

From the Archives: Gilbert James and the Fight for Interracial Justice- The Papers of Gilbert James and The Shelhamer Family Papers¹

In November of 1982, the official groundbreaking for the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism was conducted, and for many this may appear to be when the social sciences began to be integrated into the work of Asbury Theological Seminary.² However, such a view would pass over one of the most important and influential members of Asbury's faculty, who had sadly passed away on January 21st of that same year. At the relatively young age of 66, and suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Dr. Gilbert Morris James, Asbury's first academic social scientist, would not be present to see the impact of the social sciences on the future legacy of Asbury Theological Seminary. In fact, because of his early passing, his importance is often overshadowed by other more well-known names in the faculty. For this reason, it is useful to highlight Gilbert James and his important contributions to social justice in both the Free Methodist Church and Asbury Theological Seminary.

Born November 5, 1915 in Brazil, Indiana, James was the son of a man who reportedly travelled with holiness legend Beverly Carradine, but who ultimately left the holiness viewpoint and separated from his wife and children when James was just twelve years old.³ After two years of high school, James dropped out and turned to boxing. An encounter with a woman evangelist in a revival in Terre Haute, Indiana, changed his life and he returned and finished high school. In 1934, Gilbert James had made his way to God's Bible School in Cincinnati, Ohio, one of the centers for radical holiness in the United States. It was here that he met Esther Shelhamer, the youngest daughter of a well-known radical holiness evangelist, E. E. Shelhamer and his wife Julia. According to accounts, Gilbert worked hard to win the hand of Esther, even while dating was strictly against the college rules. In one story, since he worked in the maintenance department of the

school, he intentionally caused the lights to go out in Esther's dorm, so he would be sent round to fix them. In 1939, when Esther and her mother took the train to New York to depart on a two-year missionary tour of Africa, Gilbert borrowed money and clothes so he could beat them to New York and be there to open the door of their cab when they arrived at the place they were staying. Esther is recorded as saying, "I was very attracted by his ideas. He was a very interesting person to talk to. But you have to understand, I had certain ideals. My father was over 6 feet tall with beautiful wavy hair. He was a great preacher. Gilbert was 5 foot 6 and had hair that looked like weeds. I knew he was going to be bald. He was always grimy because he worked in the furnace room. I made it clear I wasn't interested."⁴ Nevertheless, nine years after they met, the couple was married in 1942.



Gilbert and Esther James about the time of their marriage.

Pictured with Julia and E. E. Shelhamer, Esther's parents (1942).

(Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

The goal of the young couple was to enter missionary service in Africa, since Esther had previously served in missions there, but the problems of World War II made this option impossible. Realizing that “Africa” also existed in America, Gilbert James and his young wife set out to take a Free Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. While working in a white church on one side of town, Gilbert and Esther began to work on planting a black Free Methodist Church on the African American side of the city, along with a grade school for African American children. Started in 1943 with Rev. W.L. Dyas and Rev. Gilbert James in a rented shack, it would become the Central Free Methodist Church of Shreveport.⁵ While the Free Methodist Church had a history opposing slavery and even had some integrated Northern churches immediately after the Civil War period, their commitment to racial justice had faded over time. This was a relatively new groundbreaking effort to dismantle the impact of segregation within white churches rooted in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition right in the heart of the South. What started as the Free Methodist Colored Work would become the Department of Interracial Evangelism of the Free Methodist Church of North America, and Gilbert James would be the Superintendent of this work from 1946-1958. Esther would really serve as his partner in ministry throughout their life together. From at least 1950 to 1956, Gilbert and Esther James published a small newsletter entitled *Interracial News* to publicize the work among Free Methodists. In 1950, James wrote,

The informed Negro today has no confidence in any church that offers him salvation on a “Jim Crow” basis. He is not half so interested in our doctrine of the trinity, our stand on baptism or secret orders as he is in our standards of Christian brotherhood. If he becomes a Christian and joins our church, will he be accepted as a brother in Christ and have extended to him the same fellowship as anyone else?

The world has built up barriers between races, for the white man’s economic and political advantage that God never intended. They have spiked and supported these barriers with a world of lies and half-truths...

The Negro is a direct descendant from Adam and Eve and as such they are all our blood brothers and sisters. For God has declared that He has made us all of one blood.

Whether or not we succeed in this task is dependent on you! What is your attitude toward other races? Have you fallen for the “Master Race” line; have you by failing to speak out against hate mongers, given your consent

to racial intolerance? It is bad enough when sinners talk about “keeping Negroes in their place” and this is “a white man’s country,” but when those who profess to be saved and sanctified do so, it is a disgrace on the church and the cause of God. If you would help us win souls, then speak out boldly against expressions of prejudice and discrimination!⁶

The Central Free Methodist Church of Shreveport would become a central piece of the work of the Free Methodist Church among African Americans. By 1946, Rev. Dyas had passed away and was replaced by Rev. John Thompson. Madeline Brewer would serve as the school’s main principal. While it initially began as a kindergarten in a neighboring home, it soon moved into a regular building for grades 1-8, with a maximum of 150 students. In 1959 a new extension was built to include space for the 9th and 10th grades and the possibility of expanding to include a high school and a second floor. One of the children in the early years of the school was Dr. Paul Lynch, who would become the first African American judge in Northern Louisiana.

In this early work, by 1950 we only see eleven sites being overseen by the Department of Interracial Evangelism. These include the church and school in Shreveport, Los Angeles Third Church in California, four organized societies in Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana, five established Sunday Schools in Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, Canada, a Home of Redeeming Love for colored girls in St. Louis, and two missions (one in Portland, Oregon and the second in Washington, D.C.).⁷ It is important to note that the mission in Washington D.C. was run by Julia Shelhamer, the widow of E. E. Shelhamer and Gilbert’s mother-in-law. Julia’s work was tireless. Her work included the mission, but also founding the first suicide hotline for which she gained national attention. In addition, it was due to her efforts that much later Gene Alston was given the opportunity to become the first African American graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary. Keep in mind that all of this occurred *before* the modern Civil Rights Movement and only shortly after Harry Truman ordered an end to discrimination in the military in 1948.



**Building Central Free Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana (1946).
People in the Photo are Unidentified.**

(Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

Julia Shelhamer, while working with Gilbert and Esther James, also became frustrated with not being able to find places for interracial camp meetings, which were such a crucial part of holiness evangelistic efforts. This rejection even included the Free Methodist campground in Maryland. She set out to create a campground for African Americans outside Washington D.C. She wrote,

The General Superintendent of all Interracial work in the Free Methodist Church of North America, Rev. Gilbert James, is with us for a few days to make a survey of the various parcels of ground that we have chosen as potential places for a camp-ground. Please pray that as God led Hagar to the well of water that saved her famishing child's life, so He will lead us to the camp-site that will prove to be the Spiritual Oasis to the many dear colored people who are unwelcome in so many places.⁸

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

With James' support, a site was chosen in 1954 near Burkeville, Virginia, which had been the site of a Presbyterian school for African American girls. It was 46 acres and contained five buildings in various states of disrepair

and was purchased for \$6,000. It was to become the site of a youth camp program.⁹ Kenneth and Mary Park were asked by Gilbert and Esther James to move to Burkeville from Shreveport, Louisiana to help build and run the camp. Rapidly, however, the county school board decided they wanted the property for another project. When the Free Methodists said they did not want to sell, they were threatened with a condemnation law suit to take the property over, forcing them to sell the site.¹⁰ The Parks helped locate another property in Crewe, Virginia and they were able to use material salvaged from the Burkeville site to construct some buildings. Camps seem to have run at the Crewe site until around 1960, when the Shelhamer Mission in Washington D.C. was closed and the Parks moved to Michigan to help with family.¹¹ On July 16, 2006 at the Free Methodist Campground in Spencerville, Maryland, which had originally rejected Julia Shelhamer's request to host an African American camp, both Julia Shelhamer and Gene Alston were honored with the dedication of the Gene R. Alston Memorial Camp Museum and the Julia A. Shelhamer Serenity Garden.¹²



Julia Shelhamer and children at the Shelhamer Mission in Washington D.C. (1953).

(Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Gilbert James wrote an editorial in June of 1954 on the breaking news of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to end segregation in schools. He wrote,

Those of us who for years have been close to this matter of segregation by law, welcome this Supreme Court decision. We are aware that there probably will be a period of adjustment that may be disturbing to those who are inherently averse to change. Also, there is the task of calming the anxieties of those who for years have fed on the diet of racial fear by unscrupulous politicians...Those of us in Interracial Evangelism have been greatly handicapped by the rigid legal and social barriers that have separated mankind. How difficult it has been to accomplish a sense of unity, brotherhood, and oneness in the body of Christ while custom, tradition and laws have forbidden our full Christian fellowship.¹³

While working in the area of racial justice, and pastoring various churches, Gilbert James went on to graduate from Greenville College in 1955, followed by a M.A. in Anthropology and Sociology in 1957 from Washington University, and a Ph.D. in Sociology in 1963 from Northwestern. He focused most of his studies on the struggle of African Americans in urban areas, with a concern for the history of racial oppression and the problems of the urban centers. James' work as the Superintendent of the Department Interracial Evangelism was pioneering, and when he left the position in 1958 the work was strong, but instead of finding someone with James' passion to carry on the work, the Department of Interracial Evangelism was merged with the larger Department of Evangelism and Church Extension (Glen E. Williamson appears to have lead the Department of Interracial Evangelism from 1959 and during its merger). David McKenna in a history of the Free Methodist Church wrote, "In his 1960 report to the General Conference, Northrup (Rev. Lyle Northrup, the head of the Department of Evangelism and Church Extension) stressed the strength of interracial ministries. Four years later Northrup's report to the General Conference carried the tone of de-emphasis upon interracial evangelism. The Shreveport church was in leadership transition; the Shelhamer Memorial Mission was struggling to exist and the scholarship fund for 'needy colored students' was falling behind the demand and the opportunity."¹⁴ Gilbert James would also serve as the pastor of Irving Park Church in Chicago, 1957-1960 (while working on his Ph.D.) and went on to teach at the University of Wisconsin, 1961-

1965, before coming to Asbury Theological Seminary in 1965 as the first Professor of Church and Society, a position he would hold until 1980.

Gilbert James entered Asbury Seminary with a determination to change the way ministerial training was done. His initial chapel (and possibly his installation address) was published in *The Asbury Seminarian* (a forerunner of *The Asbury Journal*) in 1966. After a short introduction he opened this way,

With 70 per cent of America's population now living in the great urban areas, and with the concentration in these areas of alienated and hopeless human beings, our future ministries must understand not only the needs of these people but must empathize with their longings, their fears, and their anger. They must learn to go to the people where they are, the way they are. For the day is past, if it ever existed, when the city pastor could frequent only the places of unimpeachable respectability and then expect the masses to throng to his church on Sunday morning. *The battle is out there!* The man of God is not of this world but surely he must *be in it*.

The crushing and sickening anguish of today is not apparent in the congregation of a Sunday morning worship service or a Wednesday night prayer meeting. The problems of human distress ferment in the squalor and wretchedness of decaying tenement houses, at the back table of a "gin mill" on State street, and boil in the core of a frenzied mob seeking vengeance on its oppressors. As Nietzsche has written, '*Great problems are in the street.*' So Christian witnesses must go into the streets with compassion for the victims of sin, and with holy indignation against social, economic, and political structures of evil.¹⁵

As a teacher, Gilbert James was penetrating and had high expectations for the students; expecting them to be prepared for thoughtful discussion of serious theological issues. Philip Amerson relates an example of how James in one class asked his students who most desired the prohibition of alcohol in a neighboring county. After the expected answers of preachers and religious people, James revealed that these people were of secondary importance after the bootleggers and corrupt officials who profited from the sale of illegal alcohol. In a similar lesson, James would show by maps of a Chicago neighborhood how anti-prostitution measures only caused the movement of prostitution to an adjoining neighborhood, and did not really solve the underlying problems. Amerson refers to James

as a “provocateur” and an “urban ecologist,” but he also calls him, “the most honest, Socratic teacher I have ever known.”¹⁶ Howard Snyder, who was another student of Gilbert James, relates that James was “bright” and “cutting edge” in that his teaching was “a matter of reaching the cities and it was a matter of racial justice” combined with the Gospel.¹⁷ Gilbert James was part of a new kind of seminary educator which really sought to invest time and energy into his students, including meeting them in the dining hall, which Amerson referred to as a “congregating space for conversations you didn’t want to miss.”

While at Asbury, Gilbert James did not choose to remain within the ivory tower. A commitment to the urban poor especially, pushed him in his teaching to find a way to give students an educational experience in the practice of poverty. To this end, he developed the Urban Ministries Program for Seminarians (UMPS- which would be a forerunner of SCUPE the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education founded in 1976), which was often conducted in Chicago, but also New York, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Atlanta. A 1973 pamphlet on the program reveals it to be a cooperative program between a number of schools, including Anderson College School of Theology, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Bethel Theological Seminary, Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, North Park Theological Seminary, and Asbury Theological Seminary. According to the pamphlet, the program in 1973 ran from June 5 to August 17, 1973 with a group of thirty students, while a select group of eight would continue to work through December. There were four stages to the program:

1. “The Plunge”- where the student would spend several days and nights in the city as a “non-entity” with minimal resources.
2. Several days of concentrated lectures through the summer focused on urban studies from various specialists to gain an understanding of ministry in the city.
3. Regular work where the students would live in the neighborhood they were working in under some supervision and learn how to understand the needs of the community.
4. Small group sessions to gain self-understanding and process their experiences in ministry in the urban context.

Such an approach in experiential learning was quite radical at the time. Rev. David Seamands, who was the pastor at the Wilmore United Methodist

Church and a well-known author, related at James' funeral in 1982 that when he was discussing issues of poverty or racism with James, Gilbert challenged him to "put your feet where your mouth is and come with me to Chicago." He then relates spending time as a homeless person with just a few dollars in his pocket for the weekend and noted his "horizons were pushed back" in a "prophetic way."

Howard Snyder also noted how he delayed leaving Asbury after graduating, just so he could be involved in James' first trip of experiential learning to New York in June of 1966 with about 11 others. Snyder pointed out how the trip really impacted his own view of the church by providing a conceptual "shift from looking at the church from individualism to community" and from "psychology to sociology" which helped him better understand how the Church needs to think and act as a community in social terms, along with the real impact of "institutionalism" on the life of the church. This experience would be key to future work he did as a pastor trying to prevent a Free Methodist Church in Detroit from moving to the suburbs (a typical problem of "white flight" from urban centers), and this included doing a sociological study of the area (clearly an influence of James). Ultimately these experiences would help formulate some of the ideas for his book, *The Problem of Wineskins* (1975). Snyder would dedicate his following book *Community of the King* (1977) to "Gilbert M. James and Charles W. Kingsley who in very different ways combine the evangelistic and prophetic dimensions of the Kingdom of God."





Girls' Dormitory and Dining Hall at the Crewe Camp in Virginia (circa 1957).

(Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

Joe Culumber was a student at Asbury Theological Seminary when he went with James on an urban experience to Chicago in 1968.¹⁸ As a young man from a small rural town with no experience in the city, Chicago in 1968 was a major culture shock. The city had erupted in riots as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) battled with the Chicago police prior to the Democratic National Convention, which would occur later that summer. Rather than shelter the young white men from Kentucky, Gilbert James piled them in two cars and set out to find wherever the riots were occurring so they could be there to witness social action at work. He took them to an Operation Breadbasket (later to become Operation PUSH—People United to Serve Humanity) event at a theater, which Culumber

describes as “part revival and political convention all in one.” They went to hear an unknown Civil Rights leader, and when Jesse Jackson emerged in a white suit and Afro, the crowd was electrified. While one might expect the few white students from a rural Kentucky seminary to be dissuaded from urban ministry through these experiences, the opposite happened. As Culumber noted, James “impacted us with his vision and passion” since most of them had never seen a “passionate Wesleyan conservative with a heart for the city” before. For Culumber, his own desire to do urban ministry was “ignited” by this summer experience, and he would go on to do urban ministry in Manila in the Philippines, and at churches in St. Louis, Springfield, and Seattle. During his twelve years of teaching at Greenville College, he modelled his teaching on James’ “urban plunge” model with his own students.

While such an approach was ahead of its time, there are indications that Gilbert James did have some doubts about the effectiveness of the approach. Amerson, who was involved with James on several of his urban experiences, including helping to work on one of his last in Atlanta, recalls that James “increasingly knew that it wasn’t helpful,” except for its shock value. Amerson recalls that James once said, “it may be an inoculation that prevents you from ever getting the disease.” If there was not good teaching and interpretive work along with the experience, it may simply end up making people immune to the problems of poverty. It is also possible that James had similar feelings about racial integration, believing that it might work well for a short period, but then could become dangerous as people became complacent about the importance of real racial equality on all levels of society.¹⁹ But such experiences were also liberating. Amerson recalls another trip to Chicago when James brought the group to an event for Operation Breadbasket, where Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Chicago director appointed by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was speaking. James did not want the group to stick together but spread out in the rest of the crowd. Amerson saw James from a distance standing on a seat waving a beret and loudly supporting what Jackson was saying. Gilbert James believed that true holiness required action and not just words.

The development of the 1970 Ichthus Music Festival was in some ways an offshoot of this type of innovative experiential learning. In an interview with John Park, one of the founding students who also gave the music festival its name, he noted that he had spent the summer of 1969 with Gilbert James in New York City, in Harlem (so had Philip Amerson in one

of his first of James' learning experiences).²⁰ It was there dealing with inner city problems that the news of Woodstock filtered in and where Park bought an Ichthus necklace from which he named the festival. While James had no clearly direct ties with Ichthus, in my interviews, most of students involved in the early years told me that they were partially inspired by Gilbert James' teaching, his ideas, and/or these experiential learning experiences in urban areas.

Robert W. Lyon, his fellow faculty member at Asbury and personal friend, wrote a special tribute to Gilbert James in 1980 in a campus publication. Lyon, probably best known for his work in mentoring the Christian Service Brotherhood into forming the first Ichthus Music Festival, had been hired at the same time as Gilbert James. He wrote,

When you talk with him he tells you that he is a professional sociologist and not a theologian. With a slight hint of sanctified pride he reminds you that he is not ordained and that he has never studied theology. Yet, I think a case might be made out for at least suggesting that he has been the best practicing theologian on these campuses. Dialogue on matters theological never left one in doubt that Gilbert had done his homework, that he had read well and reflected carefully on the signal works of theology.

People naturally think of Gilbert as a sociologist, or as a teacher, or perhaps even as a prophet. He is all of them. But at the very heart of his being he is an evangelist. The person of Jesus Christ in his risen power stands at the center of his life and faith.²¹

At James' funeral two years later, Lyon would describe him simply as "the truest human being I have ever known." Since, James' time it is now common to have professors whose specialties are in anthropology or sociology. Missions and evangelism without the idea of cultural exegesis would be incomplete in modern missiological studies. But for Asbury Theological Seminary, Gilbert James was the person who pioneered these ideas and thus paved the way for a multidisciplinary approach to reaching people for Christ, which was not detached from holiness, but rather rooted firmly in an understanding of God's holy love for all of humanity. In some ways, his work paved the way for Frank Stanger to create the E.S.J. School with a strong social science focus.



Gilbert and Esther James with Abbie Christian Establishing a Work in Indianapolis for the Department of Interracial Evangelism for the Free Methodist Church (circa 1955).

(Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

Gilbert James was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease relatively early in his life. Often his wife Esther had to travel with him to help him in his speaking, or even speak in his place. Rev. Philip Amerson remembered one of the last times he saw Gilbert James was in the spring of 1978 when he came to help teach a course for James, as he knew he was failing. He remembers seeing James in the Seminary post office as James saw him and began to weep, saying simply, "I should know you, but I can't place you."²² The progression of the disease became worse with cases where James would become violent without knowing he was harming his wife, who he had wooed and treasured all of those years. He would die on January 21, 1982 at only 66 years of age.²³ It is fascinating to hear some of Gilbert James' thoughts on his Alzheimer's disease, which he covered in a chapel

service in 1978.²⁴ He saw his illness as another challenge from God to learn more about the spiritual fruit of patience in his life.

Gilbert and Esther's son, David has written a short devotional book about loss and grieving. In one devotional he writes about his father's struggle,

Four years before my father died at the height of his seminary teaching career, he wrote in his private notes, "A Prayer I was Afraid to Pray": *O God, let me be crushed and ground as wheat, like bread from the oven to be broken and fed to the hungry!*

Then one night, two years later, he suddenly realized that through painful struggling with language in the pulpit, humiliation in the classroom, and anguish in meeting friends, this prayer had been answered. He took a leave of absence...

So instead of having the coffee he loved, at the staff lounge at the seminary he loved, with the people he loved, he drove to the Burger King at the edge of town. He would seek out lonely-looking people and ask if he could join them. Because he could not lecture, he listened, and because he could not preach, he prayed, and formerly lonely strangers began to seek him out.

Broken bread, anyone?²⁵

Gilbert James should be remembered, not just for his teaching and innovative immersion experiences, nor for his pioneering work in racial justice, but also for the impact he had on his students. Dr. Philip Amerson, the former President of Claremont Theological Seminary (2000-2005), and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (2006-2013) was one of his students in Gilbert James' early years of teaching, and he worked with him long after he left seminary. Despite his later academic roles, he spent a number of years working with congregations on urban community development and institutional leadership with a concern for issues of poverty and discrimination. Clearly Gilbert James left an impact there. Dr. Howard Snyder was another student of Gilbert James. Dr. Snyder has served as a missionary and professor in Brazil (1968-1975) and taught in a number of places including being the Professor of History and Theology of Mission in the E.S.J. School at Asbury Theological Seminary (1996-2006), but it is in his writing where he has frequently challenged the Evangelical Church to be more focused on social issues. His books *The Problem of Wineskins* (1975), *The Community of the King* (1977), *The Radical Wesley* (1980),

Kingdom Manifesto (1985) and *EarthCurrents: The Struggle for the World's Soul* (1995), all reflect the influence of Gilbert James and his method of holding holiness and social justice together. In addition, Gilbert James influenced Howard Olver, a Free Methodist pastor with a passion for urban ministry. Olver is reported as saying,

Gilbert James had a huge impact on my life. He was the professor of church and society at Asbury while I was there, and it was in a January interterm class on community research techniques that he led in Minneapolis-St. Paul that I made the decision to say yes to God about going to the city and going back to Brooklyn, and he actually spent several interterms in Brooklyn bringing students to be involved in ministries that we were involved in.²⁶

Joe Culumber also chose to focus his life on urban ministry, culminating in his taking Rainier Avenue Church, a dying urban church in South Seattle with about 65 white retirees in one of the region's most diverse neighborhoods. Refusing to move to the suburbs, in 1985 Culumber took this church into ministry into the ethnic neighborhoods, reaching out to African Americans, but also the large South East Asian refugee community of Laotians, Hmong, Vietnamese, and even Samoan minorities. Currently led by Rev. Peter Chin, Rainier Avenue Church is one of the most vibrant multiethnic churches in urban Seattle. Culumber was convinced by Gilbert James that, "if the Gospel is going to work, it should work in the city."²⁷ John "Ike" Owen is another example of the influence of Gilbert James on urban ministry. He records how he went on an urban experience to Chicago in 1967 where Gilbert James gave the students different assignments,

"He assigned me to ride with police. I didn't have a lot of interest in police necessarily," Owen recalled. "I saw unbelievable corruption exercised on the South Side of Chicago."

Among other things, he witnessed tavern owners and businessmen giving cash bribes and alcohol to police, who also had ties to prostitutes.

"I couldn't believe what I was experiencing," Owen said. "I said to the Lord, 'If you ever give me a chance to have anything to do with addressing police corruption. I'd like to be able to do that.'"²⁸

Owen would ultimately serve as a chaplain for the police officers guarding the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., and he also helped set up chaplaincies in other law enforcement agencies in the nation's capital.

Many of these student connections would come together in Continental Urban Exchange (CUE) meetings, a network of Free Methodists who were engaged in urban ministry. The first gathering was held in Winona Lake in 1974, and subsequent gatherings mainly in large urban centers. Charles W. Kingsley with the Free Methodist men's organization, Light and Life Men, initially brought together a number of these urban workers, several of whom had been Gilbert James' former students including: Dwight Gregory, Joe Culumber, Howard Olver, John "Ike" Owen, and Howard Snyder. Their aim, in part, was to work against the move of urban churches relocating to the suburbs. James would suggest speakers and the group would meet annually for more than two decades. CUE remains an ongoing legacy of Gilbert James within Free Methodism to this day.²⁹

While it may seem paradoxical that James emerged out of a radical holiness background and then integrated that theology into his social justice work, this is not really the case. More likely he was connecting with an historic stream of the holiness movement (including Free Methodism) which did not distinguish between social justice and evangelism. Gilbert and Esther James saw sanctification as a call to more perfectly love both God and our neighbors. In true traditional holiness form, he would not separate these two. He was somewhat suspicious of Charismatic forms of Pentecostalism, which defined sanctification in terms of religious experience, but neglected the social dimensions. In this sense he truly inherited the holiness of the Shelhamers. Holiness was not about prohibiting dancing, jewelry, fancy clothing, drinking alcohol, or makeup and modern hair styles, but about being committed in every fiber of one's being to live out the Gospel in our interactions with our neighbors. These things were not inherently evil in this theology. The early holiness leaders rejected these things because they took focus away from God, resources away from serving the poor, and elevated the individual above others. True holiness had to be lived out with the marginalized of society, and that required a simplicity of life so that there would be more available from our personal holiness to foster social holiness.



Gilbert and Esther James at Frank Stanger's Retirement Dinner (1981).
 (Used with Permission of the B.L. Fisher Archives and Special Collections)

Gilbert James wrote an essay for Asbury Theological Seminary's fiftieth anniversary in 1974, entitled, "The Use and Abuse of Power: A Study of Principalities and Power." As he concluded the essay, he sought to suggest several courses of action, and the first point clearly related evangelism as a radical action which could lead to social transformation. He wrote:

[T]here is a need for radical evangelism that will reunite the personal and social aspects of Christian experience. It should emphasize total obedience to Christ in every category of life. This means that the new creature in Christ is not only prepared to proclaim the good news to men and women everywhere, but he is concerned about the powers that limit the life options of people whom Christ loves. The Christian must be prepared to take his stand against racial, ethnic, and sex discrimination, corrupt politics, and immoral and exploitive business practices. He must be willing not only to help make known to the powers the will of God for His world, but to join with others through whom He is speaking and writing.

C. Wright Mills is quoted by Marcus Borg as saying, "If you don't specify and confront real issues, what you do will surely obscure them. If you do not alarm anyone

morally, you will yourself remain morally asleep. If you do not embody controversy, what you say will be an acceptance of the drift to the coming human hell!"³⁰

At Gilbert James' funeral in 1982 at the Free Methodist Church in Wilmore, Kentucky, time was given for people to share their thoughts. The lone African American to speak was Dr. James Earl Massey, a Dean of the Anderson University School of Theology and Christian Ministry and a trustee of Asbury Theological Seminary, 1978-1992. He noted that what he remembered most was that Gilbert James promoted an "intelligent love." Gilbert James spoke about his view of Christian love in a 1968 chapel talk on holiness at Asbury Theological Seminary entitled "The Sanctified Way of Life." He tells the poignant story of his young son, who loved baby chicks, and how one day he held a baby chick in his hand against his face and inadvertently killed the chick. James notes that his son did not lack for love, but rather lacked a knowledge about the frailty of baby chicks. He then added that "We must understand the world in which we are ministering, for unless we have some understanding of the social, political, and economic forces in our world, our efforts may hinder more than help." He defined this as his overarching reason for being at the Seminary. In his dramatic conclusion to his sermon, he spoke prophetically from 1968 into our world today,

We must labor to know and to understand and above all to seek God's will and to question over and over and over again, what would Christ do in this situation. But it isn't easy. Vested interests, competing philosophies, and political parties will cry for our loyalties. They will beguile us, they will mislead us, they will lie to us, but we must make every effort to find the truth in matters of poverty, of racial strife, of economic and political exploitation, and to witness against wickedness in high places.³¹

Such was the "intelligent love" advocated by Gilbert James, the first trained social scientist on the faculty at Asbury Theological Seminary, whose teaching inspired many to work with the urban poor, to form the Ichthus Music Festival to reach young people, to bridge gaps in interracial justice, to truly understand what it meant when Wesley said, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."³²

Reflecting on Gilbert James' life and work, Dr. William Pannell, who met James on one of his trips to Chicago and became close friends, noted that James believed that holiness and social justice had to go together. For Pannell, James was the only person at Asbury who truly understood the crisis of the cities, and as such he often seemed to be alone, "a prophet crying in the wilderness." Pannell opines that the Evangelical church today needs to really understand what it "means to be radical Christians" in the same way as Gilbert James. I am sure James would have agreed wholeheartedly with Pannell as he added, "It will always be a struggle, if justice is at the periphery of our institutions."³³

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

End Notes

¹ All images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images, unless otherwise noted. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

² As Rev. Philip Amerson notes, this shift might have begun to occur much earlier with Claude Thompson in the late 1940's. Phone interview with Rev. Philip Amerson, January 11, 2022. Claude Homes Thompson (1908-1971) taught Systematic Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary from 1947-1950. He went on to the Candler School of Theology in 1951 where he taught until his death in 1971. He was a vocal advocate of civil rights and defended a biblical view of equality in terms of race relations. His papers are housed at Emory University in Atlanta. There was an extensive controversy over Thompson's orthodoxy beginning in 1948 and ending with his forced resignation in 1950. Accused of liberal theology by a small group of faculty members (a charge never substantiated) the highly popular Thompson faced fierce pressure put on the Board of Trustees so that Thompson felt compelled to resign. As a result, the Seminary lost its accreditation in one of its greatest crises because of perceived flaws in the administration and a lack of intellectual freedom. This topic is covered in depth in Kenneth Kinghorn's *The Story of Asbury Theological Seminary*,

(2010, EMeth Press, Lexington, KY): 161-197. It is also important to note the presence of Dr. George Allen Turner at Asbury Seminary, where he taught Biblical Literature, 1945-1979. He appears in Gilbert James' *Interracial News*, even writing an article entitled, "Racial Integration and Prophetic Religion," 7(1) (April 1956). As a Free Methodist with an interest in racial justice, he would have been an ally of James at Asbury, but he also appears as one of the opponents of Claude Thompson, so his exact role is unclear. In any case, neither Thompson nor Turner were hired for positions on social concerns, but to fill specific roles in Systematic Theology and Biblical Literature. Gilbert James remains the first non-theologian to be hired by the Seminary for his expertise in the social sciences.

³ This is related in the audio tape of Gilbert James' funeral held in the Free Methodist Church in Wilmore. In a newspaper article about Gilbert James and his battle with Alzheimer's, it is mentioned that his father ran away to join the circus as a young person and that was when he adopted the name "James" for his last name. Others relate that Gilbert James was not even sure if James was his real last name, since his father apparently changed his name in a number of situations.

⁴ Robert L. Peirce, "Disease took toll on brilliant man wife remembered" *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Kentucky), Sunday, February 13, 1983.

⁵ Cf. "Shreveport Work Observes Tenth Anniversary," *Interracial News*, 4(4) (August 1953). Another helpful piece is *It Took a Miracle: The Story of Shreveport*, a film made by the Department of Interracial Evangelism about 1960 and written and directed by Glen Williamson. A digitized copy of this was obtained from the Marston Historical Society of the Free Methodist Church in Indianapolis, which also holds other material related to the Department of Interracial Evangelism, Gilbert James, and the Shelhamer family.

⁶ Gilbert James, "He That Winneth Souls," *Interracial News*, 1(5) (October 1950): 1.

⁷ Cf. *Interracial News*, 1(4) (August, 1950): 1.

⁸ Mrs. E.E. Shelhamer, "What a Time," *Interracial News*, 4(5) (October 1953): 2.

⁹ Cf. Esther S. James, "The New Camp Ground," *Interracial News*, 7(1) (April 1956): 4.

¹⁰ Gilbert James, "The Virginia Youth Camp," *Interracial News*, 7(2) (July 1956): 2.

¹¹ The year of 1960 appears to be a critical year, since Gilbert James had left the position as Superintendent of the Department of Interracial Evangelism in 1958 to teach at the University of Wisconsin (1961-1965). The work on interracial justice seems to have died out without someone with James' passion. For a short time, he was replaced

by Glen E. Williamson. The Shelhamer Mission seems to have been taken over by the Redevelopment Land Agency for land projects, no new effort was put into the camp and the land and building were eventually sold. See especially "Camp Historian's Report for Annual Conference 2007" for the Peach Orchard Christian Retreat Center by Marti Theune, camp historian, retrieved January 12, 2022 at <https://docsbay.net/a-ministry-of-the-maryland-virginia-conference-of-the-free-methodist-church>.

¹² "Gene Alston, Julia Shelhamer, Honored in Spencerville, Maryland," *Free Methodist Historical Society Newsletter*, 7(2) (Winter 2007): 2-3.

¹³ Gilbert James, "U.S. Supreme Court Outlaws Segregation," *Interracial News*, 5(3) (June 1954): 1-2.

¹⁴ David L. McKenna, *A Future with a History: The Wesleyan Witness of the Free Methodist Church: 1960 to 1995 and Forward*. (Light and Life Communications: Indianapolis, IN) 1997: 187.

¹⁵ Gilbert M. James, "The Church in Society: The Wesleyan Way." *The Asbury Seminarian*, 20(2) (1966): 82-86. Retrieved from: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol20/iss2/8/>

¹⁶ Phone interview with Rev. Philip Amerson, January 11, 2022.

¹⁷ Interview with Howard Snyder, January 13, 2022. For a video of the full interview see <https://vimeo.com/668288091/5fda293c78>.

¹⁸ Phone interview with Rev. Joseph Culumber, February 11, 2022.

¹⁹ Phone interview with Rev. Philip Amerson, January 11, 2022.

²⁰ Phone interviews with John Park, August 5, 2020 and September 3, 2020.

²¹ Robert W. Lyon, "A Tribute to Dr. Gilbert James." *Short Circuit: A Student Publication of Asbury Theological Seminary*, 79(7) (April 25, 1980): 1.

²² Phone interview with Rev. Philip Amerson, January 11, 2022.

²³ True to form for Gilbert and Esther James, Esther told their story to the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in February 13, 1983 ("Disease took toll on brilliant man wife remembered"), most likely as a way to reach out and inform others about the effects of Alzheimer's. In this article, Esther relates Gilbert's violent episodes where he yelled obscenities, threatened her with a knife, and even kicked her. But she also tells with great grace their love story and how she kept him at home out of love for the person he really was. It is a tragic story, and yet one of profound Christian love as well.

²⁴ Gilbert James, "Learning Patience: Reflections on a Fruit of the Spirit while Coping with Early Onset Alzheimer's," Chapel

Service, Wilmore, Kentucky, 1978: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsatschapelservices/5962/>

²⁵ David L. James, *From Loss to Hope*. (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 2006): 28-29.

²⁶ Jeff Finley, "Called to the City: The Urban, Cross-Cultural Ministry of Howard Olver." *Light and Life Magazine*, 2021, retrieved on January 26, 2022 at <https://lightandlifemagazine.com/called-to-the-city-the-urban-cross-cultural-ministry-of-howard-olver/>

²⁷ Phone interview with Rev. Joseph Culumber, February 11, 2022.

²⁸ Jeff Finley, "John "Ike" Owen: Chaplain to the Cities," *Light and Life Magazine*, 152(10) (October 2020): 22-25, retrieved on February 11, 2022 at http://de.hessprintsolutions.com/LLLV_October_2020/page_23.html

²⁹ Special thanks to Howard Snyder for pointing me to the direction of CUE and its significance as a result of Gilbert James' influence.

³⁰ Gilbert M. James, "The Use and Abuse of Power: A Study of Principalities and Powers," In *Theological Foundations: Fiftieth Anniversary Scholarly Essays* by Members of the Seminary Faculty, pp. 211-232. Originally published in 1974, republished in 2013. (Wilmore, KY: First Fruits Press) 2013: 227. Retrieved at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitspapers/15/>

³¹ Gilbert James, "The Sanctified Way of Life," Chapel Service, Wilmore, Kentucky, 1968: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsatschapelservices/553/>

³² John Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739.

³³ Phone interview with Dr. William Pannell, January 13, 2022.

