

Religious Observers at Miami Beach

In 1971, the news came to Miami Beach that both Republican and Democrat national conventions would be held in their city in 1972. The announcement brought considerable concern to many individuals in Miami Beach. Everyone remembered vividly the violence of the 1968 Democratic national convention in Chicago.

As early as July, 1971, leaders in the religious community of Miami began to plan for the upcoming political conventions. Perhaps, with adequate preparation, the churches could play a role in preventing violence. A group of Protestant leaders called national and local religious leaders to a meeting. They hoped to create a plan by which church agencies could work toward maintaining peace and stability in the community during the convention while at the same time supporting citizens and organized groups exercising their rights of freedom of speech and assembly. Sixteen local religious representatives gathered at that meeting and formed an organization named "Religious and Community Leaders Concerned." Then followed many months of preparation for the conventions.

In March, RCLC sponsored an "Awareness Seminar" to prepare the community for the conventions. Local police officials were invited and asked to address the meeting. The manager of the Democratic Convention was asked to participate. This Awareness Seminar was intended to "legitimize" the work of RCLC in the eyes of the "establishment." At about the same time, RCLC representatives began contacting leaders of the various movement groups intending to come to the Democratic National Convention. These groups included the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Welfare Rights Organization, the National Tenants' Organization and the United Farm Workers Organization.

John Adams, in his book, *At the Heart of the Whirlwind*, summarizes the concerns of RCLC during this period as follows:

- 1) Orienting the general public toward citizen involvement in support for the conventions. Besides the awareness seminar, several other initiatives were taken to build a stable base of support from the community.
- 2) Opening lines of communication with prospective protest groups, law enforcement agencies, government offices and political parties.
- 3) Seeking legitimization of RCLC involvement from all parts of the local religious community and also from national religious groups.

With these contacts established, RCLC began planning for widespread presence of "observers." Plans were made for locating these volunteers at various strategic spots in and around the convention center. The largest number of observers would be spotted on the streets and at hotel headquarters of the political parties and the various candidates. More than 300 persons were recruited from churches and synagogues of the Greater Miami area for this role. Adams notes that these plans for "observing" were seriously questioned by many groups. "The 'movement

representatives wanted to know for whom RCLC would be observing and just what would be done with the information it obtained. Some police representatives were cool toward having RCLC closely observe and record police actions on the streets. Many members in the religious community itself thought that 'observing' was far too neutral a role for the religious community to play in such a potentially violent situation. Other people felt that the religious community should be an issue-advocate, marching with the protesters. Some believed that churches and synagogues should primarily support the police to protect the community rather than protest with the dissenters."

"We believed that by furnishing observers the religious community could help inhibit potentially violent types of protest, monitor the activities of the communications media, and help to avoid police overreaction as well as orient a sizable and representative segment of the local community in a disciplined way."

"All observers trained for twelve hours and took part in exercises which equipped them to observe as impartially, objectively, accurately, and as rapidly as possible. Movement representatives and personnel from the Miami Beach police department participated in the training"

An operation center was set up to which the observers reported for their shifts and to which they later reported by telephone to a special communication center manned by RCLC volunteer operators. A daily composite report was made between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m., and one copy of this report was promptly delivered to each of the movement groups, the chief of police, the Community Relations Service of the U.S. Department of Justice, and to the Convention Ushering Service.

The composite report served several functions. For one, it served as an additional "truth bearer" or "reality-tester", as some individuals termed it. For another, it demonstrated that the observers were filling a special role and were not mere bystanders or curiosity seekers. Perhaps most important, the composite reports showed that observers did not single out any segment of the convention scene for special scrutiny.

RCLC also ended up in other roles. Perhaps one of the most important was helping to maintain peaceful interaction between officials and various protest groups encamped at various sites throughout Miami Beach. RCLC assisted in obtaining camping permits from the city council and then worked as a coordinator with the groups in maintaining communication with the city and among each other. When the disruptive behavior of one small group, the Zippies, threatened the withdrawal of camping privileges from all groups, RCLC called a meeting with representatives from the various groups, and succeeded in gaining cooperation.

On a few occasions police undertook action that seemed calculated to create confrontation. At one point, 30 Miami police entered the campsite of demonstrators shortly after midnight and, with no provocation, proceeded to chase young people. Police cars and motorcycles began closely circling the park. Tension mounted. The campers began arming