

Historic Decision 25 Years Old

The 25th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against racially segregated public schools offers opportunity for soul-searching within America's churches.

Virtually all American churches have endorsed as public policy and pledged themselves to embody the principle of integration set forth on May 17, 1954 in the cluster of cases known as "Brown v. Board of Education." Today, how are the churches doing as champions and models of a racially-inclusive society?

The picture is mixed, depending in part on historical and geographical factors, and depending on who makes the assessment.

Reflecting the sentiments of many black religious leaders, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, president of Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), finds racism a still virulent disease in both society and in organized religion. "The church is still the most segregated institution in American life," he says.

Church officials and other religious leaders who are white have a generally more positive view of "progress" in race relations over the past quarter-century. In fact, most white Americans see less racial discrimination today than do blacks, according to an extensive survey conducted recently by Louis Harris for the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

The Harris survey indicated, however, that large percentages of both blacks and whites perceive the predominantly white churches as indifferent to black aspirations for full equality. White Protestant denominations were seen as more indifferent than either the Roman Catholic Church or Jewish groups.

This Harris finding, open to challenge as is any poll, contrasts sharply with the oft-heard claim that organized religion is the major promoter and embodiment of the modern civil rights movement. It is more in line with the assessment of Thelma Stevens, a retired national social action official of United Methodist Women, who fought many battles for integration before and after 1954.

"With rare exceptions, the churches have followed the government and other segments of society instead of setting the tone on racial issues," says Miss Stevens.

U.S. society was moving toward a policy of racial integration before "Brown v. Board of Education," and was helped along by religiously-motivated individuals and by a few denominations, primarily black or historically liberal white Churches of the Northeast. Some ecumenical organizations, such as United Church Women (now Church Women United) and the Federal (now National) Council of Churches, took pro-integration stands.

By and large, the nation's predominantly white Churches did not actively support the cause of integration until after May 17, 1954, when the Court overturned legal segregation statutes in 21 states and the District of Columbia. In the areas affected, churches may have questioned the justice of the segregation but they did so quietly, and almost all churches throughout the land practiced de facto segregation.

Once the high court spoke -- pointing the direction toward a new social policy -- the Churches endorsed integration fairly quickly, and with considerable fanfare. Those endorsements came not only from denominations expected to make liberal statements on public issues, but also from the more conservative Churches. The Southern Baptist Convention found "Brown v. Board of Education" to be "in harmony with the constitutional guarantees of equal freedom to all citizens, and with the Christian principle of equal justice and love for all men."

Endorsement came from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups. The Synagogue Council of America, representing the three major branches of American Judaism, responded with "deep satisfaction." The predominantly Protestant National Council of Churches called the decision "a milestone in the achievement of human rights," and the Catholic Interracial Council hailed the Supreme Court for taking "a logical step in the expansion and perfection of American democracy." In 1958, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops formally put its stamp of approval on full integration in a major policy statement.



The sincerity of the churches in the civil rights movement that unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s is not to be doubted. Organized religion provided many of the national and local heroes and heroines who struggled, and occasionally lost their lives, in the name of racial justice.

In Little Rock and Montgomery, in Selma and Memphis, in Chicago and Spartanburg, S.C., and more recently, in Boston and Louisville, the churches have served as the conscience of the nation in the drive toward Dr. Martin Luther King's dream: the dream of black, white, brown, yellow and red Americans living together in peace and harmony.

The record of the churches in supporting integration is all the more impressive in light of the internal conflict caused when national assemblies, or groups of bishops, or local pastors backed the Supreme Court. Many backed the Supreme Court. Many parishes, some whole denominations, experienced years of internal turmoil. Conflicts were often ignited by avowedly segregationist clergy and laity taking advantage of a perhaps natural human inclination to protect the status quo.

As much as any cluster of institutions in the U.S., the churches have successfully argued the case for integrated public schools, for the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, and for economic justice for racial minorities. With this record in mind, United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young, a former aide to Dr. King, said last year, "Nothing happens in the United States of America until the churches have responded."

Part of the churches' response to "Brown v. Board of Education," and a cause of much internal conflict, were efforts to make backyard applications of the principle contained in the Court decision. It was a matter of logic: If Churches were to encourage public acceptance of integration, they had to overcome their own segregation.

Sometimes in conjunction with endorsements of the 1954 ruling, sometimes later, the bulk of the predominantly-white U.S. churches came to pledge themselves to full, even aggressive, racial inclusiveness -- in membership, leadership and programs on all their levels.

Within the Catholic Church, support of integration has had special significance for parochial schools. While Catholic schools in St. Louis and Washington, D.C., were integrated before the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, most diocesan systems in areas where "Jim Crow" laws prevailed did not desegregate until after "Brown v. Board of Education." Most did it without the turbulence experienced in Louisiana.

Parochial schools, especially in cities, are increasingly aware of their opportunity to provide quality, integrated education to white and black students, according to Dr. Edward Gafney of the Notre Dame Law School.

True to their word, the Churches, Protestant and Catholic, have reorganized, internal attitudes and structures to assure greater voice to black members, to

allow minority persons to rise in the ranks, and to offer more services to poor blacks. Yet, not one of the Churches predominantly white in 1954 has added a significant percentage of black members over the past 25 years, and some have lost black members.

One reason for the relatively poor showing on church integration is historical: The vast majority of black Christians in the nation belong to black denominations, typically Baptist or Methodist. This is a particularly important factor in assessing the Catholic record on integration.

Numerically, the U.S. Roman Catholic Church has actually done much better over the last quarter-century in integrating its membership than have the white-founded Protestant denominations. In 1954, the black Catholic population was estimated at 457,996, out of a total Catholic population of some 31.5 million. Today the 50 million American Catholics include one million blacks, or an increase of approximately a half-percent since 1954.

By comparison, the United Methodist Church, the racially mixed Protestant denomination with the largest black constituency, lost 20,000 black members in the decade between 1967 and 1977, and today counts 353,000 blacks among its 9.5 million members.

Black preference for their own black-founded, black-run Churches is understandable. Denominations such as the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., or the African Methodist Episcopal Church provide visible, historic centers of Christian worship, fellowship, and social influence.

"We can't expect blacks to abandon their own churches," says Dr. Foy Valentine, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, who nevertheless reports that black participation and membership in predominantly white congregations of his denomination is on the rise.

The Black Churches are for many black Christians proven bases of social power, group identity, and visibility in a time when absorption into integrated, white-founded Churches could represent a new form of white domination. It was the fear of such absorption that injected the "black power" movement into the Churches in the late 1960s.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both black and white social activists were anxious to desegregate all ecclesiastical structures and institutions. For example, the white denominations with black minorities were embarrassed by the existence of colleges and other institutions serving all-black clientele. Was that not wrong? Yes, they reasoned, and proceeded toward integration which usually meant the transfer of black students or black programs into formerly all-white settings.

Blacks soon discovered it was not always advantageous to abolish all-black institutions. Abolition or merger into white structures, could mean a loss of black bases of power, as, for example, some blacks contend was the result of the well-intended abolition of the Methodist Church's Central Jurisdiction.