferred to Oak Ridge High School as the public schools integrated. Louis W. Crooms joined the Orange County Sheriff's Department in May of 1963, just a year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in hiring procedures and segregation in schools. When Crooms started as a patrol officer, he and other black deputies were only assigned calls involving African Americans according to the Sheriff's Office. Crooms, whose funeral service was held at Carter Tabernacle, frequently had to deal with the harsh social climate that most blacks in Orlando were feeling during the 1960s.¹⁴² However, despite this deeply embedded racism, some still felt there was "a spirit of cooperation" and communication between black and white community leaders.¹⁴³

Theodore Roosevelt Harris, settled in Florida in the 1930s and immediately began looking for a CME church, having grown up in the denomination. After little success, Harris joined an AME church. Shortly after, he stumbled upon Carter and became active within the community. He organized youth activities for Black Bottom and Pepperhill communities. Harris would continue his efforts to engage with the young people in the community and went on to coach a little league baseball team sponsored by Carter. He required mandatory Sunday school attendance in order to play on his team. Eventually his work with the youth would catapult him into leadership positions within the denomination and he eventually served as the lay leader for the Florida Annual Conference and he would join the ministry in 1962. After serving in Ocala

¹⁴² Jeff Kunerth, "Carter Tabernacle Parallels Growth of Orlando's Black Community," *Orlando Sentinel*, February 26, 2013.

¹⁴³ Fred Altensee, *The Orlando, Florida, Civil Rights Movement: A Case Study in Cooperation and Communication, 1951-1971*, (Cocoa: Murfeus Publishing, 2014).

for a few years, in 1964 he was called to pastor the St. Paul CME Church in Selma, Alabama under the guidance of Bishop E.P Murchison. Both Murchison and Harris would become involved with the Civil Rights Movement in Selma and helped to organize the march on Montgomery in March of 1965. This an example of how members of Carter were actively pursuing opportunities to become involved with the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁴⁴

Reverend Ertemus T. Brown became the pastor of Carter Tabernacle in 1955. Graduate of Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee, Brown was devoted to the ministry and service that took place within the churches that he pastored. Prior to his time in Orlando, Brown was a pastor at St. Paul CME Church in Jackson, Tennessee and was remembered for his dedication to the Sunday School services that took place within the church. Once Brown settled in Orlando, he would make a significant impact in the community through his religious platform. In 1958, Brown became a charter member and treasurer of the Orlando Ministerial Association. The Association was “open to all clergymen of Orlando regardless of faith race or creed.” This group of clergymen were united in efforts to face the challenges of “moral and religious” development throughout the city of Orlando.¹⁴⁵ Brown was the pastor at Carter until 1961 and he was often called upon to speak at CME affiliated baccalaureate ceremonies.¹⁴⁶

These individuals that were connected to Carter, provide examples of people who challenged social segregation in businesses, employment segregation, and people who worked in the new integrated school system. Members of Carter reached some of most important civil

¹⁴⁴ Martha Scott Lue, *These Stones: Pleasant Hill/Carter Tabernacle* (Maitland: Xulon Press, 2006), 159.

¹⁴⁵ Orlando Ministerial Association, “Minutes of Charter Meeting, February 20, 1958,” *RICHES of Central Florida*, accessed November 22, 2019, <https://richesmi.cah.ucf.edu/omeka/items/show/10608>.

¹⁴⁶ Lue, *These Stones*, 173-174.

rights actions at Selma. An examination of Carter Tabernacle CME Church and its collective participation within the Civil Rights Movement in Orlando provides evidence that the church was indeed cognizant of the racial climate during the Civil Rights Era. Members put their lives at risk by actively seeking job opportunities and challenging the notion of fear amongst the tough racial conditions in the area. Church leaders and members were sent to other destinations across the South to help in the movements across the region, as well as stayed in the Orlando area and fought the good fight against social injustices across the city of Orlando. Like Sommerville's argument, the CME church deserves credit for not only being involved in the movement nationally but being torchbearers to the plight of equality for African Americans across the South on the local levels. Like many other churches, Carter Tabernacle cannot point to examples of hosting civil rights rallies or a fiery minister who led marches. But the quiet actions of church members to bring about equality in education, provide opportunities for building wealth, and engage in civil society in the face of a violent history enables us to understand civil rights activism in a larger personal and communal sense.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to examine CME involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and to evaluate the church's impact. CME involvement in the Civil Rights movements of the mid-twentieth century displays a powerful shift in the denomination's identity. The activists were not the most visible leaders in the movements. The work done by CME church activists during the movement is slowly being uncovered by scholars today. Using the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church as an example, a historically black denomination within the broader context of Methodism, we see that CME church leaders and members across the South help to define what it meant to be active within the Civil Rights Movement. Examining the church's leaders, the effort shown by local congregations, and the student led movements that were taking place at the church affiliated colleges places the CME Church at the center of the movement.

As the church grew over the years and into twentieth century, the denomination dealt with the task of responding to the social issues of America. CME preachers became the public spokesperson for their congregations. Although the CME leaders often expressed their love and support for the MEC over the years, as time went by denominational leaders developed distinctive approaches to overcome the effects of white supremacy that often placed them at the forefront of racial conflict. The church's response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, with a proposal to change its name from "Colored" to "Christian" Methodist Episcopal Church at its 1954 General Conference set the tone for shift that began to take place. Heading into the Civil Rights Movement, the pressure amongst churches to respond to the racial climate ran at an all-

time high as black people looked to church leaders for guidance in actions outside the church. An examination of the denomination on both a national and local shows the participation and role of the church in the Civil Rights Movement.

Defining activism within the Civil Rights Movement, we can look to the actions of the CME Church members that played a critical part in the success of the movement. The efforts from Tobias, Bunton, Pitts, and Douglas show that even at the highest levels of the movement, the CME Church had representation. The actions of these ministers represent political and ecumenical activism within the Civil Rights Movement. These men dedicated their lives to the movement and would work with the giants like King and Shuttlesworth. Activism at the local level, was also a key development of the CME Church in the Civil Rights Movement. Congregations like Carter Tabernacle in Orlando, help show that activism wasn't just marching on the streets. Activism came by way of the classroom and through the court systems. The Carter members who risked their lives daily on the job. Lastly, the student demonstrations across the different CME affiliated schools, showed activism by way of student leadership and the cooperation of faculty. The work done by Paine Miles College students, is a representation of how the Civil Rights Movement included the youth. Black college campuses became a center of power and protest during the movement. All these different levels of activism show that members of CME Church were an instrumental part of the struggle for Civil Rights in America.

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