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.” Under the leadership of Gayraud S. Wilmore, the Commission was responsible for the design, coordination, and implementation of a comprehensive race-relations strategy for United Presbyterians.

Left: CORAR promotional brochure, Brotherhood Has a Big Sky, ca. 1964.

Under a mandate from the 1964 General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) Board of Christian Education’s (BCE) 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 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 assume in the crisis.

Above left & center: Christian Action Conference brochure, The Church and Civil Rights, 1965. (cover and excerpt)
In 1964, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s Commission on Religion and Race (CORAR) created the Hattiesburg Minister’s Project to coordinate clergy participation in picket lines, canvassing, and voter registration drives. Above: Ministers participate in a protest in Hattiesburg, Miss. (Religious News Service, photograph by George Bollis, 1964.)


Right: 700 clergymen and members of the UPCUSAs Presbytery of New York march in a peaceful pre-Independence Day demonstration in support of President John F. Kennedy’s pending civil rights legislation. (Religious News Service, photograph by James E. Curry, 1963.)

Left: On June 19, 1968, members of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Synod of Virginia were prominent among the 50,000 people who gathered to demonstrate in Washington, D.C. for the Solidarity Day March. Members are pictured as they leave a prayer service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. (Religious News Service, photograph by Fred Griffing, 1968.)

Left: Nine days before the Solidarity Day March in Washington, Rev. Gayraud S. Wilmore, executive director of CORAR, wrote this letter to members of the UPCUSA encouraging participation in the march.
In February 1964, Eugene Carson Blake (1906-1985), Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and chairman of the NCCC’s Commission on Religion and Race, presented a proposal for a long term civil rights project in the Mississippi River Delta. Led by Presbyterian minister and executive secretary of the NCCC’s Division of Home Missions, Jon L. Regier, the Delta Ministry of Mississippi became the largest civil rights group in the South despite opposition from the leaders of Mississippi’s predominately white churches. Projects were located throughout Mississippi and included voter registration, education and job training, locating and building houses, distributing food and supplies, and “desegregation tests” of public facilities and schools. In 1965, the Delta Ministry played a central role in the organization of the Child Development Group of Mississippi, a statewide Head Start program administered by Mary Holmes Junior College, a Presbyterian school in West Point, Mississippi.

It was chosen for its reputation as a “safe location,” but was not immune from attack. On the night before Good Friday, 1967, four Klansmen were seen positioning an eight-foot cross against the entrance sign and setting it on fire. (Commission on the Delta Ministry, photographs by Nash Basom, 1967.)
Presbyterians and the Civil Rights Movement
The Church and Segregation

In September 1958, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Presbytery of Washburn adopted a resolution urging Arkansas Governor Orval E. Faubus to countermand his anti-integration order instructing Arkansas high schools not to open for the Fall term. Below: An excerpt from the Presbytery's resolution, signed by James A. Mahon and Jac C. Ruffin.

On July 4, 1963, Stated Clerk of the UPCUSA, Rev. Eugene Carson Blake, 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. Above left: Blake is preceded by William Sloane Coffin, chaplain of Yale University, and followed by Roman Catholic Father Joseph Connolly, as the group enters Gwynn Oak to challenge segregation. Above center: Blake enters a police van after being arrested. Above right: David Andrews, assistant chaplain at Morgan State College, is taken into police custody.