

Here there is not  
Greek and Jew,  
circumcised and  
uncircumcised,  
barbarian, Scythian,  
slave, free; but  
Christ is all, and in all.  
Put on then, as  
God's chosen ones,  
holy and beloved,  
compassionate hearts,  
kindness, humility,  
meekness, and patience,  
bearing with one  
another and, if one  
has a complaint  
against another,  
forgiving each other;  
as the Lord has  
forgiven you, so you  
also must forgive.

Colossians 3:11-13 (ESV)



## Segregated Scars and the Legacy of *Miss Denise McNair*

BY CHRISTINE SCHEELE WEERTS

A pair of shiny Buster Brown black patent leather shoes was a going-to-church must for lots of little girls growing up, and that included Denise McNair. The only child of Chris and Maxine McNair, Denise wore the brand-new, not-a-spot-or-scuff-mark shoes — and carried a matching purse — when she attended her father's church, St. Paul Lutheran, where he was Sunday School Superintendent, or her mother's at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. A bright and happy child, Denise was well loved by both Birmingham, Alabama, congregations and was clearly the apple of her father's eye. A professional photographer, one of the few African American photographers in Birmingham, he took photos of the Civil Rights movement, and also of his darling Denise.

Denise was an artistically talented and compassionate child. She played piano, sang, wrote stories, and brought neighborhood children together to read poetry. Every year she created a fund-raising variety show in her yard to support muscular dystrophy research. She once held a funeral with her friends for a dead bird, asking her mother to sing the Lord's Prayer.

A student at Central Street Elementary, where her mother was a teacher, Denise was an A student and active in baseball, dance, and Brownies.

While her parents provided piano and dance lessons and a home filled with love, there lurked an enemy in the city. It was Jim Crow segregation, which set up "whites only" restrooms, restaurants, motels, and even drinking fountains. It couldn't be avoided. One day, Denise's dad took her shopping at a local department store. While there, Denise got hungry, but the lunch counter was "whites only." It hurt her father to explain it to his precious child. Denise cried.

She saw teens marching for civil rights for her people and wanted to join them. Nightly newscasts showed Birmingham's Police Chief sic'ing police dogs and fire hoses on the teen marchers. Her parents said, "No, Denise, you are too young."

### Scars of Violence

More difficult for Denise and her friends was the violence they had become accustomed to seeing. Bombings were "like part of life. It was a part of living and growing up in the South," said Denise's childhood friend Gwen Moton.

Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State during the administration of President George W. Bush, recalls playing dolls with Denise, who loved her Chatty Cathy doll. But even in the midst of a happy, innocent childhood, there was the ever-present background of brutality. "Birmingham had become a place too dangerous for black children to leave their own neighborhoods," said Rice, "or go downtown and visit Santa Claus, or go out of the house after dark. There was no sanctuary. There was no place really safe."

### Fatal Scars

Denise's father, Chris, and his brother, her Uncle Harold, were sitting in the nave at St. Paul Lutheran Church on a cloudy Sunday in September when they suddenly heard a loud boom. "Was that thunder?" Chris asked.

"No." Harold responded.

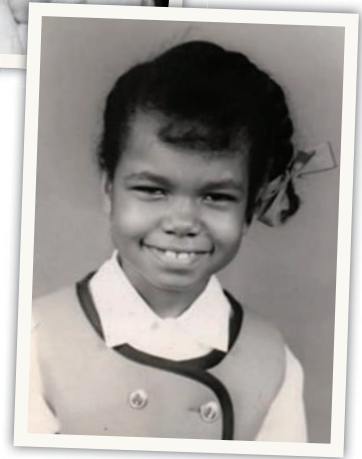
It was 10:22 a.m., Sunday, September 15, 1963, when a dynamite bomb exploded at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where Denise and her mother had gone to worship. Some 25 blocks away, the McNair brothers heard the explosion. It had demolished a massive brick and masonry wall and sent cement, stone, bricks, and debris flying like shrapnel.

A young man came running into St. Paul to tell Pastor Joseph Ellwanger, who was preaching that day about forgiveness. Chris and Harold raced toward the historic downtown church, but a block away, a cousin directed them to the hospital.

At the hospital morgue, under a sheet, lay four girls, side-by-side, on a table.

"I saw a little foot sticking out from under the sheet," Chris recalled. "And a scratched patent leather shoe covered with dust. I suppose every little girl's foot looks about the same, but I knew it was Denise's."

When they pulled back the sheet, Chris and Maxine saw their precious child covered in dusty ash, with a fist-sized piece of mortar mashed in her head.



Condoleezza Rice, 1961

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Condoleezza Rice



## Scars to the Nation

Denise was one of four girls killed that day: Addie Mae Collins, Carolyn Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, all 14 years old, along with Denise, were killed while were getting ready for Youth Sunday. The evil act of hate on innocent children in a church shattered the city, state, and nation.

President John F. Kennedy immediately responded to the horrifying, bloody attack.

"If these cruel and tragic events can only awaken that city and state — if they can only awaken this entire nation to a realization of the folly of racial injustice and hatred and violence, then it is not too late for all concerned to unite in steps toward peaceful progress before more lives are lost."

"As an 8-year-old, you don't think about terror of this kind," Rice recalled.

"I remember asking my parents, 'Why do

they hate us so much?' And my father saying, 'There are many hateful people.'"

Rev. Joseph Ellwanger, pastor at St. Paul Lutheran (1958–1967) and lifelong friend of Chris McNair, recalls his faith-filled response to the tragedy.

"By the grace of God, the light of Christ shined through Chris in one of the darkest moments in his life and Maxine's life, in the life of Birmingham, in the life of Alabama, and in the life of this nation. At a time when Chris, and all of the Black community, was tempted to return hatred for hatred and viciousness for viciousness, by the grace of God, Chris called publicly on television for the culprits of the heinous crime to be brought to justice. Despite the darkness of the moment, he called for the light of restraint and a recognition of the dignity of every person — black and white."

Rev. Ellwanger had a deep appreciation of the faith of his African American Lutheran brothers and sisters in Christ. His father, Rev. Dr. Walter Ellwanger, served as president of Alabama Lutheran Academy and College in Selma (which would become Concordia College, Selma), and supervisor of the mission field for Black Ministry from 1945 to 1967. His son remembers attending many black Lutheran church services throughout rural Alabama with his father, experiencing the deep faith of God's people and resonating with Paul's letter to the Corinthians: *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit* (1 Corinthians 12:12–14 ESV).

When Rev. Ellwanger was called to St. Paul, it was only natural that he would join with those working for equal rights for all people, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Addie Mae Collins



Denise McNair



Carolyn Robertson



Cynthia Wesley



## A Bold Martin Luther

Chris McNair, who died May 8, 2019, at the age of 93, was the oldest of 12 children raised in his mother's Holiness Church in Arkansas. His father listened to "The Lutheran Hour," and found the messages relevant and uplifting. When Chris attended Tuskegee Institute, his history teacher told them about Martin Luther and the Reformation. He was astonished that Luther stood up to the Pope and called for changes in the practices and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. He saw that Luther "was a fighter" and didn't step back from challenging the status quo, especially when it violated the teachings of Christ. Chris was sure that people of faith would also stand up for justice for the oppressed, because of the Gospel imperative to love, as God loves, without partiality. (Romans 2:9–11)



## Scars of Injustice

The family waited a long time for justice. It took 15 years for the first murderer, Robert Chambliss, to come to trial. He was convicted on November 17, 1977, on what would have been Denise's 26th birthday. Another 25 years passed before convictions were brought for Tommy Blanton, in 2001, and Bobby Cherry, in 2002. Blanton is still in prison; Chambliss and Cherry have died. All were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

"They lived their lives and they stole Denise's," remarked Harold, who sat through the trials. Harold thinks of Denise every day. "She was so sweet and so very smart. I hate she didn't get to grow up."

## Scars of Consolation in Christ

Jesus Christ, who suffered scars of crucifixion to die for our sin and rise for our eternal life, is our only consolation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded the 800 mourners at the four girls' funeral in 1963:

*"I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door, which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days."*

Rev. Ellwanger, the only white pastor participating, read Scripture at the service and officiated at Denise's graveside committal service, reading Psalm 23. He shared eternal hope in our Risen Savior, knowing that the scars parents carry after their child's death are deep and lasting.

The marker at Denise's grave carries a tender inscription for her life cut short by violence. "Carol Denise McNair. November 17, 1951–September 15, 1963. She loved all, but a mad bomber hated her kind."

Denise's scuffed and scarred Buster Brown patent leather shoes and the piece of cement that crushed her skull are on display at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, on loan from the family. Q

"Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door, which leads man into life eternal."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Christine Weerts, author of *Heroes of Faith: Rosa Young*, had the honor of interviewing Mr. Chris McNair (left) prior to his death. She first met him in 2015 and has written about the family's story in *The Lutheran Forum* and *The Federalist*. She attends Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Autauga County, Alabama, where she is a member of LWML. She has a Master's degree in religion from Concordia University Chicago.