

A Time for Burning

By Ed Carter

“We’re fighting ignorance in the place where there should be the most enlightenment.”

So says Ernest Chambers, an African-American barber who sums up one of the central issues of “A Time for Burning,” a faith-based documentary focusing on the efforts of the all-white Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska to embrace racial understanding. The film reveals both the institutional and personal racism of church leaders and parishioners who profess to love their neighbors as themselves, while illustrating the difficulty of change within firmly entrenched belief systems.



Ernest Chambers cuts a client's hair in his barber shop as minister William Youngdahl listens to his concerns. Courtesy Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Lutheran Film Associates (LFA), a media company established in 1952 as a joint venture between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, was assigned by the church to produce a film that would address the era’s radical social and political changes and offer guidance to church members wrestling with these changes. LFA’s executive secretary Robert E.A. Lee commissioned Quest Productions and its producer Bill Jersey to make the film. Jersey chose Omaha, to demonstrate that segregation and racial animus wasn’t only a phenomenon of the South or of urban centers in the North, but alive and well in pious, upstanding Middle America.

Jersey planned to film *cinéma vérité* style, however the organization expressed concern: its previous productions consisted only of scripted fiction. When Jersey told Lee that they didn’t write scripts, Lee asked how LFA would know what they were getting for their money. Jersey replied, “You *don’t* know. We don’t know. To me, filmmaking is an act of faith.” Lee accepted the idea, convinced skeptics at LFA, and championed the film throughout the process. While the filmmakers utilized *vérité* techniques, “A Time for Burning” is by no means “pure” *vérité*. It employs narration and a complex sound montage of overlapping voices that demonstrates the confusion among church leadership and followers.

The film wastes no time getting to the core of racial injustice, with perhaps the most compelling and significant sequence, early in the film when the

church’s young pastor, William (Bill) Youngdahl, visits Chambers in his barbershop. Another film might have lauded the pastor for making the effort to hear Chambers out, but he has to sweat his way (literally) through Chambers’ soft-spoken, eloquent, and blistering assessment of the racial divide in Omaha and the United States. Chambers pulls no punches, and doesn’t let Youngdahl off the hook just for showing up. “As far as we’re concerned, your Jesus is contaminated, just like everything else you’ve tried to force upon us is contaminated,” Chambers tells him. Youngdahl comes away from this meeting distressed: “What do we do now? Give up? Let’s just kill ourselves and get the heck off the earth.” The encounter – in fact – only energizes him.

Though the Augustana board almost unanimously disapproves of Youngdahl, one member, Ray Christensen, does undergo a transformation during the film. We see him first with the Social Ministries committee where he resists Youngdahl’s agenda. But he becomes a strong supporter of the interracial visits and eventually becomes an outspoken critic of his church’s blinkered intolerance, saying, “How many years do I need to prepare myself in order to talk with another human being? What am I waiting for?” He compares his colleagues’ lack of action with that of church leaders during the Holocaust. Yet when challenged by a fellow board member about how he envisions the future of the church’s race relations, Christensen admits that he’s “scared to death” of the changes he knows must come.

Because the film lacked a host, a conventional narration, and titles identifying individual people, all three commercial television networks refused to air it, but NET (now PBS) broadcast "A Time for Burning" (three times) to wide acclaim. Fred Friendly President of CBS, called it the "best civil rights film ever made." Later released theatrically, it was nominated for an Academy Award® as Best Documentary Feature.

Bill Jersey and Barbara Connell shot the film with only a camera assistant; Jersey operated the camera and Connell did sound. Jersey hired Connell, who had no film experience, originally as a secretary but later recognized her talents and brought her on for this, her first film. A former gymnast, she deftly carried the heavy Nagra recorder, two wireless receivers, and a three foot boom mic. She worked at Quest on two more films and then worked as a freelancer. But her promising career was cut short when she died in an auto accident in England in 1972.

For over a half century Jersey has continued to produce documentaries for all the major networks, and in association with PBS, WNET, KCET, WGBH and others. His films have dealt with race relations, religious issues, and social justice. He received another

Oscar nomination, for "Super Chief: The Life and Legacy of Earl Warren," as well as numerous Emmys and Emmy nominations and two Peabodies for "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" (2005) and "Eames" (2013).

Chambers' appearance in "A Time for Burning" led to further opportunities to utilize his oratorical and analytical skills for change. In 1967 he testified before President Johnson's Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders (aka, the Riot Commission), and later ran for Nebraska state office, taking over as the 11th District's representative in 1970 and holding it until 2008, when a newly-implemented term-limit law (written especially to oust him) finally forced Chambers out. He won back his spot back in 2012 at the age of seventy-five, and is the longest-serving legislator in Nebraska history.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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