

# 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.

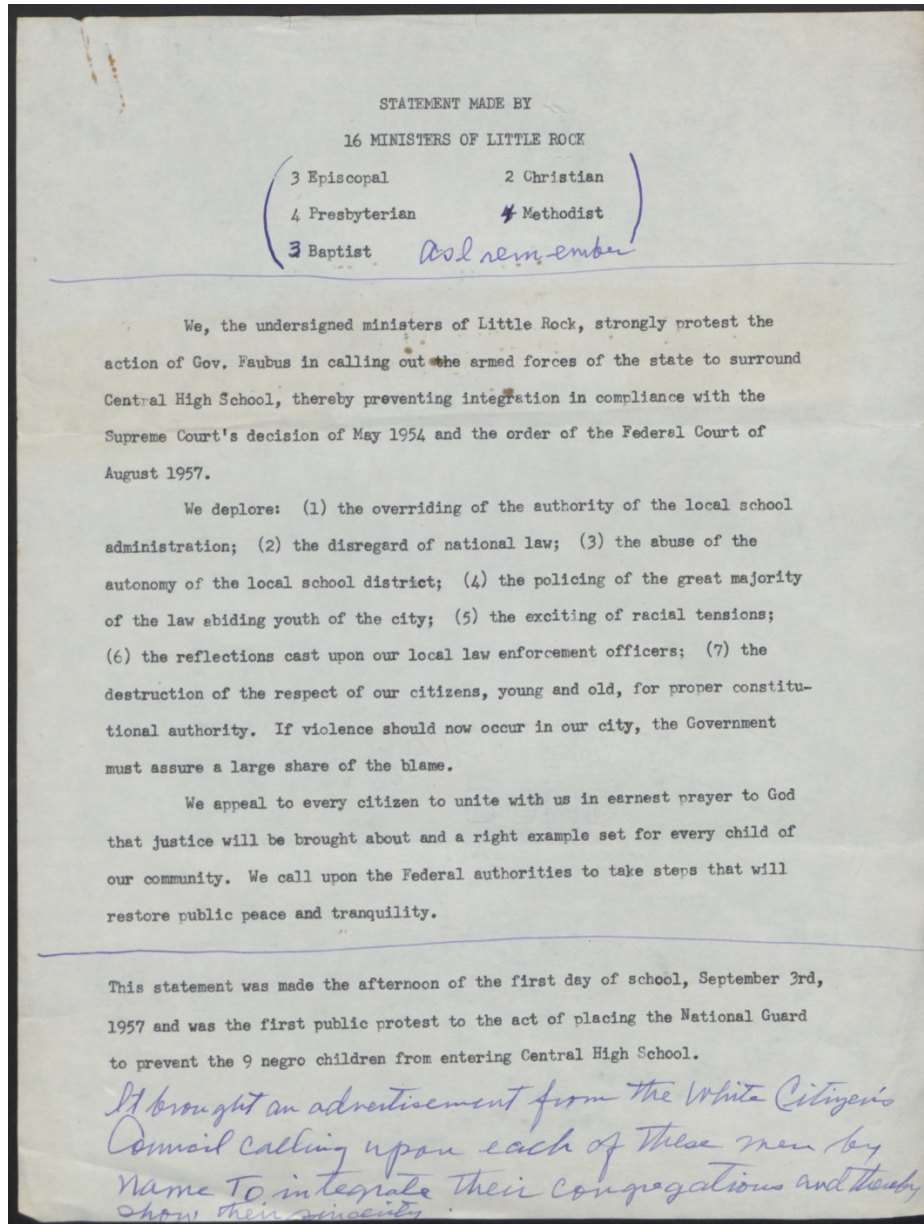
One of the greatest challenges posed by *Brown v. Board of Education* was the lack of any specific desegregation requirements or guidelines. That opened space for segregationists to resist and fight against integration efforts. In 1955, the Little Rock school board accepted a plan of gradual integration 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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CENTER FOR ARKANSAS  
HISTORY AND CULTURE  
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK



“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?