On a late New York City night in October 1969, a few men in the Young Lords were smoking pot, talking politics, and listening to music after a long day of organizing. Juan Gonzalez was eager to put Bob Dylan’s 1969 hit single “Lay Lady Lay” on the turntable. The men were drawn to its unembarrassed verbalization of male sexual desire and accompanying vulnerability. The song’s working-class protagonist bares his fantasies to his lover, hoping to convince her to spend the night with him. Its candid title suggested that sex was at long last unbound from the remaining restraints of Victorian-era social conventions, which counseled repression of sexual urges, prohibited public discussion of sex, and restricted sex to the marital bed. It was a fitting soundtrack to the transgressions that lay ahead.

The ritual repetition of this classic, era-defining, bake-out scene by legions of people, young and old, signaled the triumph of personal liberation over puritan self-denial in the way many mainstream Americans chose to live their lives—a signature achievement of the counterculture and the sexual revolution. Yet, the cultural shift was not without its challengers. As early as 1960, the emerging ranks of the New Right coalition joined evangelical Christians to condemn it, arguing that the erosion of “American morals” would lead to civilizational decline. Hell-bent on reasserting traditional values, its leaders appropriated a politically pliable term, “morality,” as an ideological battle-ax against the cultural gains of the New Left. But before these cultural warriors fine-tuned their narrative tools, the Young Lords snatched morality from the jaws of New Right elements and had their own battle with them on their turf.

In a wink, the Young Lords’ conversation turned from “Lay Lady Lay” to the gingerbread church on 111th Street and Lexington Avenue. From afar, the
Young Lords in front of First Spanish United Methodist Church.
(Photograph by David Fenton)
white trimmings on the redbrick building appeared illuminated. Its well-kept structure stood out among the dilapidated tenements and empty lots on Junkies’ Row one block away. It would not be long before the Young Lords Organization (YLO) entered into a tense dispute with the East Harlem church over the use of its facility to feed neighborhood children. The Young Lords framed their request around the morality of the biblical Jesus, counterposed against the church’s seeming indifference to poverty. The conflict drew the involvement of clergy from different denominations, government officials, mainstream media, East Harlem residents, movement organizations, and community group representatives. As two distinct definitions of morality cohered in New York’s public discourse, most had no choice but to take sides. The drama-filled clash reflected a larger contest for social influence between the Left and social conservatives over the direction the country might take in the twilight of the 1960s.

There Is a Church in Spanish Harlem

Since their emergence a few months earlier, the Young Lords had already broadened the scope of New York’s racial justice organizing. With their distinct mix of creative direct action and strategic messaging, they had shown how racism exacerbated the crises of sanitation and medical care in East Harlem; in calling attention to environmental racism and medical discrimination, they had linked civil rights to public health in New York. Their radical analysis and prefigurative examples of what a new humanistic society might achieve brought them both acclaim and increased government surveillance. However, alongside successes, the Young Lords faced organizational setbacks and failed campaigns. One such failure opened the path to their most iconic offensive.

The YLO initiated its first breakfast program in October 1969. Located at Emmaus House, an ecumenical social service organization in East Harlem, and run in partnership with the Black Panthers, the operation got off to a rough start. Among other details, it involved the securing and cooking of food, early morning pickup at children’s homes, and timely transport to school. During its first week, only a handful of children participated. To discourage attendance, police distributed reports to staff at Emmaus House alleging illicit links between the Young Lords and New York’s gangs. Troubled, the organization’s director, Friar David Kirk, expressed apprehension about the group’s use of the building. Likely bruised by the questioning of their good intentions, the Young Lords began searching for a new operating site. That errand was on their minds the night some members stumbled upon the gingerbread church while humming “Lay Lady Lay.”

The following Sunday, representatives of the Young Lords approached the First Spanish United Methodist Church (FSUMC) with a sober request for
space. The Young Lords greeted the head pastor with all the rituals of deference and respect their parents had ingrained in them. To their surprise, the reverend gave them a chilly reception. Before dismissing them, he brusquely instructed them to submit a written request to the church’s administrative board before dismissing them.

Whether by fate or happenstance, the Young Lords’ weed-induced ruminations had delivered them to what was likely the least empathetic place of worship in East Harlem. The FSUMC believed that the most effective form of social service centered on “preaching the Good News to the poor,” restoring “stability to their homes,” and instilling a strong work ethic. Its small congregation counted 138 “conservative, pietistic, [and] evangelical” worshipers—mostly working-class Puerto Ricans with upwardly mobile aspirations. Having moved out of El Barrio to Brooklyn and the Bronx during the 1960s, most returned to the church on Sundays. Yet the distance they traveled was more spatial than economic. Still, the congregants’ devoutness generated a thrifty self-denial and hard work on which their modest economic advancement depended. It also fostered a righteous superiority, which limited their capacity to gauge character beyond surface behavior. As later became evident, many of them sat in judgment of their former neighbors during Sunday service. They attributed its problems to individual shortcomings, worldly cravings, and deviation from the word of God.

Fatefully, in the conflict between the congregation and the Young Lords, the church itself fell under public scrutiny. Its church’s thorny history illustrated the power that social forces of magnitude bear on reality. By the nineteenth century, the FSUMC’s predecessor sects (the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church) had become dominant Protestant denominations. They built urban headquarters and welcomed an influx of upper-class congregants, among them politicians, judges, and captains of industry. Their complex institutions adapted the new organizational structures and investment techniques of industrial capitalism. Not surprisingly, they became junior stakeholders and managers of westward expansion, Indian removal, and territorial acquisition in Latin America. And in 1899, a year after the United States took possession of Puerto Rico, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ exported its “civilizing mission”: “to inaugurate a work that assures the Americanization of the island,” which it linked to “the joys and privileges of being a Christian disciple.”

Two decades later, in 1922, the Methodist Church established the first Spanish-language congregation in New York, ministering to the third wave of Puerto Rican migrants to the city. Forced to move several times due to conflicts with the white congregations with which it shared space, its future became uncertain. With the influx of Puerto Rican migrants to New York during and after World War II, Puerto Rican Methodists finally achieved the demographic uptick they
needed to secure a permanent home in East Harlem. Influenced by the labor and civil rights activism of the era, the church became a dynamic site of worship. In addition to spiritual refuge, it offered English-language classes and daycare services to the community, attracting Puerto Ricans of different denominations until 1964, when a fire partially destroyed its building. Through the fundraising efforts of its reverend Ezra Rodriguez, the building reopened in 1967. Beloved by some, Reverend Rodriguez was reportedly "chased out of the church" by its high officials for his progressive and Puerto Rican nationalist leanings.

His replacement, Rev. Humberto Carrazana, discontinued all community programs. A political exile, the new reverend had settled in the United States almost a decade earlier, after the Cuban revolution. He claimed to have supported the overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista but fled the island when "the Revolution turned Marxist," in fear of losing his ability to proselytize. When the Young Lords knocked at his door, as if by apparition, the exiled pastor saw young people wearing berets who evoked Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. On reflex, the reverend icily shot back, "Put it in writing." But the Young Lords lacked the experience to craft a diplomatic communique. Their October 22, 1969, letter explained their wish to use the church's facility to administer a free breakfast program. It also described a "liberation school" where children and adults could learn "black and Puerto Rican history" as well as more traditional academic subjects. The church's facility, they wrote, which sat empty during the week, should be put to the service of "one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City." The Young Lords were themselves zealots. They lived among the people of East Harlem, stood on street corners, linked community grievances to the evils of colonialism and capitalism, and deployed militancy to recuperate Puerto Rican rights and dignity. They closed their letter by saying, "We ask that your church begin to relate concretely to Puerto Ricans and their problems. Without sounding offensive, it must be understood that while poverty and racism has afflicted our black and Puerto Rican communities, the churches have stood silent for the most part. Sins of omission must be stopped now." The charge echoed the New Left's polemics against "well-meaning" civic, religious, and social service institutions for legitimizing the status quo through silence or token reforms. The tone epitomized the moralistic approach of the era's political youth.

The following Sunday, October 26, the Young Lords were back at the church, seated early for service. Clad in fatigues and Afros—not exactly Sunday best—they raised eyebrows among parishioners who knew nothing of the group's request. During the after service coffee hour, they seized a moment with the pastor, asking to discuss their letter with the board and members of the congregation. The Young Lords, whose interventions were rarely improvised, were deploying a cardinal strategy among seasoned organizers—appeal to the broad-
est audience possible and avoid isolated negotiations with powerful individuals, skilled in evasion or pacification without concession. But most parishioners had left promptly after the service ended. The reverend's stern demeanor signaled to them that he wanted privacy to handle this situation. He denied their request to meet with other congregants and told the Young Lords that the board would reply to their letter.

In a November 3 letter, the board denied the request and outlined its rationale. Policy stipulated that all on-site programs be administered by church members. The board continued with an itemized, polemical defense: “We want you to understand that our church is composed of 99 percent Puerto Ricans, who are very much aware of the problems of the community.” The barbed declaration—that an overwhelmingly Puerto Rican congregation should not be schooled on the problems of its community—aimed to put the Young Lords in their place, invalidate their accusations of indifference to the poor, and veil the board’s commitment to an increasingly contested status quo.

The board’s rebuttal typified a developing trend. It distort and appropriated calls for increased racial representation in the service of regressive ends. Answering the charge of shirking responsibility to the community, it derided new and boisterous approaches to injustices: “We feel that we are doing our share, without making too much noise, and through the proper channels, as well as taking care of the spiritual needs of the people, which is our main concern.” They seemed oblivious to Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” of 1963, which excoriated white liberal clergymen for being more concerned with the propriety of antiracist protests than the violent bigotry that brought them into being.

The next Sunday, the Young Lords were back at Sunday service. They stayed for the coffee hour and again asked to meet with the board. To avoid a public conflict before the congregation, this time the pastor conceded. The Young Lords prefaced their remarks with a clarification: theirs was a self-funded project that proposed to revive the teachings of the historic church of Jesus and its mandate to address the material suffering of the poor. Liberation theology was reclaiming that tradition in Latin America, yet in East Harlem it appeared that the FSUMC was “indifferent to the needs of working mothers for a place to leave their children during the day, the needs of children for a place to play other than the streets, the needs of families driven from their homes by fire, cold or eviction.” The pastor defended the right of his congregation to worship as it saw fit and charged the Young Lords with exploiting the sanctity of Sunday services to impose their political views. Board members took a different approach. They explained that the small congregation was already strained with a $640 monthly repayment of a loan it had borrowed to restore the church after a fire destroyed the original facility three years earlier. The National Methodist Investment Fund
financed the loan, a detail omitted by members of the board.\textsuperscript{21} Regrettably, they continued, the church was in no position to take on any projects or additional responsibilities associated with the use of the facility, which carried hidden costs, including securing supervisory staff.

Despite the board’s appeals, the pastor’s remarks intensified the growing antagonism between the church and the young radicals. Unencumbered by the strained civility of earlier communications, the Young Lords advanced their position by other means. Pablo Guzmán, the group’s minister of information, understood the appeal of this evolving drama and its potential to amplify the Young Lords’ political message to broader audiences. He stood out for his grasp of the power of words, images, and stories and had long advocated their strategic use in organizing. Over the course of the conflict he, with others in the organization’s Central Committee, crafted a sophisticated communications strategy. They combined their knowledge of scripture, which some had acquired in the religious milieu of their childhood, with the searing critique of organized religion they had adopted as teenagers and young adults in the 1960s. Though some still believed in God and others were atheists, most came to see Christianity as an ideological instrument of conquest, colonialism, and repressive state rule in Latin America, distinguishing it from the radical origins of the church of Jesus.

In a decade that made social engagement and personal sacrifice the benchmark of good character, the Young Lords honed in on the church’s abstention from neighborhood problems to challenge its moral standing in the community. They began to disseminate their message on mimeographed flyers distributed outside the church and in subsequent Sunday service visits, during coffee klatsch hour. An early flyer asserted that in blaming people for their suffering rather than blaming the “realities of life,” the church found an excuse to abandon its mission as laid out in Matthew 15:31–40, which they quoted: “I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger you took me in, and when I had no clothes you gave me something to wear.”\textsuperscript{22} The quotation mirrored the Young Lords’ proposed projects at the church.

In an interview with First Source, a publication of the National Council of Churches, Guzmán used the ecumenical language of his reform-minded audience to win them over to the vision of change articulated by the New Left. Echoing the call for “participatory democracy,” he explained that the Young Lords “were upholding an ancient Christian tradition since the time of Paul, that says that anybody that comes to a service has the right to speak up. In true Christianity the rights of the minority have always been respected.” The conflict reflected dynamics of colonial rule, he continued. In depicting the Young Lords as imposters, the FSUMC leaders had inverted reality—it was they who “imposed themselves on the community by putting their church in the middle of the community” and closing “their doors to the people.” To highlight the
political role of organized religion, Guzmán observed that the American troops
Cardinal Francis Spellman had consecrated went on to commit the My Lai Massacre. The cleric's support for the Vietnam War, he concluded, "makes obvious
that there is no separation between church and politics."23

The Young Lords continued to attend Sunday mass, and the congregation
continued to clear out quickly after each service. Despite the pastor's tight rein
on details about the conflict, one of the few congregants who still lived in East Harlem had questions. Even though she bristled at their physical appearance,
Petra Aponte de Pietri was struck by the obstinacy of these young Turks, observations she shared with her children. The widow and mother of five worked in
the local Republican Party office. Under great hardship she raised her children in
the FSUMC. But in the late 1960s, her children and other young adults became
inactive members of the church. At a moment of growing identification with the
grievances and aspirations of their generation, these young congregants were
repelled by the congregation's conservative drift and discomfited by blanket
depictions of East Harlem youth as ruffians. To Mrs. Pietri, the presence of a
new cast of young people at Sunday services raised the possibility of luring her
children back to the fold.

Carmen Pietri remembers her mother's colorful description of the Young
Lords: "Estos muchachos vinieron otra vez a la iglesia, los hiene esos . . . los
peluses que no se peinan, como el loquito de aqui, Pedro." (Those kids came
to church again, you know who, the hippies . . . the hairy ones who don't comb
their hair, like our own crazy Pedro.)24 Mrs. Pietri was referring to her son Pedro
Pietri, then twenty-five years old, a Vietnam veteran and up-and-coming poet.
In referring to the Young Lords as los peluses, Mrs. Pietri was expressing anxiety
about her son's and the Young Lords' explicit embrace of African traits, in this
case the growing out of their Afros. Los peluses was code for blackness in a culture
that had not come to terms with its own legacy of racism. Measures like men
cutting their hair close to their scalp and women straightening the curls and
waves out of their locks with chemical products were integral to upholding the
tenets of respectability, which associated blackness with indecent and shiftless
behavior. By growing their Afros and proclaiming that "black is beautiful," the
Young Lords, like the Black Panthers and many others of African descent, were
challenging the unexamined racist logic of both Puerto Rican and American
cultural norms and their psychologically damaging dimensions among people
of color.

Mrs. Pietri was anxious about these expressions of blackness and judged the
Young Lords with the politics of respectability. Yet, she encouraged her children
to return to the church to meet them. Other congregation members acknowl-
edged that the Young Lords seemed peaceful but expressed fear of their pres-
ence and irreverence. A later report of the conflict commissioned by the United

Prefiguring the New Society at the People's Church
Methodist Church's executive body recounts that on one occasion a Young Lord came with a poster of Jesus Christ carrying an AK-47 rifle over his shoulder.\textsuperscript{15} The poster, which appears in photographs of the Young Lords' office, appropriates Jesus as a man of the people and imposes the politics of armed revolutionary nationalism on his image. Some also claimed that the Young Lords disrupted services by remaining seated when the congregation rose and standing when it was seated, an accusation the Young Lords denied.\textsuperscript{26} Other sources, some partial to the young radicals and others critical of the young radicals, highlighted the group's cordial, respectful disposition and attempts "to play the game by the church's rules," especially during the initial stages of the conflict.\textsuperscript{27}

**Loyalty Sunday Clampdown**

After approximately four weeks of failed attempts to appeal to a congregation that cleared out immediately after Sunday services, the Young Lords planned a different tactic on December 7 during Loyalty Sunday, known also as Testimonial Sunday. In this less structured service, lay members bear witness to their faith from the pulpit and make a financial pledge for the year.\textsuperscript{28}

The Young Lords' decision to press their demands came in the wake of devastating news to the movement three days earlier. On December 4, 1969, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, two beloved and respected Black Panther leaders, were killed during a 4:00 A.M. police siege of the home where the Panthers lived collectively in Chicago. The deadly assault laid bare the potential consequences of political activity for radicals of color and raised the stakes for the New York Young Lords. Leaders of the group had met Hampton two months earlier during a trip to Chicago. The siege had been carried out with information provided to the police by an FBI informant who passed as a Panther member. And according to autopsy reports and the eyewitness account of Hampton's fiancée, who slept next to him as the police entered, Hampton had been killed execution style. Like Emmett Till's mother, who held an open-casket funeral to let the world see evidence of the fourteen-year-old's murder, the Black Panthers opened their blood-spattered, bullet-riddled house for journalists and the Chicago community to tour. On-scene evidence challenged the claim that police were under heavy gunfire from the Black Panthers and demonstrated that all but one bullet were shot by the police from outside.\textsuperscript{29}

The Young Lords seized the rare opportunity at the forthcoming Loyalty Sunday service to sound the alarm about state-sponsored violence, while linking it to systemic childhood hunger in East Harlem and the massive U.S. bombing of Vietnam. The group also needed a sanctuary to protect its members. Its Loyalty Sunday insistence that the church host its breakfast program, was a
well-thought-out tactical move. A murderous police raid would be difficult to execute at a house of worship without public scandal.

In the struggle over space for a breakfast program, the church itself acquired symbolic significance as a political bunker, staging ground for dissent, and tribune of the oppressed. Pastor Carrazana, who had witnessed and opposed the radicalization of the Cuban Revolution, anticipated the development and took measures to prevent it. Approximately thirty to forty Young Lords and their supporters arrived early at the FSUMC for Testimonial Sunday.

Amid a tense atmosphere, the Young Lords' talented orator Felipe Luciano—flanked by approximately six of his comrades assigned as protection—rose from a pew near the altar, seeking to articulate the Young Lords' request to the congregation. As Luciano began speaking, Reverend Carrazana was already signaling to the organist to lead the chorus in the singing of "Onward Christian Soldiers." Instinctively, a Young Lord moved to unplug the organ, to keep Luciano's words from being drowned out, but was intercepted by an undercover officer of the Twenty-Fifth Precinct, Victor Badilla, who walked over to Luciano and told him that "we'll give you speaking time if you step down from the pulpit." Despite Badilla's attempt at deescalation, the incensed pastor yelled that Luciano should not be allowed to speak. Reading this as a signal to disband the protesters, Officer Badilla ordered reinforcements on his walkie-talkie. At the same time, Arthur A. Baller, a police captain not in uniform, emerged from the pews and demanded that the group leave or risk arrest. According to the Lords, Baller did not identify himself as a police officer. Whether or not he did, the situation spun out of control.

Accounts of the clash differ considerably. Police affidavits claim that the Young Lords were "engaging in tumultuous and violent conduct" at the front of the church, "flailing their arms and shouting," and that four police officers were injured in the course of the disturbance. The undercover officer, Captain Baller, reported that while he was informing Felipe Luciano of his arrest for refusing to leave, another Young Lord attacked him with a chair. Other officers described witnessing their own being hit by the Young Lords. Juan Gonzalez allegedly jumped on the back of patrolman G. Alberti, who was hit on the shoulder and treated at the Joint and Disease Hospital. Joseph Hill allegedly hit patrolman Ronald Taylor, described as an informant, with a metal pipe. Patrolman Taylor had been assigned to protect Captain Baller and, it was stated, intentionally took a blow directed at Baller. Patrolman Taylor was reportedly knocked to the ground and suffered injuries to "the back and near his groin." Another officer was allegedly hit with a wooden club. In another account, Patrolman Taylor reported that after he placed Young Lord Denise Oliver under arrest, she fled and he had to "chase her for a block and half" before apprehending her.
Depositions recorded within an hour of the incident by National Lawyers Guild attorneys, the Young Lords' legal counsel, offer a different perspective. According to their notes, the clash between police and the Young Lords ensued when Luciano was “dragged down from the [communion] railing” and hit over the head with a club while four or five police officers surrounded him as the congregation continued to sing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Carmen Pietri's grandmother, a parishioner, tried to hit Luciano with a candelabra.

Remembrances of one of the youngest members arrested on that day, Carlito Rovira, convey the Young Lords' point of view. He explained that there was an immediate attempt by nightstick-wielding police to remove the Young Lords from the church, which led the group to close ranks at the altar: “Three words describe what took place: puño, patada, y candela [flailing fists, kicks, and rumble]. There was complete and total chaos, and all you saw was hands and NYPD [New York Police Department] nightsticks flying all over the place and people making the sign of the cross as if Satan had intruded in this peaceful mass. Meanwhile, the Young Lords were being beaten up by the police.” Charles Kropinicki, a Catholic seminarian who attended the service with the Young Lords, gave a similar interpretation. He insisted that the police marched in with “sticks held ready” and immediately lunged at the group. When male members of the Young Lords tried to defend their female counterparts, he reported, the struggle intensified. The women of the Young Lords, however, had the final say, asserting that they defended themselves and their male counterparts. Meanwhile the agitated parishioner Petra Aponte de Pietri managed to phone her daughter Carmen from the church, imploring her to come over, “The cops were in there busting heads because the Young Lords interrupted the service again.”

After the altar clash, most of the group ran out of the church and past another line of police waiting outside, escaping their grip, probably because the snow on the ground made it difficult for police to apprehend them. COINTELPRO documents report that the Young Lords sent immediate word to the New York Black Panthers that approximately half their members had been arrested, asking that they “send over some Panthers to the 125th Street station and to find a lawyer.”

A total of thirteen Young Lords, eight men and five women, were arrested: David Velasquez, Elena Gonzalez, Sonia Ivany, Joseph Hill, Mirta Gonzalez, Felipe Luciano, Erika Szczesny, Salvador Diaz, Benjamin Cruz, Denise Oliver, Carlito Rovira, Juan Romero, and Jose Diaz. They were variously charged with riot, obstruction of religious services, conspiracy, felonious assault in the second degree, possession of a dangerous weapon (a pipe), criminal trespass, and resisting arrest. A total of five Young Lords were hospitalized. Luciano suffered a fractured arm, and Benjamin Martinez received a head gash. One police of-
ficer suffered a fractured hand, and three others reported pain. When Carmen Pietri and her brother Frank arrived on the scene, they found an empty nave and "blood all over the church."  

Airing Dirty Laundry  
The Young Lords' evolving struggle with the church was one of thousands of diverse campaigns spearheaded by countless local groups. Their direct actions over the course of the decade played a major role in shifting public opinion—on the causes of racial and economic inequality, the Vietnam War, women's rights, gay liberation, and beyond—and winning reforms. Although the New York Young Lords led the period's most prolonged protest against a church, they were not the only activists whose protests targeted religious institutions for "aiding and abetting" oppression. Seven months earlier, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader James Forman led the first and best-known of such actions on May 4, 1969. He unfurled the Black Manifesto at the progressive Riverside Church during services, demanding monetary reparations from white churches for their role in the enslavement and exploitation of black Americans. The action encouraged others, who over the next two years, staged similar protests. Less than two weeks after the Forman declaration, the Chicago Young Lords used militant protest to compel the McCormick Seminary in Lincoln Park to disburse funds it had promised to a coalition of community groups for a low-income housing and neighborhood beautification development. As discussed in chapter 1, the Chicago actions led to concession on most of the coalition's demands. The New York Young Lords followed in the footsteps of Chicago.  

Against this backdrop, Reverend Carrazana's decision to call in the police on December 7 proved a critical error. Word of "the bust," as the Young Lords called it, spread quickly in the press and in religious communities. Religious officials from a diverse range of denominations condemned the church's leadership. The decision to invite the police to "physically remove the Young Lords from the church" was a terrible mistake, according to black American clergyman Robert Chapman, who said the police behaved not like men but "like what many militants are prone to call them."  

Those who voiced immediate support for the Young Lords included Rev. David Garcia of St. Mark's Episcopal Church on the Lower East Side and black radical Baptist minister Lucius Walker, an associate of Martin Luther King who supported James Forman's call for monetary reparations from white churches to black Americans. Other religious figures denounced the NYPD's violent intervention in a conflict over serving breakfast to hungry children and warned against the specter of collaboration between conservative houses of worship and government forces. The public record does not show whether or not Reverend
Carrazana was aware of the latest wave of state repression against the Black Panthers in New York and Chicago. However, his decision departed from the conciliatory disposition to protests adopted by churches in cities like New York.51 Others with more traditional views also took a stand against the violence. Late 1960s radicals were raising thorny questions about the complicity of long-standing American churches in slavery, their financial holdings, and unmet responsibilities to the poor. Congregants clamored for greater transparency, democracy, and racial diversification. Seminarians, young clergymen, women's groups, and many black members demanded that the church yoke spiritual ministering to problems of social and political import. In the context of growing scrutiny, the senior district leadership of the Methodist Church in New York refused to file criminal charges against the Young Lords and intervened to post bail and pay the medical bills of those injured.52 They understood the political fallout of these developments better than Reverend Carrazana.

For its part, the YLO was emboldened in its resolve to use the church for its breakfast program. A Young Lord captured the fallout of the police bust at the church: “When blood is shed and you see broken bones, it makes you more determined. And that's precisely what happened to us.”53 The statement recalled the widespread radicalization occasioned by state repression against protesters captured retrospectively in images of police dogs, fire hoses, and the gassing of protesters, the press corps, and doctors from Chicago to Birmingham.54 Determined to fill the church with supporters the Sunday after the December 7 bust, the Young Lords amplified their propaganda campaign and flyer distribution routine on the corner across from the church. Righteous anger emboldened them. They added impromptu speeches and sharpened their language, denouncing the December 7 incident as a “police riot.”

In their bold recasting of the police as perpetrators of mob violence, the Young Lords inverted the term's underlying assumptions and seized its symbolic power to dramatize their story. As revolutionaries, they were honing sensibilities they acquired early in life—as their parents' cultural and language intermediaries—and putting them to political use. At their best, the Young Lords had a keen grasp of the power of language, symbols, and stories to enlarge their message. In an interview from the period, Pablo Guzmán credited the Reverend David Kirk of Emmaus House for illuminating the character of police actions at the church in a telegram to the group, in which the reverend also remarked that "if Christ was alive today he would be a Young Lord."55

Within the FSUMC, the crisis loosened the pastor's grip on his congregants. A small cohort questioned his judgment and voiced long-held misgivings about the church's insularity. These and other congregants urged the pastor to reach out to young parishioners who had become inactive in their late teenage years, but whose generational insights might help defuse the conflict. Distressed by
calls from the city’s dissenting ministers and the specter of another encounter with the Young Lords, the pastor conceded. He invited young parishioners to the coming Sunday service where the Young Lords were once again expected, on December 14.

One young parishioner, Joe Pietri, who arrived early, remembers the scene humorously: “The media was everywhere. And everyone was playing to the media on both sides. Felipe Luciano was naturally Mr. Charismatic and Mr. Eloquence, a media darling. And there were others from the church who talked to the media too. It was a circus outside.” Approximately 500 people—the majority Young Lords sympathizers—lined up outside waiting to cram into the church. This was not what Reverend Carrazana had imagined, but warned by the New York Methodist Church leadership to avoid escalating the conflict, he did not block their entry. Near the end of the service, after a tense whispered exchange with the Young Lords, the pastor agreed to meet with a small delegation. One Young Lord was allowed to address the congregation, stating, “We did not come to ask for money; we only ask for the use of space in this church.” At the end of the service, sympathizers remained in their pews during the three-hour meeting that followed among the Young Lords’ five Central Committee leaders, Young Lords cadre Denise Oliver, the church board, the pastor, and the previously inactive young parishioners. The meeting began with tension and ended with acrimony. In their role as unofficial mediators, the church youth struggled with both sides. Carmen Pietri explains: “You got this Cuban minister, who was chased out of his homeland for political reasons. Pro-Batista probably. And in comes—Felipe, who was raised in a Pentecostal church and knew to go into a church properly dressed. My beef with the Young Lords is that if you want to be camouflaged in a Protestant church, your best camouflage is a shirt and tie . . . but they came in with Afros and berets looking like the children of Che Guevara. The clash was immediate. [All along, Carrazana] must have been freaking out, thinking he was back in Cuba. They were not gonna get to square one under no circumstance, because of what they were wearing. So from day one the Young Lords messed up.” Despite Carmen’s disagreement with the Young Lords’ “getup,” she was struck that the board members kicked off the meeting with the denigrating descriptions of Puerto Ricans she heard growing up.

According to Carmen these were later reiterated by congregation members, Sister Jiménez, who pulled her aside and said in Spanish: “You know why they don’t have money? Because I see them buying beer in the bodega with their welfare check instead of buying breakfast for their children. And then they want us to feed their children breakfast.” Carmen emphasized, “And this was a Christian lady speaking.”

The Young Lords countered that the church had simply repackaged, for religious audiences, state propaganda, blaming the poor for conditions out of their
control. They added that Puerto Ricans were driven out of their homeland by U.S. economic policies and that racism, dilapidated schools, and unemployment were the sources of their woes. Carmen hadn’t heard anyone of her generation speak of poverty and migration as passionately and cogently as she did that day. “Here I am being exposed to [the arguments] of a group of educated Puerto Ricans who were pissed off about situations that I’m pissed off about.” To her, it was “one big education! I didn’t completely agree with their tactics . . . but everything they said made sense.”61 She and the other youth parishioners were treading on dangerous ground. The same youth group met again the next day with select board members, voicing the idea that perhaps they “could implement and carry out certain programs and work with the community in general.” They were met with resentment, accused of sympathizing with the Young Lords’ arguments, scolded for having aired the church’s “dirty laundry in public,” branded as “Judases,” and excluded from subsequent negotiations.62

In an interview with First Source later that week, Pablo Guzmán summarized the political divisions between the Young Lords and the board: “The people of the Board of the First Spanish Church told us that we were Satan, and that if poor people wanted they could educate themselves . . . Their idea is that Puerto Rican people dig being poor, and that they made it (through hard work) so why can’t everybody else . . . They think that Puerto Rican women on welfare spend their money on beer, they play the numbers and that they really dig the gutter. It took a whole lot to hold our tempers.”63 The board presumed that the poor brought poverty onto themselves through their lack of personal drive and work ethic. Supposedly driven by wayward values and irresponsible behavior, this subgroup of Puerto Ricans was cast as different. The reasoning implied that the poor did not deserve sympathy and that help would enable shiftlessness and deepen dependence—all of which justified the board’s refusal to allow use of the church to feed poor children and offer classes to the community.

These were the oldest ideas about poverty in the United States. Promulgated by English colonists who believed the poor lacked the moral character, hard work, and discipline required for salvation, they also drove the logic of nineteenth-century poorhouse reformers who responded to the growth of poverty with proposals to institutionalize the poor.64 In the 1960s, amid a new wave of displacement occasioned by postwar economic and demographic changes, these ideas gained widespread political currency when social scientists developed a theory of culture to explain poverty. They argued that low-income people were trapped in a self-perpetuating “culture of poverty,” a web of interlocking pathological behaviors that hindered their economic advancement. Developed by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in his 1959 study of Mexicans and reiterated by political scientist Michael Harrington in his 1962 bestseller, The Other America, the theory emphasized the cultural effects of social and economic exclusion
on the social fabric of poor communities. It argued that the poor engaged in deviant behaviors that, when passed down to their children, reproduced inter-generational cycles of poverty. Harrington wrote, "There is ... a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a worldview of the poor. To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates the society." Despite Lewis's admiration for his subjects' resilience, he chastised Puerto Ricans for valuing "acting out more than thinking out, self-expression more than self-constraint, pleasure more than productivity, spending more than saving, personal loyalty more than impersonal justice." Counterposed to the Protestant ethic—the founding system of values routinely deployed by the country's ruling elite to assert social control—these value-laden judgments of the poor distorted their humanity and classified them as a threat to the country's social and moral fabric. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan penned a more analytical study of the black family. It underscored the crisis of unemployment among black men and centuries of discrimination, but also argued that other fundamental problems were at work: a "tangle of pathology," out-of-wedlock children, welfare dependency, and the authoritarian dominance of black matriarchs. These oversimplified representations of people living in poverty bore little resemblance to the distinctive protagonists in East Harlem's unfolding drama: the Young Lords with their vision of a new world and the hardworking Puerto Rican worshipers with whom they were embattled.

Writing on the heels of the communist-targeted Red Scare, these writers emphasized descriptions of poverty over analyses of its root causes, partly to avoid the association of their studies with Marxism. Their goal was to rehabilitate a sense of public mission among white middle-class Americans, steeped in the culture of consumerism. In the end, these studies imparted academic legitimacy to old ideas linking poverty to pathological behavior and validated the erroneous public discourse that poverty was primarily a problem of people of color. Above all, the studies formalized a new and more resilient racism wherein culture replaced biological explanations for inferior social status. The Young Lords' battle with the FSUMC is one of many examples, largely unknown, of how people of color used protest and direct action as a crowbar into public debate and to challenge the logic of these enduring arguments.

The Young Lords returned to the church on Sunday, December 21. COINTELPRO documents note that they were not allowed to speak and that at the end of the service they took their message outside into the icy December cold, where Felipe Luciano gave a moving speech next to the church. "The parishioners have not stayed.... So, basically, we're talking to ourselves," he said. Luciano's speech expressed a range of emotions: an earnest commitment to the idea of a beloved community and a sense that the parishioners were betraying the young. "They turn their backs on babies ... turn their backs on young people...."
who are saying to them, yes, we agree, you are our mothers and fathers, yes, we want to work in cooperation with you."

Those witnessing the conflict might well have marveled at the role reversal orchestrated by the Young Lords. Luciano warned, "The problems of this world, much less East Harlem, will not be solved by people being adamant, being like stones. They will be resolved when you are open, when you are flexible, when you are receptive in some way. All we are asking for is for them to allow our babies—not mine, our babies—call it socialism if you want—to allow our babies to come inside and eat a hot breakfast.

According to Luciano, the FSUMC congregation adopted "the whole American scene of vertical mobility, that you move out of the problem of the ghetto, you move out of the sensitivity that you once had." He linked their world view to that of the "Sadducees and the Pharisees ... the elders of the tribe of Israel" whom Jesus condemned and reminded his audience that "[Jesus] actually went into the church and beat them! And you talk about us being violent ... he told them, 'Get out of here you moneylenders, you are filth! All you are thinking of is filthy lucre, you are not thinking about the spirit of the law.'"

To Luciano, the problem of want in East Harlem was inextricably tied to the spiritual crisis among Puerto Ricans produced by colonial subjugation on their island nation. Central to the project of Puerto Rican spiritual salvation, in his view, was ensuring that "our babies understand the nature of imperialism, understand the true nature of their country, Puerto Rico, understand the independence movement in Puerto Rico. We have Puerto Rican children who don't know who their revolutionary heroes are, who don't know their language, who do not know their culture, and we will die." Felipe's speech on repression and political economy is an example of oratory elevated to art. His remarks inspired participants to stay the course and more. Impassioned, emotional, vulnerable, and honest, moments like these conveyed the humanism of socialist politics and presented a portrait of Puerto Ricans diametrically opposed to their one-dimensional portrayals in the media.

Violent police repression at their protests and potential fatalities weighed heavily on the Young Lords' collective conscience. They told the press that they "did not seek confrontations with the police, because that would be tantamount to suicide." In an interview with El Diario La Prensa, Luciano explained that the Young Lords "never threatened anyone with physical violence. We don't carry weapons. The funds we use for our programs are obtained through private donations. The food we distribute during our children's breakfast programs we obtain through written requests to the chain stores that benefit from the Puerto Rican community that buys their products.

In the context of the recent assassination of Fred Hampton, death was a real possibility for these radicals. Their only protection was broad public support.
Hundreds rallied in their support since December 7, and thousands were following the story closely, quietly rooting for the team with the purple berets. With his right arm in a cast and a patch on his head, Luciano appealed to Young Lords supporters to commit to what he believed would be a protracted struggle:

"The Young Lords will not be moved. We may lose your support, we don't know. ... With the first fires of enthusiasm, everyone is in the church [but] as time begins to pass, support begins to peter out. But we're going to stay here. We want you here because ... you are going to keep us from getting killed. And don't take it lightly. ... I don't know how I'll be able to live if one of our people is killed. ... What do you tell a mother whose 15-year-old boy, who is a member of the Young Lords, is killed by a .38 Smith-Wesson bullet. What do you tell her? He died for the revolution? ... All she sees is the loss of her son. ... That's why we need you here."77

The COINTELPRO informant for that day reported that the Young Lords participated in the services and their demonstration ended "in a peaceful manner" with "no incidents or arrests."78

The Offensive

On Sunday, December 28, the Young Lords leadership placed children at the helm of a silent procession. It began just outside their office and marched into the chapel of the FSUMC.79 The scene mirrored the controversial use of children protesters in Birmingham six years earlier, which galvanized support for the civil rights movement globally when the city's public safety commissioner fire-hosed, unleashed dogs on, and jailed many of the children.80 In both sites the symbolic participation of youngsters reflected the movements' hopes for a better society.

At the East Harlem church, the Young Lords arrived early and sat quietly in the pews. It seemed a reprise of previous exchanges. At the end of the service, the Young Lords' minister of education, Juan Gonzalez, rose to address the congregation. As if on cue, the group's defense committee also stood and with railroad spikes nailed shut the church doors from the inside.81 As the Young Lords moved to consolidate their position, parishioners turned their heads in dread, and an ominous pall befell the room.82 Gonzalez announced that the Young Lords were occupying the building and that the pastor was to blame. Carmen Pietri recalls an exchange with Juan Gonzalez. When she asked what was going on, he responded: "We're not talking any more. No more dialogue." She was devastated because in an earlier meeting at the Young Lords' office, when the group proposed a church occupation, the church youth argued against it, and the Young Lords assured them that they would not occupy the building.

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Uncertain of "what was going to happen," Carmen later described the congregation's detention as a traumatic moment. Meanwhile, the eyes of judgment focused on the church youth: "Mira, te lo dije, mira lo que esos pelusos le están haciendo a la iglesia." (Look at what's happening, we told you! Look at what those kids with the Afros are doing to the church.) Joe Pietri remembers that Juan "Fi" Ortiz yelled out from the altar that the FSUMC was now rechristened the People's Church.83

Others soon arrived with reinforcement "tools of the occupation," including martial arts nunchaku sticks for defense in case of a police attack.84 That morning, Bella August, the trusted white supporter and psychology doctoral student at Metropolitan Hospital who participated in the Lead Offensive, was sent on a blind mission to the Young Lords' office, where Denise Oliver gave her materials to deliver to the church at a designated time. Like a santera priestess, Oliver placed chains over Bella's head and around her neck. But unlike the colorful beaded necklaces of Yoruba initiation ceremonies, these were steel industrial chains, concealed by her heavy coat. As Bella walked to the church she thought longingly about her own daughter and feared the violence that might befall the radicals if they chose to use these chains in battle. She was ushered through the one door that had not been nailed shut. As instructed, she handed the chains to Mickey Melendez. To her immense relief, he clarified how they would be used.85

Like the autoworkers in Flint, Michigan who worked at the General Motors Fisher Body Plant, occupied the factory and welded steel frames around each of its doors in 1936 during the first sit-down strike in U.S. history, the Young Lords reinforced the nailed church doors with chains to block the police.86

So began the Young Lords' Church Offensive.

Nailing shut the FSUMC doors was both sacrilegious and liberatory. The nailing of the doors recalled the suffering of Jesus on the cross and the FSUMC's collective penance for straying from the path of God. To the Methodist leadership and to Carrazana, these developments signaled a violation of constitutionally protected religious freedom that evoked the moment in 1680 when Puritan authorities nailed shut the doors of a Baptist church in Boston. To others, the Young Lords' actions might well have evoked the moment when Martin Luther launched the reformation by nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to a church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The Young Lords invited the parishioners to stay and join their revolutionary ministering that evening. But the parishioners wanted out. Within an hour, those who wished to leave the building exited through the single, manned door that throughout the occupation remained accessible for those who wished to leave. The Young Lords also shepherded children sympathizers out of the building. By then, they had negotiated an agreement: the pastor, who was in close contact with the NYPD, assured the Young Lords there would be no police raid. The
activists' demands now included a space for a liberation school and a daycare center; they stated that they would leave only after officials granted them space to feed free breakfast to approximately fifty to seventy-five children. As parishioners filed out and walked down the church steps, about thirty-five remained outside singing hymns in Spanish. They joined a growing crowd on Lexington Avenue, where police had shut down traffic, to witness an occupation of a place of worship by a group of Puerto Rican radicals.

The church occupation risked widespread condemnation by churchgoing residents of East Harlem. But the Young Lords' graceful execution thrust the organization into the national spotlight and highlighted its nerve and the political savvy of the group. The success of their occupation depended on a sophisticated deconstruction of church ideology. Aware of the potential backlash in a predominantly churchgoing community of recent migrants, the Young Lords prepared to make their case to the community. Led by Pablo Guzmán, later that afternoon—and every morning thereafter for the duration of the occupation—they held a press conference in the main chapel to keep the community abreast of their activities. At the press conference, Juan Gonzalez called on his ten years' Catholic alter-boy service to elevate their message in the battle of ideas. Citing scripture, he argued that the East Harlem church had forgotten the teachings of the historic Jesus:

It's just incredible to us how a simple thing like a request to grant a space has resulted in so much trouble in East Harlem. Our only understanding of it is that religion, organized religion has so enslaved our people, has so destroyed their minds in thinking of salvation in the hereafter, that they refuse to deal with the conditions they have now and the oppression they have now. . . . It's amazing to us how people can talk about Jesus who walked among the poor, the poorest, the most oppressed, the prostitutes, the drug addicts of his time; that these people who claim to be Christian have forgotten that it was Jesus who said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

From the Young Lords' perspective, nailing the church doors inverted the public crucifixion of Jesus, the revolutionary and political prisoner who led a movement of the poor that challenged the power of the Roman Empire, its colonial rule of Palestine, and the corruption, wealth, and power of local elites. Under the Young Lords' leadership, the church would be open to grassroots communion, led by the oppressed, and driven by a commitment to the material and spiritual well-being of the surrounding community. This reimagining of the church's role was already a movement in Latin America. There, it embodied the teachings of the Brazilian teacher and philosopher Paulo Freire, who sought
to find practical applications of the teachings of Frantz Fanon, the Martinican psychiatrist and fierce defender of the Algerian Revolution. Fanon's theoretical writings on colonization's impact on the colonized transformed the canon of Western social and political thought. At the press conference, the Young Lords called on New Yorkers to support and participate in their daily medley of activities at the church, including a medical clinic, a lead and anemia testing drive, the free children's breakfast program, a series of political education classes, and nightly cultural events. By merging militant action with projects, seen as prefiguring a new socialist society in the present, the Young Lords, like the Black Panthers, expanded the vision and work of the U.S. revolutionary Left.

Mayor John V. Lindsay immediately deployed an aide to the scene. According to Sid Davidoff, the mayor's field manager, the occupation presented Lindsay with a significant challenge. With media buzzing around the church, news of another bloody scene with protesters and police would surely travel around the world. It would damage the image of his liberal administration and his aspirations to higher office. There were also false rumors that the Young Lords were holding a priest hostage, even though Reverend Carrazana had left the church of his own accord. The mayor wanted to intervene personally, but Davidoff advised against it.

Over the course of the many conflicts of the late 1960s, the mayor's team had developed a policy of working with municipal representatives whom aggrieved parties "could recognize" and relate to. Davidoff suggested that Arnie Segarra, the mayor's Puerto Rican aide and ambassador in the Puerto Rican community, "go in there and begin a negotiation." Segarra had been among a small group of young men who attempted to redirect and quell the violence of the East Harlem riots of 1967. That Segarra was also "tall... and an extremely good-looking guy" whom "women loved" made his identity as a local sports hero turned political insider even more alluring. Segarra was joined by Rev. Norman Eddy, the director of the Interfaith Council of Churches located near Columbia University.

Given that Segarra had corresponded with the Young Lords earlier during the Garbage Offensive, he was able to talk his way into the church with a portable phone powered by a mammoth battery pack. Davidoff reported sending Segarra in with clear instructions: "When you go into that situation you get the lay of the land, ten minutes to fifteen minutes. You call out. Tell me what it is I need to start working on." However, in the course of discussion between the Young Lords and Segarra, the unexpected happened. Davidoff reported: "A half hour goes by, forty minutes go by and I finally get him on the two-way and I said, 'What the fuck are you doing there? What is going on?' He says, 'We're talking.' I say, 'What are you talking about?' He says, 'Well I think they're right and I'm staying here with them.' I couldn't believe this was happening to me. This was
the worst day of my life. I didn’t even know what they were right about. At which point I said, ‘Arnie, you’re fired. If I ever see you again, I’ll probably arrest you if I can figure out how to do it.’”

When media outlets asked how they would respond to a police siege or a court injunction, minister of information Pablo Guzmán replied, “We will do whatever is tactically sound.” According to COINTELPRO documents, a press conference the following day in the basement of the church was “covered by three TV networks, Associated Press, United Press, and local newspapers.”

At one of the press conferences, Guzmán proclaimed that the Young Lords “were one with the Cuban revolution” and supported independence for all Latin American countries and the building of a socialist society. Guzmán continued, “Even though we’re revolutionaries, what we do we do with love; to a lot of people there is a contradiction between love and revolution, but Che Guevara said true revolution is guided by feelings of love.”

Holding It Down

The Young Lords’ high-profile actions at the East Harlem church drew a steady stream of media coverage spotlighting facets of Puerto Rican life previously unseen by most New Yorkers. Video clips and images on the evening news and in newspapers captured the Young Lords’ impassioned project and political vision. They called their occupation the Church Offensive, which, like the Garbage Offensive, nodded to the National Liberation Front’s 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam. The action evidenced the group’s power to quickly shift public discourse through strategic messaging and deliberate leveraging of the era’s new media. Interlaced with the teachings of the historic Jesus, their compelling narrative blamed capitalism, colonialism, and complicit church establishments for social problems and in the process dislodged culture-of-poverty theories from local discourse.

Inside the occupied church, the Young Lords’ programs held wide appeal. They collaborated with professionals and community residents to feed, heal, and educate the people. From clergymen and elected officials to pop stars and civic leaders, the controversy drew diverse voices into the fray. It propelled multiple generations of Puerto Ricans out of the shadows and into the public square, at the church and beyond—a grassroots awakening that cohered self-definition for many and strengthened the place of Puerto Ricans in the polity.

Images projected in the mainstream media were radical. They unseated long-standing distortions of Puerto Ricans as junkies, knife-wielding thugs, welfare dependents, and violent rioters. Sustained for weeks after the occupation’s end, these new representations helped civilize New Yorkers’ perceptions of the city’s second-largest racialized group. The church occupation was part of a diverse
wave of New Left activists of colors’ actions across the country, that changed the
way overt manifestations of racism came to be viewed in U.S. society—one of
the major sociocultural imprints of the 1960s movements on American history.

The waves of reporters, curious visitors, East Harlem residents, police inform-
ants, Young Lords supporters, and self-appointed interlocutors that visited the
church first had to pass muster at the front door. Members of the YLO’s security
ministry were stationed there in shifts and at each of the nailed doors. They
searched for weapons and drugs and outlined the occupation’s protocols. Visi-
tors were asked to respect the altar and spaces of worship, to exercise care with
the furniture and in common spaces, and to refrain from behavior that could
be construed as desecrating the church. Smoking was not allowed inside. Most
who entered availed themselves of the Young Lords’ services or delivered food,
medical supplies, books, posters, flyers, or piles of clothing, which the group
requested for distribution to the community. The group’s military-style occupa-
tion involved a complex operation requiring high levels of strategy, organization,
and discipline. From their daily briefings and their twenty-four-hour security
detail to the consolidation of a support network and preparations for their daily
health, education, and children’s breakfast programs, the Young Lords’ operation
was meticulously well thought out.

By day, the church had the feel of a well-run school and hospital. Even critical
accounts of the occupation lauded the discipline of the group’s daily routine:
“At the end of each afternoon regular activity stopped and all the hands (in-
cluding visitors) were put to work mopping and cleaning the premises.”99 The
New York Post reported that the Young Lords “held the church like a fort.”100
One of the dozens of letters the Young Lords wrote and delivered to local shop
owners requesting food donation for the breakfast program gives a sense of
their methodical approach and organizational capacity. In it, Young Lord Hiram
Maristany writes, “Unfortunately we did not receive a responce [sic] to our let-
ter. Since it has been over Two (2) weeks, we are again writing to you because
we would appreciate an answer in order to meet with you to relate our program
to you first hand.”101

They kept passersby informed with a loudspeaker affixed to the building’s
exterior on which they played the speeches of Malcolm X, Pedro Albizu Cam-
pos, and Fred Hampton, among others, interspersed with political music. This
included Eddie Palmieri’s “Justicia,” whose lyrics demanded justice for Puerto
Ricans and black Americans; the pro-independence music of Pepe y Flora; and
Daniel Santos’s banned nationalist album, Grito de Laredo.102 The press referenced
the Impressions’ “Mighty, Mighty, Spade and Whitey.”103 Written by Curtis
Mayfield, the song’s bold lyrics warned against American global power and the
consequences of racial polarization domestically. Although the Young Lords
defended black power for its assertion of black human dignity in the face of

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supremacist calls for white power, the song's refrain must have spoken to the
group's experience at the margins of the country's rigid race paradigm: "And
mighty, mighty, spade and whitey / your black and white power / is gonna be
a crumbling tower."

Midway through the occupation, an in-depth radio segment produced by
KPFA in Berkeley, California reported that the Young Lords had provided hun-
dreds of free meals to children. It took its listeners behind the scenes of the
operation. Young Lord Luis Nuñez, a former Vietnam medic, ran the kitchen
in the occupied church; he explained that the Young Lords' health ministry
consulted with nutritionists who set "standards" on the "right amount of starch,
vitamins, and nutrients" of every meal, including for the signature children's
breakfast program. Their objective was to offer poor children the dignity and
satisfaction of eating like "a rich man" and the "chance to feel what it's like to eat
bacon and eggs and juice and cocoa and bread and jelly and all sorts of things
that they don't get at home." 104 In New York, both the Young Lords and Black
Panthers were known for serving bacon, which many poor children and their
families considered a treat. 105 The print media reported that the Young Lords
had performed for children "a revised miracle of the loaves and fishes." 106 The
program included an early morning political education class geared to children
and their parents. 107

After breakfast, the Young Lords prepared for an inflow of East Harlem visi-
tors seeking medical care at the church's free health clinic or screening for tu-
berculosis, anemia, and childhood lead poisoning. The improvised clinic was
staffed by approximately two dozen progressive doctors, nurses, medical tech-
nicians, and interns and residents from nearby Metropolitan Hospital—among
them its chief medical resident, Gene Straus. 108 These included some of the
same medical professionals with whom the Young Lords conducted the door-
to-door medical visits discussed in the previous chapter, and others, such as Dr.
Richard Stone, were assigned to the church by the hospital as a concession to
the Young Lords. 109 The operation offered this medical cohort the rare oppor-
tunity to erect and manage community-based medical care that implemented
protocols for personalized patient treatment. Counterposed to the impersonal,
high-volume atmosphere of a large hospital, the change of venue alone facilitated
a more humane exchange between patient and doctor.

Liberation School

In the evenings, the Young Lords ran a liberation school. The experience and
skill sets of key members facilitated its development. Denise Oliver, for example,
had been a full-time instructor at the University of the Streets, an antipoverty
project for high school dropouts, and Iris Morales and Juan Gonzalez had previ-

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ously developed an internal, thirteen-week political education curriculum for the group's membership. Set on the larger and more dynamic stage of the occupation, the school challenged the group to diversify the content and format of its political message. Puerto Rican and black American history anchored the curriculum. In their quest to debunk Eurocentrism, the Young Lords highlighted the significance of people of color the world over as agents of change, emphasizing the struggle against U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico and the history of black resistance. They responded to the failure of public school curricula to make sense of the socioeconomic troubles of East Harlem by instructing on current events. They also examined negative media representations of Puerto Ricans and black Americans as criminals and welfare dependents. Screenings and discussions of such films as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* also formed part of the evening education routine.

Pastor Carrazana saw the school as a personal affront. New York's Methodist Church leaders deemed its communist-inflected instruction irreconcilable with Christianity and one of the clearest expressions of the occupation's violation of the constitutionally protected right to religious freedom. Rev. Robert Chapman denounced this narrow legal interpretation of the conflict as "self-interested" and one that church officials did not believe themselves. Criticizing its underlying assumption—that "the church and politics exist on separate planets"—he underscored the conditions that brought the school into being: the systematic erasure in public education of the history and culture of "non-white American ethnic and racial groups." The reverend drew out the human consequences. He wrote: "Its practice is psychological genocide, in that its implications, to such groups, are: a) you really do not exist, or [if you exist] b) you have no worth at all and, c) the only value you can have as a person is attained when you absorb what we are, and become like us. . . . Even if it had an honest intention so to do, however, the offer would be profane, since a man's worth is in what he essentially is, in and of himself, not in and as someone else."

Reverend Chapman observed further that while the conditions that fueled the Young Lords' actions might have been beyond the experiential comprehension of the Cuban pastor, the Church had abdicated its higher responsibilities. Its posture, in fact, contributed to the "continuation of the crushing of humanity." In contrast, the liberation school offered an antidote to such dehumanization through explicit analyses of poverty and racism and recovery of the histories, cultures, and struggles of the dispossessed. The reverend, thus, defended the Young Lords' right "to teach their reasons why Puerto Rico should remain free from United States statehood . . . and what America is functionally, rather than rhetorically, to Puerto Ricans, and to other non-white peoples at home and abroad."

To those confronting oppression the world over, the transmission and pro-
duction of knowledge had become as integral to the contest for power and dignity as strategies of resistance and war. The school proved to be one of the most controversial initiatives, arguably for rendering analyses of history at odds with canonical interpretations and dominant ideology and for flouting academic conventions regulating the instruction and production of knowledge. It also unleashed a public debate beyond the question of where children should go to school or who should control school curriculum and the staff hiring. The term “liberation” itself raised uncomfortable questions about the “American Creed.” The real danger, Reverend Chapman warned, lay in the consequences of not finding systemic solutions to these questions: the failure to grant oppressed groups “self-respect, self-definition and dignity” would lead America to enact “more repressive measures against them . . . [and] to consider the final solution to her racial problem.”[116] The reverend’s predictions were not off the mark.

**Staging a Nuyorican Identity**

At 6:00 P.M. each evening, the Young Lords served dinner prepared by local Puerto Rican women, including some of their mothers, who brought pots of food or cooked meals. After 7:30, Young Lords discipline surrendered to creative revelry. Audible from a block away, the captivating sound of conga drums beckoned visitors to the church after work. Inside, the infectious rhythm of *bomba y plena*—the battle music of the occupation—aroused spontaneous eruptions of song and dance. Derived from the experiences of African slaves and their descendants, Puerto Rican elites stigmatized these popular music genres for their historic associations with black people, “lax” morals, and biting political commentary.[117]

Older Puerto Ricans recalled that this public embrace of their folk music by the younger generation triggered complex feelings: longing for the old country and vindication of their lives in New York.[118] And for the children of the Puerto Rican migration who grew up on the mainland, for whom institutionalized racism in the streets and schools distorted their self-perception, these sounds often tapped into the yearning for self-definition awakened by the black power movement. For the Young Lords, it was grounding music for their distinctive *bembé*, an all-out celebration of Puerto Rican folk traditions and emerging urban art forms.

The Young Lords launched their cultural experiment at the church amid protests against racist representations of people of color in museums and the exclusion of black American and Puerto Rican artists from New York’s elite art world. That January, black American artists were swept into protesting the Metropolitan Museum’s high-profile exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, a voyeuristic
rendering of black life that excluded works by black artists and whose catalogue featured an incendiary term paper written by a black high school student two years earlier. By year's end, the Young Lords were curating vanguard elements of Puerto Rican cultural expression at the People's Church. The inadvertent evolution of the Church into an unorthodox art space responded to the era's demand for civil rights in the arts. It did so with a dynamic model of resistance, art making, and cultural engagement that augured a new direction in the movement to democratize the arts in New York. Committed to demystifying and democratizing art, the Young Lords also welcomed impromptu performances and fostered a fluid environment that blurred the line between artist and audience. Chairman Felipe Luciano had long nurtured an interest in the arts. Respected for his broad and eclectic cultural knowledge, he was one of the original members of the Last Poets, the group of spoken word artists and musicians whose creative work prefigured the emergence of hip-hop. The Lords approached these evenings with sensitivity, helping to foster the works of a new generation of Puerto Rican poets, musicians, artists, and writers.

The lineups often sparked impromptu collaboration across genres. Traditional Puerto Rican drummers seated in the audience often jumped into the fray with impromptu drumming cadences, adding unexpected dimensions to the heft of an emerging urban poetry. Spoken word poetry captured the essence of things with an economy of words, illuminated social relations, and aroused passions. Politicized by the world around them, they had begun to rearrange reality with the symbols and music of Puerto Rico's resilient Afro-indigenous heritage. Their renderings of joy and tragedy in Puerto Rican life captured an aesthetic—decades in the making—wrought of the crucible of Puerto Rican migration to New York. These high-energy, open-mike jams captured the "structure of feeling" of the children of that migration who were swept into political activism by the civil rights, black power, women's, and gay liberation movements, the Vietnam War, and the social fallout of their parents' dislocation from Puerto Rico to U.S. slums. It was here that playwright and poet Pedro Pietri gave the first public reading of "Puerto Rican Obituary," the poem that according to the New York Times "ignited a movement." The poem is an epic eulogy to Puerto Rican workers and a withering critique of class that tracks the illusory pursuit of the American Dream. Its snapshots of everyday working-class Puerto Rican life dramatize the soul-slaying consequences of obedience to authority:

They worked . . .
They were never late
They never spoke back . . .
They never went on strike
Without permission . . .
They Worked
Ten days a week
And were only paid for five . . .

Juan
Miguel
Milagros
Olga
Manuel
All died yesterday today
And will die tomorrow
Passing their bill collectors
On to the next of kin . . .
All died
Dreaming about america . . .
Hating the grocery stores
That sold them make-believe
steak
And bullet-proof rice and beans
All died waiting dreaming
and hating
Dead Puerto Ricans
Who never knew they were Puerto Ricans . . .

. . . And will die again tomorrow
Dreaming about Queens
Clean-cut lily white
Neighborhood . . .

They all died
Like a hero sandwich dies
In the garment district
At twelve o’clock in the
Afternoon . . .

In naming his subjects, Pietri dignified the city’s most demeaned workers and reclaimed their humanity; the ritual repetition of names in the text compels recognition on different terms. His depiction of Puerto Rican migration as a kind of collective death, a universal theme, opened new ways of seeing among New Yorkers and others around the world. They accessed the poem through its several translations into Spanish, Italian, and German, among other languages.
“Puerto Rican Obituary” also unmasked with levity the unconscious handiwork of dominant ideology and its influence on individual and group behavior and perceptions of reality. Pietri’s vision ends with an ode to the humanistic aspirations of Afro-Puerto Rican resistance:

Aquí que pasa Power is  
what’s happening  
Aquí to be called Negrito y  
Negrita  
Means to be called LOVE.

The outpouring of performances of works like "Puerto Rican Obituary" on makeshift stages across the country produced yet deeper changes. They destabilized traditional conceptions of cultural production and one of its major assumptions: that people of color produce lower forms of art. And among poor people of color who might not have seen themselves as artists, performances like these emboldened their creative urges, especially in the context of the Young Lords’ revolutionary politics. At its best, the People’s Church prefigured the many possibilities for the arts in a new society: that a radical redistribution of time and resources could unleash the creative capacity of all. This expansive vision of art making, however short-lived, broadened the narrow framework of civil rights in the arts and helped redefine the goals of a preexisting cohort of activist artists toward independent art spaces and institution building. The Young Lords catalyzed the work of artists who grasped the significance of art, both as expression of humanity and potential vehicle of resistance. Together they understood that the politics of cultural production—of who has access to it and who doesn’t, of representations of subjugated people in art, and the absence of some artists and not others in the art world—is bound up with the struggle for human liberation.

The Young Lords’ mixture of militancy, good works, political education, and cultural resistance had an observable impact on diverse sectors of the city. One mainstream report observed that the occupation “reached like a wave to the margins of society, even affecting some of the street gangs in Harlem, as in Chicago.” As the focal point of public debate on the Puerto Rican question, the occupation resuscitated the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement in New York. Its leaders now appreciated the possibility for growth among the children of Puerto Rican migrants. Many who did not agree with the full extent of the Young Lords’ Third World, socialist, revolutionary orientation supported them nonetheless. At least sixty-three cross-denominational ecumenical leaders representing “national church agencies” endorsed their projects in a public letter. Addressed to Dr. Wesley Osborne, the district superintendent of the FSUMC, the letter also demanded a response to “the social crisis by means other than alli-
ance with the State through court and police action. Another twenty Puerto Rican leaders and antipoverty and community organizations backed the group's actions in a public statement.

The Young Lords enjoyed strong support among New Left activists. Members of the branches of the BPP were among the approximately 150 activists who permanently rotated in and out of the church. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee member H. Rap Brown visited and spoke at the church, as did national BPP leader Kathleen Cleaver. Read by West Coast attorney Charles Garry, Huey P. Newton's solidarity greeting "thrilled the packed chapel with clenched fists raised in spread-armed salute." Acting independently of the Young Lords, students from Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary staged a twenty-four-hour sit-in at Osborne's office demanding that the Puerto Rican radicals be granted space there. A long list of celebrities
made appearances, among them film director Elia Kazan, screenwriter Budd Schulberg, boxer Jose Torres, actor Jane Fonda, writer Gloria Steinem, and rising salsa stars Joe Cuba, Joe Batan, and Ray Barretto. And while the Puerto Rican theater actor Rita Moreno did not make an appearance, she sent funds.

The occupation transformed the organizational character of the Young Lords. The group experienced significant membership growth, especially among women. At the same time, female members were drawn into the center of church operations. Their deeper engagement with politics as public speakers and development as leaders raised questions about the place of women in movements for social change. Many in the community, including leading members of the organization, believed that revolutionary behavior was tolerable in a young man but not in a young woman. Many parents of YLO members did not support their children’s actions at the church. A disproportionate number of these parents had daughters in the organization, who were taken out of the church “by their ears.” As discussed in the following chapters, the growth of women’s membership and leadership during the occupation accelerated a major political rift.

For others, like the handsome and charismatic Richie Perez, the church was the place where they found meaning and purpose beyond personal relationships. According to Richie, the night he came to the church he had been out dancing. His political work had been stymied up to that moment by a series of unfulfilling amorous relationships. That night he found his political home and with it, more stability in his personal life. Gloria Rodriguez’s tear-filled account captures what many Puerto Rican youth felt at the church: “I walked in and I felt like I was home. It was very gripping, it felt like that was where I really wanted to be [and] where I belonged. . . . [T]he concerns . . . that all these people had, about equal rights and . . . making a difference in the world and standing up for what they believe in and being really committed to—that moved me. It moved everything I felt I was about at that time.” Some other participants fell in love. Discussing the broader significance of his story of love during the church occupation, Rovira explains: “When you go into the world of the unknown and there is a risk component, you grow attached to people, you build bonds. And that worked to our favor because it did not allow the police state to intimidate us at all. The bonds we built is what gave us strength. And for a group whose oldest member was twenty-five years old, for that chemistry to happen to people of that age group is a big positive, because there is nothing the enemy could have done to intimidate us.”

Bunkered in amid popular support and positive media reviews, the Young Lords would not be intimidated by the threat of a police break-in or legal action. Although Reverend Carrazana had allowed the police to lead negotiations at the start of the conflict, now they were held at bay. On various occasions, the NYPD “sent their officers to the door; telling us in detail what would happen to
us legally if we continued the occupation... that you can do ten years in prison if you don't come out. They tried it all and it didn't work."\(^{133}\)

**In Legal Limbo**

On Tuesday, December 30, the church obtained a court order requiring the Young Lords' attorney to appear before the New York Supreme Court the next day to "show cause why they should not be ousted from the church."\(^{134}\) The order was served late in the afternoon, allowing their attorneys to postpone the hearing, arguing that it "was received too late to adequately prepare for the case."\(^{135}\) With the New Year holiday upon them, the Young Lords could continue their political revelry at the church. Their attorneys argued that they were upholding one of the major tenets of the Methodist Church, service to the community, which the FSUMC had renounced in East Harlem. Reinforcing this position, a Young Lords flyer distributed that day stated, "The first responsibility of the church is to the people. The church is supposed to serve the people... and work with them. This is what it means to be Christian."\(^{136}\)

On Friday, January 2, the hearing's presiding judge, Hyman Korn, concluded that the church occupation, "even for what [participants] consider laudable purposes, tends to a breach of the peace and impinges on the sanctity of this holy space."\(^{137}\) He granted the church a preliminary injunction ordering the Young Lords to end the occupation. Served to the Young Lords at approximately 5:30 P.M., it was read aloud on the church steps by sheriff Robert E. Lee. His Confederate namesake struck the Young Lords and their supporters as downright comical.

Taking advantage of their weekend reprieve, the Young Lords held another news conference on Saturday, January 3. The *New York Times* quoted Juan Gonzalez: "We are all presently in contempt of court—all of us, including you press men." Gonzalez then asked, "Why then have we not been arrested?" He answered, "Because the power of the Puerto Rican community outside of the church and the three hundred people that occupied the church last night are preventing the city from moving against us."\(^{138}\) According to the *New York Post*, Gonzalez also announced that the Young Lords had no intention of leaving the church until their demands were met and that "no injunction and no police clubs will stop us."\(^{139}\) The Young Lords were in contempt of court, but the church would have to seek a "contempt citation against the Young Lords for non-compliance" before police could go in.\(^{140}\)

On Sunday, January 4, the Young Lords opened the church for regular Sunday service. A small number of congregants attended, most of whom were among the church's youngest members. Board members argued that the Young Lords' claim that they allowed the congregation "to worship at the sufferance of a take-over group is sinister behavior."\(^{141}\) But the church's youth group thought differently;
on that day, the two young women who led the youth group, Nancy Vasquez and Carmen Pietri, presided at the liturgy with the participation of Joe, Frank, and Pedro Pietri. Carmen remembers that day well because she was ill, and before the services began Juan Gonzalez led her to one of the church’s health stations where on-call doctors treated her. In attendance were Puerto Rican community leaders and representatives of antipoverty organizations who had written a public letter in support of the Young Lords. Because removal of the Young Lords seemed imminent, these supporters sought to bring moral and political influence to bear for a peaceful resolution. Their statement was read by Lindsay aide Arnie Segarra, whose firing had not yet been made public. The opening of the church for services that Sunday would prove advantageous in court. The church’s attorney, Oscar Gonzalez-Suarez, argued in the injunction request that the Young Lords’ actions violated the constitutionally protected right to worship. This theme was developed in a statement released by Reverend Carrazana and the district leaders of the Methodist Church in New York, district superintendent Wesley Osborne and Bishop Lloyd Wicke. For these leaders, at issue was “whether this local congregation of Christians shall have the right to determine their own ministry and the programs to be operated in their own church.” The injunction request charged that “the defendants have threatened the peace and tranquility of the congregation and the community” and deprived the congregation of “its civil rights and the constitutional right to peacefully assemble and worship God according to their conscience.”

On Monday, January 5, the church’s attorneys, in consultation with New York County sheriff De Lancey, obtained a court contempt order requiring representatives of the organization to appear in court the following morning. In an affidavit challenging the church’s application for a preliminary injunction, the Young Lords and their attorneys debunked charges that the group had for months “interrupted the religious services at the church.” Had they been disruptive and unwelcome, the church would not have invited them and their supporters to a “coffee klatch with the pastor of the congregation and a few parishioners.” The deposition argued further that the Young Lords had been scapegoated by the church’s lead minister and members of the board because “the Young Lords represent a serious threat to their conscience” and a challenge to the church to observe the Methodist Church’s fundamental principle that “service to the people of the community is an important religious function, not to be ignored.” They quoted from the Methodist Social Creed found in The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church: “We believe the inner city to be a mission field crying out for bold new creative ways of witness. Here is emerging a pagan generation committed to values that run counter to those of Christ. Therefore we call our urban congregations to a deeper involvement in neighborhood life.” The Young Lords’ attorneys also challenged charges of
private property violation. Also citing the *Book of Discipline*, they suggested that for its failure to use private property in accordance with church doctrine, the church, not the Young Lords, should be held accountable for such a violation: "We believe God is the owner of all things and that the individual holding of property is lawful and a sacred trust under God. Private property is to be used for the manifestation of Christian love and liberality, and to support the Church's mission in the world. All forms of property, whether private, corporate or public, are to be held in solemn trust and used responsibly for human good under the sovereignty of God."{150}

On Tuesday, January 6, while legal procedures wound their way through the courts, the Young Lords tightened church security and celebrated Three Kings' Day, a major gift-giving event for children among Puerto Ricans. As Pablo Guzmán explained to the media, "This is a very important holiday in Puerto Rico and we are going to party. If the police come, we'll just continue partying. We're going to have folk dances and songs and experience our culture because that's what the Lords are all about."{151} The coincidence of Three Kings' Day with the end of their legal proceedings was a sign of things to come.

On that same day, a coalition of students from Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University met with Methodist bishop Lloyd Wicke to demand that the church drop the charges "against the 13 YLO members arrested on December 7, 1969," and that the church "furnish space to the Young Lords for their programs."{152} Knowing that their arrest was imminent, the Lords reported to the press that while "we may not open the doors" to the police, they would not resist arrest.{153} With public support from over twenty Puerto Rican leaders and antipoverty and community organizations, the Young Lords were about to leave the church on their own terms. Their attorneys and the sheriff's office arranged exactly what would happen.

At 5:30 A.M. on January 7, 1970, while a dusting of snow covered the ground, hundreds of riot-gear-clad police officers assumed positions on rooftops and in the area surrounding the church, which was closed to traffic. Inside, the Young Lords stood their ground. The presence of approximately twelve children and six attorneys who spent the night at the church was expected to safeguard against police violence.{154} Led by undersheriff T. William Kehl, at around 7:00 A.M. eight unarmed deputies pried open the barricaded front doors. Two of the Young Lords' attorneys accompanied the deputies every step of the way. Once inside, Kehl informed the Young Lords that they were under arrest.

At approximately 7:15 A.M., 105 Young Lords and supporters walked out of the church, twenty at a time, and into police vans. Some of the militants exited the church singing the Puerto Rican nationalist song "Qué Bonita Bandera" (What a Beautiful Flag); others shouted "power to the people" on their way out; still others walked down the church steps in solemn silence with raised
Police raided the First Spanish United Methodist Church on January 7, 1970, ending the occupation, which had begun on December 28, 1969. (Courtesy of Associated Press)
The Young Lords performed an act that many of them would not have dared to do as children. The New York Times reported that “as their names and addresses were called off, the Young Lords rose, many of them correcting the reader by giving the Spanish pronunciation of their names.” Although the Young Lords had picked a fight with a conservative church over space for a breakfast program, the occupation was also about their determination to preserve their dignity, and that of their migrant parents, in the face of racism and language discrimination. The mangling of their names in school earlier in their lives, and the feeling that they were treated like garbage by the police, in hospitals, and by the administrative structure of the city was core to their organization’s reason for being. And now as they stood before Justice Streit, they were intent on staging dissent and setting their names and identities straight for the court record.

The Young Lords’ attorneys, Richard Asch and Daniel Meyers, explained that amid their round-the-clock negotiations with police, which ensured the peaceful arrest that morning, they had not had time to consult with the activists. The judge released all 105 defendants on their own recognizance and set their hearing for January 16, 1970.

For the Young Lords, the church became a staging ground for what a new society could look like and accomplish. They saw the services organized collaboratively for human need rather than competitively for profit, as a living example of their call for a socialist society. Thousands took part, in some way, in the activities conducted at the church. Participants and reporters alike described the intoxicating atmosphere created by the Young Lords, with language echoing V. I. Lenin’s description of revolutions as “festivals of the oppressed,” during which ordinary people “come forward so actively as creators of a new social order.”

The United States in the late 1960s was in the midst of an all-sided upheaval of ideas: in the way the nation understood itself, in the place of racialized groups, women, and gays and lesbians within it, and in a halting but increasing recognition of the root causes of social problems. Throughout the decade, initiatives like the Young Lords’ Church Offensive pressed a debate about the nation’s social priorities and the contradictions of American democracy. At the heart of this public struggle were the children of Puerto Rican migrants, whose work helped to cement a place for Puerto Ricans in public discourse and New York City politics.

As the dramatic site where the most political elements of Puerto Rican culture were curated for eleven days, the People’s Church marked the first public staging of a Nuyorican identity and the idea of a radical Puerto Rican art space. Such a project would later be institutionalized in places like the New Rican
Village, a "cultural arts center" on the Lower East Side that showcased the first Nuyorican theatrical productions and was "home to Afro-Caribbean music's avant-garde." The Nuyorican Poets Cafe grew from a gathering in the East Village apartment of Puerto Rican writer Miguel Algarin to a vibrant, New York City institution for the performing arts. El Museo del Barrio would become a major museum on Fifth Avenue dedicated to Latino cultures. The church occupation also presaged the emergence of Las Casitas Criollas del Bronx, the cultural project that transformed abandoned Bronx homes into vibrant sites that evoked Puerto Rico's countryside aesthetic, music, and culture.

The week after the arrests, several hundred Young Lords again attended Sunday mass at FSUMC, requesting permission to run a breakfast program. Carranza did not concede an inch. Shortly thereafter, eighty-four Protestant denomination leaders pressured the FSUMC to seek resolution with the Young Lords outside of the courts. To that end, the parties were brought together by the newly formed Board of Mediation for Community Disputes, a Lindsay initiative that brought collective bargaining strategies in labor to disputes in the community. With Herman Badillo as mediator, a series of long, heated meetings ensued. In late February, the church dropped charges against the Young Lords and agreed to initiate a daycare center and a clinic for a drug rehabilitation program, to which the city agreed to contribute $200,000. The church never followed through.

When the Young Lords ended their Church Offensive, their spirits were high. The occupation had electrified the neighborhood, inspired artists and progressives of all races across the city, and drawn the media into the orbit of the Young Lords, with journalists around the country and the world reporting on their activities. On the same night that the Young Lords abandoned the church, Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed during his State of the State address to launch a breakfast program for 35,000 poor children in the city. In response, Harlem's Democratic state senator Basil Paterson told the media, "I think the Black Panthers and the Young Lords have influenced the governor," whom he also condemned for not having any original proposals of his own.

Even the judge who forced the church's evacuation, after declaring the Young Lords in contempt of a court order, seemed to equivocate in his condemnation of the Puerto Rican radicals. Reporting for Pacifica Radio, journalist Jeff Kamen explained, "The judge was impressed by what the Young Lords had done for the people, so he released them on their own recognizance, without bail." The attention the Young Lords garnered from different sectors of society, especially from the media, enlarged the organization's sense of itself and convinced its leaders that they could challenge the structures of power and win.