Upon becoming bishop of North Carolina, Vincent S. Waters clearly stated that it was his goal to “make every North Carolinian a Roman Catholic.” It was not always clear, though, how his policy decisions related to that goal. In the early 1950s, Waters earned approbation from progressives for racially integrating his parishes. Two decades later, in 1971, he became the first American bishop to order all female religious in his diocese to return to the habit. The two seemingly incongruous decisions can be reconciled by noting that the bishop could be painted as a liberal or a conservative, but he always considered himself a missionary. This identity, adapted to the religious landscape of North Carolina, made Waters unique among his clerical peers.

Roman Catholicism in North Carolina has long been characterized by an unusual level of missionary fervor. The church had little choice. North Carolina never experienced the waves of immigration that boosted Catholic populations elsewhere in the country. In 1924, its Catholic population stood at just 6,000. Fifty years later, the number had risen only to 38,000. Conversions from Protestantism fueled and shaped this growth.

Bishop Waters pursued converts with a variety of programs. Early in his tenure he established a Home Missionary Apostolate and an active layman’s association, mounted Convert Campaigns, and sponsored a “Trailer Chapel” program. He also labored to found parishes and schools in every county in the state. At the grassroots, he encouraged Catholics to shine the light of true religion before their neighbors. “The world needs your Catholic faith,” he wrote in 1954.
Mission became complicated when Waters desegregated all North Carolina parishes and schools in the early 1950s. Many African Americans left the church when they lost their separate facilities. Local whites also resisted desegregation, though many Northern white Catholics and journalists applauded. Waters sought to make up for his church’s losses, in numbers and local stature, by refocusing attention on mission.

Vatican II further complicated Waters’s job. His initial response was neither remarkably progressive nor reactionary, but he eventually came to see the changes that blurred distinctions between Catholics and non-Catholics as threats to his mission. Specifically, nuns out of habit could not attract the kind of positive attention that nuns in habit could. Catholics who cheered the bishop’s statement on the habit from beyond North Carolina’s borders seized upon it as a reassertion of church authority against the dangers of “liberated” women, which, in part, it surely was. Yet Waters parried his newfound fans’ laurels with the language of mission. Nuns who wore street clothes were not necessarily sinful, he explained, just less effective at attracting people to the church.

Catholics from other parts of the country could not understand this distinction because the landscape of North Carolina was foreign to them. Unfortunately, the North Carolina story is foreign to most scholars of American Catholicism as well. Yet trends such as the “Evangelical Catholic” movement indicate that many Catholics now find the questions North Carolina Catholics faced, and the solutions they devised, compelling. Catholics in North Carolina adopted such typically American Protestant emphases as voluntarism, outreach, and community relations earlier than did most of their co-religionists. This approach to cultivating faith in a pluralistic environment makes the North Carolina story difficult to categorize but ripe for investigation.