

# Martin Luther King's Protesting Pastors

Charles Teel, Jr.

**M**artin Luther King, Jr., led many of us to recognize that pilgrimages of the mind can take place in turmoil as well as in tranquility. My own journey to understanding the connection between the transcendent and social change was facilitated by King's call to "the Movement." That journey was shared by countless other churchmen of the 1960's. I have engaged in extended conversations with hundreds of Christian clergy who responded to King's call and were arrested for their nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. Structured interviews took place in settings as varied as a Selma parsonage, an Atlanta jail cell, a Midwestern farmhouse, a penthouse suite atop the National Council of Churches building in New York City, and a sharecropper's cabin in Philadelphia, Mississippi. What follows is an abridged "profile" of these men of the cloth. The profile sharply challenges some common stereotypes.

Opinion is divided on these protesting parsons. Here is a fair sampling of opinion from, respectively, a seminary student, a movement organizer, a Southern governor, a pastor, a social scientist, a bishop, and a vice-president of the United States:

*"Churchmen who back up their words by putting their bodies on the line and going to jail for civil rights are the prophets of the 1960's."*

*"Being arrested for civil rights represents no more commitment to the long-term struggle than does attending a Sunday afternoon church picnic: good singing, good friends, acceptable food, and a good nap."*

*"Race relations in the South was doing okay until those agitating preachers got the damned idea that it was a moral issue."*

*"Ministers who go to jail for civil rights tend to follow the classical missionary model: exporting good works during a brief tour in foreign fields and returning home to business as usual."*

*"I would hypothesize that any population of socially active clergy includes few pastors and is dominated by a*

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*large majority of 'structurally free' clergy from the nonparish ranks."*

*"If the truth were known, pastors who man picket lines and lobby for legislative change have little appreciation of politics and virtually no appreciation of pastoral care."*

*"The socially active churchmen of our country are in large part responsible for the passage of the progressive civil rights legislation of the mid-1960's."*

My purpose is to find out which of these images most closely approximates a collective profile of the jailed churchmen.

*Over the last five years many religious bodies—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—have been in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle, and have sought desperately to make the ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant on the question of race.—Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community**

King's call was indeed answered by clergy of diverse stripes. I spent a year on the road quizzing a population so wide-ranging as to include Andrew Young as well as his police protagonists. The study considered two hundred Christian clergy who were jailed for civil rights activities during the years of King's leadership. While most of these are from "mainline" Protestant denominations, the roster includes Roman Catholics and Unitarians as well as the more sectarian Brethren, Mennonites, and Seventh-Day Adventists. Whites outnumber blacks two to one. Geographically, they come chiefly from the Northeast and the South, and their jail records range from the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott through the fateful 1968 Memphis demonstrations.

Although jailed clergy tilt to the "left" of their nonjailed counterparts and are closer to one another in political and theological views than to their denominational peers, the roster is by no means a homogeneous grouping. Just as many describe themselves as "neo-orthodox," "conservative," and "fundamentalist" as choose the "liberal" tag. Between a third and a half of these disobedients affirm such fundamental beliefs as "divine judgment after death," "the virgin birth as a

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biological miracle," and "Jesus' physical resurrection as an objective historical fact." In short, going to jail for the issue of civil rights was affirmed as a legitimate form of Christian witness by a diverse grouping of churchmen.

*On September 1, 1954, we moved into the parsonage and I began my full-time pastorate.*

*For several months I had to divide my efforts between completing my thesis and carrying out my duties with the church. I rose every morning at five-thirty and spent three hours writing the thesis, returning to it late at night for another three hours. The remainder of the day was given to church work, including, besides the weekly service, marriages, funerals, and personal conferences. One day each week was given over to visiting and praying with members who were either sick or otherwise confined to their homes.*

*I still found additional time to take an immediate interest in the larger community of Montgomery.*

*One of the first committees that I set up in my church was designed to keep the congregation intelligently informed on the social, political and economic situations. The duties of the Social and Political Action Committee were, among others, to keep before the congregation the importance of the NAACP and the necessity of being registered voters, and—during state and national elections—to sponsor forums and mass meetings to discuss the major issues.—Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom**

Photos: Religious News Service

When people think in the abstract about ministerial functions, the prayer circle and the picket line tend to be placed at opposite ends of a continuum. The "priestly" role is defined as directed primarily toward the gathered congregation with emphasis on the integrating, conserving, maintaining, comforting, and mediating functions of ministry. The "prophetic" role is seen as directed toward the community at large, challenging unjust social structures and struggling for change.

The easy hypothesis is that jailed pastors are picketing types, while their nonjailed counterparts are praying types. This hunch finds little support. Jailed pastors do more often report that community-directed functions of ministry are personally satisfying than do their nonjailed colleagues. Congregation-directed functions such as counseling and visitation are ranked slightly lower in terms of personal satisfaction by the disobedient pastors than by the general pastoral population. Yet, when asked to rank these functions with reference to effectiveness in parish ministry, items such as ministering to the bereaved or discussing spiritual growth or counseling on family life rank on a par with community organizing, serving on human relations commissions, and monitoring affirmative action practices of city hall.

Disobedients are clearly uncomfortable with the separate categories of "priestly" and "prophetic" functions. They agree that seminary professors and sociologists of religion might legitimately separate the priestly and prophetic for analytical purposes, but such hyphenating of pastoral duties is held to create false distinctions: Priesting and propheting are all of a piece. The pastors interviewed resented the idea that pastoral care should be viewed as merely a prelude to or condition for the "real work" of social change. "That the pastor who ministers at the bedside will build trust relationships that grant 'space' for him to minister in the area of social change cannot be disputed," volunteered one pastor. "Yet building social action strategy about pastoral care in *quid pro quo* fashion is crass and untenable." For these protesting pastors the prayer circle and the picket line go together.

*I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the south on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.—Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail"*

One hypothesis receiving wide circulation among students of religion is that the pastor, saddled as he is with the baggage of the parish, was something of a rarity among activist churchmen of the 1960's. It is conjectured that the ranks of socially active clergy were dominated by "structurally free" churchmen—chaplains, administrators, and professors—who "were insulated from direct reprisals from the laity" and hence were free to rush in where their parish colleagues feared to tread (Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, 1969).

In fact parish pastors outnumber their "insulated" nonparish counterparts by two to one on the civil rights police blotter. These pastors did more often serve integrated and urban congregations than did the general pastoral population, but the jailed pastors came from every kind of parish context. Fully a half of the white disobedients pastored congregations with less than 10 per cent nonwhite membership. Although urban congregations were overrepresented, the suburbs were only slightly behind. (Largely absent were the "town" and "open country" parish classifications, which account for fully half of the nation's pastorates.) Not surprisingly, the pastors consistently describe their parishioners as being to their own political and theological "right."

Jailed pastors gave their congregants ample opportunity to witness clerical involvement in protest prior to the arrest experience. These pastoral disobedients evi-

denced a cumulative involvement on the continuum of civil rights activism, which included activities such as mass meetings, petitions, fund raising, and picketing. Not only are jailed pastors more active in political concerns than the general pastoral population, but their identification and involvement with the Movement were extensive during the year following arrest. Going to jail may have been a more forceful act of protest than the pastor had engaged in previously, but it appears to have been part of an ongoing involvement rather than an isolated action. The data indicate that it is quite inaccurate to accuse disobedient clergy, as they frequently are accused, of grandstanding on civil rights issues by engaging in illegal protest as an isolated gesture apart from long-term commitment.

*I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I am here because I have organizational ties here.*

*But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice exists here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far afield and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.*

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.—"Letter From Birmingham Jail"*

Segregationists consistently branded the protesting pastor as an "outside agitator." Moderate clergymen in Birmingham wrote King in an effort to keep "outsiders" from exporting their witness to the South. In addition some liberals suggested that protesting pastors followed the classical missionary model of exporting witness abroad while returning home to business as usual.

The reverse is true. While the "structurally free" clergy who were not tied to parishes often crossed state lines, the pulpit types more often than not went to jail on their hometown turf. Rather than being "eager to export witness to Macedonia while ignoring a home witness," an accusation made by one disobedient about colleagues who had "flown South," more pastors than not faced the consequences of engaging in illegal public protest in a manner that bore witness directly to (and therefore risked reprisals from) their immediate constituency.

It is absurd to claim that those arrested at home demonstrated "bravery," while those arrested away from home were on "ego trips." Many Northerners who went South, especially during the late Fifties and early

Sixties, faced mob violence and the violence of Southern justice. Anyone who participated in the freedom rides and voter registration drives knows that great physical risk was involved during these early campaigns. Even the term "martyred" is not unjustified, for there were those who paid for their witness with their lives. In contrast to many who were arrested in the South, those arrested in their home territory may have had ready support from selected friends and influential contacts in the community. Nevertheless it is fair to suggest that the parish pastor generally risked far more by going to jail in his hometown than by flying out of state. Taking a stand at home was the form of witness a majority of the jailed pastors chose to make.

*Not every minister can be a prophet, but some must be prepared for the ordeals of this high calling.*

—*Stride Toward Freedom*

Although an ideological gap between themselves and their flock was perceived by the protesting pastors, these jailed pastors agree they consistently underestimated congregational support and overestimated congregational opposition. They discovered an unanticipated "support bonus." By far the largest number of pastors categorize their congregations as supportive of the goals and means of the Movement.

Comments from respondents who rank their congregations as supportive include:

*"As I was assigned to an inner-city black and Puerto Rican parish, the congregation expected that I would participate in such protest activities. Had I been in a suburban parish, expectations would have been far different."*—A white Episcopal pastor

*"Several of my lay people were arrested with me, and the leadership of my church was favorable to my action."*—A white Baptist pastor

*"I had an integrated congregation and was supported by 99 44/100% because of previous discussion of the issues."*—A white Lutheran pastor

A second group viewed the congregation as providing security to the extent that the judgment of the pastor was respected even if the congregation did not share his views:

*"The members were skeptical, but willing to watch and reserve judgment."*—A black Seventh-Day Adventist pastor

*"I had been pastor eight years and had good working relations; the people respected me as a person even when they disagreed with my action—they acted like Christians!"*—A white Presbyterian pastor

*"The people knew me and my family. It was the church of my birth, growth, and ordination. They loved me and trusted me even though they did not always agree with me."*—A white Catholic pastor

Other congregational response is classified as ambivalent. The membership is characterized as uninformed and fearful while openly questioning about means, timing, or action:

*"I am black, whereas most of the members were white and elderly. They didn't understand the issues and the pros and cons."*—A black Lutheran pastor

*"Parishioners were aware of few things beyond their own 'little life.'"—A white Episcopal pastor*

Finally, a small fraction of the respondents viewed their congregation as having been definitely unsupportive:

*"I was serving two recently integrated churches in rapidly changing neighborhoods. One congregation was elderly—they didn't understand. The other congregation was younger but racially afraid—they understood and objected!"*—A white United Methodist pastor

*"Mine was an ethnic congregation of middle-class Danes who had 'made it' on their own. They felt the church's business was 'spiritual,' not 'material.'"—A white Lutheran pastor*

*"The congregation was working class and felt threatened by black people and social change."*—A white Methodist pastor

The form in which congregational conflict was expressed ranged from behind-the-scenes criticism to circulating petitions for the pastor's removal:

*"The Eucharist was boycotted. I did nothing."*—A white Catholic priest

*"Some left the church. Some withdrew responsibility. Some withdrew finances. Some sought dismissal."*—A white Baptist pastor

*"There was hostility. I met it head on and unafraid. I asked for and got dialogue and some resignations."*—A white Unitarian pastor

*"There was hostility and ultimately a demand for my withdrawal. I left."*—A white Episcopal pastor

Many protesting pastors defined one of their roles as that of attempting to guide conflict so that it might be managed creatively and made socially productive. Indeed this creative conflict formulation parallels Martin Luther King's notion of "creative maladjustment," in which the refusal to adjust to the status quo sparks awareness, discussion, and reform. The comments of one young clergyman explicitly endorses this view of conflict and the benefits gained at the congregational level:

Pastor and congregation worked it through. Some of us met together. Some of us talked together. Some of us communed together. Some of us marched together. All of us learned together. Conflict is good.

The fact that congregational support was so extensive in a situation as controversial as civil disobedience would suggest that parishioners may be far more ready to participate in prophetic concerns than they have been given credit for. What I have termed a "support bonus" from the point of view of the pastor has been termed by other students of race relations an "event of discovery" from the vantage point of the parishioner (Joseph Hough, "The Church Alive and Changing," *Christian Century*, January 5, 1972). This suggests that there are lay people who are interested in ministries for social change, but

they feel isolated and remain silent because of the "consensus model" that characterizes most forms of congregational decisionmaking. It is conjectured that when the pastor goes to jail, the consensus model is shattered. A situation emerges in which latent supporters of a prophetic style of ministry are in a position to declare themselves and, in the process, make the happy discovery of unexpected allies.

A Catholic priest in Tennessee exuded excitement in recounting the unexpected support he received. Closet liberals and moderates came forward and there were "ginger steps from the shadows" by cautious Nicodemuses. But some pastors were not so fortunate. Several were forced to leave their congregations due to lack of support. Some exhibited hostility: "I told them to sit on their steeples and rotate!" Others were more philosophical: "It was a growing process, I hope, on both sides."

*The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.*

*Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ecclesia and hope of the world.*

*But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. Men far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for the lonely travelers at midnight.—"Letter From Birmingham Jail"*

The doctrine of church that emerges from conversations with these jailed clergy tends to build on a liberation/hope model. Church is a community of believers that affirms the lordship of Jesus Christ and imperfectly gears its individual and corporate energies to proclaim and to incarnate a message of liberation and hope. Given that this liberation of people and institutions will always be "in process" and will never be complete, the church also makes a unique appeal to a transcendent referent that offers an eschatological hope.

This church is institutionally real, warts and all. Church includes structures and policies and committees and procedures and typewriters. And sin. Offered one white Lutheran pastor:

Of course church is institution. In the human community we have to deal with that which is palpable; that which is historically available to us. If a community is serious about acknowledging the Lordship of Christ, it will form institutional structures.

To say that because the institutionalized church is less than it ought to be so I'll bail out in favor of, say, the Office of Economic Opportunity or the Demo-

cratic Party demonstrates a mix of arrogance and naiveté. Naiveté of what the OEO or the Democratic Party is going to be or can be and arrogance about the historical situation. I mean, my God, the gap between what I am and what I ought to be is substantial—one begins there. That's the dilemma of history, isn't it? Of course I'm alienated from the institutional church. But I'm also alienated from myself; I'm alienated from history.

And it's kind of a cheap cop-out to refer to a supposed first-century model of retreating with a favored and enlightened few and forming an exclusive enclave and calling ourselves the "real" church. It's a hell of a mess, sure it is. But where is one to go—unless somebody has an alternative to history?

One recurring theme is that church as institution must be open to renewal and reform as it proclaims and incarnates its message of liberation and hope. After defining church as "a structure and assembly of God's people who seek to understand both God's freedom and God's promises as revealed in Jesus Christ," a black Methodist churchman offered his hope for renewal: "Whereas church as structure constantly risks becoming truncated and contained in ecclesiology and doctrine, church as grass roots assembly must have mechanisms to sensitize structure in terms of where precisely God's message is to be spoken and enacted in this time and place."

Church, in sum, is full of the same perils and promises as all social institutions. No better, no worse. But the church claims a unique message of liberation and hope, a message that it is called both to proclaim and to incarnate. One jailed pastor concludes: "The distinctiveness of the church is not that it is morally superior to any other institutions in the world, but that it has a very particular answer to the rationale of hope. And it sees the center of that answer as being the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and what the implications of that are for the struggle of history."

*Certainly, otherworldly concerns have a deep and significant place in all religions worthy of the name. Any religion that is completely earthbound sells its birthright for a mess of naturalistic pottage. Religion, at its best, deals not only with man's preliminary concerns but with his inescapable ultimate concern. When religion overlooks this basic fact it is reduced to a mere ethical system in which eternity is absorbed into time and God is relegated to a sort of meaningless figment of the human imagination.*

*But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about men's social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand*

*it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed.—Stride Toward Freedom*

King thus explicitly views the Christian gospel as a two-way road in which the physical realities of man and time are grounded in the transcendent realities of God and eternity. A universal history overarches temporal history and draws man to participate in the being of God. Man is “tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*.” Accordingly a sense of “cosmic urgency” accompanies man’s action in the present order, for he is at once “a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny.” The “isness” of the human order continues to be beacons by the “oughtness” of the divine order. Because “God still works through history his wonders to perform,” pessimism is conquered by optimism. Woes give way to hope. This transcendent God both calls and enables those who seek to work His will within history—an affirmation that King trumpets with equal clarity in the language of Baptist preachments or academic theologizing.

That transcendence does not easily lend itself to quantification on the scales of survey research. No item was included in the interviews that solicited a response explicitly focusing on this dimension of the human/divine condition. (One questionnaire was returned, blank, with the admonition: “You can’t quantify the Spirit!”) Yet questions on church evoked responses that consistently appealed to a dimension “beyond” the present order that functions as a source of inspiration and strength and hope. While varying walks of life and contrasting religious traditions elicit diverse expressions, the symbols evoked in affirming a transcendent referent were common to all.

There is the white Episcopal pastor whose storefront office window looks out on the underside of the elevated rapid transit tracks. Sidewalk traffic, revealing a broad ethnic and cultural mix, surges past on the other side of the glass, within inches of our chairs. “I’m sort of a fundamentalist,” he muses. “I believe that Christ is coming again—I believe that. I don’t have a detailed road map of eternity or anything, but I do believe that history is being moved toward an ultimate fulfillment.” He goes on to refer to “the mystery” that is celebrated liturgically: “In worship we come as broken persons and broken communities in search of reinforcement, reaffirmation, restoration, and hope. Without this ultimate dimension I could never have lasted in this kind of crisis-oriented urban ministry.”

Philadelphia, Mississippi, offers a study in contrasts to the parish of the Episcopal priest. Directions to the rural Mississippi share cropper’s cabin include taking “the first dirt road to the left after passing the barn with the double silo.” Chickens scratch and children play as an elderly black preacher, who bears physical marks of the Movement, seconds the testimony of his Episcopal colleague. “You’ve got to know that we’re living for more than the present, that we’re a piece of something much bigger.” He pauses and we hear hens clucking. “Otherwise you’ll burn out. You’ll just burn out.”

Or back in the town where the King years of protest began, Montgomery. A black pastor of heavy frame and

strong voice reflects on the Movement and mixed motivations. “I have to keep asking myself whether what I’m doing is really being done for Christ. I remember well praying as I was walking down to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church one day: ‘Lord, am I doing this only for the present—the crowds and the press and the TV—or am I doing this because that’s what eternity is calling me to do?’” He then draws on the imagery of universal history that he has used throughout the interview: “To keep going in the struggle you have to drink deep and be refreshed from the wells of eternity.”

The same theme of time and eternity is reflected in the thoughts of a Lutheran pastor whose office address elicits at once the sophistication and power and rush and complexity of the urban Northeast:

Now civil disobedience is never something to be undertaken nonchalantly. It is always a very sober thing. But on the other hand, nobody should be surprised at such action. Because at the very heart of the Christian gospel is the premise that the present order is a provisional order. The only absolute order for those who seek first the Kingdom of God is an order that is still far distant. At this particular moment that transcendent order calls us to witness to what is to be, what must be, and what God has promised will be.

It is left to an affable Irish priest on the Eastern Seaboard to urge us to take Providence very seriously while not taking ourselves too seriously. As he wolfs down lasagna he recounts a fascinating biography and asserts: “I believe in Providence. I know that this idiot, God, uses happenstance for circumstance—‘How odd of God to choose the Jews’ type of thing—so I don’t believe that anything is accident.’” The waiter freshens his drink, and he continues. “And when I say ‘Providence,’ I don’t mean the great IBM computer in the sky. I don’t know how in the hell to reconcile Providence with much of what we know—I don’t have a pat answer for the poverty of my parish or the hydrocephalics or the retarded kids—but somehow or other in this crazy ironic world there is a loving and caring and knowing Power at work toward His end.”

Thus Baptist preachers, pedigreed pastors, and Irish priests share more than a jail cell. They tend to share a common grounding and a common hope in an eternal order that transcends the present.

A broad-stroke profile, of course, is not intended to constitute a finished portrait. Blemishes and warts are glossed over; certain fine and distinctive features are omitted. Subtle shadings of ego and witness and mixed motivation and courage and bandwagon and prophecy are not filled in. Still, broad strokes do offer the beginnings of a form on a canvas otherwise devoid of coherent images. The protesting pastors tend to reject a caricature of themselves in which they are pictured as wearing the prophetic mantle: Prophecy is not a gift to be claimed. Yet those pastors who responded to King’s call do, for the most part, come very close to what must be described as prophetic ministry.