

# unrelenting faith



**THE REV. BRUCE KLUNDER**

1937-1964  
Killed protesting construction of segregated school, Cleveland, Ohio

**“I pray that by the time the children grow up, their father’s death will have been redeemed, and they will be able to see the effect of what his dying did for the consciences of at least a few people – at least a few.”**

JOANNE KLUNDER

**B**ruce Klunder was a minister who believed his life must be his sermon. He was living out his faith when he laid his body down in the mud behind a bulldozer that was breaking ground for a segregated school. Klunder’s intention was not simply to protest segregation but to prevent it. Instead, he was crushed to death. And although his death was in one sense an accident, it was also an expression of the purpose to which he had committed his life.

In 1955, when blacks in Montgomery stopped riding buses to protest segregation laws, Klunder was an 18-year-old college student in Oregon, far removed from the realities of racism. The bus boycott awakened him to the inequities between blacks and whites in America. Klunder raised money to help support the Montgomery boycotters, and he began discussing civil rights issues with his fellow YMCA Student Council officers. His mission had begun.

After completing divinity school at Yale, Klunder and his wife, Joanne, moved to Cleveland, where he took a job with the Student Christian Union and immediately immersed himself in civil rights issues. He and Joanne took a group of students on a field trip through the South to expose them to

the effects of segregation, and they became founding members of the Cleveland chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Klunder was among the CORE members who demonstrated at the state legislature for a fair housing bill. Whenever there was a protest against injustices in housing and education, Klunder was there.

For Bruce Klunder, this work was not just a matter of conscience. His hope was not simply to improve black lives but to make his own life an expression of God’s love. Before he was killed, Joanne remembered, they talked about moving their family into the heart of the ghetto “so that our children could grow up knowing the meaning of caring for others.”

## WE ALL ARE ONE

Bruce Klunder articulated his beliefs in a 1963 sermon in which he told the white congregation that it was not enough for Christians to bring fairness and equality into their personal relationships: They must also work to reform the institutions of society — even if it meant taking personal risk. “Our central affirmation is that, through Jesus Christ, we all are one — one with God and one with each other... We must — each in his own way — suffer with and for those who are oppressed by

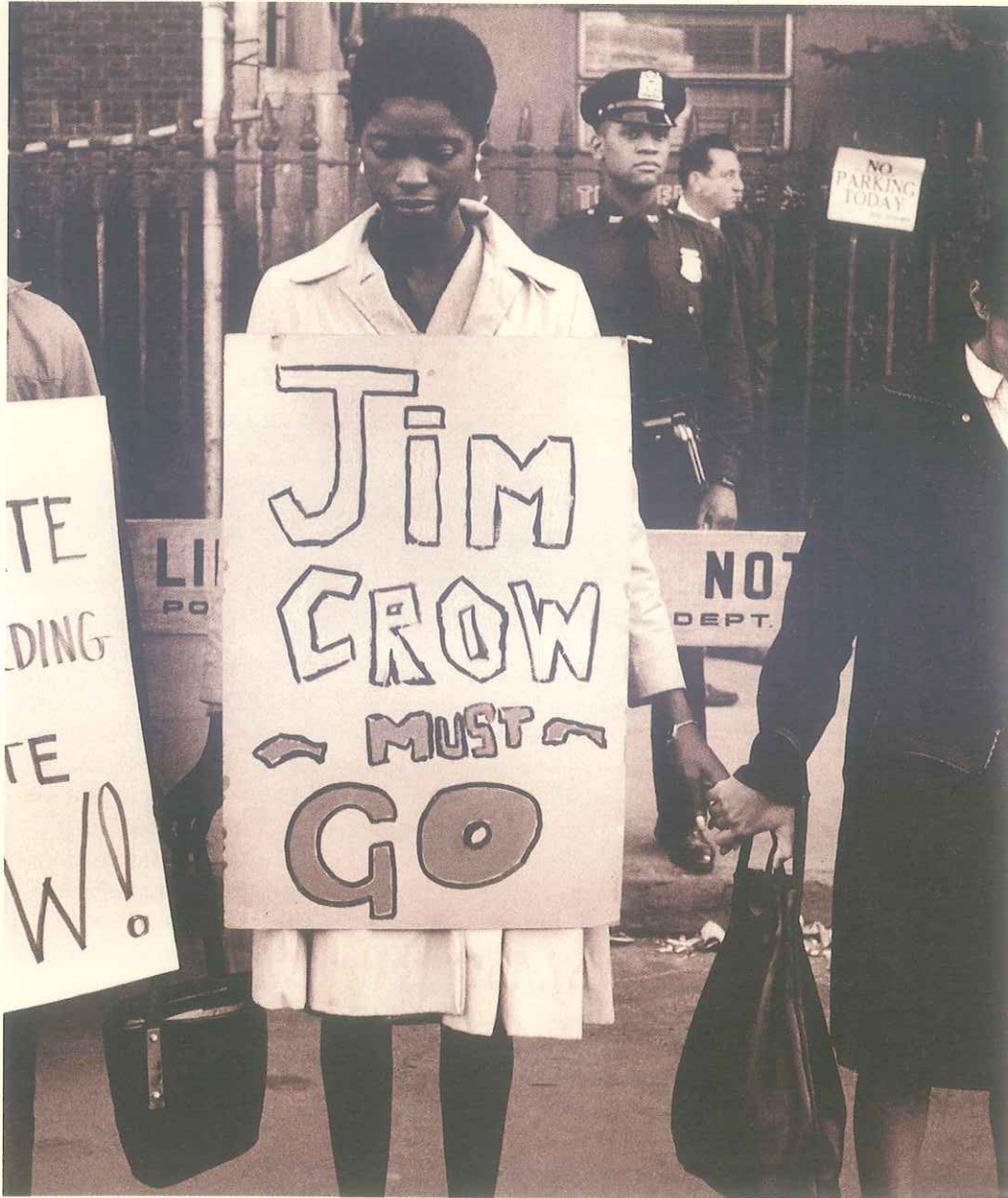
those structures of injustice... We must learn to feel their pain as our own and ... be willing to bear personally some of the cost of that pain’s removal.”

One of the institutional injustices that blacks suffered all over the country was inadequate education. In Cleveland, black schools were so old and overcrowded that students had to attend classes in shifts. Parents in the black community protested, and the school board agreed to bus some children to white schools but keep them in segregated classes. After a few years of demonstrations and sit-ins, board members agreed to integrate the classes. However, the board immediately began to build new schools in the black community to return the black children to “their own neighborhoods.” Local ministers and civil rights leaders were outraged that school officials would go to such lengths to preserve segregation.

## LIVES ON THE LINE

Bruce Klunder and others were determined to stop the construction of the black schools. When legal roadblocks failed, they staged picket lines at the site of the first school. When police began arresting demonstrators, some of the protesters decided to place their own bodies in the way of construction equipment. “We will not stop short of having the school board revise its plans,” said Klunder.

On April 7, Klunder and several others went to the construction site where a bulldozer was preparing ground for the black school. Three protesters threw themselves to the ground in front of the bulldozer. Bruce



Even after the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools, cities all over the country sought ways to preserve Jim Crow facilities. In most cases, school integration came only after civil rights activists insisted on equal rights for black children.

Klunder went to the back of the vehicle and laid down on the muddy ground. When the bulldozer operator reversed directions to move away from the protesters in front, the huge machine ran over Klunder, crushing him to death.

Police ruled the death an accident. Some blacks in the community reacted with rage and were on the brink of rioting

when Joanne Klunder made a plea for calm. The violence was sporadic and short-lived.

In the aftermath of Klunder's death, school officials halted construction on the segregated school. Once tensions eased, however, the work resumed and the school was completed.

Joanne Klunder wrote later that her husband's death shook whites and blacks out of a sense

of complacency about racial injustice. "There now is a feeling of 'Yes, we can do something about it — and we must.'"

She continued, "I pray that by the time the children grow up, their father's death will have been redeemed, and they will be able to see the effect of what his dying did for the consciences of at least a few people — at least a few." ❁