Baptists active on both sides in the Little Rock integration battle

August 31, 2007
Posted: 8/31/07

Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, is pursued by a mob outside Little Rock's Central High School. (UPI Photo/Library of Congress)

Baptists active on both sides in the Little Rock integration battle

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP)—The story of Lakeshore Drive Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., encapsulates the little-recounted role that white Baptists played during the Civil Rights Movement—on both sides.

The church owes its existence to the 1957-59 struggle to integrate Little Rock Central High School, when pro-integration members were kicked out of another congregation pastored by an outspoken segregationist. Dignitaries will gather in Little Rock Sept. 25 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Central High's desegregation.

"It's a unique church," said Doyne Elder, Lakeshore Drive's church historian. Ousted members founded University Baptist Church, located across the street from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. The church later changed its name to Lakeshore Drive.

White citizens rally at the Arkansas state capitol, protesting the integration of Central High School in Little Rock. (U.S. News & World Report Photo/Library of Congress)

Wesley Pruden was pastor of the congregation —Broadmoor Baptist—that ejected University Baptist's founding members. He became one of the most vocal segregationist leaders in Little Rock during the month-long integration crisis in 1957. Pruden remained in the news through the ensuing turmoil of the 1958-59 school year, when Gov. Orval Faubus—a Baptist—ordered the city's high schools closed in order to prevent them

from operating on an integrated basis.

Ironically, Pruden's church eventually folded. The University Baptist congregation then took over the old Broadmoor Baptist building. It continues to use the same property today.

Unlike many other desegregation battles of the era, the Little Rock crisis didn't prominently feature African-American Baptist ministers.

Race: The Final Frontier

- Race: The final frontier
- Baptists active on both sides in the Little Rock integration battle
- Opportunities, challenges confront increasingly multi-ethnic congregation
- Minorities are flocking to multi-ethnic campus groups for Christian fellowship
- Aging minister recalls price paid for recognizing God's image in all people
- BOOKS: When All God's Children Get Together–A Memoir of Race and Baptists

The pastors of the Little Rock's wealthiest and most prominent and churches and synagogues—including two of the city's three largest Southern Baptist congregations—spoke out in favor of obeying federal court orders and maintaining law and order. But many pastors of smaller Southern Baptist churches and independent, fundamentalist Baptist congregations were far more outspoken in their defense of segregation.

The segregationists' rhetoric was suffused with evangelical jargon. In archival news photos from a pro-segregation demonstration on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol, protesters hold signs that say things like, "Stop the race-mixing march of the Anti-Christ!"

Historians and Baptists who were in Little Rock at the time agree courage in the face of committed segregationists was hard to find among many white leaders, including Christian ministers.

"There were segregationist preachers and they were very outspoken and in the press, and in the news often. Unfortunately, on the other side, I don't think I could point to that many examples of strong, courageous white pastoral leadership, at least in Baptist circles," said Larry Taylor, who recently retired as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Alexandria, La.

Troops from the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division disperse a crowd in front of Little Rock's Central High School. (Library of Congress)

Taylor was a junior at Central during the 1957-58 school year. He was there when nine African-American students—shepherded by local civil-rights activist Daisy Bates—successfully integrated the campus on Sept. 25, 1957.

"I have immense respect for the Little Rock Nine and for Daisy Bates—I think they were courageous, courageous people made of cactus and steel—otherwise they couldn't have gotten through that," Taylor said. "I wish I could have pointed to equally courageous people in the white community."

But Taylor as well as historians pointed to a handful of Baptist leaders as prominent exceptions. One as Dale Cowling, pastor of Little Rock's Second Baptist Church.

"The three largest Southern Baptist churches were within a couple of miles of the Central High area," said Fred Williams, a University of Arkansas at Little Rock professor and a longtime member of Calvary Baptist Church in Little Rock. "But of those three churches, only Second made an effort … to get the congregation to go along with the idea" of integration.

One of the most prominent members of Second Baptist at the time was the late Rep. Brooks Hays, who had represented Little Rock for eight terms in the House of Representatives. In the early days of the crisis, he had worked as a mediator to try to end the standoff between Faubus and Eisenhower. After Faubus closed the schools, he continued to work to re-open them on an integrated basis.

Hays' support for integration eventually cost him his job. In the 1958 election, a segregationist write-in candidate—Dale Alford—barely beat Hays in his bid for a ninth term in Congress.

During the crisis, Hays also served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In his address to the SBC annual meeting in 1959, Hays noted his recently unemployed status and asked his fellow Southern Baptists to consider living up to the denomination's publicly expressed commitment to supporting integration. He said it especially was important for SBC missionaries to demonstrate that they represent a denomination that believes all people are created equal by God.

"We cannot export what we do not have, and if our Christian devotions here are not adequate, our missionaries cannot transmit the Christian message to unsaved masses abroad," he said.

Other Baptists played less public—but crucial—roles in the crisis. Margaret Kolb, a longtime member of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, served with the Women's Emergency Committee to Open our Schools. In 1958, the women's group stepped in when many white male business leaders would not, working to re-open Little Rock's high schools on an integrated basis after the Faubus-ordered shutdown.

One place the Women's Emergency Committee held meetings was in the Baptist Student Center at the University of Arkansas Medical School—a safe meeting place because Tom Logue, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention's campus-ministry director, was an ardent integrationist.

In the fall of 1957, Logue led the students who came to the state's Baptist Student Union annual convention to pass a resolution favoring integration—a subject the Arkansas Baptist convention conspicuously had avoided during its annual meeting a few weeks prior.

Lakeshore Drive Baptist Church continued to be a pacesetter congregation

after the crisis that birthed it. It disbanded as University Baptist and reorganized as Lakeshore Drive in 1970 in a bid to regain membership in the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. The group had previously voted to unseat University Baptist's messengers to a convention meeting because the church practiced open communion.

But congregations like Lakeshore and leaders like Hays and Cowling were the exceptions in white Baptist life during the civil-rights era rather than the rule.

"I have found myself for 50 years wishing that Baptists could get in on the front end of something significant instead of the back end," said Taylor, the retired pastor and Central High graduate. "I'm still hoping and wishing for it."