

Church Conference Blueprints Racial Stand

By LOUIS CASSELS
United Press International

A blueprint for bold action on racial problems has been laid before America's churches and synagogues.

If they take it seriously, organized religion will cease to be a "sleeping giant" and may become the most dynamic force working for a desegregated society.

Religion in America is a massive enterprise. Religious institutions own billions of dollars worth of real estate and other property. They operate schools, colleges, hospitals, camps, welfare agencies, orphanages, homes for the aged and recreation centers. They employ hundreds of thousands of people, from janitors to psychiatrists. They have vast sums of money in pension and endowment funds to invest in the American economy.

Have Influence
Churches and synagogues also presumably have at least some degree of moral influence over their 116,000,000 members.

For these reasons, it has long been obvious that organized religion is potentially a mighty factor in the struggle for racial justice.

But the potential so far has been largely unrealized. By their own public confession, religious bodies have lagged far behind many areas of secular society in eliminating racial barriers. And, partly because of their own deep involvement in the practice of segregation, they have had relatively little influence on the formation of public attitudes toward racial problems.

All of this has been said many times by many religious leaders. And each time the confession has been accompanied by a wistful statement that "something ought to be done" to arouse the sleeping giant into action.

Catholic Acts

About a year ago, a Roman Catholic layman named Matthew Ahmann undertook to light a fire under organized religion. Ahmann is a slim, bespectacled man of 31, who serves as executive secretary of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice. He does not look like the instigator of a revolution. But history may record that he started one of vast significance.

Ahmann went to the top leaders of America's three great faiths — the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the Synagogue Council of America — and persuaded them to sponsor jointly a "National Conference on Religion and Race."

The conference, unprecedented in U. S. history both in its scope and in its interfaith sponsorship, met at Chicago earlier this month (Jan. 14-17.) Seventy leading Protestant, Catholic and Jewish organizations sent delegates.

Strange Sights
Strange sights were seen during the four days that the 700 delegates spent in conference at the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

Walking through the lobby one day, this reporter saw a Negro nun in animated conversation with a bearded rabbi. A few yards away, a Southern Baptist minister and an Episcopal priest were listening attentively to a Roman Catholic bishop.

After the preliminary speeches, the delegates split up into 25 small work groups to get down to the brass tacks of planning specific, concrete things that religious groups

can do to combat racial discrimination.

Their recommendations — there are scores of them — are now being widely disseminated to religious organizations, including local congregations and affiliated clubs and societies in every community of America. They constitute the blueprint for action.

Attacks Race Problem
It cannot be expected that all churches will act on the proposals, or that any particular congregation will try to tackle all of them. But if even a small part of the blueprint is translated into action, there will be a radical change in the stance of organized religion on the racial problem.

All of the proposals are based on moral conviction which was unanimously voiced by the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders in an "appeal to conscience" which they issued at the end of the conference.

"Racial discrimination and prejudice are an insult to God, the giver of human dignity and human rights."

The conferees were also of one mind in the conviction that churches and synagogues cannot exert a constructive influence on society at large until they "clean their own house."

The "action program" developed at the conference calls for the prompt elimination of racial barriers in all religious institutions, including church-related hospitals, schools, welfare agencies and fraternal organizations.

It is not enough, the conference said, for religious institutions to announce a "non-discrimination policy" in hiring. As employers, they should "set an example" for private business by "aggressively seeking" qualified Negroes to serve on school facilities, hospital staffs, denominational boards, the like.

The conference also emphasized that integration of worship should not be a one-way street. Instead of waiting for Negro families to seek a welcome at all-white churches, white Christians might join Negro churches in some instances.

Other recommendations dealing with the "inner life" of churches and synagogues included:

— There should be far more hard-hitting sermons on practical racial problems.

Seeks Information
Religious education programs for children and adults should aim at the development of an informed conscience on racial matters.

— More opportunities should be created for whites and Negroes to meet "on an equal status footing" and get to know one another as human beings. Youth groups particularly should be exposed to interracial associations under church auspices.

— White and Negro churches in the same community should exchange ministers on some Sundays and even occasionally "exchange congregations."

Looking beyond the realm of specific religious activities to society at large, the conference recommended that churches and synagogues act, on a community-wide, interfaith basis, to promote better housing and job opportunities for Negroes and other members of minority groups.

It was suggested specifically that religious groups:

— Solicit "open occupancy" housing pledges throughout their communities.

Service Centers
— Establish "service centers" to "bring together buyers and sellers who are willing to integrate their community."

— Invest their pension, endowment and other funds in interracial housing projects, or in private financial institutions which will agree to provide mortgage loans to minority groups on a non-discriminatory basis. (Conversely, it was suggested that church money never be invested in financial institutions which use their lending powers to perpetuate patterns of residential segregation.)

Use their purchasing power to promote fair employment practices in their community by demanding non-discrimination clauses in all contracts for church construction and supplies. (Religious bodies spend more than \$1 billion a year on construction alone.)

— Refuse to accept land offered free as a church site by a real estate developer who is known to be planning a segregated community.

— Campaign on an interfaith basis for enactment of federal, state and local laws banning discrimination in housing and employment.

— Demand that all federal grants to schools, colleges and hospitals be "conditioned on assurances of non-discriminatory admissions policies."

Extend Discipline
There was much discussion at the conference about how far national denominations or local congregations should go in trying to enforce "discipline" over church members in regard to racial practices. Some delegates felt that churches should expel a

member who flagrantly and persistently practices racial discrimination after the church has plainly labeled it a serious moral evil.

Others felt that churches have become so lax about discipline, in other moral matters that it would be difficult for them to crack down on racial bigotry. But there was a general consensus that the whole problem of discipline deserves very close study if churches expect to be anything more than social clubs.

The conference recommendations are not binding on any denomination or local congregation. They are being passed along to churches and synagogues simply as practical ideas for concrete action by religious people who have a sore conscience on this subject.

Plans have been made, however, to follow up the conference with similar meetings on a regional and community level. And interfaith committees have already been organized in 10 "target cities"

to implement the proposals. The cities are Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, New Orleans, San Francisco, Oakland, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Seattle and San Antonio, Tex.

Conference leaders hope that hundreds of other American communities will follow their example.

If they do, the National Conference on Religion and Race may prove to be, as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. predicted, "one of the most significant meetings in the history of this nation."

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OFFERS LEADERS PLAN—Matthew Ahmann, 31, executive secretary of the National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice, offers a plan to leaders of the country's three major religious faiths that may spur religious leaders to take a stronger stand on race problems. (UPI)

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