The Arkansas Baptist State Convention and Desegregation, 1954-1968
Author(s): Mark Newman
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Arkansas Historical Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40023176
Accessed: 08/06/2012 20:38

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
The Arkansas Baptist State Convention and Desegregation, 1954–1968

MARK NEWMAN

OSTENSIBLY THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT had little impact on the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, the largest white denomination in the state. The convention ignored the Supreme Court's Brown decision of 1954, passed no resolutions when Governor Orval Faubus defied the Court's ruling during the Little Rock crisis of 1957, and did not address the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Yet the convention's primary commitments to scripture, missions, peace, "law and order," and education led editors of the Arkansas Baptist, the denominational weekly, and some leading pastors, to call for acceptance of desegregation in the 1950s and early 1960s. (The Southern Baptist Convention, with which the Arkansas Baptist State Convention was affiliated, also called for such acceptance.) Sharing their editors' and pastors' commitments, increasing numbers of Baptists in Arkansas accepted the end of legal segregation in the 1960s. In 1968 the state convention passed its first civil rights resolution when it called upon Baptists to comply peacefully with and even "go beyond" civil rights laws. Letters and surveys indicate that although many Baptists in Arkansas still preferred social and religious segregation, some supported open churches, and many more accepted the premise that Jim Crow laws denied black people equal rights.¹

Between the 1940s and early 1960s, most Southern Baptists (i.e., those affiliated with the SBC) in Arkansas shared the commitment of other white southerners to segregation. Surveys recorded that 98 percent of white southerners opposed school desegregation in 1942 and 80 percent did so in 1956. Yet white southerners were not so united in the intensity of their commitment to segregation. Hardline segregationists supported the maintenance of Jim Crow at all costs, but there were many moderate segregationists who preferred segregation but not at the expense of social disorder. Postwar Arkansas had a black population of approximately 25 percent, mostly concentrated in the plantation counties adjoining the Mississippi River. The plantation counties provided the bulk of the state's hardline segregationists. Most white Arkansans were moderate segregationists who viewed Jim Crow as an intrinsic part of the social order. A smaller number of white Arkansans, 20 percent of the population according to a 1956 survey, supported desegregation.

Southern Baptists in Arkansas mirrored the divisions of the white population in their attitude to segregation. Some, including prominent pastors and a few denominational officials, were progressives who believed that the Bible did not support racial segregation. A larger number, concentrated in plantation counties and towns with substantial black populations, were hard-liners who claimed that selected biblical verses or "proof-texts" demonstrated that God had been the author of segregation. The

---


4 They did not call themselves progressives. The term is used as a convenient shorthand here.
majority of Southern Baptists in the state were moderate segregationists who held that the Bible neither supported nor opposed segregation.5

In the 1940s and early 1950s, most Southern Baptists in Arkansas, as moderate segregationists, saw no conflict between their primary commitments and the maintenance of segregation. The Little Rock crisis brought Baptist commitments directly into conflict with segregation: it produced disorder, undermined education, and, by exposing American racism, undermined the success of Baptist missions abroad. Some progressive and moderate Baptist leaders appealed to their coreligionists to accept desegregation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their primary commitments enabled moderate segregationists gradually to reconcile themselves to the demise of Jim Crow. Some hard-liners also renounced the biblical defense of segregation and accepted the end of legal racial inequality.

Postwar Arkansas politics reflected the moderate segregationist bent of most of the state’s white population. Concerned with industrial growth, Arkansas governors in the late 1940s and the first half of the 1950s avoided racist appeals. Consistent with the state’s racial moderation, the University of Arkansas voluntarily desegregated its law school in 1948 (the first southern law school to do so). In response to the Brown decision, Gov. Francis A. Cherry declared, “Arkansas will obey the law.” By September 1954 two school districts in western Arkansas had desegregated.6

Acceptance of Brown also marked the response of the South’s major white denominations. The Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and the Methodist Church endorsed the decision. Meeting in June 1954, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a recommendation urging Baptists to adhere to the court ruling because it was Christian and constitutional. B. H. Duncan, editor of the forty-five-thousand-circulation Arkansas Baptist,


praised the SBC’s recommendation as “a fair and conservative statement” and published it in full. Ralph A. Phelps Jr., president of Ouachita Baptist College in Arkadelphia, urged Arkansas Baptists to respond to the Brown ruling by ending segregation in the convention’s churches and educational institutions.7

In 1954 only one Southern Baptist church in Arkansas had an interracial membership. Oak Grove Baptist Church in Greene County Association, near Paragould, admitted ten black members in April 1954, because they did not have a church of their own. The Reverend Amos Greer, a missionary for the association, claimed that the congregation acted because “we would look funny talking about foreign missions if we could not do something like this in our own community.” Here was an early indication that the demands of missions and segregation might come into conflict. In this instance, however, Greer indicated that the congregation hoped that its new black members might become members of a segregated black mission planned by the church.8

The State Convention also sought to deflect the question of desegregation by focusing on promoting evangelism among blacks. Responding to the Brown ruling in the Arkansas Baptist, O. L. Bayless, chairman of the convention’s State Mission Committee, like most of the white liberals who commented on the decision, avoided the question of the decision’s merit. Bayless quoted only those parts of the Southern Baptist Convention’s recommendation that dealt with the need for “patience and good will.” To improve race relations, he called for the appointment of a director of Negro Work in the missions department. In August the convention appointed Clyde Hart to the post.9

The missions department equated civil rights with communism, and it treated blacks with condescension. Reporting to the convention in

---


November, the department claimed: "The Communists make their approach through the underprivileged group. And they have interfered with the work among the Negroes in some areas. But these humble dark skinned people are more responsive to the Baptist message than any other. They need our help and we are trying to give it." The convention's "messengers" (elected representatives of member churches) voted to adopt the report. Adopted convention reports and resolutions had no binding effect on member churches, but they nevertheless indicated mainstream Baptist opinion.10

The State Convention did not specifically mention Brown or desegregation. Its social service committee, charged with providing guidance on ethical issues, issued a vague report designed not to offend segregationists and thereby preserve denominational peace and unity. Adopted by the convention, the report appealed to Baptists' commitment to the rule of law: "Some sort of government is necessary as a means of securing protection and social justice for all the people. . . . The State is to guard the equality of its citizens before the law." By contrast, the Presbyterian Synod of Arkansas (PCUS) and the Methodist Conferences of Little Rock and North Arkansas endorsed the desegregation decision.11

Token school desegregation proceeded without significant opposition in Arkansas. The state legislature declined to pass a pupil assignment bill, which was designed to maintain segregated schools. In 1955 five of Arkansas's six state-supported colleges admitted blacks. Schools in Hoxie and Lincoln County desegregated in September of that year. Encouraged by the change, the social service committee cautiously encouraged Baptists to accept further desegregation. Reporting to the convention in November 1955, the committee gently challenged the argument of hard-line segregationists that the Bible supported segregation: "Churches as well as individual Christians ought to take a positive stand on the teachings of the Scripture that all men are of one blood." The danger of directly condemning segregation had been illustrated a few months earlier. In March the congregation of Fortune Baptist Church in Parkin, in east Arkansas,

10Ibid., 22, quotation on 87–88.
exercising its right to hire and fire pastors, had dismissed the Reverend E. Jones for denouncing Jim Crow as un-Christian in a sermon.\textsuperscript{12}

Commitment to segregation hardened across Arkansas in 1956. Hitherto most whites had been willing, although reluctantly, to accept token desegregation as inevitable. When southern politicians offered the prospect of successfully defying desegregation, many supported resistance. In March 1956 every member of the Arkansas congressional delegation, including Brooks Hays, who was at the time also chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission, signed the Southern Manifesto. The manifesto called the \textit{Brown} ruling "contrary to the Constitution" and pledged its signatories "to use all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision."\textsuperscript{13} Most white Arkansans seemed to welcome the manifesto. Hays recalled, "I don't suppose I received over a half-dozen letters protesting my action and expressing chagrin and disappointment."\textsuperscript{13}

Running for reelection in 1956, Gov. Orval Faubs, who had eschewed racist appeals and supported college desegregation in his term of office, faced hard-line segregationist Jim Johnson. To fend off Johnson's claim that he was weak on segregation, Faubs called for initiative petitions to secure a pupil assignment law and an interposition resolution, asserting the right of the state to "interpose" its authority to block federally ordered school desegregation pending an amendment to the United States Constitution to allow dual school systems. Faubs won reelection. In November Arkansas voters approved two interposition measures, a resolution and a nullification amendment to the state constitution. The amendment allowed the state to "nullify" federal law. Unwilling to challenge segregationist sentiment, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention adopted a lame recommendation that "in


all problems of human relations, the principles of Jesus be applied with faithful convictions and without apology.” A year later, when Governor Faubus defied federal court-ordered school desegregation in Little Rock, the convention fell silent about race relations and its social service committee stopped issuing reports.14

Little Rock seemed an unlikely site for resistance to desegregation. In 1954 the Little Rock School Board had announced its intention to comply with Brown. One year later it developed a court-approved plan for gradual desegregation, beginning with Central High School in September 1957. In 1956 Little Rock’s busses and restaurants desegregated, and the city’s black and white ministerial alliances agreed to arrange a merger. In March 1957 candidates for the city school board who favored compliance with desegregation easily defeated hardline segregationists, who had been endorsed by the Capital Citizens’ Council.15

Little Rock’s major churches rallied behind school desegregation. In May 1957 the Reverend Nolan P. Howington, pastor of the twenty-seven-hundred-member First Baptist Church, delivered a sermon condemning segregation and racial prejudice. After the sermon Howington declared his support for Little Rock’s school desegregation plan. He described the congregation’s response to his sermon as “surprisingly good.” In July Marion Boggs, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, delivered a similar sermon. Of Little Rock’s Southern Baptist pastors, only the Reverend Wesley Pruden of Broadmoor Baptist Church publicly opposed desegregation. Pruden served as the president of the Capital Citizens’ Council. The Council never exceeded five hundred members and drew its main support among clergymen from the working-class and Missionary Baptist pastors, all of whom had small congregations. Many of the


Missionary Baptist pastors argued that God had sanctioned racial segregation in the Bible, and they cited “proof-texts” in their defense.  

On September 1, the Sunday before school desegregation was due to begin, Dale Cowling, pastor of the 2,585-member Second Baptist Church, delivered a sermon that endorsed the “plan of gradual integration” as “wise.” Cowling challenged the proof-texts employed by biblical segregationists. He also used scientific evidence to refute the myth of black mental and physical inferiority. Cowling argued that school desegregation was the law, and “Christians ought to be obedient to civil authority and to abide by the laws of the land.” He ended his sermon by appealing for a “peaceful solution of the problem” in which whites would reject mobs and violent resistance.

Cowling served as a leading member of the Greater Little Rock Ministerial Alliance. Some months earlier the alliance had offered to endorse the city’s school desegregation plan, but Virgil T. Blossom, the superintendent of schools, discouraged the idea. Blossom proved ineffective in rallying white support behind the plan, and often indicated his own lack of enthusiasm for desegregation. He also feared that desegregation would produce violence. Sharing Blossom’s fears or merely seizing on an opportunity to boost his chances for reelection, Governor Faubus on September 2 called out the National Guard to prevent desegregation of Central High School.


The next day a group of sixteen Protestant Little Rock ministers, including Cowling, W. O. Vaught Jr. of Immanuel Baptist Church, and Harold Hicks of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, released a statement protesting Faubus's action for defying national law and undermining respect "for proper constitutional authority." They said nothing about the issue of desegregation. Wesley Pruden and fourteen Missionary Baptist pastors responded by issuing a counterstatement commending Faubus for upholding state law and protecting Little Rock's citizens.19

At the same time Dunbar H. Ogden Jr., the white pastor of Central Presbyterian Church and president of the recently integrated Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, agreed to escort the black children to Central High at the request of the NAACP. Joined by National Council of Churches representative Will D. Campbell, Ogden led the nine children to school. A mob awaited them. Acting under Faubus's orders, the National Guard barred the children from entering class.20

Responding to the crisis, Erwin L. McDonald, Duncan's successor as editor of the Arkansas Baptist, refused to take a "stand either for or against integration" because the issue divided Baptists. Nevertheless, McDonald insisted that "We want to be counted with those who stand for law and order, for clear, cool thinking, and for lives motivated by the love of Christ."21

Brooks Hays, like McDonald, refused to endorse either segregation or integration, which in Arkansas marked him as a moderate. Elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1957, Hays advocated justice for all, law and order, and reconciliation between the races. As congressman for the Fifth District, which included Little Rock, Hays arranged a meeting between Faubus and President Dwight Eisenhower at Newport, Rhode Island, in a fruitless attempt to arrange a settlement. On September 20 Federal District judge Ronald Davies enjoined Faubus and the National Guard from preventing desegregation. Three days later the nine black children entered Central High, only to be removed by police when an unruly mob gathered

---

outside. Eisenhower responded by federalizing the National Guard and dispatching federal troops to insure desegregation.22

Both Brooks Hays and Erwin McDonald responded to the arrival of the troops by focusing on the need to observe law and order. On September 25 Hays told the Little Rock Lions Club: “The enforcement of law is not limited to popular laws. Constitutional forms are maintained only when people are completely dedicated to the ideal of law and order without reference to its impingement upon some cherished practices of their own. . . . Let me emphasize that the issue is not integration or Federal authority in school matters, but rather how to deal with lawlessness.”23 On October 3 Erwin McDonald issued a strong appeal for peace and law and order in the Arkansas Baptist: “Jesus would not be a part of any crowd committing acts of violence in resistance to duly constituted law and order. He was obedient to the law of the land. He taught his disciples to be law abiding and to respect those in authority.” McDonald did not specifically mention integration. Instead, he claimed that Jesus’ “love knew no racial bounds.”24 A week later McDonald reprinted the front page of the Buenos Aires Herald, sent to him by Baptist missionary James O. Watson. Stories about the Little Rock school crisis dominated the page. Watson commented, “You can imagine how this helps Baptist Mission work.” McDonald devoted a column to the theme of missions. “The cause of missions and of democracy,” he wrote, “have suffered inestimably from the ‘Little Rock’ incident.” McDonald concluded by calling for prayer.25

Concerned primarily with the restoration of law and order, Brooks Hays and forty leading clergymen, including the Right Reverend Robert R. Brown, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas, Methodist bishop Paul Martin, Monsignor James E. O’Connell, Rabbi Ira Sanders, and Marion Boggs, decided to sponsor a day of prayer on October 12, Columbus Day. Wesley Pruden and twenty-three Missionary Baptist pastors responded to the

23Hays, This World, 97, 100.
announcement by organizing a rival prayer day in support of segregation. Held on October 11 at Central Baptist Church by invitation of the Reverend M. L. Mosser Sr., its Missionary Baptist pastor, the service attracted thirty-eight ministers and six hundred laymen, who prayed for Governor Faubus. The following day eighty-four Little Rock churches and synagogues held prayer services calling for law and order. Three of the four largest Southern Baptist churches in the city participated. The Arkansas Baptist State Convention’s Baptist Student Union, holding its annual convention, adopted a “Statement of Beliefs in the Matter of Race Relations.” The statement asserted “the equal worth of all individuals,” supported “the law of the land,” and condemned “violence in the settlement of any difficulty.” Only one of the 360 delegates attending voted against the statement.

Anxious to preserve denominational unity, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention took a much more cautious line than its Baptist Student Union and Little Rock ministers. Ralph Douglas, acting general secretary of the convention’s executive board, declared: “It is not our task to decide who did right and who did wrong, but it is our responsibility to do what we can to resolve the problem and help our people live together in peace, as good citizens in a great nation should live.” In November the convention held its annual meeting at the Reverend W. O. Vaught’s Immanuel Church in Little Rock. An advocate in his own church of compliance with public school desegregation, Vaught pleaded for the convention to avoid the issue because of its divisiveness. He also acknowledged that most Baptists favored segregation: “The topic of the day is integration, but multitudes are sold on segregation. We are not a law-making body. We are not here to make pronouncements that are to handed down to the churches.” The convention followed Vaught’s advice and did not address the school crisis. Commitment to the maintenance of segregation had become too strong among many Southern Baptists for the convention even to discuss racial issues.

---

26Campbell and Pettigrew, Christians in Racial Crisis, 26–31, 41; Brown, Bigger than Little Rock, 93–109; “Community and Church Action, October 1957,” in Record and Record, Little Rock, U.S.A., 80; Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 138–139; Sherrill, Gothic Politics in the Deep South, 106.

27”Arkansas Baptist Students Uphold Equal Worth of All,” RS, October 16, 1957.


29”Arkansas Baptists Take Forward Steps,” AB, November 28, 1957.
Faubus’s reelection as governor in July 1958, with a sweeping majority of nearly 70 percent of the vote, confirmed the popularity of segregation among Southern Baptists and other white Arkansans. Faubus responded by persuading the legislature to give him authority to close any school. When the Supreme Court refused to halt the continued implementation of gradual school desegregation in Little Rock, Faubus closed the city’s high schools in September and assured white parents that their children would be able to attend new private, segregated schools. Influenced by his words, over 70 percent of them voted against reopening the city’s public schools on an integrated basis.30

The Pulaski County Baptist Association, which included the capital’s SBC churches, asked Ouachita Baptist College to establish a high school in Little Rock. In October 1958 the association’s five hundred messengers overwhelmingly approved the school proposal drawn up by college president Phelps. Avoiding the issue of desegregation, they also adopted a vague resolution calling “for God’s will to be done in the public school crisis.”31

Phelps announced that the new Baptist school would accept children regardless of religious affiliation, provided that they were white. He justified the whites-only policy by claiming that “it seems highly improbable if not totally impossible that a school could be conducted in Little Rock now on any other lines.” Phelps argued that the issue was not segregation or integration but the maintenance of education. He said that the school would close once children had access to another school. The Arkansas Baptist State Convention did not fund Baptist High School, which relied on tuition and voluntary contributions. Over four hundred children registered for the school, which held classes in three SBC churches: First Baptist, Second Baptist, and Gaines Street Baptist churches.32 Some other major denominations also offered private education to displaced students. The Trinity Episcopal Cathedral set up a private academy and Little Rock’s Catholic high schools admitted more white students. McDonald

acknowledged that Southern Baptists were divided about the establishment of Baptist High School: "Regardless of individual feelings about the wisdom of the move, now that Ouachita has entered the field she should have our prayers and our hearty support toward maximum success."

The Arkansas Baptist State Convention, like McDonald, continued to avoid taking a position on segregation. In October 1958 the Reverend T. K. Tucker, president of the convention, and the Reverend B. K. Selph, president of the convention's executive board, publicly dissociated the convention from a statement by the Missionary Baptist Association of Arkansas that defended segregation as biblical. They reminded Baptists that "the Arkansas State Convention has taken no official action on integration or segregation." At its annual meeting in November, the convention received a report from Ouachita College detailing the establishment of Baptist High School, but it made no official pronouncements about the desegregation crisis. The best that can be said of the convention is that it did not endorse segregation or resistance to desegregation.

Brooks Hays's defeat for reelection to Congress in November 1958 indicated the preference of many white Arkansans for resistance. Hays, who narrowly lost his seat to write-in candidate Dale Alford, a hard-line segregationist, attributed his defeat to his refusal to endorse segregation and his earlier attempts to mediate between Faubus and Eisenhower. After his defeat, Hays continued to advocate a middle course between resistance and acquiescence, in which legal segregation would be lifted, desegregation settled at the local level, and blacks would no longer pursue forced integration of schools. Freed from the constraints of political office, Hays also condemned the biblical defense of segregation in his presidential address to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1959.

Erwin McDonald, like Hays, also took a more forthright stand in 1959, but he did not criticize segregation. Committed to education, McDonald

---

argued in the February *Arkansas Baptist* that Little Rock’s public schools had to be reopened:

> It becomes more and more apparent that we must accept the limited integration as ordered by the Supreme Court of the United States or do away with our public school system altogether. . . .

> Our public school system is the very bulwark of our democracy. Let us not willingly sacrifice the lives and careers of many of our fine children and further cripple Arkansas and the South. There simply is no way for a system of private schools to replace the public system.

The *Arkansas Gazette* reprinted the editorial, and Little Rock’s business and community leaders discussed it at the Chamber of Commerce. In March the chamber called for the reopening of Little Rock’s schools on a desegregated basis. McDonald protested when the Little Rock School Board, now dominated by segregationists, fired forty-four teachers and administrators in May for allegedly supporting integration. McDonald, W. O. Vaught, Dale Cowling, and John A. Gilbreath, administrator of the Arkansas Baptist Hospital, along with ministers drawn from the other major denominations, joined the 240-member committee to Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP), initiated by the Little Rock Parent-Teacher Association. McDonald was quick to point out that the committee took no stand on the issue of integration. Its aims were to have those who had been fired reinstated as well as to force new elections to the school board.36

Many teachers, ministers, parents, and businessmen rallied behind the STOP campaign in the belief that the public school closures had undermined education, law and order, and the city’s economic growth, as investors looked to other states in search of a stable business environment. STOP secured sufficient signatures to force a recall election to the school board. Held in May 1959, the election produced a new board pledged to comply with school desegregation. The following month a federal district court declared the state’s school closing law unconstitutional. In July Baptist High

---

School announced that, in anticipation of the public schools resuming operations, it would not reopen in the fall, as parents had registered only twenty-two students. The Trinity (Episcopal) Academy also closed. In August 1959 Little Rock’s formerly white public high schools peacefully reopened on a desegregated basis, and the crisis ended.37

Emboldened by the new spirit of moderation in Little Rock, the Pulaski County Desegregation Association expelled Wesley Pruden’s segregationist Broadmoor Baptist Church in October. Dale Cowling seconded the motion for dismissal, which claimed that the church had failed to give money to the association and to support and cooperate in its activities. The 350 messengers approved the motion with only three dissenting votes. Pruden correctly attributed the expulsion to his segregationist activity.38

The Arkansas elections of 1960 confirmed that the new mood of moderation was not confined to Little Rock. Although Governor Faubus won reelection by a large majority, the voters overwhelmingly defeated a Faubus-supported constitutional amendment permitting local communities to close their public schools to avoid desegregation. Faubus adjusted to the new situation by appealing for unity, industrial growth, and even black support. Token school desegregation continued in the new decade.39

In the early 1960s their commitment to missions, peace, law and order, and education continued to push leading Arkansas Baptists to advocate acceptance of desegregation. In February 1960 McDonald strongly condemned the bombing of the home of a black student at Central High School. He urged Christians to offer “prayerful and fullest moral support” to the police as they sought the bombers.40 In April the trustees of Ouachita


Baptist College voted to accept qualified students from its foreign mission fields should they apply. In January 1962 Ouachita admitted its first black students, Michael and Mary Makasholo from Rhodesia. Phelps explained: "We have taken this step with the conviction it is an essential part of our world mission program. Our missionaries in Africa and other parts of the world have told us the communists are 'beating them to death' with the fact that mission converts are not permitted to come to the school that sent out the missionaries."41 McDonald welcomed the students' admission and described them as "truly great heroes." First Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, which included many faculty and students from the college, voted two-to-one in a secret ballot to "look with favor" on membership applications from foreign black students at Ouachita. Under the policies of the church and college, American blacks remained barred from entry, but concern for missions had nonetheless forced the first significant crack in segregation among the convention's institutions.42

Desegregation of churches was a wholly separate matter from schools and public accommodations, on the whole a more sensitive, and in the minds of many southerners more radical, issue. But after the controversies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, some Arkansas Baptist leaders were much more forthright, even on this issue, than before. Civil rights activists attempted to enter large, prestigious churches in several major southern cities in 1963. Although McDonald respected the right of Baptist congregations to determine their own admission policies, he urged Baptists not to bar blacks. He also warned that leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board were convinced that "our unchristian attitudes to race are a threat to the cause of foreign missions."43


The assassination of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Mississippi, in June 1963, led McDonald to condemn not just the murder, but also the segregationist rhetoric of Deep South governors: "If Mr. Evers—and Christ Himself—are not to have died in vain, we must not only be against murder—we must be dead set against having the attitude of mind and heart that create the atmosphere for it." After Alabama governor George C. Wallace failed in an attempt to block the desegregation at the University of Alabama in the same month, McDonald condemned Wallace as a "racist" who ignored scriptural teachings about the unity of mankind and the need for love. He argued that federal law was supreme and had to be obeyed: "Gov. Wallace's talk of state sovereignty is sheer bunk."44 McDonald's editorials on race relations generated equal amounts of praise and criticism from readers.45

Though McDonald favored only gradual change and had a somewhat paternalistic attitude toward black people, he defended the constitutional right of civil rights activists to demonstrate, and he spoke in favor of desegregation bills, including what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964.46

After the passage of this act, more and more Baptists in Arkansas spoke out in favor of desegregation. Title VI of the Act required educational institutions in receipt of federal aid to drop racial barriers. Having admitted blacks to graduate classes in March 1963, the trustees of Ouachita Baptist College voted to admit them to undergraduate programs in September 1964. Phelps presented this move as a pragmatic one: Failure to comply with the law "would have meant losing our R.O.T.C. [Reserve Officer Training Corps program], the oldest in the state, and denying our students participation in such programs as the National Defense Loan Program, on which some 200 of them are now attending Ouachita."47 All of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention's colleges signed a civil rights compliance pledge.48

45See, for example, R.G. Pierce and D.I. Crow to the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, August 8, 1963.
Though the convention remained officially quiet about racial issues, McDonald became more outspoken. In September 1964 he told the Southern Baptist Communication conference, “I couldn’t be a Christian and be a segregationist.” He joined the Arkansas State Advisory Committee of the United States Commission on Civil Rights and fully supported implementation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.49

Although Southern Baptists adjusted to the end of Jim Crow laws, they did not seek integration, especially of their own congregations. A reader explained to the *Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine*: “Personally, I believe that integration is inevitable, and perhaps desirable. It is not right for any American to be a second-class citizen. Most people share that opinion in spirit[,] but many whites think the Negro can and should have equal rights in a segregated society, and they are afraid of an integrated society. They feel it represents some threat to them.” SBC congregations in Arkansas remained almost exclusively white. In November 1967 McDonald lamented that only four Southern Baptist churches in the state had any black members. There is no evidence, however, that civil rights groups in Arkansas were pressing for integrated congregations.50

McDonald renewed his call for open churches and equal rights when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April 1968. McDonald praised King as “one of the great men of his day” and described his death as “tragic and untimely.”51

The letters printed in the *Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine* were split evenly between commendation and condemnation of King. Critics accused King of fomenting lawlessness and violence. Vaughn W. Denton, pastor of Magnolia Baptist Church in Crossett, in southeast Arkansas, claimed that King “talked peace with his lips, but his actions resulted in violence. He openly defied the law and caused his followers to do likewise.” Carel G. Norman, pastor of First Baptist Church in Mount Ida, wrote: “I did not always agree with Dr. King[‘]s methods [or] his results but I have for a long

time been sympathetic with his aims. . . . I think the time has come for Arkansas Baptists to open our doors to all men of all races."

King's murder and the subsequent riots induced leading officials of the Southern Baptist Convention to draft "A Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation" for presentation to the convention's annual meeting in June. McDonald joined nearly seventy other leading Baptists from across the South in signing the statement. Subsequently approved in modified form by 72 percent of the messengers to the Convention, the statement called on Baptists to support open churches, equal rights, and an end to discrimination in education and employment. A survey of the response of one hundred Southern Baptist pastors in Arkansas to the statement revealed that about half of them favored open churches, and that many of those in favor found varying degrees of disapproval in their congregations.

Although most Southern Baptists in Arkansas were not yet ready to sanction church integration, many now supported enforcement of civil rights legislation ending legal segregation. The state convention approved a resolution in November 1968 that called on Baptists to work for "reconciliation among all men" and pledged the messengers to go beyond mere "peaceful compliance with laws assuring equal rights for all."

In subsequent years more and more Arkansas Southern Baptist churches abandoned racial prohibitions on attendance and membership, and a few gained black members. Most white Arkansans accepted desegregation. Polls

---

52Vaughn W. Denton to ABN, May 23, 1968; Carel G. Norman to ABN, April 18, 1968. See also letters to ABN, May 9, 16, 30, June 6, 20, 1968.


55Annual, Arkansas, 1968, 42–43.
taken in the first half of the 1970s indicated that less than 20 percent of the state's voters described themselves as "strong segregationists," and a majority identified themselves as at least mildly integrationist.\textsuperscript{56} Changing attitudes toward segregation allowed the Arkansas Baptist State Convention to form a relationship with black Baptist conventions grounded in equality. In 1976 the convention held its first joint session with the state's two black Baptist conventions, and the next year the three conventions began sponsoring an annual evangelistic conference. In 1978 the convention agreed to participate in another joint state convention session to be held in November 1980.\textsuperscript{57}

Most Arkansas Baptists adjusted to the demise of Jim Crow slowly and reluctantly. In the 1950s a minority of Southern Baptists believed that the Bible sanctioned racial segregation. Most Baptists were moderate segregationists who accepted Jim Crow as a natural part of the social order that in no way conflicted with their primary commitments to scripture, evangelism, law and order, peace, and education. When massive resistance to school desegregation in Little Rock undermined Baptist commitments, some leading pastors and Erwin McDonald urged acceptance of token school desegregation. Committed to denominational peace and unity, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention fell silent about race relations in the second half of the 1950s and most of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the Little Rock crisis, coupled with growing worldwide awareness of American racism and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, led moderate Baptists to relinquish their support of segregation as it increasingly came into conflict with the success of foreign missions, the law of the land, and the maintenance of education. Although few Baptists supported integration of their churches, by 1968 most Baptists conceded the injustice of segregation and supported equality of rights under the law.

\textsuperscript{56}Bass and DeVries, The Transformation of Southern Politics, 105.