

PARSONAGE
1110 LIVE OAK

RHODES THOMPSON, JR.
MINISTER

First Christian Church

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE

326 S. PALMETTO
DAYTONA BEACH, FLORIDA

January 24, 1962

To Members of First Christian Church
Daytona Beach, Florida

Dear Friends,

This letter is written for four purposes: (1) to express appreciation; (2) to offer information; (3) to voice some Christian hopes; and (4) to enlist your prayers for God's blessing to be with our church.

The immediate occasion of writing was the presence in our morning service last Sunday of a Negro sister-in-Christ, unknown to any of us before her visit to our service on Sunday.

First of all, appreciation for the warm Christian welcome accorded to her by you and our people most assuredly comes to you from Jesus Christ himself, our eternal contemporary, who says: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40) "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matt. 25:21) To his, let me add my word of pride and appreciation in serving as the minister of a church that really acted like the church, the body of Christ, on Sunday morning!

Secondly, let me more fully introduce our visitor to you. On her way out of church she identified herself to me as Mrs. Julia Wood, new housemother at Meigs Hall, Bethune Cookman College, and a member of the Christian Church in Louisville, Ky. When she indicated a desire to worship here when her duties permit, I stopped by to visit with her on Monday to know her better. I discovered that she received her Bachelor's degree in Sacred Literature from The College of the Scriptures, an institution maintained by some independent Christian Churches in Louisville, Ky. A veteran of the U.S. Women's Army Corps during World War II, a teacher of retarded children for several years, a widow as of last spring, she arrived here on December 28 to begin her new work.

What shall we do? Since we are not our own, but Christ's, we must begin by asking: What would Jesus do? In seeking an answer to that question in advance of any situation that might develop, it was moved, seconded and passed by our general board on February 11, 1960, "that the ushers be instructed to seat all people who come to our church as guests regardless of race, creed or color." On September 8, 1960, in the wake of the racial disorders that erupted in Jacksonville, I offered these suggestions in my monthly report to our general board:



"I hope all of you are aware of what a remarkable community we live in relative to the current racial problems that grip our world. Ninety miles from here people are right now living in the shadows of paralyzing fear for lack of Christian love and good-will. Here we enjoy communication between the races and their responsible leaders. We have a home-grown mayor whom I believe to be a man of reason and good-will. Progress has been made here in recognizing human dignity--and we are still living in peace and concord, free of fear and violence. Change must come if we are sincere when we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". And in this day of change Christ has commissioned us to be his ambassadors of reconciliation, God making his appeal through us. (II Cor. 5:20) I pray that we may not disappoint our Christ.

"I say this in order to mention the kneel-in campaigns that have come and which may come some day to our own church. When and if they do come to us, may these words of a Christian Century editorial (Aug. 24, 1960) be a guide for our conduct as Christians:

"So long as visitors to a Christian church conduct themselves with quietness and dignity it is not the privilege of any representative of the church to analyze the motives of communicants or to refuse them admission. The church belongs to Christ, not to the ushers, deacons or trustees. Christ knows the hearts of men who come to his church; he will judge and will recompense them according to that judgment. Whatever the motives of the Negro visitors who come to white churches, the usher has only one duty and one proper course of action: to welcome the visitors and to see that they are comfortably seated. If the Negro is engaged in unchristian agitation, cordial white Christians may be the instrument through which God's grace may work a converting power upon his life. If his enterprise is Christian, the absence of slight or rebuff will be pleasing to God whose child has been accepted.

In a word, the same motives should move both the Negro visitor and the white host: a confession of sin, a need for forgiveness, a commitment of the whole life to God's full will. The sit-ins and the wade-ins succeed, but the will of Christ for the races will not be accomplished until Negro Christians and white Christians break bread together on their knees. For a long time to come the presence of Negroes and whites in the same church will not be normal, but the abnormality can be turned to the glory of God and to the good of all his children."

You've heard me say that the Chinese word for "crisis" is composed of two characters, one representing "danger", the other representing "opportunity". Christian friends, we face a "dangerous opportunity" in the weeks ahead - but perhaps God is hereby testing "the stuff of our rough-hewn faith and the fiber of our souls". Surely He has brought us through every challenge of the past five years, and in the process he has strengthened my faith - yours, too, I trust - that "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose". (Romans 8:28) I've come to know and love you as "those who love him, who

are called according to his purpose" - and, because I know that, I'm persuaded that even in this situation God will work for good. Honestly, I don't know of any Christian Church in the southeast that could face this challenge in a more Christian way - and perhaps that's why God has chosen us to accept a dangerous opportunity for His honor and glory.

And so I write to ask for your prayers - fervent and unceasing - that we shall not deny our Christ in this moment of challenge, but that we shall "widen (our) hearts" (II Cor. 6:13) until there's plenty of room in them for Christ and for all who are his brothers and sisters - and ours!

With deepest faith in God - and in you!

Rhodes Thompson, Jr.

RT/f