WHITE RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THE LITTLE ROCK CRISIS



White Religious Leaders and the Little Rock Crisis

Introduction

In 1954, nearly a century after a formal abolition of slavery in the United States, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, one of the most important Supreme Court decisions in US history, declared that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. It was a momentous victory for civil rights activists and all black Americans. However, the decision sparked outrage among many white Americans, particularly in the South. It was evident that law alone was not enough to change deeply rooted racial prejudices.

One of the greatest challenges posed by *Brown v. Board of Education* was the lack of any specific desegregation requirements or guidelines. That opened space for segregationists to resist and fight against integration efforts. In 1955, the Little Rock school board accepted a plan of gradual integration presented by superintendent Virgil Blossom. According to the plan, Little Rock schools were to begin integration process in the fall 1957. However, when nine African American students enrolled in previously all white Little Rock Central High School appeared in front of their new school on September 4, 1957, they were met by a white angry mob and the Arkansas National Guard. Governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus called the latter not to protect the black students' constitutional right to equal education but to block them from entering the school building.

In this activity, you will examine an appeal signed by sixteen Little Rock Christian leaders who responded to these events in the early days of what is today known as the Little Rock Crisis.

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STATEMENT MADE BY
16 MINISTERS OF LITTLE ROCK
3 Episcopal 2 Christian
4 Presbyterian # Methodist
3 Episcopal 2 Christian 4 Presbyterian 4 Methodist 3 Baptist Asl nem ember
We, the undersigned ministers of Little Rock, strongly protest the
action of Gov. Faubus in calling out the armed forces of the state to surround
Central High School, thereby preventing integration in compliance with the
Supreme Court's decision of May 1954 and the order of the Federal Court of
August 1957.
We deplore: (1) the overriding of the authority of the local school
administration; (2) the disregard of national law; (3) the abuse of the
autonomy of the local school district; (4) the policing of the great majority
of the law abiding youth of the city; (5) the exciting of racial tensions;
(6) the reflections cast upon our local law enforcement officers; (7) the
destruction of the respect of our citizens, young and old, for proper constitu-
tional authority. If violence should now occur in our city, the Government
must assure a large share of the blame.
We appeal to every citizen to unite with us in earnest prayer to God
that justice will be brought about and a right example set for every child of
our community. We call upon the Federal authorities to take steps that will
restore public peace and tranquility.
This statement was made the afternoon of the first day of school, September 3rd,
1957 and was the first public protest to the act of placing the National Guard
to prevent the 9 negro children from entering Central High School.
It brought an advertisement from the White Citizens
It brought an advertisement from the White Citizens Commoil Calling upon each of These men by Name To integrale their congregations and thereby
Name To integrale Their congregations and thereby
Ohan Their ringerity.

"Statement Made by 16 Ministers of Little Rock," September 3, 1957 (Bishop Robert R. Brown Papers)

Handwritten: [Top] As I remember [Bottom] It brought an advertisement from the White Citizens' Council calling upon each of these men by name to integrate their congregations and thereby show their sincerity."

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Questions:

- 1. Who are the sixteen men who signed this statement?
- 2. What do the sixteen men who signed this statement protest?
- 3. How do the sixteen men understand the ongoing crisis in Little Rock? Examine the seven points in the second paragraph. Each of them offers a clue on how the statement's authors understood the events at Central High.
- 4. When was this statement made? See the timeline of the Little Rock Crisis (https://www.nps.gov/chsc/learn/historyculture/timeline.htm). How does this statement fit in the timeline of the 1957 events?
- 5. The handwritten note at the bottom reads: "It brought an advertisement from the White Citizens' Council calling upon each of these men by name to integrate their congregations and thereby show their sincerity." Research the role of white citizens' councils in the crisis. Why do you think this council called the sixteen ministers to "integrate their congregations"? Why would a white citizens' council make that appeal if their main goal was to oppose integration?
- 6. The comment about the white citizens' councils calling the men who signed this statement to integrate their congregations suggest that the sixteen ministers were white. Do you think that sixteen is a big or small number? If you are not sure, research how many residents and how many white congregations Little Rock had in the 1950s.
- 7. Historians have concluded that most white religious leaders in Little Rock either opposed integration or stayed silent during the Little Rock Crisis and other civil rights struggles. Those who supported integration and voiced their support for the Little Rock Nine were a minority. What does it tell us about white Christian leaders in Little Rock at the time? What does it tell us about the sixteen men who signed this statement?