

Fellowship of Southern Churchmen ^[1]

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by Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, 2006

The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen ^[2] (FSC), organized in 1934 and headquartered in North Carolina, was a loosely affiliated group of prophetic, neo-orthodox southern Christians, both black and white, who worked to eradicate the region's economic and racial problems. Contending that the time had come for radical Christians to lead the way toward a more just society, the FSC attracted such members as Howard Kester ^[3], Myles Horton, and Alva Taylor. In 1939 the FSC established headquarters in Black Mountain ^[4]. From there Kester, the executive secretary, planned meetings and conferences, solicited funds, and sponsored members' activities across the South.

Until 1957, under the leadership of Kester and two other North Carolinians, educator Nelle Morton ^[5] and the Reverend Charles Johnson, the FSC supported various programs that addressed the South's poverty. During the 1930s and 1940s, fellowship members lent their time and labor to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union ^[6] and the Congress of Industrial Organizations ^[7]. The FSC also served as a clearinghouse for liberal causes in the region. Members distributed pamphlets, speeches, and articles that advocated racial and economic change. After the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ^[8] decision, the FSC reprinted and distributed 35,000 copies of Frank Porter Graham ^[9]'s prointegration article, "The Need For Wisdom and Good Faith." They also published the journal *Prophetic Religion*, which espoused their Christian vision of social equality.

While the churchmen blamed the South's problems on greed, power, and ignorance, they also criticized mainstream southern Protestant churches for abdicating their responsibility in the struggles for social justice. They accused churches of catering to the rich and powerful and of neglecting the South's poor blacks and whites. Preaching an updated version of the Social Gospel, the FSC called upon black and white Christians to do good works and to build God's kingdom on earth.

By the 1950s, the FSC had shifted its focus almost entirely to racial justice. Under Kester's leadership, the churchmen vigorously supported the *Brown* decision and sponsored local workshops on school integration. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, however, younger black and white activists flocked to more radical civil rights organizations, and the FSC-led by older, mostly white southern liberals-lost its appeal. A meeting of southern ministers in the spring of 1957, at which Martin Luther King Jr. spoke, was the FSC's last organized activity. Despite its quiet ending, for more than 20 years the FSC had served as a strong but often lonely voice for economic and racial justice in the South.

References:

John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*(1995).

Robert F. Martin, "Critique of Southern Society and Vision of a New Order: The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, 1934-1957," *Church History* 52 (March 1983).

Martin, *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904-1977*(1991).

Additional Resources:

Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, UNC Libraries:

http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/f/Fellowship_of_Southern_Churchmen.html ^[2]

Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov/folklife/civilrights/survey/view_collection.php?coll_id=3149 ^[10]

Subjects:

Religion ^[11]

Authors:

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From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[13]

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