

NOTES AND COMMENTS

A Note on the 1963 Civil Rights Statement

STERLING M. McMURRIN

ON THE TUESDAY before the 1963 October General Conference, Mr. Stephen Holbrook called on me at the University to tell me that the local NAACP was planning a civil rights demonstration sometime during the coming Conference. The idea was to have demonstrators at the gates of Temple Square for a march around Temple Square. According to Mr. Holbrook, the demonstration was to be entirely friendly and in the interest of urging the Church to use its influence to achieve the enactment of strong civil rights legislation by the Utah legislature. I later learned that concurrent demonstrations would be held by the NAACP in other places, particularly in New York City. Mr. Holbrook assured me, and I am sure that in this he was entirely correct, that the proposed demonstration was to be entirely in the interest of civil rights and that it had nothing to do with the question of the LDS priesthood. Mr. Holbrook indicated that he was a member of the committee charged with planning the affair.

I told Mr. Holbrook that although I was entirely sympathetic to the purposes of such a demonstration, I was not interested in becoming involved in it. Knowing the typical Mormon attitude at that time toward protest meetings, picketing, and demonstrations, I told him that I was quite sure such an affair would be counterproductive. He told me that he was not asking me to join in the demonstration but that he simply wanted me to know what was going on.

I questioned Mr. Holbrook on whether anyone in the NAACP had had any conversations with church leaders on the civil rights issue. He replied that he did not know for sure but that the committee was meeting that evening with the president of the Salt Lake NAACP Chapter, Mr. Albert Fritz, and that he would check the matter out with Mr. Fritz.

Later, while the committee was in session, Mr. Fritz called to tell me that there had been no contact whatsoever with church authorities on civil rights. I asked whether there had ever been conversations between officials of the NAACP and General Authorities of the LDS Church on matters of interest to the NAACP. He

STERLING M. McMURRIN is an E. E. Ericksen Distinguished Professor at the University of Utah.
Author's note: This statement was written at the request of Dialogue's editors.

told me that he knew of none. He assured me moreover that he had made no effort to arrange for conversations with church officials on the civil rights problem or any other matter. Mr. Fritz agreed that it would not be wise to proceed with a demonstration at the Tabernacle without at least first attempting to pursue the question of civil rights legislation with church officials. When I asked if he would like me to arrange a meeting with the First Presidency, he responded with much enthusiasm. So I contacted President Hugh B. Brown, who said that he would like very much to meet with Mr. Fritz and any others who might accompany him to discuss any problems that they would like to put before the Church. Within the next few minutes, with some back and forth telephoning, arrangements were made to have Mr. Fritz and his committee meet with President Brown in President Brown's office on the following afternoon.

Since I was not present at the meeting in President Brown's office, I am not sure who accompanied Mr. Fritz, except Mr. Holbrook and Dr. Charles Nabors of the University's Department of Anatomy. President Nathan Eldon Tanner joined President Brown in the discussion with Mr. Fritz and his committee. It is my understanding that the conversation centered on the question of the proper role of a church in the matter of civil rights legislation. I was advised by both Mr. Fritz and President Brown that there was a mutual understanding that they would meet on future occasions to discuss matters that the NAACP might want to bring to the attention of the Church. I believe that only one other meeting took place, a year later when the state legislature was considering open housing legislation.

It is my impression that the NAACP committee simply discussed with Presidents Brown and Tanner their interest in having the Church support strong civil rights legislation for the state, but that the committee did not indicate to them the possibility of a demonstration at the Tabernacle during Conference. I may be in error on this. At no time did I mention the proposed demonstration to President Brown or President Tanner. I felt that the Church should take a position on civil rights for minorities and that it should do so freely and not under any kind of duress such as would be the case under the threat of a demonstration. It seemed wise, therefore, that I avoid any mention of the demonstration.

Following his session with Presidents Brown and Tanner, Mr. Fritz called a meeting of the NAACP for Friday evening. I was a member of the NAACP (if my dues were paid up at that time), and I attended the Friday meeting.

On Wednesday, before the NAACP meeting, President Brown asked me to discuss the Church's position with him. Thereafter I met twice with him and President Tanner in President Brown's office. They made it clear to me that as far as they were concerned the Church supported the principle of full civil rights for everyone, that they further felt that it should make a public statement to that effect, and that this should be done even without persuasion from the NAACP. On Saturday morning President Brown and President Tanner agreed to a brief statement which was prepared for them setting forth in an unequivocal manner the Church's position on civil rights. President Brown thereafter presented it to President McKay who approved the statement with the exception of one sentence, which he asked to have deleted. However, President McKay felt that it would be well for the statement to be read by President Brown in his Conference address rather than be presented as an official statement of the First Presidency.

In the meantime, on Friday evening, I had attended the meeting of the NAACP. The meeting attracted so many people that it was held in a small Catholic church, the Guadalupe Church. It was a lively affair with some of the more militant members, both black and white, pushing for a strong but friendly demonstration. It was clearly understood that the proposed demonstration was not geared to the matter of the priesthood for the blacks. It was to be entirely a civil rights affair, a friendly demonstration urging the Church to use its influence in support of civil rights legislation. It was not intended in any sense to be an anti-Mormon demonstration.

In the course of the meeting things became rather warm. I did not argue against the proposed demonstration but simply urged that it be delayed until the end of the Sunday morning session of Conference. This could give the Church until the end of that session to come out strongly in favor of civil rights, with the understanding that if a statement acceptable to the NAACP were not made by the end of the morning session, the demonstration would then go forward and continue through the afternoon session. Mr. Fritz, the NAACP president, and others favored this course. There was spirited argument both for and against this proposal, but when the vote was taken it carried. Though there was a strong dissenting minority, the entire body of the NAACP conformed to the decision.

At the time of the NAACP meeting I did not know for sure that a statement from the Church would be forthcoming. I was confident that this would be the case and went out on a limb at the meeting in an effort to assure the NAACP membership that there would in all probability be a statement, hopefully one which they would welcome. However, they were definitely prepared to go ahead with the demonstration if a satisfactory statement were not made by the end of the morning session.

On Sunday morning, as is now well-known, President Brown, with the full backing of President McKay and President' Tanner, read the following:

During recent months both in Salt Lake City and across the nation considerable interest has been expressed in the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the matter of civil rights. We would like it to be known that there is in this Church no doctrine, belief, or practice that is intended to deny the enjoyment of full civil rights by any person regardless of race, color, or creed.

We again say, as we have said many times before, that we believe that all men are the children of the same God and that it is a moral evil for any person or group of persons to deny to any human being the right to gainful employment, to full educational opportunity, and to every privilege of citizenship, just as it is a moral evil to deny him the right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience.

We have consistently and persistently upheld the Constitution of the United States, and as far as we are concerned that means upholding the constitutional rights of every citizen of the United States.

We call upon all men everywhere, both within and outside the Church, to commit themselves to the establishment of full civil equality for all of God's children. Anything less than this defeats our high ideal of the brotherhood of man.

I attended the Conference Sunday morning session and was very impressed by the way in which President Brown read the civil rights statement. He read it at the beginning of his sermon very much as if he were reading a separate official statement from the First Presidency. Then he set it aside and proceeded with his own address. It was most effective. As is well-known, his statement received considerable exposure in the local and national press and was thereafter treated as if it were an official statement of the Church. Despite the fact that it was not a statement issued by the First Presidency, it is apparently quite commonly regarded now as the official Church position.

At any rate, President Brown's statement was favorably received by the NAACP leadership, and the demonstration was cancelled.

