

The Evangelical Covenant Church's Response to the Civil Rights Movement, 1963–1968

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In the shadow of World War II, the Covenant Church took an official stance against racial discrimination. The Annual Meeting of 1944 adopted a resolution that reads in part: “We believe that all men are of one blood, and that all discrimination, based upon race, creed or nationality, is not in keeping with the Christian profession and life, and further, that it fosters conflict and war.”¹ The 1946 Annual Meeting minutes explicitly linked the racial ideology of Nazism and racial discrimination in the United States: “The Nazis built their house of fury on a foundation of racial superiority, with its implicate of racial hatred. The Nazis are out of power but Nazism is far from dead.”² Between 1946 and 1968, with only six exceptions, every Annual Meeting issued a resolution affirming the equal dignity of all people and rejecting racial discrimination.³

Held in Minneapolis, the 1950 Annual Meeting passed a resolution on “race relations,” that stated: “We reiterate our unequivocal stand for Christian practices in race relations,” and, “We renew our efforts to bring our practices into line with our beliefs.”⁴ In this article I examine whether denominational resolutions on racial relations were in fact

1. *Covenant Yearbook* 1944, 133.

2. *Covenant Yearbook* 1946, 165.

3. 1947, 1955, 1956, 1960, 1961, and 1967. David Nystrom, “The Covenant Commission on Christian Action,” *Covenant Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1987): 25.

4. *Covenant Yearbook* 1950, 202.

increasingly followed by action during the civil rights era. Focusing on the years 1963–1968, my study begins by considering broad denominational engagement through attention to the work of the Christian Citizenship Committee and to Covenant publications. Two congregational case studies follow. After briefer attention to Community Covenant Church of Minneapolis, I consider North Park Covenant Church of Chicago as an in-depth case study, enabled by extensive archival records housed at the Covenant Archives and Historical Library. Initially discouraged by the minimal involvement among Covenant congregations, the more I researched the more I appreciated the remarkable courage required to fight prejudice in a racially hostile society. My research bears witness to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in the church and denominational leaders that defied the status quo and proclaimed through their actions the presence of the kingdom of God on earth.

Christian Citizenship Commission

Annual Meeting resolutions did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but were brought by a commission that sought to resource local congregations and guide them in action. In 1944 the Covenant Church established the Committee on Civic Relations to mold a Christian mindset toward various matters of civility. The name was changed in 1948 to Christian Citizenship Commission (and in 1968 to the Commission on Christian Action).⁵ The Christian Citizenship Commission would study and offer its opinion on suffrage, civil rights, international wars, political affairs, social ethics, and other important civic issues. The denominational commission encouraged the formation of congregational commissions and provided them with resources and recommendations. This commission also sought to connect with the civil work of other churches and denominations, representing the Covenant Church in ecumenical conferences (for example, those organized by Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and the United Evangelicals) and reporting back to the Covenant in publications.⁶

The practical action of the commission primarily took place through congregational commissions established at their request and under their direction. At its inception, the commission recommended the establishment of a “committee on civic relations” in every Covenant church,

5. For an overview of this Commission, see Nystrom, “The Covenant Commission on Christian Action,” 5–35. See pp. 25–29 for Nystrom’s discussion on race relations.

6. *Covenant Yearbook 1948*, 178.

sending letters to each congregation with this request in November 1947. As the 1948 report stated, "Commission members quickly realized that no program of information or action could be implemented unless there were local committees,"⁷ reporting that sixty churches had formed such a committee. The basic task of these local committees was twofold: (1) to educate their congregation about moral issues facing nation and community, and (2) to guide them in an appropriate response. The denominational commission pursued the same program of education and action on behalf of the local commissions.

Education. A significant component of the commission's work was creating and compiling resources for Covenant congregations. This included writing a general manual on Christian citizenship as well as identifying existing resources on specific issues. The 1961 Annual Meeting approved the commission's proposal that race be adopted as the "issue of the year," launching a year of "denomination-wide study of Christianity and racial relations."⁸ In support of this, the commission compiled extensive resources and mailed these to each congregation:

To challenge Covenanters to better align their practices with their beliefs, the commission prepared and sent to all Covenant churches a discussion guide which defined the problem, presented perspectives from the Bible, the churches, and government, and suggested local areas in which these guidelines appeared relevant. Also included in the mailing were several studies by other Protestant denominations and a comprehensive bibliography on the issue.⁹

Prior to the Sunday dedicated to Christian citizenship in October 1966, the commission published an insert in the *Covenant Companion* with suggestions for the practical implementation of each of the 1966 resolutions. One of the 1966 resolutions "vigorously reaffirmed"¹⁰ resolutions on race relations from 1962, 1963, and 1965, again charging Covenanters with pursuing racial justice.

Action. In David Nystrom's assessment, Covenant resolutions on "race relations" show "development not only toward action, but also toward solidarity with oppressed groups, as well as a keen understanding

7. *Covenant Yearbook* 1948, 92.

8. *Covenant Yearbook* 1962, 228.

9. *Covenant Yearbook* 1962, 163.

10. *Covenant Yearbook* 1966, 196; full report 194–98.

of the complexity of modern social problems.”¹¹ During these years we find increasingly specific calls to action, focused on actively pursuing integration in all arenas, with an emphasis on housing discrimination. The 1962 Annual Meeting not only “reaffirm[ed] its previous forthright stands against racial prejudice in every form,” but also resolved *specific practical action*, “that the following practical implications of this position be implemented.”¹² The recommended actions included advocacy for voting rights, equal education, and the integration of public facilities. The 1963 resolution, “Race Relations in Neighborhood and Church,” not only asserted characteristically that “racial discrimination in any form is an insult to God and an offense to human dignity,” but also identified housing discrimination as the root of other forms of inequality: “The continued condition of segregated housing produces segregation of schools, churches, and community enterprises.”¹³ The resolutions that follow include advocating for implementation of fair housing legislation and a call to Covenanters to “join with other churchmen in those states and municipalities in which fair housing legislation has not yet been enacted to accomplish such legislation.”¹⁴ Even more directly, the 1965 resolution, “Concern for Racial Justice,” calls Covenant churches and individuals to “repent of the sin of racial discrimination” and to “*assum[e] the initiative* in integrating both our urban and rural congregations and their staffs, the faculties and student bodies of our schools, and the employees and residents of our institutions.”¹⁵ We will see below how local Covenant congregations responded to these calls to action.

Where Is It Written? Covenant Publications

The Evangelical Covenant Church is known for its commitment to publications and increasing the knowledge and awareness of its constituents by the written word. Thus, many of the denomination’s publications used the power of the written word to educate readers about the unrighteousness of racial disparities. The commission itself used publications to communicate with the larger Covenant its purpose (and initially extensive justification for it¹⁶), advocacy for congregational action, and resources

11. Nystrom, “The Covenant Commission on Christian Action,” 25.

12. *Covenant Yearbook* 1962, 247.

13. Ibid.

14. *Covenant Yearbook* 1963, 229.

15. *Covenant Yearbook* 1965, 222–23, emphasis added.

16. *Covenant Weekly*, February 20, 1948, 5.

for engaging specific issues, including racial injustices.

In the summer of 1965, Carl G. Lugn, pastor of Evanston Evangelical Covenant Church in Evanston, Illinois,¹⁷ wrote an article for the *Covenant Quarterly* entitled, "Race Relations: A Community Profile and Proposal." Lugn was active on neighborhood committees that were concerned with effective racial integration and the eradication of unfair hiring and housing practices in this near north suburb of Chicago. One of these committees commissioned a study in 1964 to assess the status of racial relations in Evanston.¹⁸ The study found that "the total situation in Evanston might be described as one not of integration or segregation but of accommodation."¹⁹

Lugn follows his summary of the study with several practical suggestions to further effective racial integration of Evanston. He advocates for integration as "of incalculable value."

It is the primary way to stabilize a community. What so often happens is that when a Negro family moves into a neighborhood, in due time the adjoining white families move out. If this trend can be terminated and white and Negro live together, security for both groups will be realized. It is through social contacts that any race situation will improve. Civil contacts are important but often superficial. It is in the give and take of residential socialization that help is found. Otherwise the Negro remains in a ghetto and suffers gross indignities as a person. Through discovering one another as persons, understanding comes.²⁰

Lugn makes a strong argument for his community to end the practice of white flight and blockbusting. These were regular practices of the day when fear of interracial community motivated white families to leave their established communities in droves.

Covenant Youth Today devoted an entire issue to the civil rights movement. The January 1964 issue was titled, "Negros on the March," and its cover featured a picture of civil rights activist Andrew Young walking to

17. Lugn was a member of the Christian Citizenship Commission 1966–1971, serving as its chair 1967–1969.

18. Carl G. Lugn, "Race Relations: A Community Profile and Proposal," *Covenant Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (August 1965): 3–8.

19. *Ibid.*, 6.

20. *Ibid.*, 7.

a church in Birmingham, Alabama. This issue published excerpts from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written while he was incarcerated there after peaceful protests and marches for integration. It also published photographs of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church after it was bombed by white supremacists, resulting in the death of four little girls. The photos include the church's headless Jesus stained-glass window, and a kneeling African American boy praying outside the church. Young's article highlighted the young people's non-violent demonstrations in Alabama, where he helped lead the non-violent movement.²¹ He reported that the young people were arrested, jailed for days at a time, and would go home to rest and return for more demonstrations "with their minds on freedom."²² Young's article depicted the steadfastness of the struggle for freedom. "The non-violent movement is rooted in our Christian heritage. It is based on a faith that the world is a part of God's moral order and that when evil is exposed, there are forces within the world that will seek to root it out."²³

Covenant Youth Today published an article in 1965 written by a North Park Theological Seminary student who encountered African Americans at a hospital in his work as a nurse's aide. In his work there he changed the bedpans of mostly African Americans and worked with and for African American nurses. He was enriched by this experience of becoming intimately acquainted with African Americans and seeing them as individuals as opposed to a class of inferior people. He acknowledged the main difference as skin tone in a time and era when numerous studies were undertaken to attempt to prove that African Americans were intellectually and socially inferior to their white counterparts.²⁴ The same issue of this magazine ran an article entitled, "Race and Culture: A Valid Basis for Segregation?" This article refuted the idea that African Americans were genetically inferior, citing reputable scientific studies to debunk such a view. This article decried the notion that such claims of inferiority justified the nation's segregation and unfair treatment.²⁵

21. Andrew J. Young, "Everybody Wants Freedom," *Covenant Youth Today* 10, no. 1 (January 1964): 2–5.

22. *Ibid.*, 9.

23. *Ibid.*, 4.

24. Everett L. Wilson, "Neither Easy Nor Naive," *Covenant Youth Today* 11, no. 1 (January 1965): 2–3.

25. Claude E. Stipe, "Race and Culture: A Valid Basis for Segregation?," *Covenant Youth Today* 11, no. 1 (January 1965): 4–12.

In order to paint a picture of freedom from a different cultural perspective, the Fourth of July 1965 issue of *Covenant Youth Today* told the story of the African American experience. Phyllis Reynolds Taylor contributed to the issue four fictional but realistic short stories in an article entitled, "Four Vignettes from an American Family Tree." The stories narrate generations of an African American family, beginning in 1791 with the capturing of African natives on the shores of Africa. The stories follow this family from the horrors of being disbanded on American slave auction blocks to a granddaughter enrolling at a newly integrated college in 1964.²⁶

In addition to informing Covenanters on the issue of racial justice, publications served to publicize Covenant involvement in civil rights action. In the April 9, 1965 *Companion*, editor Carl Philip Anderson reported on Covenant participation in the historical voting rights march of 1965 led by Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery. North Park Covenant Church (Chicago) was represented by J. Melburn Soneson, Fredrick Holmgren, Calvin Katter Jr., James Pohl, Elder Lindahl, Earl Dahlstrom, and his son Konrad Dahlstrom. Douglas Park Covenant Church (Chicago) was represented by Vernon Wettersten. Winnetka Covenant Church (Wilmette, Illinois) was represented by John Hanson. Evangelical Covenant Church of Clay Center, Kansas, was represented by James Bowman. The group was instructed in the unorthodox rules of non-violent engagement that included walking with their arms at their side and a strict order to not aid their neighbor if they were assaulted. As the Covenanters sang the freedom songs with their fellow marchers, they reported that many were moved to tears. Some expressed their surprise at the warmth and welcome of the African Americans who did not seem to harbor anger for white southerners in spite of the heinous ways they were being treated. The Covenanters got a taste of this treatment as white protesters of the march spit on marchers and shouted vilifying remarks.²⁷

26. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, "Four Vignettes from an American Family Tree," *Covenant Youth Today* 11, no. 3 (July 4, 1965): 2-7.

27. Carl Philip Anderson, ed., "Covenanters Share in Alabama March," *Covenant Companion* 54, no. 8 (April 9, 1965): 18-19. The 1964 Annual Meeting had passed a resolution on "Direct Involvement in Seeking Racial Justice," affirming "the rightness of orderly and non-violent means of combating injustice toward racial minorities," *Covenant Yearbook* 1964, 233. This affirmation was repeated the following year within a resolution on "concern for racial justice," *Covenant Yearbook* 1965, 223.

Ben Bankson, managing editor for the *Covenant Companion*, reported on the Ninth Quadrennial Convention of Covenant Youth of America in 1966.²⁸ The theme of the conference was “Knowing an Adequate God in Today’s World.” The goal of that year’s event was to convince the 362 youth gathered that they had the power and the responsibility to make a difference in this issue. The program included plays, poems, speakers (even inviting Martin Luther King Jr. to speak, though he declined), panelists, cartoon strips, singing, and discussion time, providing the youth ample opportunity to consider their role in society. The gathered youth unanimously approved a resolution affirming the need for a Christian response to the societal ills of discrimination in employment, unequal educational opportunities, unfair housing practices, and any other practices that denied the humanity and respectability of any person in the sight of God and humanity. The resolution voiced the youths’ support for “any Christian efforts to provide for the equal opportunities of minority groups which our nation’s history has tacitly denied” along with their intentions “to work in whatever way [they could] in the area of equal opportunity, that as a body we support the efforts of Christians throughout the country in this cause.”²⁹ This unanimously accepted resolution endeavored to involve Covenant youth in the struggle for the equal rights of minority populations across the country. The youth additionally raised for the Department of Christian Education \$1,214 in cash with an additional \$6,398 pledged, a sum of over \$54,400 in today’s economy.³⁰ The money was given with the condition that the department create a list of “ways to get involved.”³¹

As recognized by the Covenant Commission on Christian Citizenship, resolutions would be effective only as “interpreted and carried out by the local committees.”³² For this reason I surveyed two congregations located in cities that, historically, have served a prominent role in the denomination: Community Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and North Park Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois.

28. Ben Bankson, “Involvement: Ben Bankson Reports the Covenant Youth Quadrennial,” *Covenant Companion* 55, no. 19 (Sept 23, 1966): 4–6, 24–25.

29. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

30. CPI Inflation Calculator, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

31. *Ibid.*, 5.

32. *Covenant Yearbook* 1962, 163.

Community Covenant Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

In October 1966, the near north side neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota, experienced racially motivated rioting, following a summer of racial tension in the community. Community Covenant Church (CCC) expressed its stance on the racially induced violence by planting a “brotherhood tree.” This multiracial church and neighborhood came together for this momentous occasion that attracted the city’s mayor, Arthur Naftalin, as well as Harry Davis, the local chapter president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The tree was placed in the ground by a twelve-year-old African American boy.³³ The church’s pastor, Arnold Bolin, spoke at the event, stating, “It is highly inappropriate and undesirable that we should see one another in any terms other than human being.”³⁴ He concluded his speech by urging those gathered to “nurture and tend to the growth of brotherhood and goodwill.”³⁵

CCC identified itself as a “multi-racial church . . . not a ‘black church,’ not a ‘white church,’ but a group where skin is no consideration, where all work for a united community.”³⁶ CCC sought to live this out in their congregational life. In June 1966, seven African American children from the CCC congregation spent a week on a farm in Iowa where they were hosted by congregants of Albert City Covenant Church. One purpose of the endeavor was “to provide a basis for better understanding between two completely differently cultures within our society.”³⁷ Many in the town of Albert City had never had a conversation with a person of color prior to these encounters and, according to the article, two times the question, “Can they talk English?” was asked. The same project was adopted by Vista Covenant Church in New Richland, Minnesota. This program was well-received by the rural churches and the inner-city children, encouraging mutual understanding across cultures.³⁸

33. Carl Philip Anderson, ed., “Symbolic Tree Is Planted,” *Covenant Companion* 55, no. 19 (September 23, 1966): 22.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Community Covenant Church, “What Do You Know about Community Covenant Church,” Chicago, IL Covenant Archives and Historical Library (Record Series 8/11/14/56, n.d.).

37. Carl Philip Anderson, ed., “City Youth Visit Country: Cooperative Venture Is Met with Enthusiasm,” *Covenant Companion* 55, no. 15 (July 29, 1966): 14–15.

38. Ibid.

In the initial days of its ministry, CCC served mostly children through its Sunday school and afterschool programming. On one occasion, the junior-high students had a discussion about the civil rights movement and collectively wrote a letter of appreciation to Martin Luther King Jr.³⁹ Bolin worked to move his church staff and members into the community, reasoning, “Just think how much more advantageous it would be if the youngster’s Sunday-school teacher were also his neighbor.”⁴⁰

Bolin wanted to share his love for inner-city integrated ministry with the Covenant Ministerium. He hosted an event where Twin Cities Covenant pastors were served a meal typically eat by low-income residents of the community. The purpose of this event was to raise awareness of the effects of racial prejudice, unfair employment practices, and unemployment as it related to the daily life condition of those suffering these oppressions. During this event the pastors listened to the personal narrative of a local African American woman who had recently migrated north to raise her nine children. She expounded on the differences she experienced living in the South versus the North, sharing her lived experience with those in attendance.⁴¹

North Park Covenant Church, Chicago, Illinois

Through his ministry as pastor of North Park Covenant Church (1955–1970), Douglas Cedarleaf served a prophetic role in the church, daring to live the Gospel truth that all humanity is created equal and deserves to be treated with dignity. On June 16, 1963, Cedarleaf preached a sermon to his congregation based on one verse of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10).⁴² Cedarleaf challenged his congregation, along with Covenant pastors from across the nation who were in Chicago for a workshop, with the convicting question, “Do you really want God’s kingdom?” He followed with prophetic utterance:

Friend, is God on the side of Martin Luther King? Is God on the side of Bull Conner? Is God on the side of the Supreme

39. Carl Philip Anderson, ed., “In Search of the One: Minneapolis Church Serves the Inner City,” *Covenant Companion* (June 18, 1965): 4–6.

40. *Ibid.*, 6.

41. Northwest Conference, “Ministers Receive a Glimpse of Poverty,” *Covenant Companion, Northwest Conference Edition* 54, no. 26 (December 17, 1965): 1.

42. [Editor’s note: A transcription of Cedarleaf’s June 16, 1963, sermon is printed in this issue, [pp. 33–44](#).]

Court? ... Is the cry of the Negro for justice in this community a cry that is actuated by God Almighty, and will God Almighty answer his prayer? Is it possible for us simply to sit here and hope somehow that maybe we will still be able, double tongued as we are, to talk about the will of God while we have nothing to say about sharp fanged dogs? While we have nothing to say about fire hoses turned on children? While we have nothing to say about a [gun] shot in the back? Which side are you on? ... I am asking at this moment for you to decide in your own soul, whether or not you can mix up God's will with our keeping one-tenth of our population submerged. Do you want to pray with me that God will sharpen the teeth of Bull Conner's dogs? Do you want to pray with me that more black men will be shot in the back? ... You have the right to do this and defy the law of God, if this is your wish. But no one has ever defied the law of God and found peace.⁴³

These powerful words of judgment called civil rights era Christians to discern the depth with which they wanted to embrace and respond to the truth of God's word. Cedarleaf's prophetic words were key in effecting transformation in the hearts of his congregants and leading many to advocate proactively for justice.

In the same sermon, Cedarleaf suggested a creative idea for advocating racial harmony. He suggested his congregants wear badges, made of black and white cloth, with a gold pin as the fastener. The black and white pieces of cloth sewn together would represent the communion of blacks and whites in the kingdom of God. The gold pin would represent the golden rule's centrality to one's life practices. This badge would be a symbol to African American citizens that its wearer desired to follow God's will and supported equal rights for all American citizens. Cedarleaf also led the church in sponsoring a Haitian family of six. Cedarleaf did not paint a rosy picture for those who would decide to pursue justice in this way. He warned his congregants of the resistance this bold declaration would invite from their neighbors and friends: "you're gonna have to answer these neighbors around here who say that stupid church is bringing dark

43. Douglas Cedarleaf, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done Sermon," Covenant Archives and Historical Library (Chicago: North Park Covenant Church, June 16, 1963).

people into this community.”⁴⁴ Despite the intolerance of fellow white citizens, he urged his congregants to choose to do the will of God.

This congregation was consistently challenged by their beloved pastor to stand on the side of racial righteousness and to show it with their lives. On January 22, 1967, NPCC experienced cross-cultural worship. Sixty members of NPCC traveled to the South Side of Chicago to engage in what they described as “a sub-culture quite different from ours.”⁴⁵ They were guests of the First Baptist Church at 935 East 50th Street, an “integrated” church. A sacred interracial moment highlighted by the Covenanters was “watching two little girls drinking fruit juice together—one a bright-eyed, dark-skinned youngster from First Baptist and the other a bright-eyed, fair-skinned girl from North Park.”⁴⁶ After the church service, these sixty guests were welcomed into the homes of the congregants for dinner and fellowship. Three weeks later First Baptist congregants traveled north for fellowship, as members of NPCC reciprocated the hospitality they had received.⁴⁷

Having a new perspective of the African American plight after spending time building community with their black brothers and sisters, the NPCC congregation was able to offer an empathic response to their suffering. At the end of that same year, the NPCC congregation was moved when they heard about the devastation of the Hester family. This African American family’s newly purchased home at 10528 South Forest Avenue in Chicago was bombed weeks before Christmas. Fifty-one members of the congregation were moved by this news to donate money to offer restitution to this family. December 11, 1967, Cedarleaf and his wife, Carolyn, delivered the \$500 gift, today’s equivalent of over \$3,500.⁴⁸

NPCC built a culture of using finances to support causes they felt strongly about. NPCC donated funds to the racially integrated Oakdale Covenant Church on Chicago’s South Side, which the church used to hire a part-time minister and build a Christian education library.⁴⁹ Paul Erick-

44. Ibid.

45. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, February 1967, p. 2; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, January 1968, p. 8; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1. CPI Inflation Calculator.

49. Incidentally, the minister hired was Pastor Cedarleaf’s daughter, Jeannine Cedarleaf.

son, a member of NPCC and on staff as youth counselor while attending seminary at North Park, resigned his position at NPCC to serve Oakdale and continued to serve as a bridge between the two congregations. He would write in the NPCC newsletter, "The Oakdale church is one of the very few in the Covenant denomination where a racially integrated group of Christians is working together in harmony and devotion." Robert L. Erickson, Central Conference superintendent at the time, saluted NPCC for their care and financial support of the Oakdale congregation that was on the front lines of the struggle for racial reconciliation.⁵⁰ Erickson, in speaking about Oakdale, stated, "this congregation . . . has faced the racial problem in a very realistic and constructive way."⁵¹

In addition to building community with African Americans and giving benevolent offerings, NPCC was also active in providing educational opportunities to better understand racism and African American people as a people. They offered a special series of adult Sunday-school classes that addressed issues of daily Christian living, one of which was entitled, "Towards Racial Redemption."⁵² The NPCC library also exemplified the congregation's genuine concern for eradication of the racial tension of their contemporary society. It contained books such as, *Call Me Neighbor, Call Me Friend* by Philip A. Johnson, which analyzed the integration of the Park Manor neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. The library also contained, *Mandate for White Christians* by Kyle Haselden, which also spoke to the racial crisis of the day.⁵³ The church encouraged its members to be educated about this issue in order to decide for themselves where they stood.⁵⁴

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. stimulated many dialogues about race and power. To further educate the congregation, an NPCC family hosted a viewing party in their home for the "What Do You Know about Black Power" 1968 summer television series. The weekly topics,

50. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, November-December 1966, p. 5; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

51. Ibid.

52. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, September 1967, p. 3; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

53. *Call Me Neighbor, Call Me Friend: The Case History of the Integration of a Neighborhood on Chicago's South Side* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965); *Mandate for White Christians* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966).

54. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, May 1968, p. 4; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

televised on Channel 5, included defining black power, black power and psychology, black power and white racism, black power and black churchmen, black power and white churchmen.⁵⁵

In 1965 the young adults of NPCC began a coffeehouse in the North Park neighborhood as a way to serve and engage the community in dialogue without the walls of the church being a barrier. Named the Broken Wall, the coffeehouse sought to be “a fit instrument through which Christ may ‘break down the dividing wall of hostility’ (Ephesians 2:14) which separates people from one another and from God; to overcome the barriers of class and status which come between both groups and individuals, and above all between church and world.”⁵⁶

Even in this community project the church’s heart for healing the social ills of its day was manifest. On appointed evenings the community would come together to dialogue about various socially engaging topics. On one occasion the topic of discussion was race relations. A white Roman Catholic priest, an African American minister, and members of a civil rights organization gathered, along with eighty community members. It was noted at the time that this discussion night yielded full audience participation and the greatest debate the coffeehouse had seen thus far.⁵⁷ On another occasion, the Broken Wall’s evening hot topics series engaged a discussion on Chicago’s challenges with racial integration. Hal Freeman, director of housing and community services for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, was invited to speak to the community at the coffeehouse, “to discuss the integration problem in Chicago.”⁵⁸

This coffeehouse, an outgrowth of NPCC’s socially minded ministry, displayed the church’s commitment to live the truth of the gospel in their neighborhood. The Broken Wall, in its short life, was able to provide a space for theological dialogue on civil and human rights.

In 1955, at the direction of the denomination, NPCC started a Christian citizenship committee. The committee invited NPCC members to

55. *Ibid.*, 11.

56. North Park Covenant Church, “Proposed Revised Constitution,” Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 5, Folder 2.

57. Carl Philip Anderson, ed., “Coffee and...,” *Covenant Companion* (October 8, 1965): 14–15, 26.

58. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, February 1966, p. 5; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

participate in the betterment of their local community, city, and nation. From 1963 to 1968 NPCC's, committee focused primarily on fair housing and equal educational opportunities for all, in partnership with the North River Commission (NRC). The NRC was established in 1962 as a community development partnership of North Park College and Theological Seminary, Swedish Covenant Hospital, and the National Bank of Albany Park.⁵⁹ With the NRC, NPCC helped lay the foundation for a smooth transition when the area's high schools, Von Steuben and Roosevelt, finally integrated, and calmed fears about neighborhood integration.

In 1968, the church sent a letter of support to the Chicago Board of Education, encouraging and supporting their efforts to integrate public schools in the North Park neighborhood by busing students from lower income areas. NPCC's committee held a Christian citizenship service on April 2, 1967, and invited non-discriminatory housing activist Edward Holmgren, executive director of the Leadership Council for Open Housing in Metropolitan Chicago, to speak. A panel discussion with Holmgren and representatives from other community organizations ensued after the service. This dialogue centered on the negative effects suffered by people of color due to poor race relations, unfair housing initiatives, and unjust housing practices.⁶⁰ In order to address housing discrimination, the committee offered the congregation an opportunity to support the "good neighbor pledge," which meant that they would allow people of color to live on their block or in their neighborhood. This presentation saw a 33 percent response from the congregation in February 1968, with more than 250 members positively responding to the pledge. This support led to the formation of a community organization that would advocate for equal housing in the North Park neighborhood.⁶¹

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the committee sponsored a discussion to hear from the perspective of an African American activist about the violence and riots that occurred as a result. Around

59. Still in operation, now with over 100 organizations in membership, focused on work of business development, education, affordable housing, community development, and environment for Northwest Chicago. <http://northrivercommission.org>.

60. *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, April 1967, p. 3; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 1.

61. North Park Covenant Church, "Annual Reports 1968," p. 11; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 10, Folder 1.

the same time the congregation contributed a special offering of \$168 (today's equivalent of \$1,155) to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁶² NPCC's committee was motivated by and responded to the denomination's commitment to racial reconciliation across the nation communicated through resolutions passed at the 1968 Central Conference annual meeting. Reprinted in the congregational newsletter, the resolutions read in part:

Whereas the Scriptures call upon us to be doers of the Word and not hearers only, and whereas we are likewise instructed that faith is to work itself out in love, and whereas our nation faces many crises in its domestic affairs, particularly the racial revolution with its components of inadequate housing, employment, education, law enforcement, political representation, and other responsible factors, we therefore resolve to confess and renounce all racism in ourselves and in our churches and other social structures of which we are apart... and to increase our contact with areas of tension through specific programs.... We also resolve to become involved in power structures by which we can bring influence to bear upon the problems that contribute to the urban crisis... and we resolve to so order our churches that effective, redemptive, and loving action on these and other issues may become as regular and effective a part of their corporate lives and the lives of their members as the preaching of the Word.⁶³

In September 1968, the pulpit hour was used to highlight issues of race and poverty with an opportunity for the congregation to receive additional information and contribute financially to effect change in these citywide crisis areas.

Conclusion

The Evangelical Covenant Church was active in its efforts of pursuing racial reconciliation during the 1963–1968 period of the civil rights era.

62. Ibid., 22. CPI Inflation Calculator.

63. "Excerpts from the Report of the Resolutions Committee," *North Park Covenant Church Newsletter*, June 1968; Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Record Series 8/2/10/23, Box 6, Folder 7.

The denomination is nothing without the pursuits of its body. Thus, these pursuits were witnessed through the written words of its publications, the education and cross-cultural experiences of its congregations, prophetic preaching, and through the forward-thinking leadership of church boards and citizenship committees. Instead of merely talking about acting, this research has revealed that churches and leaders actively responded to the call of the gospel to work together and live in community without regard for differences in language, culture, or race.

The ECC currently offers the Sankofa program, which facilitates a journey back to the night season of the civil rights era so that we might move forward with greater insight and freedom. This research suggests that our current efforts of racial righteousness were incubated in the womb of a denomination that saw the gestation of the evil of racism in American society and sought to abort it with passionate pursuit of justice on behalf of people of color. This work, the pursuit of racial righteousness, is part of the “DNA” of the Evangelical Covenant Church. It is a natural progression for the ECC to continue pursuing justice in these ways to bring the kingdom here on earth.