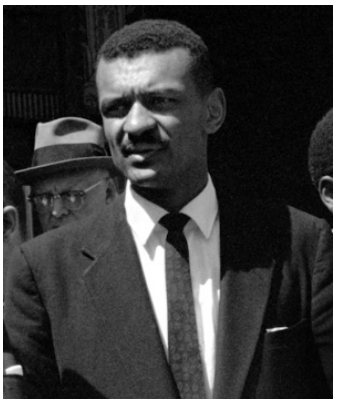
Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



The Reverend C.T. Vivian (1924-2020)

Cordy Tindell (C. T.) Vivian, the only child of Robert and Euzetta Tindell Vivian, was born on July 28, 1924 in Boonville, Illinois. At the height of the severe global economic depression that began in the late 1920s, his mother and maternal grandmother lost everything, including their marriages, agricultural holdings, and their house in the city. Wanting Vivian to have the best education possible, they moved to McComb, the county seat of McDonough County, which had a desegregated educational system. Young Vivian received his primary education at Lincoln Grade School. While there, he refused to let school bullies beat up weaker students and recalled to the *Peoria Journal Star*, "Those incidents meant nobody was going to mess with me and I could be free, in fact, [I] … could use [my] … position to free other people." His actions on behalf of others opened his eyes to the power of nonviolence. Vivian continued his education at Edison Junior High School and McComb High School. An active youth member of Allen Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, he taught in the Sunday school and served as the youth group president.

After graduating from high school in 1942, Vivian entered Western Illinois University (WIU) as a social science major, where he clashed intellectually with the department head. White male students tried to protect white females from black men on campus. These covert racial issues proved difficult for Vivian. Thinking that the behavior of the social science department's head was the exception rather than the rule, Vivian changed his major to English, only to find the same issues. Vivian was refused entrance to the English Club and students who were his friends received threats. Vivian realized how deeply racism permeated the culture. Just as he had become aware of the power of nonviolence, he now recognized that the beliefs entrenched in the upper echelons of the social order were not the same as those held by the people at the opposite end of the social strata. In the mid-1940s, Vivian left WIU and moved to Peoria, Illinois, where he worked for the Carver Community Center.

Two years after arriving in Peoria, Vivian participated in his first sit-in demonstrations, which ushered in a lifetime of activism for equality and justice. Unlike the South's *de jure* segregation, the country's northern region practiced *de facto* segregation, an approach that Vivian found little better than the South's. Although the region's businesses posted no racially-specific signs, its customs and traditions were well known by residents. Vivian set out for change and became an active participant in an integrated group working to open restaurants and lunch counters to all races. While working in Peoria, Vivian met Octavia Geans (1928–2011) of Pontiac, Michigan, and they married on February 23, 1953. That same year, the Peoria National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter elected Vivian as vice president. A year later, he accepted his call to the ministry and made plans to attend Nashville's American Baptist Theological Seminary. Unknown to him, Vivian was about to embark upon one of the most important social movements of the twentieth century. Vivian came to Nashville the same year (1955) that the actions of Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which catapulted the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King into the national spotlight. In addition to attending the seminary, he pastored the congregants of the First Community Church and worked as an editor at the National Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention.

In late 1956, Vivian boarded a Nashville Transit Authority bus and seated himself near the front of the half-filled vehicle. The driver of the bus, adhering to the city's customs, ordered him to the rear. A heated debate ensued and Vivian refused to acquiesce to the driver's orders. The driver ordered other passengers to vacate the bus and drove Vivian downtown to police headquarters. The U.S. Supreme Court's earlier decision in the *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) case ruled in favor of the Montgomery plaintiffs with regard to the desegregation of intrastate transportation. After making phone calls to city hall, Nashville's law enforcement

This publication is a project of the 2021 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials.

learned that the city was in the process of desegregating seating on public conveyances.

Four years after arriving in Nashville, Vivian joined other ministers under the leadership of Kelly Miller Smith, Sr. and established the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), a local affiliate of King's SCLC. During NCLC's organizational meeting, Vivian was elected vice president. He met the Reverend James Lawson and others who ultimately brought about the end of Nashville's racial segregation. Vivian also affiliated with Diane Nash, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Berry, and James Bevel, who became the student marshals of the Nashville movement. As vice president, Vivian managed the NCLC's direct-action component. Lawson joined and served as chair of NCLC's Action Committee. After formulating a plan to conduct workshops on Gandhi's method of protest, NCLC leaders and students tested Nashville's segregation policies in November and December of 1959. Due to a lack of media coverage, Nashville's 1959 sit-in movement was eclipsed by the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in on February 1, 1960. Within twelve days of the Greensboro sit-in, Nashville students moved into full action. Two months later, NCLC and the Student Committee, with the assistance of Fisk University economics professor Vivian Henderson, launched an economic boycott of Nashville's retail district.

On April 19, 1960 the home of civil rights attorney Z. Alexander Looby was dynamited. Leaders in Nashville's black community called for a mass protest march to the office of mayor Ben West. Familiar with New York's silent march against lynching in the early 1900s, Vivian insisted that the silent strategy be utilized. Over 3,000 persons from both races marched. When West came out to meet with them, Vivian read a prepared speech denouncing the mayor's leadership. This angered West, and the two men in caustic fashion verbally retaliated against each other. According to the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, when Vivian asked West "if he thought segregation was moral," the mayor answered, "No." Nash continued the questioning and asked the mayor to use the standing of his office to end racial segregation. Immediately, he appealed to all citizens to end discrimination, to have no bigotry, no bias, and no hatred. Taking his answer to the next level, Nash probed, "Mayor, do you recommend that lunch counters be desegregated?" The mayor answered in the affirmative. Vivian's razor-sharp questioning paved the way for Nash's questions, and Nashville lunch counters began the desegregation process on May 10, 1960, two months before Greensboro, which captured national attention.

After the first wave of the Nashville sit-ins, Vivian and his family moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he pastored Cosmopolitan Community Church. His wife gave birth to their youngest son in a segregated hospital. Vivian used this occasion to end segregation in that city's healthcare facilities. A proselytizer of nonviolent resistance, he participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961, where he experienced his first beating en route to Mississippi. “Going to Mississippi in 1961 was a whole different world,” said Vivian. “You knew you could easily be killed there.” He participated in major campaigns at Albany, GA (1961); Birmingham, AL (1962); St. Augustine, FL (1964); and Selma, AL (1965). In *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* by Alan Anderson and George W. Pickering, Vivian argued that “Nonviolence is the only honorable way of dealing with social change. . . if we are wrong, nobody gets hurt but us. And if we are right, more people will participate in determining their own destinies than ever before.”

Vivian helped organize Tennessee’s contingent for the 1963 March on Washington, and Dr. King appointed him to SCLC's executive staff as national director of affiliates. Vivian later directed Vision (Upward Bound), a program that put over 700 Alabama students in college with scholarships, and established the Anti-Klan Network (Center for Democratic Renewal). In recognition of his fervent commitment to the civil rights movement, he has been placed in the Civil Rights Institute (Birmingham, AL); the National Civil Rights Museum (Memphis, TN); the National Voting Rights Museum (Selma, AL); and the Portrait Hall of Fame, M. L. King Chapel, Morehouse College (Atlanta, GA). Several documentaries highlighting the civil rights era spotlighted Vivian, including *Eyes on the Prize* and *The Healing Ministry of Dr. C. T. Vivian.* He served as director of the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions in Chicago (1966), dean of the Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, NC (1972), and deputy director for clergy during the presidential campaign of the Rev. Jesse Jackson (1984).

The Rev. C. T. Vivian lived in Atlanta, where he remained active with numerous civic groups and organizations. He received the Trumpet Award (2006) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2013). The life of the paladin of direct nonviolent protest came to an end on July 17, 2020. He was buried in Atlanta’s West View Cemetery. Vivian died the same day as his friend and fellow comrade U. S. Rep. John Robert Lewis.

-Linda T. Wynn