

Farmer, James (12 Jan. 1920-9 July 1999), founder and national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), civil rights activist, and educator, was born James Leonard Farmer, Jr., in Marshall, Texas, the son of James Leonard Farmer (known as "J. Leonard"), a Methodist minister and the son of ex-slaves, and Pearl Houston Farmer, who had been a teacher. Farmer's father, who earned a doctorate of religion from Boston University, was one of the first blacks in Texas to hold a Ph.D. When Farmer was six months old the family, which included an older sister, moved to Holly Springs, Mississippi, where his father had accepted teaching and administrative posts at Rust College. Able to read, write, and count by the age of four and a half, Farmer was accepted into the first grade. The family soon moved again, as Professor Farmer joined the department of religion and philosophy at Samuel Houston College in Austin, Texas.

Farmer's outstanding academic and oratorical skills won him a four-year scholarship, and at the age of fourteen he entered Wiley College in Marshall. He was fortunate in his mentor, the poet [Melvin B. Tolson](#). Farmer was captain of the debating team and president of his fraternity. After his graduation in 1938, he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., to study for the ministry. Among others, the staff at Howard included [Sterling Brown](#), [Ralph Bunche](#), [Carter G. Woodson](#), [Benjamin Mays](#), and, most notably, [Howard Thurman](#). Poet, philosopher, and preacher, Thurman introduced Farmer to Mohandas K. Gandhi's philosophy on the use of nonviolence to effect social change. At this time Farmer became the part-time student secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Quaker pacifist organization.

During his years at Howard's School of Religion, Farmer focused on the interrelatedness of religion, economics, and race, and he wrote his master's thesis on this theme. As a result of his studies, Farmer decided not to be ordained, as the racial segregation in all denominations was repugnant to him. Close to graduation in 1941 when his father asked him what he then planned to do, he replied, "Destroy segregation." Asked how, Farmer told him it would involve mass mobilization and the use of Gandhi's principles.

Farmer began the grand mission of his life by continuing to work at FOR, first in Chicago, giving antiwar speeches there and in other midwestern cities. In Chicago he used Gandhi's technique for the first time to integrate a coffee shop where Farmer and a friend had been refused service. With added insult, they had been asked to pay \$1 for a nickel doughnut and had had their money thrown to the floor. In May 1942 they returned with a group of twenty-eight others and staged a sit-in that succeeded.

At this time, under the auspices of FOR, Farmer cofounded CORE (Committee of Racial Equality). The acronym came before the name, to indicate its purpose: that racial equality is the core of a just society. In little over a year CORE had chapters in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Its appeal was broad because CORE had always stressed its interracial aspect, mirroring the belief that the "race problem" concerned all Americans, black and white. At its second annual convention in 1944, "Committee" became "Congress," reflecting its rapid growth. Peak membership came in the 1960s when CORE had 82,000 members in 114 chapters. But Farmer described their efforts during the 1940s at integrating housing, banks, amusement parks, and barber shops as "a flea gnawing on the ear of an elephant" (*Lay Bare the Heart*, p. 153), for the lack of publicity CORE received.

In 1945 Farmer worked as a union organizer for furniture workers in the South. He also recruited college students for the League for Industrial Democracy, a socialist organization; organized and led strikes for the New York arm of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees); continued to participate in CORE's activities; and became program director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), under the leadership of [Roy Wilkins](#). In 1945 Farmer married Winnie Christie; they had no children and divorced the following year. In 1949 he married Lula Peterson; they had two daughters.

In February 1961 Farmer took the helm of CORE, the organization he had founded, as its first national director. "The dream that made our hearts beat since 1942 was in 1960 a reality," Farmer recalled in his autobiography. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956 had been successful, and a lunch counter sit-in, which four students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged on 1 February 1960, soon became the catalyst for the formation of the national Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In May 1961 Farmer launched the Freedom Rides to the South to end desegregation in interstate transportation and in station waiting rooms. A participant as well as CORE's director, Farmer faced terrifying episodes, and he was in a Louisiana jail on the day of the March on Washington in 1963. The demands for civil rights were answered with bus and church burnings and beatings by mobs and police. The violence escalated into the murders of CORE members James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi in 1964. Such violence, coming a year after the Birmingham church bombing, in which four young girls died, and the murder of [Medgar Evers](#), motivated civil rights workers to challenge the idea of nonviolence, as well as the large role played by whites within CORE. The preference for more confrontational action undermined Farmer's tenure, and he resigned in 1966.

Farmer then taught at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and at New York University. In 1968 he ran for a Brooklyn congressional seat but lost to Shirley Chisholm. President [Richard Nixon](#) appointed Farmer assistant secretary in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in April 1969. "Chaf[ing] in the ponderous bureaucracy and long[ing] for my old role as advocate, critic, activist," Farmer resigned in December 1970. During the 1970s he worked with the Council on Minority Planning and Strategy, a think tank, and with organizations of public employees that made mortgage loans for integrated housing.

In 1985, despite failing eyesight, Farmer completed and published his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*. He then taught history at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he died.

To an enormous degree, James Farmer accomplished the goal he set for himself at the age of twenty-one, to "destroy segregation." His vision and energy challenged the social status quo and eliminated many injustices in American life. As Farmer summed up, "In movement days . . . the grasping at liberty . . . ennobled life for this nation" (*Lay Bare the Heart*, p. 351).

Bibliography

The James Farmer Papers are at the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, comprising forty-three feet. Tapes relating to his run for Congress in 1968 are held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Farmer's *Lay Bare the Heart* (1985) is an exceptionally gripping and frank autobiography. Jeff Sklansky, *James Farmer: Civil Rights Leader* (1992), provides a skillfully condensed biography. For a description of Farmer's teaching life, see Michelle NK Collison, "One of the 'Big Four,' a Civil Rights Leader Keeps History Alive," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 Feb. 1989, p. A3. Obituaries are in the *New York Times*, 10 July 1999, and *Jet*, 26 July 1999.

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Citation:

Betty Kaplan Gubert. "**Farmer, James**";

<http://www.anb.org/articles/15/15-01290.html>;

American National Biography Online October 2001 Update.

Access Date: Mon Jul 12 16:38:23 CDT 2010

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