

Newsletter of the LCHR and BRCHR

Louisiana Council on Human Relations and the
Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations

Volume 2016_2

April, May and June 2016

I. Notice of Annual Meeting

The two councils will have a joint Annual Meeting on June 11, 2016. The meeting will be held in Baton Rouge at the Mount Pilgrim Family Life Center located at 9700 Scenic Highway 70807. The meeting will be highlighted by a forum with the topic “A Choice for Our Children: Traditional Public Schools or Charter Schools. Coffee will be available at 10:00 AM with the meeting beginning at 10:30 AM. The public is invited. See the attached announcement and some details on the program below.

II. Your Dues May be Due

The LCHR Board has decided that since the Annual Meeting of the Council is held in June, dues will become due on July 1st of each year. Since the BRCHR often holds a joint Annual Meeting with the LCHR, this same policy will apply for the dues of the BRCHR. Some of you may have recently sent contributions. But if you have not paid dues since early this spring, you should consider that your dues are due. Several members of the LCHR and the BRCHR have given financial support beyond the \$15.00 single membership or \$20.00 family membership fee. We are very grateful for that support. Your dues are used mainly for the cost of Newsletter mailings and for the purchase of plaques for persons being honored at the Annual Humanitarian Award Programs (awards given by both the LCHR and the BRCH).

III. Concerning the Forum

There will be presenters from both traditional public schools and from charter schools. As an example of presenters is Mr. Eric Lewis, the Founder and Executive Director of Apex Collegiate Academy. This charter school will be housed in the Mount Pilgrim Family Life Center (the place where the Annual Meeting is being held). The history and purpose of charter schools will be explored along with their impact on the operation of traditional public schools.

IV. LCHR and BRCHR Awards

A. The LCHR Awards

The LCHR will give awards to persons in recognition of their contributions to human relations. The awards are named for the late Dr. James Oliver and the late

Msgr. Alexander O. Sigur, both of whom were involved with the Louisiana Council Human Relations in the early decades of its inception. They were invaluable in being there at the right time to make integration work at what was then the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL) and were also influential in this regard within the Catholic Diocese and the Lafayette Community, working tirelessly on behalf of social justice and against racism. Dr. Oliver, a chemist by profession, was known as the father of computing at the University of Lafayette. Oliver established the first computer science program in the country. Msgr. Sigur was a beloved pastor, who served in the Diocese of Lafayette, recognized formidable problems facing youth including attacks on family structure, and open challenges to human morals, values, and character. Msg. Sigur also served as

National Chaplain of the Newman Club Federation and Vicar General of the Diocese.

B. The 35th Powell/Reznikoff Awards

In 1978, the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations began recognizing Baton Rouge citizens who have helped to achieve the goals of the organization: to eliminate prejudice and discrimination and to foster better human relations. Usually two persons are chosen each year to receive humanitarian awards. In 1993, the Council decided to name its award after the late Fr. Elmer S. Powell, former Pastor of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church, and the late Rabbi Marvin M. Reznikoff, former spiritual leader of Liberal (now Beth Shalom) Synagogue. Both served on the Board of Directors, made significant contributions toward improving human relations in the Baton Rouge community, and were made life members of the council.

V. Remembering Fr. Albert McKnight, C.S.Sp.

A significant figure in the Acadiana area and indeed throughout the South, has gone on to his reward at the age of 88. Albert J. McKnight was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1927. He joined what were then called the Holy Ghost Fathers (Now known as the Spiritans). He professed his vows in 1947 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1952.

The Holy Ghost fathers had missions to African-Americans in the South. The young Fr. McKnight was appointed to St. Paul's Catholic Church in Lafayette. He served at Black Catholic parishes in Abbeville, Duson, Lafayette, and Opelousas. For a number of years he served as Executive Director of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

In 1969 Fr. McKnight founded and was the first president of the Southern Cooperative Development Fund. Through this agency Credit Unions and Cooperatives were set up throughout the South, to empower poor people to cooperatively work toward greater economic self-sufficiency. During this period Fr. McKnight had frequent contact with the Louisiana Council on Human Relations.

Fr. McKnight's auto-biography was published as "Whistling in the Wind", documenting his years of prophetic ministry in Louisiana. He saw his work as spearheading economic development and believed that a spiritual revival was essential in bringing about authentic liberation and equality. As pastor at Holy Ghost Catholic Church in Opelousas he sought to mold that parish, the numerically largest Black Catholic parish in the United States, to have fully-enculturated worship serving as an impetus toward community action and change. Unfortunately, his challenging of the white power structure of Opelousas led to the Bishop dismissing him from his pastorate. He did not give up, taking the model of the small-group prayer meeting to found B.U.S.T. (Blacks United for Spiritual Transformation).

Fr. McKnight felt an urgent need to nurture vocations to the priesthood by African-American young men. He felt Black priests with an Afro-centric orientation could affect the spiritual, cultural, and economic revival he saw as so necessary. To this end he held retreats for young men and spent four years as a novice director in Texas. He was then in his mid-70's and felt it was time for him to retire. He asked to be sent to Haiti, so he could still serve the poorest of the poor. The climate and conditions in Haiti were hard on his health and in 2012 he returned to the States to live at the retirement center of the Spiritans in Pennsylvania.

A Prayer and Eulogy Service was held at Holy Ghost Parish Life Hall in Opelousas on Friday, May 27th from 6 to 8 p.m. A Memorial Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated on May 28th at 11 a.m. at Holy Ghost Catholic Church. Burial followed at Assumption Cemetery in Carencro, LA.

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