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"The Lord Requires Justice of Us"

Civil Rights Activism in World War II South Carolina

> If we as Christians see injustices that frustrate some of God's children or
> hear lies that lash sensitive spirits, it is our duty under God to do our part
> in ending these things. Failure to do so may cause others to doubt the
> sincerity of our faith.
>
> WOMEN OF ST. MICHAEL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, 1943

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In 1943, the women of the predominantly white St. Michael's Episcopal Church
in Charleston, South Carolina, addressed the inferior conditions in black
schools in the city, explaining that their concern arose from the conviction
that "the Lord requires justice of us." They noted that the value of all the
black schools in the city was just one-fifth that of white schools, even though
each educated approximately the same number of pupils. Taxpayers' money,
they insisted, should be used "above all to provide adequate grammar school
education for all young people of the city . . . regardless of creed and color."[1]

These women's actions demonstrated the growing attention to racial in-
justice in South Carolina during World War II. Although they made up a
small minority of the population, some citizens of the Palmetto State—fe-
male and male, black and white—began to take action to guarantee Afri-
can American citizens their rights to education, political representation,
and protection from racial violence. The challenge over unequal education
made by the women of St. Michael's reveals several elements of civil rights
activism in South Carolina in the 1940s: the influence of religious convic-

tions, the role and importance of women and their organizations, the possibilities and limitations of racial activism, the role of education as a key civil rights issue, and the impact of World War II's democratic rhetoric on black and white women's efforts to effect change. Although the women of St. Michael's were promoting "separate but equal" facilities, not integration, their statements provide evidence of the tentative steps some South Carolinians were taking to promote racial justice in education.

When the white women at St. Michael's challenged the inequities in public school funding, they addressed only one of the many issues that African Americans had been working on for decades. During the 1940s, predominantly black organizations like the federated black women's clubs, the YMCA and YWCA, Masonic lodges, Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, fraternities and sororities, burial and benevolence societies, and various other private and professional organizations became increasingly active in African American communities throughout South Carolina. In most cases, they supported church- and education-related causes by combining their professional and social activities and giving direction to African American communities. Even though there were significant contributions from these organizations in rural areas like Clarendon County, most of the impetus and strength for activism came from blacks in Columbia, Charleston, Greenville, Orangeburg, and Rock Hill. In Columbia, for example, in 1941, the Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA), which had been organized in 1939, appeared before a joint meeting of the South Carolina Senate's Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee to request a pay increase for black teachers.[2]

Educational institutions were also an important source of social and community leadership. In Charleston, African Americans attending such all-black schools as Burke Industrial School, Avery Normal School, and the Catholic Immaculate Conception School often worked with these organizations to celebrate black achievements to resist negative stereotypes of African Americans. The black branch of the Charleston YWCA, for example, scheduled programs focusing on African American contributions to American life and celebrated Negro History Week, whereas local schools did not.[3]

Black women also created and supported organizations to combat racial injustice throughout the South.[4] Before southern black and white women began working together, black women already had a history of organizing, developing, and leading programs to improve the quality of black communities throughout the South. Long before the 1940s, local black women's orga-

nizations—for example, the Sunset Club of Orangeburg, South Carolina, of which Marion Birnie Wilkinson was president; the Tuskegee Women's Club of Tuskegee, Alabama, led by Margaret Murray Washington; and the Neighborhood Union of Atlanta, Georgia, founded by Lugenia Burns Hope—provided support and services to African American communities such as health clinics, educational opportunities, and homes for black youth.[5]

Together, black club women founded larger organizations such as the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).[6] Wilkinson, Washington, and Hope emerged as leaders in the southern black women's movement and the national black women's movement. These women, along with their husbands, often joined integrated organizations like the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), an integrated mixed-gender group founded in 1919 following a spate of race riots throughout the South.[7] There they found southern white women working to improve race relations.[8]

In the Palmetto State, the South Carolina Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (SCFCWC), an affiliate of the NACW, was one of the state's most significant service groups for African Americans even before the 1940s. Founded in 1909 at Sidney Park Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbia by Marion Birnie Wilkinson and Susie Dart Butler of Charleston, Sara B. Henderson and Lizella A. Jenkins Moorer of Orangeburg, and Celia Dial Saxon of Columbia, the SCFCWC's purpose was as follows:

> Promote education of colored women and to hold an educational convention annually . . . Raise the standard at home . . . Work for social, moral, economic, and religious welfare of women and children . . . Protect the rights of women and children who work . . . Secure and enforce the civil and political rights for our groups . . . Obtain for colored women the opportunity of reaching the highest standards in all fields of human endeavors . . . Promote interracial understanding so that justice and goodwill may prevail among all people.[9]

Born in 1873, Wilkinson, a descendant of one of Charleston's antebellum free black families, led a number of organizations in Orangeburg, including the Sunlight Club, an affiliate of the NACW. She was also the founder of the YWCA at South Carolina State College and had been an active member of the South Carolina Committee on Interracial Cooperation (SCCIC) since its founding in 1919, serving on its National Defense Committee during World War II.[10]

The SCFCWC developed strategies to address not only African American concerns statewide but in particular those plaguing indigent young black women. In 1917, under Wilkinson's leadership, South Carolina black club women established the Fairwold Home for Delinquent Girls (later renamed the Wilkinson Home for Orphan Girls) in Cayce to house black girls. The state government had failed to provide "separate but equal" facilities for black teenage girls, who were often placed in county jails or the state penitentiary with hardened criminals for petty crimes or antisocial behavior.[11] Fairwold was built on property secured for black club women by Episcopal bishop Kirkman G. Finlay of the diocese of upper South Carolina. Black club women raised $12,000 to build the home and also received small contributions from the Duke Foundation.[12]

Black women's clubs also supported a host of other causes, such as suffrage, health, education, temperance, and home economics. Although black women forged alliances with white women to correct racial injustice and other social ills, most of their early efforts involved African American institution building and community support as well as introducing poorer blacks to middle-class norms.[13] This activism would assume increasing importance during World War II.

African American Activism and World War II

After Europe descended into war in 1939, African Americans seized opportunities to increase their claims for equal treatment. In 1939, Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), anticipated a significant role for the United States in the international conflict. He understood that many African Americans embraced isolationism because they could not imagine fighting a war to end fascism in Europe when they suffered the indignity of segregation in the United States. According to historian Harvard Sitkoff, militant editorials in the black press, threats by African American leaders and protest organizations, and portents of black disloyalty alongside support for the Allied cause were evident even before the war.[14] But White also recognized that black participation in the war was a propitious moment that would underscore their demands for civil rights.[15]

Nationally, African American activists were galvanized by the rhetoric of Allied forces, which invoked democratic principles in their propaganda against Nazi Germany. In turn, activists adopted this propaganda as a central argument in their campaign for civil rights, making it a moral crusade for