

“A new, higher order of living”

by Ann Kearns



Ann Kearns.

My first personal encounter with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was at a rally in my hometown. He spoke at a local athletic field known as “Peanut Park.” I was thirteen or fourteen years old at the time and part of a Girl Scout troop which had been assigned to usher for the event. My post was right in front of the lectern, which proved to be a wonderful advantage, because after the presentation I was able to shake Dr. King’s hand. I can’t recall the exact words of the speech, but I do remember being totally electrified and inspired by it ... it was the beginning of many events that have shaped my life and helped me to be the person that I am.

My hometown was a small southern town, racially segregated in almost every area. The “colored community” as we were called then, had its own schools, doctors, neighborhoods, churches, social organizations, movie theaters, and even our own drugstore (owned and operated by my father) complete with a soda fountain. Though we knew there were inequities in jobs, resources, etc., we managed to coexist with minimal trouble “as long as we knew our place,” a phrase and process that was both dehumanizing and demoralizing for those of us of color. The March on Washington gave voice to a new, higher order of living, one which emphasized character over color, equal opportunity over a “caste system,” and a new social order where people of all races were viewed as equals in the sight of God and thusly should be treated as equals in the sight of humankind.

I traveled to the March on Washington in a bus chartered by the youth division of the NAACP. Since I was only sixteen, my first hurdle was getting permission from my parents to take the trip. They, of course, were frightened—especially after seeing on television the terrible violence that was perpetrated on freedom riders. They soon realized it was the things they had taught me that caused my desire ... things like being proud of your heritage and standing up for yourself. The trip was on, and I was on the bus.

It was a hot, sweltering day when we arrived in the nation’s capital—like most summer days in D.C. The dress code was a lot more formal than it would have been today. Men had on shirts and ties, many women had on dresses. This was obviously a special occasion. People were walking around with freedom signs, chanting and singing; some were sitting on blankets on the grass, people of all ages, races, and religions—a sight I seldom saw in my hometown. The crowd of people was tremendous. Looking around, it seemed to be a sea of faces and figures.

Two of my friends and I started moving toward the Lincoln Monument, where the program was to take place. As we moved through the crowd one thing was very evident; there was a politeness, cordiality, and respect unusual in a crowd that size. Many times we heard the sounds of an ambulance because someone had been overcome by the heat. I observed people offering water or other liquids to people who seemed to be having trouble. As the program started, people were willing to share space so that others could see ... small children were hoisted up on the shoulders of adults ... people were polite as speakers spoke and singers sang. It was a long program, but people remained attentive because there was an expectation that this was indeed a “historic moment.”

My friends and I kept inching closer and closer to the front. Surprisingly, when we reached the roped section which was marked “reserved,” there were empty seats on the back row. We slipped under the ropes and sat down, a feat which gave us something to brag about when we got back on the bus.

There were many speeches before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, but I knew we were in for something extraordinary when he stepped up to the podium. Tears still come to my eyes when I hear excerpts—especially the “I Have a Dream” and the “Let Freedom Ring” litanies. Dr. King was indeed a modern-day prophet and brought us an inspired message, one which called for reconciliation between the oppressed and the oppressor, justice for all—both socially and economically—and freedom as a human right, not one earned by the color of your skin. His analogies using famous landmarks around the country gave a vision of unity among diversity.

King said in his speech in Memphis, not long before his assassination, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”

In the fifty years since his death, have we arrived at the Promised Land or have we merely seen glimpses of what it could be? I’ve seen segregation demolished; I have many wonderful friends who are not African American; my children dreamed dreams that I never thought possible; my grandchildren live in a totally multicultural community in Washington, D.C. and their first memory of a president will be Barack Obama, an African American.

I think if Dr. King were alive today, he would still be on his podium preaching against poverty, injustice, and advocating for peace and equality. Our greatest tribute to him would be to continue that fight by envisioning what the Promised Land would look like ... maybe a place without poverty, maybe a place without wars, maybe a place without prejudice, maybe a place where everyone truly has an equal opportunity to succeed. We should continue on with that mission and do what the Lord requires ... seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Elder Ann R. Kearns

Louisville, Ky.

“The crowd would roar and then fall silent”

by Reverend Dean H. Lewis



Dean H. Lewis.

For me as a Presbyterian, the March on Washington was not an isolated event in 1963. The year started with the Interfaith Conference on Religion and Race in Evanston in January; I was one of the Presbyterian representatives and joined with the others to hatch the Presbyterian Interracial Council. That was followed in May by the dramatic action of the 1963 General Assembly that created the Commission on Religion and Race, and in July by the arrest on July Fourth of Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake at a Baltimore Amusement Park. Indeed, 1963 had been a year of constantly increasing Presbyterian momentum.

I was living in Philadelphia and serving as secretary of the Office of Social Education and Evangelism in the Board of Christian Education, plus newly appointed to the staff of the new Commission on Religion and Race. I drove to Washington with my neighbor and friend, Bob Thomas, secretary of the Division of Lay Education. In a decision that seemed silly later, we had thought it best if our wives did not accompany us. There were dark forebodings in the press about the possibility of violence. We arrived in Washington on a beautiful, clear August day, blessedly relieved from the oppressive heat and humidity that can characterize such days in Washington. As we walked from the place we had found to park, we were stunned by the rivers of humanity streaming from every direction toward the Mall. The New York Times reported the next day that the crowd was estimated at 40,000 at 10:00 am. By the time we arrived at 11:00 am, the estimate was 90,000 and before it was over at least 200,000 filled and overflowed the great Mall.

Rather than any undertones of violence, the atmosphere was festive, small groups breaking into song every so often, joined by others, as we moved over to the Washington Monument area for the entertainment. I don’t remember too much about that—only Joan Baez and Pete Seeger. The Times reported that Josephine Baker had come from Paris, but I don’t remember seeing or hearing her. By the time that had been announced to begin the official “march” to the Lincoln Memorial, the crowd was enormous, sprawling all over the place, and still becoming larger and larger as people kept streaming in from buses and cars.

We all just started moving toward the Lincoln Memorial in a great surge and the “leaders” who were to lead us were lost somewhere in the throng! I think it was Bobby Kennedy who was said to remark later what a blessing it was that the American people really didn’t know how to march! We were all just walking along, filling the whole street and singing all the way, with signs and placards from everywhere. It was like a great picnic on the federal lawn!

Bob and I worked our way up to the edge of the paved area around the memorial but were still separated from the platform that had been erected by a large crowd, many with children on their shoulders. Despairing, I decided to pull a “Zacchaeus” and climbed one of the trees high enough to have a great view. There were, of course, a lot of speeches—there were eight or ten “sponsors” or “organizers,” including some of the giants of the movement, Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph. I don’t remember a word of what any of them said!

I do remember two of the speakers. Our own Eugene Carson Blake, the National Council of Churches representative, was both hopeful and candid on behalf of the churches of the U.S.: “Late we come” are the words that still run electric in my memory. I felt quite consciously proud that this remarkable man had backed his commitment and that of our denomination by his personal witness in Baltimore. He had earned his place on the platform with Martin!

As Martin Luther King, Jr. came to the microphone and looked over the vast sea of black, white, brown, and red humanity stretching the extent of America’s national promenade, the buzz that had accompanied other speakers suddenly ceased and a great, almost palpable hush came over the crowd. I had heard him first at the Pittsburgh General Assembly in 1958 that inaugurated the United Presbyterian Church, later at fundraising events at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, and at the Evanston Interfaith Conference earlier that year. I had some sense of what to expect, but a combination of that familiar, black-preacher cadence and the historic significance of the awesome occasion quite overwhelmed me. I swear I can still hear that rising symphony of “I Have a Dream” as the crowd would roar and then fall silent each time. And I confess that I still choke up as I remember the soaring peroration under the brooding presence of the Great Emancipator: “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last,” and his quick stride away from the microphone as the congregation (for that is what he had formed us into) erupted in unrestrained celebration.

I could not know then that I would hear Dr. King in a far smaller and more somber setting scarcely two weeks later. On September 15, 1963, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed during the Sunday School hour and four young girls were killed. I flew to Birmingham that afternoon to represent the Board of Christian Education and remained through the funeral service later that week, where Dr. King was an eloquent pastor to an entirely different congregation, one deeply sorrowing rather than gloriously celebrating. We were reminded again of the ugly reality that lay between us and the dream.

Several shards of stained glass that I picked up in the street outside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church after the bombing are among my most cherished mementos of forty years in ministry.

Rev. Dean H. Lewis

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“Restlessness for racial justice”

by Reverend Jack E. McClendon



Jack E. McClendon.

I was invited by the editor of the *Journal of Presbyterian History* to offer some reflections on the March on Washington in 1963. In retrospect, the mass of people who gathered at the Lincoln Monument was indeed huge, one of the largest crowds in the history of marches on Washington. Why did people come out that day? I believe our nation was saying there must be a change in the ways African Americans have been treated. By their presence they were declaring their restlessness for racial justice. They came from small towns and cities, sensitized to the plight of their fellow citizens. They had been engaged in their areas in programs, activities, protests, and advocacy. On that occasion they were prepared to respond to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream speech, an oration that is now celebrated along with the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln’s second inaugural address. Along with many others, they were

engaged in interracial ministries, saying we want a new day.

The church where I was associate minister, the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., had been engaged in interracial ministries, after-school activities for inner city youth, a ministry to the homeless, and advocating for affordable housing and jobs. In those early years we did not have an elected mayor

or city council to advocate for these ministries. However, numerous churches in the city and across the nation were involved in ministries for African Americans and advocacy for change.

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church played a very active role on that hot, humid August day. The church was a welcoming center, providing rest and refreshments, and worship. Hundreds passed through the church, and together people of all faith persuasions marched to the Lincoln Monument, a renowned location that had hosted Marian Anderson when she was not allowed to perform at Constitution Hall.

In locations across the country many had participated in sit-ins at restaurants, freedom rides, and had joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the movement for voting rights in the South. I am further convinced that the outpouring of people that August day contributed to the voting rights legislation introduced by President Lyndon Johnson and ratified by the Congress in 1965. In many ways, Selma in April 1965 was a reunion of those who had been in D.C. in August of 1963. We remember that historic day and celebrate the masses of people who were sensitive to the second class citizenship of African Americans.

The March on Washington in 1963 for jobs and freedom was indeed, to use the Greek word for such a time, a *kairos* moment—a sacred, fulfilled time; an event that will be recorded in American history as one of the pivotal times when African Americans as well as white people began to comprehend what emancipation could mean in our nation.

Rev. Jack E. McClendon, PhD.*

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**Rev. McClendon passed away in January 2010.*

“The approaching of another Emancipation Day”

by Reverend J. Oscar McCloud



J. Oscar McCloud.

Recently I visited my brother and sisters in my hometown of Waynesboro, Georgia. My sisters and brother do not own computers. They live in a world that is somewhat less complicated than mine. As a person who is used to touching base with the world via email every day, I found it difficult to resist the temptation to find someone, anyone with a computer. My brother suggested I go to the local library and use its computers. As I sat at a computer in the local library, I reflected back to my teenage years when I attended public school in Waynesboro. The public library in Waynesboro was a foreign place to me. Now, here I am at age seventy-three, using the public library in my hometown for the first time—a facility that I was excluded from using when I was a youth.

Nineteen sixty-three was the beginning of historic changes throughout the country and especially the South. This was the year that African Americans, accompanied by many Hispanic and white friends, stood up and said to the nation and the world, “We shall overcome!”

This was not my first march to Washington. When I was a seminarian in New York City in 1959, A. Philip Randolph organized a march for jobs and desegregated schools. I escorted a church youth group to Washington to that march. However, that was primarily a Northeastern effort and did not generate a great turnout, nor a lot of enthusiasm throughout the nation.

The 1963 March on Washington was the culmination of months of planning in communities throughout the country. I was a pastor in a small United Presbyterian congregation in Raleigh, North Carolina. Although the student sit-ins that began in Greensboro, North Carolina had galvanized students, especially in the South, the sit-in movement remained very much a Southern endeavor. The March on Washington gave the students a larger agenda.

Organizing for the march required money to pay for the buses that would transport the marchers to Washington. College students lacked the money to charter buses, and this is where local organizations, black churches, and older adults came into play. Various fundraising efforts were undertaken for what many, especially African Americans, felt was the approaching of another emancipation day just one hundred years after the first.

I shared the excitement, as did many others in my community. Although my wife was expecting our first child in November, she suppressed her anxiety about the potential violence that might occur during the march and encouraged me to participate. I do not recall how many members of my congregation went to Washington for the 1963 march, but I know our church supported the effort financially.

I shall always remember the excitement of the five- or six-hour bus ride to Washington. Strangers, black and white, had boarded the buses, yes, with some anxiety—but sharing a common hope. But nothing compared to the feeling one had upon arrival at the Lincoln Memorial and seeing the thousands of people pouring onto the ground from thousands of buses. It was biblical in proportion, in that people came from East and West, North and South, across the Atlantic and the Pacific to witness to the conviction that justice and freedom were the rights of all people. There were people of all races, religions, and nationalities. They were saying by their presence “down with segregation and discrimination.”

August 28, 1963 was a typical summer day in Washington: hot and humid—but the temperature did not dampen the spirit of the people. They had traveled from near and far, and now they eagerly awaited the words from the leaders of the civil rights movement. And the people were not disappointed.

Eugene Carson Blake’s message, speaking for the National Council of Churches and its member churches, Protestant and Orthodox, could be summed up in these words, “late we come, but we have come.” However, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who lifted the crowd’s hope and faith with his message titled “I Have A Dream.” The voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed across that mass of people at the Lincoln Memorial to every corner of the United States and to oppressed people throughout the world. The message was that one day justice, freedom, and peace would triumph over injustice, oppression, and war.

Thousands of people left Washington as the sun set on that day with renewed hope that though the struggle ahead would be hard, that right would triumph over wrong and good over evil.

Did the United States and the world suddenly change that day because of the March on Washington? No, but a new spirit was ignited and there would be no turning back.

My own ministry took on a renewed emphasis for racial and economic justice as legitimate elements of Christian witness in the world. There were men and women whose lives were changed by their experience during the 1963 March on Washington.

There is little doubt that what happened in the United States Congress in passing a Civil Rights Act and a Voting Rights Bill in years immediately following was a direct result of the March on Washington. Because of these two historic pieces of legislation, my late mother voted for the first time in 1965 at the age of sixty-three, and I could use the public library in Waynesboro, Georgia in 2009.

Rev. J. Oscar McCloud

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“I had to stand with the hope-filled people”

by Reverend Eugene Turner



Eugene Turner.

When I left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 23, 1963 to attend the historic March on Washington, my heart was full of hope that freedom for African Americans would come. I lived from my early years in Macon, Georgia, trusting that the races of the U.S.A. could live in peace, respecting each other—something never accorded to me as a young African American. The white society in which I grew up demeaned African Americans. A commitment to struggle for justice for all never escaped me.

This commitment was present as I prepared to attend the 1963 March on Washington. I became engaged to be married to my bride-to-be five months prior. She almost persuaded me not to attend the march. The press was full of projections of dangers that could occur, forecasting fights in the streets and on the Washington Mall. Neither my love for her nor hers for me was going to

stop me from attending the march. It was more than the physical act of marching. I had to stand with the hope-filled people who went to the march. Nothing was going to prevent me from marching in Washington on August twenty-third!

As did many others, I boarded an overcrowded Greyhound bus in Philadelphia en route to Washington. Making no stops, we reached Washington, unloading several blocks from the Washington Mall, where throngs of marchers were already in the area. The walk from the unloading bus to the Mall was thirty minutes, though the distance was not far. I joined the marchers as I made my way to the Mall. I looked for recognizable faces—none I saw, though I was astonished by the number of white marchers among the throngs. Some were stone-faced, others were waving banners and showing excitement. The marchers came from all directions, filling all of the ground space of the Mall, spilling over into the nearby streets. There was no evidence of violence or dissension exhibited.

Initially, I felt alone among the hundreds of thousands. This feeling did not last long. The marchers were most friendly toward each other. We danced and sang to the tunes coming from the Lincoln Memorial stage. Many famous artists contributed gifts of music, including the likes of Mahalia Jackson; Pete Seeger; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and several others whose names I don't recall.

I was a young, ordained minister in the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of this church, had made an impression on me during the civil rights struggle. When he came to the stage and to the microphone to speak, it warmed my heart. I remember his opening lines: "Though we have come late, we have come." This phrase was referring to the latecomers to the Civil Rights Movement. The statement was not an apology. It was declaration of a commitment and an affirmation of the rightness of the call for justice for African Americans in the nation and in the society. At the time, there was uncertainty about whether the Civil Rights Bill would pass in Congress. President Kennedy made a weak promise that he would sign the bill but he was not aggressively leading toward its passage. Gene Blake was a strong voice in the nation and among the mainline churches, a group having much more political leverage then than now.

My feelings were varied during the several hours of the march. I remember the festival-like setting. It was fun and serious simultaneously. Since there was little ground space available, some folks sat on the banks of the wading pond of the Mall, some literally climbed trees to get a view of the happenings during the march. It was a sweltering day, often found in Washington during the summer. The twenty-third of August was no exception. So, I sought the shade of a tree at one point.

While a hopeful feeling was present, there was too, a sense of its conflict with reality. We, and certainly I, knew that blacks were not full citizens in all of the southern states of the U.S., and only quasi-citizens in the northern states. The march was hopeful and promising, for claiming our constitutional rights as natural-born citizens of the nation. And we knew the mountain obstructing civil justice for African Americans was high, and that climbing ropes to reach the top were few. This reality did not suppress the hopeful atmosphere of the march.

There were many speeches. Fortunately the planners of the march established time limits for all speakers. The most anticipated speech was that of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One of my standing neighbors commented to me, "What will Martin say to top the many good speeches already delivered?" I wondered the same. When Martin came to the stage, he was the star. There were shouts of joy to see him. His speech took all by surprise. It was a totally different speech, connecting the geography of the nation to the relationships of the people of the nation. His speech was interrupted by the audience many times to give approval to his words. At this point, the festival nature of the march changed to serious contemplations of our fight for civil justice. Everyone was touched emotionally by Martin's speech. My eyes were full of tears, along with those of thousands of other marchers.

I saw no groups of people leaving the Mall until the march was over; in fact, there were thousands of people on the Mall hours after the official march ended.

I went to the waiting location of my Greyhound bus back to Philadelphia. En route, the driver hit the back of an automobile, causing minor injury to some on the bus, but I escaped harm. Arriving in Philadelphia, I went straight to my fiancée, filled with excitement and hope. She had been following the march on radio and television. The news gave a slanted report on the march, missing its

significance. It took weeks for the truth to come out to the public, and depending on how one views the march, one could say it took years to understand its impact on the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

Rev. Eugene Turner, B.A, MDV, D.D.

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“Custodians of the gospel of liberation”

by Reverend Gayraud S. Wilmore



Gayraud S. Wilmore.

Recollection After Forty-Seven Years

The day before the March on Washington I learned that Bryant George, my National Missions colleague on the staff of the Board of National Missions at the Interchurch Center in New York City, had arranged to escort Eugene Carson Blake, John Coventry Smith, William Morrison, and Kenneth Neigh¹ to the Lincoln Memorial to hear Dr. King’s greatly anticipated speech. Dr. Blake was also scheduled to make remarks as a representative of the National Council of Churches. Since I lived in Princeton at the time I decided that it would be easier for me to rendezvous with them in Washington rather than travel up to 475 Riverside Drive and from there back downtown to Pennsylvania Station in order

to catch a train crowded with jubilant New York marchers.

It was one of the most ill-advised decisions of my mildly irritating career as an uncharacteristic and sometimes radical Presbyterian minister. It’s a wonder I wasn’t fired, for as it happened I never caught up with Dr. George and his elite delegation but spent my time wandering around the Lincoln Memorial alone, critiquing to myself the boring and repetitive speechifying. I guess at the same time Bryant and the others were looking for me—the head of their new race relations program—until they became totally mesmerized by the extravagant rhetoric of the numerous speakers leading up to King’s climactic “I Have a Dream.”

Dr. Blake’s remarks were at the beginning of the program, an enviable position for a white cleric so unfamiliar to tens of thousands in the massive audience—and to most of the twelve or thirteen speakers who followed him. His message essentially was apologetic. He acknowledged that the churches had come late to the movement for civil rights, but that they were present at the march and, however belated, were now remorsefully accepting their share of the struggle.

We Presbyterians were thrilled to have our most prominent minister pledge the unflagging partnership of the Christian churches of America with Dr. King’s great campaign for jobs and freedom, but I couldn’t help feeling, as I stood on tip toes in that teeming mass of humanity, that Blake had missed a golden opportunity to set the record straight. He should have said that the white churches were making a belated appearance, but that the black churches of America began the struggle for black liberation in the eighteenth century! That throughout the cruel and weary years they had never forsaken the cause! Petitions and agitation for basic justice and civil rights have always been the signature of African-American Christians, ever since Richard Allen and Absalom Jones created the first independent black congregations in Philadelphia and laid the foundation for the bully pulpit upon which King, Abernathy, and thousands of other black preachers mounted in the years since.

This is not a rejection of Dr. Blake’s historic remark, nor an invidious comparison of churches calculated to create ill will and resentment, but an observation from an event on August 28, 1963 that begs to take advantage of a teachable moment in American church history. I believe that the special meaning of the black churches in America is that God created and conserved them to be custodians of the Gospel of Liberation, so that the main body of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in this nation could never forget “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed,” John 8:36. That enduring message has been, by the grace of God, our greatest gift to this nation.

Today the black denominations and most black congregations within the predominantly white denominations are in danger of withdrawing from that prophetic vocation that Dr. King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Conference of Black Christians (NCBC), represented in the 1950s and '60s. With Barack Obama in the White House many of us tend to believe that role of the African-American sector of the Church Universal in the United States is no longer needed. It is said that we have, to all intents and purposes, entered a post-racist society. The black church has all but been reduced to soul-saving mega stations in new suburbias, with Bible-thumping, handkerchief-waving preachers and swinging gospel choirs competing with one another for the biggest offering and the largest crowd. What a charade of the churches of Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955! What a caricature of the congregations and mosques of black Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Harlem, and Brooklyn, N.Y. during the long, hot summers of the 1960s!

I returned to 475 Riverside Drive the day after the March on Washington with the intention of speaking to my friend, Gene Blake, about the lacunae in his Lincoln Memorial speech. Instead I failed to speak out, just as our churches are failing to speak and act today. Perhaps we both, black and white alike, need to recall, after all these years, what was missing in Gene's speech and resolve to take up once again the banner of radical prophesy and liberating social action that we once bore faithfully in an earlier time now almost forgotten.

Rev. Gayraud S. Wilmore

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Notes

¹ Blake was Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A; Smith, the Executive Secretary of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations; Morrison, the same for the Board of Christian Education (BCE); and Neigh, the same for the Board of

National Missions. The BCE was headquartered in Philadelphia. All the others had offices in the Interchurch Center where I began work in the summer of 1963 as Executive Director of the Commission on Religion and Race, UPCUSA.