



Module 1: Peacemaker

An examination of the role Harding played in mediating among activists during the 1963 Birmingham integration campaign.

Objective: Introduce students to Vincent Harding and examine his role in the 1963 Birmingham integration campaign as mediator between white segregationists and Black Civil Rights

Key Concepts:

- Students will identify foundational experiences in Harding's life prior to 1963.
- Students will recognize the context and goals of the Birmingham desegregation campaign.
- Students will identify mediation as one of the strategies employed by SCLC.
- Students will consider the religious foundations and influences present in Harding's behind-the-scenes work.

Estimated Lesson Time: 50 Minutes.

Teacher Preparation: [adapt below]

1. Obtain a bottle or stick of glue and a rubber band.
2. Copy the **Vincent Harding's Life**, **Rosemarie Harding's Life**, and **Who wasn't present?** handouts below so that there are enough for each small group of 4-5 to have access to them.
3. Prepare and review the mini-lecture notes below on the context of the Birmingham campaign.
4. Copy **Harding's' Account of the Secret Birmingham Meetings** if extending the Module with that material.

This research was funded by a Fellows Grant from The Crossroads Project, a collaborative research initiative directed by Judith Weisenfeld, Anthea Butler, and Lerone Martin and supported by the Henry Luce Foundation and Princeton University.

Citation: Tobin Miller Shearer, *Vincent Harding, Religion, and the Long Civil Rights Movement*, June 2025.

Materials: [adapt below]

1. A bottle or stick of glue and a rubber band.
2. A hat
3. Copies of the **Vincent Harding's Life**, **Rosemarie Harding's Life**, and **Who wasn't present?** handouts (above).
4. Copies of the **Harding's' Account of the Secret Birmingham Meetings** handout (above).

Instructor overview. Born in 1931, African-American activist and academic Vincent Harding grew up attending a small Black Seventh-Day Adventist congregation in Harlem with his mother. After earning degrees in history and journalism, he went on to study the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago and pastor both Adventist and Mennonite congregations before serving in Atlanta alongside Martin and Coretta Scott King.

Success followed. Harding penned King's 1967 anti-Vietnam War speech and served as the King Center's first director before garnering a post at Iliff School of Theology in Denver in 1981. He continued to teach from his position as Professor of Religion and Social Change, promote connections between activists and academics, and speak and write on religious themes until his death in 2014. The previous year he had reflected on the importance of story: "And I suggest that we are already living inside our own stories, as if we were storied into being. In the same way that food and water are essential to our survival, stories are also essential. Gathering together to tell stories is absolutely necessary for every human society."¹

This curriculum brings a central theme of Harding's story – the contributions of Black religion to the Black Freedom struggle - to advanced high school and early college students in history or religious studies classes.

¹ Vincent Harding and Daisaku Ikeda, *America Will Be!: Conversations on Hope, Freedom, And Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Dialogue Path Press, 2013), 27.

Introducing the Module:

A sticky situation. Without comment, place a bottle or stick of glue and a rubber band on a desk or table where all the students can see the objects. Ask, “What do the following objects have in common?” Allow for a variety of responses. Add, “These objects also have something else in common. They represent the role of Vincent Harding during one of the most pivotal moments of the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement.

“For example, a bottle of glue represents the ability to bring together and attach two separate items. In the case of the Birmingham campaign, the story of Harding that we’ll soon discover is one in which groups on very different sides of the issue of segregation came together and stayed together even in the face of challenging and contentious moments of discord.

“The rubber band also represents the ability to hold things together but has the additional ability to flex when forces stretch you. In 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, the ability to adapt to prevailing conditions proved essential to the eventual success of the campaign.

“Together these two items represent the two most important qualities – both of them stemming from his religious commitments - that Harding and his wife Rosemarie brought to the Birmingham campaign.”

Module Steps:

1. **Mini-lecture.** Provide the following information to the students about the 1963 Birmingham campaign:
 - a. *Looking for a conflict.* Key players at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization founded by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the aftermath of the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1957, were looking for the location of their next desegregation campaign. Their previous effort in Albany, Georgia, in 1962 had failed miserably largely due to the wily strategies of Albany chief of police Laurie Pritchett who had carefully studied nonviolent strategy and figured out ways to render them ineffective.
 - b. *Birmingham served their purposes.* Birmingham proved attractive to the SCLC officials for several reasons:
 - i. It was a compact city where marches and demonstrations could be easily organized;
 - ii. The city’s segregation laws were archaic and stood in clear violation of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Topeka, Kansas*, Supreme Court desegregation ruling;

- iii. Unlike the measured and thoughtful Police Chief Pritchett in Albany, the man who held the same policing position in Birmingham – Bull Connor – had a proven history of being easily provoked to violence and reprisal. SCLC officials wanted such an advisory so that they could generate the kind of crisis that would bring the attention of news reporters and federal officials;
 - iv. There was a well-organized local civil rights group already in place led by Baptist pastor Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR).
 - c. *Connor was violent.* In response to the marches and demonstrations organized by SCLC and the ACMHR, Bull Connor played the role of the mercurial southern sheriff as expected. He ordered special three-hose fire nozzles to pummel protestors and did not hesitate to turn police dogs even on young children who had joined the marches.
 - d. *News coverage followed.* The subsequent news coverage – often including dramatic photos and newsreel footage of those attack dogs and firehoses doing damage to the marchers – did, indeed garner the attention of the Kennedy administration, especially after Dr. King was jailed. While incarcerated, King wrote his now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in which he challenged eight white clergymen for being too cautious in the face of ongoing injustice.
 - e. *Crisis was building.* Throughout April and into early May, the crisis built throughout the city as the jails were packed full of protestors, business leaders from across the country pressured the Kennedy administration to intervene, and downtown Birmingham businesses were no longer able to operate in light of the demonstrations underway.
 - f. *Secret meetings underway.* In this situation, the first of the meetings attended by the Hardings – both Vincent and Rosemarie – took place on April 15, the night before Easter.
2. **Who’s in the room?** Say, “We are going to figure out who it was that was in the secret room where Harding met during the 1963 Birmingham campaign.” Provide each group with three handouts – one each about Vincent and Rosemarie and a third describing who might have been in the room – to small groups. Each group has to decide which person was not at the secret meeting or not and explain why. They will then each introduce their character to the group as a whole.
3. **Choose from a hat.** Divide students into groups of four or five (fewer per group if needed, so that there are five groups in total). Have one student from their group take out a scrap piece of paper, write down their group’s name, and place it in a hat. Pick their names one by one and allow have in present their findings in that order.

After the students have selected their presentation order, give the following assignments:

You are a reporter assigned to the Birmingham campaign – you have just heard about some secret meetings that are being held behind the scenes. An anonymous tipster gave you a description of the five people – in addition to the Hardings – who might have attended the meeting. Based on the description provided, you have to figure out if you think this person was actually involved in the secret meetings.

4. **Group work.** Allow each group fifteen minutes to prepare their report on who they think was not in the room. Check in frequently with each group to encourage, prompt, and ensure that they are putting their presentations in their own words.
5. **Present.** Begin by having each group in turn report both on the character and their reasons for suggesting that the person was not present at the secret meetings.
6. **Discussion.** Following the presentations, discuss the following questions with your students. Ask:
 - a. Having heard all the presentations, who do you think actually was or was not present? Why or why not?
 - b. Based on the presentations, what were the most significant challenges that the Hardings faced during the secret meetings?
 - c. How do you think the Hardings felt going into these meetings, especially given their racial identities as African Americans in the South in a segregated city?
 - d. Why do you think the Hardings agreed to conduct these secret meetings? What might have been their motivations?
 - e. Much of the story that we hear about the Birmingham campaign has to do with the violence faced by activists in the streets. How did street activism and these behind-the-scenes meetings interact?
7. **Outcome.** Working through many more secret meetings, the Hardings helped craft a four-point agreement released to the press the morning of May 10. The agreement included plans to desegregate downtown lunch counters, drinking fountains, restrooms, and fitting rooms within a three-month period and begin hiring Black people as clerks and salespeople in downtown businesses. Those being held in jail would also be released.
8. **Reconnect.** Ask students to reflect and discuss how a bottle or stick of glue and a rubber band represent the Hardings' actions in 1963. Are there ways in which their actions do not represent those items?

Extend the Module:

These activities will take longer than 50 minutes.

- **Harding's writing about the events.** Once each group has reported on who they thought was not present at the secret meeting, pass out Harding's account of what actually happened (**Excerpts from Harding's' Account of the Secret Birmingham Meetings**). Ask:
 - What is surprising about this account? Did it conform to your expectations?
 - What do you think motivated the participants to attend this meeting and those that followed?
 - How do you interpret Harding's comments about the White participants? What stands out to you about his observations?
 - If Harding and Rosemarie were peacemakers at this event, where did their negotiating skills come from? How did they arrive at them? What in their lived experience made them good candidates for this role?
- **Predict the future past.** Inform students: Two days after the agreement, terrorists bombed the A. G. Gaston Motel at which King had been staying while another went off at the home of King's brother, A. D. King. On September 15, 1963, four White terrorists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Four Black girls - Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (11) - were killed immediately. Two Black boys - Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware - were murdered by White assailants in the violence that followed. Then ask, "Based on what you have learned in this lesson, do you think the four-point agreement held? Why or why not?" After students have discussed the questions, let them know that, although violence did break out after both events, the Hardings and others immediately got on the phone to those they had been meeting with secretly and were able to keep the agreement in place.
- **Peacemaker qualities.** A host of skills came into play with the Hardings' peacemaking interventions in the Birmingham 1963 desegregation campaign. Name and identify what those were. Draw on the following list and discuss with students:
 - **Active listening.** Letting the person you are talking to know that you are hearing them by repeating back what they said without commenting on their words. Rosemarie Harding was known to have developed this skill particularly well;

- **Determining the possible.** After listening, reflecting back to the group what could happen at that particular juncture even if it was not yet apparent;
 - **Crafting and compromise.** Coming up with wording that everyone can accept even if it might not be what they would otherwise prefer;
 - **Building relationships.** Connecting with an adversary as a human being. Both of the Hardings did this repeatedly. Even amid the frustrating failure of the 1962 Albany campaign, they maintained relationships with Sherif Pritchard and Albany's mayor.
 - **Religious roots.** Both Vincent and Rosemarie credited the training and formation they received as members of the Mennonite church, a community known for its commitment to nonviolence, for their ability to work productively in situations of tension and fractured relationships.
- **Alternate assessment.** Allow a student to write a short story as if they had been one of the people meeting in secret. Require them to explain why and how they would have responded to the invitation to meet with their adversaries during this difficult time.

Vincent Harding's Life

Name: Vincent Harding

Birth: 1931, New York City

History bit: A behind the scenes figure in the civil rights movement who would go on to become a historian of the long Black freedom struggle and Professor of Religion and Social Transformation at Iliff School of Religion in Denver, CO.

Childhood and young adulthood: Raised by his mother, Mabel Harding, Vincent was an avid reader from a young age, was often invited to speak at the congregation he attended with his mother, Victory Tabernacle, a Black Seventh-Day Adventist faith community. During Junior High school he encountered racial discrimination for the first time when a group of young white men called him and his friends a racial epithet and chased them out of the park where they were playing. After deciding not to become an aviator, he graduated from Morris High School in the Bronx in 1948. While at Morris, he excelled amid a highly diverse student body, eventually serving as editor of the school newspaper and class valedictorian.

College career: After graduating from City College in New York with a Bachelor's degree in History, he earned a master of science degree in Journalism from Columbia University with the hope of becoming a newspaper reporter. Following a two-year stint in the Army, he changed direction and began studying history at the University of Chicago.

Religious affiliation: While pursuing his Masters of Arts in the Windy City, he also served as pastor of another small Black Seventh Day congregation. In the midst of that work, he met and began dating Rosemarie Freeney, an African-American teacher and member of the Mennonite Church, one of the Historic Peace Churches along with Quakers, Mennonite Brethren, and Church of the Brethren. Vincent soon left the Seventh Day congregation and joined Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago along with Rosemarie where he served as an associate pastor.

Marriage and movement to Atlanta: He and Rosemarie celebrated their wedding at Woodlawn in the summer of 1960. Soon after the couple moved to Atlanta under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee, a relief and development organization of the Mennonite family of churches interested in peace and justice programs. In Atlanta, they founded Mennonite House, a racially integrated community of volunteers, just around the corner of Where Martin and Coretta Scott King lived.

Birmingham entry. Although based in Atlanta, the couple travelled throughout the South, often at the request of King, frequently meeting with White segregationists to open up lines of communication across the racial divide. King called Rosemarie to meet

with him after a church service the night of April 7. He asked that the couple go immediately to Birmingham and open up what Vincent later called “creative communications” between White and Black leaders there.²

.

² Vincent Harding to Peace Section Executive Committee, personal communication, Atlanta, GA, May 30, 1963 (Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society - Clarence E. Lutz, MCC Peace Section, 1963-1969, 1).

Rosemarie Harding's Life

Name: Rosemarie Freeney Harding

Birth: 1930 in Chicago, IL

History bit: A nutritionist, counselor, educator, and civil rights activist who played an often unacknowledged role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Childhood and young adulthood: The youngest child of nine children born to her parents Dock and Ella Lee Harris Freeney, she grew up in Chicago and attended Carver High School. Interested in teaching from a young age, she enrolled in Chicago Teachers College and then finished her degree in 1955 at a Mennonite College in Goshen, Indiana – Goshen College. Having followed her older sister's footsteps into the Mennonite Church, one of the Historic Peace churches along with the Quakers, Mennonite Brethren, and Church of the Brethren, she believed in and practiced nonviolence as a religious commitment.

Marriage and movement to Atlanta: At a Mennonite church conference, Rosemarie met Vincent Harding and the couple soon began to date. Wed at Woodlawn Mennonite in Chicago the summer of 1960, the couple accepted an invitation the following year to begin a southern peace ministry under the auspices of the religious nonprofit, Mennonite Central Committee, in Atlanta.

Work at Mennonite House: Rosemarie and Vincent founded Mennonite House, an interracial household of volunteers that also provided space for Civil Rights activists to meet, recover from physical attacks, and rest. Rosemarie often administered the household and helped host visitors for dinner around a purpose-built round wooden table. She and Vincent travelled widely throughout the South visiting other Mennonite voluntary service sites, supporting SCLC desegregation projects, and challenging Mennonites to become more involved in Civil Rights activism.

King invitation: In April of 1963, King asked Rosemarie if she and Vincent – along with their infant daughter Rachel – would travel to Birmingham from Atlanta to begin meeting with white leaders to negotiate a settlement in the midst of the growing desegregationist crisis in that city. Rosemarie agreed to do so and on August 15 they held their first meeting.

Who wasn't present?

Based on the profiles of Rosemarie and Vincent Harding, we know that both of them – as well as their infant daughter Rachel – were present at the first secret meeting held in Birmingham on April 15, 1963. Which one of the following were not present. Base your conclusion on the Harding handouts, the information provided in the mini-lecture you just heard, and your analysis of the events. Be prepared to present and defend your answer.

Person #1: a White representative of the Alabama Council of Human Relations who had a wide network within the both black and white community of Birmingham

Person #2: a local White minister who had said only the night before, “The time has come, and I'm ready now to commit myself to work to find a solution. What can I do?”

Person #3: a White representative of Bull Connor's office of public safety (i.e. the police) who had grown impatient with Connor's violence and incendiary public pronouncements

Person #4: a White young professional connected to local business leaders and the incoming Birmingham administration who was himself a native southerner

Person #5: a Black SCLC staff member, one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s lieutenants, who had been tasked with working with the Hardings on behind the scenes meetings.

Which one of these individuals was not present at the secret meeting on April 15? Explain in your own words why you think this.

Excerpts from Harding's Account of the Secret Birmingham Meetings³

Editor's note: Vincent Harding uses racial terminology - like the label "Negro" - that was common in 1963 but is no longer considered appropriate in contemporary usage and should not be used outside the context of this historical document.

Although not a local Negro, I was present on April 15 when the first effective contact between the Negroes and whites was made. As a lay minister I had already served as a mediator in Albany, and I was called to Birmingham to act again as a bridge between members of my race and whites....

This was not the first attempt at negotiations. Meetings were held between white businessmen and Negroes as far back as September last year, after the leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, Fred Shuttlesworth, had announced the imminence of protest demonstrations against the city's rigid patterns of segregation. The focus of the announced demonstration was to be the lunch counters and other customer facilities in the downtown stores, along with discriminatory employment policies. Though the merchants were afraid to challenge Connor and the city ordinances by acting openly for desegregation, they did agree at least to take down the COLORED and WHITE signs over their rest rooms and water fountains as a trial step....

Finally, through the help of a member of the Alabama Council of Human Relations, contact was made with one of the city's young professional men who turned out to be all-important. He had the ear and the confidence of both business leaders and the city administration-elect. Late on April 15, the night after Easter, he met in a minister's home with one of King's co-workers, the Council's representative, and my wife and me. The movement toward real negotiations now began. King's aide found almost immediately that the young man's concern was not limited to ending the demonstrations but with working out just and meaningful solutions. Moreover, he was well trained, like many of the protest leaders, and personal bonds began to be developed. If credit for bringing about a settlement in Birmingham ever were to go to any one person, it should be to this native Southerner. (At this time, he is better left unidentified.)...

For the next two weeks semi-secret meetings were called, usually early in the morning or late at night. They were held in churches, homes, deserted office buildings; and in their course a network of relationships began to build up....

Late Thursday night, May 9, I worked with one Negro and one white lawyer and a representative of King's on the wording of the four-point agreement to be given to the press. The next morning the prisoners began to be released, even before the last negotiating session. The phrasing of the agreement was settled, and firm assurances

³ Vincent Harding, "A Beginning in Birmingham," *The Reporter* (New York) June 6, 1963, Vol. 28, pp. 12, 13-16.

were given that the schoolchildren would be readmitted on Monday. Early that afternoon, the final press conference was held, and Fred Shuttlesworth announced: The city of Birmingham has reached an accord with its conscience." Before scores of cameras, Martin King was so moved that he said: "Birmingham now stands on the threshold of becoming a great, enlightened symbol, shedding the radiance of its example throughout the entire nation."...

The very confidence that the Negro leaders have in the good faith of the white negotiators is in itself heartening. (Of course, one of these leaders quietly revealed the fact that his confidence was greatly bolstered by the presence of Burke Marshall at all of the initial stages of negotiations.) They will be less tempted to stage impulsive demonstrations, even when sorely tried by situations like the May 12 bombings or the Connor-appointed school board's action in expelling or suspending 1,081 students. Moreover, I, too, felt that the men who represented the white business and industrial leaders were men of goodwill, men who had been certainly affected by the demonstrations, but also men who were doing more than merely trying to stop marches. They were concerned with setting right at least some of the inequities of the system in which they too were trapped....

The respect and trust was not one-sided, though. It grew among the whites in painful, sometimes clumsy motions. At first they wanted to be the ones to decide who would and who would not be accepted as a Negro leader, but soon found they had to take seriously the young minister who explained that "Negro leadership is now largely determined by the willingness of a man to suffer for the people." They had to learn to deal with activists and "jailbirds," as well as Negro businessmen and educators, and among them all they found men who cared deeply about the city of Birmingham, men who sought the things that made for its peace. Now that these white and black men know each other (even to sharing private, unlisted phone numbers in some cases), there is far less danger of a breakdown in communications than ever before....