

AN ADVENTURE  
*In*  
GOOD WILL



The Commission on Interracial Cooperation  
Its Origin and Work

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A WEEK before the Armistice which ended the Great War a traveler through the South would have been struck with the wonderful solidarity of the population, white and colored. In the support of the war they were united as never before. Two hundred thousand Negro youth were fighting for the flag in France and many more were preparing to go over. The millions back at home were responding heartily to every war-time appeal, and in proportion to their means quite as generously as any other group.

The white people were unstinted in their praise of the Negro's loyalty, while the Negro, encouraged by the stirring utterances of President Wilson and the democratic ideals of the war, felt that in the future things would not be quite the same. He looked for more of sympathy, less of prejudice and injustice, a fuller guarantee of his constitutional right of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Race antagonism was forgotten in devotion to a common cause.

A week after the Armistice one might have observed a subtle but ominous change. Distrust was beginning to get abroad. What would be the attitude of the Negro troops when they returned from France? Incendiary rumors filled the air, and by the time the Negro soldiers began to return suspicion and fear had taken deep hold upon both races. Mob violence, which had greatly declined during the war, burst out afresh. In city after city race riots flamed up, with casualties on both sides. The tension tightened everywhere, and the nation awaited the outcome with dread suspense.

It was in this crisis that the Commission on Interracial Cooperation came into existence. Oppressed with the ominous possibilities of the situation, a small group of Southern leaders met day after day in Atlanta, earnestly seeking some means of averting the threatened calamity by bringing to the front the constructive Christian leadership of both races. At the center of this group were John J. Eagan, manufacturer and churchman, Rev. W. W. Alexander, who, as a representative of the Y. M. C. A. War Work Council, was in close touch with the returning Negro troops, and Dr. M. Ashby Jones, pastor of a leading Atlanta church. It happened that these three represented three of the strongest Southern denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist.

Out of the thought and prayer of these men and others like them the Commission on Interracial Cooperation was born early in 1919. Its membership was made up of leading educators, ministers, business and professional men from every State in the South, including a number of outstanding Negro leaders.

The situation was desperate and the effort to cover the field with a close and effective organization was pushed

at top speed. State committees were organized throughout the South and men were put in the field to set up as quickly as possible a local committee in every community where the problem was acute. It was a staggering task and fraught with peculiar difficulties, but with the cooperation of the Y. M. C. A. machinery and the War Work Council it was accomplished in record time.

The result fully justified the effort. A better spirit immediately appeared. Suspicion and distrust began to give way to understanding and confidence. The forces of law and order were encouraged and strengthened. The fires of hate were checked and the threatened conflagration was averted, largely, without doubt, through the agencies set in motion by the Commission.

Having proved its efficacy in the crisis which called it into being, it was felt that the Commission should enter upon the task of permanently improving race relations throughout the South, by putting them, as far as possible, upon a thoroughly Christian basis. A South-wide campaign of good will was accordingly projected, aimed at the creation of a better spirit, the correction of grievances, and the promotion of understanding and sympathy between the races.

To this end committees have been set up in every Southern State and in 800 counties. In many communities their efforts have been notably successful. Threatened lynchings and riots have been prevented, injustices have been corrected, cooperation for mutual welfare has been brought about, and relations of frankness and confidence have been established between the best elements of both races.

The philosophy on which the work of these groups rests is the belief that every man is entitled to a hearing, that mutual understanding is the surest means of conciliation, and that a Christian solution of every interracial problem can be found if men are willing to seek it in a Christian spirit.

The method of securing these ends is to bring together in each community representatives of the best white and colored people, so that conference relations may be set up. These committees frankly face and discuss all points of friction or danger, and seek to obviate them. The Negro members are encouraged to lay bare any grievances or injustices from which they feel they are suffering, or any needs of which they are keenly sensible. Perhaps it is a feeling that they are not getting justice in the courts, or protection at the hands of the law. Perhaps it is lack of sewers, sidewalks, or other public utilities in the Negro area of some city. Perhaps it is the need of better schools. Perhaps it is economic exploitation of which they complain. Whatever it may be, the committee hears the case with open mind, goes

into it frankly and sympathetically, and takes such action as the facts seem to demand. The actual relief afforded means a great deal toward better relations, but the opportunity for frank and sympathetic conference means even more.

This method of approach to the problem represents the major contribution of the Interracial to its solution. The Commission does not seek to put over a program of race relations. It does not say to any community: "This must you do with relation to the Negro." It insists upon one thing only: That in every community where race relations are an issue the best people should take the matter seriously in hand, with the determined purpose to seek a Christian solution of every problem as it arises, and to substitute good will and justice for distrust and suspicion. With a proposition so sound there can be no disagreement. With rare exceptions, therefore, the Commission has no difficulty in securing the hearty cooperation of the best people in the community.

An interesting recent development in the movement is the enlistment of the leading women of the Southern states, to cooperate with the various State committees, and to promote the study of this question in their civic and religious organizations. In every case the women have made strong pronouncements against mob violence and in favor of even-handed justice for the Negro, particularly in matters primarily affecting the welfare of women and children. Plans have been adopted by a number of the denominational women's organizations by which the study of this question, both from text books and practically, shall become a part of the work of every group, with the view to such efforts to improve local conditions as may seem to be needed. This phase of the movement is highly significant.

The Commission carries on also a number of lines of general activity, working for better understanding through the press, in the colleges, in summer conferences, through contacts with great religious groups, and wherever else opportunity offers.

The Commission has about seventy members and is headed by Dr. Ashby Jones, of Atlanta. Will W. Alexander is the general director and Mrs. Luke Johnson heads the department of woman's work. The work in the field is looked after by eight secretaries.

It should not be understood from the above that the race problem in the South has been solved. Only a beginning has been made. But it is a hopeful beginning. A method has been found that works—the method of conference and cooperation. A road has been discovered which, if consistently followed, will surely lead us out—the road to the hearts of men.