

Howard Thurman: Moral Anchor to the Civil Rights Movement

Class 2

Mentoring the Movement

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Course Goals and Outline

GOALS:

- Introduce Howard Thurman and place him in historical context
- Illustrate his influence on the American Civil Rights Movement
- Highlight his impact on American Christianity

OUTLINE:

1. Up From Slavery: Introducing Howard Thurman in Historical Context
2. **Mentoring the Movement**
3. Common Ground: The Beloved Community

Class Objective:

- To understand how Howard Thurman's tenure at Howard University, Friendship Tour of India, and pivotal meeting with Mahatma Gandhi combined to help Thurman to shape a new approach for a generation of civil rights movement leaders and activists.
- To understand Thurman as a part of the trio: (M. Johnson, H. Thurman and B. Mays) of Church Reformers intent upon Revising the Social Gospel for African Americans and for American Christianity

Sue Bailey

- National YWCA leadership
- Musician
- Scholar activist and intellectual in her own right
- Howard and Sue - a dynamic, power couple
- Sue Bailey Thurman was Thurman's partner and right hand for the duration of his life



The early 1930s was a time...

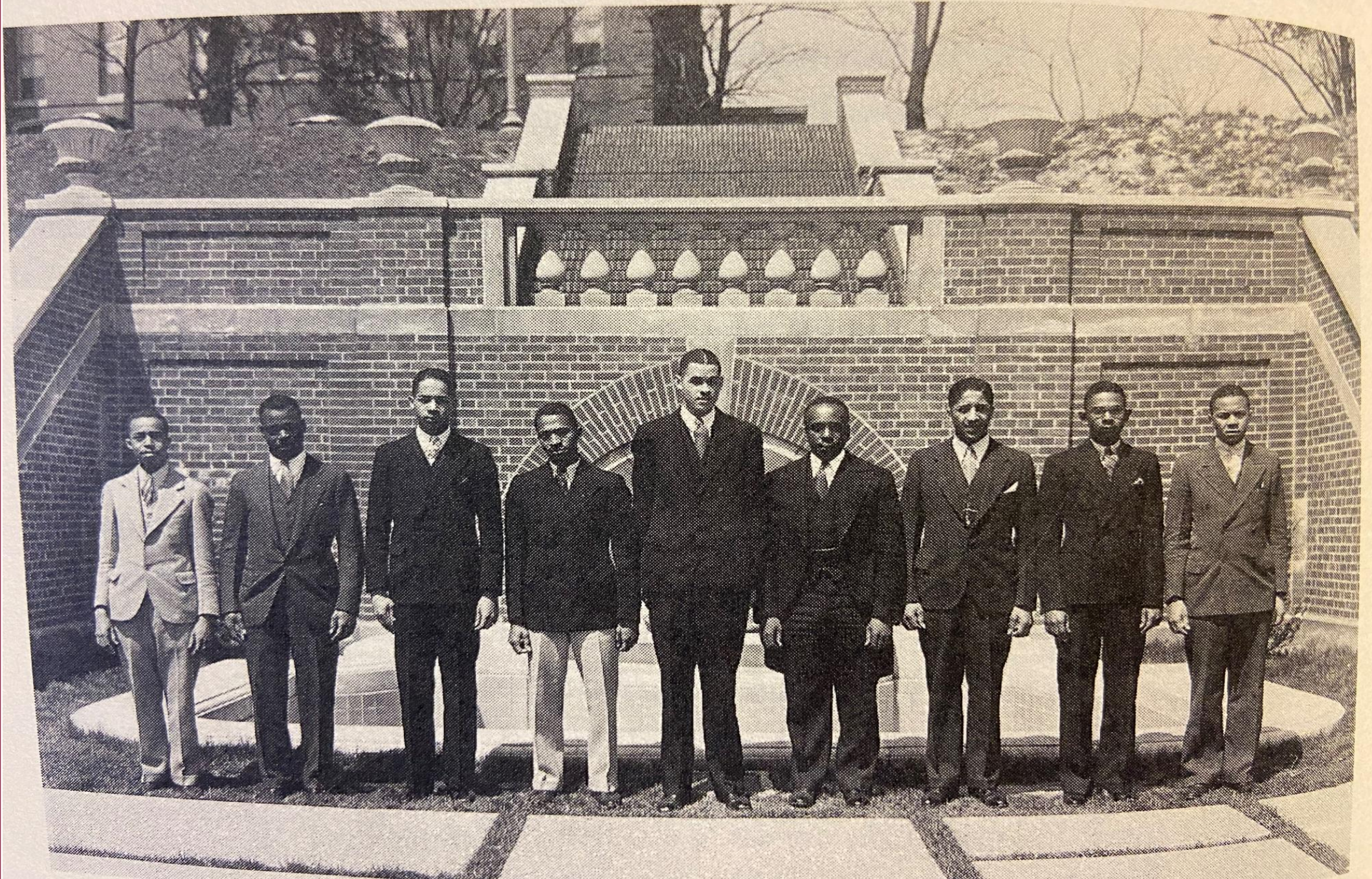
“before religion occupied a central role in the black struggle, and before religious thinkers became intellectually respectable among the austere ranks of the black scholar.” -James Farmer

Howard University: The Capstone of Negro Education

- Thurman invited by his mentor and friend, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson (now president of HU) to join the School of Religion at Howard University
- Fall of 1932 Thurman begins tenure at School of Theology as professor of religion and dean of Chapel
- The School of Religion: Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman

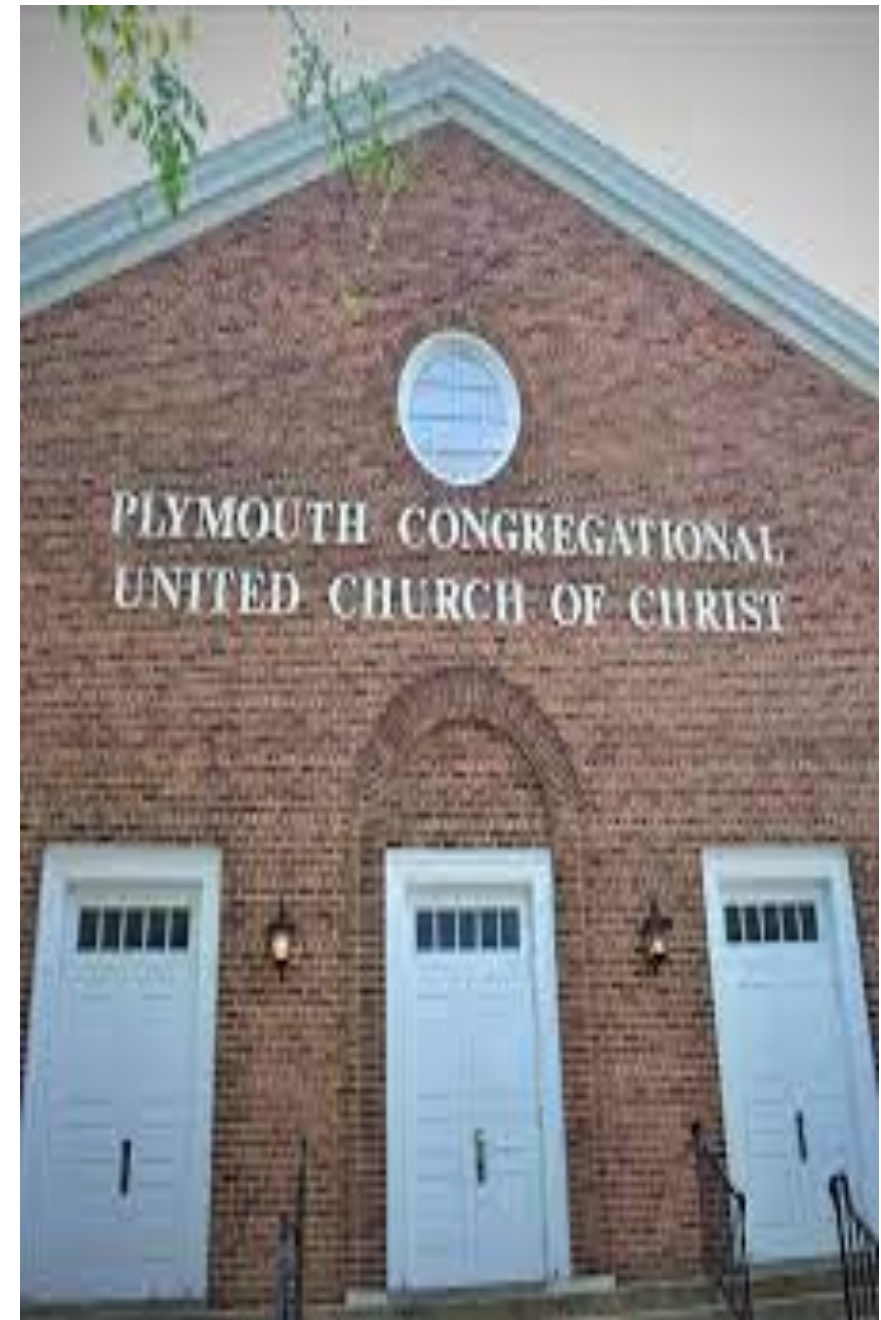
**HOW DID
THURMAN
AFFECT BOTH HIS
STUDENTS AND
THE
DEVELOPMENT
OF CHRISTIAN
THOUGHT
WITHIN AFRO
AMERICA?**

**Spiritual
Mentor
and Guide
in the
Classroom**



Barren or Fruitful?

- Thurman's first published sermon
- Delivered at Plymouth Congregational Church, Washington D.C.
- Sermon based upon Jeremiah 17
- Same sermon delivered in
 - 1927 at United Church, Oberlin Ohio.
 - 1928 Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY



"Is Your Life Barren..."

"First- a curse on him who relies on man, who depends upon mere human aid. For he is like a desert scrub that never thrives; set in a salt solitary place in the steppes- a striking picture? A certain kind of man likened unto a desert scrub-undeveloped and underdeveloped, undernourished and emaciated, stubby, and stunted, acting on the theory that to breath is to live! What a character analysis! He is thus, sayeth Jeremiah, because he relies on man. He has a false sense of security. When such a man wants to convince himself that he is somebody, his appeal, most often is to those things that are of temporary and passing significance."

In the first place, there are those who appeal to family connections and social position...There are others who appeal to their training, their education....And then there are those who appeal to the peculiar quality of their righteousness. They are "I thank God I am pure" people.

"Is your life barren? When you are most yourself do you know yourself to be a "desert scrub," a spiritual undernourished and moral emaciated individual- narrow, selfish, puny-souled, bigoted, living under a false sense of security?"



"..Or Fruitful?"

The second picture is most inspiring. The prophet pictures the man who depends on God, who has God for his confidence, as a tree planted beside a stream sending his roots down to the water. He has no fear of scorching heat, his leaves are always green. He goes on bearing fruit when all around him is barren and lives serene. In other words such a man looks out on life with quiet eyes! your fundamental security then is not family, training, piety or the like but rather the supreme quality of your dedication to the highest there is in life—God. To say, “I affirm my faith in God with my total personality” is one of the supreme affirmations of the human spirit.”

The real atheist is not necessarily the man who denies the existence of God; but rather the man who, day after day and week after week, subscribes to a faith in God with his lips while *acting* on the vital assumption that there is not God.

In the chat, please answer the question:

“In what do you find your security?”

“Barren or Fruitful?” 28 August 1932

There are three things that my faith in God teaches me about God. In the first place it teaches me that God *is*...Again, my faith teaches me that God is near...The final thing that my faith teaches me is that God is love. Not only that He is; not only that He is near; but that He is love...”

“When a man dedicates his life to God he begins at once to fulfill in his own experience the practical logic of that dedication. It is here that he finds a true basis for security.”

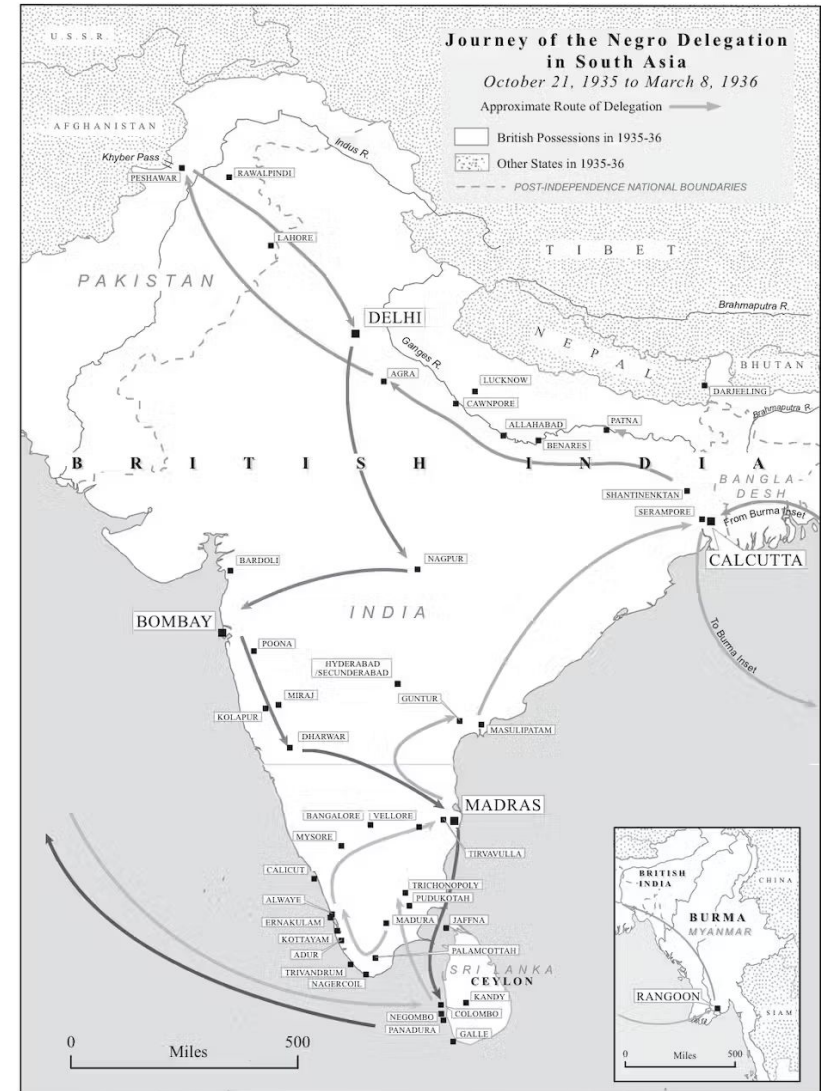
Friendship Tour to India The Negro Delegation - PRE TRIP

- Genesis of Trip
- Preparation
- YMCA Delegation
- Indian Christian
Global Movement
- Thurman's Role

*HOW DID THE TRIP
SHAPE HIS OWN
THINKING AND
APPROACH TO RELIGION
AND CHRISTIANITY IN
AMERICA?*

Friendship Tour South Asia 1935-1936

- The Negro delegation had an exhasuting and grueling schedule, no member more so Than Howard Thurman
- Thurman spoke over 250 times in over 50 cities
- Topics from St. Paul to Booker T. Washington
- Diverse Indian Audiences



Friendship Tour South Asia 1935-1936

“Good news for the Underprivileged”

- What subjects does Thurman speak on? What does he consider taboo and why?
- Encounters and Friendships
- Rabindranath Tagore
- Mahatma Gandhi - Gandhi's challenge to Thurman
encounter with Ceylon law student



Encounter with Ceylon Lawyer

“What are you doing here? This is what I mean – Africans were taken to America as slaves, by Xians – they were sold in America to other Xtians – they were held in slavery for 300 years by Xians – They were freed as a result of economic forces rather than Xtian idealism ... and I understand that you are lynched in America by Xtians. In the light of all this, I think that for a young intelligent Negro such as you to be over here in the interest of a Christian enterprise is for you to be a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. Such I consider you to be. Will you please account for yourself and your very unfortunate situation?”

Thurman's response (in his journal after the encounter)

“(I do not come to) bolster up a declining or disgraced Xn faith in your midst. I do not come to make converts of Xny nor do I come as exhibit A as to what Xnity has done for me & my people. I am a Christian because I think that the religion of Jesus in its true genius offers me very many ways out of the world's disorders. But I make a careful distinction between Xnity and the religion of Jesus ... I am dead against most of the institutional religion with which I am acquainted. I belong to a small minority of Xns who believe that society has to be completely reorganized in a very definite egalitarian sense if life is to be made livable for the most of mankind.”

The Kyber Pass Moment

“Here was the gateway through which Roman and Mogul conquerors had come in other days bringing with them goods, new concepts, and the violence of armed might. All that we had seen and felt in India seemed to be brought miraculously into focus. We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry-over into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them.” - Howard W. Thurman

What lessons does Thurman learn in India?

- Just as Thurman reinterpreted Christianity to radically emphasize and focus upon Jesus as an oppressed non-citizen Palestinian subject of the Roman state
- Thurman radically interpreted Gandhi's nonviolence, placing it in a Christian framework as an antidote to the virulent racism crippling Christianity in the context of American racism.



Howard, Sue (in black with pearls), and Edward Carroll (next to Thurman) with
the Thurman

Takeaways from Thurman's Trip to India

“Since we saw you last, we have been to India and we have seen for ourselves. The only thing that I can say in passing is that I did not know what it was to wrestle with hate until my experiences in that country. I may add I am not thinking of anything directed at me as a person but the complete futility that is present in the mind when one sees what Imperialism truly involves.”

“It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.” This is Gandhi's challenge that is percolating in Thurman's post India thoughts and will continue to inform his ideas and speech

Thurman connects Afro America to the spiritual philosophy of nonviolence and the true religion of Jesus

- Thurman reinterprets Christianity to radically emphasize and focus upon Jesus as an oppressed non-citizen Palestinian subject of the Roman state.
- Thurman reconsiders Gandhi's nonviolence, placing it in a Christian framework as an antidote to the virulent racism crippling Christianity in the context of American racism.
- He sees the importance of African Americans having their own Gandhi.
- Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, and others immediately travel to India, further cementing African American leaders to Gandhi and his leadership. These men are building blocks of the SCLC civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s.

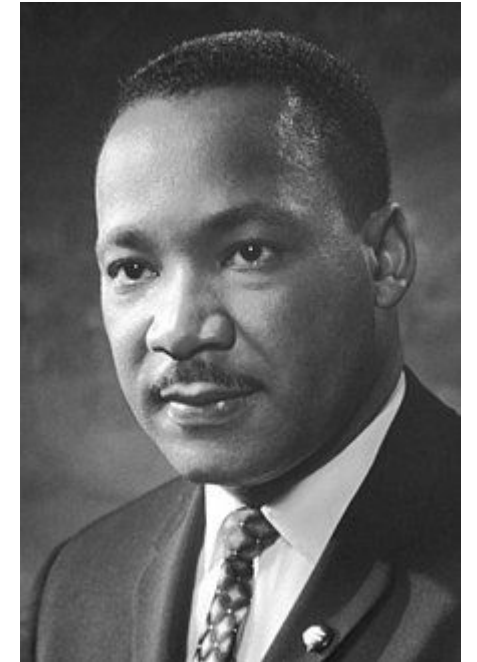
Thurman's emerging civil rights strategies as outlined in a May 1936 letter to John Nevin Sayre, Chairman of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation

- “First, the Fellowship ought to concentrate its energies by confining its work of reconciliation to one segment of conflict in the South. It should give its good wishes to all work in the other areas but it should confine its own primarily to one particular kind of job.
- Second, when the area is selected someone especially fitted by background, training, insights and “guts” should be commissioned to carry it through.
Third, the active interest and support of Negroes and white people in that section should be solicited and utilized.
- Fourth, Negro and white students and faculties and a few courageous and intelligent ministers of both races could also be enlisted.
- Fifth, representatives from the masses, particularly among Negroes, should be contacted. I have been deeply concerned for sometime because the message of peace to which we are committed and of which we are a part cannot be reduced to terms that are realistic to the ordinary man in the street.

You will notice that I do not mention a particular area. I hesitate to do so because I would not wish to put forward any pet idea of my own.

“Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?”

- *“If I let flower in my own heart what I condemn in society and in my fellow man, Christian, who calls me Christian?”*
- *“It is a great creative spiritual act to know when the moment for martyrdom has arrived.”*
- *“In moments of profound meditation I become sometimes for one transcendent moment only, a central part of the purpose of life.”*



Sowing the Seeds for the Movement



Pauli Murray 1910-1985

- Studied with Thurman while a law student at Howard Law
- Civil Right activist
- Women's Rights Advocate
 - "Jane Crow"
- First African American priest within the Episcopalian Church



James Farmer 1920-1999

- 1930's - student of Howard Thurman at Howard University's School of Religion
- Founder of CORE- Congress of Racial Equality, Chicago, 1942
- Initiator and Organizer of the first Freedom Ride in 1961



Jefferson Rogers 1917-2014

- 1930's: Student of Howard Thurman at Howard University's School of Religion
- Founder of the Church of the Redeemer, Washington, D.C.
- Civil Rights Activist, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- President and Executive Minister of the Black Ecumenical Commission of the Presbyterian Church, USA



“It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences which divide them.” -Thurman

Consider Thurman’s search for spiritual unity and ICJS’s mission and reflect on the following question:
How can you find spiritual unity with someone religiously different from you?

To dismantle religious bias and bigotry, ICJS builds learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good.