

## Grace Church Leads the March

April 7, 1968

Grace Church was part of the front page news giving a detailed account of Sunday's memorial march following Martin Luther King's assassination on Friday April 5, 1968. As events moved very rapidly on Friday night and Saturday, certain members from Grace Church were drawn into a leadership position in organizing the march. One such person was Wendell Verduin, Director of the Planning Division of United Community Services and a member of Grace Church. Late into Saturday evening, his office was the center of organizational activity in pulling together a myriad of details necessary to launch the march from Franklin Park to the steps of the Grand Rapids Court House.

One of the initial concerns involved rumors that some who were publicly known to favor violence in achieving minority rights would disrupt the march. The then Grand Rapids police chief initially advised against giving us a parade permit. We then requested, and were given, a hearing at an emergency Saturday morning session of the Grand Rapids City Commission. This resulted in the granting of a parade permit. The police were then assigned not only to "protect" the marchers, but to insure good crowd and traffic control. Independently, informal contacts with the Black Militants gave us their assurance they would not disrupt the march.

By Saturday afternoon, organizational activities moved into high gear. The following were among the details that had to be worked out:

- Recruiting of Marshals, mostly from the Black Community, to make certain the march would remain orderly and respectful of the grief and pain that the community was experiencing.
- Planning crowd control at the march's starting point. It was decided to initiate the march with a time of silent prayer.
- Establishing a safe route for the marchers. (north on Fuller, west on Wealthy, north on Division, west on Lyon to City Hall.)
- Establishing an orderly structure for the march (four abreast, with a break after every 200 people). Marshals, known as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, were recruited to be at the front and rear of each group.
- Spotting First Aid Units at the four locations along the route.



- Discouraging the marching of organized groups, and restricting placards and signs.
- Attending to transportation issues, including how marchers would get back from City Hall to Franklin Park after the march was over. (Volunteer bussing was secured from community organizations, including Calvin College, Grand Valley State University, Sheldon Complex, the Grand Rapids Board of Education, and the Guiding Light Chapel.)

The result was a somber and respectful march in memory of Martin Luther King, providing an opportunity for large numbers of people, not only to express public grief, but to commit to the values he lived by. Rev. Peter Huiner, then Pastor of Grace Church, concluded the march on the steps of City Hall by leading the large assemblage in prayer:

"This is a day of mourning. A man has been killed. A peaceful man, a decent man, and a Christian man. And because we are men, we mourn the tragic death of a man that made us proud to be human.

This is a day of repentance. In a country built on brotherhood and freedom and peace, we still allow to ravage us the demonic glories, that seek to achieve their goals, by brutality, by hatred, by violence, and war. And because we are that society we must today stand in humble and heartfelt repentance.

This is being called by some a day of defeat, a day which marks the end of a dream for America, the end of a dream for the world, and there are those who despair. Martin Luther King did not live by despair. And he would not have called us to accept this day in defeat. He marched in the steps of Him who on this day led a march into ancient Jerusalem. A peaceful march. The King was seated on a donkey, and children waved palms and strewed flowers in the way. That march did not end when the forces of violence and injustice and lovelessness took his life five days later. That march indeed is the triumph of Easter, in the victory of God's love, and in the power of new life. Martin Luther King lived by that power all his life. And he lives by that power today.

It is now for us who believe in the principles for which he gave his life to turn this day of mourning into a day of victory. We are called to unite behind a program of love and justice that will be an enduring memorial. We are called to offer ourselves and everything we have and are to rekindle a dream. We're called to start a movement in Grand Rapids. We will begin a movement in Grand Rapids. We shall begin a movement that will be a demonstration to Western Michigan, to the state, and to the nation – a resurrection movement based on the power of justice and the persuasion of love. 'For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: And this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.' Amen."

*Ted Rottman*

## Grace: One-of-a-Kind Christian Reformed Church

My home church has a history of being somewhat non-conformist, at least by traditional Christian Reformed standards. For instance, over a decade ago we decided to “experiment” for six months by eliminating the evening service. The “experiment” continues to this day, without denominational sanction.

Even further back in time, when queried by official church visitors if we were doing all within our power to support Christian education we said “no.” Our ploy, to engage them in a discussion of why so few of our African-American youth attended Christian schools. They simply moved on to the next question.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated, our pastor took the lead in organizing a march to the courthouse, over the initial objections of the Grand Rapids Police, the City Commission (in special session), and local black militants.

Or again, long before the denomination permitted women to hold office, Grace found a way to recognize and demonstrate the effectiveness of woman in leadership positions.

“Grace Gleaners” was a long running church volunteer project to gather produce to feed the hungry even before West Michigan Gleaners (now Second Harvest) entered the picture.

A final example: the CRC practice of “close communion” was never strictly followed by Grace Church. Wine was a communion staple before shifting to grape juice in later years. Having run out of wine one Sunday, I raced down to the neighborhood Jefferson Market during the sermon to replenish the supply – only to be told that Sunday wine sales were illegal in Grand Rapids. My protest that it was for communion went to no avail, an “excuse” the clerk hadn’t heard before. Next stop – to the Penn Club where fellow elder Henry Washington was employed. The wine we got was much stronger than Mogen David, as attested to by the amount of coughing and wheezing among the congregants.

*Ted Rottman*



1960’s and the anger and flames of the riots which had hit Los Angeles and Detroit descended on Grand Rapids. Bands of young people wandered in the streets while older people cowered in their houses. Mack Brandon was out trying to restore a modicum of peace, even restraining a verbally violent crowd who were apparently not sorry to see the results of two police cars which had crashed, near Grace Church, while patrolling the mean streets. One of the cars was rolled over, policeman pinned inside, and gas spilling from the car. Mack took charge and verbally restrained the crowd until additional reinforcements arrived.

The next morning, a Saturday, an emergency meeting of the Grace Church Council was called to consider what we might do to ease the situation. My impulse was to be critical of the police for exacerbating an already volatile situation.

Mack beat me to the punch, declaring how thankful we should be that the police had protected our church building. He suggested that we send church representatives to the hospital to personally thank them. He then volunteered me to go with him to St. Mary’s Hospital to do so. Imagine: Sunday morning, the sky still red. This white guy in tow with Mack going to the reception desk. “Who do you want to see?” we were asked. Mack pulled out a note with the names of the two police officers! Reluctantly I believe, we were given the room number. Imagine the surprise of the white police officers and their families when we entered. Mack took charge, thanked the officers, and delivered a sermonette and a prayer before leaving. What a witness!

*Ted Rottman*

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## Models of Humility and Wisdom

One of my unwitting mentors was Mack Brandon, a fellow church member who happened to be black. It was in the

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“Grace Notes” is collected by Chris and Greta Overvoorde and distributed when ready. If you have any news, ideas, or stories, like the ones Ted Rottman has shared this month please contact us at [over@calvin.edu](mailto:over@calvin.edu) or call us at 956-7454. We are also looking for news from the various organizations and committees. If you have planned activities please send them to us and we will publish your event. If you have any responses to the published material we will be glad to incorporate those in the next “Grace Notes.”

*Chris and Greta Overvoorde*