Celebrate the 50th of the Movement

Join us for an old fashioned Movement Meeting at 7:00 p. m. on June 5 at Old Sardis Baptist Church, 1240 4th Street North in Enon Ridge. This is where the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights organized June 5, 1956 under the leadership of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, pictured at the pulpit that evening. Photograph by Ernest Hardin, courtesy The Birmingham News.

The civil rights conflict in Birmingham was not, as some believe, a mistake. It was the result of disciplined, principled, and strategically brilliant action by a network of inspired working-class, churchgoing people led by their pastors. Neither is the conflict a cause for shame. Rather it is to be celebrated as a magnificent achievement of the human spirit. Few times in our history has a group of ordinary men and women risked life and limb so unremittingly for the purpose of achieving liberty and equality.

Birmingham can be proud that its citizens won their fight for freedom, organizing it in the churches of our city.
The Birmingham Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s — “The Movement” as its members called it — began on June 5, 1956. The first Mass Meeting was held at Sardis Baptist Church, 1240 Fourth Street North in Ensor Ridge.

The Movement began when the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights to fight for equal rights and first class citizenship for his people. The State of Alabama had outlawed the National Association for Colored People (the NAACP), formed in 1909 to champion rights and voting privileges. ACMHR organized to fill the void.

Many people know that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 — which enacted laws and enflamed statements of Public Officials do not lead us to embrace Gradualism. We want a beginning NOW! We have already waited 100 years!!

(H) We Negroes shall never become enemies of the White People: We are all Americans; But America was born in the struggle for Freedom from Tyranny and Oppression. We shall never bomb any homes or lynch any persons; but we must, because of History and the future, march to Complete Freedom and Democracy, and to guarantee to each of its Citizens the same Rights and Privileges.

(The Movement) and the Movement Churches

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Many people know that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 — which ensures equal access to public accommodations in America — was a response to the demonstrations and violence that occurred in Birmingham in the spring and fall of 1963.

Less known is the fact that Birmingham became a catalyst for the most dramatic social and legal changes of the 20th century because of blue collar African Americans and their pastor-leaders who worked from 1956 through the 1960s in the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. ACMHR Mass Meetings to educate and motivate participants were held every Monday night in nearly 60 churches scattered across the industrial city at this time. The meeting were modeled upon the Baptist worship service, full of religious fervor, and well attended by 300 or 400 faithful members.

ACMHR was not a ministerial association. It was people more than pastors. Pastors and members of individual churches welcomed the ministerial-led movement. People who attended the mass meetings put pressure on their pastors to host meetings . . . . To be a meeting church was to invite terror from the police and the Klan,” Reverend Shuttlesworth noted in a 1998 interview.

ACMHR became the strongest of the local civil rights movements that joined together to form an umbrella group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) under the leadership of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. From SCLC’s founding in January 1957, Reverend Shuttlesworth served as SCLC secretary and as one of the “Big Three”: King, Shuttlesworth and Abernathy.” Shuttlesworth was the only major SCLC leader to run a local organization. Called by his colleagues, “the Wild Man from Birmingham,” Shuttlesworth was bombarded, beaten and jailed more than any other civil rights minister. He is said to have taken more cases to the U. S. Supreme Court than any other private individual in the history of America. The 1964 Act mandating equality in public accommodations and employment was inspired by the Birmingham demonstrations of April and May 1963.
Negroes roar approval at rights meeting

Reprinted from The Birmingham News, June 6, 1956, Pages 1 & 11

An organization pledged to sweeping away “any forms of second class citizenship” was formed here last night amid roars of an estimated 1,200 Negroes approving “a march to complete freedom.”

The “Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights” was established at a mass meeting of Negroes at Sardis Baptist Church.

Negro ministers told the overflow crowd the new organization may provide leadership for Negroes over Alabama and possibly the entire South. Speakers declared it has no connection with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The meeting was announced after Circuit Judge Walter B. Jonas granted an injunction at Montgomery Friday restraining the NAACP from operating in Alabama, but a spokesman said it had been set before that date.

The Rev. F. L. Shuttlesworth, one of the ministers who called the meeting, was named president by acclamation.

The Rev. R. L. Alford, pastor of the Sardis Baptist Church, 1240 Fourth St. N., estimated 1,000 to 1,100 Negroes attended the meeting. The church has a seating capacity of about 850, he said, and there were a number of persons standing.

Rev. Shuttlesworth, the principal speaker, declared: “The Citizens Councils won’t like this. But then, I don’t like a lot of things they do.”

The Negro preacher frequently raised his voice to a shout during his speech and mopped his face with a handkerchief. A thermometer near the pulpit read 88 degrees.

At the close of his address, Rev. Shuttlesworth introduced the Rev. N. H. Smith, Jr., who read a report of a committee which met Monday.

The committee report, containing a resolution naming the organization and setting forth its aims was adopted with a roar of approval.

One dissenting vote was cast, that of a man who identified himself as G. W. McMurray. He obtained the floor later and declared: “We should think seriously of what we are doing. Birmingham is too over-organized now.” He cited another organization of Negro ministers formed several months ago.

Rev. Shuttlesworth replied, “If it takes one organization five months to get a constitution, what are we going to do?”

The speaker was interrupted a number of times by cheers and applause. The good-natured audience also encouraged him with frequent cries of “Yes, yes,” “Go ahead, Reverend,” and “That’s right.”

In his impassioned plea for organized Negro leadership, the speaker declared, “Our citizens are reactive under the dismal yoke of segregation.” Then, he shouted, “Aren’t you,” and the crowd, roared “Yes.”

“These are the days when men would like to kill hope, when men in Mississippi can be declared ‘not guilty’ (of murder), when men can be shot down on the steps of the courthouse. These are dark days.

“But hope is not dead. Hope is alive here tonight,” he said.

He shouted: “We seek nothing which we would not deny others.”

He asked, “Would you be willing tonight for a white man to sit down beside you?”

The audience again roared assent.

Then, he shouted: “Then you believe in integration.”

Rev. Shuttlesworth declared.

The lengthy resolution adopted near the close of the meeting was prepared by a committee of 11 ministers and laymen.

“As free and independent citizens of the United States of America and of the State of Alabama, we express publicly our determination to press persistently for freedom and democracy and the removal from our society any forms of second class citizenship.”

Commemorating the Movement Churches

Each of the 60 Movement churches will be awarded a historical marker on the evening of June 5, 2006 to commemorate their role in the Birmingham Movement. Those congregations remaining in their Movement-era church buildings may display the marker at the front entrance to the church. Otherwise, the historical markers must be displayed inside the church. Those congregations or persons now located in the historic Movement-era churches many also display the historical markers on the outside of the historic buildings.

Churches to be Presented Historical Markers

Abyssinia Baptist Church, Bethel AME Church, Bethel Baptist Church, Camaan (Missionary) Baptist Church, Christian Valley Baptist Church, East End Baptist Church, First Baptist Church of East Thomas, First Baptist Church of Ensley, First Baptist Church of Hoover City, First Baptist Church of Kingston, First Baptist Church of Woodlawn, First Ebenezer Baptist Church, First Metropolitan Baptist Church, 46th Street Baptist Church, Galilee Baptist Church, Groveland Baptist Church, Hopewell Baptist Church, Jackson Street Baptist Church, Lily Grove Baptist Church, Macedonia 17th Street Baptist Church, Metropolitan AME Zion Church, Metropolitan CME Church, Metropolitan Community Church, Mt. Azarat Baptist Church, Mt. Olive Baptist Church, New Bethlehem Baptist Church, New Hope Baptist Church, New Pilgrim Baptist Church, New Rising Star Baptist Church, New Salem Baptist Church, Oak Street Baptist Church, (Sixth Street) Peace Baptist Church, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, Regular (St. Mathew) Missionary Baptist Church, St. James Baptist Church, St. John AME Church, St. John Baptist Church, St. Luke AME Church, St. Luke AME Zion Church, St. Paul AME Church, St. Paul CME Church, St. Paul (United) Methodist Church, St. Peter Primitive Baptist Church, (Historic) Sardis Baptist Church, 17th Street AOH (AOH Cathedral) Church, Shady Grove Baptist Church, 16th Street Baptist Church, Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, Historic (Sixth Avenue) Zion Hill Baptist Church, South Elyton Baptist Church, Starlight Baptist Church, Tabernacle Baptist Church, Thingood (Memorial) CME Church, 32nd Street Baptist Church, 22nd Avenue Baptist Church, Union Bethel Independent Methodist Church, West End Hills Baptist Church, Zion Spring Baptist Church, Zion Star Baptist Church, First Congregational (Christian) Church

Additionally, the following persons and churches now occupying Movement era church facilities will receive markers for placement on the historic structures: Omie Crockett Sr., current owner of the First Baptist Church of Ensley Parsonage (occupied by the Reverend and Mrs. A. D. King and their family in May 1963 when it was bombm); Christy Holtz, currently renovating historic 32nd Street Baptist Church into residential housing units; Deliverance Temple Inter-Faith Church now headquartered in the historic Sixth Avenue Zion Hill Baptist Church; Christ Temple APM Church of God located in the historic Metropolitan A. M. E. Zion Church, and Lighthouse Church Ministry located in the historic First Baptist Church of Kingston.
Documenting and Listing Movement Churches on the National Register of Historic Places

Since 1993, Birmingham Historical Society, working at times with the Historic American Engineering Record and the Historic American Building Survey of the National Park Service, has conducted field work and archival research on Birmingham's Civil Rights Churches. This research was published in A Walk to Freedom: The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth & the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, 1956-1964. Preparation of nominations for listing on the National Register of Historic Places continues.

During the 1990s, full National Park Service (NPS) documentation — histories, photographs and measured drawings sufficient to rebuild the churches — was completed for Bethel Baptist Church and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

To be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, a Movement era church must remain at its Movement era site and retain sufficient architectural integrity. Additionally, as the churches are being nominated for their "civil rights associations" and their "period of significance – 1956-1963" is not beyond the required 50-year threshold, NPS reviewers require documentation to justify "exceptional national significance."

To date individual nominations to the National Register have been completed for 15 ACMHR churches and these churches have been placed by the Secretary of the Interior on the National Register, the nation's list of properties worthy of preservation. Individual nominations are under review for several other churches.

Two churches, Bethel Baptist and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, have been declared "nationally significant" on the National Register and have become: National Historic Landmarks. The historic New Pilgrim Baptist Church, a day center today, is expected to be listed any day. Its significance is argued at the national level due to the large numbers and able service of its many members and its pastors to the Movement.

The 13 additional ACMHR churches that have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places as individual structures include: Canaan Baptist Church, East End Baptist Church, First Baptist Church of East Thomas, First Baptist Church of Kingston, First Ebenezer Baptist Church, Mount Union Baptist Church, New Rising Start Baptist Church, (Sixth Street) Peace Baptist, St. Luke AME Church, St. Luke AME Zion Church, Old Sardis Baptist Church, Shady Grove Baptist Church and West End Hills Missionary Baptist Church. Additionally, 32nd Street Baptist Church was listed as part of the Southside National Register Historic District.

Six other ACMHR churches are being nominated as part of the National Register of Historic Districts. St. Paul (United) Methodist Church, Sixth Avenue Union Hall Baptist (now Deliverance Temple) Church, Metropolitan A.M. E. Zion Church and St. John A. M. E. Baptist Church are currently being nominated as part of the Birmingham Civil Rights District which has passed Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) review and is headed to Washington. First Congregational Church, being nominated as part of the Center Street ("Dynamite Hill") National Register District, will be reviewed by AHC in the fall.

Nominations for which additional research has been requested by Washington reviewers include the 22nd Avenue Baptist, Bethel AME, Christian Valley, Metropolitan Community Church, Oak Street Baptist Church, Metropolitan CME Church and St. Peter Primitive Baptist Church. Hopefully, a total of 30 churches can be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the nation’s list of places worthy of preservation. That 30 of 60 churches — those that remain at their Movement era sites and retain architectural integrity and can qualify for the National Register — is remarkable considering the impact of expressways and other unfriendly urban policies of the last 40 years.

Former ACMHR secretary Lola Hendricks mentored the identification of the ACMHR churches. Many individuals assisted, including the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, the Reverend Ed Gardner, Colonel Stone Johnson, the Reverend Wilson Fallin, Lillie Fincher, and Odessa Woolfolk. Birmingham Historical Society spearheaded the research and nominations. Ellen Mertins, Trina Binkley, Christy Anderson and Melissa Bailey of the AHC staff have assisted BHS with the nominations. Dr. Glenn Eskew, Dr. C. Van West and Linda Nelson served as consultants. Researchers included Fred Renneker IV, Lauren Bishop, Michelle Crunk, Bill Jones, Brenda Howell, Carol Slaughter and Marjorie Lee White. Marjorie White serves as project director.

Program for the 50th Anniversary ACMHR Mass Meeting

Presiding ———— Bishop Calvin Woods, Pastor, Shiloh Baptist Church & President, Birmingham Church, Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Selections ———— The Carlton Rene Memorial Unity Choir, Sam Robinson Director
Prayer ———— Reverend Thomas L. Wilder Jr., Pastor, Bethel Baptist Church
The Occasion ———— Odessa Woolfolk, Founding President, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute
Presentation of the Speaker ———— Reverend Abraham Woods, Pastor, St. Joseph Baptist Church
The Speaker ———— The Reverend Fred Lee Shuttlesworth

Documenting the Movement Churches-Presentation of 13 National Register of Historic Places Certificates ———— Marjorie L. White, Birmingham Historical Society
Presentation of Historical Markers Commemorating 60 ACMHR Churches ———— Ullie M. H. Finch, President, Birmingham Historical Society
Sponsored by Birmingham Historical Society, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Birmingham-Church of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Committee for June 5th—— Victor Blackledge, Ullie Fincher, Stone Johnson-Loyal Lee, Marie Sutton, Bishop Calvin Woods, Odessa Woolfolk, Marjorie White, assisted by the Cabada Council, Esley Anna Gail Scovil under the direction of Mrs. Peggy Myles and BHS Trustees Lewis Burke Jr., Aline Bowsher, Linda Nelson, Barbara Shows, Carol Slaughter and Jim Strickland.

The sponsors and the committee express sincere appreciation to Rev. Willie E. Smith, Pastor, Old Sardis Baptist Church and members of the congregation for hosting the Mass Meeting.

One Sloss Quarters
Birmingham, Alabama 35222
Address Correction and Forwarding Requested

Join us for the 50th Anniversary of the Founding of the ACMHR and Presentation of Historical Markers to the Movement Churches

Old Fashioned Mass Meeting
Old Sardis Baptist Church
Monday, June 5, 7:00 p.m.

Historical markers to be picked up in the Fellowship Hall following the service.