

The 1964 Civil Rights Act: One Brief Shining Moment? Or a Model For What We Can Achieve Today?

– Reflections by Allen Fisher

Eighteen years ago, Dr. David Hay – a professor of religion at Coe College – and I were asked to write a history of First Presbyterian Church, as we marked our 150th anniversary. As we researched and wrote that book, which we titled In the Heart of the City, one of my greatest joys was discovering that our senior pastor in the 1960s, Dr. Francis Pritchard, and a small but very vocal and persistent group of prominent lay members of the church, were strong and effective advocates of what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Through their many letters, phone calls, marches, newspaper ads, and personal visits with members of Congress, they – along with many, many other persons of faith in Iowa – contributed significantly to the ultimate passage of that landmark piece of legislation. (One ad in The Gazette, titled “We favor the civil rights bill,” had over 2500 signatures.)

Last spring, as the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act approached, two splendid and inspiring new books about that epic battle were published: Clay Risen’s The Bill of the Century and Todd Purdum’s An Idea Whose Time Has Come. The main argument of both of these books, especially Risen’s, is that similar grass-roots efforts were occurring throughout the country, especially in the Midwest. “The Civil Rights Act is often portrayed as a one-man play,” [or as a series of dramatic and large public events, like the March on Washington or “Bloody Sunday” in Selma], Risen argues, “when in fact it had a cast of thousands” of grass-roots activists taking action at the local level. In a review of these two books, the political scientist David Garrow states that religious activists “were far and away the most important and influential voices calling on members of Congress to vote for the bill. No one – not organized labor, not even civil rights organizations – could match them in organization, passion, and power.” Of 67 Representatives that churches targeted from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and South Dakota, most of them Republicans from small towns, 61 ended up voting for the bill, a far more dominant result than the roughly two to one margin in the final vote in both Houses of Congress. Senator Jack Miller of Iowa voted for the bill after the Archbishop of Dubuque visited him. And Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota was heard to mutter after he voted for the bill: “Maybe that will satisfy those two goddamned bishops who called me last night.” Senator Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic floor leader for the civil rights bill, often said that the Civil Rights Act would never have been passed if it had not been for the tenacity of religious activists – black and white, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish.

Alas, political realities have changed in the past 51 years. Whereas Republicans were even more likely than Democrats to vote for the Civil Rights Act, today we have political polarization so toxic and destructive that political parties seem not to recognize their own past, or they simply repudiate it. (For example, what is maligned by Republicans today as “Obamacare” is simply a casserole of leftover policy ideas that Republicans have been advocating for the past 100 years, since the days of Theodore Roosevelt. But now, since Democrats support those ideas, they supposedly represent “socialism” and must be repealed.)

But why, I wonder, can similar movements by people of faith not succeed in the same way today as civil rights did a half century ago – whether to fight climate change, or to advocate for gun safety? At times of frustration and seeming hopelessness about the state of our politics, I think back to Senator Edward Kennedy’s eloquent eulogy to his brother Robert, after he was assassinated in 1968. Quoting his slain brother, Edward stated: “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” In his shock and grief, Edward Kennedy concluded by quoting the playwright George Bernard Shaw: “Some men see things that are and say ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and say ‘Why not?’” Indeed, why not? Why can’t we achieve today the kinds of momentous and transformative changes that we accomplished fifty years ago?

Inspiration shared by Allen Fisher
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