

The Most Segregated Hour in America: Protesting Segregation in the Church

Catherine Lawson

During the 1960s, the majority of churches, like most places of business, were segregated in the South. Consequently, a movement began in the United States to bring integration to all aspects of society. Churches were no exception. However, protesting segregation in the church was controversial. Some felt that they had the right to worship as they pleased with whomever they pleased, while others thought it was hypocritical of the church to deny membership to certain people because of their race. In order to protest this form of segregation, many people staged “kneel-ins,” so called because people would kneel outside the churches in prayer as a peaceful protest. These “kneel-ins” occurred in churches of all denominations, and as time progressed, they became a popular form of protest.

“Kneel-Ins” started as early as 1960, but became more popular as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum around 1963. These protests followed a basic formula, and occurred all over the South, which consisted of states such as Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. Presbyterian and Baptist churches were two of the denominations that were frequently protested because “Unlike their colleagues of other denominations and faiths . . . Southern Baptists and Presbyterian ministers lacked the protection and support of a church hierarchy.”¹ However, all churches were subject to “kneel-ins.” Each “kneel-in” incident varied but many shared similar characteristics.

“Kneel-ins” typically began with an interracial group of college age students choosing seven or eight churches to attend. The churches they chose had all-white membership and were

¹ Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press), 70.

typically very large, influential churches in the community. The majority of the time the visitors were welcomed into the service; however, “kneel-ins” occurred at the churches that would not allow the interracial groups to attend service.

An adult pastor normally organized the protests and led these interracial groups of students. Organizations such as the NAACP or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Commission (SNCC) also arranged to have groups of students attend protests at local churches. Protestors came from all over the country, and many had come to the South to witness first-hand the Civil Rights Movement.

When the interracial groups arrived at churches, church elders or ushers normally denied them admittance by meeting them at the door and telling them they were not welcome. Churches began to hire guards to stand outside the doors and control those who tried to enter the church. It was also common for the ushers or church elders to deny these groups access to the church, and challenge the pastors, who supported integration. In fact, many of these churches had no specific written rules against African Americans worshiping at their church; however, the members felt the rule was “implied.” When denied admittance to the service, many of the groups of students would kneel in prayer or sit outside and read the Bible, which is how these protests received the name “kneel-ins” or “pray-ins”. Those who decided to stay and participate in a “kneel-in” and did not vacate the church property, were threatened with arrest, and in some cases were arrested.

Easter became the preferred season to perform “kneel-ins” after 1963. The groups protesting the segregation would write form letters explaining their motives and visit several churches on Easter Sunday. They would present this form letter to the usher regardless of whether or not they were admitted that Sunday. Often, if a group was not admitted, they would continue to return to that church until they were granted entry.

“Kneel-in” protests became more formulated as the Civil Rights Movement progressed. Protests that gained national attention, such as the “kneel-ins” in Birmingham, were partially responsible for the increase in church protests in the mid-sixties. Consequently, when one protest gained national attention it would spawn new demonstrations. Varieties of “kneel-ins” occurred in Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama during the early 1960s, and these protests exemplify the phenomenon of “kneel-ins”.

Atlanta, GA 1960

One of the first “kneel-ins” occurred on August 7, 1960 at the largest Baptist church in Atlanta. A group of 25 students from eight different universities united to protest segregation in the churches of Georgia. These students were part of two integrationist committees. These two committees met in Atlanta, and planned to continue around the mid-south protesting segregation. Members of the churches that they visited often referred to student integrationist committees as “uneducated agitators;”² however, they were from respected universities from all parts of the United States. There were students from NYU, Morehouse College, Howard University, Spellman College, Fisk University, Morgan State University, and Philander Smith College in this group. Also traveling with this group was a white male named Jim Laue. Laue was a graduate of Harvard and was doing research on the race problem and the church’s position in the South. His presence exemplifies that people were not only protesting segregation in the church 1960, but segregation in the church was also a common occurrence and researchers had begun to travel down south to study the situation.

² “Students Visit Seven Atlanta Churches”. *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 Aug. 1960, A1.

Consequently, on Sunday August 7, 1960, these students broke into small racially diverse groups and simultaneously visited six predominately-white churches in Atlanta. Students were admitted at First Presbyterian Church, St. Marks Methodist Church, Grace Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip. All these churches were prominent in the area, and influential clergymen pastored some of the churches.

Bishop J.O Smith was the pastor at Grace Methodist Church at this time, and he greeted the group of students with respect. He had been wanting African Americans to join his congregation for some time, and thanked them for attending the service at his church. He then took the opportunity in his sermon that Sunday to discuss the importance of their presence. In his sermon, he said, "If you can't love a man you can see, how can you love a God you can't see?"³ This was clear reference to first John in the New Testament. It says "If a man says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"⁴ Although many churches during this period were attempting to use biblical references to support segregation, Smith diverged from this trend, and instead used the Bible to support integration in his church.

Unfortunately, not all of the churches that these students attended were as welcoming as Grace Methodist Church. When students arrived at Druid Hills Baptist Church, they were told by a member of the "Welcoming Committee" that they could not sit in the sanctuary, but were welcome to watch the service from a television in the basement of the church. Dr. Louie D. Newton was the pastor at Druid Hills and claimed the "students came late to service and refused to sit in the rear pews in the sanctuary."⁵ A similar situation occurred at First Baptist Church. When students arrived to attend worship, they were stopped in the foyer by an usher and told that

³ "Students Visit Seven Atlanta Churches". *Memphis World*, 8 Aug. 1960, A1.

⁴ *The Holy Bible*. 1st John 4:20. (Indiana: B.B Kirkbride Bible Co., 1984).

⁵ "Students Visit Seven Atlanta Churches." *Memphis World*, 8 Aug. 1960, A1.

they were not allowed in the sanctuary. However, they could listen to the service from the foyer. Joe Vining, an usher at First Baptist, said, “The students were a bunch of agitators and wanted to separate and sit where they pleased.”⁶ Although the students did not cause a scene when they were asked to leave these two churches, their actions brought to light for the first time the hypocrisy that existed in many of the Atlanta churches. Little is known of what the students did once they were denied access to these churches; however, they had plans to continue traveling around the mid-South protesting segregation in the church.⁷

Rev. Ashton Jones

First Baptist of Atlanta denied black visitors in 1960, and the church remained segregated for several years. First Baptist’s rigid segregationist views made it a notoriously racist church. Consequently, an integrationist group visited the church again in 1963.

Rev. Ashton Jones was the leader of the student group that attempted to attend worship at First Baptist on June 30, 1963. Jones was a 67-year-old white male from San Gabriel, California. Born in Butler, Georgia, he had returned to fight racism in this segregated town. Prior to protesting at First Baptist Church, Jones had been arrested four times for various sit-in attempts in Atlanta. Earlier that month, Jones was charged with vagrancy and suspected of dementia. He had been arrested while participating in a sit-in at a downtown restaurant in Atlanta. He had gone there with an African American student in hopes of being served, but was arrested instead. The Judge ordered that he be held at Grady Hospital and undergo a psychiatric evaluation. However, he showed no signs of dementia. His lawyer claims that Rev. Jones was

⁶ Students Visit Seven Atlanta Churches.” *Memphis World*, 8 Aug. 1960, A1.

⁷ “Hearing for Minister is Continued”. *Atlanta World*, 28 June 1963, A1.

being “illegally confined and held at Grady Hospital because of his belief in racial equality and brotherhood and solidarity of all mankind, irrespective of race, creed, religion, or national origin.”⁸ However, Jones’s arrest did not deter his efforts. Shortly after Jones was released from Grady Hospital, he planned a “kneel-in” at First Baptist Church.

An interracial group of fourteen students from Atlanta University accompanied Jones to First Baptist. When they arrived for the morning service, an usher told them that they were not allowed to worship in the sanctuary. When they heard this, they kneeled on the church steps and began to read from the Bible. When the service concluded they left, but returned that night for the evening service. This time Jones was much more impassioned when the pastor, Rev. Roy O. McClain, denied him entry into the church. “Members of the congregation said that Jones called out ‘circus barker’ style to those that attempted to enter that Sunday: ‘Step right in folks; worship a segregated God in a segregated church’ . . . Jones insisted he cried out only when he was physically abused--by the church members and by the policemen who hurt him dragging him away.”⁹ That morning, Jones had left when he was asked by the ushers, but became enraged when he was threatened with arrest that evening. McClain contacted the police because Jones was “seated against a column, his legs stuck out so that those entering the church had to step over him.”¹⁰ After Jones’s arrest, the students who were with Jones joined hands on the church steps and began to sing “We Shall Overcome”.

On July 1, 1963 Judge T.C Little ordered that Jones be held without bond pending the hearing on charges of disturbing public worship and disorderly conduct. Judge Durwood T. Pye

⁹ “Sit-In Pastor Fined \$1,000, Is Given Maximum 18 Months”. *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 Aug. 1963, A1.

¹⁰ “Court Continues Case of Sit-In Minister”. *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 July 1963, A1.

was the reigning judge in Jones's trial. Unfortunately, for Jones, the evidence was not in his favor. The two police officers who arrived at the scene were Capt. W.L. Duncan and Lt. A.L. Posey of the Atlanta Police Department, and they testified against Jones. They said they "told the man he was under arrest. . .he immediately started screaming and sat down on the ground stating that he was not going anywhere and if he did they would have to carry him. They told him they had a duty to perform and asked him to get up and accompany them to the car. . .He still continued to scream."¹¹ However, Jones's story is slightly different. Jones claimed "that they [the police] dragged me 50 feet. . .and when the police grabbed me, one almost broke my arm."¹² Although Jones insisted he was battered, the testimony from the police and the First Baptist congregation members was enough for a conviction.

The trial lasted for three days and the jury only deliberated an hour and ten minutes before returning the verdict of guilty. Jones was charged with disturbing religious worship services and was held in contempt of court. On August 28, 1963, Jones was sentenced to serve the maximum penalty for a misdemeanor, which was twelve months jail time and six months of hard labor in the Fulton County Jail. At the sentencing hearing, Judge Pye took the opportunity to give his opinion. He said, "Other people have the right to worship a segregated God in a segregated church if they please. Men have died on a thousand fields of battle for that precious right. No one has a right to impose his views on the views of others in those matters. That is what the jury has found you guilty of."¹³ Segregation was deemed unlawful in public places after *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. However, Pye's statement proves that almost ten years later, many law enforcement officials were acting as if segregation was justifiable.

¹¹ "Minister Held as 2 Sit-Ins Fail at First Baptist Church." *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 July 1963, A1.

¹² Court Continues Case of Sit-In Minister." *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 July 1963, A1.

¹³ "Sit-In Pastor Fined \$1,000, Is Given Maximum 18 Months." *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 Aug. 1963, A1.

On March 3, 1964, after only 188 days of his 18-month sentence, Jones was released on a \$5,000 bond. Miss Louise Cramer, a white Atlanta citizen, posted the required property bond. She had no connection to Jones or any of the current civil rights issues that were occurring in the city during this time. She said, "It just seems to me somebody has got to do it. As a decent Atlanta citizen, I am just ashamed of all the publicity we're getting."¹⁴ However, Jones's actions were not fruitless because while in jail, First Baptist decided to allow members of all races to worship in their church.

Birmingham, Alabama

Birmingham, Alabama was one of the many racially charged cities during the civil rights movement. Therefore, it is fitting that one of the most well known "kneel-in" protests was in this city at First Baptist church. The pastor of First Baptist was Rev. Earl Stallings, and he was part of a reconciliation committee. This committee called for a halt to violent protests in Birmingham because of they believed them to be counterproductive. Stallings participation in the civil rights movement prepared him for potential "kneel-ins", and the way in which he reacted to the "kneel-ins" at his church earned national coverage. The incident at First Baptist caught the attention of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. King commended Stallings for his actions in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail". In this letter, King wrote:

"I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Reverend Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non segregated basis."¹⁵

¹⁴ Gulliver, Hal. "Sit-In Pastor Freed On \$5,000 Bond". *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 March 1964, A1.

¹⁵ King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail". <http://www.nobelprizes.com>.

The incident King is referring to occurred on Easter Sunday in 1963. A group students, who had met through a Negro non-violent organization, . The students involved met early that Sunday morning and each received a different assignment on where to attempt to attend service. In order to attend several prominent churches in Birmingham on that Sunday, the students split into small groups. They first attended Sixth Avenue Presbyterian Church, but were met at the door by a white delegation. “An usher told them that the church was for white people, and referred them to a Negro Presbyterian church.”¹⁶

During the same time, Rev. Andrew Young, a black civil rights activist, led a group of four African American women to worship at First Baptist Church in Birmingham. An usher met them at the door of the church. He refused to shake their hands, but referred them to some rows in the back of the church reserved for African Americans. The group worshipped with the congregation. After the service, Young handed the pastor, Earl Stallings, a letter explaining their motives. “They had come to First Baptist on this day of resurrection to seek a new life together with ‘our separated brothers and sisters’. Some called this act a ‘kneel-in’, but the civil rights activists simply hoped to worship in a house of prayer ‘for all people.’”¹⁷ However, the Earl Stallings was a man who would go on to make history through his reaction to Young’s visit.

Stallings was born March 20, 1916 in Durham, North Carolina. He grew up during the Great Depression supporting his family. These early years taught Stallings important lessons that would help him later during the civil rights conflicts in Birmingham. Stallings said, “It ultimately came down to the fact that I had to make a stand in Birmingham, because of the values that I learned in my early life. Those ideals included honesty, personal integrity, a

¹⁶ Gordon, Robert. “Birmingham Churches Split on Knee;-Ins.” *Birmingham World*, 23 April 1964, A1.

¹⁷ Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 70.

willingness to assume responsibility, and respect for the dignity of all humankind, regardless of race.”¹⁸ Stallings earned his master’s in theology from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and pastored two Baptist churches before being appointed leader of the Florida Baptist Convention. Due to his early success, Stallings’s friend Pastor Grady Cothen recommended Stallings to fulfill the recently vacated prestigious pulpit at First Baptist Church in Birmingham. At this time, the church had around 4,000 members, but due to the increasing uncertainty and instability in Birmingham, they had been unable to retain a pastor for more than a few years. It was 1961, and Stallings would be their fourth pastor since 1952. “Stallings was partially aware of the difficulties in pastoring the First Baptist Church of Birmingham. Over the previous decade, the church had gained a reputation as a ‘meat grinder’ for pastors and staff-chewing them up and spitting them out in only a few years.”¹⁹

The large congregation was entirely white, and as racial tensions, heightened, segregationist pressure on the church and its staff increased as well. Demographics in the area surrounding the church were changing, and this created heightened fears of integration in the community. Consequently, an increasing number of members retreated behind the thick walls of the church in an effort to maintain Southern tradition and provincial values.²⁰ As a result, when Stallings became pastor at this church the only option in maintaining peace within the congregation was to remain silent on the issue of race and keep controversial issues off the pulpit. However, on Easter Sunday 1963, Stallings was no longer able to maintain his neutral stance on these controversial issues.

An hour before the church service on April 17, 1963 Stallings received word that there were African American visitors. Young and four black women had attended the service at First

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹ Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001). 73

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

Baptist that morning. “Stallings wrote a few days after the incident ‘we had no Christian justification for closing our doors, and if they came to provoke an incident, we were determined to have no part in this action.’ The Church had intended to welcome blacks for years. Since 1954 the church maintained an open door policy for any black visitors.”²¹ Despite church policy, seventy members got up and left when African Americans were admitted that morning for the service. Although many of the church members were upset, Stallings went out to greet the visitors and tell them how pleased he was that they had come to worship at his church that morning. This was a drastic change from Young’s initial reception at the church. On Easter Sunday, when Young arrived, the ushers refused to shake his hand and when Young had attempted to give an offering the ushers had declined his gift. However, after the service Stallings shook hands with all of the visitors and thanked them for their attendance. Community members had assumed that the African Americans would be banned from First Baptist, and consequently many were shocked when no one was turned away from the service that morning.

Integrationists and segregationists clashed over this issue. Many commended Stallings for his actions. One man said, “Your demonstration of real Christian ethics helps me stand back and a little taller, as an otherwise embarrassed Alabamian.”²² There were just as many people, however, who were appalled by Stallings actions. Segregationists said, “The most “Christ-like” way to deal with the situation, they suggested, was to drive out these groups just as Christ had forced the ‘money changers from the temple’. These black visitors had not come to worship, this group believed, but to advance the aims of their organization.”²³

The controversy over this event prompted black visitors to come back for worship. On April 22, 1963, just one week after Young’s initial visit, three black men and two black women

²¹ Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 77.

²² Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 78.

²³ *Ibid.*, 79.

came to First Baptist for worship. These people were not turned away, but welcomed. “A receptionist pinned on each protestor a red and white ribbon with a small badge that read ‘A Welcome Guest’. For many, however, the blacks were anything but welcome.”²⁴ Over the next decade, the segregationists and integrationists in the congregation divided the Church. Many felt that the church policy needed to be changed in order to keep the church segregated. On the other hand, many felt it was unchristian to turn people away. These drastically different points of views were representative of the civil rights movement with in the church.

Jackson, Mississippi

The protests that occurred in Birmingham set an example for how many would now protest segregation in the church. Consequently, the following Easter season similar events occurred in Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee. However, the first “kneel-ins” in Jackson took place in June of 1963. Ed King, a chaplain at Tougaloo College, led a group of black students from Tougaloo in several “kneel-ins” in Jackson. They protested Galloway Memorial Methodist Church and First Baptist Church. They were turned away immediately at First Baptist Church, but the events that unfolded at Galloway were much more dramatic.

The Easter visitation at Galloway was part of an ongoing effort in Jackson to “crack down on the iceberg of closed society at its most sensitive point.”²⁵ The leader of this movement in Jackson was Ed King. King was a Mississippi native and a Methodist minister. He was also very involved in the civil rights movement. King’s most remarkable civil rights activity was “his leadership of the extraordinary church visits campaign--an attempt to desegregate and agitate

²⁴ Bass, Jonathan. Blessed are the Peacemakers. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 2001),80.

²⁵ Marsh, Charles. God’s Long Summer. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 129.

white conservative and moderate churches.”²⁶ King encouraged “church-testings” and believed it was essential to highlight the hypocrisy in segregated churches. He made these protests an integral part of Jackson’s civil rights movement. The incident at Galloway was just the beginning of a national movement called “Freedom Summer”.

In addition to Ed King, many other ministers visited Jackson in an attempt to integrate the church. Rev. James Lawson was a well known civil rights activist and pastor from Memphis. He came down to Jackson with a group of Southern Methodist ministers to participate in the “kneel-ins”. The group organized a trip to Jackson when another group of interracial Methodist ministers were arrested for attending services at Capitol Methodist church in Jackson. Rev. Lawson said, “Southern Methodist ministers, both white and negro, should participate in the effort to give impetus to it since Northern Methodist ministers had been arrested and jailed.”²⁷

Galloway was not immune to these protests. Consequently, When W.B. Selah, Galloway’s pastor, arrived at his church on Easter morning, he saw five black individuals standing outside. He later found out that the ushers of the church had denied these students admittance. Selah could not tolerate this blatant act of racism because he was part of a group of 28 Mississippi Methodist Clergy Men who had declared the national churches affirmation that ‘all men are brothers in Christ.’”²⁸ He declared that morning “there can be no color bar in the Christian Church, so I will ask the bishop for another appointment.”²⁹ His successor was Rev. W.J. Cunningham.

During Cunningham’s first week as pastor, he received a phone call from King informing him of the group’s plans to attempt to worship at Galloway during the next few weeks. Although

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁷ “Memphis Pastor to Participate in ‘Kneel-In.’” *The Tri State Defender*, Vol. 9:4, A1.

²⁸ Marsh, Charles. *God’s Long Summer*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 132.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

the group was unable to attend service, Cunningham often met with them on Sunday afternoons to discuss integration. Despite Cunningham's eagerness to cooperate with King, the church members were very determined to keep the church segregated. In the fall of 1963, King and his students arrived at Galloway. "The ushers, who had not been prepared for the visitors' arrival, rushed to the front of the chapel . . . and formed a human barricade at the double doors."³⁰ King became infuriated, and he and his students began angrily knocking on the large wooden doors. After this incident, the police were called anytime King and his group appeared at Galloway, and protestors were frequently arrested.

On Easter Sunday 1964, Charles F. Golden and Bishop James K. Matthews attempted to worship at Galloway Memorial Methodist Church. Golden was the leader of the black Central Jurisdiction for the Methodist Church in Mississippi, and Matthews was the Methodist Bishop of Boston. Church guards intercepted these men as they were walking into the sanctuary. The guards explained that their job was to protect the church from black or interracial groups of worshippers. Therefore, these men would not be allowed to worship at the church that Sunday. The guards said that they should attend an all black church in Mississippi or go to their home state and attend church.

The president of the church council at Galloway and a prominent leader in the community, Nat Rodgers, arrived to settle the conflict. He simply explained the church policy to these two men. "The Church's policy, enacted a year earlier on January 14, 1963, was clear on the matter: 'It is not un-Christian that we prefer to remain an all white congregation. The practice of the separation of the races in Galloway Memorial Methodist Church is a time honored tradition.'"³¹ Matthews and Golden left without a struggle, but gave the guards an open letter to

³⁰ Marsh, Charles. God's Long Summer. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997),133.

³¹ *Ibid.*,128.

the congregation of Galloway. The letter said, ““there cannot be any true Christian worship at all which is not intercession on behalf of all mankind . . . for Jesus Christ died and rose again for *all*.’ How tragic that a church could so misshape the Gospel that the Easter celebration becomes removed from the lived experience of social relations.”³² This visit was not the first of its kind. The initiative to integrate the churches “in Mississippi was inspired in large part by the event that had taken place in Birmingham in the spring of 1963” and church protests had been going on at Galloway for the past year.³³

Galloway’s minister, Rev. W.J Cunningham, had been in office for six months. Cunningham had instructed Rodgers to allow the two Bishops to attend the service. Consequently, when he received the letter that Matthews and Golden had been turned away, he was deeply troubled because Rodgers had blatantly usurped his power and forbidden their entry. His assistant minister had also ignored his request to allow the Bishops into service, and had sided with Rodgers in this decision. Cunningham said, “The mental and emotional stress of his ministry at Galloway had become almost unbearable.”³⁴ In 1965, King was finally able to reverse the church’s closed-door policy, but unfortunately, he lost his job as a result.

Memphis, Tennessee

Turmoil broke out in the churches of Mississippi on Easter Sunday 1964. However, at the same time a similar movement was taking place in Memphis, Tennessee. On March 22, 1964, Palm Sunday, a Negro student named Joe Purdy, and two white students, James Bullock and Howard Romaine, attempted to worship at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. They

³² Marsh, Charles. God’s Long Summer. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997),128.

³³ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁴ *Ibid.*,129.

had met through the intercollegiate chapter of the NAACP in Memphis. This chapter included students from the University of Memphis, Christian Brothers University, and Southwestern College. Prior to visiting Second Presbyterian Church, these students had visited seven other prominent churches in Memphis. They were admitted at First Baptist, Bellevue Baptist, Evergreen Presbyterian, Idlewild Presbyterian, Calvary Episcopal, St. Mary's Episcopal, and Centenary Methodist Church. However, their visit to Second Presbyterian would yield different results.

These three young men attempted to enter the sanctuary for worship. However, several church members promptly blocked the door. "A church member asked Purdy whether he was 'African'. When he responded that he was 'American', he and his white colleagues were denied admittance into the sanctuary."³⁵ They church members threatened to call the police on these three students, and they left without any complaint. However, this was not the last time the members of Second Presbyterian would be seeing these young men.

They returned for the next seven weeks, and each time they came with a larger group of people. The interracial group of students would attempt to enter the church, and when they were denied entry, they would kneel outside the church on the lawn in prayer during the service. The group knelt outside the church in prayer regardless of the weather. On Easter Sunday, the students knelt in the rain. The protest grew so large and continued for so long that it gained national attention, and Second Presbyterian hired a private police agency to help keep the group from attending service. These "private police" would at times forcibly remove the protestors off the church property. The first article appeared in the Tri-State Defender on April 25, 1964. "The

³⁵ Haynes, Stephan. "A Church, A College, and Civil Rights: Rhodes and the Second Presbyterian Controversy". (unpublished manuscript), 4.

Defender led with the headline ‘Private Police Block ‘Kneel-Ins’ from Presbyterian Church.’”³⁶

Romaine also published an article in the Sou’wester, the school newspaper for Southwestern College. In this article, he explained the aims of the group. He said, “We feel that our presence at the church itself is an act of worship, the presentation of our bodies a symbol of the churches tragic rejection of the gospel message of brotherhood and love.”³⁷ Unfortunately, despite the clear biblical aims of their protest, many of the church members referred to these students as “atheists.”³⁸

Eventually, word of this conflict reached the national Presbyterian Church. Carl Pritchett was a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), and he was appalled by the actions of Second Presbyterian. He flew down to Memphis to kneel with the protestors. His presence created more publicity for the protest. After witnessing the “kneel-ins”, Pritchett insisted that Second Presbyterian lose its privilege to host the General Assembly that upcoming year. Second Presbyterian was one of the largest churches in the denomination, and had been hoping to host the General Assembly for some time. However, Second Presbyterians failure to allow African Americans to worship at their church, reflected poorly on the overall denomination, and therefore it lost its privilege to host the General Assembly in 1965. Many in the PCUS felt that “if the GA were to meet in a segregated church . . . it would be compromising its own stand that racial barriers in the church are contrary to the gospel.”³⁹

The “kneel-in” protests at Second Presbyterian ended in mid-May, but it was not until February 10, 1965 that the churches segregation policy was changed. In January of 1965,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ Haynes, Stephan. “A Church, A College, and Civil Rights.”(Unpublished manuscript), 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

“kneel-ins” reoccurred at Second Presbyterian. The “kneel-ins” lasted for several weeks, and this prompted the church to reexamine the segregation policy it had enforced for years. In order to amend this problem, a congregational meeting was held. At this meeting, the congregation voted to implement a new policy in which elders would rotate off the session after five years. The church elders had been enforcing the segregation policies, and rotation allowed for the possibility of integration. “In early March the Press-Scimitar reported that the crisis had finally been resolved with a plan for ‘admitting Negroes and segregating them inside the church.’”⁴⁰ Later that month, an African American attended service, but sat in the balcony at Second Presbyterian for worship. However, the entire congregation did not embrace this new policy. After the new policies were implemented, 250 members, or ten percent of the church, left in protest and formed Independent Presbyterian Church.

Different Places, Shared Characteristics

People protested segregation in the church in various ways. Some groups chose to kneel in prayer outside the church, while other groups yelled and protested when asked to leave. Despite these minor differences, the protests that occurred in Birmingham, Atlanta, Jackson, and Memphis all shared similar characteristics. The phenomenon of “kneel-ins” is exemplified through these five incidents.

During all five of these “kneel-ins” at First Baptist of Atlanta, Second Presbyterian, First Baptist of Birmingham, and Galloway, the groups protesting typically consisted of a group of interracial college age students who were led by a pastor. The “kneel-ins” in Jackson, MS were

⁴⁰ Haynes, Stephan. “A Church, A College, and Civil Rights.”(unpublished manuscript), 41.

staged by a group of black students from Tougaloo College, who were led by Ed King, who was the Chaplain at Tougaloo. The Atlanta protests in 1963 had students from Atlanta University who were led by Rev. Ashton Jones. Rev. Andrew Young was the leader of the group of students that protested in Birmingham; however, the group had been formed through a Negro-Nonviolent Organization. Many times if a group was not organized under a specific person, such as Ed King who organized the Jackson protestors, then the group was organized through a nonviolent Civil Rights committee. For example, the students who protested Second Presbyterian had met through the intercollegiate NAACP in Memphis. Similarly, the students involved in the 1960 Atlanta “kneel-ins” were part of two integrationist committees and had been organized under a nonviolent coordinating committee.

The students and pastors involved in the protests were not necessarily from the particular area in which they were protesting. Those involved in the 1960 protests were from all over the country. Students from as far north as Boston and New York had traveled down to Atlanta participate in this movement. Rev. Ashton Jones, who protested in Atlanta three years later, was from California, and the two bishops who attempted to worship at Galloway, were from Los Angeles and Boston. These demographics prove that the civil rights movement was not something that solely affected those in the South, but rather was a nationwide movement where people from all over the country, traveled south and protested the antiquated segregationist policies.

These interracial groups of pastors and students visited similar types of churches despite their varying locations. The churches that they visited had all-white congregations, and were normally very large, prominent, churches in the area. For example, Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis was the largest church in the denomination at the time. First Baptist in Atlanta was

the largest church in Atlanta. Similarly, First Baptist Church of Birmingham was the largest Baptist church in the city at the time, and Galloway Methodist Church to this day has over two thousand members in its congregation. Not all the churches were necessarily the largest in their denominations, but were still very influential. For example, bishops pastored several of the congregations visited, such as Grace Methodist Church.

Although three of the five cases described occurred at Baptist Churches, “kneel-ins” were not exclusive to any one denomination. Baptist Churches were frequently the site of “kneel-ins.” However, many denominations were visited during a protest, and all denominations faced the hardships and controversy of that came with integration.

Typically, the protestors would attempt to worship at between five and seven churches on a given Sunday. A large group would break into 5-7 smaller groups so they could attend services simultaneously. The only case in which one church was singled out was in 1963 when Jones protested First Baptist. This possibly is due to the “kneel-ins” that occurred three years prior in Atlanta. During the 1960 protest, First Baptist was one of the only churches that did not seat the interracial group. However, Jones’s specific reason for only visiting First Baptist in 1963 remains unknown.

When the group arrived at the churches for services, they often carried a form letter. This letter explained their Christian motives. The use of a form letter was not seen in any of the early protests in Atlanta; however, it is directly seen in the protests at Galloway and First Baptist of Birmingham. Although, a form letter was not presented at Second Presbyterian, a letter was published in the college newspaper, which essentially served the same purpose.

When a group of students was denied entry into the church, they would act in several different ways. Many groups peacefully left after being denied entry. Bishops Matthews and

Golden left Galloway without protest, as did the group of students in the 1960 Atlanta “kneel-ins”. However, it was also common for those denied to gather outside the church and kneel in prayer during the service. This occurred at Second Presbyterian and First Baptist in Atlanta. Occasionally, those protesting would take slightly more extreme measures. Rev. Jones yelled and blocked the entrance to the sanctuary when he was not allowed to enter with his students. During one of the protests at Galloway, those who were blocked from entering the church began loudly knocking on the doors in order to disrupt the service for everyone else. “King and his students leaned over the outstretched arms of the Methodist men and began knocking on the heavy wooden closed doors of the chapel.”⁴¹ King insisted if they could not all worship together, than no one should be allowed to worship in peace.⁴² Often, when protestors were denied admittance, they would return in the preceding weeks. The “kneel-ins” at Second Presbyterian lasted eight weeks, while the protests at Galloway went on for over a year. In Birmingham, everyone who showed up for service that Easter Sunday was allowed to worship; however, the protestors returned for a second week to ensure that Stallings and his congregation intended to follow their open door policy.

Church members played a large role in the segregation policies the congregation enforced. It was common that the church members, not the pastors, were the ones to forbid people from worshipping. During the 1960 Atlanta protests, the church members insisted that the students were just a bunch of “agitators.”⁴³ Jones visited this same church in 1963. Church members were the ones to report Jones to the police, and later testified against Jones in court. Jones also claimed that members from the welcoming committee dragged and battered him in an

⁴¹ Marsh, Charles. *God’s Long Summer*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 134.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴³ “Students Visit Seven Atlanta Churches”. *Memphis World*, 8 Aug. 1960, A1.

attempt to remove him from the front of the church.⁴⁴ The ushers of First Baptist in Birmingham refused to shake hands with Young, and many of the members left when Stallings refused to change his open-door policy.

The actions of the church members at Galloway and Second Presbyterian are also very similar. Both churches employed private police agencies in order to keep protestors off their property. In addition, church members physically blocked the doors at these two churches. At Second Presbyterian, the members stood by the doors with their arms crossed, while at Galloway the Church members linked arms in front of the door. Both churches called the students “communists”⁴⁵ and “atheists”⁴⁶, and saw nothing Christian about their protests.

Although, Galloway and Second Presbyterian were very similar, a large difference between these two churches was the stance that the pastors took on the issue of segregation in the church. At Second Presbyterian, the pastor took a neutral stance, and allowed the church members to dictate the segregation policies of the church. However, the pastors at Galloway did not share the views of the congregation. Galloway’s pastors wished for integration, but the church members were constantly ignoring their wishes and forbidding African Americans to attend worship at the church. This clash of ideals was the cause of the resignation of two pastors in three years. Even Stallings, who was praised by Martin Luther King Jr. for his acceptance of all races, had members leave his church when he allowed African Americans to attend service.

These five “kneel-ins” all shared many characteristics, but despite their similarities their outcomes were drastically different. The churches that allowed African Americans into worship, and avoided a drawn-out protest were able to sustain their membership. Little is known of what

⁴⁴ Minister Held as 2 Sit-Ins Fail at First Baptist Church”. *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 July 1963, A1.

⁴⁵ Marsh, Charles. *God’s Long Summer*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 134.

⁴⁶ Haynes, Stephan. “A Church, A College, and Civil Rights: Rhodes and the Second Presbyterian Controversy”. (unpublished manuscript), 19.

happened after the protests subsided at First Baptist in Atlanta, but the church did integrate the following year. Churches such as Second Presbyterian and Galloway Methodist suffered greatly due to their resistance to change. Civil Rights issues plagued Galloway well into the 1960s and consequently forced the church to close for several years. Second Presbyterian lost approximately ten percent of their congregation when they integrated the church.

National Church Policy

Although many individual churches insisted on maintaining segregation, it is important to remember that National Church policy in general encouraged churches to allow people from all races to attend service. In addition, many bishops, pastors, and laymen were very active in the civil rights movement. Racism in the church was frequently a topic of discussion in the World Council of Churches. In 1963, colored people cast a vote of non-confidence in the Christian leadership among white people. This prompted the World Council of Churches to make it a topic at their meet in May.⁴⁷ During the meeting, the Episcopalian minister, Rev. Daisuke Katagawa said, “This growing distrust should concern every Christian whether he be a white man, a colored man, an African or an Asian.”⁴⁸ His remarks at the meeting prove that racism in the church was a growing problem, but there were many ministers, black and white, who were addressing the problem.

Episcopalians were aware of this problem as early as 1960. In October of 1960, the Episcopalian Society for Racial and Cultural Unity acknowledged that there was a division among the membership in both churches in the North and the South, and therefore was

⁴⁷ “Church Racism a Meet Topic.” *Memphis World*, 4 May 1963, A2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, A2.

encouraging members of the Episcopal church to participate in the “kneel-in” movement in the South in order to help bring an end to this division. They said, “We urge them to persevere in their attempt to renew in church a realization of its nature as a community of Christ’s people.”⁴⁹ This statement was issued in Atlanta shortly after the first series of “kneel-ins”. Perhaps the predominance of Baptist and Presbyterian churches in the South was the reason that Episcopal churches avoided many of the protests that plagued other denominations. However, it could also be possible that the National Episcopal Church’s public stance on the matter of racism was what prevented protestors from visiting many of the Episcopal Churches.

The Methodist Church was also in favor of integration. In addition to the pastors that visited Jackson to participate in the “kneel-ins”, the Methodist church also formed a commission on social concern. The Methodist Commission on Social Concern supplied the bail bond for those arrested for “kneel-ins” at Methodist churches.⁵⁰ Methodist bishops from all parts of the country flew in to places such as Jackson, MS, in order to participate in “kneel-ins”.

In April of 1963, shortly after the “kneel-ins” occurred in Birmingham, the Southern Presbyterian Church made a national statement. It said, “Every Southern Presbyterian institution is being asked to abolish all racial barriers.”⁵¹ This recommendation was to be presented at the General Assembly of Southern Presbyterian Churches in late April. Four hundred and fifty six churches would be represented at the General Assembly, and racism was one of the main issues being discussed. The Southern Presbyterian Church was encouraging its members “to seek realistic communication between the two racial groups in order to prevent such episodes that

⁴⁹ “Episcopalians Formally OK the ‘Kneel-Ins.’” *Memphis World*, 8 October 1960, A1.

⁵⁰ “Memphis Pastor to Participate in ‘Kneel-In’.” *The Tri State Defender*, Vol 9:4, A1.

⁵¹ “Southern Presbyterians Asked to Drop Race Bias.” *Atlanta World*, 17 April 1963, A1.

have shamed the region.”⁵² However, the vote needed to be ratified by the a majority of the members if it was to be implemented.

Second Presbyterian affiliated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in 1990. However, the conflict that occurred at this Second Presbyterian exemplifies the same issue being dealt with by the Southern Presbyterian Church. Approximately a year after the National Southern Presbyterian Church encouraged integration, interracial groups of students visited Second Presbyterian. When the “kneel-ins” gained national attention, the members of the denomination were embarrassed and outraged. Despite their anger, little could be done to alter the individual policies of the church. Second Presbyterian’s strong desire to host the General Assembly that following year was the only thing that the national church could use to persuade them to integrate. This is because of the power that each individual church had over it’s policies. Although specific action could not be taken, influential Presbyterians, such as Carl Pritchett, came down to participate in the “kneel-ins” as a show of support. His presence exemplifies that Second Presbyterian’s policies were not representative of the overall denomination.

Conclusion

Currently, all four of these churches are still open. With time came change and all of the churches welcome members from every race to come and worship. Even though these churches no longer believe in segregation, some of the congregations are still comprised of mainly white people. The process integration was difficult for each church.

Galloway resisted Cunningham’s desire to integrate, and fought to keep their church a segregated place. They even altered their constitution in order to preserve their closed-door

⁵² *Ibid.*,(A7).

policy. However, the internal conflict that this issue caused the church was almost fatal.

“Galloway struggled with the issues of civil rights, first closing and then opening the doors of the church. The result of opening the doors caused nearly one third of the church's membership to transfer out.”⁵³ Not only did the church lose many members during this time, but it was also forced to close at one point in the late sixties. Rev. Cunningham pushed the congregation to integrate, which consequently caused many of the members to leave, and eventually caused him to resign. Currently the church has regained many of the members it had originally lost, and recovered from problems that integration caused the church. It is now one of the largest churches in Jackson, and has been implementing programs that include people of all races and economic levels in the community.⁵⁴

Although Second Presbyterian, like Galloway, was very unwilling to adopt an open door policy, by creating a rotation among the elders, they were able to bring integration to the church. This new policy caused 250 members to leave and form a new church, but like Galloway, Second Presbyterian has now recovered from the effects of integration, and now has a growing congregation of approximately 3700 members.⁵⁵

First Baptist of Atlanta was at one time the site of several “kneel-ins”. However, today they are referred to as a “mega-church”, with over 15,000 members of all races. Rev. Charles Stanley, formerly president of the Southern Baptist Convention, has been the senior pastor of the church since 1971. He is a New York Times best-selling author and his sermons are broadcast worldwide. The church has faced very few race-related incidents since they implemented integration in 1965, and the church is now described as being ethnically diverse.⁵⁶

⁵³“History of Galloway”. www.gallowayumc.org.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “2PC FAQ”. www.2PC.org

⁵⁶ www.fba.org

Earl Stallings passed away on February 23, 2006, but he left behind a legacy worthy of praise. Stallings risked rejection from his white congregation when he allowed African Americans to attend service, and his exemplary actions are still honored today. Race issues plagued First Baptist during the 1960's. Stallings transferred to a new church in 1965. Unfortunately, First Baptist was intent on remaining segregated after Stallings had left, and this caused many of the more progressive members to leave and open a new church. First Baptist church of Birmingham has recovered from the turbulent times of the 1960s and is still a large, prominent, and functioning church in Birmingham that holds two services a week.

The "kneel-ins" that occurred throughout the country played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. Religion is an essential aspect of society and without integrating the churches of America; the civil rights movement would have been incomplete. People from all denominations, ethnicities, and backgrounds united to integrate religion. "Kneel-ins" were not an isolated event, but rather a movement that uncovered the hypocrisy that was being preached in many of the churches in America. Those involved in "kneel-ins" and the overall civil rights movement demonstrated the gospel message of brotherhood and love. It is no longer acceptable to deny someone entry in to a church based on their race, and this exemplifies, that the gospel message, that many fought to enforce, is still valued today.

