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The Role of Ministers and Church Groups in the Hartford Civil Rights Movement

Ryan Lerner
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While major cities were erupting with violence and confusion during the civil rights movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's, the city of Hartford, referred by some activists to be "the Mississippi of the North," experienced its own prolific tumult inspired by decade-long, suppressed racial tensions. The Black and Puerto Rican communities that migrated to the North to find work during the World War I era found their new life in Hartford's North End plagued with racist oppression and poor living conditions. While city officials turned a blind eye and Hartford's white residents "shunned the slums," de facto segregation and discrimination thrived. Within this grim atmosphere rose community religious leaders, and interracial, interfaith church groups that strove to meet the civil rights impetus with direct, but pacifistic action. The following paper will discuss the role and effectiveness of Church leaders and religious groups in Hartford's civil rights movement, showcasing the stories of Reverend King Hayes of Shiloh Baptist Church, and Bishop Peter Rosazza of the Archdiocese of New Haven.

Hartford, like many northern cities, had a history of de facto segregation. However, the relatively peaceful atmosphere that existed between whites and blacks changed drastically during World War I, as numerous blacks came from the deep South to fill positions in the city's labor shortages, mainly in tobacco and industry.¹ From 1910 to 1920, there was a one hundred-forty percent increase in the number of Blacks in Hartford. Because of the intense expansion that occurred between World War I and World War II, authoritative disregard and White contempt for the rising Black population, the North End became a predominantly Black ghetto by the 1950's.

¹ Author's interview with Andrew Walsh, 25 September, 2002.

Throughout the fifties and sixties the Black population continued to grow. By the seventies Blacks comprised twenty-eight percent of the city's population. They resided predominantly in the North End where living conditions rapidly declined. Simultaneously other minority groups such as the West Indian and Puerto Rican populations had been growing since the fifties. Waves of White flight ensued along with steadily increasing minority populations. The Upper Albany and Blue Hills neighborhoods that were mostly White in the 1960's, were mostly Black by the 1970's.²

The dilapidating effects of racial tensions that began from this demographic milieu amidst a shrinking industrial economy became increasingly visible in Hartford throughout the sixties.³ Blacks seemed to experience the most serious problems throughout the early sixties, especially in housing. City officials, organizers and business executives turned their heads to the declining conditions of the North End.

A 1963 study in the Hartford Times showed that problems with housing stemmed from the fact that key financial institutions "shunned the slums." Hartford insurance companies refused to write fire and liability insurance in North End housing. Banks often declined to mortgage North End homes. De facto segregation in housing was worse in Hartford than anywhere else on the northeastern seaboard.⁴ Code inspection officers for buildings, facilities and apartment complexes worked haphazardly when gathering data in the North End community. Bad conditions went unnoticed and North End residents avoided rent payments for extremely poor housing. When landlords finally did collect

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Discussion of Bruce M. Stave, "Making Hartford Home: Moral History of the 20th Century Ethnic Development in Connecticut's Capital City," in *Hartford, the City and the Region*, ed. Sandra Stave, (University of Hartford, 1979), p. 33. In Susannah Clifford, *The American Catholic Church and the civil rights movement, 1960-1969*, (Trinity College, Department of History, 1984), p. 85.

rents, they turned it over to the city rather than allocate funds to repair plumbing systems or utilities. After six months without code enforcement, apartments simply decayed to critically low points. The trend flourished in the North End while city officials continued to avoid critical assessment of the “slums.”⁵ To make matters worse, twenty-eight percent of the Black population was poverty stricken by 1963.⁶

Hartford’s major issues through the sixties and seventies affected education, housing, and job opportunities. Conditions brought the question of racial makeup to the forefront. The school system was constantly struggling to maintain an extremely low degree of integration among the students, teachers, and administrators. At the same time, there was very little space to accommodate the huge numbers of youth brought on by a constantly increasing birthrate. School environments throughout the city were in relatively poor condition, especially in the North End, largely due to the severe degree of segregation.⁷

The Harvard Graduate School of Education conducted a study in the mid-sixties that urged new school development and focused specifically on discouraging segregation in Hartford schools. The group came up with a plan to restructure the traditional educational breakdown that occurred from a neighborhood-based school system: kindergarten to eighth grade in one school, then high school at another. Instead, the plan developed three zones that urged integration at the earliest level of education. Students would begin in neighborhood schools from kindergarten to fourth grade, then onto

⁵ Author’s interview with Robert Mitchell, 20 October 2002.

⁶ Stave in Clifford, p. 85.

⁷ Walsh.

middle schools with blended populations, and finally onto one of the three hopefully racially balanced high schools in the North End, Asylum Hill, and the South End.⁸

Harvard's school development plan was tested in the 1960's with the construction of two middle schools in the North End, rather than in the South End where a third middle school already existed. From the start, local whites, primarily in the South End, were agitated by the integration effort. "A widespread attitude of 'well my kids aren't going to school with *those* kids in *that* neighborhood'" seemed to be the predominant expression in answer to the push for integration.⁹ Also, with serious segregation still existing in housing and employment, the chances to turn the focus towards integrating the school system were slim. Lewis Fox, the head of the Board of Education during this period, actually facilitated segregation by selectively applying the Harvard Plan. Inevitably, the plan failed.¹⁰

The civil rights issues facing Hartford in 1964 and 1965 symbolized a national trend that emerged from Lyndon B. Johnson's somewhat idealistic "Great Society" plan in 1963, which aimed to solve problems in urban planning with a series of civil rights projects by funneling money to neighborhoods. However, the Vietnam War effort curbed several of these funding plans as cities began to suffer serious tax base problems. Because of that, the driving conflict behind the civil rights struggle was confusion as to where to place financial support, and whether the main impetus for spearheading educational, business, and neighborhood development should come from community

⁸ Walsh.

⁹ Author's interview with Reverend King T. Hayes, 9 October 2002.

¹⁰ Walsh.

participation or elite business and civic figures.¹¹ As stated previously, Hartford's elite business firms had already begun to turn their backs on the "slums."

Black people were not alone in the midst of these glaring civil rights inadequacies. Puerto Ricans had been migrating to Hartford since the 1950s to fill labor shortages and work tobacco, initially residing in camps owned by the Shade Tobacco Growers Agricultural Association. In the beginning, many came to work during the tobacco season, living in barracks outside of Hartford, only to return to Puerto Rico at the end of the season. However, by 1957, three thousand Puerto Ricans lived in Hartford. That number increased tenfold in three years.¹²

With major population increases up through the early sixties, Puerto Ricans continued to settle in "the North End and the spotty enclaves developing near the South Green Park and Chapel Street areas, as well as in Frog Hollow and Parkville."¹³ Their language and ethnicity already placed them on bad footing with Hartford residents. Hartford residents and city officials expected that Puerto Ricans would simply "adapt and assimilate." A journalist for the *Hartford Courant* stated in 1954 that "their language and foreign culture will be a block to better jobs, the education and the homes most Americans are used to." And surely, for Puerto Ricans in the 1950's, their language and culture posed many early obstacles that would play out in later years.¹⁴

Puerto Ricans and Blacks living in the North End faced similar experiences regarding the culture of the "slums." By the late fifties, early sixties, there was a severe lack of housing. Puerto Ricans that obtained housing dealt with unsanitary conditions and

¹¹ Walsh.

¹² Jose Cruz, *Identity and Power, Puerto Rican Politics and the Challenge of Ethnicity*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1998, p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 50.

landlords' discrimination practices. Despite low pay rates and Hartford's relatively high cost of living, Puerto Rican residents faced extremely high rents. It was regular practice for landlords to rent out at prices substantially higher than the city council's welfare fair rent formula. "They are the city's most exploited tenants and their housing is the city's worst. The general housing picture is nearly identical to that of the Negro in the North End."¹⁵ Because of the language barrier, many Puerto Ricans relied on interpreters (that were sparsely available) to communicate their problems to public officials.¹⁶ Also, grave inadequacies in rights to employment, education, and discrimination continued to plague Puerto Ricans on up through the sixties. In essence, "Hartford was the Mississippi of the North."¹⁷

The initial push for civil rights in the sixties relied on the groundwork of some groups that had already been active in Hartford. In order to help blacks and Puerto Ricans obtain rights in housing, employment, education, and welfare, the Urban League of Greater Hartford started an employment agency in 1963. In 1967 it spearheaded a "Job Now" campaign that joined forces with local manufacturing firms to place blacks and Puerto Ricans in job qualification and training programs.¹⁸

The NAACP had a strong presence in legal and public policy initiatives throughout the Hartford civil rights movement. Its roots can be traced back to a 1917 visit from W. E. B. DuBois, teacher and co-founder of the NAACP, and James Weldon Johnson, field secretary for the NAACP. Two years later, a Hartford chapter opened and served through the 1960's as a unifying legal and public policy force within the black

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 44.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 52.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Julius Newman, 11 November 2002.

community. In 1943, it established the state's Human Rights Commission. Partnerships of various groups with the NAACP are seen throughout the discussion of Hartford's civil rights scene.¹⁹

The move to immediate action as a leeway to constructing civil rights policy came from the NAACP's work with the North End Community Action Committee (NECAP). It began as a pilot tutorial program developed to support protests in the South, then turned its agenda locally by protesting the housing, employment, and education discrimination that was reflected in the North End community.²⁰ NECAP's connection to the national movement could trace its foundations to the efforts of Reverend Richard Battles at Mount Olive Baptist Church, who maintained close relations with Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC).²¹ NECAP was successful in pushing for better jobs and more open and affordable housing in Hartford's black community.

Robert Mitchell, a student at Trinity College from 1960 to 1964, was one of the co-founders of NECAP. Aside from his involvement in Martin Luther King's Community to Defend Equality (CODE), there was no other impetus for civil rights work at Trinity. He and fellow civil rights-conscious students were disturbed by the fact that there were only two Blacks in their class, and not a single Black professors, or professional worker at Trinity. With the exception of a few in the Howard Johnson food service, there was little Black presence at Trinity. Looking back, Mitchell laments that he did not get more directly involved in assessing Trinity's own racial issues.²²

¹⁸ *The Hartford Courant*, 19 December 1967, p. 1. Discussion in Clifford, p. 85.

¹⁹ Alan Bisbort, "A History of a Struggle," (Hartford Advocate Home Page). Copyright 1999. Collected on September 19, 2002. <http://www.hartfordadvocate.com/articles/blackandwhite3.html>, p. 1.

²⁰ Clifford, p. 86.

²¹ Bisbort, <http://www.hartfordadvocate.com/articles/blackandwhite3.html>, p. 1.

²² Author's interview with Robert Mitchell, 20 October 2002.

CODE, though fruitful in developing Mitchell's initial civil rights ideology, lacked the cohesion and focus needed to make serious differences in the problems that faced the community surrounding Trinity. The advisory board was composed of primarily political science professors and Black community leaders, including Reverend Battles. Mitchell became disenchanted with CORE for its lack of organization and conception as to what needed to be accomplished at the street level. So he started to recruit Trinity and Hartford Seminary students from within and outside the program to branch out into the community. They began by setting up an office in the heart of the North End.²³

NECAP's first direct involvement was with the Hartford school system. At this time the Board of Education operated "gifted child programs," a process through which "gifted" students were weeded out of the supposedly poor, low grade schools in the Hartford school system, and then placed in better schools with college preparatory programs. The program was a segregating mechanism by which White students were pulled out of predominantly Black classrooms. The common racist misconception during this period was that Black students were "slow learners that could not get by in decent schools or hack it in the normal school system." Segregationists believed that the reason why schools located in the North End were failing stemmed from problems with the students themselves.²⁴

NECAP began by conducting research and investigation into these situations. In the summer of 1963 they obtained a grant that was used to establish summer tutorial programs for local Black students that were denied adequate education opportunities in the Hartford school system. The goal was to prove, on paper through test scores, that

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

North End Black students were just as smart as White students, and therefore, should be accepted in White schools and “gifted student programs.” That summer, NECAP students tutored one thousand children in the North End.²⁵

Shortly thereafter, NECAP began to assess Hartford’s housing issue. Despite City Manager Elisha Freedman’s warning that the city would not tolerate protest in the form of pickets and demonstrations, NECAP conducted a rally outside City Hall to protest the lack of a definitive housing code regarding rodent control, sanitary conditions, and development issues facing the North End. The event culminated in a sit-in that refused to disperse until the proper authorities listened to several widespread housing complaints. Eventually, City Hall agreed to establish a housing authority field office in the North End.²⁶

Utilizing connections established early in CODE, NECAP representatives started to approach business employers and Republican councilmen for support in spearheading programs to facilitate equal opportunity employment and combat employment discrimination. They held pickets and demonstrations to place Blacks in “visible positions” in stores and restaurants throughout Hartford. Blacks filled some menial positions as dishwashers or stock boys in backrooms and kitchens, but NECAP worked to place skilled workers in waiting and cashier positions.²⁷ In 1963, they picketed Carville’s, a restaurant in Windsor, to protest blatant employment discrimination. Though thirteen people were arrested from the demonstration, the owner agreed to hire six Blacks for

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Discussion of *The Hartford Courant*, 3 August 1963, p. 1, in Clifford 87.

²⁷ Ibid.

visible positions in ninety days. As a result of NECAP-led demonstrations, eventually a second restaurant, diner, and a dairy each placed Black workers in visible positions.²⁸

Much of NECAP's employment work was connected to the larger civil rights movement in the South. They led a major initiative to integrate Hartford lunch counters where, since the arrival of the first Black residents, Blacks were disallowed from eating with Whites. Two downtown department stores, J. J. Woolworth and J. J. Newbury, were connected to a chain with locations in Greensboro, North Carolina, that refused to hire Blacks. Though the Hartford branches hired them, NECAP picketed the stores as representatives of their Southern racist counterparts. During the demonstration, Mitchell went on radio, publicly criticizing the chain for its civil rights violations in Greensboro.²⁹

Various Church groups participated on several levels with NECAP. The first avenue of church participation was a financial one. As treasurer, Mitchell traveled from church to church advertising NECAP's tutorial and daycare programs and soliciting donations. Though few White ministers rarely got involved directly with NECAP activities, they made sporadic twenty-five to fifty dollar donations. The donations helped pay for guest speakers, demonstrations, literature drops, and a monographer. Joe Duffy, a charismatic spokesperson for NECAP, was a formative representative of the Presbyterian Church Council for Social Responsibility.³⁰

In 1965, along with the NAACP, the Catholic Interracial Council of Hartford, and the Connecticut Race & Religion Committee, NECAP protested through sit-ins and demonstrations against the United Postal Service and the Hartford Chamber of Commerce because of labor discrimination. The campaign went on for two weeks until

²⁸ Discussion of the *The Hartford Times*, 13 July 1963, p. 1, in Clifford, p. 86.

²⁹ Mitchell.

UPS agreed to establish a “Human Relations Program,” a special recruiting initiative that focused on training, then hiring minorities for eight positions at all levels within the company.³¹

James Henderson, President of the Hartford Catholic Interracial Council, assisted NECAP, along with several other civil rights and education representatives, in an ongoing dispute with the Superintendent Kenneth Meinke, to desegregate the schools. School officials insisted that students attend school in their own neighborhoods, which only assured consistent segregation. Meinke constantly avoided the issue. He claimed that the only way to solve the problem was with integrated housing. Because of continued pressure from NECAP and other civil rights groups, he issued a plan to integrate junior high schools while continuing neighborhood-based elementary schools. However, he warned that if it caused exodus from the neighborhoods, he would immediately abandon the initiative. White families feared that it could only lead to integration in the elementary schools and threatened to leave the city if Meinke’s plan was put into effect. When the South End Betterment League, founded by Frank Russo, exhibited staunch vocal opposition, Meinke relinquished his plan for integration. James Henderson publicly defended the initiative and denounced Meinke’s failure to act: “Meinke should not be influenced by the threats of a few White families to leave the city, but should back, and the school board put into practice, a policy of full integration at all levels.” However, it was not until 1969 that the Board of Education adopted an all-inclusive desegregation

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Clifford, 89.

code that threatened to cut off State funds to segregated schools in districts that failed to comply with the regulations.³²

NECAP, despite its financial connection with many White churches, experienced sporadic conflicts with non-supportive White church representatives. One incident occurred during a picket at one of the “gifted” school programs where Black parents wanted their children to have the opportunity to take entrance exams into the school. A man from one of the local Catholic churches appeared with a few “intimidating guys” in order to defend segregation. That same day, a white minister approached Mitchell with a “financial benefactor” to inquire about making donations, and asked to take a look at the books. The benefactor turned out to be an undercover *Hartford Times* reporter investigating NECAP’s financial record for communist donations.³³

The initiatives begun by NECAP and other civil rights groups were small solutions to major problems that mushroomed into two years of intermittent violence and dangerous racial tension in the Hartford riots. In July of 1967, violence ensued in response to the arrest of a Black teenager that was kicked out of a North End luncheonette for using “bad language.” Violence spread throughout the city and into the next night. Hartford declared a state of emergency with fifteen damaged stores, nine arrests made, and thirteen injuries, eleven of which were police officers. Mayor George Kinsella placed the blame on the behavior of a few bad, but influential individuals in the North End. Black leaders and city officials saw the violence as obvious backlash in

³² Clifford, 89.

³³ Mitchell.

response to unemployment, poverty, degrading treatment from Whites, and the city's apparent lack of concern for these serious issues.³⁴

The violence continued. A second riot occurred in September of 1967 after police arrested twenty people during a demonstration against housing discrimination. Later that day, ten people were arrested during a demonstration against police brutality at the Hartford Police Department.³⁵ Another riot occurred in April of 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. It spread throughout the city, damaging twenty-one stores and businesses.³⁶ The worst violence in the North End occurred during the summer riots of 1969. On June 5, bystanders attacked police officers that came to break up a fight that ensued after a dance. Riot spread throughout the North End and “two-thirds of the police force was mobilized to combat roving gangs of youths who threw stones, bricks, bottles and chunks of cement at them.” Police tear-gassed entire crowds, “sometimes as large as 250 people.”³⁷

Reverend King Hayes of Shiloh Baptist Church reflected on his perception of the North End violence. There used to be an Irish Tavern and a Stop and Shop that were located in the adjoining lots to Shiloh Baptist Church. Both were burned down during the riots. “Gangs of rioters used firebombs and Molotov cocktails to burn and loot White-owned establishments.” Though he intensely disagreed with the violent backlash, Hayes perceived the riots to be “Hartford’s response to a growing consciousness of racism as

³⁴ Discussion of *The Hartford Times*, 13 July 1967, p. 1, in Clifford, p. 90.

³⁵ Discussion of *The Hartford Courant*, 19 September 1967, p. 1, in Clifford 91.

³⁶ Discussion of *The Hartford Times*, 5 April 1968, p. 1, in Clifford 92.

³⁷ “Shots Fired in North End Violence,” in *The Hartford Courant*, 5 June 1969, p.1.

rioters were spilling over with an impetus to riot against the powers that deny their rights.”³⁸

The Black citizens of the North End had reached a breaking point while city officials consistently denied the fact that racial tensions and discrimination were at the root of the violence. Councilman Collin Bennett, who toured the North End shortly after the violence had ceased late Thursday night, blamed the violence on the fact that “too many children are allowed to stay out late at night.”³⁹ Mayor Uccello and the Hartford City Council answered the riots by issuing a nightly curfew.⁴⁰

The worst was yet to come in the form of a five-day riot that occurred in September of 1969. There were five hundred arrests and one hundred-twenty destructive fires. Four people were shot and even three small children were severely injured because of tear-gas. The local Black leaders condemned the riots, but it became very clear that Hartford’s sporadic, slow, and unpredictable civil rights initiatives were insufficient to face the magnitude of the problem.⁴¹

The Puerto Rican community also responded with violence against several years of discrimination and poor living conditions with the Comanchero and Labor Day riots in the summer of 1969. Long-standing tensions between Puerto Rican residents and a White-ethnic motorcycle gang erupted in a riot through Hartford’s South Green on August 10 after the gang assaulted an elderly Puerto Rican man at a Main Street bar. The police seemed to single out the Puerto Rican community while ignoring the Comancheros. “The police were singling out Puerto Ricans while looking the other way

³⁸ Hayes.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

⁴⁰ “Curfew Stops Violence,” in *The Hartford Courant*, 7 June 1969, p. 1.

⁴¹ Discussion of the *The Hartford Courant*, 3 September 1969, p. 1.

where gang members were concerned.⁴² Again, the Mayor responded with a twelve-hour curfew. Two Puerto Rican community leaders, Alejandro La Luz and Ramon Quiroz, encouraged the community to publicly reject the racist insults from an article in the *Hartford Times* that referred to Puerto Ricans as “pigs.” Violence lasted for one week and spread from the Clay Hill and Arsenal neighborhoods in the North End to the South Green and Charter Oak areas in the South End. Sixty-seven stores were looted, one policeman was shot, and about five hundred arrests were made, half of which were Puerto Ricans. “Mayor Uccello lifted the state of emergency with a plea for help from the suburbs. ‘The suburbs must absorb some of the population of the inner city.’” Uccello suggested the riots were evidence of the dangerous tendencies from “aberrant members of the Puerto Rican and Black communities.”⁴³

Councilman Bennett, on the other hand, saw in the riots the devastating affects of the language barrier that existed between city officials and the Spanish-speaking community. For example, police brutality, a prime issue surrounding the Comanchero riot, stemmed from the lack of Spanish interpreters in the Hartford Police Department.⁴⁴ Still, Father Segundo Las Heras, a Spanish priest at Sacred Heart Church, explained the riots as violent reactions fueled by the disgust and resentment of Puerto Rican “ghetto dwellers over living conditions that turned anger into violence.”⁴⁵

Both the Puerto Rican and black experience in the riots from 1967 to 1969 were violent reactions to racial tension and discrimination. It was painstakingly obvious that more needed to be done concerning the civil rights milieu in Hartford. I have discussed

⁴² Cruz, p. 56.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 56-60.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 60.

up to this point the kinds of racial tensions and civil rights inadequacies that Blacks and Puerto Ricans faced in the North End. I have also highlighted the significant civil rights groups that were active during this period. Now I will turn my discussion over to concentrate solely on the involvement of Black and White ministers and church groups within these communities concerning civil rights.

The Black church is a profound organization that is looked to by the black community for leadership, and the Black preacher has been a unifying force in all facets of life.

Congregations look to Black church leadership to fulfill essential roles such as father/mother, shepherd, preacher, leader of community causes, and overseer for all ministries of the church, whether directly administering them or utilizing other ministers to assist in the process.⁴⁶

The Black preacher is a resource broker for church and community members, assisting with housing, food, clothing, family issues, or economic crises. More importantly, the black preacher is the program administrator, teacher, and interpreter of the American Black experience.⁴⁷

Usually in order to accomplish anything in the Black church, it must begin with the minister, thereby empowering Church volunteers to get involved in various initiatives. To the Black community, the minister is a visionary, standing on the cutting edge with a clear look at a more positive future. They have definitive insight into God's plan. This image of the Black minister/leader is historically reminiscent of slavery times and of Africa, in the character of the medicine man. "He's the one with the power and the

⁴⁶ Esther L. Bush, *The State of Black Hartford*, (Hartford: Urban League of Greater Hartford, Inc.), 1994, p. 200.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

influence.”⁴⁸ This role is most important when considering the Black minister’s primary role concerning civil rights and social ministry.⁴⁹

Reverend King Hayes commented on the advantage that Black ministers have over White ministers when it comes to working in the North End. The advantage stems from the initial power relationship between the pulpit and the pews. “In the White church, whatever the minister says is second to the voice of the people in the pews. What’s said in the Black church needs no second; what the minister says is profound, responded to with an adamant Amen!”⁵⁰ Considering the problems that Hartford faced during the sixties and seventies, and in view of those that still exist and are foreseen, the presence of the Black preacher among the people and conditions in the North End, also puts him in better position to be affective in civil rights.⁵¹

Unfortunately, that kind of position comes with its fair share of baggage. During a meeting held by the Black Panthers in a church basement in the midst of the summer riots in 1969, an enraged North End resident accused the ministers for being superficial leaders. “Where were the preachers when we were getting tear-gassed? Where are they when they’re needed?” Since ministers are spokespeople of the religious communities they represent, many suggested that they spent too much time in meetings with Whites, rather than in the community at the most sensitive times. At the same meeting, a White minister stood up to defend the Black ministers, stating that when the “so-called leaders of the North End,” are crucified by their own community when times are rough. But

⁴⁸ Hayes.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

when they attempt to do something constructive, their critics refuse to take them seriously.⁵²

Reverend King Hayes, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church on Albany Avenue for twenty-seven years, is heir to a rich tradition in civil rights and has been at the center of the movement on a variety of levels. Hayes spent his early childhood in Cuthbert, Georgia where he found inspiration from his father's unwavering work ethic in various civil rights movements, especially voter registration for Blacks in the South.

Upon high school graduation he came to Connecticut via a contract that Morehouse College had with the Tobacco Growers of Connecticut. He worked in Simsbury on the same farm that Martin Luther King had worked. By living in Hartford he developed a "great empathy" for the civil rights struggle. At age nineteen he joined the NAACP in picketing downtown businesses that discriminated against Blacks. Creskus and Grant dime stores, which refused to hire Blacks, and Carville's restaurant, that refused to serve them, are two examples.⁵³ He also worked with students at Trinity to establish the Community Organizational Program, a small organization based at first in Windsor, that focused on planning pickets and demonstrations on businesses in problem areas in Hartford's surrounding cities.

Hayes joined Shiloh Baptist Church shortly after his decision to reside in Hartford. Shiloh Baptist Church is the first church in Hartford that was built by blacks from the ground up and it boasts a rich tradition in civil rights under the leadership of Reverend Robert Moody, who came to the pastorate in 1929. Moody instituted several church-based social projects that reached out to the North End community. These

⁵² Excerpts from video footage of the meeting with the Black Panthers and Hartford residents during the riots of 1969. Footage courtesy of the Hartford Works Project.

included a breakfast and school lunch program for young students and a clothing exchange for the homeless.⁵⁴

During Moody's pastorate, Hayes was a deacon for Shiloh Baptist and served as superintendent of the Sunday school for thirteen years. The church recognized his call to the Christian ministry and nominated him to become a licentiate. He graduated from Hartford Seminary's first Black Ministry Program. He was ordained in 1969 and served as interim minister at the New Canaan Community Baptist Church, the Greater Faith Baptist Church of Stamford, the Community Baptist church of New Haven, and the Third Baptist Church of Suffield. He was ordained pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in 1976.⁵⁵

Reverend Hayes's exerted his most profound civil rights ministry in education. He is a former director of Christian Education for the Connecticut Missionary Convention and a former vice president and chairman of the Education Committee for the Hartford branch of the NAACP. "The NAACP's Education Committee was very profound in bringing attention to politicians and Hartford residents that there was inequality in education because Hartford schools were de facto segregated."⁵⁶ They gathered statistics of Blacks and Whites in North End schools and then challenged the Board of Education. They cited evidence from Bulkely High School, an all-White school that refused to admit Blacks. Reverend Hayes personally contacted the superintendent, Kenneth Meinke, and "like a prophet, Meinke told [him]: If I integrate, the parents will move out of town." Upon achieving minimal success in admitting a handful of Black students into Bulkely High School, several white families withdrew their children.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ King T. Hayes, *A Historical Profile of Fifteen Black Churches in Connecticut*, (Hartford: Trinity College), 1992, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Hayes.

With the NAACP Hayes led several picket demonstrations in schools located in the South End. The Education Committee developed several reports of continued de facto segregation in schools throughout the area and fought to place more Black teachers and principals in the school system. Even up into the seventies there were no Black principals in the Hartford School system, despite the presence of degrees. The NAACP Chief of Education came from the New York City headquarters to deliver a speech about de facto segregation, to be followed by warnings of legal action on Hartford's Board of Education for continuing segregation in the school system. Hayes collaborated with Attorney Lou Fox, who was extensively involved with the NAACP, and Frank Simpson, the first black chairperson of the State Human Rights commission, on several education initiatives.⁵⁷

Reverend Hayes stressed the fact that during the early to mid-seventies, Hartford's neighborhoods continued to change dramatically, and unresolved education issues from the sixties lay dormant. Education codes were not concretely specified and Board of Education directors were extremely lax when it came to assessing civil rights inadequacies in schools. The principal of the Fred D. Wish School, who was "dogmatic in her racism," cited evolutionary evidence for white superior intelligence when she encouraged teachers, Black teachers included, to not give A's to Black students. She refused to have an active Parent Teacher Association. Hayes's commission distributed pamphlets and held PTA organizational meetings with parents of students attending the school. Then the Education Committee presented a plan for a functioning PTA before the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

superintendent and the Board of Education. The Board of Education approved the plan and members elected officers to the Fred D. Wish PTA.⁵⁸

An active civil rights pacifist, Reverend Hayes has always championed peaceful but unwavering resistance to the racial and poverty issues facing the Hartford community. In an effort to maintain programs begun by his mentor, Reverend Moody, Reverend Hayes implemented the after school daycare and Sunday school education initiatives to prepare students for an education with a profound commitment to civil rights awareness. “Community organization, starting at a young age, not violence, is needed to cure the city’s illnesses.”⁵⁹

Guided by “Christian social consciousness,” Reverend Hayes applied his charisma beyond the North End to include an amalgam of White and Black churches on several committees geared towards improving Hartford’s human relations. In the 1980’s Shiloh Baptist Church pioneered interracial partnerships with predominantly white suburban churches, in which eleven Black and eleven White churches were paired. Hayes is a former subcommittee chairman on housing for the Hartford Council of Churches, a committee that completed a profile study on Blacks in suburban housing. With goals to develop concrete civil rights legislation, he established Hartford’s first interracial ministers’ council, the Hartford City Wide Clergy. He urged that “ministers are the natural lobbyists for their constituents.” It was co-founded with Reverend James Kidd of Asylum Hill Congregational Church and Reverend Michael DeVito, head of the Hartford deanery of Catholic churches, in order to improve urban problems with housing, drugs,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

AIDS and the quality of public education.⁶⁰ Active since his youth in the civil rights movement, Reverend King Hayes has conducted his tri-decade career at the helm of several civil rights initiatives in partnership with the intimate parish of Shiloh Baptist Church, and with a citywide community of civil rights empathizers.

Reverend Richard Battles of Mount Olive Baptist Church was another formative figure throughout the Hartford civil rights movement. He grew up in North Carolina, and was influenced by his minister that “would go out of his way to see that the people of his community who needed employment got it.”⁶¹ After graduating Union Theological Seminary in New York, Reverend Battles became assistant pastor at Amity Baptist church in Jamaica, Long Island. He had the opportunity to preach at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Dexter Hill Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Largely due to King’s influence, he became increasingly active in the civil rights movement, primarily in fair employment initiatives. While serving a pastorate for Baptist Church in Brewster, New York, he was appointed as regional director of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁶²

Reverend Battles formed Hartford’s own CORE chapter and served as a NECAP leader for a brief period. He was president of the Board of Education until he resigned in 1971, wishing to return to private life in order to become more actively engaged in working for the Black and Puerto Rican communities. He was elected unanimously to the board in 1967 and was named a special assistant in urban affairs to Dr. Ralph C. Abernathy, president of the SCLC. His involvement in a controversy regarding the integration of Clay Hills Middle School, the first part of a plan from the Board of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ David Holmberg, “Leader of the Lowly” in *The Hartford Times*, 22 January 1971, p. 6.

Education to integrate the seventh and eighth grades, was a major reason behind his decision.⁶³

In Hartford we are building new middle schools planned and designed for seventh and eighth grade children. There has been severe opposition from one particular area of the city to this plan. The opposition is based a large degree on the fear of sending white children to a school in a predominantly black neighborhood which has been depicted as 'unsafe,' for children of that age level.⁶⁴

The Board of Education's disregard for Black students' safety in the reversed scenario fueled his disenchantment. By constantly pushing for consideration of several alternatives, Reverend Battles made a lot of enemies in both the White and Black communities. Since his resignation, his main objectives focused on "bringing all the elements of the community together, and to work for the common good of the children in the education system." As pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church, Reverend Battles continued to work consistently for employment and education rights for Hartford Blacks and Puerto Ricans.⁶⁵ For the final part of this paper I will discuss the role of white churches in the civil rights movement, highlighting the story and ministry of Bishop Peter Rosazza.

The Catholic Church has always taken a more passive approach to Hartford civil rights. In most cases, individual ministers and lay people stand out in the crux of the movement while the presence of the Church seems to take a backseat to the major civil rights initiatives, especially in the North End. "While the Catholic Church was not outstanding, it was not apathetic." Most likely the spiritual pressure that derives from a theological, "Christian Social Gospel," and social pressure from the movement in the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ W. Edward Wendover, "Battles Will Leave Board of Education," in *The Hartford Times*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

South had demanded from the Catholic Church some type of response. Priests in Hartford responded in several, though passive, ways.⁶⁶

The formation of the Hartford Catholic Interracial Council in 1963, organized by Father William McGrath and Father Leonard Tartaglia, two North End priests, began as a venue to develop interfaith discussion to promote better human relations among Hartford communities. CIC's early work focused on education workshops supplemented with speech bureaus and civil rights lectures, in preparation for more formative activity in voter registration, housing, education, and employment.⁶⁷

CIC facilitated a partnership with the NAACP to conduct a voter registration drive in the North End. That same year it worked with the Hartford branch of Project Equality to contact employers in the Chamber of Commerce to promote more equal employment initiatives. They participated with NECAP in demonstrations against the United Postal Service for its employment discrimination practices in 1965. The CIC recruited white volunteers from within and outside the organization to be housing testers, aiding specifically non-Whites to secure housing in predominantly White neighborhoods. They collected cross-cultural statistics on "slum housing" and housing code violations with a commentary on the city and state standards, then publicized them to draw public attention to the housing problems faced by non-Whites.⁶⁸

Interfaith and interracial church organizations have always stood at the forefront of the Hartford civil rights movement. In 1968, the Program for Cooperative Parish Sharing, the Twinning Program, and the Archdiocesan Office of Urban Affairs were

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 63.

⁶⁶ Clifford, p. 98.

⁶⁷ Clifford, p. 100.

⁶⁸ Discussion of *The Hartford Courant*, 27 May 1965, p. 26, in Clifford, p. 101.

developed to meet the needs exemplified by Hartford's inner-city congregations. The Cooperative Parish Sharing initiative was a general fund set aside to make financial resources and technical assistance more readily accessible for inner-city parishes, regardless of their church affiliation.⁶⁹

The Twinning Program paired suburban parishes with inner-city parishes. Suburban parishes would donate a portion of their weekly collections to provide regular financial support to their urban "twin." Auxiliary Bishop Donnelly developed an advisory board of thirty priests to examine ways in which the Catholic Church could better respond to urban parish needs. The board, modeled after the National Urban Task Force of American Bishops, made the Office of Urban Affairs in order to train urban staff on how to obtain financial and technical resources for inner-city parishes, articulating the need to develop prospective public policy.⁷⁰

The Archdiocesan Office of Urban Affairs' most complex piece of public policy was the "Farmington Papers," a body of documents geared to assist urban poor and migrant populations. The policy sought to construct a field office for Spanish-speaking interpreters for arrest and booking procedures. It also urged Church support for the participation of poor people in public relations by planning an "Archdiocesan Embassy for the Poor," that hoped to include their voice in lobbying urban legislative initiatives. To assess housing deficiencies, parishes would donate church-owned properties as collateral for funds to develop prospective space for housing. To engage the community

⁶⁹ Clifford, p. 104.

⁷⁰ Clifford, p. 104.

within the Church and produce more employment opportunities, parishes would create job openings within their own institutions for unemployed workers.⁷¹

Unfortunately, the Farmington Papers were not approved, but they did succeed in developing a deeper awareness among the Archdiocesan hierarchy when it came to constructing prospective future urban assistance projects.⁷² One of which was Project Concern, a voluntary busing and integration program that began in 1967 to bring inner-city Hartford children to suburban Catholic schools in Manchester, West Hartford, New Haven, and Plainville. Funding was provided by the Hartford Board of Education until lack of sufficient funds caused the project to discontinue in 1981. The Archdiocese also allocated funds to sponsor twenty-five thousand housing units in Connecticut.⁷³ These are the most significant institutional projects carried out by the Hartford Catholic Church. Most civil rights activity, with exception of behind-the-scenes financial support, usually came from individual Catholic priests.

The hierarchy within the Hartford Catholic Church was very moderate in the realm of civil rights, yet encouraged their clergy at varying levels to be sympathetic to the needs of the Hartford community. Archbishop Henry O'Brien was a staunch supporter, an "enabler" that was generous with financial and spiritual support for priests that wanted to get directly involved in Hartford's civil rights. For example, he gave free reign to clergy and lay people to participate in the Selma march, sending fifteen to twenty busloads, including at least five Hartford priests, throughout the Archdiocese.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 106.

⁷² Ibid, p. 109.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 113.

On the whole the Hartford Catholic Church was strong on policy, but weak in implementation of their somewhat grandiose civil rights initiatives. The Farmington Papers were an example of that. Despite a relatively supportive hierarchy, priests often lacked the support from their own parishes. This condition harks back to Reverend King Hayes's discussion on the "power of the priest versus the power in the pews." Given the civil rights atmosphere of Hartford during the sixties and seventies, most white parishioners were either naïve to the issues at hand, or were non-supportive of their parish priests that might have wished to get more directly involved. Most Catholic priests were physically outside Hartford's problem areas in the North End, as most parishes were located downtown towards the South End. Ten percent of Catholic priests played active roles as "ghetto workers," and the other ninety percent were either passive or opposed. These conditions certainly played a role in the "laissez-faire attitude on the part of the Church, whose level of commitment and activity was lacking in relation to the seriousness of the problem."⁷⁵

Despite the Catholic Church's aloof history concerning the civil rights movement, Bishop Rosazza stood out as a glaring exception because of a deep commitment to working for the poor and lower classes. That drive facilitated an intimate connection to the Puerto Rican community in Hartford's North End. "I've always had my greatest happiness in the streets, working with the people." That simple statement vouches for the success of Bishop Rosazza's work in Sacred Heart Church on Albany Avenue.⁷⁶

Bishop Rosazza's personal commitment to Christian "social thinking" was a primary foundation to his impetus for civil rights. It developed intensely during the

⁷⁵ Hayes.
Quote from Clifford, p. 114.

second half of his seminary preparation for the priesthood in Paris. While in Europe, Rosazza traveled to the Holy Land, Yugoslavia, Southern Italy, and Turkey, where he saw enduring spirituality emerge from extreme poverty. “I was inspired by people like that, and seeing the poor. You see all this poverty and then it hits you.” Fellow seminarians and mentors were intimately involved with the French working class and had actually fought and died in the Algerian War. He carried that sensitivity for the poor and working classes back to the United States where he participated in the Priest Worker Movement. The movement was active during the 1940’s, following World War II. Priests worked on construction sites and in the factories to reach out to the working classes in hopes of gathering them into the Church.⁷⁷

During the civil rights explosions of 1968 and 1969, Father⁷⁸ Rosazza was teaching Spanish and theology at St. Thomas Seminary. His friend, Father Segundo Las Heras, whom we discussed earlier, was working alone at Sacred Heart Parish. There were about sixteen thousand people in the North End during that period, and Puerto Ricans, who comprised the majority of his congregation, were still migrating to Hartford by the thousands. As the lone priest in one of the few Catholic churches in the North End, it was a very difficult job for him, both emotionally and physically. He asked Father Rosazza to come join him at Sacred Heart at the end of 1971. Father Rosazza was the only priest that spoke Spanish who wasn’t involved in a parochial position. Father Heras urged: “You’ve got sixteen kids in your classroom, there’s sixteen thousand people in the North End. Where do you think God needs you?” And of course, the answer was obvious.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Author’s interview with Bishop Peter Rosazza, 9 October 2002.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Father” used to denote that he was a priest at the time. This was before his Bishopric.

⁷⁹ Rosazza.

The Archdiocese operated on a competitive volunteer basis when priests chose to seek out their own spiritual missions in positions throughout the region. "But you can be sure that there weren't many people lining up for Sacred Heart." Father Rosazza obtained permission from the Superior of St. Thomas. He then received permission and support from Archbishop John Wailand to work "in the poorest, toughest place, in the inner city." So Father Las Heras and Father Rosazza were made co-pastors of the parish on 6 April 1972.⁸⁰

Shortly thereafter Father Tom Gettry joined the parish and the three started a St. Vincent De Paul Society. They contacted other Catholic and non-Catholic parishes within the area, to conduct a charity drive sponsored by the Greater Hartford Area Church Council to collect food, clothing, and furniture for the poor in the neighborhood. The three worked together in this way for the next several months, until a critical event caused them to become directly involved in Hartford civil rights.⁸¹

On 15 January 1973, a Puerto Rican family brought their recently baptized eight-month old daughter, Rosa Rivera, who was suffering from severe diarrhea, coughing, and related sickness to Hartford Hospital. The parents spoke very little English so it was difficult for hospital employees to communicate. Twice, they sent the child home. They then brought her to Mount Sinai Hospital where the baby was placed under the care of a resident rather than a trained pediatrician. Again, the child was sent home. The next day, Rosa Rivera was dead.⁸²

The death of Rosa Rivera was a devastating event for the entire parish community. Sacred Heart Church organized a picket demonstration on Mount Sinai and

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Hartford Hospitals, demanding Spanish interpreters to accommodate Hartford's large Spanish-speaking community. The press also appeared, which seemed to fuel the demonstrators. Hospital officials claimed that there was not enough money in the budget. Rosazza and other spokespeople demanded: "You find the money in the budget, you FIND IT!"⁸³ "From that experience," Bishop Rosazza reflected, "you learn what power you have with numbers."⁸⁴

The years following the Rosa Rivera demonstration, Sacred Heart Parish bolstered several civil rights demonstrations and community betterment initiatives. Father Rosazza consistently worked with various workers' unions throughout the city. He and Father Gettry tried to organize the farm workers in the area that were excluded by the State from NLRV rules. Though NLRV standards were ideologically applied across the nation, they failed to cover domestic or farm workers in Connecticut. Sacred Heart also worked to construct housing, and to "place North End school children in better schools."⁸⁵

During the late seventies, city official Robert Ludkin consistently ignored the fact that several people were living in poverty, holed up in a rundown Hilton Hotel near the Hartford YMCA. The problem had been going on for a while and seemed to go unnoticed by most city officials. Sacred Heart Parish gathered two hundred supporters and accompanied by a television crew, organized a picket demonstration and sit-in at the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "FIND IT" – Bishop Rosazza repeated the phrase and specifically emphasized the words.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Town Manager's office in City Hall. Within weeks, city officials removed the people and found proper places for them to live.⁸⁶

Father Rosazza began a parish youth group with Father Gettry and Sister Mary El Asinqua, a Catholic nun that presently works for the Hartford Institute of Justice. The group was an after-school program and summer school that focused on developing strict Christian social ethics with workshops in critical thinking and inquiry skills. Speakers including high school principals, congressmen, and the mayor added another key dimension to the program. Mayor Eddie Perez participated in the Sacred Heart youth group while growing up in the North End.⁸⁷

Father Rosazza was ordained a Bishop in 1978, but continued to work in Sacred Heart Parish until 1981. He serves on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and has continued a tradition of working for poor and workers' rights. Upon collaboration with a group of Bishops, Nobel Laureates, business leaders, community leaders, and ten thousand written responses from across the country, he co-wrote a document on the American economy with a "Catholic social insight." Mayor Eddie Perez and Professor Frank Kirkpatrick of Trinity College both contributed to the draft. The project took six years as the Bishops worked with economists and city planners to develop a formal critique of the Reagan administration that in an effort to increase defense spending, caused serious cutbacks in social spending, and cut taxes that produced an eighty billion dollar deficit. The document sparked formal discussions and hearings that spread from

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

parish meetings to colleges and universities bent on developing social consciousness regarding these issues.⁸⁸

At about the same time that the Bishops' statement was published, Pope John Paul II had just issued a formal statement with very positive remarks about the ingenuity of business leaders. While Bishop Rosazza was appreciative of those attributes, he knew he'd gone out on a limb by questioning the corporate atmosphere. There were times when his work in the community, locally and nationally, positioned him in conflict against the business establishment. He took a lot of criticism from secular officials, religious authorities, and rightwing Catholics for publicly taking radical stances concerning the economy, class politics, and other civic platforms. However, these conflicts seldom hindered his commitment to civil rights. "We gotta be in the community. We're not monks."⁸⁹

Bishop Rosazza highlighted the fact that the European experience and the Priest Worker Movement certainly should not be exceptional within the Catholic clergy's participation in the civil rights movement. He discussed two major Catholic institutional statements that invoke the Christian social commitment to the poor. On 25 January 1959, the First Vatican Council connected the "Kingdom of God" with the world community, stating that Catholic living should constantly seek to "create conditions so peoples' rights can be achieved." Bishop Rosazza added: "You don't give people rights, they have them, by birth."⁹⁰ He also discussed the inspiration of Pope Paul IV's landmark encyclical in 1968, titled *Popoloto Progressio*, "On the Progress of the People", which encouraged Bishops to revive secular and spiritual service in the face of poverty around their

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

subsequent parishes.⁹¹ Rosazza obviously took both messages to heart as if they themselves were components of a daily creed for his work in Hartford, as well as his lifelong ministry in civil rights, forged in empathy for the poor.

Throughout this project I have tried to develop a story about the Hartford civil rights movement from a religious standpoint. Amidst waves of violence from 1967 to 1969, in answer to decades of repression and simmering racial tensions, religious community leaders arose with non-violent but affective approaches to assess the civil rights issues facing the city. By collecting information from interviews with Andrew Walsh, Robert Mitchell, King Hayes, and Peter Rosazza, I have highlighted the most significant civil rights initiatives concerning the Black and Puerto Rican communities in the North End. By showcasing the stories of Reverend King Hayes, a prolific Black Baptist minister and civil rights activist, and Bishop Peter Rosazza, a White Catholic clergymen that transcended the passivity of the Catholic Church, I have laid the foundations for a much deeper discussion on the contrasting roles of Black and White ministers and Church groups.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

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Excerpts from video footage of the meeting with the Black Panthers and Hartford residents during the riots of 1969. Footage courtesy of the Hartford Studies Project., courtesy of the family of Julian Biggs.

