Chapter 10

I go periodically to the Pentagon, break the law, and am shunted into court and into jail. I honor Paul’s admonition, “Be not conformed to this world.” I like to translate the words in my own way— “Try to be as marginal as possible to madness.”
Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

“An Island of Sanity in a Sea of Insanity” A New Church and New Ministries

The congregation of West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church was stunned by the action of the General Assembly. All through the long drawn-out ecclesiastical procedures, they had assumed that sooner or later justice would prevail. They knew the Reverend McCrackin to be a good man and above all a man dedicated to the cause of living in Christian love. Many of them had been personally befriended by the pastor. He had been there when children were born, when domestic troubles arose, when illness or death threatened. Even when he made trips to the South to help with Operation Freedom, he had always found time to respond to his congregation’s calls for sympathy and encouragement. Not only theirs, but their neighbors’ as well; few West Enders doubted McCrackin’s selfless dedication.

Then, too, McCrackin had represented them before City Council, gone with them to police stations when their children were in trouble, helped them organize for better schools and housing. And besides all that, he had established a meeting place at the Findlay Street Neighborhood House where their problems could be worked on. All of this nurtured neighborhood people’s hopes for improving their lives.

Through church trials and Operation Freedom, activities at Camp Joy continued. Children from the West End still looked forward to ten days in the country every summer, thanks to the efforts of McCrackin and his co-workers. During McCrackin’s 1959 imprisonment at Allenwood, the camp had survived a cutoff of its water supply by the city by temporarily locating to a site near Columbus furnished by the Ohio Council of Churches, an arrangement facilitated by John Wilson.

Adults, too, were deeply involved in the activities at the church and neighborhood house. Miriam Nicholas, who served on the vestry session of the church and was bookkeeper for Operation Freedom, had joined the church on the same day in 1956 that Julia Watson, McCrackin’s widowed sister, was welcomed for the first time. Mrs. Watson brought her missionary zeal and practicality to her brother’s household and would serve as his hostess for the next twenty years through the extraordinary upheavals that followed his attendance at Highlander and his conviction for contempt of court. Margaret Von Selle, an immigrant from Germany, a good friend of Miriam Nicholas, and, like Nicholas, a tax-resister, was a public health nurse whose speciality was working with parents and teenagers on the topic of sex education. These women and others continued the tradition of active service and creative programming during McCrackin’s difficulties with legal and ecclesiastical authorities.

A newsletter begun in 1960 by two church members reported a steady round of fundrais-
ers and as they said "funraisers." More than forty babies were welcomed into the church family through the “Cradle Roll” program with a rosebud placed on the altar the Sunday after they were born and gifts delivered to their houses. The Women’s Society held programs on topics ranging from Chinese missions to police brutality. Film showings drew up to 500 viewers. Deacons visited the sick and shut-in. The 1960 parish budget of $25,400 covered the salaries of the staff required to maintain all this activity, supporting not only the pastor, but also a parish worker, secretary, custodian, organist, church visitor, bookkeeper, and part-time bus driver. The Findlay Street Neighborhood House had its own budget, staff, and an extensive corps of volunteers.

McCrackin’s absences, whether delivering goods in the South or spending time in prison, had actually served to strengthen his church. Not only did church services continue when he was gone, but many members of the congregation were empowered by accepting leadership responsibility. What they were experiencing was so clearly a living out of the Christian gospel that it was difficult for them to grasp the ecclesiastical niceties of the process that was slowly and pain-

fully working to remove their minister from their midst. In fact, a group of enterprising church-

women borrowed a copy of the Book of Discipline in order to study the incomprehensible words that the authorities were using to accuse McCrackin of not doing his job. Vivian Kinebrew later recalled, “We looked up all the big words and tried to make sense out of it, but it didn’t make any sense to us.”

The people did know, however, that McCrackin’s problems were not dissimilar to their own. What he was doing by way of war-tax resistance, refusal to testify, fasting, and “going with his body” where people were in trouble was somehow a part of their own struggle, and they appreciated it and trusted him. They could not comprehend the decision of the church authorities to remove McCrackin except by seeing it as part of the same system that repressed them as well. They therefore intended to stand by their pastor in his time of trouble just as he had stood by them so many times before.

In May 1961, just after the Presbytery had suspended McCrackin, a group of his friends met at the church to discuss his situation. They formulated a protest to be sent to the judicial commission of the Presbytery. Echoing the language of the charges against McCrackin, it read in part, “We therefore question the right of the commission to command a member of the Church to obey a law that is contrary to his Christian conscience. Any person acting on conscience cannot at the same time be guilty of pretense of Christian conscience. We have heard the Word of God from Maurice McCrackin, our Minister, and found no erroneous preaching that had destroyed or tended to destroy the peace of our Church.” Having said what was in their hearts, they set up a Maurice McCrackin Fund to support him “during his waiting period.” Little did they realize how long his waiting period would be!

Up until June 1962, regular activities continued at full pace at West Cincinnati-St. Barn-

bas. Squeezed in among the announcements of activities and advice on Christian living in the church newsletter were McCrackin’s brief accounts of his progress with the various judicial bodies that were trying to determine his fitness for the ministry. In early 1962, before the General Assembly met, McCrackin wrote to thank all his friends who had stood by him. He took comfort, he said, in the words of others who had suffered for their beliefs and found strength in their faith:

The noted historian, Charles A. Beard, was once asked what major lesson he had learned from history and he answered that he had learned four. They are these: “First, whom the gods would destroy they first make mad with power. Second, the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly small. Third, the bee fertilizes the flower it robs. Fourth, when it is dark enough you can see the stars.”

We will be helped to walk the way of faith if we accept without rebellion the fact that life is a struggle and that none escapes its pain and suffering.
Many great hymns of consolation grew out of pain and suffering, he wrote; it is in doing good things for each other that we give our lives eternal significance.

During late 1961 and early 1962, McCrackin was on indefinite suspension while the synod and the national church reviewed his case. Each Sunday he participated from his position in the choir loft as a replacement minister preached. During the week he visited people in the hospital “as an individual,” reporting in at his office daily to make sure all the church business was appropriately delegated.

The dismissal letter from the Cincinnati Presbytery stunned the congregation as much as it did McCrackin himself. Did this mean that they should leave the church in order to stand by the Reverend McCrackin? Did it mean that all their hard work in building up the neighborhood house would be lost for lack of McCrackin at its helm? Did it mean that their pastor would have to leave the West End as well as the church in order to find employment? Lifelong Presbyterians found these questions especially troubling, for their loyalty to the church was in conflict with their loyalty to a man, and also with their loyalty to Jesus, as they were coming to know him. But McCrackin’s parishioners were sure of one thing: they were not going to berate one another if they came to different answers. Those who stayed at West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church and those who felt they must leave would remain friends and respect each other’s decisions.

Once he received his dismissal, McCrackin felt that he should no longer enter the church building. Episcopal support had already been withdrawn, and soon the Findlay Street Neighborhood House would become the Seven Hills Neighborhood House, a community center entirely independent of the church. The energy had been sapped from his inner-city experiment in ecumenical outreach.

McCrackin had not wanted this breach with the Presbyterians; he had cooperated fully with every level of the judicial inquiry so that the issue would clearly remain conscience and not noncooperation with church authorities. The personal support he was receiving reinforced his certainty that he was right and that he was truly doing God’s work. As painful as his removal from the church was, he knew even then that the experiences of his lifetime had expanded the light of his own conscience, and he cast about for ways to appeal to that light in others.

When McCrackin was given one month to leave the manse, the people closest to him were beside themselves with worry about what he could or should do. McCrackin himself thought briefly about ways to earn his living other than serving as a minister—organizing for the American Friends Service Committee, perhaps, or doing some other type of community-based work. Although he did not know this at the time, some Unitarians who had been active in the Committee for Freedom of Conscience considered inviting him to join their denomination but assumed that he was too “Christian” and would be “no bedfellow” of theirs. It soon became evident, however, that the people with whom he had worked most closely wanted him to continue as their minister.

Dorothy Ratterman, longtime Sunday school teacher at the church, invited people to her home to see what they could come up with. After some discussion, U. S. Fowler, the worship leader, withdrew to the dining room and drafted a statement of commitment for the group’s approval. Eloquent in its simplicity, this statement defined “church” in a way that bore testimony to McCrackin’s witness of conscience:

Believing in the essential freedom of the Christian spirit and in the necessity for like-minded followers of Christ to bind themselves in fellowship, worship, study, and service, unfettered save for those “ties that bind us” in Christian love, we the undersigned in humility, faith, and hope, do hereby this sixth day of July in the year of our Lord 1962, constitute ourselves into a body for the purpose of establishing in Cincinnati, Ohio, a community church congregation.
After that first meeting, those who wanted to follow McCrackin out of the Presbyterian Church decided to hold their first Sunday morning service at the nearby YWCA building on July 8. About eighty people were present at the YWCA that Sunday morning, and Fowler’s statement was signed by twenty-two.

The Charter Sunday Service was held two weeks later. McCrackin’s homily began with the story of the Jews’ return to the holy city of Jerusalem after 70 years of Babylonian captivity. The prophet Haggai exhorted them to rebuild the Temple, saying, “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former . . . and in this place I will give peace.” McCrackin cautioned the members of this new congregation not to apply the text too literally to their situation, reassuring them that their seventeen-year affiliation with the Cincinnati Presbytery and the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio was not exactly analogous to the Babylonian captivity. But, he went on to say, “Nevertheless, we now feel a degree of liberation and are coming to a New Jerusalem where it is our purpose also to build a temple.”

McCrackin went on to discuss the nature of the church in general and the specific character that this new church might develop. “A church is not a church unless it has this outgoing love for people for their own sakes and thereby upholds the principle of the sovereign right and worth of every person.” Their new church would follow the example of Jesus and his disciples, whose practice of religion was decidedly uneclesiastical, unconventional, and the opposite of legalistic. McCrackin talked of the personality of this new church. It would be a place of commitment, a place for people unafraid of embracing the cross. McCrackin said that the new church would strive to value “the sovereign right and worth of every person, to the principle of religious liberty and freedom of conscience.” But it would not be a morose or downhearted church: “Let us never forget that Jesus was first of all a man of happiness and acquainted with joy.” He concluded, “Jesus came into the world to make people glad, and people knew where he had been because of the trail of gladness he left behind him.”

The sermon closed with some speculation about specific community projects the church might embrace. One idea was to establish a half-way house for men released from prison, to ease their way back into society—a vision derived from McCrackin’s own personal suffering during his six months in Allenwood Federal Prison. A second plan proposed a “Freedom Hostel,” a place of respite and renewal for those involved in the civil rights movement, and particularly the Operation Freedom campaign. “Our ministry,” McCrackin told his new parish, “can be as inclusive as the human race and as wide as the world.” That day, fifty-three people signed the charter, and thirty-two more names were added during the next several weeks.

About this time a member of the congregation suggested that they might consider being affiliated with the National Council of Community Churches, a denomination that gave its member churches considerable autonomy and would honor McCrackin’s Presbyterian ordination. The Community Churches were soon to have a conference at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. McCrackin attended this conference and worked out an acceptable affiliation. Almost simultaneously an appropriate building became available, a three-story house several blocks from the West Cincinnati—St. Barnabas facilities. On September 23, just three months after McCrackin’s removal from that church, the Community Church of Cincinnati celebrated a Day of Consecration, installing Maurice McCrackin as its new minister.

The 1960s saw the United States torn apart by divisions of race, class, and age. After the brief spurt of optimism and idealism inspired by the Kennedy administration, the nation had sunk into a demoralizing war in Vietnam while trying to enforce fiercely resisted civil rights legisla-
tion at home. Young people, discouraged by the complacency of their elders, challenged the status quo in new and unexpected ways. Blacks in the ghettos, angry about the physical conditions of their daily lives, erupted in city after city. Seething discontent extended even to the prisons, where repressive policies were perhaps least checked by a balancing respect for human life.

The 1960s and early 1970s consolidated McCrackin’s beliefs. The positions he had advocated for so long, the values that had so alarmed the Presbyterian authorities, were recognized and honored by an increasing number of citizens newly alarmed about the excesses of their government. Since the Community Church was small and did not have an outreach program like the Findlay Street Neighborhood House, McCrackin’s pastoral work consisted mainly of conducting services, visiting people in the hospital, and being available for the spiritual and practical needs of the people of his neighborhood.

In the late 1960s, as his work with Operation Freedom became less crisis-oriented and more routine, McCrackin’s focus changed. Rather than drive all the way to southwestern Tennessee and the Mississippi Delta, he began delivering clothes and used furniture to Jackson County, Kentucky, a poverty-stricken region three hours away from Cincinnati. There a group led by Wilma Medlock, a social worker, was attempting to start craft industries in order to break the cycle of poverty. Friendships formed, and on several occasions McCrackin arranged to bring children from the West End to the hills of Jackson County. These outings gave the city children a good romp in the country and the country children their first experiences with children of another race.

Relieved of the responsibilities of attending to Presbyterian business and running a settlement house, with his widowed sister to take care of his household, McCrackin was free as never before to offer his ministry of compassion and action to the broader world. Still vigorous in late middle-age, he found himself increasingly available for and drawn to forms of radical witness.

His first outreach was to prisoners. He began visiting men in prison and following up these visits with letters. His friends at Allenwood had made him aware of the acute need for some kind of half-way house to ease the transition from prison to the community, especially for men who had drug and alcohol problems and were likely to return to bad habits if they encountered their old friends and neighborhoods. McCrackin had heard of half-way houses elsewhere, such as St. Dismas in St. Louis, and he was sure that such a venture would be possible in Cincinnati if he could bring together the right people.

To explore this possibility, he called a meeting at the Community Church. Only a half-dozen people attended. All agreed that if judges and probation officers were to be involved, McCrackin would probably have to drop out of the planning process he had initiated. By this time he was too notorious to direct a program that needed support from members of the Cincinnati establishment. Eventually several judges and parole officers became involved in the project. At subsequent gatherings, held at the Friends Meeting House instead of the Community Church, the group selected the name “Talbert House,” after Ernest Talbert, a professor emeritus at the University of Cincinnati who had been a leader in prison reform.

In response to the board of directors’ request for institutional support, Father Clement Busemeyer offered Talbert House the use of St. Edward’s rectory for the nominal fee of a dollar a year. This seemed a daring and radically Christian use of institutional-church facilities.

By 1962 the United Appeal, which had earlier suspended the Findlay Street Neighborhood House because of McCrackin’s affiliation with it, was contributing funds to Talbert House, whose program had expanded to include a women’s residence. Clearly McCrackin’s decision to stay in the background had been correct. And he had once again recognized a community need.
By 1985 Talbert House, with a staff of eighty-five and a million dollar budget, had become known for its drug and alcohol programs. By 1987 there were eleven separate Talbert House facilities. This growth reflected the great need for prison-related programs and McCrackin’s foresight in organizing them.

During the years immediately after his defrocking, McCrackin continued to take part in the civil rights struggle in the South. In 1965 he and Ernest Bromley participated in the historic march from Selma to Montgomery. Along that route they saw a billboard that defamed the Highlander Folk School by depicting (in a doctored photograph) Martin Luther King, Jr., sitting at a speaker’s table with the Communist writer Abner Berry at the 1957 Labor Day Conference. Large letters underscored the accusation: “Communist Training School.” The Georgia Education Commission had paid for the billboard.

By the mid-1960s, the civil rights movement had gained tremendous momentum, unifying blacks and whites in building the Beloved Community. McCrackin was one of those who talked his old friend Theodore Berry into running for Cincinnati’s City Council in 1963. Berry won and subsequently became Cincinnati’s first black mayor, an accomplishment that would have seemed an impossible dream when McCrackin first came to Cincinnati.

But soon the hope of unity between the races seemed to disintegrate. On the national level Stokely Carmichael, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), used the phrase “black power” to suggest that blacks should make the most of their own heritage and abilities to gain what they deserved rather than plead with whites for what they needed. His feisty language and his call for blacks to work in all-black groups seemed to contradict the more inclusive approach of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. McCrackin had been close enough to blacks to empathize with their suppressed rage at continuing racial oppression, but he feared the sanctioning of violence and disagreed with Carmichael’s insistence that blacks should solve their problems without white participation.

In a sermon given in July 1966, McCrackin explained his objections to the term and concept of “black power.” Acknowledging the need for a “black consciousness” that rejects the concept of white superiority and affirms black history, he criticized the implications of “black power.” The black panther symbol suggested violence, he thought, and it seemed to McCrackin that Carmichael was suggesting that blacks had tried nonviolence and it had not worked. Although McCrackin could understand the urge toward confrontation among those who had suffered degradation and injustice, more of a bad thing was still wrong. He feared that separatism was keeping people of conscience from condemning violence:

No white person can ever know what it is to be a Negro in American life, yet among the white people there are those who sincerely try to understand and to identify with the Negro in his struggle for genuine emancipation. This is what I fear, that these white people may be so afraid of being misunderstood or of appearing to disassociate themselves from Negroes in the freedom movement, particularly from those who have suffered most from the white man’s bigotry and violence, that they will not speak out against a trend in the civil rights movement which they believe to be wrong and which can well lead both races to their destruction. If white people who feel this way fail to speak out, they will not only be failing their own conscience but they will also be failing the minority among the Negroes who are committed to non-violence as a way of life and who also believe that the use of violence is a dead end street and contrary to moral and religious principle.
McCrackin’s sermon placed the black power issue in a larger context. He knew that churches, especially white southern churches, were condemning black violence while some of their members were in the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens’ Councils, or repressive law enforcement jobs. McCrackin reminded his listeners that this same alliance of churches and repression had, during the Russian Revolution, caused the emerging Communists to declare themselves atheists: “May we learn before it is too late that if we laugh now at the ‘beloved community,’ morality, love, conscience, we will weep later because of the bitter fruit we’ve sown in the repudiation of these principles.”

An alternative to black consciousness, white consciousness, or national consciousness, maintained McCrackin, is God consciousness. His sermon ended with this exhortation: “Let us have faith to believe that out of our need for God we shall all come to know the blessing and the joy of living together in the beloved community.”

Wally Nelson agreed with McCrackin about black power. Years later he said, “I do not see the civil rights movement as a black movement. To me, the struggle to wipe out racism is part of an overall effort for freedom. Freedom for one is freedom for all.” Criticizing the direction the movement took in the mid-1960s, Nelson recalled, “Black became the focus rather than personhood; power rather than freedom.”11 Yet McCrackin’s friend and fellow activist against racism, Anne Braden of Louisville, Kentucky, interpreted black power differently. Even the most confident blacks often deferred to whites in mixed groups, she explained; they needed the confidence of knowing they could organize by themselves before they collaborated with sympathetic whites. Preaching nonviolence to the oppressed was not, she maintained, the best way to stop violence. Braden’s was the voice of experience. The Bradens had long been active in the civil rights movement, particularly through their work with the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF).12 It was painful to McCrackin to disagree with Anne Braden because he admired her work so much and because he knew that his heart and her heart were basically in the same place on the racial issue.

In 1967 violence erupted in the black neighborhoods of Cincinnati and many other American cities. Hopes for jobs, housing, and services had been raised, only to be dashed one too many times. The Wall Street Journal reported that 16,000 black people had been displaced over the years from Cincinnati’s West End and crammed into substandard housing; and unemployment, especially among the young, ran high.13 Forty-three separate job-training programs had failed to place many blacks in jobs; twenty-eight prominent Cincinnati businessmen had been meeting for two years to discuss race relations, without much effect. Carmichael and King articulated what many felt: that racism in Cincinnati was part of a nationwide structure.14

One evening in June 1967, a young black man, Peter Frakes, was arrested for loitering when he protested against the arrest of his cousin on a criminal charge. After 250 rallied in support of Frakes, a few windows were broken, but the resulting disorder was contained by eleven o’clock that night. The next day, however, communications broke down between militants and city officials. Violence at numerous points in the city caused Governor James A. Rhodes to call out the National Guard to restore order.

In the black neighborhoods, some individuals were distributing “Soul Brother” signs to mark black businesses and automobiles so that their windows would not be smashed. That night

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McC rackin was among those who walked the streets of the city trying to calm people down. A black child ran up to him with a “Soul Brother” sign, wanting to protect his property with it. A slightly inebriated black man also offered to stand guard with a shotgun over McCrackin’s car. McCrackin declined both offers, saying that he would take his chances along with everybody else.15

Young people caught up in a mood of retaliation yelled insults, stopped cars driven by whites, and threw rocks and Molotov cocktails into buildings. Frantic police arrested black youths indiscriminately. In the confusion, the Reverend Richard Sellers, McCrackin’s successor at West Cincinnati Presbyterian Church, found out that his wife Eddie was in jail, detained not for demonstrating, but for trying to get the names of teenagers she saw being arrested so that she could alert their parents. Only when the police read her name on her credit cards did they realize that she was the wife of a member of the Mayor’s Friendly Relations Committee, a group convened to deal with racism in the city. Once Eddie Sellers was identified as the wife of a black person of consequence, she was released.16

Such incidents marked the tension of the city, and no one in the West End was unaffected by it. Yet in those 1967 disturbances, the West End experienced relatively little of the violence that riddled other predominantly black neighborhoods. Under McCrackin’s guidance, Community Church members issued a statement shortly after the violence broke out. They spelled out what they felt were the causes of the violence and called for a return to nonviolent tactics.

The members of The Community Church of Cincinnati are greatly concerned about the violence that has erupted in our community. We recognize the major and underlying causes of this violence as being lack of employment, especially of young adults, the problem of decent housing, inadequate support for welfare families, segregated housing, segregated and inferior education, and injustice in law enforcement and in the courts. Those who have it within their power to right these injustices have been reasoned with, pleaded with, and warned that if tangible, concrete action in these areas did not come about, rioting might result.17

Eventually the worst of the violence died down, but there were signs of continuing unrest all that summer and afterward, in Cincinnati and nationwide. Then, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Shock waves shuddered through the already tense nation, and further violence seemed imminent, especially in prisons, with their disproportionately black and poor populations. That year there would be a terrible disturbance at the 100-year old Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus.

Inmates of the Ohio Penitentiary were restless because of what they regarded as persistent violations of their rights. Their complaints had long been ignored by prison officials. After violence erupted in June 1968, a new warden was appointed. M. J. Kaloski, formerly warden of Chillicothe State Prison, apparently established some rapport with the prisoners, but, as McCrackin recalls, “a campaign of agitation within the prison to have another rebellion” continued.18

On the morning of August 20, an inmate on his way to the shower overpowered a guard,
seized his cellblock keys, and set other prisoners free. By early afternoon 350 prisoners had seized nine guards and taken over several cellblocks. The prisoners requested amnesty for those who had led the June rebellion and improvements in living conditions and regulations. Warden Kaloski, speaking over an internal radio system, urged the prisoners not to use force and assured them that there would be no assault. Yet by that afternoon Governor Rhodes had called out about 500 national guardsmen and the state highway patrol for that very purpose. While the hostages begged for restraint from windows where they were held at knifepoint, guardsmen planted ninety pounds of explosives in the wall and on the roof of the building. Within two hours the explosives had been detonated, opening up a fifteen-by-eight-foot hole through which the guardsmen and patrolmen stormed, killing five prisoners and subduing the rest without harm to any of the hostages. Prisoners were herded into the courtyard, stripped, and transferred naked to a nearby ballfield for the night. Warden Kaloski was soon replaced by Harold J. Cardwell of the highway patrol. There was virtually no attempt at prison reform; if anything, conditions became even more repressive and volatile.

These events saddened McCrackin. By now he was corresponding with dozens of prisoners at other Ohio prisons and visiting them regularly. He knew firsthand why prisons sometimes erupt. Years later he said:

I speak now to the facts that are really responsible for prisoner uprisings, prefacing this by saying that after eight years of writing and visiting scores of men and women in prison, perhaps the quality of character which most impresses me is their patience. By patience I mean a refusal, under extreme duress and provocation, to openly rebel against the oppressor.

What prison authorities ignore, or knowing, could not care less about, is that the provocative acts of guards or other prison personnel, their physical and verbal abuse, may become so great that the patience of prisoners is exhausted and the lid goes off.... At such a time of anger and frustration, word of a brutal beating of a prisoner by a guard, for example, can spread like wildfire through the prison population and trigger an uprising. When seeds of rebellion have been sown for years, in a state of mounting desperation and hopelessness, a particular incident may light the fuse of open and violent rebellion.¹⁹

After the 1968 rebellion, or “counter-violence” as McCrackin referred to it, he started visiting the Ohio Penitentiary on a regular basis. To these prisoners McCrackin offered the kind acceptance and steady counsel that characterized his other relationships. One inmate fondly recalled his first meeting with McCrackin. He had heard so much about this man that he expected a massive, powerful presence. He was surprised instead to see in the visitors’ room a rather frail, humble-looking, inconspicuous man.²⁰

At one point McCrackin was not only corresponding with almost forty prisoners, but also making the rounds of the various Ohio prisons several times a month. These trips often involved the delivery of food, medical supplies, and television sets, most of them paid for out of McCrackin’s own meager church stipend. He became intimately familiar with incidents of harassment and the meaningless regulations peculiar to each institution. Once he attempted to donate a television set and was told that only sets in black cases would be acceptable. He had to take a white television set home and paint it before bringing it back to the institution. Between

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the letters and the visits, McCrackin often deprived himself of sleep. At the end of one prison trip, he fell asleep at a stop light a few blocks from his home and was mistaken for a drunk or a heart attack victim. It took considerable explaining before the police officer who had found him allowed him to proceed home for some much-needed rest.

Prisons are, McCrackin insists, forgotten bastions of cruelty where convicts are unfairly treated and officials are not held accountable. A case in point was the denial of parole for Steve Williams, convicted of burglary in 1969 and sentenced to Ohio’s Marion Correctional Facility. Williams, whose prison record was exemplary, was later denied parole in spite of the recommendation of a social worker who was impressed by his work in various rehabilitation projects. McCrackin had written to Williams for some years, and it was his contention that Williams was arbitrarily denied parole for protesting against mistreatment of prisoners, conducting hunger strikes, and filing suits.21

In 1971, McCrackin took on a creative penance during Lent to show his solidarity with prisoners, fasting and regularly traveling to Columbus to carry hand-lettered signs in a vigil outside the gates of the penitentiary. The signs read, “Prisoners Have Rights, Too” and “Let the Brutality Stop at the Ohio Penitentiary, ‘Dignity: Man’s Birthright.’” After walking back and forth for a while, he would enter the prison for a few visits. An inmate assigned to work duty at the visiting hall hid the signs while McCrackin was inside.

McCrackin believed that the prisoners’ demands in 1968 and afterward were probably justified. He had heard of a prisoner with lung problems who died for lack of oxygen, and he feared that the same thing might happen to his friend Myron Billet, a former Mafia runner who suffered from emphysema.22 When McCrackin protested against the lack of medical treatment for Billet, prison officials lied, claiming that oxygen was readily available. This and other distortions of fact led McCrackin to initiate a campaign to hold prison officials accountable. He spoke before the state legislature and later petitioned Governor John Gilligan for reforms. He requested that duly-elected convict representatives be allowed to hold regular meetings among themselves and with prison officials. McCrackin also urged state officials to dismiss, or transfer away from the prison population, twenty-three guards named by prisoners as exceptionally brutal. As he later recalled it:

I had the names of twenty-three guys. I talked with so many prisoners. These names just came up again and again, so I wrote a letter to the editor of the Cincinnati Post, telling about my experience and the friends that I made and what had been going on. Then I named these officers and guards [and indicated] that there was proof that they had done these things. I wasn’t asking that they lose their jobs, but there were plenty of state jobs that they could go to. But if they could treat people this way, they needed help. . . . People shouldn’t be exposed to this kind of treatment. Let them keep their jobs, but transfer them. So, of course, what happened? Well, nothing happened from that. These that were most brutal were the ones that got promotions.23

In one of his sermons McCrackin shared what he had learned about prison employees during his years in prison ministry. Most prison workers, he said, fell into one of three categories: new employees, quickly driven from the system if they see prisoners as people; hard-core sadistic types; and those who simply cannot find employment elsewhere.

In a statement of concern, which he duplicated for distribution to the press, relevant offi-
cials, and friends, McCrackin explained why he thought prisons do more harm than good and so should be abolished. In the first place, he said, they do not really separate criminals from the rest of us: “Of 800 people who have committed acts judged criminal, only 100 come to the attention of the courts. Of this 100 only 25 are brought to trial, and of this number only 2 percent are sentenced to prison.” Therefore, only a fraction of 1 percent of all people committing crimes are in prison. Some of these, he said, should indeed be institutionalized for society’s protection, and they should receive help. Yet rehabilitation in prison is nonexistent; if anything, prison often makes people worse, destroying whatever modicum of self-esteem they entered with. The real crime, concluded McCrackin, is that the public knows so little of the truth. Indeed, “prisons are not only planned to keep prisoners in--they are planned also to keep the public out. Anyone who really wants to know the conditions in our prisons cannot get this information by taking a conducted tour through a prison, by talking with the warden, a social worker, or the State Commissioner of Rehabilitation and Corrections; one can only find out what these conditions are from those in prison.24 Or, perhaps, like McCrackin, by being a prisoner oneself.

Another consequence of his prison experience was the formation of the Coalition Against the Death Penalty, a group that met regularly at the Community Church and sponsored a series of educational events around the issue of capital punishment. Partly as a result of the lobbying work of this group and others, the death penalty was struck down in Ohio. (A 1976 Supreme Court decision would reinstate it.)

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Peacemakers continued to publish their newsletter and hold periodic strategy sessions for effecting change nonviolently. During the protests against the Vietnam War, and especially after the 1970 killings at Kent State University, the Peacemakers experienced a resurgence of interest in their message of active nonviolent resistance. Many of the young Peacemakers were draft-resisters during this period, and many received prison sentences for their acts of conscience. Dan Bromley, the son of Ernest and Marion, newly graduated from high school, served nearly two years for refusing to register for the draft.25

Among the most active Peacemakers were Amos and Polly Brokaw, who opened their home to college students and others who were coming to Cincinnati to take part in demonstrations against the war. Miriam Nicholas called their place the “Brokaw Hilton,” and the name stuck. Their door was always left unlocked, and sometimes Polly would come downstairs in the morning to find her living room covered with sleeping young bodies. The Brokaws, the Bromleys, Nicholas, and McCrackin had become “elder statesmen” among a younger group of activists.

It was in the 1960s that McCrackin became popular as a rally speaker. His presence and his witness set a powerful example for the younger activists coming of age during the 1960s. Buddy Gray, a young man who later waged his own political battles as the founder and director of the Drop-In Center for alcoholics and the homeless, described McCrackin’s influence on him: “Some of us who are a lot younger than Mac are really inspired just by his example of--I guess you’d simply put it--consistency and perseverance. That’s really something to make you carry on when times are grim.”26 McCrackin and Gray met through an indigent friend of both. Richard Winbush, a pedestrian struck down by a careless driver, required extended medical care, and McCrackin undertook to see that he got it. Thereafter McCrackin and Gray kept in close touch and supported each other in confrontations with the authorities.

McCrackin rarely turned down an opportunity to speak at Cincinnati's Fountain Square or
Eden Park or wherever a group was gathering to oppose the Vietnam War, the buildup of arms, or the more repressive aspects of American foreign and domestic policy. His speeches and invocations were as eloquent as they were straightforward, larded with the facts, personal stories, and the “quotable quotes” that he loved.

He liked to think of himself and those who joined him in protesting against the violence endemic to the country as “islands of sanity in the sea of insanity,” a phrase he freely borrowed from William Sloane Coffin, the antiwar activist and former chaplain at Yale. An “island of sanity” was a person or community of people who were attuned to the great teachers of the ages and obeyed the mandates of individual conscience. McCrackin saw that somehow people must get beyond the need for approval, beyond blind obedience to civil law, if peace was ever to come. He returned again and again to the idea that people must educate their own consciences and then follow them:

The evil chain of violence and death must be broken and it will be broken when enough individuals say to the state, “You may order me to do something I really believe wrong, but I will not execute your command. You may order me to kill, but I will not kill, nor will I give my money to buy weapons that others may do so. There are voices that I must obey. I must obey the voices of humanity which cry out for peace and relief from the intolerable burdens of armaments and conscription. I must obey the voice of my conscience made sensitive by the inner light of truth. I must obey the voice heard across the centuries: “Love your enemies, pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you.” Only in obedience to these voices is the way of non-violence; let them be the voices we hear and obey.

Over the years McCrackin’s calls for action became increasingly urgent as he himself tried to become more and more consistent in his own witness. In 1977, as an expression of his belief in the sanctity of all life, he gave up meat—in spite of his great enjoyment of crisp bacon and Cincinnati-style chili. He made this concession to consistency as abruptly and thoroughly as he had earlier taken on the spiritual discipline of fasting.

While he tried to be more consistent in his own personal witness, he pondered why so many good people seem to be unaware that the world is in crisis and that they can do something about it. He referred again and again in his speeches to the silence of the German people when so many millions were murdered in the gas chambers of central Europe. And he asked about our own silence in the face of the hundreds of millions who would be annihilated in a nuclear explosion. He cited statistics to show that, pound for pound, there are more explosives on earth than there is food. “Few people are ready to accept the truth that the planet Earth is in imminent danger of becoming a radioactive cinder. To believe that we can live as usual, basing our national security on nuclear arms, this is the greatest danger on earth.”

What is the prescription for survival? McCrackin recommended that we first admit that we are sick and then do something about it. “If we accept the diagnosis of the sickness of our time, if we are engaged in unilateral action for justice and peace, then this becomes for us a prescription for our own personal emotional and spiritual survival. God does not require of us that we be successful in our efforts—as the world counts success—but he does require of us that we keep the faith and follow truth wherever it may lead us.”

These were the years of McCrackin’s most expansive ministry. In caring for society’s most rejected people, McCrackin was completing a form of mission work that had begun in Iran and blossomed amid the tensions of the inner city. He always circled back to his close friends and his church for a renewal of the faith that sustained him. Members of his congregation
seemed to understand what they meant to him in this regard, for, as Bill Mundon explained:

Over the years—and I’ve been going through this now since the 1950s—we simply realized that we loved the man so much that we were determined that he was going to have a base from which he could operate. Even though there were varied opinions about whether he should or he shouldn’t do [some action], we always agreed that he had the right of his own conscience. And that what he chose to do we were going to support, because we felt that he was a man who truly walked in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.  

During this busy time in McCrackin’s life, he took part in a little ritual on most evenings. He would leave whatever meeting he might be attending by nine-thirty in order to have coffee and dessert with his sister and neighbors Dorothy Ratterman and Emma Rolf. The foursome would go to Frisch’s Restaurant and order coffee and a Danish or a doughnut. Laughing over the events of the day, the women and their friend would ward off the troubles of the world with the good humor of their simple affirmation of one another’s lives.

Walking in the footsteps of Jesus, being an island of sanity in a sea of insanity--this is how those close to him saw McCrackin, but the bond created by this shared vision continued to be misunderstood by those who did not know him personally. Depending on what they read in the newspapers or saw on television about McCrackin, these people could only shake their heads and say, “There he goes again, that crazy McCrackin. What in the world is he going to do next?”

Notes for Chapter 10

1. Miriam Nicholas had been church secretary for six years before officially joining.
2. Interview with Vivian Kinebrew, May 1987.
6. Contrast this with McCrackin's actions on the income tax issue, where he was ultimately convicted of contempt, not conscientious objection to taxes, because of his noncooperation with the authorities.
8. Located about two blocks from the Dayton Street manse, the house was being sold by the Negro Sightless Society, which was moving to a larger building. Johnnie Mae Berry, a real estate broker and wife of Theodore Berry, arranged the purchase.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with Maurice McCrackin.
17. Statement prepared by the Community Church Council, June 1967.
18. Interview with Maurice McCrackin conducted by Chuck Matthei.
22. Billet, who had experienced a profound religious conversion during his imprisonment, claimed to have been party to the plan to assassinate President John F. Kennedy.


25. Other young Peacemakers who served time for draft resistance included John Leininger, John Thompson, and John Luginbill. A center of Peacemaker activity in Cincinnati was the Mansfield House community in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, which involved Caroline Bromley, Chris Cotter, Bob Coughlin, Dick Crowley, Richard Gale, Greg Haas, Joan Levy, John Luginbill, Andy Meyer, Kenny Przybyliski, Denny Ryan, Peggy Scherer, Henry Scott, Mary Alice Shepherd, Jack Shereda, Joel Stevens, Bonnie Tompkins, Anne and Clare Weinkam, and others.


27. Speech delivered on August 6, 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.