Vincent Harding’s Dual Demonstration

This revolution will never be complete until the church does what it was called upon to do in the first place.
—Vincent Harding, African-American Mennonite pastor, Newton, Kansas, 1963

On the Border

On September 14, 1963, at a hastily organized civil rights meeting at Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana, four African-American men spoke before Vincent Harding ever said a word. Each of them called for action. Ed Riddick, a member of Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago, cajoled the assembled midwestern Mennonite leaders to “apply the gospel to the whole man . . . [including his] civil rights.” Gerald Hughes, a Lee Heights Community Church leader from Cleveland, Ohio, spoke of the “agonies of the racial problem” that required “action programs.” Following Hughes, seminarian and future Woodlawn pastor Curtis Burrell proposed interracial exchanges to bring about “greater faithfulness.” Burrell’s fellow seminarian Warren Moore enthusiastically urged those assembled to “get the church on the move.” All of the participants at the Prairie Street gathering spoke with passion, fervor, and clear vision. They evinced, in a word, charisma. Yet after African-American Mennonite pastor and activist Vincent Harding spoke, the direction of the conversation shifted. Largely on the basis of Harding’s appeal, those attending the Prairie Street meeting agreed to break with
the long-standing practice of the (Old) Mennonite Church and “influence legislation even as we do . . . the [military] draft.”

Although the four other African-American speakers had also proposed action plans with energy and passion, in the end—as was the case in scores of other Mennonite settings in the late 1950s and early 1960s—Harding’s voice prevailed.

This chapter explores how Harding bridged the gap between the streets and Mennonite homes and sanctuaries. Unlike most other African-American civil rights leaders, Harding expended as much energy demonstrating for an end to segregation in the street as he did in his church. These dual demonstrations gave Harding a unique influence on Mennonite attitudes toward interacting with the state. Although a gifted and charismatic speaker, Harding’s influence derived from his ability to straddle the border between traditional Mennonite quietism and civil rights activism. As he negotiated boundary lines, Harding connected the internal legacy of Rowena Lark, Fannie Swartzentruber, and Fresh Air children to the external action of Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., and other civil rights activists. More than any other Mennonite leader, white or African-American, Harding shaped the Mennonite church’s response to the Second Reconstruction.

The narrative of Harding’s straddling sojourn with the Mennonites from 1958 through 1966 challenges those historians who debate Martin Luther King Jr.’s role in terms of Weberian charisma. Following the terms of this debate, historians have attempted to decide, for example, whether King created the civil rights movement or the civil rights movement created King. Such debate tends to occlude the contributions of women, local communities, and faith-based change efforts. This chapter seeks to reframe bipolar charisma-centered inquiry not by expanding the field of scholarship to study gender, grassroots organizing, or belief but by analyzing those who straddled boundary lines. From a bordered perspective, Harding’s charisma appears less important than his position between a sectarian religious community and the civil rights movement. In the same way, King’s personal charisma seems less salient when he is cast as a border dweller. King confounded the preconceptions of white people who expected buffoonery and servitude while also refusing to conform to the expectations of African Americans and white people who anticipated calls to violence. Like Harding, this nonviolent, well-educated African-American minister attracted the attention of the nation not only because his oratory
proved arresting but also because he had a place in both African-American and white communities. Civil rights historians can thus use the study of borderers as presented in this chapter to analyze the movement anew.7

This study also repositions Mennonite historiography of the civil rights period. Perry Bush and Paul Toews acknowledge Harding’s charisma but fail to ask why Mennonites centered on Harding in an era when several charismatic African-American men had risen to prominence.8 Charismatic African Americans in the Mennonite church at the time included Bishop James Lark, James Harris, Ed Riddick, and others. Lark and Harris both led revivals and spoke at church meetings and, especially in the case of Lark, asked provocative questions of the church. Yet even the highly charismatic and widely respected Bishop Lark never reached the national and international prominence of Harding. Although Lark also moved between the church and the world, his evangelical mission was squarely lodged within the church. Harding, however, maintained equal footing in both the church and the movement. Whereas Lark worked from a church base to bring converts off the streets and into pews, Harding stood abreast both the church and the movement to get church members off pews and into the streets. This chapter suggests that Harding achieved greater attention not because he was more charismatic than Lark but because he was more evenly divided between two worlds.

Similarly, other treatments of Mennonite engagement with the civil rights movement have either ignored Harding’s wide-reaching impact entirely or explained his intervention in terms of the growing influence of black power.9 During Harding’s most influential years, however, he moved in circles far more influenced by King than by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Stokely Carmichael. In 1963, for example, John Lewis, just elected the committee’s chairperson, actively promoted a Christian nonviolent agenda.10 Carmichael’s and Willie Ricks’s call for black power would not enter the national scene until mid-1966.11 Furthermore, a regional study of Camp Landon in Gulfport, Mississippi, puts far more emphasis on visits by white church administrators in 1963 than on a visit by the Hardings, though local staff referred to the latter visit more frequently and with deeper appreciation.12 Harding, a Mennonite convert, challenged the church on its own terms even while gaining the trust of civil rights leaders. Setting a new direction in Anabaptist history, this chapter explains why Harding’s border-straddling position as an Af-
rican-American Mennonite allowed him to rise from a field of charismatic African-American male leaders to critique the church without relying on black power rhetoric.

The true measure of Harding’s unique role at the border between the Mennonite and civil rights communities became most apparent in 1963. During that year, every aspect of the relationship between white and African-American Mennonites and of their engagement with the broader issues of the day became the focus of intense conversations. Mennonites debated what it meant to nonconform to the world in a time of social crisis. They explored the meaning of legislative advocacy for a more just society as cities erupted in racial tensions and violence. Discussions surfaced in church publications and denominational meetings about the sins of racism, the realities of Mennonite prejudice, and biblical passages that allegedly supported African-American servitude. Church leaders issued statements to their congregants and national political leaders. Although the years leading up to and following the momentous events of 1963 frame the story, this chapter focuses on Harding’s words and actions during that year of “racial revolution.”

Harding’s sojourn among the Mennonites, and his challenge to the church on issues of race, turned on his status as someone who could move with integrity between two very different communities. On the one hand, Harding brought sterling Mennonite credentials. He knew Mennonite history, led a Mennonite voluntary service unit, and had served as a Mennonite pastor. He embodied Mennonite virtues of humility, frugality, servanthood, and integrity. Harding did not just talk about the need for racial reconciliation; he and his wife Rosemarie demonstrated it through the integrated ministry they led at Mennonite House in Atlanta. Harding also claimed full-fledged membership because he spoke like a Mennonite. His presentations appealed to love, long-suffering, and nonconformity. More forthright than Guy Hershberger, the leading Mennonite theologian and social ethicist of the time, Harding articulated a rationale for, and practical theology of, sustained social engagement that, he argued, would save the church from destruction. In his service, speech, humility, and theology, Harding thus could legitimately claim a Mennonite identity, even as he actively challenged Jim Crow practices, spent time in jail, and earned the respect of civil rights movement leaders. In the precarious posture of a carpenter straddling a roof crest, Harding kept one leg in the world of separa-
tion and another in that of engagement. Although his charisma prodded people to action, it was his ability to straddle two worlds that got their attention and kept it.

A Congregational Camelot

Harding was drawn to Mennonites by the witness of the early Anabaptist community. Born in 1931, he was raised by his mother in the West Indian community of New York City, where his mother worked in a variety of domestic jobs. In his youth, he attended the Victory Tabernacle Church in Harlem, “an offshoot of the Black Seventh-Day Adventist denomination,” where his pastor made early reference to peace activists like Mahatma Gandhi but not to Mennonites. Harding served in the Army at Fort Dix in New Jersey from 1953 through 1955, and his time in the armed service left him “deeply disturbed” by the dehumanizing power of the military. Having developed a love of history while earning his bachelor’s degree at City College of New York, he went on to pursue his master’s in history at the University of Chicago, where he began to encounter the writings of sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Harding was struck by “their discipline, self-sacrificing love, . . . [and] willingness to accept death rather than inflict suffering.”

While studying for his master’s degree Harding encountered contemporary Mennonites at Woodlawn Mennonite Church on the south side of Chicago. In that congregation he also met his future wife, Rosemarie Freeney, a teacher in the Chicago public schools who had earned her degree from Goshen College, a Mennonite liberal arts school in northern Indiana. By 1958, the Woodlawn congregation had called Harding to serve as its associate pastor while he worked toward a doctoral degree in American history at the University of Chicago. During those years, Harding and lead pastor Delton Franz received attention from the General Conference Mennonites for their integrated pastorate (see figure 4.1). Although by 1958 the (Old) Mennonite Church included more than two-dozen congregations with significant African-American memberships, none of those churches could boast such a high-profile integrated pastoral team. What the General Conference lacked in African-American congregational membership it made up for in pastoral balance. Indeed, the two men captured the imagination of the church to such an extent that a Mennonite historian
later referred to Woodlawn as a “congregational Camelot.”21 Never before had the General Conference denomination included an African-American leader.22

In the summer of 1958, Harding, fellow African-American Mennonite Ed Riddick, and three of their white coreligionists—Franz, Glen Boese, and Elmer Neufeld—traveled through the South in an effort to gain new insight into the “Negro’s demands” and the “white man’s fear.”23 Unlike most of the Mennonite groups who also toured the South to learn more about racial issues during the latter half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, the Woodlawn group connected southern segregation with northern separation.24 Both Franz and Harding emphasized that white Mennonites throughout the country had denied African Americans “a place in our fellowship” and, in so doing, had “denied Christ” as well.25 The denominational editors and reporters who profiled much of the activity emerging from Woodlawn at that time made no exception regarding this trip. The men’s visit to the South received significant public attention.

The five men also sought to connect Mennonite nonresistance to nonvio-
dent strategies then gaining traction in the emerging civil rights movement. At the time, many church leaders felt that the doctrine of nonresistance entailed an absolute rejection of all coercive force—including nonviolent public protest. Guy F. Hershberger, the most vocal and informed proponent of a consistent Anabaptist approach to nonresistance at the time, applied that vision of noncoercive nonresistance to the civil rights agenda by promoting a middle road. Although Hershberger encouraged Mennonites to “take an open stand against segregation,” advocated “a ministry of concern, of sympathy, and of love” to African Americans, and called for a “witness” to segregationist or unconcerned white people, he also criticized civil rights groups for promoting nonviolence as a tactic rather than a biblical principle.26 Here, as elsewhere, Hershberger and his coreligionists used witness to indicate any morally substantive exchange with an outsider, not just evangelically specific interactions.

By contrast, the Woodlawn contingent called for direct action. Harding in particular urged Mennonites to protest publicly “the inaction of Congress and the President on the segregation controversy in the schools.”27 At least one other promising young church leader from the (Old) Mennonite community raised similar concerns. J. Lawrence Burkholder, a Princeton Theological Seminary doctoral student and future Goshen College president, also challenged the validity of Hershberger’s position.28 Nonviolent measures like street marches, Harding and Burkholder maintained, did not coerce, and, Christians concerned about racial oppression were therefore free to participate in nonviolent direct action.

Hershberger countered the young men’s critique by returning to core Mennonite principles even while remaining open to further dialogue. In a chapter devoted to race relations in his 1958 text, The Way of the Cross in Human Relations, Hershberger made no mention of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court desegregation decision, the subsequent Montgomery bus boycotts in 1955 and 1956, or the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who had long since entered the national and world stage.29 Despite his somewhat inexplicable avoidance of these national events, Hershberger did evaluate the biblical basis for equality of the races and enjoined the Mennonite community to enact scriptural mandates in their daily lives. Although he unfailingly opposed racial subordination and dampened his public criticism of King so as not to encourage reactionaries in the church, Hershberger continued to critique the kind of
direct, nonviolent action proposed by Harding. In light of conversations with Harding and other civil rights leaders like Fellowship of Reconciliation staffer and King confidant Bayard Rustin, Hershberger eventually expressed openness to nonviolent action taken in a spirit of suffering love rather than tactical coercion. In 1959, Hershberger even participated in a spontaneous sit-in of sorts, during which his integrated traveling party asked for and eventually received service at a segregated restaurant in the Atlanta airport. Although Harding continued to disagree with Hershberger’s theological opposition to coercive street demonstrations, the two men remained in conversation through the period of this study.

Following the group’s sojourn through the South, Harding increasingly challenged Hershberger and the entire Mennonite community on the principle of integrity. In an essay titled “To My Fellow Christians: An Open Letter to Mennonites,” Harding called upon his readers to bring such cherished Mennonite values as discipleship, nonresistance, and consistency of belief to bear on the urgent reality of racial oppression. “Can the voices which once sounded so loudly in opposition to warfare,” Harding asked, “. . . now be silent when men are destroying other men (and themselves) with hatred?” He enjoined his co-believers to demonstrate the same integrity of “words and deeds” they had shown when Mennonite men faced mandatory military training. In the past, leaders from the church had met with high-level governmental officials to negotiate nonviolent options like alternative service in Civilian Public Service during World War II and I-W service during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. As Harding observed his coreligionists, they seemed far less eager to lobby on behalf of racial justice. Undaunted, he called white Mennonites to leave secluded communities and align themselves with African-American struggles as an expression of “the way of the disciple.” For the first time before a national Mennonite audience, Harding employed core Anabaptist concepts to support civil rights goals. He continued to focus the church’s attention on civil rights issues in dozens of articles, hundreds of speeches, and countless conversations with white Mennonites through the next four years.

Eight months later, Harding and Franz hosted a seminar on race relations at which Harding stated his position squarely at the boundary between the Mennonite church and the civil rights movement. Held at Woodlawn from April 17 through 19, 1959, the conference drew lead-
ers from the hosts’ General Conference denomination but also from the Lancaster Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, and the (Old) Mennonite Church. In a departure from other meetings on race relations held up to that point and, in many cases, subsequent to that point, nearly 30 percent of the approximately fifty participants were African Americans. Harding addressed this diverse audience as a Mennonite but also spoke from his commitment as a movement activist. In a plenary address he questioned how Mennonites could profess nonconformity to a sinful world while “slavishly and silently” acquiescing to racial segregation. From his perspective, nonconformity should lead believers to oppose racially unjust laws and practices. Even as he called Mennonites to move forward into the world he also pointed back to the Mennonite church itself. Having noted how the cultural stereotype of Mennonitism excluded non-Europeans, he called his audience to bring African Americans “into the deep places” of Mennonite fellowship. In his most direct challenge to Hershberger’s separatist nonresistance, Harding closed his speech with a series of laments that Mennonites had “too long” remained separate. At the crest between separation and engagement, Harding directed Mennonites to demonstrate against segregation within and without the church.

Menno House in Atlanta

Harding’s position at the boundary of the Mennonite church and the civil rights movement stabilized in the following years as he moved into leadership in both circles. In 1960 the Hardings celebrated their marriage at the Woodlawn congregation and, within a year, started a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit in Atlanta under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee’s Peace Section, the peace advocacy arm of the Mennonite family of churches (see figure 4.2). Rosemarie resigned from her teaching post and Vincent took a leave from his dissertation project in order to direct a new voluntary service unit, which Vincent later described as “a combination residence for an interracial team of local Movement participants and social service volunteers, a house of refuge for field workers from the various Movement organizations, an ecumenical community, and a base of operations for our own ministry of reconciliation.” The Hardings located Mennonite House—as locals dubbed the unit—only a block away from Martin and Coretta Scott King’s home. Harding had met King
during his trip to the South three years earlier, and they soon developed a close friendship. By moving to Atlanta, he solidified his relationship with key civil rights leaders and established a base from which to become more engaged with the activism he called on the church to embrace.

Soon after their arrival in Atlanta, King invited the Hardings to join the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s protest work in Albany, Georgia, to “help keep this a Christian movement.”37 From December 1961 well into 1962, the Hardings repeatedly traveled to Albany to hold discussions with white and African-American community leaders about “the way of reconciling love.”38 During one of their Albany sojourns in 1962, Vincent spent three days in jail for praying in public as part of a demonstration at city hall, an action that blurred the boundaries between Christian piety and social activism.39 King and Albany sheriff Laurie Pritchett then urged Harding to accept release so that he could help calm anger roused in the local African-American community after police officers beat a prominent black lawyer.40 Harding accepted their counsel and,
once Pritchett signed Harding’s bond, visited “bars, pool halls, [and] barbershops” to call “for a Christian response to violence.”41 Although the Albany protests saw little success, the Hardings’ efforts gained the trust of civil rights movement leaders. Through the remainder of 1962 the Hardings regularly hosted civil rights leaders at Mennonite House and attended meetings to help craft movement strategy.

Harding brought the high drama of his Albany experiences to the Mennonite church. While in jail he considered his speaking assignment at the Mennonite World Conference, less than two weeks away. He pondered how to address a community still uncertain about involvement in worldly pursuits of any kind, let alone political agitation. Despite the activist example of white Mennonites like Woodlawn co-pastor Delton Franz in the General Conference denomination and Lee Heights (Cleveland) pastor Vern Miller among (Old) Mennonites, most members of the community viewed integrationist activity with suspicion and, in some cases, outright antagonism. Harding knew his audience, however, and used biblical imagery to make his case, a strategy he had used many times before. He mulled over the possibility of forgoing his speaking responsibilities because he was “weary . . . of talking and talking and talking about the church and race.” He considered instead sending “a short, gracious note of invitation, urging” Mennonites to join him in Albany in his jail cell. Although he left his cell to maintain peace in Albany, Harding mentioned his weariness at the Mennonite World Conference and concluded his talk with one of his harshest indictments to date. Drawing on the prophetic imagery of the book of Revelation, he said, “We . . . are insipidly lukewarm on the challenge of racial brotherhood and human justice.”42

A Revolutionary Year, 1963

Vincent and Rosemarie, however, had not left the Mennonite world. Early in 1963, they described their work among Mennonites as “meaningful, frustrating, and rewarding.” Among the most meaningful of their activities came the opportunity to act as “sympathetic confessors” to white church leaders. In addition to writing for all of the publications in both the General Conference and (Old) Mennonite Church denominations, the Hardings listened to the “untold inner agonies” of white church leaders, tried to “understand them,” and called them to costly response.43 Al-
though their calls for public action clearly troubled those committed to separatist nonresistance, the Hardings’ personal engagement also appealed to Mennonites committed to maintaining right relationships.

At the same time, Harding’s impatience with the church became increasingly evident. On February 5, 1963, for example, he published an article in which he called on his readers to let go of their “Swiss-German Mennonite” identity. Unlike other featured writers, Harding also pressed the church to move beyond good intentions to interracial “fellowship, neighborhood life, school comradery [sic], and job relationships.” Yet even here, Harding wrote as an insider. He used plural pronouns twenty times in the article, repeatedly referring to “our problem,” “our captivity,” “our life in one body,” “our thinking.” Concurrent with such strong claims of membership, white church news reporter Daniel Hertzler lauded the Hardings for their courageous action in Atlanta. Other editors had heaped praise on the Hardings in the previous year as well. Although his claims of Mennonite identity would dissipate as the year progressed, Harding soon proved so influential that any Mennonite leader who hoped to speak about the racial tumult of 1963 had to address issues Harding raised.

At least one white Mennonite leader found Harding’s growing influence objectionable. Following a visit by the Hardings to Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia, Mahlon Blosser, a local white Mennonite church executive, objected to Harding’s observation that the Virginia Conference had acquiesced to Jim Crow practices. Blosser bristled at Harding’s proposal that the conference host a race relations meeting to better equip Virginia Mennonites to oppose segregation. “Can one person go into a [M]ennonite community of about 2000 members,” Blosser queried, “and have one meeting with less than 200 present, then have a meeting with the student body at E.M.C. and then write an accurate evaluation of the race situation in the community?” He answered his own question by declaring that such a race relations gathering would prove harmful.

Other white Mennonite leaders found Harding’s words challenging but remained open to his activist message. For example, as Bishop Blosser penned his letter, Vincent, Rosemarie, and their infant daughter, Rachel, were spending time with the staff of Camp Landon in Gulfport, Mississippi, where General Conference church executives had asked them to assess the camp’s twenty-year-old program. The conscientious objectors’
work in constructing sanitary privies at Camp Landon during World War II had garnered local respect. By 1950, church administrators had built on that respect to create a ministry to African Americans in the form of public school religious education, recreational leadership, and youth bible education. By 1963, the voluntary service workers also administered rural visitation programs, staffed a weekly radio broadcast, ran a lending library, and served on a variety of local ministerial groups.

From all reports, long-term white staff members Edna and Orlo Kaufman and Harold and Rosella Regier nervously awaited the Hardings’ visit. Orlo Kaufman had heard Harding speak at Woodlawn’s 1959 race relations conference in Chicago and knew firsthand his ability to challenge the status quo. In response to a query about the Hardings coming to work at Camp Landon in 1960, Kaufman wrote that he would accept the idea only if they agreed to do “personal work”—by which he meant service rather than civil rights activism. Explaining his objections, Kaufman stated, “I’m not sure that Vincent fully understands [the southern reality], and being a Northerner could get into . . . serious difficulty.” At that time, the local African-American community had begun to agitate for access to the Gulfport beaches. Kaufman and other Camp Landon staff had sought to be mediators in the dispute by participating in an integrated ministerial alliance.

For these efforts and their work with African-American children, staff faced local harassment in the form of name-calling, suspicion, and both overt and covert attention from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state-sponsored vigilance committee tasked with identifying and intimidating supporters of integration. Local tensions rose to new heights in advance of the Hardings’ visit as white members of the Gulfport community expressed their support for Governor Ross Barnett’s refusal to enroll James Meredith at the University of Mississippi. In light of these prior exchanges and local conditions, Edna Kaufman requested prayer that the Hardings’ visit would be “beneficial for all of us.”

Despite the collective nervousness and a full schedule—Orlo Kaufman scheduled Vincent to speak seven times and to visit numerous local leaders—the Hardings spent most of their four-day visit with Camp Landon members. In three extended sessions, they discussed every aspect of the camp program. According to Kaufman, the exchanges made a profound impression. He later wrote that Vincent “never leaves one the same.” No
wonder then that Kaufman wrote to the national offices on April 30 expressing concern that the Hardings’ report had not yet arrived. In the interim, Orlo Kaufman wrote an article in which he described Harding’s challenge to relate to white segregated churches, support civil rights activity, and reconsider where staff lived and worshipped.

When Harding’s report did arrive, it gave Camp Landon administrators and staff much to consider. The recommendations touched on all the issues Kaufman had named in his article, but with greater intensity. The Camp Landon group, Harding wrote, needs “to resolve its schizophrenia of week day work with Negroes and Sunday worship where Negroes cannot go.” Although he recognized that Camp Landon staffers had mentored African-American children and young adults, Harding lamented the absence of a Mennonite church that would welcome them. The two Mennonite congregations in the area, Gulfport and Crossroads, practiced segregation and, in the latter case, did so vociferously. As in previous speeches and articles, Harding called the Camp Landon staff to pay attention to racial dynamics within their organization. Not surprisingly, he also called for greater involvement with civil rights groups outside the church. Admitting that the “swirling, often confused patterns” of civil rights changes made it difficult to know exactly how to become involved, Harding urged staff to “take our heritage seriously” and act on the belief that God would make it clear how to join in the racial “revolution.” Such an invitation contrasted with the gradualist, relationship-centered approach advocated by Kaufman.

Yet the Hardings’ visit clearly had an impact. On June 27, for example, Kaufman urged the Gulfport mayor to appoint a biracial committee as a proactive measure to avoid violence. In that same month, Harold Regier broadcast a Sunday school lesson on the radio in which he discussed the murder of Medgar Evers and Governor George Wallace’s refusal to admit African-American students to the University of Alabama. Kaufman and Harold Regier’s resolve was strengthened by their attendance, in December 1963, at an NAACP dinner where a group of white protestors threw rocks and debris at the banquet hall. These and other new initiatives continued, so that by March of 1964 the interracial activities of the Camp Landon staff brought them under renewed investigation by county and state officials. Five years later, staff continued to reference Harding and seek his counsel. Such public engagement represented a significant shift
for Kaufman and his staff as they began likewise to straddle the Mennonite church and the civil rights movement.

Almost immediately, the Hardings paired this Mennonite encounter with another venture into civil rights activism. On the heels of their visit to Camp Landon, they traveled to the Mississippi Delta to visit white and African-American community leaders. Working from the home of African-American activist Amzie Moore in Cleveland, the Hardings met with a plantation owner, a white businessman, an Episcopalian minister, an African-American businessman, and several Franciscan monks. Even more notable than the breadth of their contacts was the manner of their initial invitation. The Hardings refrained from identifying themselves as African Americans when first requesting meetings over the phone. They explained, “We decided to move about and converse with individuals just as if Mississippi were well.”

Occasionally during these grassroots ventures, the two worlds the Hardings straddled overlapped. While on a similar trip to the Delta that same year, the couple arranged to meet Titus Bender, a white Mennonite pastor seeking to support civil rights activity in the town of Meridian. Given the racial tension in the region, Bender told the Hardings not to ask locals where he lived, since such a query could draw dangerous attention. Instead, they planned to rendezvous at a local gas station where, when he saw them, Bender would start driving and the Hardings would follow. When the Hardings approached the gas station, however, Bender got out of his car in front of the older white men gathered at the station and gave Vincent the Holy Kiss, a traditional Mennonite greeting. Harding later recalled Bender’s salutation as a bold “kind of risk-taking” at the juncture of Mennonite identity and civil rights activism that encouraged him to continue the difficult work of mediating between the two worlds.

Such contact with grassroots civil rights activists influenced how Harding spoke when he returned to the Mennonite community. In April, following his travels during the previous month with Rosemarie and their infant daughter, Rachel, he went to Broad Street Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where congregational leaders promoted him as an evangelist. He did not, however, act like one. Speaking at this small church, the first racially integrated congregation in the Virginia Conference, Harding preached each evening for seven days on the “challenge of the cross” (see figure 4.3). Rather than direct his comments toward per-
Sonala evangelism and end his sessions with an altar call, however, Harding concluded each evening’s service with open discussion, an unusual practice for an event billed as a “spiritual life conference.” Although interest in the tent revival ministries of charismatic evangelists like Virginia Conference minister George R. Brunk II had passed its peak by the time Harding traveled to Harrisonburg, audiences still expected to be called forward to repentance, not invited into open conversation. Once again, Harding created a new form of witness as he straddled two worlds.

Harrisonburg Mennonites continued to discuss Harding’s challenges after he left the area, especially the idea of hosting a meeting on race relations. On March 31, 1964, a year after the Broad Street meetings, ministers and lay members from the Virginia Conference gathered at Chicago Avenue Church in Harrisonburg to discuss “the Christian and race.” Significantly, however, whites dominated the meeting, despite the fact that a number of gifted African-American speakers served within the Virginia Conference, including Billy Curry, an ordained deacon at Broad Street, and Leslie Francisco, pastor of the Virginia Conference congregation in...
Newport News. Both men had significant speaking experience within and beyond their congregations and regularly spoke to large audiences. Yet rather than invite either of these local charismatic African-American leaders, the Virginia Conference brought in Paul G. Landis, a white bishop from the Lancaster Conference. Ironically, only Landis mentioned Harding in public session. The Virginia Conference leaders’ refusal to invite or even refer to Harding—even though the meeting emerged from his earlier visit—suggests a fear that Harding would further disrupt their internally focused and nonconfrontational approach to racial integration. It also suggests that even those who opposed Harding’s call for more involvement in social activism could not ignore his challenges.

Into the Battle

Rather than wait for the Virginia Conference to discuss race relations, the Hardings continued to deepen their civil rights work. With responsibilities complete in Harrisonburg, they returned to Atlanta on April 7 to attend a baptismal service led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at Ebenezer Baptist, King’s home congregation. At the end of the service, King contacted Rosemarie and requested that she and Vincent travel to Birmingham to act as intermediaries between civil rights demonstrators and white community leaders. After considering the request for several days, on April 10 the Harding family drove to Birmingham, where they played a critical mediating role with white “clergymen, lawyers, businessmen, [and] political leaders.” Behind the scenes, they helped keep communication channels open between Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders and the local white establishment in the midst of violence, incrimination, and large-scale unrest.

In accepting this assignment, the Hardings drew on skills honed through their work at the border with the Mennonite church. In these engagements, however, they did not display the weariness that had begun to creep into their work with white Mennonites. Here, the drama and deep sense of engagement with matters of historical import proved invigorating. Owing to the sensitive nature of the contacts, for example, the Hardings often attended secret meetings and private negotiations. And they willingly refrained from participating in the actual Birmingham demonstrations in order to better facilitate their negotiations between the
white leaders and civil rights demonstrators, which lasted well past Easter. In Birmingham, the Hardings evinced a new level of sophistication and gravitas in their civil rights work. Working out of the public eye, they supported civil rights street activism with the Mennonite-modeled skills of daily demonstration.

These intense civil rights negotiations, in turn, led to new public appearances in the Mennonite church and beyond. After returning to Atlanta on April 20, Harding left for a speaking engagement in Connecticut followed by additional meetings in Nashville, Tennessee, and Akron, Pennsylvania, headquarters of the Mennonite Central Committee. He returned to Atlanta on April 25 and, by order of his doctor, went on bed rest from April 28 through May 5. The second day back on his feet, Harding traveled to Birmingham with Mennonite minister Paul Peachey, staff member for Church Peace Mission, an organization of Protestant peace groups. Peachey had come to Atlanta to meet with Harding, King, and other movement leaders, but upon his arrival he received a message from King that he should go to Birmingham and meet with committee members there.78 Harding traveled with Peachey to participate in the ad hoc peace meeting but quickly entered into negotiations between demonstrators and city officials. At one point Harding went into the streets to “help stop the battle between the fire hoses and the Negro crowd.”79

Through May 10 Harding stayed in the city to mediate between the two sides. Before he returned home, he drafted the press release King would read upon completion of the negotiations.80 When bombs exploded the night of May 11 at the home of King’s brother, the Reverend A. D. King, and at the Gaston Motel, where King had been staying, Harding got back on the phone with civil rights leaders and white officials, urging them to keep their agreement. Shuttling between activism in the streets and speeches in churches, Harding stayed connected to both Mennonites and movement leaders.

In events at Birmingham, Harding played a role that affected the nation. As reporters broadcast images of fire hoses, police dogs, and batons battering civil rights marchers, the rhetoric of democracy lost credibility. Although he had been hesitant to address previous civil rights campaigns, President Kennedy expressed outrage at the brutality in Birmingham and growing concern over increasing levels of violence.81 In a nationally televised broadcast on June 11, Kennedy appealed to the nation’s moral sensi-
bility and asked American citizens to accept changes to the racial order. The skills and experience Harding had gained working at the border between white Mennonites and civil rights leaders allowed him to play a significant role in this broader shift in national perception.

As the struggle for civil rights in Birmingham continued, Mennonites across the church began to pay new attention to racial oppression within their own communities. Incidents of overt racial discrimination came under new scrutiny and received swift, public condemnation. For example, Mae Schrag, a white staff member at Camp Landon, reported on conversations she had with five African-American girls who had attended Mennonite colleges. In May, she informed Camp Landon supporters that white Mennonites had used offensive racial epithets in front of the girls, denied the young women associate membership status in local congregations, and housed the girls in separate rooms by race. News of these incidents spread far beyond Gulfport and eventually entered the national Mennonite press. At a time when both the General Conference and (Old) Mennonite communities had begun to define their identity by emphasizing selfless service and the pursuit of social justice rather than visible marks of nonconformity, such overt evidence of racism inside the church proved troubling. Mennonite claims of racial egalitarianism weakened in the face of such reports and brought renewed attention to Harding’s increasingly high-profile ministry.

At the same time, the growing visibility of national civil rights activism prompted Mennonite church officials to promote the Hardings’ work. Mennonite leaders noted the rising intensity of racial struggle, marked by the June 12 murder of civil rights activist and NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers. Five days later, Ed Metzler, executive secretary of the Peace Section of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Hardings’ supervisor, contacted every Mennonite peace committee in the country to inform them of the Hardings’ work in Atlanta and to encourage lobbying for civil rights. Although he stopped short of calling for mass street action, Metzler nonetheless moved away from Guy Hershberger’s posture of separatist nonresistance, thanks largely to the influence of the Hardings. Metzler knew his audience. Before suggesting a new departure he had to demonstrate the couple’s integrity in word and deed. Thus in his appeals Metzler first described how the Hardings served “as a reconciling bridge between the white and Negro communities.” Only after establish-
ing their credibility in traditional Mennonite language did he advocate for “witness to government on civil rights legislation.”

As the year progressed, Harding spent less energy on Mennonite contacts while simultaneously moving ever closer to an embattled civil rights community. The summer of 1963 saw 1,122 civil rights demonstrations throughout the country and some twenty thousand arrests in the South. White southerners responded by incarcerating and beating demonstrators. Police officials and other segregationists attacked women in the movement with particular intensity. For example, Mississippi state police arrested Fannie Lou Hamer—the voting rights activist who would later captivate the attention of the nation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention—and a group of her co-workers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee while they traveled home from a June voter registration workshop. During her time in jail, the police officers forced African-American inmates to beat Hamer with a blackjack. After her release, Hamer traveled to Atlanta to meet with staff members from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to recover from the brutal beatings. She stayed at Mennonite House while in Atlanta, where she spoke and laughed long with the Hardings. Through such encounters, Vincent’s commitment to the civil rights movement grew stronger.

Harding’s increasing civil rights involvement drew even more attention from Mennonite church leaders as the summer months progressed. While on a tour of the South, Guy F. Hershberger met with Harding in late July. The two men spent less time on their theological differences than on the “urgency of the [civil rights] situation.” Harding felt that the “integrity of the church” would be irreparably damaged if Mennonites did not act soon. Once again, he advocated for interracial bible schools and summer camps, vocal stands against public school segregation, and direct nonviolent action in support of civil rights. Although Hershberger’s own subsequent recommendations focused on matters of education, missions, and personal reconciliation rather than the public advocacy proposed by Harding, he nonetheless quoted Harding at length. Goshen College professor and theologian C. Norman Kraus also spent three weeks in Atlanta from mid-July through early August. Harding put Kraus in touch with a broad range of civil rights activists, including Southern Christian Leadership Conference executive Ralph Abernathy, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee communications director Julian Bond, Koinonia Farms
founder and author Clarence Jordan, and leaders of the White Citizens Council. Thanks to Harding’s contacts, Kraus enjoyed a level of access unusual for a white northerner.

Ironically, the more Harding turned his face toward civil rights activism, the more leaders from both the General Conference and the (Old) Mennonite Church denominations regarded him as the church’s spokesperson on race relations. By August of 1963, denominational officials regularly called on Harding to attend their meetings and to challenge Mennonite listeners. Early that same month, David Augsburger, the host of a nationally broadcast radio program known as the Mennonite Hour, interviewed Harding on air. Several weeks later, (Old) Mennonite Church delegates passed a resolution on “reconciliation” at a national assembly where leaders challenged their constituents to follow the Hardings’ example. In correspondence with Guy Hershberger following the assembly, home missions secretary Nelson Kauffman proposed a meeting with African Americans, “in addition to Vince Harding,” to instruct white church leaders in how to relate to civil rights groups. Kauffman underlined Harding’s prominence by referring to him repeatedly. Hershberger followed suit. When he released a report on his southern trip to more than thirty groups and individuals, Hershberger included only one African American, Vincent Harding, in the distribution list.

Harding’s profile rose even higher in the Mennonite press. On August 6, 1963, editors of both The Mennonite and the Gospel Herald—the weekly national publications of the General Conference and the (Old) Mennonite Church denominations, respectively—referred to Harding. On the General Conference side, Maynard Shelly quoted Harding’s bracing speech at the 1962 Mennonite World Conference that challenged his audience to engage in civil disobedience. Gospel Herald editor John M. Drescher noted that Harding had influenced his thoughts on segregation. Drescher also printed an article by Harding challenging the church to be true to its calling of nonconformity to “prejudice and discrimination.” In the five months that followed, the editors of these two magazines included appeals to legislative action no less than five times, a significant departure from the relationally based efforts promoted by Hershberger and other supporters of a less politically engaged Anabaptism. Once again, Harding’s agenda guided the church’s response.

Harding ended the summer at the center of national civil rights activ-
ity. On August 28 he joined a quarter of a million civil rights demonstra-
tors at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where King gave
his “I Have a Dream” speech. Unlike their antagonists, the interracial
demonstrators did not resort to violence. In subsequent weeks, the Stu-
dent Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other civil rights groups
built on the success of the national protest by conducting nonviolent voter
registration drives in Mississippi and throughout the South. Despite
the tactical nature of the nonviolent action, the public, disciplined display
of the peaceful protests drew the attention of the nation and challenged
those Mennonite leaders who continued to criticize King and his associ-
ates for using nonviolence but not committing their lives to it. Nonethe-
less, the nonviolent discipline of the activists offered an implicit critique
of Mennonites’ quiet withdrawal.

In the face of such critique, Mennonite officials who had previously
given scant notice to civil rights activity began to pay attention. On Sep-
tember 14, two weeks after the March on Washington, Harding attended
the hastily organized meeting on civil rights at the Prairie Street Men-
nonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana, that opens this chapter. The meeting,
originally proposed by Kauffman and supported by Hershberger, pur-
ported to “inquire of our colored brethren what in their mind should be
the role of the Mennonite churches in the current racial revolution.”
Twenty-five leaders gathered on that Saturday, all but two of whom were
men. At least seven of the twenty-five leaders were African Americans,
and five of those “colored brethren,” besides Harding, opened the meeting
with statements of concern. Their comments encouraged dialogue, love,
educational initiatives, interracial church fellowship, church-based evan-
gelism, and interracial visitor and pulpit exchanges. Although the men
spoke with passion and fluency akin to Harding’s own, none of them ad-
vocated involvement in civil rights demonstrations.

Harding, by contrast, insisted on a more activist approach. Once the
other speakers had concluded, Harding called for immediate, concrete
political action. Rather than focusing on pulpit exchanges or generic ad-
monitions to love, Harding turned his attention to employment, housing,
and equality, topics central to the March on Washington. “It may be that
God is ready to use revolution as a prelude to resurrection,” he proclaimed.
“Most of our people will never be ready for the requirements of the hour,
and we cannot longer wait for them.” Harding’s mention of “the re-
quirements of the hour” appears prescient in retrospect. The next day four girls died from a bomb thrown into a crowd of African-American youth at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Such horrific events only increased the frustration already evident in Harding’s comments at the Woodlawn conference in 1959. Harding seemed to be on the verge of abandoning Mennonites if they could not at least join him in public demonstration, when he and his civil rights colleagues were considering even more revolutionary measures.

Ironically, even as Harding’s frustration with Mennonite disengagement neared a breaking point, white Mennonites began to take tentative action. In northeast Indiana, Mennonites mobilized to write letters, lobby representatives, and distribute the church’s race relations statement to every member of Congress. Congressman John Brademas later said that Elkhart Mennonites gave more support to the 1964 Civil Rights Act than any other religious group. Although they did not take to the streets, their legislative initiatives signaled a more profound shift toward engagement than Harding realized. As Harding himself often noted, white Mennonites had previously lobbied only for conscientious objector status in the military. By September of 1963, however, some church members had followed Harding across the boundary of Mennonite quietism toward civil rights activism.

The group gathered at the September 14 meeting at Prairie Street also moved closer to active engagement than perhaps even Harding had anticipated. Despite the participation of Guy Hershberger and other leaders who had opposed organized street protest, those present called for action that went beyond the standard emphasis on church constituent education. The group recorded their support of limited but definitive involvement in civil rights marches. An anonymous quote from the day’s proceedings stated, “The disciple must be on the side of the oppressed, and this may have many ramifications, possibly even marching, sitting-in, and jail.” This succinct encapsulation of a position long advocated by Harding suggested an openness to new tactics. Later on that year, Hershberger drafted a widely distributed pamphlet on race relations in which he encouraged Mennonites to consider becoming involved with civil rights organizations, a significant shift in his position. Although he stopped short of advocating for direct street action, Hershberger joined other white Mennonite leaders who moved closer to activism as a result of conversations
with Harding. Across the church, members considered the new calls to action, and some responded by shifting their action to the streets. Many more, however, continued to focus on demonstrations inside their homes and sanctuaries.

In the wake of the limited Prairie Street shift toward public and confrontational forms of protest, Harding pressed his activist message throughout the church with even more zeal. A week after the event, Harding attended a regional gathering of the Indiana-Michigan Conference where, once again, he provided the only racial diversity. Guy F. Hershberger noted that “we had Vincent Harding there for these people to see and talk to.” Yet despite the awkward mix of deference and paternalism surrounding the event, Harding continued to challenge Mennonites with direct, uncompromising, and increasingly stark language. At this point, he remained committed to bringing together his work with Mennonites suspicious of politically oriented, tactically nonviolent activists and his engagement with civil rights organizers wary of quietist, sectarian, religious communities. The balancing act continued.

Disengagement

Eventually, Harding’s high-profile itinerancy elicited special scrutiny from church officials on the Mennonite Central Committee board responsible for Harding’s work. From January through the end of September 1963, Harding had written or been cited in seventeen separate items in the national Mennonite church press in a spate of articles that looked surprisingly similar across both General Conference and (Old) Mennonite publications. In light of this attention, Peace Section board members asked for more detail about Harding’s day-to-day activity. Given that other Mennonite Central Committee administrators, like voluntary service director Edgar Stoesz, had already relayed constituent concerns about Harding’s civil rights involvement, it is likely that board members had begun to hear criticisms about Harding’s activism. Although Harding’s supervisor, Ed Metzler, did not explain why board members made their request, Metzler’s requirement that Harding keep a journal for the last three months of 1963 demonstrates an uncommon level of scrutiny of Harding’s activity.

From October through December, Harding met with Martin Luther
King Jr. and Southern Christian Leadership Conference associates such as Andrew Young and Fred Shuttlesworth, hosted Ella Baker from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, spent a day talking with author James Baldwin, and visited with white civil rights activist and Baptist pastor Will Campbell. During the same period, Harding met with representatives from at least twelve additional groups, including the Georgia and Alabama Councils on Human Relations, the National Council of Churches, the Anti-Defamation League, and a local White Citizen’s Council. This period of intense activity also included a keynote address at a national conference on race and religion.\textsuperscript{115} Board members concerned that Harding had strayed too far into civil rights territory found little comfort in the report he offered on his high-profile straddling of church and secular contacts.

Despite an increasingly demanding schedule, Harding continued to speak with a broad range of Mennonites. On October 12, only a month after he had declared his deep impatience with Mennonite passivity on the question of racial justice, Harding agreed to meet with the leaders of a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit in Atlanta, based in Berea Mennonite Church, a congregation opposed to the “crusade for individual rights for the Negro.”\textsuperscript{116} Unit leaders John and Beth Miller asked to discuss their relationship with Mennonite House, the Mennonite Central Committee service unit led by the Hardings, where unit members, by contrast, regularly participated in civil rights organizing and tested extant segregation laws.\textsuperscript{117} The Millers’ request to meet with Harding and his subsequent consultations with them show the extent of Harding’s influence within the church; both those who found his activist message suspect and those who embraced it sought his counsel.

So influential had Harding become that he received speaking requests from outside the United States. From late October into early November, Harding traveled to southern Ontario to speak to Mennonites in the Kitchener-Waterloo area.\textsuperscript{118} Consistent with his overall approach, he challenged Canadians as directly as U.S. citizens. In his writing, he returned again to familiar theological territory of selflessness and discipleship by calling on white Mennonite Canadians to surrender their lives and face the prospect of “social ostracism and economic deprivation” in pursuit of racial justice.\textsuperscript{119} Upon completion of meetings at Sterling Avenue Mennonite Church, Harding traveled to Mennonite Central Committee head-
quarters in Pennsylvania, where he led multiple discussions for volunteers preparing to serve overseas and throughout North America. Unbeknown to those who sought his insight, such international influence and high-profile connection had already begun to sow the seeds of his departure.

While such seeds of discontent remained hidden, Harding’s energetic and persistent appeal to the church began to show results. As the year progressed, Mennonite church leaders acknowledged the political, as well as personal, dimension of the racial problems inside the church and throughout American society. Within the General Conference denomination, for example, a November 1 staff report by administrator Vern Preheim summarized meetings held “to discuss Mennonite involvement in the social and racial revolution.”120 Toward the end of the year, members of the Mennonite Central Committee’s Peace Section approved Hersberger’s civil rights pamphlet, “From Words to Deeds in Race Relations,” that listed twenty-eight concrete actions church members could take in “response to the challenge of the racial revolution.”121 Harding had long used such politically charged terms and continued to do so even with the most conservative of Mennonite church leaders. For instance, on November 22—the day of President Kennedy’s assassination—Harding met with bishops and pastors from congregations sponsored by the Lancaster Conference in Alabama, Georgia, and Florida to discuss “our churches and the racial revolution.”122 Now, in the South and across the church, a few Mennonite leaders used political language strikingly similar to Harding’s own.

Harding’s tireless efforts to shape the church’s racial agenda, however, came at a cost. During the past year, he had spent much of his time away from Rosemarie and their daughter, Rachel. In the month of December alone, Harding attended fifteen conferences and gave four plenary addresses, enjoying only four days free of meetings or speeches.123 The strain of his schedule and on-going frustration with Mennonite reluctance to support visible and confrontational witness began to show itself in Harding’s growing impatience. The benefit of his doctor-ordered bed rest earlier in the year had long since worn off. Harding needed rest but instead got more meetings.

Harding finally erupted at a national meeting in the Midwest. On December 4, leaders from the General Conference Board of Christian Service gathered in Newton, Kansas, for conversation with Harding and Her-
shberger. Harding sat yet again through a meeting dominated by white Mennonites. With growing impatience he listened to another round of talk about racial intermarriage, education, and the tension between non-resistance and demonstration. By the end of the afternoon, Harding had had enough. After Guy Hershberger described plans for yet another series of educational meetings on race, Harding let loose. In his longest speech of the day, he pled with his fellow Mennonites to speak to him directly, to even get “angry as hell” with him. He admitted to his own anger that Mennonites played “games with this issue so often.” That anger then turned into biting critique as he lamented that God had to bring about change through the Supreme Court, the Communist Manifesto, and the NAACP rather than the church. In the depth of his lament, he asked his co-believers to become the “front light” to the world rather than the “rear light.”

No one interrupted as he spoke.

Even in such passion Harding chose his closing words carefully. As in his essay in the February Gospel Herald, he consistently used plural pronouns when he spoke of Mennonites. “We,” “our,” “us,” and “ourselves” appear more than one hundred times in his recorded comments. Clearly, Harding still considered himself a Mennonite. His relationship with the church, however, had become strained. Although he clarified that he was “not quite” ready to leave the Mennonite community, he nonetheless was “tempted pretty much when I hear us talking about so many things that seem so important to us and yet in terms of the living and the dying of the people in the world it seems so unimportant to me.” With that sobering comment still ringing in the room, Harding then challenged the church to embrace all people rather than give “preference to whites.” The Mennonite community, in Harding’s mind, had a particular responsibility to step into the racial revolution with the selfless courage shown by Mennonite martyrs in the sixteenth century. The Mennonite theological commitment to nonconformity, love, and selfless sacrifice, he argued, lost all its integrity if church members held back from a forceful engagement with the civil rights struggle. From his perspective, he had done nothing more than call upon his white co-believers to live out their professed commitment to join word and deed. Harding concluded with a challenge to the white male church leaders in the room: “This revolution will never be complete until the church does what it was called upon to do in the first place.”

The response to Harding’s impassioned plea proved disheartening.
Chair Robert Kreider sidestepped Harding’s criticisms and returned the discussion to educational initiatives by asking, “What about the joint secretariat idea?” Committee member David Habegger suggested that a few members of the group draft “some sort of statement” in response to the racial crisis. No one leapt up and called for a march, a demonstration, or a letter-writing campaign. Even in the relatively more politically active General Conference environment, church officials suggested the same sort of educational and pronouncement-focused strategies promoted by their (Old) Mennonite cousins. The meeting concluded with a tentative commitment to appoint church staff to educate Mennonites on racial issues. Among this group of General Conference leaders—some of whom had personally lobbied politicians to obtain conscientious objector status for young white men—Harding’s call for political advocacy on behalf of African Americans went unanswered.

Other Mennonites less entrenched in church institutions did move toward active political engagement by year’s end. Harding again prompted their action. In his last formal interaction with Mennonites in 1963, Harding attended an all-day planning meeting on December 17 at Mennonite House to prepare for a conference on race and the Mennonite churches of the South, which would be held in Atlanta in the coming year. The initiative for the 1964 conference emerged from conversations the Hardings had with Orlo Kaufman during their visit to Camp Landon in March. Although Harding was again the only African-American Mennonite to speak at the February 25–26 conference, local African-American leaders including C. T. Vivian of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Charles Demere, an African Methodist Episcopal minister in Atlanta, also addressed the assembly. The Atlanta meeting opened up space, perhaps for the first time among southern Mennonites, for members within the church to support a more activist response to the racial revolution. Although conference participants remained divided on the question of involvement in street marches, many made enthusiastic declarations of their commitment to boldly oppose segregation upon return to their home communities.

The race-focused gathering in Atlanta marked the end of Harding’s long effort to straddle the border between activism inside and outside the church. Following a trip to visit European Mennonites during the summer of 1964, the Hardings returned to Atlanta in August and requested
a six-month leave of absence. In the midst of the heavy travel schedule and rigorous public presentations Harding had, like his friend and mentor, Martin Luther King Jr., been unfaithful to his spouse. Unlike King, however, Harding took direct and immediate action to end his infidelity of “thoughts, words and deeds.” He abruptly stepped aside from active involvement with civil rights organizing to salvage his marriage and “make as clear a break as possible with the duplicity of the past.” At the end of the leave in early 1965, Harding gave frank witness to what he called “sexual undiscipline and lack of honesty,” claimed cleansing and renewal, resigned his post with the Mennonite Central Committee, and accepted a teaching assignment at Spellman College.

Having cut institutional ties with the Mennonite church, Harding moved to further distance himself from the Mennonite community. He signaled his departure in 1966 by quoting colleagues who asked him, “Are you going to stay with those nice white Mennonites, Anabaptists, Christians? Are any of them going to join the fight, Vince? Where do they stand, Vince? Where do they stand?” Other than a controversial address Harding gave at the Mennonite World Conference in 1967 and a few equally provocative articles he published in the Mennonite press that same year, Harding left the Mennonite world.

The Dual Demonstration

Harding’s abrupt departure reveals dynamics introduced by his dual demonstration. Harding resigned for a combination of reasons. He had clearly grown frustrated with the church’s hesitant, half-hearted, and unenthusiastic response to his plea to join the movement. But behind the obvious frustrations with the church’s response loomed other, more personal reasons. The physical demands of an itinerant schedule left him exhausted. He and Rosemarie requested their six-month leave of absence “for purposes of personal spiritual rehabilitation and family reasons.” Although the couple used that time to restore their marriage, they did not seek to take up their previous leadership roles within the Mennonite community. Rather than follow a process of “confession and forgiveness” within the church, Harding chose to move away from the church. The language Harding used to explain his abrupt departure drew on a principle he learned from Mennonites. In his resignation statement, he confessed to inconsistency of “words and deeds” and expressed a desire for personal in-
tegrity. Although he did not include details of his “sinful past,” he felt that he had been “unfaithful” to his religious community by not showing integrity in his personal and professional life. In the end, regardless of his frustration with the apparent lack of integrity among white Mennonites in their response to the racial revolution, Harding could no longer tolerate personal inconsistencies in his own life. The desire for integrity that had attracted him to Mennonites had truly become his own.

Harding had proved attractive to Mennonites precisely because of that commitment to integrity. He called for sacrificial service while leading a voluntary service unit. He spoke about the values of nonviolence after personally helping to calm angry mobs in the streets. He demanded that Mennonites love their enemies at the same time that he counted a southern, white, pro-segregationist sheriff as “a personal friend.” Given his high profile, Harding had little trouble attracting Mennonites’ attention. During his sojourn among these daily demonstrators, he often acted more like a Mennonite than the Mennonites themselves.

Yet that same concern for integrity, when joined to the lessons he had learned from the civil rights community, kept Harding at the church’s border. The civil rights community had taught him to embrace activism, exercise leadership, and claim his racial identity. Those lessons made Harding hard to describe. He served as a Mennonite minister, but he marched and spent time in jail. Neither birthright Mennonite nor child convert, he nonetheless spoke like other Mennonite leaders. Unlike other African Americans active within the Mennonite community in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Harding had not come into the church as a recipient of Mennonite missions or service outreach. Instead, he called Mennonites to include activism in their service in order to remain true to the Anabaptist values of discipleship and peacemaking. Thus Mennonites at the church’s center could claim Harding as their own, even as his activist leadership and racial identity moved him to the periphery.

Harding’s concern for integrity thus reconfigures the relationship of the church and the civil rights movement. As previously mentioned, many historians have identified how African-American congregations inspired activists, provided infrastructural support for demonstrations, and, at points, offered sanctuary from racial tumult. Other historians note that some white congregations provided similar support and many lobbied for civil rights legislation in 1963 and 1964. Still others remind us that many
white churches distanced themselves from activism or opposed the civil rights agenda entirely. All these scholars assume that energy and resources flowed in one direction, from the church toward the streets. Harding’s sojourn at the border of church and movement reveals a bidirectional exchange. Harding learned lessons from demonstrating in the streets that shaped how he demonstrated in the sanctuary. And lessons learned from his adopted church influenced how he participated in the movement. Harding’s concern for integrity, for instance, showed up in his writing for King and other civil rights leaders. In short, the church conversed with the movement.

More important, Harding’s story reveals civil rights struggles unfolding within the church. Not just a staging ground, the church was a battleground. Harding argued, cajoled, and agitated on a daily basis to get Mennonites to end segregation and discrimination inside the church. He never stopped pushing his co-believers to join social protests, but those calls to action emerged from his critique of Mennonite racism. Like Lark, Swartzentruber, and the Fresh Air children who entered Mennonite homes before Harding ever heard the word Mennonite, Harding challenged the church to act in keeping with its professed doctrine. Rather than a separate or ancillary tale, the narrative of such church struggles is central to civil rights history.

In the end, white Mennonites found Harding so attractive and so troublesome precisely because he attempted to hold together the stories of the church and the civil rights movement. His charisma helped bring those stories together, but his position as a Mennonite–African American, an insider-outsider, and a church leader–civil rights activist gained him an audience. Harding challenged the false divisions between church members and outsiders, between withdrawal and engagement, and between whites and blacks precisely because he himself straddled two communities. In some cases his actions and words successfully transcended these divisions in ways that led to new forms of action. Intense contact with Harding led Mennonite leaders like church theologian Guy Hershberger and Lancaster Conference bishop Paul Landis to modify their perspectives and to promote new strategies of social engagement. In other instances, Harding’s actions unnerved his fellow Mennonites. White leaders like Mahlon Blosser of the Virginia Conference and Orlo Kaufman of Camp Landon initially found Harding’s activism threatening. As southerners,
Blosser and Kaufman feared shifts in the social order to a greater degree than did Hershberger and Landis in the North. Nonetheless, encounters with Harding unquestionably shaped Blosser’s and Kaufman’s responses. Although they disagreed with his new application of church doctrine, they could not ignore him. Ironically, they often enacted the initiatives Harding proposed.

Harding never entirely gave up his dual demonstration. He continued to contribute to the struggle for racial justice and, periodically, to the Mennonite church. In 1969, a Newsweek reporter dubbed him the “pope” of black studies in an article describing Harding’s efforts to unify African-American scholars from his post as the director of the Institute of the Black World at the King Memorial Center in Atlanta. Once again, Harding balanced between two worlds, this time between the academy and the activist community. Following his work at the King Center and several teaching posts, Harding went on to write an influential history of antebellum African-American resistance, served as senior adviser to the Eyes on the Prize civil rights documentary series, and, along with Rosemarie, moved freely between the academic and activist communities by leading workshops and giving speeches. White and African-American Mennonites continued to seek out Harding for advice and counsel well into the 1970s and beyond. In 1996 the Hardings and their daughter, Rachel, returned to Atlanta to celebrate thirty-five years of Mennonite Central Committee work in the city and to mark the formal closing of the service unit, a termination stirred in part by the same tensions between activism and withdrawal that Harding had brought together. At the gathering, Harding offered words both pastoral and prophetic to the gathered administrators and former volunteers. Once again he joined the sanctuary with the street.

Harding’s struggles as a dual demonstrator parallel the difficulties faced by interracial couples in the Mennonite church. Like Harding, African-American men and white women who became romantically involved often straddled two worlds. Their perch was no less precarious than Harding’s. Like him, they demonstrated on a daily basis to end segregation and racism among Mennonites. The chapter that follows shows how civil rights struggles about interracial marriage inside the church also brought about significant social change.