

My Civil Rights Years by William J. Meers

Bringing Everyone Together in Church: My Civil Rights Experience La Grange, Kentucky in the '60s

By William J. Meers
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While a freshman at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky, my interest in civil rights developed rapidly. The activities in Lexington and the involvement by Transylvania students and faculty provided a stimulating environment in which that interest could grow.

Ironically, Transylvania did not have any Negro students until my senior year.

Dr. Margaret Smythe, a school nurse who had been a medical missionary in China, especially encouraged my interest.

I organized several programs for the Student Christian Association on civil rights, including a visit by Genevieve Hughes, one of the freedom riders on the Greyhound bus burned in Anniston, Alabama. For another program, I obtained the film, "Walk in my Shoes" which had originally been a program on one of the television networks. It was a very powerful film that featured interviews with freedom riders and others active in the movement. I especially remember a powerful interview with Percy Sutton, president of one of the boroughs of New York, who shared his reasons for being a freedom rider.

During my senior year, I was a facilitator for one of the discussion groups for the Kentucky College Conference on Human Rights held at Transylvania. The Conference was sponsored by the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Lincoln Foundation, and B'nai B'rith. At the conclusion of the conference, we had a dance in the school cafeteria. The interracial dancing was both exciting and a strong symbol of the breakdown of segregation in social relationships.

Later, I helped organize a group of Transylvania students who participated in the March on Frankfort in the spring of 1964 in support of the Kentucky Civil Rights Law. Dr. Martin Luther King was the primary speaker. We marched with others from Lexington and while there I met a small group from my home town, La Grange.

While gathering for the March, we joined the Lexington Congress on Racial Equality group in singing the song, "This May Be the Last Time." The words to that song still come to me frequently: "This may be the last time we march on Frankfort, this may be the last time, but I don't know."

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Civil Rights Rallies and Sit-in in Lexington

While at Transylvania, I attended many civil rights rallies in Lexington--primarily at Negro churches-- and heard talks by many movement leaders, including James Farmer, Ralph Abernathy, and Fred Shuttlesworth.

I frequently attended meeting of the Lexington Congress on Racial Equality where I met Julia Lewis, Ronnie Berry, and other local Lexington civil rights leaders. I joined the NAACP as a youth member in November 1961, although I was not part of any local chapter.

Sit-ins at restaurants and lunch counters were still going on while I was at Transylvania. I was part of a mixed group that went to the Phoenix Hotel dining room to test whether the hotel had changed their policy of refusing to serve Negroes. We were not served and left quietly.

I read much about civil rights and clipped many articles from magazines, newspapers, and books. Today, I still remember the names from the newspaper articles of civil rights leaders and small towns in the South where many of the struggles for equality occurred.

During the height of my interest in civil rights, I read many books by black authors or on black culture: "Manchild in the Promised Land" by Claude Brown, "The Biography of Malcolm X", "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, most of the books by Richard Wright, "Black Like Me" by John Howard Griffith.

Community Church Services in La Grange

In my home town I took a strong interest in racial equality. I had written a letter to the school board president supporting integration of the public schools in Oldham County. For youth Sunday at the La Grange Christian Church when I was a senior in college, I gave a talk on civil rights titled "Blowing in the Wind" from the Peter, Paul, and Mary song of the same name. I played their record in church. It was a strong message and was delivered forcefully. Those who were worried that I wouldn't speak loud enough to be heard were very surprised.

On Easter 1964, I was responsible for desegregating community church services in La Grange. I had felt for a long time that the church should take the lead in integration, although I knew that the Sunday morning church hour was the most segregated hour of the week. During the previous summer, I had talked to the white ministers who organized these services at Easter and Thanksgiving and to leading lay people in their congregations. No one had any strong objections to my idea, although no one wanted to take any action to make it happen. I had also talked to the members of the black Baptist and Methodist churches and they, too, were supportive. I had attended the local white fundamentalist Assembly of God church with a black man, Roscoe Harvey, so knew that local people could accept having blacks worship with them.

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Since no one was apparently in a position to risk bringing the churches together, I took it as my personal responsibility to make it happen. Once I knew I would follow through on my commitment, I didn't sleep well from fear. I sent letters to both the black Baptist and black Methodist churches inviting them to attend the services as my guests at the Easter Sunrise service. I read the invitation from the pulpit of the black Kynette Methodist church on Palm Sunday.

I met with Rev. Calvin C. Woods, minister of the black Baptist church several days prior to the service and asked him to have the morning prayer. I didn't want only to have blacks sitting in the pews, but to have participation in the program as well. He agreed.

All Together on Easter

On Easter Saturday, I met with my minister, Roy D. Martin, to tell him that I had invited the two churches and expected them to attend. When I told him I wanted Rev. Woods to participate in the service, he volunteered immediately, "We can give him the morning prayer." I must have felt greatly relieved and much satisfaction at his suggestion since I had no part in planning the service and had no authority to invite anyone to take part.

The Sunrise service was set for 6 a.m. at the DeHaven Memorial Baptist Church (white) and I sought a meeting with Rev. A. L. Meacham, the pastor, on Saturday afternoon to inform him about the two new churches that were coming to the service. He did not return my call, so I arrived at the church at 5:30 a.m. on Easter Sunday morning to tell him about his special guests. Rev. Woods arrived first, so he and I waited together for Rev. Meacham's arrival. When he arrived, I introduced Rev. Woods to him. Right away, Rev. Meacham said, "We would be happy if you would offer the morning prayer." I knew now that all would go well.

Rev. Woods had the morning prayer and Rev. Meacham called it an "historic occasion." Several men left the service, but I believe it was a special service for the others. The atmosphere was very peaceful. I sat quietly in my pew. Only a few whites knew that I had anything to do with what happened there that Sunday morning.

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