end of February to thirty cities and seven states. By mid-April 1960, 100 communities and over 50,000 blacks and whites had participated in some sort of sit-in demonstration.[43] Within 18 months, 70,000 people had participated in sit-ins, according to the Southern Regional Council.[44] The sit-ins spread to every state in the deep South and several border states including Ohio, Illinois and Nevada. Sit-ins involved more people than any other civil rights movement in its history: 70,000 blacks and whites in more than 800 sit-in demonstrations in over 100 communities.[45] No previous activities of the southern civil rights movement had generated this widespread activism among whites across the nation.[46]

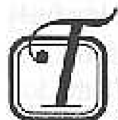
Highlander began utilizing strategies developed at its school in 1932 and remained a solid foundation on which many civil rights leaders built. HFS provided insight to the sit-in protesters and leaders. With the guidance of HFS, the sit-ins, along with the economic boycott, ended the desegregation of public facilities. Sit-ins only worked when the adult black population within the communities boycotted the same premises. This brought the white establishments to their knees. The first fell on May 10, 1960, in Nashville, Tennessee. The black population provided twenty percent of all downtown business. With ninety-eight percent of all blacks cooperating in the Nashville boycott, the white business owners opted to raise the white flag and surrender. Lunch counters also desegregated throughout Nashville. The same happened in Savannah, Georgia in 1961.[47] The sit-in movement of the 1960s achieved a major victory for the civil rights movement thanks to the guidance and help from Highlander Folk School. The driving force behind the sit-in movement, obviously, was the passionate individuals who believed skin color should not inhibit any person's rights. Although the real fire started within the people, HFS kept the embers burning.

[43] Glenn, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 145.
[44] Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, 257.
[45] Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 124.
[46] Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 222.
[47] Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 129-31

The Role of the Church in the Civil Rights Movement

Christina Wresch

Christina Wresch is a junior at Eastern Illinois University. She is a history major working towards teachers' certification. Christina's focus is in American history.



The civil rights era of the 1950s-1960s was a turbulent time for the entire United States, (but the South, as it had always been, was certainly the most tumultuous). In the early fifties, plagued by unfair voter registration practices, segregation and Jim Crow laws, African-Americans in the South began to take a stand for their rights. To do this, they looked to the one foundation which had stood strong for them throughout their entire existence in this country–the church. Though there has been little dispute that the church was an irreplaceable part of the black family's life, historians have debated the church's role in the civil rights movement. Historian Adam Fairclough contends that it was laymen rather than men of the cloth who spearheaded the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. However, many other historians disagree, putting the church at the head of most, if not all, civil rights activities. The church had been an integral part of the African-American family life from the beginning, religion being their only solace from the horror and unjust treatment they had succumbed to since slavery. The church preached freedom, liberation, and equality which is exactly what they desired, and precisely what they sought. In the fifties and sixties the church was still a driving force in the African-American agenda. Freedom had been granted, but equality stood yet unforseen as a reachable goal in the distace, but not without the help of God and the church. By instilling motivation, providing

leadership, and a usable meeting space, black churches were instrumental in the success of the civil rights movement.

In the nineteenth-century the church played a considerable role in the life of the black family. During Reconstruction, after African-Americans won their freedom, they built communities for themselves. In the cities, African-Americans seized control of their own churches, while the "invisible institution of the rural slave church emerged into the light of day."[1] Throughout the South, freedmen saw such a pressing need for a social institution-their church, that they pooled their resources to purchase land and erect the buildings. The church was the cornerstone of black family life after slavery. It was the first social setting fully controlled by black men in America and its multiple functions led to its centrality within the black community. During the Reconstruction era, not only did the church building serve as a place of worship, but churches also housed schools, social events, and political gatherings. As early as 1870, before the civil rights movement even took form, the Freedmen's Bureau saw the church provide much of its leadership-of the twenty-two black delegates, seventeen were ministers. This involvement perhaps foreshadows the church's involvement with the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth-century.[2]

The civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth-century gained momentum in the early post-second world war period. As early as 1946, black Baptists in the South were becoming increasingly uneasy about their situation. During the convention of black Baptists held in Montgomery, Alabama in that same year, which several white men attended, J. Pius Barour noted "[the white folks] heard a plenty as those preachers made out they were talking to God but were shooting [snide comments]at those white folks."[3] Two years later black pastors in Birmingham made a public statement denouncing segregation, and announced that

[1]Eric Foner. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877.* (New York: 1988), 89.
[2]Ibid.,91-92.
[3]Andrew Manis. *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict.* (Athens, Georgia: 1987), 22.

though segregation would continue to be practiced, it was time for Christian people to take the lead in abolishing it. Southern black Baptist ministers preached on the topic of equality and addressed the social conditions of their society. Martin Luther King would later say of this practice, "in the act of faith, every minister became an advocate for justice."[4] In the south, this meant active involvement in changing the social order in every city. In many cases, the black ministers' motivation stemmed from their own personal humiliation early in their lives at the hands of Jim Crow laws. This humiliation would never be forgotten. Eventually, it would strengthen them enough to be ready to finally fight for their rights, especially with their God on their side. The pulpit became their soapbox. Vernon Johns, predecessor to Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church became a classic example of a political preacher. Routinely, Johns would preach of social injustices in the community and would put politically tense and accusatory, however true, statements on his streetside marquis, an act for which he would regularly be brought in by police to be questioned about his motives.[5] Johns encouraged his community, and instilled a pride in his parishioners that perhaps they would otherwise not have had. Johns', and this particular church's influence established great community pride and strength that would be the basis to unite first these African-Americans and then the African-American community as a whole.

The black church as a whole was the most important social institution within the black community. Black members of the church held positions in the hierarchy of church government and exclusively held positions of power, with very little interference by whites of any sort- religious or otherwise. The church was held sacred, but it also served as a place where African-Americans could come together for a common cause without being dispersed or treated like non-citizens as had been the case when they met in other public places. This was the place where not only was the Gospel preached, but the message of equality and

[4]Ibid., 17.
[5]Ibid., 22.

justice as well.[6] This was also the forum civil rights workers would seek to express their opinions and advertise the message for the necessity of the vote. For example, many SNCC volunteers, Anne Moody for one, spoke in the church setting to motivate blacks to vote or register to vote. This was the one place they could be assured an attentive wholly black audience. In the beginning, SNCC volunteers canvassed rural churches encouraging their members to register to vote, and attended workshops to learn how to utilize their rights. Soon, the church would become sole meeting ground for workshops of this kind. Anne Moody, in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, tells of her experiences going into various churches in rural Mississippi to reach their ultimate goal. In Madison County, more specifically, Canton, Mississippi, where Anne–employed by SNCC, did much of her work, the church was their playing field. Due to the lack of enthusiasm of several of the ministers, the group decided to go right to their congregations. To the ministers' surprise, Anne and company had made serious "headway with several of their most influential members, and they put [them] right where [they] wanted to go–behind the pulpit for more than five minutes."[7] Now they could hit the churches hard, and reach the majority of the rural population whose only regular big group social gathering would be Sunday morning. The church's apparent influence could be seen even by white outsiders as noted by Deputy General Council of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Ray Terry. When questioned on how involved the church had been in the civil rights movement, Terry responded with a resounding "very!" He stated without a doubt the church was influential in all facets of the movement, especially in the leadership and coordination areas of the movement.[8]

Not only did the church serve as the court where civil rights workers could plead their cases to their peers, but even the few churches who were left untouched by civil rights workers on official business served to bring Negroes together for a common cause. Church leaders or ministers could take control and train their congregations for action. In many cases, ministers served as the leaders for boycotts, sit-ins and other rallies, and the first to be invited would be their congregations. Those ministers who were not actively involved, would still help to organize the followers for their outside Negro leaders.[9] Church leadership came to be very influential in political decisions. It was not a mystery that black churches held high political prowess. Black churches were integral in moving the people to campaign for their rights, from Reconstruction through the 1960's.[10] The church's first recognizable attempt at rocking the boat came after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, when the push for change altered course. This Supreme Court decision which desegregated the schools opened the nationwide discussion on the validity of segregation, and allowed clergymen to form their own opinions on the matter of not only segregation, but the action for the right to vote. To that end, black ministers hoped the white churches would see desegregation as a positive idea and would support black churches in their quest for equality.

The white churches of the south, however, did little for the civil rights movement. Disappointed in the area of race relations, and trusting the Christian belief of the "brotherhood of man" would help in their fight for equality, the black church made an impassioned plea to white religious leaders. This plea fell on deaf ears. Though the rural white and black churches were quite similar in congregation, their purposes were entirely different. "The white church served a purely religious function, [whereas] the black church served social, political, and economic needs."[11] This is not to say the white church remained entirely passive throughout the civil rights movement, however, to white ministers, it seemed as though remaining neutral was in the white churches' best interest. As seen in the passing of the 1960 Church

[6] Obie Clayton, ed. *An American Dilemma Revisited: Race Relations in a Changing World.* (New York: 1996), 191.

[7] Anne Moody. *Coming of Age in Mississippi.* (New York: 1968), 305.

[8] Ray Terry, *Chief Council Of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.*

[9] Clayton, 193.

[10] Adam Fairclough. *To Redeem the Soul Of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: 1987), 32.

[11] Clayton, 192.

Property Bill in Mississippi those who were sympathetic to the Negroes' cause were not spared political discourse. This bill revoked the tax-exempt status of integrated churches, and in doing so, supported churches totally committed to segregation. Still, the church, according to Obie Clayton, was probably the source of more native white support for the civil rights cause than any other segment of southern society. He concedes that this does not indicate an accomplishment in the mission of change.[12]

The white church of the south responded to the movement with silence in most cases. Early in the movement, in February of 1955, the *New York Times* printed an article stating that Methodist Bishops in North Carolina defended segregation, arguing that segregation provided for protection of the rights and privileges of minorities. However, on that same page, Lutheran ministers were praised for their acceptance of Negroes into their congregations, and during the Division of American Mission meeting, Dr. H. Conrad Hoyer stated that indeed Lutheran churches recognized that African-Americans soon would be a part of their congregations, and many congregations were ready to accept them, and even those who were not immediately prepared had already begun educational processes which would follow for Negro integration into their congregations in the near future.[13] In Cleveland, just prior to the Lutheran's first public announcement of desegregation, the Missions Council of the Congregational Christian Churches met. During this panel discussion, Dr. Douglas Horton of New York, minister of the churches' general council, suggested the denomination set up a "standard of practice" denouncing segregation for new churches and including it in their constitutions.[14] Even before the end of the Second World War, racial tension could be seen between the churches. As D.V. Jemison, President of the National Baptist Convention stated in his address to the convention of 1943, "the difference between the white and Negro preacher is this: the Negro preacher makes the sentiment for his people, but with the white preacher, people

[12]Ibid., 195.
[13]"Methodists Attack Segregation." *New York Times*. 4 February 1955, 24:4.
[14]"Church Segregation Hit." *New York Times*. 26 January 1955, 27:8.

make the sentiment for him...because the white minister dare not preach against traditions and customs...if he does, he will lose his position."[15] Regardless of the white churches' apparent apathy, the Negro leaders recognized that if white preachers were to take a stand for the black preachers' cause, they would certainly lose not only the faith of their congregations, but their jobs as well.

The SNCC, one of the many civil rights groups working toward African-Americans' greater good had their roots in Christianity and thus, the Southern church. The SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) had many of its field workers come out of the churches of Mississippi, so that they would be educated in the religious traditions of the south. Mass meetings resembled a church service, and were grounded in the religious traditions of the Deep South, complete with gospel songs, many of which were then considered "Freedom Songs." Many of the protests the SNCC was involved in were led by ministers. In fact, Ella Baker looked to ministers to conduct and volunteer for a mass house-to-house canvassing voter registration drive. In a memo dated in 1959, she called for the recruitment of one-thousand ministers to work on this drive, in which she estimated that over 300,000 people could be reached in ten months.[16]

Surprisingly enough, however, SNCC was comprised, for the most part not of ministers or regular church-goers, but of the youth. Part of the contribution of the youth was their willingness to work with nearly all of the community. Their youthful persistence, and in some cases, obstinence made them not only known, but remembered. Arrest lent no fear to the youth of the movement. In mere hours in Canton, Mississippi, four-hundred high school students were arrested, and incarcerated at the local fairgrounds. The following day, four-hundred more high school and now college students also tried to be arrested so they could be with them.[17] In fact, to SNCC members, the contemporary ten-

[15]Manis, 20.
[16]Charles M. Payne. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. (Berkeley: 1995), 95.
[17]Moody, 273.

dency to assume that movement leadership was basically ministerial is laughable.[18] Matt Suarez of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) a group which worked closely with SNCC, said of the initiative of the organizers in Canton, Mississippi, "we were young and full of energy...trying to bust down brick walls by running our heads through them."[19]

The black middle class too, slowly began to make their contribution. Black business people no matter which side of the law they operated on became more and more likely to make donations of some sort, especially under the table, so as to avoid the attention of the authorities. In smaller towns, doctors had great influence as well. For example, in Greenwood, Mississippi, Dr. Mable Garner used her position as a physician to bring food to people in jail when no one else could get in.[20] Also, the visible participation of teachers surely swayed others to join or support the movement.

Similarly, due to his popularity, the introduction of Dr. Martin Luther King into the highest leadership position in the Montgomery Improvement Association led to the recognition of ministers in positions of leadership within their communities who stood up in defense of African-Americans' rights. Ministers, being another portion of the middle class, in most cases, had the most impact on the community, though any familiar face from the neighborhood had the potential to motivate more individuals to come out to meetings and join the 'freedom fighters.' After King's and other ministers' appointments to leadership positions, the church then became the heart of the fundraising machinery, the organizational atmosphere and the colloquial meeting ground for activist groups both religiously and secularly based.

Tallahassee, Florida and Montgomery, Alabama shared similar leadership development experiences. Like Montgomery, Tallahassee's bus boycott was initiated by regular citizens but organized by the church. In Tallahassee, two black students were arrested for conspiring to incite a riot by sitting beside a white

[18] Payne, 196.
[19] Ibid., 199.
[20] Ibid., 177.

passenger on a bus in the last two available seats. The following day, three thousand students from Florida A&M University voted to stay off the buses. The link between this boycott and the church came from University professor and ordained minister, Dr. James Hudson. At mass meetings Hudson initiated at his home church, the Inter-Civic Council coming into being with six ministers among its nine officers.[21]

By nature, ministers are motivational speakers. Black ministers preach with an exceptional fervor at any occasion and civil rights issues were no exception. When it came to arousing an audience, the black preacher knew no rival. Vernon Johns' is a classic example of this motivational preacher early in the movement. His successor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an obvious motivational speaker. A compelling speaker, he drew crowds in the hundreds of thousands as well as television coverage every time he spoke. Ministers who took on leadership positions within the civil rights movement were ahead of their class-the cream of the crop. Men like Rev. Ed King, Robert Parris Moses, and even women like Ella Baker, like so many other African-Americans, found their roots in the church. They grew from those roots into the encouraging and strong individuals and leaders we recognize today. It was their presence at civil rights events which stirred the crowd into a frenzy. Because of them, and others, attending civil rights oriented meetings at any church in the South could be compared to attending a religious revival complete with gospel music-Freedom Songs, impulsive "Hallelujahs", and a fired up crowd.[22]

Historian Adam Fairclough argues that the impulse which led to the civil rights movement came from outside the church and was motivated by politics. In Montgomery, in the period before the bus boycott, the leading black activists were E.D. Nixon, and railroad porter and trade-union official; Rufus Lewis, a businessman; and Jo Ann Robinson, a college teacher. Even the original idea of a boycott stemmed from outside the church-it

[21] Fairclough, 19.
[22] William Loren Katz. *Eyewitness.* (New York: 1995), 450.

came not from ministers but from laypeople. Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus was not the action of a mere seamstress with sore feet. Her action made a statement for the entire black community, and the NAACP for which she had served as secretary for a number of years. It was not until December 5, 1955, the day after the Montgomery bus boycott began, that Martin Luther King, Jr. became president of the boycott organization. The Montgomery Improvement Association voted Dr, King into the position because, as one of the women activists put it, "the ministers who didn't want the presidency of the MIA…were just chicken, passing the buck to Dr. King."[23] In fact, most preachers in Montgomery were skeptical about the boycott's chances for success. Nevertheless, the formation of the MIA brought the preachers into the forefront and there they remained for the duration. The appearance of black church leadership in movements against segregation reflected a shift in black attitudes rather than a bold initiative by black preachers.[24]

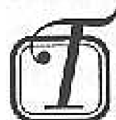
Granted, from the beginning, it may not have been ministers or church groups at the helm of the movement, but without their sustenance early on, the civil rights movement as it is now known, would have fizzled to nothing. Without the church instilling motivation, providing leadership, and a usable meeting space, fewer individuals would have been reached, and the movement would have been severely hampered. It is possible that the African-Americans' ultimate goal of whole freedom would have been reached. The African-American church in the South played such a role in the civil rights movement, that had it not been for the manpower it provided or its support financially and spiritually, the movement would have been changed immensely-for the worse. Many citizens of the South who would have otherwise allowed the "white machine" to roll right over them, stood strong with the backing of their faith and their friends against the cruelty and injustice in which they were forced to live. They had the courage and the will to change their situation, and the power to do so with the support of their peers and their church.

[23] Fairclough, 17.
[24] Ibid., 14.

The Success of Gender in the Civil Rights Movement: A Study of Jo Ann Robinson, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Anne Moody

Lisa Grierson

Lisa Grierson is a sophomore in history at Eastern Illinois University. In this essay, she analyzes the roles and the importance of personality and ethos in four women during the Civil Rights Movement.

he Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought many people to national attention. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went from a locally known Baptist preacher to a national hero. More tragically, the nation mourned the deaths of young Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and the three workers during Freedom Summer. Although many women participated in the movement, few had national roles; however, no explanation has been given that completely answers why this is so. Some historians have recently argued that the Women's Rights movement was the reason some women attained national attention and others did not. For example, the press did not recognize the women of the early Civil Rights movement because of the secondary role women played in everyday society. Similarly, historians claim women attained more attention because the Women's Liberation Movement had set the groundwork. This conclusion is not completely true. More accurate is the conclusion of historian Janice Hamlet. She presents ethos and image as the reasons why some women were able to rise into the public spotlight. Ethos is produced through character, intelligence, goodwill, and charisma. It is important to note that in this instance