In 1946, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) approved the concept of a “non-segregated church in a non-segregated society,” well before the Supreme Court overturned state segregation laws in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954. After the Brown ruling, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) became the first church body to officially endorse the Court’s decision when it ratified a statement affirming that “enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics.” In the aftermath of these moral and legal resolutions, both denominations established commissions, organizations, and special projects to address racial issues. Presbyteries, congregations, and individual Presbyterians found themselves divided on civil rights issues and the church’s role in the Civil Rights Movement.
After the 1954 PCUS General Assembly endorsed the Supreme Court’s decision, many Southern congregations spoke out vehemently against the GA’s action. The session of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, made their disapproval known by publishing an address by Reverend Guy T. Gillespie (1885–1958) of Belhaven College arguing against integration on biblical grounds. (Synod of Arkansas-Oklahoma records, number 134419, box 9)

Crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas

On the morning of September 16, 1958, the leaders of the PCUS Presbytery of Washburn found themselves in the center of the growing conflict between Central High School and the governor of Arkansas, Orval E. Faubus, when, in a press conference, the governor claimed that certain Presbyterian ministers were “left-wingers and Communists.” Faubus made this charge after the presbytery adopted a resolution urging the governor to countermand his anti-integration order instructing Arkansas high schools not to open for the fall term. As Presbyterian congregations and individuals from North and South spoke out in support of the presbytery, an equal number sided with the governor, flooding the presbytery with hate mail and propaganda.

(Synod of Arkansas-Oklahoma records, number 134419, box 9)
154th Tri-Annual Stated Meeting
The Presbytery of Washburn
September 16, 1958

RESOLUTION

To: The Hon. Orval E. Faubus

From: Washburn Presbytery

It has been reported to us that in a press conference this morning the Governor of Arkansas in discussing certain proposals that were being considered by the Presbytery of Washburn, at its 154th Stated Meeting, gave it as his belief that certain of these Presbyterian Ministers have been brain-washed by left-wingers and communists and that some are, in fact, left-wingers and communists.

It is our conviction that, in justice to Presbyterians everywhere, some answer must be given to these insinuations.

We wish first to point out that this meeting, as in every court of the Presbyterian Church, is composed equally of ministers and lay representatives of our constituent churches. Any slur against a Presbytery is therefore an aspersion against the entire Presbyterian membership. We greatly regret that in this hour of crisis, with the educational welfare of thousands of children at stake, the Governor of Arkansas has resorted to name-calling and slander. We indignantly and emphatically reject and deny that any of our Presbyterian leaders are left-wingers or communists or that they have been brain-washed by left-wingers or communists. If the Governor of Arkansas has been correctly quoted, our great Church is due an apology.

In the stand we have taken in this Presbytery on these grave matters we are reflecting the repeatedly affirmed convictions of the General Assembly of our denomination. Our Church has historically stood for the principles of democracy, free education and the right of every individual to express his honest convictions. We believe that these principles derive directly from the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. These principles we propose to maintain and uphold.

Signed,

James A. Mahon Jr.
Moderator

Jae C. Ruffin
Stated Clerk

(Note: this is a true copy of the resolution adopted unanimously at the 154th meeting of Washburn Presbytery at Central Presbyterian Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, September 16, 1958.)
Leaders of the Presbytery of Washburn discuss Governor Faubus' charge that they have been "brainwashed by left-wingers and Communists." Standing, left to right, are Reverend James A. Mahon, Jr., moderator of the Presbytery of Washburn and minister at Second Presbyterian Church, Fort Smith, Arkansas; Dr. T. B. Hay, president of the Arkansas Council of Churches and pastor at Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church; and Charles S. Harley, permanent clerk. (Religious News Service records, RNS PF 22715, photograph by Leila Funston, September 22, 1958)
Civil Rights Protests and Marches

From large-scale protests and marches organized by Presbyterian commissions to smaller, peaceful demonstrations attended by members of presbyteries and congregations—both the PCUS and UPCUSA were active in countless events throughout the Civil Rights Movement.

On July 4, 1963, a day after the “sympathy demonstrations” by New York Presbyterians, the Congress of Racial Equality organized a caravan of around 1,000 people from New York to Cambridge, Maryland for more extensive demonstrations against segregation of public facilities. Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA, Reverend Eugene Carson Blake, was among those who traveled from New York to Maryland to walk with African Americans seeking admission into the segregated Gwynn Oak Amusement Park. Blake was arrested during the demonstration, along with 282 other protestors.


(right) Eugene Carson Blake enters a police van after being arrested. (Religious News Service records, RNS PC 29568, photograph by James E. Curry, 1963)
The Poor People's Campaign was organized in late 1967 by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as the “second phase” of the Civil Rights Movement, focusing on rights for poor people, regardless of race. The first demonstrations began in May 1968, after King was assassinated. On June 19, 1968 members of the PCUS Synod of Virginia were prominent among the 50,000 people who gathered to demonstrate in Washington, D.C. for the Solidarity Day March. Demonstrators are pictured as they leave a prayer service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. (Religious News Service records, RNS P-37321/ NCC 030531b, box 2, photograph by Fred Griffing, 1968)
Nine days before the Solidarity Day March, Reverend Gayraud S. Wilmore, executive director of CORAR (1963–1972), wrote a letter to members of the UPCUSA encouraging participation in the march. (CORAR records, RG 301.9-14-26)
The Commission on Religion and Race

In 1963, on the heels of the national crisis precipitated by the Civil Rights marches in Birmingham, Alabama, the 175th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) mandated the creation of the Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR) as “the focal point for race relations and liaison with interfaith and ecumenical efforts.” The Commission was responsible for the design, coordination, and implementation of a comprehensive race relations strategy for United Presbyterians.

A compilation of recent pronouncements and recommendations of the UPCUSA General Assembly, 1954–1964. (CORAR records, RG 301.9-12-19)

(Photograph by Joseph M. Elkins, ca. 1964, CORAR records, RG 301.9-14-68)
The Commission on Religion and Race of the General Assembly works to purge its own house of the unclean practice of color prejudice—urges all boards, agencies, judicatories and institutions of the Church to change attitudes and practices in this regard. The Commission in DIRECT ACTION . . .

has put men and resources into Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and other communities, north and south, for long delayed civil rights . . .

has requested review of all United Presbyterian investments, bank deposits, purchasing and other business dealings—to eliminate support of discriminatory practices, and support the principle of a NONSEGREGATED SOCIETY . . .

CORAR promotional brochure, *Brotherhood Has a Big Sky*, ca. 1964. (Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Board of Christian Education, Office of Church and Society records, RT 619, box 3, folder: Race Relations)
Under a mandate from the 1964 General Assembly, the PCUS Board of Christian Education’s Division of Christian Action organized the 1965 Christian Action Conference, held in Montreat, North Carolina, on the topic of “The Church and Civil Rights.” BCE Secretary Malcolm P. Calhoun (1908–1989) invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to make the keynote address. The conference provided an opportunity for members of the church to speak with individuals who had been active in the civil rights movement and to evaluate what role the Church should play in the crisis.
November 6, 1964

The Rev. William J. Fogleman
Third and Gaines Streets
Little Rock, Ark.

Dear Bill:

In planning for the Christian Action Conference to be held in Montreat next August, the selection of the Sunday morning preacher on the 22nd must be made. The preacher would be invited both by the Bible Conference, of which Dr. Grier Davis has oversight, and the Conference on Christian Action. I have conferred with Dr. Marshall Dendy about the person who should be invited, and we both feel that it is right and proper to invite Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be the morning preacher. We would appreciate your reaction to extending the invitation to Dr. King.

It is our feeling that the time has come for the voice of Dr. King to be heard by the Conference group at Montreat. He is recognized as a world Christian and leader in the Civil Rights Movement, and, of course, more lately has been named a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Because of the stirrings both within and without the Church, we feel that a group of Presbyterians during the Conference period in Montreat should have the privilege of hearing this man.

It is not likely that Dr. King would be available, but at least we should get the invitation to him as quickly as possible. As far as I know, Dr. King has not been invited to address a group of Presbyterians.

Let me hear from you at your earliest convenience about this matter.

With kindest regards and all good wishes, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Malcolm P. Calhoun

MPC:pc

(CORAR records, RG 301.9)
The Hattiesburg Ministers’ Project

On January 22, 1964, CORAR sent fifty-two clergymen to participate in Freedom Day, a voter registration event in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The volunteer clergymen were met with bitterness and resentment by the community, and nine UPCUSA ministers were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. Not deterred by the arrests, CORAR created the Hattiesburg Ministers’ Project to coordinate clergy participation in picket lines, canvassing, and voter registration drives. The project was largely successful, and in May 1964, it was transferred to the National Council of the Churches of Christ (NCCC) to be incorporated into the Mississippi Summer Project and, later, into the Delta Ministry. Presbyterian minister Robert Lyon Beech (1935–2008) took over as director of the NCCC’s Hattiesburg Ministers’ Project in 1964.

CORAR supplied this voter registration leaflet to Presbyterian ministers for use in church mailings and house-to-house distribution. (CORAR records, RG 301.9-10-12)

Volunteer clergymen in Hattiesburg are shown participating in a preparatory briefing in a local church, at a morning prayer service, and in picket lines. (Religious News Service records, RNS P 31238, photographs by George Bollis, 1964)

Rev. Robert L. Beech at a Head Start center in Hattiesburg. (Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Board of National Ministries photo file, RT 746, box 5, folder: Social Corporate Ministries, photograph by Bruce Hilton, ca. 1964)
Posters in the window of the Hattiesburg offices of the NCCC's Delta Ministry. (Religious News Service records, RNS P 34159, photograph by Bruce Hilton, 1966)

June 10, 1964

Pat Hornaday
CORAR

Dear Pat:

Thanks for your continuing correspondence. I have received the letters about Mrs. Robert E. Newcomb, about Dr. Knowles not coming, and about Dr. Charles Reese. I either have written or will write to all these people.

As Gay Wilmore may have told you, we are really hurting for staff down here. I feel like a chief with 16 Indians. Could you folks in the CORAR office send out a plea for help to Presbyteries and to the alumni of the Project? If your bosses give you an OK on this, I surely would appreciate it.

The reason I feel that it should come from you is that it carries with it the weight of the Commission. We are sending out weekly news reports and the next one will have a similar plea for support. But we need all the prestige we can get. Please lend us yours!

Thanks again for your letters. Keep it up. It was a really refreshing experience to know you briefly. Keep us posted on the rent strike groups and other such interesting projects.

Sincerely,

Bob Beech

(CORAR records, RG 301.9-8-13)
Delta Ministry of Mississippi

In February 1964, Eugene Carson Blake (1906–1985), Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA and chairman of the NCCC’s Commission on Religion and Race, presented a proposal to the NCCC’s General Board for a longterm civil rights project in the Mississippi River Delta. Despite opposition from the leaders of Mississippi’s predominately white churches, including factions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), the Delta Ministry (DM) project was approved and slated to begin in September. Jon L. Regier, Presbyterian minister and executive secretary of the NCCC’s Division of Home Missions, was asked to lead the highly controversial project.

In its first year, the DM attracted over 300 volunteers and staff from various denominations. By 1967, it established itself as the largest civil rights group in the South. DM projects included voter registration, education and job training, locating and building houses, distributing food and supplies, and “desegregation tests” of public facilities and schools.

Delta Ministry brochure, ca. 1967. (Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Board of Christian Education, Office of Church and Society records, RT 619, box 1, folder: Delta Ministry #3)
"A tenant family near Greenville. The Delta Ministry is attempting to help such families understand their rights as citizens, and to provide job training and new housing, in some cases, at ‘Freedom City.’"

(Religious News Service records, RNS P 36444, photograph by Toge Fujihira, 1967. Used by permission, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church.)

Prior to the official start of Delta Ministry programs in September 1964, Robert W. Spike suggested the NCCC’s Commission on Religion and Race hold a summer orientation session for student volunteers needing preparation for service work in Mississippi. Reverend Bruce Hanson, assistant minister at First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C., led the program. Pictured left to right: Robert Moses, director of the Mississippi program for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; Rev. Bruce Hanson; and James Forman, executive secretary of SNCC. (Religious News Service records, RNS P 31179, 1964)
Though the UPCUSA was active in the establishment and support of the Delta Ministry, the predominately Southern PCUS was divided on the issue. It did not officially endorse the project until the 1967 PCUS General Assembly voted 214 to 200 to allocate $25,000 in funding. Pictured in the Presbyterian Survey's analysis of the DM is William Rusk, member of the UPCUSA and volunteer for the education program at Freedom City, a cooperative community for displaced farm workers. (Presbyterian Survey, June 1967, p. 23)