

Letters from Abroad

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Rev. and Mrs. Darius L. Swann
Johnson C. Smith University
Charlotte, North Carolina
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Dear Friends:

We are glad of the opportunity to break a long silence. Some of you may not have heard from us since we left India two years ago. It has not, of course, really been a silence, for we have been fully occupied in a very meaningful situation. So complete and immediate has been our engagement that we simply put aside much correspondence which should have been done many months ago.

One of our friends, writing from India, said that he had heard that we were unable to return to India just now as we were engaged in passive resistance to achieve civil rights. While this cannot be said to be true, neither can it be said to be untrue. We have been deeply involved in the civil rights movement in our area. However, what we have been doing here in Charlotte we understand to be participation in the mission of God's people in His world. While this has been a furlough from labors in India, it has been in no way a furlough from the Christian colony's warfare in the world. Our choice to spend this furlough in the South has led us inevitably into involvement in the civil rights revolution. The moral issue, for Christians, is inescapable. We have faced the issue with all the energy and grace which the Lord has given us.

A real problem for us is what attitude to take toward those Christians who cannot or will not see that acquiescence in a system of built-in inequities in education, housing, employment and government representation is a denial of the Lordship of Christ.

Since September, 1964, Lee has been serving on the faculty of the Johnson C. Smith University Theological Seminary. He has been teaching religious drama and missions and producing plays and choral readings on campus and with several churches in the city. Vera worked for a year and a half as secretary in the Religious Education Department of the College of Liberal Arts. Increasingly the job included work with the Student Christian Association and other student organizations. This very congenial and interesting work came to an end in January, 1966, when Dr. A. O. Steele, Head of the Department died suddenly. As Vera had been feeling the need to have more time with the children, this seemed like a logical time to make the break. We have both enjoyed this renewal of association with our Alma Mater in an exciting period of rapid growth and new challenges.

Aside from our responsibilities on campus we have been very much involved in community affairs. These involvements can only be listed briefly; to go beyond that would make this letter too long.

1. During the spring and summer of 1965 we were involved with organizing a SCOPE (Summer Community Organization for Political Education) chapter on campus. Nine of our students and two students from other North Carolina colleges spent their summer in Bertie County in eastern North Carolina, carrying out preparation for voter registration, community organization, summer tutoring, etc. Their experiences included a three-day fast on the courthouse steps at Plymouth, an arrest and trial, and being mobbed and beaten by Ku Klux Klansmen during a march.

2. Vera was elected to serve on the Board of Directors of the Charlotte Bureau of Employment, Training and Placement, an anti-poverty program initiated by local citizens.
3. Lee has put in a good deal of time with the Ad Hoc Committee of Parents and Concerned Citizens who have been especially concerned about the public schools and the attempt on the part of the Charlotte school board to avoid integration wherever possible. Working with other clergymen, especially the United Presbyterian Fellowship (of which Lee is the president) he has been helping to organize the Negro communities throughout Mecklenburg County.
4. Recently, Vera has been serving on a committee of United Church Women which has undertaken to help domestic workers to articulate their demands for better pay, better working conditions, social security benefits, etc.
5. We have been plaintiffs in three suits filed against the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. One case, which involved the Pearsall Plan under which the state could make tuition payments to white students who chose to withdraw from the public schools and attend private schools in order to avoid integration, has already been won. The other two are now before the Fourth District Court of Appeals.

A word ought to be said here about Charlotte. It has a national image of a "progressive" Southern city. The Chamber of Commerce and others who yield power in the city have labored assiduously at cultivating this image. Open restaurants, motels and movie houses are pointed to as signs of that progressiveness, but closer inspection reveals a less pleasing picture. Racial bars in public accommodations were not dropped voluntarily but as the result of aggressive leadership on the part of Negro civil rights workers (before the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act). School desegregation is still in very token form, and urban renewal has made the city more segregated residentially than it has ever been before. A large Negro ghetto in the northwestern section of the city daily grows larger. Also, Charlotte has fewer Negroes in city government and public posts than many another Southern city with a less glowing image.

This bright image was tarnished briefly last November when the homes of four prominent Negro leaders were bombed. A large protest meeting, arranged by the N.A.A.C.P., and at which Roy Wilkins spoke, was cleverly taken over by the representatives of the power structure who insisted that they also wanted to express their outrage and sorrow. This great outpouring (in the glare of national television publicity) restored Charlotte's image, as it was meant to do. When the cameras were turned off, however, the city returned to business as usual. Not a single arrest has been made in spite of a \$10,000 reward subscribed by the public, and only two of the families whose homes were bombed received any of the more than \$6,000 solicited by one of the daily papers for rebuilding the homes.

A matter of concern to us as we witness is the growing distance between the Negro and white communities. It would seem that here, as elsewhere, the great fund of goodwill and forbearance which Negro citizens had for so many years is now running out. We sense that it is almost too late for any "talking over" to do any real good. Nothing short of some bold and dramatic action on the part of the white community can now help. I have in mind something in the nature of a public expression on the part of a group of white Christians of their desire to live in an

integrated community, or their intention to work actively for integrated schools. I say that it has to come from the white community because most Negroes now express their weariness at trying to make overtures and being responded to with fear and flight. The situation, then is potentially dangerous. Unfortunately, the white churches, by and large, cling to the status quo.

This is the situation in which for the past two years we have been called to bear witness to One who loved the world and gave his life for men and women who must live in it. To live in this situation without being overcome by frustration or giving way to bitterness is not easy. Indeed it is impossible except for the grace of God which has been with us and around us as a very real and present gift. We ask your remembrance and active encouragement of Christians who must live in this situation year after year.

There have been other experiences also. For six months in 1964-65 Lee commuted between Charlotte and New York, serving as missionary associate in Jeanne Carruther's office (Fine Arts) while she attended meetings in Asia. The summer of 1965 found us at the Barn Playhouse in Stony Point. Lee served as Chaplain and both of us participated as members of the Company. It was a tremendously full and strenuous summer and one from which we learned a great deal.

This summer finds us at Stony Point again. Vera is attending summer school at Teachers College, Columbia University, working toward a masters degree in religion and education. Lee is getting started on a play which he has been commissioned to write.

The children are growing and learning well. Jamie is now eight and tall. He is as active as ever and likes any kind of ball. He also enjoys reading and drawing and is quite good at both. All of his drawings MOVE! Edith has just turned seven and is proud that she can also read and write. She continues to be very sweet and affectionate. At present she is spending a few days in New York City with her cousins and Jamie is having his first experience of summer camp. He is spending three weeks in a camp near Albany. We are eagerly awaiting his first letter. They are wonderful children and a constant course of joy and amazement.

We have had many occasions during the past two years to remember you and to thank God for your friendship and fellowship. They have been to us a continual blessing.

Faithfully yours,

Lee, Vera, Jamie and Edith