

MEMPHIS MINISTRY

A reflection of Fr. Greenspan on his time as coordinator of the experiment at St. Pat's in 1968

When I first arrived at St. Patrick's Church in Memphis on February 25, 1968, the first thing I noticed was a pile of garbage in front of the church. The first decision I had to face was whether or not to move it. A lot hinged on this decision. If I hauled it away, it would signal my black neighbors that I was out of sympathy with the garbage men's strike against the city. I decided to let the garbage pile up.

On my list of people to contact when I got to Memphis was Malcolm Blackburn. During a meeting at the National Council of churches in New York, I was told that Malcolm, former member of the national office of the Presbyterian Church, was now the only white pastor in the AME black church and that he was stationed in Memphis.

It didn't take long to make contact with Malcolm. The next thing I noticed after the pile of garbage was a large stone church and a modern office building adjacent to Saint Patrick's church yard. I decided to make a neighborly visit and when I walked in the door of the church office I ran in to Malcolm Blackburn.

I quickly learned that he was Pastore of Claiborne temple and that it was the rallying place for the church supporters of the garbage men's strike.

Malcolm also worked for the Minimum Salary department of the AME Church to supplement the income of Clayborn Temple's congregation which numbered less than 100 members. He introduced me to the Rev. Ralph Jackson, the head of the Minimum Salary offices. They told me that a rally was being held that night in the temple and extended an invitation.

When I finished my first dinner in Saint Patricks rectory, I scaled the fence in the church yard and had it for the front door of the temple. Little did I know what was in store for me.

As I approached the doors of Claiborne temple, I heard the song "We Shall Overcome" being sung with gusto. I entered and found a pact church and I could see only one other white face in the crowd. I later learned he was, Dr. Wells, a professor from the Cumberland Seminary in Memphis.

As soon as I was spotted by Ralph Jackson and Malcolm Blackburn on the stage, I was backend to come join them. Dr. Jackson introduced me as the Pastore of Saint Patricks Church and I received an enthusiastic round of applause. I told them I was there new neighbor and that I was there to find out what the issues were in the strike and to explore what role I might play in it.

With that I took a seat in the audience and listened to talks by Reverend James Lawson, Pastor of century United Methodist Church, and Jesse Epps, organizer for the Public Employees' Union, which were punctuated with shouting, applauding and whistling. When the meeting was over, I walked back to Saint

Patricks rectory shaking my head, feeling that I had been caught up in a tide.

The next day I went to the union hall where the garbage men were meeting. Once again as soon as I was spotted, I was asked to come up on the stage. When I sat down I realized that the garbage men were engaged in their daily strike liturgy. One of their members, a part time preacher, was leading them in a litany of old testament passages pertaining to the deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptians. Each time the minister shout it out selected Verses from the opened Bible in his right hand the 300 garbage men shouted the response, "Amen." In the ministers sermon Henry Loeb, the mayor of Memphis, was Pharoah and the striking city employees were the enslaved Israelites. In the next old testament analogy, the City Hall was the walls of Jericho and the Voice scene of grievances by the mast garbage men in the street were the trumpets that would make city hall come tumbling down. Theit liturgy ended with a prayer for God's protection and deliverance from evil and injustice.

I was asked by the minister to come to the microphone and speak to the men. As I stood there looking at those 300 garbage man, I was deeply moved by the look of peace and dignity on their faces. I thought that any one of the faces would be worthy of the cover on Life magazine. I thought that no one would ever guess that these men were caught up in the stress of a bitter strike. I felt there was no need for the greeting, "the Lord be with you," because I felt convinced that He was already there.

My remarks to them seemed to stem from an inner prompting. I told them that my role as a priest was to find out where Christ was at work in this strike and to join Him. I ended with, I know now that if He's anywhere in Memphis He's with you and so from now on I am with you.

When I sat back down, I noticed two other white men enter at the back of the hall. They also were called to the stage. I cannot recall their names but they were a lawyer and architect, both members of the prominent Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis. Each one in turn stood up and told the garbage men that he had examined the issues in the strike, that justice was on their side and that he was on their side.

I remember having deep admiration for them. It took much more courage on their part than it did on mine. They exposed themselves to the wrath and the retaliation of their peers. Their peers' rejection of me helped my acceptance and credibility among my new neighbors in the black community. The suburban whites had to deal with and agonize a little over their stance. They wrote my stance off as the subversion of an outside Yankee agitator. I left the union hall that morning feeling encouraged knowing that the white community was not completely polarized against the strikers.

Another event that deepened my involvement in the strike was coming to know the Reverend James Lawson. Lawson was pastor of the Centenary United Methodist and chairman of COME, Community On the Move for Equality, a newly organized committee of black clergy in Memphis.

Reverend Lawson's background was impressive. His commitment to pacifism (sic) led to two years imprisonment for refusing to be drafted during the Korean war. When he was released he went to India and spent a year with Gandhi and his non-violent movement. He was the architect of the non-violent philosophy embraced by Martin Luther King and the other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference known as SCLC. He was a member of the World Council of Churches and well known by church leaders in America.

When I first sat down in his modest church office and began to listen to him at length, I felt that his pastorate of this small black congregation was an ecclesiastical overkill. Now I know that his call to Memphis was much wider than the sanctuary at Centenary Church. He became prophet and leader of a city during its darkest hours.

Jim Lawson helped me to explore what my ministry would be in the strike. We felt part of it would be to try to present a more balanced view of the plight of the garbage men to the white church leaders.

A meeting was set up at Saint Patrick's Church to present the unions side of the dispute to city church leaders. The union cause would be presented by Lawson and Ralph Jackson with a question and answer period.

Invitations were extended by phone to the white clergy among whom were Frank McRae, district superintendent of the inner city United Methodist churches; Dean William Dimmick, pastor of Saint Mary's Episcopal Cathedral; Msgr. James Leppert, of

the Catholic Human relations council; and Msgr. Clunan of Saint Louis Catholic Church.

The afternoon of the meeting I was met with two situations I had not planned on. One was this sudden invasion of cameras and reporters from the three Memphis TV stations in the churches parking lot.

Since we had promised the clergy that the meeting would be closed and private, I told the TV people that they could not come into the church and film the meeting. This did not sit too well so they proceeded to film the people as they entered the church and aired them on the nightly news. It was my first awareness that Memphis in spite of its size still remain essentially a small Southern town with a well rooted grapevine.

The other surprise was the appearance of a number of Catholic laymen who were in a stage of confused hostility about what they had learned in a Serra Club meeting about the strike rally at St. Patrick's Church. I invited them to come in and find out.

Some of these men became converts to the cause of the strike, became members of Saint Patrick's new worshipping community and joined the cadre of white marchers and supporters of the garbagemen.

The meeting that afternoon established St. Patrick's as the rallying place in the black community for white support. On the day of the marches the nuns, priest and Layman, who were in sympathy with the union, gathered in Saint Patrick's church

for a prayer service and lined up in the street behind the garbage men.

Another role I tried to play was attempt to reduce the intensity of the polarization taking place among the people in the city. It was a very difficult role to play when both sides of an emotionally charged conflict become hardened and radicalized. Another difficulty is you have to deal with the radicalization taking place within your self. You constantly have to resist becoming unbalanced and fanatic. You have to keep remembering that your motivations like everyone else's in a bitter social polarization are mixed and ambiguous. Your credibility in both camps becomes fragile and suspect. Building communication dykes in the face of a torrent of collective fear, rage and guilt feels like a losing battle. Some time after the strike I can remember discussing this role with bishop Walsh of the Episcopal Cathedral in Washington. He said that he tried to play the role of holding hands in both camps but after a while both arms began to be pulled out of their sockets.

Luckily this role was welcomed by the union and black leaders and I was able to temper the feelings in some of the opposition. I found that coming face to face with some Catholic parishioners could ameliorate fear and guilt. Their realizing that you did not reject them as persons as you opposed their beliefs seemed to be a relief for them. My limited success in depolarizing added a few new white faces to the marches on main street.

As I reflect on the events of that spring in Memphis in 1968, I feel that it was fitting that the drama of the strike was enacted

during the season of Lent. In my mind there were parallels to the passion, death and resurrection cycle of Lent in the events of the strike.

I can remember watching the garbage men lining for their first march down main street. Seeing them dressed in their Sunday suit's, displaying posters reading, "I AM A MAN," across their chest and stepping out, surrounded by hundreds of vocal supporters, I felt a recurrence of Palm Sunday was taking place.

Two weeks later when Martin Luther King joined the March, I witnessed a street liturgy of passion Sunday when shortly after the March began, shop windows were stoned and broken, tear gas was shot into the crowd and Martin Luther King was shielded and lead from the march by his supporters.

The following week Martin Luther King was slain on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, and event that reproduced the shock and despair of good Friday.

Three days later the joy of resurrection was born in Memphis. A majority of the Judaic Christian community in the city united and clamored for social justice and negotiations. A peaceful mass march, including leaders from all areas of the nation and all segments of society, took place. It concluded with a memorial service to Dr King in front of the city hall.

On April 16 the strike was settled and the total population of the city experienced a sigh of relief. It was Easter Sunday in Memphis.

St. Patrick's was also the place where Bishop Durick centered his interest and involvement in the strike. When he was in Memphis he set up meetings between him and the black leaders among the union and clergy. Bishop Durick's support of the garbage men was costly for him. When he marched and spoke in front of the City Hall during the memorial services for Martin Luther King, he incurred the scorn and rejection of the pastors and the laity of the establishment of Memphis. His role as the good Shepard was enhanced among the non-establishment but his effectiveness as a diocesan administrator was greatly impaired. When Memphis became a new diocese and Bishop Dozier came on the scene, the polarization caused by Bishop Durick's stand in the strike (he also opposed the Franciscans in the hospital workers strike) began to heal.

During the turmoil of the strikes, St. Patrick's Church underwent a transformation. St. Patrick's Parish was one of the oldest in them for us. It had been an Irish parish for which later became predominately Italian.

When I arrived in Memphis, the parish boundaries and circled a non-Catholic, black population who were on welfare and living in substandard dwellings are low income housing projects.

Like so many inner city parishes, Saint Patrick's was serving a real minute of white Catholics who came in from the suburbs for Sunday mass. This remnant dwindled due to the racial tension and fear of violence in the wake of the strike. The announcement that St. Patrick's Parish was to become a center for social ministry for the neighborhood regrettably

disturbed the remaining parishioners. They stop coming to Sunday mass and joint other parishes in the city.

What was once a parish school had been renovated and was housing the Diocesan School Office. Within a year of school office was closed and moved to safer ground, leaving us valuable space for religious and social programs.

An agreement had been worked out with Bishop Jerit in which he said so does the new center to provide our room and board, operational expenses and see money for grant proposals.

By the end of June the other two members of the staff on board. Charlie Martin came in the middle of May and Chuck Mahoney a month later.

St. Patrick's community center was also an experiment and Paulist life style. No one was appointed local Sapir year. We were to function as a team operating through group process.

There were two other tallest in the city. Stan McNevin was director of our Newman club at Memphis State University and lived in the center which was just off the campus. Tim Tighe was a Paulist seminarian taking a course in Clinical Pastorial Counseling at Memphis City Hospital. Tim joined our staff and came to live at Saint Pats at the end of August.

Since the diocean structure was not to set up a deal with a team, I was voted to act as pastor of Saint Patrick's and to be the liaison with the bishop and his Chancery office. My

qualifications were being the oldest and greyest member of the team.

The leadership of the team which shift according to the project we were engaged in. Whoever had the gifts and background best suited for the task at hand became the quarterback for preparing and presenting the program and taking the lead in implementing it.

Before we could settle down to developing our goals and projects for the community center we were embroiled in another labor dispute. The employees union begin organizing in the hospitals and met resistance in St. Francis hospital which was administered by the Franciscan nuns. The city hospital had been organized and granted a contract, and Saint Francis was to be the entree of the union into the private hospital sector. But the union failed and met it's Waterloo in the guise of Sister Rita, the administrator of the Catholic hospital.

The union began to over extend its self through to rapid growth coupled with the spare city trained and experienced leadership. Stripe was called with only a minority of employees committed to the union, breaking cardinal rule of unionism, "You don't call for strike if you don't have the votes."

Sister Rita held the support of the majority of her employees who were content to have the "bird-in-the-hand" security of a paternalistic relationship with her rather than the "bird-in-the-bush" promises of dignity and greater voice in their working conditions flowing from the right to organize and the protection of the union contract.

Sister Rita also had the support of the boards and administrations of the influential non-Catholic hospitals in the city. This swelled sister Rita's ranks considerably since it consolidated almost all the members of the "power-base" in Memphis in and all out ecumenical stand for God and country.

Saint Patrick's community and Bishop Durick stood by "the-bird-in-the-bush" minority because we believed that the Church's teachings on social justice were being violated by the hospitals.

We ended up being caught in the middle and had to confront both the union and the hospital on occasion.

When a union is faced with losing a strike, the members become desperate and resort to irresponsible tactics. Non-union workers were threatened with bodily harm. Secondary boycotts and picketing were called for against downtown merchants. Mass marches were staged to intimidate the populace.

One tactic wrought dissension in the black community and retaliation by the city fathers. Members of the Invaders began to organize on the public school campuses and persuade the black children to stay out of school and join the daily marches on main street.

This led to the arrest of the COME committee along with Fr. Guthrie who worked with black youth on the north side of the city. When they were brought to the police station and told they could be released until their hearing by posting a one

dollar bond, they refused to pay the dollar and demanded to be jailed as political prisoners. This meant that they would be segregated from the other prisoners and have a cell block of their own. This resulted in events and drama worthy of a Tony award.

I can't remember how but Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the head of the SCLC, ended up being retained in the cell block with the local COME clergy. Their cell block became "center stage" in the jail and with members of the press in Memphis.

The political prisoners eight only bread and water and spent most of the day praying, reading scripture and singing hymns.

Each day a rally was held on the front steps of the jail with the inmates receiving accolades and cheers as they preside it from the windows of the third floor of the jail.

This situation put the county sheriff in an agonizing position. He was in the midst of mounting a campaign to run for mayor of Memphis and did not want to alienate the black voter.

I remember attending one of the strategy meetings in the jail, approved by the sheriff who even supplied a picture of ice water and cups for the participants.

After a week of joyful incarceration, the political prisoners were released and all the charges against them were dropped.

When the hospital strike ended and normalcy return to the city, a number of programs and services to meet the needs of

the neighborhood began to take shape at St. Patrick's. Three of the doctors from Saint Jude's Children Hospital and their families became members of our worshipping community. Saint Jude's was a research center for leukemia in children and it also received a grant to research the effects of malnutrition on infants. Part of the research was conducted at St. Pat's. A pilot program was set up which included the distribution of baby food, free examinations of children after mass on Sunday and free hospitalization for critical cases.

Chuck Mahoney and later Tim Tighe began to set up social and recreational programs for the youth in the area. The grounds around the church were converted into basketball courts and playgrounds. Tim built up rapport with the teenagers by playing basketball with them and organizing them into teams. Chuck developed a teen council for the center which ran dances in the school building and with the age of two white teenagers from St. Pat's community from the young girls into "7-11 Club" which set up nutritional cooking class, sewing classes and trips to cultural and the stork sites in Memphis.

Charlie Martin was our financial and program administrator. He served on the Board of Directors for the War On Poverty and later became president of the board. He wrote and obtained grants from the government for educational programs which made room for two nuns and a secretary to join our staff. He met and introduce an architect, Claude Braganza to St. Pat's and together they designed and restructured St. Patrick's Church into a creative and unique multiple purpose center and a modern small chapel. This became an domination to the former parishioners and an

attraction for the new “turned on by Vatican II” catholics in the city.

St. Pat’s also was a center where community organizations were given free office supplies. These included an organization run by welfare mothers to improve conditions in the housing projects and a school on black history conducted by the Invaders, a militant group of black college students and “drop out” activist.

A good portion of my time is taken up with the ecumenical ministry in the city. I served as a member of various boards and committees which were concerned with social issues and programs. The one which took up the most time was MIFA, the Memphis Interfaith Association. It’s main purpose was to act as a catalyst for coordinated inner-city ministries, which included Meals On Wheels for the elderly, a center to distribute emergency relief for the poor and homeless and workshops for the clergy and lay leaders dealing with the role of the church in the inner-city.

Money was raised from the grants and donations from the churches which enabled MIFA to rent office and hire a full-time director. Methodist minister, Reverend Berkeley Poole, was chosen as director and I volunteered to serve as his assistant.

Tim Tighe became a teacher of religion in, father Bertrand’s high school, and all black school run by the Franciscans. This enable Tim to expand his ministry to black teens.

The worshipping community at St. Pat's became predominately white which in some ways became a mixed blessing. The innovative little church attracted Laymen who were discontent with their home parish. This caused raised eyebrows among the pastors in the city.

There is always the danger of a Christian community becoming too self-serving and neglecting to serve the needs of the wider community around it. This was guarded against at Saint Pats by involving a large majority of the congregation in the ongoing ministries of the center.

The members of Saint Pats displayed many elements of true community which were lacking in most other parishes. They were small in number so everyone knew every other member as a friend.

There was enough diversity of ministries so that everyone could find expression for his or her special gifts and enjoy the feeling of relevant discipleship.

The governing of the community was structured so that every member enjoyed meaningful participation in the decision making process.

And trying to discover realistic ways to witness in a black ghetto culture St. Pat's ran into a schizophrenic identity problem. The bottom line was could a middle-class white through part time living and working in the lower class black society internalize a sufficient blending of the two cultures so that he could emulate Fr. Damien and say "We whites or "We

blacks” depending upon which congregation he stood in front of.

Personally my way to avoid cultural schizophrenia was to see my role as a catalyst trying to plant anthropological seeds in the ghetto culture that would bring about long range betterment. I called upon my study of anthropology in Fordham University to help me avoid my white middle-class values and biases from coloring my perception of the nature and values of the culture I came to befriend and serve.

In trying to determine what role we could play at St. Pat’s neighborhood, we found ourselves vacillating between alternatives. One was to supply material, educational and spiritual aid to the poor in the area. A draw back with this was the programs were funded and administered by a predominately white community. This was resented by some who saw this as distributing crumbs to Lazarus from the table of the oppressors. One black active saw our effort as Band-Aid ministry. She saw herself a victim of systematic violence and expressed it in this way, “I am being hit on the head with a hammer and you were putting Band-Aids on my cuts. Why don’t you hold back the arm that’s swinging a hammer?”

Another alternative was to support and did US leaders and movements so they could have greater influence and success. This also had drawbacks. Many of the leaders and movements were struggling to confirm their blackness and increase black power and did not want white help.

We considered working with the black ministers in the area that discovered that they were leery of our motives. It was

premature for programs to be carried on ecumenically so we sought ways to build trust between us and the black clergy.

We had some success in building good relationships with the clergy in the area. Reverend Jordan was the pastor of the black Baptist church a block away from us on Beale Street. He felt free enough to drop in on us and enjoy fellowship in our common ring. Jim and I play golf once a week and I was a dinner guest at his home occasionally. Charlie Morton work closely with black ministers in the war own property program. Our friendships with the members of the members of the COME committee continued, especially with Reverend Blackburn and Dr. Ralph Jackson, our next-door neighbors.

One example of our success and building trust stands out in my memory. When Rev. Lawson was in jail, he asked me to preach during the Sunday services in this church and deliver a message from him to his congregation which was a moving experience for me. But also I remember having to give an apology for Reverend Lawson's civil disobedience to the middle-aged conservatives in the congregation he did not take pride in a jail pastor.

When we considered working to form a black church center by more active evangelization, we had to think in terms of directing our ministry to the non church so we would not threaten our black Baptist neighbors, a block away. We also had to consider the effects this would have on our relationship with the Franciscan black parish in the area.

We tried to reach a balance in our ministries and somehow managed to grow and serve as we struggled to define our

pastor oil identity. However our search for identity was mostly a concern during our team meetings which we held twice a week. our concrete ministry evolved from attempting to meet the needs of people who came to us by ringing the rectory doorbell, frequenting our playground are showing up for our worship services.

Our presence in the neighborhood served as a small sign of God's kingdom. We gave the ghetto people and exposure to whites who did not fit their stereo type of uncaring tickets. We were also a sign of blacks and whites working to serve together.

Another ministry attempt it at St. Pat's was bridge building between the inner city and suburban churches. We conduct workshops and preached at suburban parishes during the Sunday masses.

We also became active in jail ministry since most of the jail population was from our neighborhood. Crime, police jails and courts were part and parcel of ghetto life as opposed to country clubs, ballet teachers and Little League coaches in the suburban life.

Tim Tighe became chaplain at the juvenile detention farm. Claude Braganza and John Fox, members of St. Pat's community, became involved in the Big Brother Program in the juvenile courts. Astrid Braganza became a minister to the women's jail.

Through working with MIFA friendships were formed with the leading protestant clergy in the city. Reverend Berkeley Poole

the director of MIFA became our teams facilitator and met with us twice a month.

St. Pat's began to church more and more people in the city and still continues to do so today 20 years later. It is always a joy to me to experience the continuing growth of St. Pat's during my educational return visits to Memphis.