

Kester, Howard Anderson ("Buck") ^[1]

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by Robert F. Martin, 1988; Revised December 2021

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Howard Anderson ("Buck") Kester, clergyman, educator, and social reformer, was born near Martinsville in Henry County, Va. He was the youngest of three children of Nannie Holt, of Lynchburg, Va., and William Hamilton Kester, originally of Washingtonville, Pa. Kester's later radicalism stemmed neither from the economic deprivations nor the abundance of his childhood, for his family though not affluent enjoyed a measure of middle-class respectability. His father was a tailor, Presbyterian elder, and respected member of his community; however, economic difficulties in 1916 did prompt William Kester to move his family to Beckley, W.Va.

Howard Kester returned to Virginia in 1921, enrolling in Lynchburg College ^[2] in preparation for the ministerial career to which his parents had dedicated him at his baptism. But already he experienced doubts about the relevance of the church to social problems of his day. Over the next six years his experiences helped transform these doubts into a positive conviction that the church had fallen short of its prophetic mission.

While at Lynchburg Kester served briefly as a student pastor in the coal fields of West Virginia, where his open support for striking miners among his parishioners roused the ire of Presbytery authorities. During these years he became deeply involved in YMCA ^[3] work in the South, striving to integrate the student Christian movement in the region and coordinating the YMCA's efforts to raise money for the relief of European students suffering in the aftermath of World War I. ^[4] These activities intensified his commitment to the promotion of economic and racial justice and, for a time at least, to the cause of pacifism.

In the fall of 1925 Kester enrolled in Princeton Theological Seminary ^[5], but left within a year because of his conviction that the seminary overemphasized dogma at the expense of Christianity's social dimension. Seeking a more satisfying theological education, he entered Vanderbilt University in the fall of 1926. His attempts to sponsor interracial fellowship meetings among students in the Nashville area and his unpopular political views cost the young radical his job as assistant director of the Vanderbilt YMCA in March 1927. This loss of his only means of financial support occurred just three weeks after his marriage on 18 February to Alice Harris of Decatur, Ga. His dismissal was the first of many turbulent episodes the couple would share as a result of their commitment to social change.

In the spring of 1927 Kester became youth secretary of the Fellowship of the Reconciliation and moved to New York City. Two years later he resumed his theological training in Nashville, receiving the B.D. degree from Vanderbilt in 1931. His unorthodox religious and social views made conventional church authorities wary of him and he was not ordained until 1936 when, after twice having been rejected by the Presbyterians, he was accepted for ordination by the Congregational church.

After his graduation from Vanderbilt Kester joined the Socialist party ^[6] and became active in organizational work in central Tennessee. In 1932 he ran for Congress on the Socialist ticket. Although soundly defeated, he continued to work for the party until the late 1930s, serving as national executive committeeman in 1937.

Meanwhile the young activist worked for social justice throughout the South. He later said of these years, "Wherever trouble brewed we tried to go." He served as southern secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation until 1934, when a dispute over the role of violence in the class struggle caused him and other leading members to resign. Several of those who withdrew from the fellowship, among them Reinhold Niebuhr, organized the Committee for Economic and Racial Justice and financed Kester's work in the South. Under the sponsorship of Niebuhr's committee, Kester investigated lynching ^[7]s for the NAACP ^[8] and the American Civil Liberties Union ^[9], helped organize the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, assisted in the organization of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union ^[10], publicized the plight of many of the South's rural poor with his book *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (1936), lectured for the League for Industrial Democracy, and began publishing *Prophetic Religion*, the journal of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.

In 1939 the Kesters and their daughter Nancy Alice (b. 27 Apr. 1934) moved from Nashville to High Top Colony near Black Mountain, N.C. The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, to which Kester now devoted most of his time, assumed responsibility for his work in the fall of 1941, but financial difficulties—stemming from a lack of interested sponsors for the group during World War II—soon resulted in the fellowship's inability to meet its commitment to the Kesters.

In December 1943 Howard and Alice Kester accepted positions with the Penn Normal, Agricultural, and Industrial School on St. Helena Island ^[11] off the coast of South Carolina. He became the institution's principal and she its director of instruction. In December 1948 the Kesters resigned after the school had become a facility for adult education and a community service center. For a brief time in 1949–50 they lived in New York City, where they directed the Congregational

Christian Service Committee's program for the relocation of persons displaced by World War II. In the late spring of 1950 Kester became the director of the Campbell Folk School at Brasstown, N.C., and remained for eight months. From early 1952 to 1957 he was executive secretary of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, and in the fall of 1957 he joined the staff of Eureka College in Eureka, Ill., as director of student life, professor of history, and dean of students.

In 1960 the Kesters returned to North Carolina where Howard managed Christmont Assembly, a project of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) near Black Mountain. From 1965 to 1971 he served on the faculty of Montreat-Anderson College ^[12] as an instructor in the department of social studies and as dean of students. His wife's death on 6 Apr. 1970 and a heart attack he suffered eleven months later prompted Kester to retire to his home at High Top Colony. In January 1977 he married Elizabeth Moore Harris, Alice Kester's sister-in-law and the couple's friend for nearly a half century. Kester died the following July and was buried at Mountain View Memorial Park in Swannanoa.

In 1926 the president of Princeton Theological Seminary had accused Howard Kester of having rejected eighteen centuries of Christian tradition, a judgment in which this pioneer of southern social activism later concurred. But Kester never rejected the teachings of Christ; rather, he desired a return to what he understood to be the basic teachings of New Testament Christianity, and therein lay his radicalism.

In a 1974 oral history interview of Howard Kester by the the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina, Howard Kester discussed aspects of his upbringing and his father's membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

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Additional Resources:

Howard Kester Papers, 1923-1972 (collection no. 03834). The Southern Historical Collection. Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/k/Kester,Howard.html> ^[13] (accessed August 12, 2014).

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