

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Guess Who's Coming to Church: The *Chicago Defender*, the Federal Council of Churches, and Rethinking Shared Faith in Interracial Religious Practice

William Stell

New York University, New York, United States

Email: wstell@princeton.edu

Abstract

On the cover page of the September 23, 1922, issue of the *Chicago Defender*, editor Robert S. Abbott announced Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday. Less than a month later, the Federal Council of Churches announced its inaugural Race Relations Sunday. Through a comparative analysis of these two events, this article reconsiders historians' tendency to assume and emphasize a shared faith across racial lines when discussing interracial religious practice in various historical contexts. Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday was intended both to introduce white churchgoers to black respectability and to provide moral guidance to white churchgoers, whose racism rendered their faith something other than true Christianity. Notwithstanding ceremonial nods to interracial religious brotherhood, Abbott's campaign hinged more so on shared understandings of respectability than on shared Christian faith. While the FCC's Race Relations Sunday differed in its valorization of white Christianity, with proclamations that interracial religious brotherhood was sufficient to solve "the race problem," both events displayed a shared faith in the power of interracial proximity in itself to accomplish their respective ends. Historians have replicated this problematic faith in interracial proximity by using language of racial transcendence and writing as if interracial religious practice is egalitarian unless proven otherwise. This article calls for more critical, contextually mindful approaches.

I. Introduction

On the cover page of the September 23, 1922, issue of the *Chicago Defender*, editor Robert S. Abbott announced: "Let the Race have a special day to visit white churches." Through his Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday campaign, Abbott aimed to "help bring about a better day by knowing the other fellow better and helping him to know the best that is in us."¹ Born in Georgia in 1870 to parents who had been enslaved five

¹Robert S. Abbott, "Christians Are Urged to Pull Together in Church Worship," *Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1922.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Society of Church History. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

years prior, Abbott learned the printing trade at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, migrated to Chicago to attend law school, and then founded the *Defender* in 1905. By the early 1920s, his paper had reached a circulation of around 200,000, not counting the countless others who borrowed copies or heard them read aloud.² Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday was a nationwide call for black Americans to pursue an experience of interracial worship, coming from one of the most influential black Americans of the day and publicized on the cover page of perhaps the premier black periodical in the United States. It was unparalleled.

The announcement got readers talking. The front page of the following week's paper reported that Abbott "has received a large number of letters approving and endorsing his plan." One letter came from Rev. Moses H. Jackson of Grace Presbyterian Church, where the campaign was praised from the pulpit (and where Abbott had become a member in 1898). Without specifying a date for the "special day," the *Defender* encouraged its readers to make plans to visit a white church in the near future. In the words of Rev. W. H. Bennett, the president of a local Baptist ministers' conference, "If this were practiced it would bring all Christians closer together."³

Less than a month after Abbott's announcement, Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday suddenly had a parallel: Race Relations Sunday, coordinated by the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) and scheduled for February 11, 1923.⁴ Founded in 1908 and merged into the National Council of Churches in 1950, the FCC was the leading ecumenical organization in the United States and consisted of 32 denominational members, four of which were black (the National Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church).⁵

At the helm of the Race Relations Sunday campaign was Dr. George E. Haynes. Born in Arkansas in 1880 to formerly enslaved parents, Haynes attended Fisk University in Nashville, then earned a master's degree in sociology at Yale University, where he studied with the laissez-faire economist and Social Darwinist spokesman William Graham Sumner. Haynes then enrolled at Yale Divinity School, but he left the program to take a position with the YMCA, following the advice of a mentor who he had met at Fisk: W. E. B. Du Bois. With the help of Du Bois's connections, Haynes would become the first executive director of the National Urban League, earn a doctorate degree in social economics from Columbia University (the first black American to earn a

²James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 79–80. For an expansive history of the *Defender* and its influence, see Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

³"Church Plan a Good One Pastors Say: Clergymen Endorse Chicago Defender's 'Go-to-a-White' Church Sunday Campaign," *Chicago Defender*, September 30, 1922.

⁴The *Defender* described Race Relations Sunday as "in line with" and "following the idea suggested by" its own campaign, which seems to imply a belief that the FCC got the idea from the *Defender*'s Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday. Though I have found nothing in the FCC's archive that credits the *Defender*, it is worth noting that the FCC had an office in Chicago, the head organizer of Race Relations Sunday was likely a reader of the *Defender*, and the timing seems more than coincidental. That said, it is also worth noting that the FCC commission hosting Race Relations Sunday had displayed an interest in promoting interracial gatherings for black and white Christians ever since its first meeting in 1921. See "Boost Plan to Worship with Whites," *Chicago Defender*, October 28, 1922; "Church Council Asks Sunday for Race Relations," *Chicago Defender*, February 3, 1923.

⁵For an insider's perspective on the early years of the FCC, see Samuel McCrea Cavert, *The American Churches in the Ecumenical Movement, 1900–1968* (New York: Association Press, 1968).

doctorate from Columbia), and head President Woodrow Wilson's Bureau of Negro Economics in the Department of Labor. Du Bois's efforts to redirect Haynes away from religious work proved unsuccessful, however: following the Wilson administration, Haynes dedicated himself to interracial work through predominantly white religious institutions, beginning with the short-lived Interchurch World Movement in 1919. Haynes helped to launch the FCC's Commission on the Church and Race Relations in 1921, serving as its executive secretary until 1947.⁶

Building on the tradition among denominations' Home Mission Boards of giving "special attention to their work for Negroes" on the Sunday before Abraham Lincoln's birthday, the FCC's Commission on the Church and Race Relations encouraged pastors to craft relevant sermons for Race Relations Sunday and called for special worship services as "a means of bringing more closely to the attention of the churches their responsibility and opportunity for promoting goodwill and cooperation between the races." In that same vein, the commission stated, "This is an appropriate time for white churches to invite representative delegations from Negro churches, and Negro churches to invite representative delegations from white churches to visit their services."⁷ According to the FCC's *Federal Council Bulletin*, more than one hundred articles in white and black periodicals reported on Race Relations Sunday events throughout the country.⁸ Thereafter, Race Relations Sunday became an annual tradition that grew increasingly popular and lasted for decades.⁹ Through a comparative analysis of the inaugural Race Relations Sunday in 1923 and the Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday campaign in 1922, I invite a fresh consideration of one of the more common frameworks for conceptualizing and discussing interracial religious practice in various historical contexts: shared faith.

Initiatives like Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and Race Relations Sunday were shaped by the turbulent sociopolitical environment and rapidly shifting racial landscape of the early twentieth-century urban North. In 1919, the *New York Times* reported that an estimated half a million black people had recently migrated from the South to Midwestern and Northeastern cities such as Chicago and New York City, home of the FCC's main office.¹⁰ Not coincidentally, 1919 was also the year of the Red Summer: white supremacist violence spawned riots in over three dozen American cities, with extensive property damage and 38 deaths in Chicago alone. Economic decline, labor unrest, the escalation of white Protestant nativism (as seen in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan), Catholic anti-black racism, and the fraught reintegration of black veterans from World War I into a segregated society helped to fuel the riots, which in turn fueled the specters of anarchy and Bolshevism.¹¹ Although the riots revived

⁶Haynes's position with the FCC became full-time in 1934. On Haynes's interracial religious work, see Samuel K. Roberts, "George Edmund Haynes: Advocate for Interracial Cooperation," in *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*, eds. Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), 97–127. See also Bruce Haynes and Syma Solovitch, *Down the Up Staircase: Three Generations of a Harlem Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25–64.

⁷"New Plans for Inter-racial Goodwill," *Federal Council Bulletin*, October–November 1922. The language of "representative delegations" may indicate a belief that not all members of black and white churches were seen as suitable candidates for this initiative.

⁸"Churches Observed Race Relations Sunday," *Federal Council Bulletin*, February–March 1923.

⁹James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18–19.

¹⁰"For Action on Race Riot Peril," *New York Times*, October 5, 1919.

¹¹E.g. Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2011).

white religious interest in addressing racial issues, visions of what exactly this should look like varied significantly, and white enthusiasm largely failed to generate lasting action.¹²

In the early twentieth-century North, most interracial religious activity—for example, among Baptist women and YWCA women—consisted of organizational collaboration on evangelistic, educational, and welfare initiatives, perennially marked by white paternalism and consequent tensions over black involvement in decision-making processes.¹³ In the South, initiatives such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, launched by white Methodist minister Will W. Alexander in 1919, generally came to terms with and even served to shore up legal segregation.¹⁴ In the North and South alike, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interracial worship services were exceedingly rare outside of Holiness and Pentecostal settings.¹⁵ By the time Abbott launched Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday, segregation generally prevailed even in Holiness and Pentecostal worship across the nation.¹⁶ Thus, when the *Defender* invited hundreds of thousands of black people to worship in white churches in 1922, and when the FCC invited thousands of white and black churches to exchange “representative delegations” less than a month later, their initiatives were unprecedented in several respects.

In taking up the tendency to assume and emphasize a shared faith across racial lines when discussing interracial religious practice in various historical contexts, this article begins with an analysis of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and the respectability politics that propelled it. Abbott’s campaign was meant to show white churchgoers how respectable black people could be, and the campaign accordingly pressured black people to emulate certain values and behaviors attributed to middle-class white and black churchgoers. At the same time, the campaign was meant to provide necessary moral guidance to white churchgoers, whose racism rendered their Christian faith questionable at best. Notwithstanding ceremonial nods to the notion of a shared Christian faith between white and black people, Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday was more substantively premised on the notion that white Christianity, unlike Black Christianity, was a religious failure—so much so that perhaps it should not be called “Christianity.” From this perspective, Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday hinged more so on shared understandings of respectability than on a shared Christian faith.

¹²E.g. Heath W. Carter, “Making Peace with Jim Crow: Religious Leaders and the Chicago Race Riot of 1919,” *Journal of Illinois History* 11 (Winter 2008): 261–276.

¹³Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 88–119; Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906–1946* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁴Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 53–84.

¹⁵Catholic parishes in New Orleans are one exception. See Jim Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 162–192. A hundred years earlier, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, interracial worship—albeit with segregated seating—had been much more common.

¹⁶E.g. Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 47–106; Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 104–105, 226–235; Estrela Y. Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 110–158, 249–292; Elton H. Weaver III, *Bishop Charles H. Mason in the Age of Jim Crow* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 181–216.

The article then turns to the FCC's Race Relations Sunday, which by contrast valorized white Christianity. Haynes's campaign sought to demonstrate that racial goodwill abounded among white as well as black churchgoers and sought to invigorate an interracial "Christian brotherhood" that was itself supposedly sufficient to solve the nation's racial problems. Whereas the *Defender* regularly critiqued racism within white Christianity and thus expressed more modest hopes for interracial religious gatherings, the FCC insistently held white people's Christian faith in the utmost esteem and much more highly estimated the role of interracial religious gatherings in resolving "the race problem." While acknowledging these and other important differences, I argue that both Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and Race Relations Sunday shared faith not just in a religious tradition or in reform agendas, but in the power of interracial proximity in itself. Analyzing the different ways in which both campaigns displayed this latter kind of faith yields a fresh perspective on interracial religious practice not just in the early twentieth-century urban North, but in other (including contemporary) contexts.

Discussions of a shared faith across racial lines are often accompanied by descriptions of interracial worship as "transcending race." In the article's third and final section, I contend that this language of transcendence is inadvisable, and not only when historians use it to describe interracial worship in contexts of slavery and segregation.¹⁷ In some cases, the language of transcendence is taken from the promotional accounts of white religious leaders, who hardly speak for black worshippers' experiences of race.¹⁸ Even in cases where this language comes from black subjects themselves, however, my analysis of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and Race Relations Sunday discourages the use of racial transcendence as a framework for understanding interracial religious events. The experience of a black participant in these campaigns, Dr. Alma Mary Haskins, illustrates how instances of interracial worship can be deeply meaningful for black people, spiritually and otherwise, while still buttressing white supremacy.

This analysis contributes to (mostly sociological) scholarship on the persistent power of whiteness in interracial worship, which has helped to problematize the widespread assumptions that interracial religious activity is egalitarian unless proven otherwise and that it is more or less inherently progressive, inherently promotive of black people's

¹⁷E.g. Gastón Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–3; Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 15–98; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 80–148; Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Evangelicalism in Mississippi, 1773–1876* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 60–75, 132–145; Iain MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), 60–94.

¹⁸E.g. Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 107–168; Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 159–190. Harvey's chapter "The Color of Skin Was Almost Forgotten for the Time Being: Racial Interchange in Southern Religious Expressive Cultures" begins with white faith healer Maria Woodworth-Etter's account of her own service: "God came in such wonderful power it was not long till they seemed to forget the color. The altar was filled with seekers, white people on one side and colored on the other" (109). The contradiction between the enforcement of segregated seating and "forgetting the color" goes unnoted, and the white speaker's self-flattering claims about her audience's experiences of race goes uninterrogated. While Harvey acknowledges that interracial worship "might simply have reinforced the white supremacist regime" (111), his chapter repeatedly bypasses opportunities to identify indications within his primary sources that such reinforcement occurred. That said, an important exception is his analysis of white Pentecostals who sought ordination in the Church of God in Christ (144–145).

aims, and inherently inimical to white supremacy.¹⁹ Ultimately, I advocate for a more critical posture in investigating on whose terms interracial religious events took place, as well as whose interests these events and accounts thereof served. Adopting such a posture will rightly trouble language of racial transcendence, temper optimism about the power of interracial proximity in itself, and foster accounts of interracial religious practice that both refine and reach beyond the lens of shared faith.

II. Respectability without Respect: Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday

In the second sentence after his announcement to “let the Race have a special day to visit white churches,” Abbott wrote that many white Christians “never see a well dressed, well behaved Race man or woman at worship with them in their churches.” The following paragraph began, “Let us put on our best clothes and best manners and go see how the white man worships his God.”²⁰ The same phrase—“put on your best clothes and manners”—appeared in the following week’s update on the campaign.²¹ One of the most prominent themes in the *Defender’s* accounts of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday was the importance of dressing and behaving in particular ways for the sake of making a good impression on white churchgoers.

In an article entitled “Church Plan a Good One Pastors Say,” the *Defender* devoted several sentences to elaborating on one element of respectable behavior in white churches: punctuality. Rev. Moses H. Jackson had emphasized this point when announcing the campaign to Grace Presbyterian Church, an established black church that ran a Young People’s Lyceum.²²

[Jackson] urged those persons who proposed to make such visits to be prompt. White churches have a habit of beginning their services on time and the congregation is usually on time to start the services. The Race visitors, of course, ought to have this custom in mind and be ahead of time if possible. Do not make yourself conspicuous by going in a strange church late.²³

The last sentence’s stern warning demonstrates just how seriously the *Defender* took, and expected its readers to take, the codes of respectability in the white churches they visited.

This focus on quality of clothing and behavior was in part a product of racial uplift movements that sought to cultivate a black middle class in the early twentieth century.²⁴

¹⁹E.g. Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert J. Priest, “Divergent Worship Practices in the Sunday Morning Hour: Analysis of an ‘Interracial’ Church Merger Attempt,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, eds. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275–293; Kathleen E. Jenkins, “Intimate Diversity: The Presentation of Multiculturalism and Multiracialism in a High-Boundary Religious Movement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003): 393–409.

²⁰Abbott, “Christians Are Urged to Pull Together in Church Worship.”

²¹“Church Plan a Good One Pastors Say.”

²²Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 73.

²³“Church Plan a Good One Pastors Say.”

²⁴E.g. Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For a Chicago-specific study, see Will Cooley, *Moving Up, Moving Out: The Rise of the Black Middle Class in Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern

Informed by Progressive Era values, racial uplift movements emphasized the ideal of a clean, healthy home life for black Americans, whose success would be both indicated and enhanced by sartorial excellence and impeccable comportment.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, churches were prime sites for advancing racial uplift, including the Congregationalist church in which Abbott was raised and the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches that he joined as an adult. Just a few years before the Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday campaign, with thousands upon thousands of southern migrants settling in Chicago, Abbott went to great lengths to promote proper dress and behavior among recent arrivals. With more stern warnings, the *Defender* published “Some ‘Don’ts’” (27 in total), including: “Don’t live in insanitary houses, or sleep in rooms without proper ventilation,” “Don’t get intoxicated and go out on the street insulting women and children and making a beast of yourself,” and “Don’t appear on the street with old dust caps, dirty aprons and ragged clothes.”²⁶ Even as Abbott used the *Defender* to support mass migration through “the Great Northern Drive,” he also used his paper to prescribe, proscribe, and disparage migrants’ behaviors in accordance with his agenda for racial uplift.²⁷

As Wallace Best has written, Abbott’s and other black American elites’ concerns about migrants reflected a bias against the South. Indeed, it is fair to speculate that Abbott hoped Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday would help “to get the South out of them,” as an editor for the black *Chicago Whip* put it.²⁸ Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday was an exercise in the pragmatic activism of respectable presence, and it was meant to work both ways: white churchgoers would be impressed by their guests’ middle-class manners and thus be inclined to treat black people with more respect, while those guests would be all the more intentional about heeding Abbott’s “Don’ts” with white middle-class churchgoers seated close by.

While Abbott clearly wanted his readers to emulate some of white churchgoers’ behaviors, his posture toward white churchgoers’ faith was more complicated. On the one hand, Abbott repeatedly invoked a theological value of ecclesial unity in promoting Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday. Halfway through his initial article, he wrote, “Let us lift up our voices together with [the white man’s] in common praise of the Father of us all.” Because of Christians’ professed belief in a “Father of us all,” black and white, Abbott could conclude his article with the rhetorical question, “If Christians cannot pull together, who can?”²⁹ On the other hand, the *Defender*’s critical discourse on white Christianity suggests that the question might not have been rhetorical after all.

Critiques of white churchgoers’ unchristian racism lie just below the surface in the *Defender*’s discussions of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday. The first sentence after Abbott’s announcement of “a special day to visit white churches” reads: “Millions of

Illinois University Press, 2018). For one of many accounts by a historian of religion, see Vaughn A. Booker, *Lift Every Voice and Sing: Black Musicians and Religious Culture in the Jazz Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 25–46.

²⁵E.g. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 141–172. The importance of clothing in particular is exemplified by the Detroit Urban League’s Dress Well Club, founded in 1917. See Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 49–92.

²⁶“Some ‘Don’ts,’” *Chicago Defender*, May 17, 1919.

²⁷Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 66–97. For more on Abbott’s political values and influence, see Wallace Best, “The *Chicago Defender* and the Realignment of Black Chicago,” *Chicago History* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 4–21.

²⁸Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 37–38.

²⁹Abbott, “Christians Are Urged to Pull Together in Church Worship.”

white people calling themselves Christians never realize that there are millions of other Christians, their brothers in Christ, who are not white and who are not to be confused with the foreign work collections to save the heathen.” Though the theological value of ecclesial unity was honored in the reference to “brothers in Christ,” Abbott nevertheless began the sentence with a reference to “white people calling themselves Christians,” who somehow “never realize” this rather obvious fact. With similar subtlety, Abbott invited his readers to “go see how the white man worships *his* God” (*italics added*). In addition, at several points in the article, Abbott hinted that white Christians may need black Christians to teach them, or at least remind them, about some of the basics of Christian faith. For example, Abbott encouraged readers both to welcome white people into their churches in order to “show them your idea of brotherly love” and to arrange for black pastors to preach in white pulpits in order to “preach good will and better understanding of one’s [black] neighbors.”³⁰

While the *Defender’s* criticisms of white Christianity remained subdued in its coverage of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday, scathing critiques of this sort regularly appeared elsewhere in the newspaper. Perhaps most forcefully, in an article titled “Billy Sunday Cowered Before Race Prejudice in Washington,” Rev. Francis J. Grimké of the prominent Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., condemned “the members of our white church, I will not say Christians” for uncritically admiring a renowned evangelist who acquiesced to “the devil of race prejudice, rotten, stinking, hell-born race prejudice.” Grimké distinguished between “the religion which he, Mr. Sunday represents,” which did not appear to be concerned with race prejudice, and “Christianity, the religion of Jesus Christ,” which “is, and always will be.” Speaking of “white professors of religion” who failed to address race prejudice, Grimké stated, “the sooner the churches are rid of all such professors, and the pulpits of all such ministers, the better it will be for the kingdom of God.”³¹ Periodically, the *Defender* made similar claims about the false Christianity of white churchgoers who were silent about lynching—claims that built on the anti-lynching activism of Ida B. Wells, who wrote, “Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hell-fire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians.”³² In 1921, commenting on white churches that “pass over the subject [of lynching] in silence,” the *Defender* declared, “A religion of that sort is nothing less than hypocrisy.”³³ At times, a mere parenthetical phrase would encapsulate these sentiments—for example, in a front-page article on the lynching of a 17-year-old boy in Waco, which mentioned that “Christians (posing as such, however)” were present.³⁴ Indictments of white churchgoers’ faith thus abounded in the *Defender’s* stories of violence, discrimination, and segregation in the South (and to a lesser extent in the North).³⁵

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Francis J. Grimké, “Billy Sunday Cowered Before Race Prejudice in Washington,” *Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1918.

³²Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 131. See also Paula J. Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 230–252.

³³“Warless World,” *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1921.

³⁴Henry Walker, “Southern White Gentlemen Burn Race Boy at Stake,” *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1916.

³⁵E.g., “Members of a White Church Attempt to Lynch Citizen,” *Chicago Defender*, February 14, 1920; “Sunday School Council Closes Great Session: Race Downs Attempt Made by Southern Whites to Segregate Delegates,” *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1922; “A Southern Christian Drove Them Out,” *Chicago Defender*,

Such perspectives did not originate with and were not at all unique to the *Defender*.³⁶ The NAACP's periodical *Crisis* included trenchant denunciations of "the hypocrites of the white Christian church" and their "unchristian policy of color discrimination."³⁷ According to W. E. B. Du Bois, white churches were "the strongest seat of racial and color prejudice," and thus "white Christianity is a miserable failure."³⁸ In 1919, A. Philip Randolph wrote in *The Messenger* that "The white church is paid to preach the Christianity of lynch law profits."³⁹ So common were these sentiments within the black press at the time that white members of the FCC's Commission on the Church and Race Relations were informed about them during their first meeting: "A. M. Lavel, speaking as a representative of the Negro press, called attention to the fact that the Negro press reflects a loss of confidence on the part of Negroes in 'the white man's religion.'"⁴⁰

Notwithstanding nods to the theological value of interracial unity, then, the *Defender's* discourse on the Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday campaign—if one reads between the lines, as well as before and after them—compatibly coincided with the newspaper's (and other black publications') framing of white Christianity as unchristian. Framed thusly, one could say that black Christians and white churchgoers did *not* have a shared religious faith. Black Christians could embrace both this framing and Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday because the campaign was not premised on the legitimacy or merit of white Christianity. Rather, it was premised on the hope that the presence of respectable black Americans could help to win over white churchgoers, could help to convince them to act like Christians should. Until then, theirs was not necessarily a shared faith.

At the same time, the campaign appeared to be propelled by another hope as well: that the presence of white churchgoers could help to convince less respectable black Americans to behave in ways that Abbott and other elites wanted them to behave—that is, in ways that middle-class white and black churchgoers behaved. Both hopes for Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday reflected, in different ways, faith in the power of interracial proximity. Though Abbott of course knew that dressing up, minding one's manners, and stepping into a white sanctuary would not automatically solve the

July 22, 1922; "Georgia Pastor Upsets State on Lynch Evil: Assails Officer of Law and Good Christians Who Permit Murders," *Chicago Defender*, July 29, 1922.

³⁶E.g., Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 126–152. During the era of enslavement, "slaves distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholder's gospel of obedience to master and mistress." Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, updated edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 294. Most famously, the appendix of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* differentiated between "true Christianity" and "slaveholding religion."

³⁷W. E. B. Du Bois, "Crucifying Christ," *Crisis* 11, no. 5 (March 1916): 228–230. See also e.g., R. S. Lovingood, "A Stranger and Ye Took Me Not In," *Crisis* 3, no. 5 (March 1912): 196.

³⁸W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Church and the Negro," *Crisis* 6, no. 6 (October 1913): 290–291; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1920; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), 21. Citations refer to the Dover Publications edition.

³⁹A. Philip Randolph, "Lynching: Capitalism Its Cause: Socialism Its Cure," *The Messenger*, March 1919 [irregularity in numbering the volumes and issues].

⁴⁰"Minutes of the First Meeting of the Commission on Negro Churches and Race Relations." Folder 3, Box 57, Records of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA. The name "Commission on Negro Churches and Race Relations" was changed to "Commission on the Church and Race Relations" after its first year.

problems that black people faced in a racist society, he believed that these actions constituted what Rev. W. H. Bennett called “a fine step in helping to break down the bars of prejudice.”⁴¹

Not all black leaders shared this belief. For example, CME Church Bishop Lucius Holsey came to believe that such tactics were actually more likely to provoke white rage than to promote black advancement:

There is little or no chance for the black man in the country if he grows rich, polished, and puts on style, or tries to be equal to the white neighbor in civic attainments. Good breeding, politeness, kindness, self-respect and all the virtues may be added and retained by a black man, as have been attained by many, but these, instead of helping him to live in the esteem of his white neighbor, actually put him in a precarious condition, and endanger his life and property.⁴²

Bishop Holsey challenged Abbott’s respectability politics on the grounds that it fueled white supremacist backlash. Others challenged these accommodationist approaches on the grounds that they would ultimately shore up white supremacy, fueling the same classism and colorism under which Abbott himself had suffered.⁴³ The respectable proximity of Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday might have been what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham called “a deliberate, highly self-conscious concession to hegemonic values” that could function as a “bridge discourse” between black and white reformers, but many black Americans—as Higginbotham herself noted—were concerned about the collateral damage of constructing such bridges.⁴⁴

III. Willing Goodwill: Race Relations Sunday

While not as evidently concerned with respectability in the forms of attire and behavior, the FCC’s discourse on Race Relations Sunday evinced a commitment to a kind of religious respectability regarding race relations for white churches. Frequently, the FCC stated that white (as well as black) Christians already possessed “goodwill” toward other races and already shared an interracial “brotherhood,” and Race Relations Sunday provided an opportunity to “express” these admirable possessions. This strategy of vaunting the racial goodwill of white Christians is especially apparent in the discourse of Dr. George E. Haynes, who spoke extensively about Race Relations Sunday to both black and white periodicals. As quoted in the *Defender* in October 1922, Haynes said that February 11, the Sunday preceding Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, was “an appropriate time for the white churches and our churches to express the goodwill and fellowship that exists between them.” One sentence later, Haynes declared, “There is a fund of goodwill in the bosoms of both races,” and through Race Relations Sunday “such goodwill may find wings of expression.”⁴⁵

Writing for the *New York Amsterdam News* just a few days before February 11, Haynes asserted that “the Christian churches of America are the organized channels through which the greatest expression of the ideals of such interracial goodwill can

⁴¹“Church Plan a Good One Pastors Say.”

⁴²L. H. Holsey, “Race Segregation,” *A.M.E. Church Review* 26, no. 2 (October 1909): 115–116.

⁴³E.g., Michaeli, *The Defender*, 1–21.

⁴⁴Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 193, 197.

⁴⁵“Boost Plan to Worship with Whites.” See also “New Plans for Inter-racial Goodwill,” *Federal Council Bulletin*, October–November 1922.

find practical application in the community life of the two races.” According to this article, there were “problems of applying brotherly goodwill,” more so than problems with generating it. Race Relations Sunday addressed the need for ideals of interracial brotherhood to “be more effectively translated into co-operative action in our communities,” rather than the need for white Christians to be convinced of and committed to those ideals in the first place. Every so often, Haynes hinted at the latter kind of need—for example, when he stated that black churches “are giving expression to a type of good will and neighborliness that needs to be met only half way to be fruitful of a brighter day between the races in America.” Immediately following this sentence, however, Haynes commenced a paean to white Christianity’s racial goodwill:

There is no brighter page in the history of the Christian church than the record of some of the great denominations made up mainly of white church men of America. From the days when the Quakers of Pennsylvania held that no Christian could conscientiously keep their black brothers in bondage, from the time when the missionary societies of the several denominations began to spend millions for the education of the freedmen, to the present day, there have been thousands of white churchmen who have sacrificed, worked and prayed that justice and goodwill should obtain between the races. They have looked forward to this day when their darker brethren might be received upon terms of Christian fellowship.⁴⁶

Haynes was not flattering white Christians directly; he was speaking to black people, aiming to persuade them that their lighter brethren truly were praiseworthy—despite all evidence to the contrary—and aiming to persuade them to “be received upon terms of Christian fellowship” by participating in Race Relations Sunday. Haynes’s phrasing invites the question: What precisely were these terms, and who set them? The answer appears to be the predominantly white Christian fellowship of the FCC.

The idea that white Christians merely lacked an avenue to express and apply their goodwill toward black people was closely linked to another idea that undergirded the early work of the FCC’s Commission on the Church and Race Relations. In 1921, at the commission’s initial meeting, members listed the following as the first of nine “purposes which this Commission will seek to serve”: “To assert the sufficiency of Christianity as the solution of race relations in America and the duty of the Churches and all their organizations to give the most careful attention to this question.”⁴⁷ The notion that Christian ideals and initiatives were sufficient to “settle the problems of race relations” repeatedly surfaced in Haynes’ and the FCC’s discourse. Haynes’s *New York Amsterdam News* article, for instance, began with the sentence, “Race problems are religious problems and require the application of Christian ideals”

⁴⁶George E. Haynes, “Churches as Avenues of Food [sic] Will,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 7, 1923.

⁴⁷“Minutes of the First Meeting of the Commission on Negro Churches and Race Relations.” Folder 3, Box 57, Records of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Reprinted in “Coming to Grips with the Racial Problem,” *Federal Council Bulletin*, August–September 1921. Prior to listing these nine purposes, the minutes mention that “there has been an increasing conviction that since Christianity affords the real solution of the inter-racial problem the Church ought to play a more important part. It is the one agency which must furnish the atmosphere in which alone solutions can be found, and its moral authority is needed to support the present efforts in the face of any opposition which they may meet.”

and ended with the sentence, “At this time we need to reiterate that the churches have a strategic opportunity to demonstrate under most favorable conditions that Christian goodwill can and does solve the conflicts of interests between races.” Even in 1946, while accepting a tribute from the FCC for 25 years of leading the Commission on the Church and Race Relations, Haynes reaffirmed his investment in “remedies that will assert the sufficiency of Christianity as a solution [to racial injustice].”⁴⁸

Justifying this investment required Haynes to advance what one scholar has called “an incredibly optimistic view” that perhaps indicated “a naïve estimation of the racial barriers erected by prejudice.”⁴⁹ In the commission’s first annual report, presented a few weeks before Race Relations Sunday, Haynes spoke of “clear evidence of the deep feeling and ready response of thousands of Christian men and women of both races in all parts of the country to the appeal to settle the problems of race relations thru goodwill, understanding, and cooperation. To be sure,” the report acknowledged, “there have been many evils, frictions, misunderstandings, and other manifestations of prejudice and ill feeling.” Unfortunately, such evils “frequently gain the first places in the public press and public attention,” and thus many had not yet realized what the commission’s members had: “that there are deeper forces of goodwill and ideals of brotherhood to which the conscience of thousands, even millions, will respond.”⁵⁰ Such optimism about a Christian goodwill that runs “deeper” than prejudice seems to be a precondition for optimism about the sufficiency of Christianity to resolve racism.

Within Protestant circles, the notion that Christianity could and would cure society’s ills all on its own was fueled by postmillennial thought and the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵¹ In his 1907 book *Christianity and Social Crisis*, Social Gospel leader Walter Rauschenbusch advocated for “the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men” and stated that the church’s mission was to live for and toward the kingdom of God, “transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”⁵² Even as “the Great War” and social unrest seemed to undermine optimism about Christianity’s transformative potential, many white Protestants appeared to remain confident that their churches were up to the task.⁵³ Haynes conveyed this confidence throughout his career, during which he maintained closer ties with white churches than with black churches (ties that were facilitated by his lighter complexion).⁵⁴

The minutes for the first meeting of the Commission on the Church and Race Relations reveal that black members of the commission—numbering 9 of 24 at the meeting—did not necessarily share Haynes’s optimism, nor were they committed to

⁴⁸Roberts, “George Edmund Haynes,” 120. Importantly, Haynes stated that such remedies included religious activism on behalf of anti-lynching and anti-discrimination legislation.

⁴⁹Roberts, “George Edmund Haynes,” 116.

⁵⁰“Minutes of Second Annual Meeting of the Commission on the Church and Race Relations.” Folder 4, Box 56, Records of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

⁵¹See James H. Moorhead, *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁵²Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and Social Crisis* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 48–49, 65. See also e.g. Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 77–106.

⁵³Moorhead, *World without End*, 147–169.

⁵⁴According to his grandson, Haynes “might have passed for a Cuban, with his olive skin, finely chiseled features, and dark curly locks.” Haynes and Solovitch, *Down the Up Staircase*, 27.

the strategy of vaunting white racial goodwill.⁵⁵ John R. Hawkins, Financial Secretary of the AME Church, was recorded as saying, “We need to recognize frankly that the two races are not living happily together in America, not as happily as they did twenty years or so ago.” Bishop Charles S. Smith of the AME Church then “pointed out that the races have been drifting apart” and stated that better understanding would necessitate “creating a new spirit of goodwill” (as opposed to merely “expressing” that spirit). C. H. Tobias of the CME Church “urged that the heart of the problem is one of the status of the Negro,” stating that “in the privileges of citizenship we still have a double standard—for example, in securing justice in the courts and in protection from mob violence—which is fundamentally inconsistent with democratic principles.” In light of this, Tobias asserted, “the Church has not realized how its failure to practice its ideal of democracy in relation to the races is preventing it from proclaiming more than a fractional message to the non-Christian world.” In response to these three black members of the commission, whose comments were relayed one after the other in the minutes, “Bishop E. G. Richardson of the [white] Methodist Episcopal Church suggested that the chief trouble is that neither race really knows the other.”⁵⁶

Little if anything in Haynes’s or the FCC’s public discourse about Race Relations Sunday confronted what black Americans such as C. H. Tobias, W. E. B. Du Bois, Francis Grimké, and many readers of the black press saw as the damning failures of white Christianity. Moreover, Bishop E. G. Richardson’s response to the three black commission members illustrates how white religious leaders’ focus on interracial proximity could serve to redirect attention away from structural inequities and structural remedies: apparently, further discussion of “the status of the Negro” and the nation’s undemocratic denial of the privileges of citizenship to black Americans was foreclosed by a white religious leader’s insistence that “the chief trouble” was actually a lack of inter-personal connection—a lack to be redressed by initiatives like Race Relations Sunday.

Whereas the *Defender* tended to speak of interracial goodwill as a hope and brotherhood as a goal, with events like Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday functioning as “a fine step” toward fruition, the FCC tended to speak of goodwill and brotherhood as realities already secured in and through Christian faith, with events like Race Relations Sunday functioning as an opportunity to express them. From the perspective of the *Defender*’s campaign, white churches were sites for the pragmatic activism of respectable presence, where interracial proximity would enable black Christians to give much-needed moral instruction to white churchgoers misled by “the white man’s religion,” even as white churchgoers would give much-needed social instruction to certain black migrants. From the perspective of the FCC’s campaign, white churches were established sources of abundant goodwill toward all races, and this goodwill could and would heal the nation’s racial wounds, once each race had a chance to “express” their Christian brotherhood and “really know the other.” White churchgoers participating in Race Relations Sunday were meant to display their interracial goodwill to black people and in so doing convince them (and perhaps themselves) that they had already been well-taught, that they had already achieved Christian brotherhood, and that Christian brotherhood was all that any race, all that the world, really needed. The Kingdom of God, white leaders in the FCC believed, was at hand—and within their grasp. All they had to do was

⁵⁵Five of the fifteen white members belonged to Southern denominations with pro-slavery origins.

⁵⁶“Minutes of the First Meeting of the Commission on Negro Churches and Race Relations.” Folder 3, Box 57, Records of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

reach out and touch the hand of their darker brethren, and the awesome power of interracial proximity would be revealed.

IV. Transcendence in Perspective: The Case of Dr. Alma Mary Haskins

Much of the preceding analysis has focused on discourse disseminated by the organizers of these two events. What about the experiences of black Americans who participated in Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and Race Relations Sunday? Dr. Alma Mary Haskins gives us a glimpse. Born in Virginia, and just twenty-eight years old when she wrote a letter to the *Defender's* editor at the end of February 1923, Dr. Alma Mary Haskins had received her medical degree from New York University and had become the first African American woman to work as a podiatrist in New York City.⁵⁷ Not long ago, she had been one of the unfortunate southerners whom Abbott was encouraging to migrate; now, she was one of the black American elite, presumably conducting herself in accordance with the requisite codes of respectability and, Abbott would hope, inspiring more recent migrants to do the same.

Published under the title “Went to White Church,” Haskins’s letter to the *Defender* began with a reference to “an article in your paper urging Negroes to visit white churches” from “several weeks ago.” The recent article to which Haskins referred concerned Race Relations Sunday, though her letter did not name the event or the FCC. In fact, the experience relayed in her letter occurred a few months earlier, just after the height of the *Defender's* discourse on Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday and well before the FCC’s initiative. Thus, Haskins’s letter (published with the words “White Church” in the title) may very well have been intended or received as a reference to the *Defender's* campaign, rather than to the FCC’s. At any rate, Haskins did not distinguish between the two as she enthusiastically informed Abbott and the newspaper’s readers that “I have acted on this suggestion and in so doing I am sure I have discovered a great friend of the Negro Race.”⁵⁸ This friend, the subject and hero of her letter, was Rev. Dr. John Roach Straton. As pastor of New York City’s Calvary Baptist Church, Straton was a pugnacious voice for moral reform in the city and was becoming an increasingly prominent figure in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies of the 1920s.⁵⁹

While attending a Sunday evening service at Calvary Baptist Church in early December, Haskins had witnessed Dr. Straton speaking “to an overflowing house. . . on the Ku Klux Klan. This subject was masterfully treated from every angle,” as Haskins saw it.⁶⁰ Quoting Straton, the letter reads, “What else is there for me to say in this pulpit but that I am unalterably opposed to the Ku Klux Klan and their activities.” Straton stated that he had “made this same statement” at an interracial conference

⁵⁷Veronica A. Davis, *Inspiring African American Women of Virginia*, (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 255.

⁵⁸Alma Mary Haskins, “Went to a White Church,” *Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1923.

⁵⁹E.g. Ralph G. Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing, and Morality in 1920s New York* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008); Wallace Best, “Battle for the Soul of a City: John Roach Straton, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in New York, 1922–1935,” *Church History* 90, no. 2 (June 2021): 367–397; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153–184.

⁶⁰Haskins’s letter to the *Defender* does not mention the location of the service, but an earlier, very similar account that she wrote for the *New York Age* clarifies that she was indeed at Straton’s church. See Alma Mary Haskins, “Dr. Straton and the Negro,” *New York Age*, December 16, 1922.

in Memphis and at a gathering of black Baptist preachers in Harlem. According to Haskins, he succeeded in “emphatically and completely vindicating himself and his church from any connection or alliance” with the Klan.⁶¹

Such vindication was necessary, the *Defender’s* readers knew, because New York City was buzzing with controversy when “it was discovered that Klan literature was distributed in Calvary Baptist church” shortly after the mayor had ordered a police crackdown on the Klan.⁶² As it turns out, the culprit was Rev. Dr. Oscar Haywood, a member of the Klan who had been enlisted as an evangelist in Straton’s church (without salary) in 1918 and again in 1921. As the controversy unfolded, Haywood publicly stated that Straton was “afraid” and “too proud” to push him out of his evangelistic role, and if he did, “the church will split on its pastor and not on me.” Rising to this challenge of his authority, Straton oversaw the passage of a church resolution that rescinded Haywood’s title and “omitted [his name] from the church calendar so long as Dr. Haywood is employed in work incompatible with his position as an evangelist of this church.”⁶³ When Haskins heard Straton speak at Calvary Baptist, this controversy was just days old.

Besides vindicating himself and his church, Straton (in Haskins’s words) “touched on the tarring and feathering and burning of Negroes, and said that it was an outrage and that God would visit vengeance for such acts and said they should be stopped.” Addressing Klan efforts to drive black people from their homes, Straton proclaimed, “Knowing the Negro as I do and loving him as I do, I consider this a crime. The Negro is the most harmless being I know and the most loyal.” Straton too, he insisted, was harmless and loyal: “There is no hatred in me, but I do hate race prejudice in any form, anywhere: this is my conviction and I stand by it.” After “touching on the Jews and Catholics,” whom he also sought to defend against mistreatment and prejudice, Straton returned to the subject of the Klan and declared, “We need no Invisible Empire. . . . Let this Empire [of the United States] suffice. It is enough for us.” Although Haskins had commended Straton’s denunciation of the Klan for being “sincere and emphatic minus any dram[a]tics,” she concluded her letter with a vivid description of how she was swept away in the undeniably dramatic climax of his talk:

Dr. Stratton [*sic*] said he did not like this new color scheme, white, green, yellow and black, white Klanism, green sectarianism, yellow journalism and general black guardism, but there was a color scheme that he loved, that was the old Red, White and Blue: then seizing a U.S. flag he waved it in the air and the entire audience began to sing, “My Country ’Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty, Of thee I sing!” The organ struck up the “Star Spangled Banner.” Dr. Stratton [*sic*] took his seat, I, gratified, amazed and bewildered turned to my escort and these words rushed to my brain, hence I uttered them, “It was good to have been here.”⁶⁴

It is not hard to imagine why Haskins was so enraptured by Straton’s message. Having grown up as a black girl in southern Virginia at the turn of the century and having become a trailblazing young doctor in New York City, she had somehow managed to carve out a respectable space for herself in an empire that was not hers, in a land

⁶¹Haskins, “Went to a White Church.”

⁶²“Mayor Orders Police to Rid City of Klu Kluxers,” *Chicago Defender*, December 2, 1922; “Klan Nest in Straton’s Church,” *New York Age*, November 25, 1922.

⁶³“Dr. Haywood Is Dropped by N.Y. Baptist Church,” *Chicago Defender*, January 20, 1923.

⁶⁴Haskins, “Went to a White Church.”

where powerful forces still conspired to rob her of anything approaching sweet liberty. It is not hard to imagine that Haskins dreamed of the day when she and her kin would feel no need for “black guardism”—the day when she and her kin would be able to seize and wave, with confidence and without fear, “the old Red, White and Blue” for themselves.⁶⁵

Notwithstanding the inspiration that Haskins derived from Straton’s interracial worship service, this account serves as a warning. Scholars should not hasten to read such events, whatever the historical context in which they occurred, as a heartening testament to interracial harmony or as a remarkable instance of racial transcendence—not without first inquiring on whose terms such events occurred and what interests they served. As it turns out, there is ample evidence to suggest that Haskins unwittingly assisted Straton’s highly questionable publicity campaign. The volume and vehemence with which Straton denounced the Klan helped to drown out a host of thorny questions: Did the evangelist Haywood have good reason to think that Straton’s church was fertile ground for the Klan? Had Haywood’s Klan sympathies manifested at all prior to his distribution of official literature? Excepting the single act of distribution, were Haywood’s ideas about race still compatible with or even identical to Straton’s or his church’s? Why did Haywood seem so confident that Straton would let the incident slide—and that, if he did not, Straton’s Klan-friendly church would side with an unpaid evangelist in their midst over their pastor? If there had not been a media firestorm over the matter, would Straton have dismissed Haywood? Told him not to recruit for the Klan? Discouraged members from joining?

A closer look at Straton’s own history with race legitimizes such questions. Both Straton’s 1920 book *The Dance of Death: Should Christians Indulge?* and his 1929 book *Fighting the Devil in Modern Babylon* portrayed large swaths of New York City’s social scene as threats to “the Anglo-Saxon race” and “the Anglo-Saxon way of life.”⁶⁶ In an article entitled “Will Education Solve the Race Problem?,” the minister wrote that overly hasty movement toward emancipation had created “a tendency to immorality and crime” among black Americans. Straton’s self-appointed role as a moral reformer allowed him to cover his white supremacist views with a veneer of compassion for “harmless Negroes” (who he had called “simple-minded children of the human race” elsewhere). His reformist zeal also surfaced in his avowed abhorrence of interracial romance in modern entertainment.⁶⁷ Despite Straton’s claims to “love the Negro,” black people were not, in any durable sense, welcome in his church; not only were there no black members, but when a story circulated in 1928 that someone had seen “several negroes seated” in his church, Straton took umbrage at the rumor and angrily denied it.⁶⁸ However widespread knowledge of such details were, the *New York Times* knew enough about Straton to cast suspicion on his publicity campaign for “condemning the methods but not the motives of the Ku Klux Klan.”⁶⁹ Indeed, in a report on one of

⁶⁵Haskins’s article in the *New York Age* ends by citing Straton’s commendation of “the Red White and Blue” over and against “General Blackguardism.”

⁶⁶Ralph G. Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing, and Morality in 1920s New York City* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 47, 199–201.

⁶⁷Matthew Bowman, *The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 232–233.

⁶⁸Best, “Battle for the Soul of a City,” 27. This anecdote raises questions about Haskins’s presence at Calvary Baptist in 1922. It is possible that the Sunday evening service she attended was exceptional in its welcome of black Americans—a welcome necessitated by the nature of the controversy that Straton’s publicity campaign was meant to quell. It is also possible that Haskins was passing as white at the service.

⁶⁹“Ku Klux Must Go, Says Dr. Straton,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1922.

Straton's sermons during the controversy, the *New York Age* reported that Straton "dealt very lightly with the Klan's principles, declaring that 'there are many good people in the Ku Klux Klan,' and he summed up by saying, 'The Klan's motives are good and their methods are bad; their principles are virtuous and their practices are vicious.'"⁷⁰

From Haskins's perspective, she had taken part in a personally meaningful and socially promising interracial Christian worship service. Hers is a valuable, even necessary perspective to include in any account of this event. That said, historians must frame individual experiences of this sort within a broader, more informed perspective: Haskins was drawn into a largely hollow and misleading performance, fashioned by a white minister whose professed goodwill toward black people failed to materialize in substantive action and, moreover, whose white supremacist rhetoric of Christian Americanization did far more to hurt than to help Haskins's race—for it was, in fact, Klan rhetoric.⁷¹ Instead of emphasizing the presumably shared Christian faith of the participants (nowhere in Haskins's letter does she identify as a Christian), what if we focused on the apparently shared faith in "the old red, White and Blue?"⁷² Instead of merely replicating Haskins's gratification and amazement in the moment, what if we attended to the operation of whiteness in and around the event? Instead of opting for simpler, happier endings, what if we told more complex, more truthful stories that challenged faith in the inherent power of interracial proximity and in the attainability of racial transcendence?

V. Conclusion

Abbott never repeated his Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday campaign. One reason might be that Race Relations Sunday grew in size and status with each year, and Abbott did not want to compete, or to be seen as competing, with it. Another reason might be Abbott's gradually diminishing faith in the ability of Christianity—be it black, white, or interracial—to combat racism effectively. Twelve years after calling for Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday, Abbott publicly affiliated with the Baha'i faith, which he called "the religion that will rescue humanity." Like Harlem Renaissance architect Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois's first wife Nina Du Bois, Abbott was drawn to the Baha'i "Race Amity" movement, concluding that "Christianity has proved faithless to its trust" regarding race relations: "[Christianity] has failed to bring peace and good-will among men. Why? Because it has never emphasized racial unity or oneness of mankind as a central motive of its gospel."⁷³ By 1934, then, Abbott was disseminating a different answer to his earlier question, "If Christians cannot pull together, who can?"

Even so, the *Defender* reported consistently and positively on Race Relations Sunday, notwithstanding a few hints of cynicism in the early years.⁷⁴ More than likely, this

⁷⁰ "Dr. Straton's Sermon," *New York Age*, December 9, 1922. See also "What Straton Had To Say," *New York Age*, December 2, 1922.

⁷¹ E.g. Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011).

⁷² Though Haskins does not explicitly identify as a Christian in her letter, there is evidence that she was a member of a Catholic church.

⁷³ Robert S. Abbott, "Baha'ism Called the Religion That Will Rescue Humanity," *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1934. Christopher Buck, "The Baha'i 'Race Amity' Movement and the Black Intelligentsia in Jim Crow America: Alain Locke and Robert S. Abbott," *Baha'i Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (May 2011): 3–46. See also Michaeli, *The Defender*, 213–214.

⁷⁴ In the final paragraph of its first article about the inaugural Race Relations Sunday, the *Defender* stated, "Not many obstacles are expected to be found in the way of the plan, except in the South. It is hardly felt that the white Christian of the South will welcome worshippers of another color to their services" ("Boost

positive coverage is at least partially attributable to the fact that as Race Relations Sunday grew, it focused increasingly on racial injustice not only within the nation at large, but within white churches specifically. For example, in 1928, the sixth annual Race Relations Sunday materials began with “A Call to Penitence and Prayer” about lynching, “a national crime which leaves its stain upon us all.”⁷⁵ The inclusion of a multi-paragraph prayer of confession for indifference, silence, and inaction signaled the commission’s emerging commitment to seeking atonement for white Christians’ racial failures, as opposed to vaunting their racial goodwill.⁷⁶ Perhaps this evolution helped to pave the way for more concrete action in the struggle for black freedom: by the late 1950s, the National Council of Churches was contributing to and participating in the Civil Rights Movement.⁷⁷

I have argued that an analysis of the *Defender’s* Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday in 1922 and the FCC’s inaugural Race Relations Sunday in 1923 invites a fresh consideration of the framework of a shared faith and its prevalence in discussions about interracial religious practice across historical contexts. Both the *Defender’s* campaign and the FCC’s campaign displayed faith (albeit in different forms) in the power of interracial proximity in itself. Abbott hoped that Go-to-a-White-Church Sunday would allow white churchgoers to see just how respectable many black Americans were, as well as hoped that black Americans would act more respectably when they were in close proximity to white churchgoers. Neither hope was premised on the legitimacy or merit of white Christianity; the *Defender’s* readers were taught that, in an all-too-true sense, black Christians did *not* share a faith with white churchgoers, whose religion was utterly fractured by racism. Conversely, Haynes hoped that the interracial proximity occasioned by the FCC’s Race Relations Sunday would validate his claims about a preexisting abundance of interracial goodwill and would vindicate his investment in Christianity as the solution to American racism, along with his investment in predominantly white Christian institutions such as the FCC as the primary vehicles for that solution. As suggested by the fact that, during the very first meeting of the FCC’s Commission on the Church and Race Relations, white members used the prospect of interracial proximity as an excuse to abort conversations about racism, that validation and vindication proved less forthcoming than Haynes had hoped.

Like countless other interracial worship services, these two campaigns generated moments of interracial proximity that were deeply meaningful, spiritually and otherwise, for both black and white Christians. Be that as it may, visions of shared faith or of racial transcendence must not supersede inquiries regarding on whose terms and on what bases such events took place, as well as who benefitted from their performance and the discourse about them. Even when an interracial campaign is directed by a black American, and even when black Americans greatly appreciate it, “white people”

Plan to Worship with Whites”). The *Defender’s* report on the third annual Race Relations Sunday subtly cast doubt on whether or not the FCC’s plans would be carried out: “Sunday, Feb. 8, Set Aside as Race Relations Day,” *Chicago Defender*, February 7, 1925.

⁷⁵“Race Relations Sunday, February 12, 1928.” Folder 20, Box 60, Records of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

⁷⁶By the mid 1930s, Haynes was far less interested in the latter: his “Message for Race Relations Sunday” of 1935 stated, “The churches of America must face reality and recognize the friction, unfriendliness and race prejudice so evident in the relations between racial groups.” See “Church Is Challenged in Message for Race Relations Observance,” *Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1934.

⁷⁷Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, 11–47.

and “white supremacy” can still be accurate answers to those questions. Whiteness is not so easily transcended, nor is racial transcendence a goal to be presumed. Mere proximity is no elixir for racism, and interracial worship can variously support racial inequality and injustice, regardless of how segregated or integrated the seating is. Meanwhile, not all shared faiths go by religious names.

William Stell is a Faculty Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at New York University, where he teaches courses on American religions.

Cite this article: Stell, William. “Guess Who’s Coming to Church: The *Chicago Defender*, the Federal Council of Churches, and Rethinking Shared Faith in Interracial Religious Practice.” *Church History* 92, no. 3 (September 2023): 607–625. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300210X>.