Daily Demonstrators

Shearer, Tobin Miller

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Shearer, Tobin Miller.  
Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries.  
Project MUSE.  https://doi.org/10.1353/book.482.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/482

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=8946
Prayer-Covered Protest

I am not challenging the devotional covering . . . but the attempt to introduce our particular version into a culture and on hair different from our own.
—Paul Peachey, white Mennonite pastor, 1957

Prayer Covering as Movement Medium

On a nameless country road in 1939, Rowena Lark and Fannie Swartzentruber stand relaxed and contented in each other’s presence (see figure 2.1). Lark, on the left, and Swartzentruber had been working together for two years at the Gay Street Mennonite Mission in Harrisonburg, Virginia, when a photographer took their picture. Although Lark was nearly two decades older than Swartzentruber, the two women had developed a close and lasting attachment, as suggested by the photo. Both women smile, their covering-clad heads cocked at opposing but symmetrical angles. The women appear as comfortable with each other as with the clothing they wear. Although the fabric differs, the cut and styling of their cape dresses—traditional nonconformist Mennonite garments tailored with modesty panels—match as closely as the prayer veils they wear on the back of their heads. In a southern county bound by Jim Crow practice, Lark and Swartzentruber appear at ease beneath their white lace head coverings.

The prayer coverings these women wore were an integral part of their struggle to end segregation within the Mennonite church, as were other types of civil rights—era protest taken up by African-American and white
Mennonites. Through the interlocking life stories of these two women, the history and form of Mennonites’ daily demonstrations emerge. An integrated group of Mennonites used common religious resources like cloth-
ing and ritual to protest racial exclusion. Their demonstrations took forms
unfamiliar to most students of the civil rights movement, such as wearing a
religious symbol, as well as forms more familiar, for example, participating
in street marches—although in the latter case not on the expected scale, in
the expected place, or at the expected time. Together, these two forms of
protest—one subtle and understated, the other direct and unequivocal—
extended the reach of traditional civil rights demonstrations into a com-
community that external observers deemed racially disengaged. In that com-
community, women transformed the prayer covering into a medium of civil
rights protest.

The variously tragic and hopeful story of Swartzentruber and Lark’s
challenge to their church from 1935 through the end of the 1960s re-
frames women’s resistance to the racial order in the United States. Al-
though other social groups also pursued common goals across racial lines,
Christian communities often claimed that interracial cooperation should
be the norm rather than the exception.¹ Though rarely acknowledged in
U.S. church history, the expectation nonetheless brought African-Ameri-
can and white Christians together. Scholars of religion have studied high-
profile events such as eighteenth-century Moravians worshipping across
racial lines in eastern Pennsylvania, early twentieth-century Pentecostals
hosting interracial gatherings at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, and white
and African-American Christians working together at Koinonia Farm in
Georgia in the latter half of the twentieth century.² Those same scholars
have unfortunately ignored interracial partnerships that, while less visi-
ble, altered religious communities and quite often lasted much longer than
the high-profile encounters. Lark and Swartzentruber’s story also dem-
onstrates the particular resilience of women’s relationships across racial
lines. As other scholars have noted, women played a key role in sustaining
and advancing the civil rights movement.³ The narrative that unfolds here
adds to this growing body of scholarship by demonstrating the complex
ways in which two women in a long-term interracial relationship faced
religious and political changes during the long civil rights era. Together,
Lark and Swartzentruber built a friendship across racial lines that led to a
different kind of freedom struggle, one marked by distinct yet intertwined
daily responses to oppression.

This chapter opens new vistas into the history of the American Menn-
onite experience. The few studies that have attended to racial issues
among Mennonites have paid more attention to men than to women.\textsuperscript{4} By foregrounding male experience in the Mennonite history of race relations, scholars have missed the reasons that African-American women joined the church. When undergirded by church doctrine, lifelong interracial relationships brought African-American women into an often unwelcoming church. Similarly, the women featured in this chapter excoriated racial discrimination in the church, did so earlier than many of their male counterparts, and sustained interracial fellowship longer than many men.\textsuperscript{5} Mennonite women resisted the most oppressive forms of racial subjugation in their day. With their words and bodies, women in the Mennonite church thus built a foundation on which race relations in the community would both thrive and falter.\textsuperscript{6}

Wearing clothing that marked them as Mennonites was one way the two friends built that foundation. The prayer covering, in particular, drew attention within and without the church. With origins in the Palatinate folk custom of eighteenth-century Europe, the covering took on religious significance in the late nineteenth century, as church leaders established it as an ordinance on par with communion and baptism.\textsuperscript{7} Church leaders promoted the covering based on a New Testament passage: “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head” (1 Corinthians 11:5). Leaders used the same Corinthians text to assert that the covering represented male authority.\textsuperscript{8} In response to this mandate, Lark and Swartzentruber wore prayer caps daily, in a practice that two decades previously had been limited to church services and personal devotions.\textsuperscript{9} In the post—World War II era, women and men would increasingly debate the meaning and necessity of the prayer covering, but at the time this story opens, Lark and Swartzentruber demonstrated their church membership by donning the covering every day.

Their choice to wear distinctive religious garb required more of women than it did men. As in other religious groups, church officials policed women’s dress.\textsuperscript{10} Although some Mennonite men wore a collarless “plain coat,” church leaders did not enforce this practice as closely as they did the prayer covering.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, those men who wore the plain coat rarely did so on a daily basis. Lark’s husband, James, shed his during business trips to town.\textsuperscript{12} By the end of the 1930s, however, few Mennonite women on the eastern seaboard had the option of taking off the prayer veil. To show proper piety and avoid censure, women wore the prayer covering at all times.
Yet those who wore the prayer covering did not automatically acquiesce to male patriarchy. As scholar of religion Saba Mahmoud points out, women who don religious garb also pursue their own interests. Some Muslim women, for example, teach others how to embody piety while wearing the hijab, a formal religious veil, creating intimate space where they decide how they will move in society. In that space, men, ignorant of the practice, have diminished authority. In the same way, Mennonite women who wore the prayer covering controlled the shape, size, styling, and positioning of the covering. The choices they made about the prayer veil challenged the authority of Mennonite bishops and ministers.

From the start, Lark’s choice to wear the covering differed from Swartzentruber’s. Within the African-American community, hats and head coverings carried deep cultural significance. Especially during a Sunday worship service in an African-American church, a woman’s hat sent both a religious and a fashion message. Rather than making an uncomplicated switch from one kind of head covering to another, African-American converts like Lark used a highly symbolic mode of dress as part of a strategy to counter racial exclusion. Because she broke with one tradition to join another, Lark’s choice to wear the covering becomes all the more significant. As this chapter makes evident, Lark and other African-American women wore the covering to claim belonging in a church that frequently denied them full status.

At the time they posed in front of a Ford Slantback in 1939, Lark and Swartzentruber sought to create a more racially egalitarian church through a shared passion for African-American missions. Swartzentruber’s eldest son recalled his parents’ visiting Lark and her husband, James, during the Swartzentrubers’ move from Delaware to Virginia in late 1936. Early the next year, soon after arriving in Virginia, Swartzentruber and her husband, Ernest, invited Lark to join their ministry to African Americans in the northeast corner of Harrisonburg. With the support of the Virginia Mennonite Conference mission board, the couple extended an official invitation to “the colored sister from Washington” to participate in their vacation bible school program, an evangelistic effort common in the period that focused on providing scriptural instruction to neighborhood children through classroom activities, crafts projects, and outings. Lark led songs, told stories, and energized the gatherings. She would later look back on the time spent at Gay Street as “glory-filled days when we labored together for the Master.”
The women dressed alike during their shared ministry in Harrisonburg, even though they came from different backgrounds. Having been raised in the Amish community until her parents joined the more liberal Mennonite church, Swartzentruber had long worn the prayer covering. From an equally young age, she had expressed sensitivity to the marginalized. Early exposure to prejudice directed at an adopted sister of Italian heritage may have motivated Swartzentruber to take up the unpaid Gay Street matron responsibilities. Once in Harrisonburg, she entered a community where enough Mennonites resided that women who wore the white prayer veil attracted little attention. Lark had already been a part of the (Old) Mennonite Church for more than a decade when Swartzentruber and her husband contacted her. Lark first began attending Rocky Ridge Mennonite Mission near Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in 1927. When the family relocated in 1935 to Cottage City, Maryland, near where Lark taught in the public school system, she and James joined the Brentwood Mennonite congregation. By the time the Swartzentrubers recruited her, Lark had adopted the prayer covering and cape dress as her daily attire. When she came to Harrisonburg, she entered a community in which a black woman wearing the covering was a rare sight.

The women’s similar dress belied the image of a racially egalitarian church. Following early twentieth-century attempts at integrated missions, Mennonite urban church workers in the North segregated their churches. For example, the Philadelphia Colored Mission in 1935 started a separate mission for African Americans only two blocks away from the first white congregation. Although African-American children had attended summer outreach programs for several years, in 1936 the white mission workers wrote that “It was thought best to have a separate work for the colored.” As mission boards became more active following World War II, they maintained those patterns of separation, in some cases through the early 1960s. Similarly, although they had not yet legislated segregation, leaders of the Virginia Mennonite Conference followed their northern co-believers by separating white and black Mennonites, as Lark observed in her periodic travels to Harrisonburg in 1937. As a 1939 photo from one of Gay Street’s first vacation bible schools attests, church leaders kept African-American children separated from their white counterparts on the other side of the city (see figure 2.2). Nonetheless, Lark and Swartzentruber worked side by side and dressed alike. Although church leaders segregated churches, they did not mandate different clothing.
From the start of her time at Gay Street, Lark tested the limits set by her adopted church. Some of her co-believers appreciated the solos she sang during evening meetings. Others found her introduction of African-American musical tradition troubling. Although Mennonites in the area enjoyed four-part a cappella singing, they disapproved of the prideful attention solos invited. Lark also used one of the few public speaking opportunities open to women to test the boundaries of approved behavior. Rather than limit herself to telling children’s stories during vacation bible school programs, Lark gave “stirring message[s]” while wearing the prayer covering that gained the attention of mission and conference-wide leaders.
In his 1939 report to the annual meeting of the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, the sponsoring body for the work at Gay Street, Ernest Swartzentruber made specific mention of only one name. He referred to Rowena Lark, the “colored sister from Cottage City, Maryland,” who had assisted in the vacation bible school program. As she claimed Mennonite status while wearing the covering and challenged Mennonite practice by exercising leadership in song and sermon, Lark quickly gained the attention of Virginia Mennonites.

Lark’s efforts to claim equality with white Mennonites parallel African-American laborers’ efforts to defeat racism during the 1940s. Black union members participated in the Double V campaign to end fascism abroad and racism at home. They sought to use the social dislocation brought about by World War II to realize dual victories on the domestic and international fronts. Like Lark, they offered skilled labor, found themselves in high demand, and remained committed to their sponsoring organization—in the case of the unionized African Americans, the house of labor; in Lark’s case, the Mennonite church. African-American laborers lent their sweat and toil to the country’s war effort in hopes of ending racial disparity in society. Lark offered her services to the church’s mission enterprise in order to stop racial oppression in the church. Although no evidence exists that Lark modeled her efforts after those mounted by unionized African-American laborers, her efforts inside the church resonate with those exerted by advocates of the Double V campaign.

Lark and the Double V participants had one more thing in common. They all encountered significant backlash, despite demonstrated commitment to church and country. In Lark’s case, leaders from the Virginia Mennonite Conference responded to her high-profile ministry by officially segregating church sacraments. In late 1940 the executive committees of both the Virginia Conference and its mission board passed “definite policies to govern” interracial relationships. Claiming a desire to promote “the best interests of both colored and white,” the joint executive committees voted to segregate the rites of baptism, foot washing, the holy kiss, and communion. Notably, the official sacramental segregation centered on the most physically intimate of the church sacraments. At no point did the policy call for racially differentiated prayer coverings, for instance. Although Lark agreed to dress like white Mennonites, she no longer could share a communion cup with them.
Lark and Swartzentruber responded to the segregation pronouncement in different ways. Along with her husband, Swartzentruber challenged her supervisors to identify a scriptural basis for the dictate. In response, the bishops declared that some decisions did not require scriptural backing, an uncharacteristic statement from leaders who called for biblical guidance in all other areas. Swartzentruber and her husband viewed the bishops’ explanation—that “as a matter of expediency we must make some distinction to meet existing conditions”—as a significant setback for their work. The latter portion of the mandate particularly irked Swartzentruber, since it broke with the long-standing tradition of sharing a common communion cup. By contrast, Lark chose a less public role. In the difficult period following the bishops’ mandate, Lark offered to travel to Harrisonburg to assist the Swartzentruber family after an accident left Ernest in the hospital for a stretch of ten days. Lark assured Swartzentruber of “the complete sympathy and service of the Lark family” and enjoined her to “not worry my dear.” Rather than direct challenge, Lark supported her friend’s efforts while continuing to wear the covering in a subtler kind of protest.

The combined witness of Swartzentruber’s direct protest and Lark’s clothing-based strategy drew new members to the mission, despite the church’s segregation policy and doctrinal demands. Although by 1942 as many as ninety children had begun to attend the congregation’s vacation bible school program, many fewer adults participated on a regular basis, and men were more likely than women to join. As already noted, men had a less demanding sartorial barrier to overcome in that they experienced greater flexibility in the wearing of the plain coat. By contrast, in addition to facing nonconformist dictates, such as those forbidding life insurance policies, women bore the extra requirement of needing to adopt the cape dress and covering upon their baptism.

At the beginning of 1942, Swartzentruber reported that seven adults, only one of them a woman, had joined the congregation as of that year. At this initial stage, the congregation broke the trend common in most African-American congregations in which women constituted the majority. Clothing requirements thus may have dampened women’s receptiveness to the mission’s early outreach efforts. Nonetheless, during her frequent trips to Harrisonburg, Lark demonstrated that African-American women could join the church and wear the veil. In response to her exam-
people, Roberta Webb, a talented teacher and community organizer, became a member in early 1943. Following her baptism, Webb began to wear the prayer cap and cape dress (see figure 2.3). She explained that she did so because of the “very deep desire to treat our people [African Americans] as brothers” evidenced by mission workers like Swartzentruber, who on June 8, 1943, accepted another year’s reappointment as matron at Gay Street. Lark and Swartzentruber together overcame some of the racial barriers constructed by the church.

This chapter begins by setting out to explain how prayer coverings became a medium of civil rights protest. Lark’s and Swartzentruber’s narrative thus far highlights four developments crucial to that explanation. First, during World War II, at least some African-American and white women in the church developed strong relationships. Second, during the same period, the increasingly high-profile African-American missions that grew out of those relationships prompted formalized segregation. Third, though a measure of paternalism undergirded their relationships, Lark, Swartzentruber, and contemporaries like Webb wore the same clothes as they struggled against racist practices in the church. Finally, as they wore the same clothes, African-American and white women used different types of protest to counter Jim Crow practice. Swartzentruber directly confronted bishops about their segregation decision. Lark stepped into leadership roles that indirectly challenged gender and racial expectations. Both women pursued their protest strategies while wearing the prayer veil. Thus at this point in the narrative, the women wore the same religious garb and made similar claims on church membership even while pursuing different protest strategies.

Diverging Paths and Intensified Protests, 1944–1945

Lark continued to mark her Mennonite identity through dress when she moved west to minister in Chicago. In the summer of 1944, at the age of fifty-two, she and her husband, James, traveled to the Near Southside neighborhood of Dearborn Street in Chicago, an impoverished African-American community, to lead vacation bible school. Lark’s reputation as an enthusiastic and effective leader of children’s programs again drew attention. While carrying out her new responsibilities Lark continued to wear the prayer veil and cape dress, though Mennonites in the Chicago
area did not enforce dress restrictions with the same rigidity as in Virginia and Pennsylvania. For example, she and James dressed far more conservatively than their white co-workers even though both couples had relocated to the Chicago area from the more conservative East (see figure 2.4).
Whether Lark continued to dress plain because of her fidelity to church teaching or as part of a deliberate, long-term strategy to gain acceptance and full-member standing in the church matters less than the impact of her dress decision on those with whom she came in contact. As she transitioned from bible school helper at Gay Street in Harrisonburg to pastoral leader at the emerging Bethel Mennonite congregation in Chicago, Lark made visible her denominational affiliation.

Back in Harrisonburg, Webb followed Lark’s sartorial strategy even as she intensified protest against the church’s Jim Crow practice. At the time of Lark’s move, the Virginia Conference-sponsored Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg maintained a whites-only policy. Administrators segregated their institution because they feared that admitting African-American students would create “trouble.” Webb, however, viewed the policy differently. Her brother John complained that “they accept you in the church . . . yet, they won’t accept your children in their college.” Webb noted this hypocrisy in letters to church leaders even while contacting other Mennonite colleges to see whether they would accept her daughters. Even as she protested through writing letters, she also made clear through the clothes she wore that she was a Mennonite. Her co-believers had to acknowledge her commitment in part because she dressed like them.

In the midst of her ever bolder protest, Webb lost her most vocal ally against the conference’s segregationist policies. Having bid farewell to Lark, Roberta Webb said good-bye to Swartzentruber as well but under far more controversial circumstances. In the fall of 1944, Swartzentruber lost patience with the practice of segregated communion. She had been overruled by supporters of sacramental segregation, watched Lark leave the Jim Crow South, and witnessed school administrators deny Webb’s daughter’s enrollment bid. At every turn the church’s segregated practice blocked her efforts to evangelize African Americans. Swartzentruber could not fully welcome potential converts into a church that claimed to include all but, in its most sacred rituals, excluded some. Even those African Americans who, like Lark and Webb, marked their separation from society by the clothes they wore could not fully participate in physically intimate sacraments where believers kissed cheeks, shared a cup, washed one another’s feet, and entered together into baptismal waters. Emboldened by Lark’s departure and Webb’s entry, Swartzentruber made a deci-
Prayer-covered protest

41

sion to take to the streets. Before communion ended on a Sunday morning, she gathered her youngest daughter Rhoda into her arms and stormed out of the service. Rather than wait for her husband, she walked four miles to their farm just north of Harrisonburg. When Ernest joined her, Swartzentruber declared that she would never again sit through such a service.53

Swartzentruber’s long walk home in her covering and Sunday best symbolized a singular entry into a form of protest anathema to most white Mennonites but already common among African Americans. In 1941, for example, civil rights activists A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin made plans for a massive march on Washington to protest the exclusion of African Americans from wartime defense industries. In response, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, ending racially discriminatory federal hiring practices. In a move prompted in part

Fig. 2.4 Paul and Lois King, Rowena and James Lark, Chicago, 1953

Photo courtesy of Mennonite Publishing Network, Scottdale, PA
by this kind of street-fueled activism, the Supreme Court struck down the all-white southern primary in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944, the same year that Swartzentruber protested the segregated communion service.\(^{54}\) Although Swartzentruber was not connected to the organizers who brought about such legal and political change, her spontaneous march from the church into the street reflected organizers’ labor- and legal-focused tactics. Swartzentruber modeled a proactive means of challenging racism in the church using methods similar to those employed outside the faith community. For many years few Mennonites would follow her example. Yet by marching out of a communion service while wearing sacred garb, she set a precedent that others would later follow.

Leaders from the Virginia Conference responded to Swartzentruber’s singular demonstration by shattering her congregational foundation. Although in May 1944 the Swartzentrubers had been reappointed for another year’s term, on January 5, 1945, only months after Swartzentruber stormed out of the communion service, the executive committee of the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions abruptly removed the Swartzentrubers from their posts as matron and superintendent.\(^{55}\) In the space of a few minutes, the bishops forced Swartzentruber to leave a church community into which she had poured the best of her energy and passion. Family members expressed concern about the couple’s well-being and witnessed their emotional devastation. A niece remembered hearing about the dismissal when she was about eight years old and thinking that “something awful” had occurred.\(^{56}\) Although Ernest continued to work at a local hatchery and Fannie and the older children kept the farm running, they felt spiritually adrift. \(^{57}\) The dismissal from Gay Street left them so distraught that the Swartzentrubers contemplated leaving the Mennonite church and for a short while considered joining an independent bible church in the area.\(^{58}\)

The bishops’ decision to dismiss Fannie Swartzentruber can thus be understood as a move to rid the community of an internal, prayer-veiled threat during wartime. Mennonites in Virginia knew that conscientious objectors from their community had been imprisoned and harassed during the Civil War and World War I.\(^{59}\) Those tales of persecution remained fresh as church leaders administered a nearby Civilian Public Service camp for Mennonite conscientious objectors to World War II.\(^{60}\) Although church doctrine required that they accept reprisal for their pacifist belief, it made
no similar demands that leaders risk antagonistic response for their racial convictions. Leaders from the Virginia Conference had already decided to cooperate with the “general attitude of society in the South toward the intermingling of the two races.”\textsuperscript{61} Swartzentruber’s protests invited racial antagonism toward members of the conference when wartime persecution remained a possibility. That she made her protests while wearing the covering only served to emphasize the threat she posed. Church leaders could not dismiss her as an outsider. Given that northern Mennonites had not yet organized to oppose ecclesiastical segregation in the South, the Virginia Conference leaders made an easy choice.\textsuperscript{62} By severing Swartzentruber’s official connections to Gay Street, the bishops dismissed the person most likely to upset the precarious balance between racial acquiescence and military demurral.

The bishops’ authoritative move also reflected their interest in reining in mission workers at home and abroad. Leaders in the Virginia Conference and the nearby Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Conference felt threatened by returning missionaries who introduced cultural relativism as they questioned the appropriateness of mandating European dress styles in African, Asian, and South American contexts.\textsuperscript{63} These bishop groups and others like them across the church struggled to protect distinctive Anabaptist practices and beliefs from encroaching acculturation. At a time when their attempts to codify and enforce nonconformity doctrine met both passive and overt resistance from longtime members, the bishops had little patience for those who advocated for change on behalf of new entries to the church.\textsuperscript{64} By threatening to upset the racial status quo, Swartzentruber had also disrupted doctrinal stasis. Although she and Lark both cooperated with sartorial dictates, the pressures resulting from African converts who did not cooperate with those practices seems to have led to stricter enforcement of all doctrines at home.\textsuperscript{65} In 1946 Swartzentruber further diminished the threat she posed by moving with her husband to Greenwood, Delaware.\textsuperscript{66}

Spectacle, Success, and Outspoken Women, 1946 – 1952

While the bishops tightened racial restrictions and dismissed their most vocal critics, white Mennonite leaders in the Virginia Conference and elsewhere highlighted African Americans dressed in nonconformist garb.
As Lark and Webb had demonstrated, conservatively dressed African-American women claimed belonging by showing that they looked like any other Mennonite. Church leaders initially confounded the women’s strategy, however, by putting dark-skinned converts on display. Countering any assumption that only older African-American converts like Lark and Webb wore the prayer veil, a 1947 denominational magazine featured a photo of a conservatively dressed wedding party beneath the heading, “A Mennonite Colored Wedding” (see figure 2.5). In the photo, the bride’s covering stands out with particular clarity atop her bowed head. Through his racially specific caption, the editor emphasized the rarity of an African-American wedding. Moreover, the photo amplified the spectacle of African-American Mennonites dressed in nonconformist attire. The photographer stood in front of the congregation during the ceremony to take the picture, a practice at odds with Mennonite rules of decorum. As the surrounding text made evident, the couple’s race, rather than the photographer’s ritual violation, made the event notable. Other Mennonite editors also featured prominent photos of plain-dressed Lark and her husband. The attention given to photos of African Americans in sectarian garb suggested that they merited public display but not full inclusion.

Amid such visual spectacle, Swartzentruber and Lark fostered their relationship and their connections with Broad Street as they sought to end Jim Crow in the church. In 1948 Swartzentruber stayed at home with her children to make it possible for her husband to serve as the vacation bible school superintendent at Lark’s congregation in Chicago. In a reversal of their previous assignments, the Swartzentrubers had become Lark’s helpers, a position that placed them under the authority of African Americans. At the time, few white Mennonites would willingly have accepted such arrangements.

Lark also nurtured connections with the Broad Street congregation by assisting Webb’s daughter Ada. Despite Webb’s protests, officials from Eastern Mennonite College had refused to admit the young woman in 1945. Undaunted, Webb arranged for her daughter to study at Hesston College, a two-year school in rural Kansas. In November of 1947, Ada moved to Chicago, where the Larks welcomed her to their congregation. The following year, again with the support and encouragement of Lark, Ada took evening courses at Roosevelt College in Chicago. While she studied in the Windy City, other parts of the church began to challenge
segregationist policies. In 1948, for example, white mission workers in the Lancaster Conference appealed to their mission board to allow African Americans into the Welsh Mountain retirement facility. Changes in Pennsylvania foretold changes to come in Virginia. In early 1949 Ada returned home to Harrisonburg and became the first full-time African-American student enrolled at Eastern Mennonite College. Through careful maneuvering within the Mennonite community, Swartzentruber, Lark, and Roberta Webb witnessed the end of one expression of segregation within the Virginia Conference at a time when other Protestant denominations in the South had not yet integrated their educational institutions.

In the wake of Eastern Mennonite’s desegregation decision, Lark challenged the racial and gender stereotypes then restricting women’s roles. In
Chicago, a city grown increasingly African American in the aftermath of white flight, Lark donned her prayer covering each morning as she ran a woman’s sewing circle, conducted bible studies, and kept “[the missions at] Dearborn St. and the work at Bethel going” when her husband took ill for a period of several weeks. In 1949 the Bethel congregation, a group that then accounted for nearly a third of the adult African-American members of the (Old) Mennonite Church, had begun to outgrow its facility. Before the mission board produced a fund-raising brochure, Lark mobilized the women of Bethel’s sewing circle. Through rummage sales on March 12 and April 9, the women raised more than $150. With evident pride Lark noted that this was the “first time in the history of the church” that a group of African-American Mennonites had contributed to a church-building project or major mission endeavor. Even though some white Mennonites in Chicago resented the Larks’ leadership and marketed in stereotypical descriptions of African-Americans’ “emotional extremes, . . . poor housekeeping, . . . lassitude, and immorality,” Lark continued to invite other African Americans to join the Mennonite church.

Lark extended her ministry to African Americans outside Chicago and, in so doing, rivaled the authority of white bishops. For the summers of 1952 and 1953, as Jim Crow ruled the land, Lark traveled from Chicago to Philadelphia to assist in vacation bible school programs. One church leader recalled Lark’s “vivacious” presence as she encouraged young African-American women to wear their hair “naturally” under the prayer covering. In her atypical commitment to natural hair styling, Lark not only challenged the standards of respectability that had prompted many middle-class African-American women from the 1920s forward to straighten their hair but also claimed cultural space outside the bishops’ purview. The bishops could demand that female converts wear the covering and refrain from cutting their hair, but they had no knowledge of hair relaxers or how to discuss African-American hair care, a culturally specific practice steeped in history and tradition. In the vacuum created by the bishops’ ignorance of culturally specific hair care, Lark led where the bishops could not follow.

Lark’s support for natural hair styling also bolsters the argument that she deliberately chose to wear the covering and cape dress as a strategy to claim church membership. As of the early 1950s, Lark expressed little interest in conforming to white norms. Her opposition to hair-straighten-
ing practices makes this evident. As she chose hair treatment on her own terms, so she chose dress standards. She dressed in plain attire even when not required to do so in order to establish religious rather than racial credentials. That is, Lark embraced a Mennonite dress code, not a white one. Unlike the many white women in the church who sought ways to circumvent clothing directives during the early 1950s, Lark embraced the covering. Although the historical record does not indicate whether Lark ever articulated this strategy, her actions leave a convincing trail. It appears that Lark wore a cape dress and a covering, at least in part, to send the message that she was a Mennonite even though many in the church did not treat her as one.

Lark’s sartorial strategy to claim belonging in the church inspired other members of the growing African-American Mennonite community to do the same. Although in 1950 only 150 African-American adults had joined the (Old) Mennonite Church, by 1953 that number had doubled, and Sunday morning attendance had risen to more than one thousand.\textsuperscript{82} Several decades would pass before African-American Mennonites approached the 10 percent membership mark achieved by black members of many white majority Protestant denominations at the time, but Lark nonetheless helped bring about a significant increase.\textsuperscript{83} Lark spoke in congregations, led vacation bible school programs, and organized bible clubs and sewing circles among the burgeoning African-American Mennonite community.\textsuperscript{84} Photos from the period show both young and older African-American women in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Illinois having adopted the dress patterns Lark had long chosen to model.\textsuperscript{85} Yet Lark did not dictate her strategy. Neither she nor her husband required converts to dress plain, and some of the newcomers demurred.\textsuperscript{86}

Double Standards, Testing Grounds, and Women as Objects, 1953–1955

During Lark’s high-profile ministry, discussions about race in the Mennonite church intensified. During the early 1950s, many white Mennonites recognized that African-American converts had come to stay. Church leaders and mission workers responded by tightening restrictions on African-American women’s dress and using African-American churches as missionary testing grounds while also passing church statements against
racism and channeling new resources into African-American missions. Mennonite leaders also discussed how best to respond to the burgeoning civil rights movement. Denominational and congregational leaders encountered new divisions in the church over whether evangelism and material relief or lobbying and direct action offered the best witness to their faith. Such internal discord intensified as leaders and lay members alike debated whether support for nonviolent campaigns like the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott upheld Mennonites’ doctrine of nonresistance. In brief, race commanded the church’s attention.

During this period Lark and her African-American contemporaries focused less on street-based strategies and more on church-based change. They first encountered racial double standards in the church’s dress codes. White mission workers in the Lancaster Conference admitted in 1954 that they required African-American converts to “dress much plainer than members of home congregations,” but they decided that the restrictions offered “a blessing rather than a hindrance.” Workers at the Andrews Bridge congregation in southern Lancaster County corroborated the double standard, as did a 1955 nonconformity survey distributed in Virginia. African-American converts also struggled to garner formal leadership posts. In 1953 white workers serving in African-American mission stations contended that turning leadership over to new converts would “loose the bears to ruin the world.” Not much had changed three years later when a church leader objected to African-American leadership by declaring that “A good thing can be overdone.” Personal slights added to the institutional restrictions. At a conference on race relations in 1955, Lark reported that her white co-believers frequently asked to touch her hair. Although she could not understand their request, Lark explained that she “graciously let them feel it.” In the wake of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that struck down “separate but equal” legislation, her anecdote influenced delegates to pass a race relations statement in 1955 that called the church to repent of “prevailing customs of discrimination.” Supported by such a proclamation, Lark and her contemporaries confronted those who treated their bodies as material curiosities rather than the sacred tabernacles symbolized by the prayer coverings that many of them wore.

Lark’s African-American coreligionists in Virginia and Pennsylvania also encountered white missionaries preparing for African field service.
Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Mennonites followed the example of their Protestant contemporaries by channeling human and financial resources into overseas missions. The African mission field, in particular, captured white Mennonites’ attention, imagination, and pocketbooks. That fascination fueled mission efforts throughout the African continent during a period when dozens of mission workers were getting ready to cross the Atlantic in a missions boom. To prepare workers for service in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanganyika, and other overseas mission posts, Mennonite agencies began to apprentice neophyte missionaries at African-American mission churches. Some African-American members noted the pattern and felt that their congregations had become “testing ground[s],” an observation confirmed by congregational records. Ironically, while church leaders attempted to use black Mennonites to prepare white missionaries for African evangelism, African leaders requested that the Mennonite church send African-American missionaries to work alongside them. Rather than African-American missionaries, however, the church sent more white Mennonites, a significant number of them white women who had prior experience with African-Americans in the church.

Mennonites concerned about ending segregation and racial discrimination in the church had plenty to do. In addition to countering stringent dress codes, they built churches open to integration. When not challenging restrictions on African-American leadership, they counseled overseas missionaries. If no one was groping their hair, African-American converts still had to prove they belonged. Such activity required time, energy, and thoughtful consideration. Well before street activism drew the attention of the nation, African-American Mennonites and their white allies demonstrated daily. On the inside of the church, they ran their own movement.

Two Types of Protest, 1956 and Beyond

In the middle of this activity, the African-American Mennonite community blossomed. Especially during the later half of the 1950s and the first several years of the 1960s, new congregations arose, and church agencies invested money in domestic missions. From 1952 to 1962, mission workers planted more than twenty-six African-American congregations, many
of them supported by funds from the newly flush coffers of the national Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, an evangelistic arm of the (Old) Mennonite Church. While President Dwight D. Eisenhower stepped up federal support for public school desegregation efforts in Arkansas to counter criticism from his cold-war adversaries, Mennonite mission administrators increased domestic evangelism budgets as African partners and returning missionaries found fault with domestic evangelism efforts. Some Mennonites also called for an end to segregation in the church to counter “communist propaganda.” Leaders of both the federal government and the Mennonite church wanted to restore integrity to their initiatives abroad by addressing racial inequities at home. By 1964, 53 of the 818 Mennonite congregations in the United States listed African-American members, a fourfold increase over the 13 African-American missions in place as of 1950. More than any other era in the twentieth century, the seven-year stretch from 1956 through 1962 held great promise for the hope of racial integration in the church.

Lark and Swartzentruber kept on challenging the church and dressing plain even though the geographic and experiential distance separating the two women grew wider. From 1956 through 1962, Lark and her husband completed their ministry in Chicago and then moved through St. Louis and on to Fresno, California. Just before this period, Swartzentruber and her husband had relocated to Schuyler, Virginia, where they engaged in a low-profile rural ministry. In Schuyler, Swartzentruber groused about the dress standards placed on women but continued to wear the covering. In Fresno, Lark offered no complaint about the distinctive clothing and veil she donned each day. The contrast between Swartzentruber’s complaints and Lark’s compliance belied an underlying unity of purpose. Both women sought to challenge racial exclusion in the church and the patriarchy that helped maintain it.

In particular, Lark’s long-term strategy to claim church membership by wearing Mennonite attire bore fruit. In 1959 Lark marked her sixty-seventh birthday, in Fresno. She continued to wear a prayer covering, though few Mennonite women in that part of the country did the same. Following her example, many other African-American Mennonite women donned the prayer veil. Photographs from this period show African-American women in Cleveland, Harrisonburg, and Chicago wearing prayer coverings in both church and home (see figures 2.6, 2.7, 2.8). Lark had con-
tact with women in each community. At a Colored Workers Committee meeting in 1962, where memory of Lark’s trendsetting example continued to loom large, African-American mission worker Willie Mae Thomas led a session promoting the prayer veiling. Rather than chafe against prayer covering dictates, as had become even more common among white Mennonite women during the 1960s, African-American women donned the church’s most visible symbol of church membership in order to call other Mennonites to treat them as bona fide members. Peggy Curry of Broad Street and Mattie Cooper Nikiema of Diamond Street, two more African-American converts, both affirmed that they wore the covering as a sign of inclusion and belonging. Like Lark, many African-American women during this period viewed wearing plain dress as an opportunity to establish membership rather than a hindrance to the same.

Swartzentruber and Lark continued to nurture their friendship despite different approaches toward issues of patriarchy and racial exclusion in the church. In an early 1963 exchange of letters, the two women described the details of their respective ministries. A mutual affection shone through as the seventy-year-old Lark wrote to Swartzentruber, who was then in her early fifties, that she thanked “God upon every rememberance [sic] of you.” Even though Swartzentruber carried the burden of her abrupt
dismissal from Gay Street and remained disengaged from African-American ministry in Virginia, she stayed connected with Lark through such regular correspondence. In Lark, a woman by then widely respected and valued by church leaders, Swartzentruber found a sympathetic listener ready to reminisce with her about their shared “beautiful days of old” and “fine Christian fellowship.”

Fig. 2.7  Peggy and Billy Curry and their children, Broad Street Mennonite, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1961
Virginia Mennonite Archives, Box Broad Street 1936–1979 Richard & Virginia Weaver Billy and Peggy Curry & Family, 1961. Photo courtesy of Virginia Mennonite Conference, Harrisonburg, VA
Even as the two women connected across diverse experiences and geographical distances, white and African-American women around them pursued various paths in response to the prayer covering. Swartzentruber and Lark had long before helped clear those disparate trails. In Swartzentruber’s case, she had repeatedly railed against the covering in the intimacy of her home by noting that “God put the mark on the man, not the women,” an allusion to the Genesis passage where Abraham underwent circumcision as a sign of separation from the world. Although Swartzentruber continued to wear the prayer covering as mandated by church officials, the unequal, gender-based dress restrictions struck her as inappropriate and unjust. Acting on similar sentiment in the early 1960s, some white women reduced the covering’s size, styled their hair beneath the covering, and repositioned the covering on their heads. One Mennonite bishop strenuously objected to those “Christian women” who made use of the covering.\footnote{K. Aschliman, “Living Family Worship,” Gospel Herald 55, no. 24 (June 12, 1962): 538. Photo courtesy of Mennonite Publishing Network, Scottdale, PA}
of the “services of professional hairdressers.” The length and specificity of his instruction on how to cut hair and wear the covering indicate that, by 1962, enough women had begun to challenge nonconformist dress dictates as to evoke official response.

White women’s overt protest contrasted with African-American women’s covert strategy. From 1963 through 1965, African-American women accepted the prayer veil, as had Lark before them, but embraced the covering with an aesthetic sensibility unimagined by Lark or white church leaders. Even as officials in 1964 expressed approval of “the chaste and simple European veil as the most suitable application of the New Testament command for women to be veiled,” new converts reinterpreted the covering as a fashion accessory. An African-American convert to the Diamond Street Mennonite congregation in Philadelphia asked for a covering with strings because she thought that the “ribbons,” considered a conservative sign by established Mennonites, looked pretty. In the same community, other African-American Mennonite women refused to wear the strings because they did not like how they looked. An African-American member of a Kansan congregation wore a prayer covering to church one Sunday morning in the early 1960s along with dangling gold earrings. Throughout the United States, African-American women transformed the church’s primary symbol of separation from the world on their own terms.

Even as African-American women appropriated Mennonite religious costume to serve their purposes, white women objected to the covering in new ways. Some wore the covering but coiffed their hair. Others stopped wearing the covering to work but not to church. Some stopped wearing it altogether, although through the 1960s few took this riskier step. In one instance, a member of a youth ministry team appeared on the front cover of a national Mennonite magazine with an airbrushed covering; at the time the photographer snapped the picture, the church worker had not been wearing a prayer veil. The editors, deeming the veil mandatory, airbrushed a prayer covering in place (see figure 2.9). They were willing to misrepresent the truth of the original photograph to promote the wearing of a religious symbol that white women had begun to challenge.

A Mennonite in Atlanta followed Lark’s example as late as 1970. Betty Gwinn, the spouse of the incoming pastor of Berea Mennonite, wore a
black covering when she posed before a newspaper photographer along with her husband and the outgoing pastoral couple (see figure 2.10). The reporter assumed Gwinn chose the black covering to make a racial statement. Gwinn later attested, however, that she had donned the black covering simply because she liked the color. Although she had a white covering as well, she chose the black one because of personal preference.
rather than religious conviction. Fashion again displaced doctrine. Rather than a statement about her status as an African American, Gwinn’s dress made a statement about her status as a Mennonite.122 Gwinn did not abandon the covering, she merely adapted the way she wore it. Gwinn wore the covering, she later said, because she had “given her heart” to the Mennonite church.123 To wear the covering was to stake her claim as a Mennonite. Lark’s legacy survived.

The white woman who posed alongside Gwinn also made a statement. Like Swartzentruber before her, Marian Jane Martin pushed racial boundaries while wearing the covering. She supported Gwinn and Gwinn’s husband despite resistance from leaders in the Lancaster Conference. Those same leaders later forced the Gwinns to leave Berea after
the couple introduced African-American music and worship to the integrated congregation. In a moment of promise before the suspension, Martin posed with Gwinn wearing a covering that also challenged the status quo. Against the bishops’ wishes, Martin coiffed and styled her hair and, in the process, moved the covering forward. In comparison to the traditional setting of the prayer covering on the back of the head, the covering now sat perched much higher. Although she had not removed the covering, she challenged tradition by repositioning it. While not obvious to most outsiders, Martin had nonetheless registered an internal protest.

Swartzentruber’s legacy also survived. On March 5, 1970, the same month the photo and article featuring Gwinn’s black and Martin’s repositioned prayer coverings appeared in print, Rowena Lark died at the age of seventy-eight, leaving behind her husband, six children, and multiple grandchildren. The bulletin distributed at her funeral featured a photo of her wearing a covering. A life of service and commitment to the Mennonite church had been capped through to the end by the prayer covering, demonstrating her commitment to the church.

Swartzentruber grieved the passing of her longtime friend but lived another twenty-nine years, most of them while wearing a prayer covering. Following a tearful reconciliation with representatives of the conference that had dismissed her so abruptly in 1945, Swartzentruber mourned the death of her husband in 1986. Swartzentruber continued to wear the covering until she retired to a new community in northern Indiana. Once settled, Swartzentruber walked away from her church just as half a century earlier she had walked away from a communion service. For the six years following her departure from the Mennonite church until her death in June of 1999, Swartzentruber attended a Baptist congregation where leaders did not require women to cover their heads. Although she chose to adhere to the dictate to keep her hair long, she finally found space to act out her lifelong complaint about the covering.

Protests Initiated, Amplified, and Modified

Rowena Lark, Fannie Swartzentruber, and their contemporaries open a conversation about the nature of protests in homes and sanctuaries during the civil rights era. These women first show that actors inside the religious
community initiated protests in places untouched by traditional civil rights strategies. Swartzentruber’s protest against segregated communion services drew attention to a form of segregation left unchallenged by the demonstrations then being mounted against civic Jim Crow practices. Ada Webb’s matriculation at Eastern Mennonite College, an act made possible by Webb, Lark, and mission workers like Swartzentruber, came six full years before the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. The women featured in this chapter thus protested and planned strategies when and where civil rights movement leaders had not thought to look.

The women’s actions also amplified initiatives taken by civil rights leaders. When Lark testified that other Mennonites touched her hair, she presented evidence of racism inside the church to a community that had heard only distant echoes of racial injustice from outside the church. White Mennonites could ignore civil rights challenges when promoted by external activists like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and A. Philip Randolph but found it much more difficult to do so when a member of a conservative Mennonite church confronted them. Lark thus amplified Baker, Hamer, and Randolph’s critique of white exclusivity in a way that demanded the attention of white Mennonites.

Lark’s challenge to white Mennonites also amplified the risk she took. Unlike some African-American activists who had long since broken ties with white organizations, Gwinn, Lark, Webb, and their contemporaries maintained relationships with their white co-religionists even while addressing racism in the church. Although many high-profile civil rights leaders challenged the white church while worshipping in the safety of black congregations, African Americans in majority-white denominations challenged their white co-believers and then kept on worshipping with them.¹²⁹ Lark, Webb, and Gwinn not only refused to conform to the obsequious stereotypes often associated with African-American women who worshipped in white organizations, they also confronted the church from the inside and braved the resulting backlash.¹³⁰

The daily demonstrations of the women profiled in this chapter also reveal modified forms of civil rights protest. Rather than carry a placard for a demonstration that lasted a few hours, Lark wore a covering for days on end. In so doing she used religious symbolism to craft a lasting kind of demonstration. Although other African Americans brought civil rights rhetoric to bear on a variety of cultural practices including hairstyles, hats,
and haberdashery, few moved beyond Afros, kufias, and dashikis to bring African-American identity to bear on the religious symbolism of a majority-white Protestant denomination.\textsuperscript{131} The African-American women who transformed the prayer veil into a fashion accessory by calling conservative covering strings pretty and matching coverings with worldly earrings also modeled new forms of protest. Although less obvious to outsiders than street marches, they nonetheless brought about significant change. The incongruity of coverings set off by gold earrings and prayer veils called fashionable often led to a relaxing of rigid dress requirements.\textsuperscript{132} Rather than counter the growing threat directly, ministers in some parts of the Mennonite church simply let the covering go.

When seen as culturally creative resisters, Lark and her African-American coreligionists have much in common with Ron Karenga, founder of the black nationalist Organization US and creator of the Pan-African celebration Kwanzaa. Like Karenga, these women countered white dominant racial norms by creating new forms of cultural protest. Karenga did in secular academic settings what Lark and her contemporaries did in the religious milieu: they used clothing to assert identity. Although the women were not Afrocentric black nationalists, they nonetheless acted in ways that resonated with Karenga’s cultural movement when they wore Mennonite garb without denying their racial identity. They created religious practices as a way to be “black and Mennonite.”\textsuperscript{133}

Once converts like Rowena Lark and Roberta Webb joined the church, they defined themselves as Mennonites through the protest strategies identified in this chapter. Lark’s example makes the point. Thanks to her quarter-century tenure as a public school teacher and her husband’s success as a church planter and entrepreneur, Lark did not draw on the material aid that Mennonites offered service recipients and new converts. Lark instead financed missions and prompted African-American converts to contribute financial and human resources to the church. She also challenged racial and gender assumptions by daily dressing in conservative attire. The covering and cape dress did more to establish her credentials as a Mennonite than did any other aspect of her church life. More than the words she spoke, the songs she led, or the money she raised, the clothes she wore and the religious symbol she donned each morning sent the message that she was a Mennonite. She continued to dress in a plain manner even when other church members stopped using clothing to mark Mennonite
identity. Lark remained faithful to core church markers even as others discarded them.

At root, Lark’s and Swartzentruber’s gender, avocation, clothing, and interracial friendship undergirded their protest strategies. As women, they cooked and raised children together during vacation bible school sojourns. As mission workers, they brought African-American converts into the church. Both also wore plain attire in public, a practice that connected those so dressed. While washing dishes, evangelizing new believers, wearing the covering, and leading others to do the same, Swartzentruber and Lark forged a long-term relationship that supported their protest against racial and gender-based restrictions. Although the women protested in different ways, they supported each other through shared activities and regular correspondence. Throughout their lives, they reminded each other that it was, indeed, worthwhile to stay in the church. As a white person, Swartzentruber offered Lark the same kind of support that moderate white southerners offered civil rights activists during campaigns in Birmingham, Little Rock, and Montgomery. Swartzentruber played a similarly supportive role in Lark’s campaign to establish herself as a full-fledged Mennonite. Friendships, clothing, and shared ministry thus contributed to changing racially oppressive practices in the church.

Swartzentruber’s and Lark’s narratives also explain the reasons for Mennonite women’s resistance to the racial order in the United States. The relationships themselves called the women to take risks. Mennonite bishops dismissed Swartzentruber from her appointment at Gay Street Mennonite Mission because she protested communion restrictions placed upon her friend, Rowena Lark. Lark stayed in the church despite numerous encounters with Mennonite racism because there she found friends like Swartzentruber. Yet relationships alone do not explain the multiple motivations for resistance evident in the women’s lives. Religious convictions also account for why the women spoke up, walked out, and stayed within the church. Swartzentruber cared deeply about demonstrating integrity in her testimony and action. Lark ordered her dress and speech based on church teachings. These religious values acted in various ways upon the women. At times they pulled both women out from society by separating them from a sinful world. That movement away from the world also brought them together as they shared dress styles and head coverings. Such a nonconformist impulse also pushed them apart, however, as they
sought racially appropriate means to counter oppression in the church. They thus joined their daily demonstrations with various and at times contradictory efforts to follow the church’s teachings.

Lark, Swartzentruber, and those they emboldened left a legacy. With the support of her white ally, Lark showed that an African American could live and die as a Mennonite. In so doing, Lark invited African Americans to stay in the church. Some of them responded. As of August 2006, Calvary Community Church in Newport News, Virginia, a predominantly African-American congregation located a few short hours from Harrisonburg, where Lark and Swartzentruber first worked together, listed more members than any other Mennonite congregation in the United States. Although leaders from that congregation struggled to establish themselves as legitimate Mennonites, they made those claims based on strategies modeled by Lark. Calvary members did not wear coverings, cape dresses, or plain coats, but they did claim membership by staying in the church, promoting church doctrine, evangelizing other African Americans, and drawing attention to white Mennonites’ prejudice. Lark had done the same.

In the chapter that follows, the story of four young African Americans reveals additional protest strategies within the Mennonite church. Unlike Swartzentruber and Lark, the children who participated in Mennonite-run Fresh Air programs had little opportunity to enter into sustained relationships across racial lines. The intrepid young visitors who entered the homes of white strangers disrupted the lives of their hosts to such an extent, however, that they changed their hosts’ racial attitudes and prompted some of them to support the civil rights movement. Although their story, like those of Lark and Swartzentruber, abounds with contradiction, irony, and the uncertain interplay of egalitarian intention and prejudiced conduct, new forms of civil rights protest nonetheless emerged.