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The Soul of Southwestern: The 1964 Integration
of a Presbyterian (US) College

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CONTENTS

Signature page	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	iv
Abstract	v
First page of body	1
Conclusion	48
Epilogue	51
Bibliography	54

ABSTRACT

The Soul of Southwestern: The 1964 Integration of a Presbyterian (PCUS) College

By

Jenna Nicole Sullivan

Southwestern at Memphis, now known as Rhodes College, became formally affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS) in 1855. This resulted in a particular Presbyterian identity that shaped the students, faculty, and overall ethos of the college. In 1954, the PCUS publicly denounced racial segregation as incompatible with Christianity and called PCUS-related institutions to integrate. Southwestern remained committed to segregation for another decade. The religious and moral values of the college encouraged a commitment to civility, rather than direct action, protest, or racial justice. Southwestern was a place where good character did not require bold action against inequality.

In early 1960s, the *Sou'wester* newspaper became a space for lively discourse about Christian faith and integration among students. Some students challenged the college to integrate with passionate, satirical editorials. Others asserted that blacks should develop their own institutions. In the spring of 1963, The Board of Directors approached integration with great caution, fearing that integration and the presence of black students might destroy the college altogether. This process was expedited by a potential grant

from the Ford Foundation, which would require the college to integrate. This financial incentive seemed to outweigh the moral or religious responsibility articulated by the PCUS in 1954. In 1964, Southwestern admitted Coby Smith and Lorenzo Childress, the first African American students. Ultimately, integration at Southwestern was approached cautiously and with great regard for civility. This often overlooked element of Rhodes College's history has important implications for our conversations about campus climate and racism today.

“In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships.”

--Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

History often demonstrates that official institutional statements tend to obscure much more than they reveal. In the spring of 1963, the administration of Southwestern at Memphis, now Rhodes College, approved a resolution to accept applicants regardless of race. In describing this decision, the official record of the Board of Directors states: “Whereas at its meeting on March 20-21, 1963 the Board of Directors, following careful study and with appropriate regard for the action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, without dissent, voted to accept as day students, beginning with the session of 1964-65, applicants...without regard to race.” This statement might lead us to believe that Southwestern at Memphis was integrated swiftly and with deep regard for Presbyterian belief and practice. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The statement was an ideal narrative that the administration of Southwestern wished to preserve.

Southwestern became formally affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in 1855. This resulted in a Presbyterian identity that shaped the students, faculty, and overall ethos of the college. In 1954, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) publicly denounced segregation as incompatible with Christianity. While Southwestern at Memphis was perceived by some southern Presbyterians as a more liberal private college in the South, it remained explicitly committed to segregation for another decade. The religious and moral values of the college encouraged a commitment to civility, rather than direct action, protest, or racial justice. Like other southern institutions, Southwestern was a place where good character did not require bold action against inequality.

The religious and moral values adopted by Southwestern at Memphis in the early 20th century were reminiscent of the commitment to civility that took root across the South. In his book, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, William Chafe describes the concept of civility:

Civility was what white progressivism was all about—a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action. Significantly, civility encompassed all of the other themes of the progressive mystique—abhorrence of personal conflict, courtesy toward new ideas, and a generosity toward those less fortunate than oneself.¹

This form of civility manifested itself in the politeness of students, faculty, and staff at Southwestern. It certainly provided a framework for how Southwestern would respond to integration. The Board of Directors would respond politely, and with caution, to avoid any risk of violence or conflict. Southwestern was a place that avoided conflict at all costs. Rarely did students, faculty, or administrators present strong opinions that might disrupt the courteous nature of the college. And yet, as Chafe describes, this commitment to civility had a cost. It did not encourage bold or direct action, as this was in opposition to “good manners.” Civility allowed white Southerners to exclude African Americans and remain morally upstanding people—good fathers, wives, and even ministers.

Some factions of the Southwestern community challenged this commitment to civility. In the early 1960s, the *Sou'wester* newspaper became a space for lively discourse about Christian faith and integration among students. Some students challenged the college to integrate with passionate, satirical editorials. Others asserted that blacks should

¹William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 1981), 8.

develop their own institutions. In September of 1962, a majority of faculty members signed a petition that asked the Board of Directors to integrate the college.

In the spring of 1963, The Board of Directors approached integration with great caution, fearing that the presence of black students might drastically change the college as they knew it. This move toward integration was expedited by a potential grant from the Ford Foundation, which would require the college to integrate. When Southwestern admitted Coby Smith and Lorenzo Childress, the first African American students, in 1964, this financial incentive seemed to outweigh the moral/religious rationale articulated by the PCUS in 1954.

“Racial Creeds”: Southwestern’s Religious Commitment to Segregation

For centuries, religion and racism have been intertwined in the fabric of American life. Since the enslavement of Africans, elements of Christianity have sustained and preserved white supremacy. The college now known as Rhodes College carries a legacy of religious racism and oppression against black Americans. Between 1875 and 1925, the college was known as Southwestern Presbyterian University and was located in Clarksville, Tennessee. Like the majority of American southerners, the students, faculty, and administration of the college were morally and religiously invested in segregation. This commitment to segregation is prominent in an essay that appeared in the 1909 edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, entitled, “The Young Southerner and the Negro.” Carl Holliday, an English professor at Southwestern, asked his students to write papers in response to the prompt: “What will become of the American negro?” He sought to expose some of the popular racial prejudices among Southwestern students to inspire a “keen

realization of existing conditions and their attending perils.” Holliday was an amateur sociologist with a clear interest in the unfiltered opinions of his students.²

There were forty-eight writers in the class who participated, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-seven. They were from seven states throughout the South, predominantly Tennessee. According to Holliday, these students were not of the lower and rougher elements of Southwestern society, but “members from well-known and influential families.”³ The students were also “from a student body in which ninety-six percent [were] professing Christians” and nearly half were preparing to enter a vocation of ministry. Overwhelmingly, the students responded to Holliday’s prompt with remarks that predicted a bleak future for African Americans.⁴

One student, on the topic of interracial marriage, wrote: “I think that if a Negro man proposes to a white lady he should be killed, although there have been cases in the North, and nothing done about the matter.”⁵ Another student from Mississippi agreed with common sentiments regarding the inferiority of African Americans. The student wrote:

The two races are placed together, the Anglo-Saxon, the most pure, proud, noble race that ever walked the earth, and the black African, the most vile, degraded, and filthy race living, and the Northern politician says they must be equal.⁶

These students attended a Presbyterian college and many of them hoped to become ministers in the Presbyterian Church. Many of their remarks involved language

² Carl Holliday, “The Young Southerner and the Negro,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1909), 116.

³ Carl Holliday, “The Young Southerner and the Negro,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1909): 117.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*

about God and God's will for African Americans. Some students complained about the nature of African American religion. One student wrote, "He shouts his religion on Sunday and steals on Monday."⁷ The myth of black violence served to limit and dehumanize blacks as well as promote segregation as a means of social control and protection. In the perspective of this student, an African American is incapable of being a complex human; he is simply a "shouting," "stealing" nuisance. Perhaps the most disturbing student comment regarding God's view of African Americans stated: "Ever keep it stamped upon his memory that the place which God intended him to fill is that of a servant, and that is the only place he can ever fill in America."⁸

Leon Litwack, author of *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, describes these students as young southerners who had inherited the "racial creed" of the preceding generation. He observes that just fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, white southerners were developing a racial ideology that would maintain their authority during a new era in the nation. Litwack notes that this creed, which emphasized the inferiority of blacks and the dominance of whites, acted as a religious and moral commitment for many whites in the South. This complicates the notion that white southerners had a religion based solely on doctrinal beliefs. Instead, for many southern whites, religion was formed, shaped, and even characterized by racism and white supremacy.⁹

⁷ Carl Holliday, "The Young Southerner and the Negro," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1909): 125.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 181.

Part of this “racial creed” included the use of biblical texts to justify white supremacy and segregation. One Southwestern student noted that, “The sons of Ham shall always be servants to the sons of Japheth and Shem.”¹⁰ The student was paraphrasing the story of Genesis 9-11, which came to be known as “Noah’s curse.”

Stephen Haynes writes:

In modern European and American racial discourse, Genesis 9 has been regarded primarily as a story of *differentiation* among Noah’s sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Triggered by some transgression on the part of Ham, Noah prophesies the distinct destinies his sons’ descendants will assume in the corporate development of humankind.¹¹

The Southwestern student’s reference to Genesis 9 was nothing novel in popular racial discourse. The student was participating in a longstanding tradition of using the story of Noah’s curse to demonstrate the inferiority of African Americans. Ultimately, each of these disturbing comments made by Southwestern students show that in the first decade of the twentieth century the college was immersed in a culture of explicit devotion to white supremacy and segregation. In summarizing the views of the Southwestern students, Professor Carl Holliday described the fear of an “educated Negro” as a threat to white society.

These then, are the views of forty-eight young men from seven States of the South. They unanimously opposed any idea of social equality; thirty-nine were opposed to higher education of the African; twenty-five favored only reading, writing, and a trade...¹²

¹⁰ Carl Holliday, “The Young Southerner and the Negro,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1909): 127.

¹¹ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

¹² Carl Holliday, “The Young Southerner and the Negro,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1909): 130.

In summary, in the beginning of the twentieth century, Southwestern Presbyterian University was familiar with the racial creed that would impact the course of the college's history. The students whose opinions Holliday surveyed were dedicated to the exclusion of blacks from white mainstream society. In 1925 the college was relocated to Memphis, Tennessee under the leadership of Presbyterian minister Charles Diehl. Although the college's location changed, its legacy of white supremacy and its religious commitment to segregation would be difficult to shake.

Changes in the Presbyterian (US) Church Regarding Segregation

In the early 1960s Southwestern at Memphis was still affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the United States, a denomination comprised predominantly of southern whites. Like many denominations in America, the Presbyterian Church (US) had a complicated relationship to racism and segregation. Unlike other denominations, the PCUS was the only large religious organization to primarily occupy the boundaries of the South.¹³ Therefore, the PCUS was in a unique position to respond to the challenges that emerged in the South in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁴ The decisions of the PCUS during the civil rights movement were shaped by its particular political structure of decision-making. In the Presbyterian Church, decisions are made through a system of "courts," ranging from the church session to the General Assembly, the highest legislative body. This system has been in place in America since 1789. All major decisions are made using this system of legislation. In this system, power flows from both the bottom up and the top down.

¹³ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Presbytery members are elected from church members and synod members are elected from presbyteries. However, the General Assembly votes on policies that directly affect the actions of local congregations.¹⁵

In 1936 the PCUS formed a Committee on Moral and Social Welfare. This committee produced a document that “recognized that Negroes in the South were economically and politically disfranchised, had inadequate housing, educational and recreational facilities, and frequently failed to secure equal justice in the courts.”¹⁶ Until the formation of this committee, the denomination as a whole had been defined by a theology of “the spirituality of the church.” This meant that discussing civil, political, and social matters were beyond the church’s mission. This narrow definition of the church’s relationship to society bolstered segregation policies in PCUS churches across the South. According to this doctrine, all were equal in spirit and therefore there was no need to pursue other forms equality in life here on Earth. This powerful argument enabled Christians to ignore political injustices and remain “faithful” Christians.¹⁷

However, the formation of the Committee on Moral and Social Welfare marked a transition in the theology of the PCUS. It did not call for any sort of systemic change in local PCUS churches but it did establish the importance of including civil and political problems such as racism and prejudice in theological discourse.¹⁸ In the midst of World War II, the PCUS was challenged to confront its racism in the context of global prejudice. Christians could no longer condemn the Nazi persecution of Jews without

¹⁵ Ibid.,3.

¹⁶ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), 530.

¹⁷ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

recognizing their own complicity in persecution of African Americans. This new global perspective forced Presbyterians to acknowledge their own acts of prejudice. In 1943, the General Assembly recognized that if America condemned Nazi persecution, Christians must “combat with all earnestness and power racial prejudice against Negroes in the South.”¹⁹

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the PCUS would struggle to balance national legislative decisions with local church attitudes and ideologies.²⁰ Local ministers and congregations responded to these statements from the General Assembly in a variety of ways. Although some were in support of racial progress, the majority did not mention race in weekly sermons. Opinions about segregation were generally divided along lines of “liberals” and “conservatives”; however, even liberals in favor of integration disagreed on the extent to which change should be implemented. The two most influential publications among Southern Presbyterians were the *Presbyterian Outlook*, which represented the more progressive voice, and the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, which began as an effort to challenge the liberal movement within the denomination. Both wrote quite extensively on matters of race.²¹

In 1954, with the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the nation witnessed the first legislative indication that racial segregation could end in America. This decision prompted more urgent reflection and action among the PCUS national leadership. The PCUS was scheduled to have a General Assembly meeting shortly after the Supreme Court decision was made. This timing was convenient and from the outside appeared to

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), 531.

be a remarkably quick reaction to the decision. Prior to the *Brown* decision, in 1953, the PCUS Council on Christian Relations met to discuss segregation. This meeting resulted in “A Statement to Southern Christians,” which was published in one of the June editions of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. The statement sought to address opponents of integration in theological and moral terms. The council did not condemn pro-segregationist ministers or churches for thoughtless, un-Christian acts of racism. Instead, the statement claimed that segregationists acted out of their own interpretation of the Christian faith.²² The statement read:

This doubt [?], which might be called the crux of the segregation question for many white Southerners, is at its core religious and theological. It is a doubt as to the soundness of the Christian doctrine of man. It springs, in effect, from a certain view of the nature and worth and status of the Negro as a human being. This view holds that Negroes, though truly human and members of the family of God, are nonetheless inferior beings who belong to an innately inferior race.²³

The council’s description of segregationist’s beliefs suggested that they were not “bad people” but rather subscribed to a theology that denies the humanity of blacks. The statement likely adopted a sympathetic tone to appeal to as many members of the denomination as possible. The document was not intended to alienate segregationists within the denomination, but rather to make a clear statement that petitioned for the integration of Presbyterian institutions. Ultimately, “A Statement to Southern Christians,” was adopted by the General Assembly in the summer of 1954 as an official position of the PCUS. The statement passed by a vote of 239 to 169—clearly not a

²² Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 57.

²³ “A Statement to Southern Christians,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, June 1953.

decision arrived at with ease or unanimity.²⁴ Presbyteries across the South responded quickly to the Assembly's decision. The decision of the Supreme Court and the nearly immediate affirmation by the PCUS frightened proponents of segregation. According to PCUS polity, the General Assembly's decision would not take effect unless ratified by two-thirds of presbyteries during the following year. John R. Wallace, a leader in the Memphis Presbytery, "expressed confusion and shock at the report."²⁵ The Synod of Alabama expressed disapproval of the General Assembly's statement. Other Presbyterian leaders were more supportive of the 1954 decision.²⁶ Ultimately, the next few years would be defined by internal debate and disagreement as various factions within of the denomination wrestled with the implications of the General Assembly's action. In particular, institutions of higher education, including Southwestern at Memphis, would be forced to examine policies of segregation.

Integration of Church-Related Colleges

Presbyterians have historically valued the pursuit of education. This led to the establishment of hundreds of church-related colleges and seminaries, although not all of them have survived. The PCUS decision to condemn segregation in 1954 was largely directed at the trustees and presidents of colleges within the denomination. However, this decision did not ensure swift integration of higher education institutions. Southwestern at Memphis was one of many Presbyterian colleges that struggled to adopt the policies suggested by the General Assembly mandate in 1954. Only a few colleges acted

²⁴ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

immediately. King College in Tennessee, in the same state as Southwestern, and Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia adopted policies of admission regardless of race. However, a change of policy did not ensure that these colleges would actually integrate. Some colleges had a more difficult time adopting new policies. In particular, Davidson College faced more difficulties during the decision process. The college officially integrated in 1962, although the first student was African, demonstrating the resistance to admitting African-Americans. The process of integrating higher education institutions was particularly complicated as each school dealt with its own set of financial, social, and political pressures.

Davidson College in North Carolina is “one of the oldest and most prestigious of the denominational colleges.”²⁷ Davidson integrated two years prior to Southwestern, in 1962. The decision to admit students of color at Davidson was preceded by years of debate and struggle within the school and the surrounding community. In 1959, five years after the PCUS General Assembly’s statement, the Davidson Board of Trustees still voted against accepting non-white students. Henry Shue, a white student and advocate for integration, was determined to change the school’s admission policy. Shue addressed the Board of Trustees with a petition to integrate the school that was signed by 250 students. Interestingly, he also referred to the PCUS General Assembly’s statement when he addressed the Board of Trustees. It is unclear how large of a role the PCUS opinion played in the course of integration at Davidson. However, it is important to note that Henry Shue was aware of the PCUS’s statement and felt compelled to include it in his argument to the Board of Trustees.

²⁷ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 90.

Davidson's President Grier Martin received reports from other integrated colleges "attesting that integration had caused no significant unrest in their schools."²⁸ In addition to the moral and religious aspect of the decision, there was also a question of "safety" and "unrest." Although it was unlikely that Davidson or other colleges would suffer much unrest, this question was used as a tool to delay the process of integration. Although there was a possibility of unrest and disapproval in the community surrounding Davidson, this was not as much of a threat as it seemed. The fear of unrest amongst the student body was not nearly as pervasive as the fear that African Americans would somehow defile the protected ground of white institutions.

In addition to the student body's support of integration, fifty-three members of the Davidson faculty were in open support of the admission of students without regard to race. Finally, in the spring of 1962, the decision was made to "admit Congolese students in the following fall semester." In 1961, an article in the *Davidsonian*, the college's news publication, was entitled, "Trustees Open College to Congolese Students." The first non-white student to attend Davidson was Ben Nzengu, a young man from the Congo. The first African American students did not arrive until the fall of 1964, the year that Southwestern was integrated.²⁹

The Board of World Missions of the Presbyterian Church (US) sponsored the first African student at Davidson.³⁰ The decision to financially support a Congolese student to attend the school reflects the broader Presbyterian Church's emphasis on African evangelism and mission work. This strategic decision allowed Davidson to officially

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Catherine Endeley, "Integration at Davidson College."
http://library.davidson.edu/archives/acs/integration/kates_page.htm

admit a non-white student and yet continue to discriminate against African-Americans.

Many churches in the South, including Second Presbyterian in Memphis, accepted Africans much more quickly than African Americans. When Joe Purdy, a black student at Memphis State University, approached the doors of Second Presbyterian in Memphis during the Memphis “kneel-in” campaign of 1964, he was asked if he was “African.” Purdy replied, “No I’m an American, but I’m black.” Both Purdy and Jim Bullock, a Southwestern student and advocate for integration, were not allowed to enter the sanctuary.³¹ This strange phenomenon reveals the depth and complexity of racism in the South. At times, dark skin could be accepted, even celebrated, in white religious institutions. African faces represented a global and growing Presbyterian Church. But the fact remained that those whose identity was both African *and* American were not welcomed into Presbyterian pews. The acceptance of African Americans would not enhance the Church’s reputation of global mission work. Their identity, history, and culture was not interesting or exotic enough. In fact, it was too familiarly foreign to evoke acceptance or even companionship.

In the fall of 1964, the year that Southwestern officially integrated, the first African-American students arrived on the campus of Davidson. The numbers of black students continued to increase over the years and eventually the Black Student Coalition was formed in 1972. Black students at Davidson experienced profound alienation and discrimination in the years following the integration of the campus.³²

³¹ Steven Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.

³² Catherine Endeley, “Integration at Davidson College.”
http://library.davidson.edu/archives/acs/integration/kates_page.htm

“The Ruling Spirit Within its Walls”: Southwestern and the Presbyterian Church

When the Presbyterian Church gained control of the college in 1855, it would fundamentally shape Southwestern’s identity, reputation, curriculum, faculty and student body. Religious affiliation was not merely a formality or an insignificant aspect of the college’s identity. Rather, it grounded Southwestern at Memphis in a particular set of values that affected institutional attitudes and policies in the years leading up to the college’s integration. The school now known as Rhodes College has had several names since its founding in 1848 in Clarksville, Tennessee. It was first known as the Masonic University of Tennessee, and was quickly renamed Stewart College in 1850 under the leadership of its president William Stewart. In 1875, the name was changed to Southwestern Presbyterian University to denote its new affiliation with the PCUS denomination.³³

Southwestern’s affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (US) shaped its administrative structure. The college was governed by the Board of Directors, which consisted of thirty-eight elected members. The members were generally elected for four-year terms. The PCUS Synods of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee each selected representatives to serve on the board. In 1967, some representatives were selected by the entire Board of Directors, rather than by individual synods. Regardless, the Presbyterian Synods had direct control of who led the college through administrative decisions. President Charles Diehl would later convince the synods to allow him to appoint a Memphis businessman as one of the members of the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors appointed various committees to handle the business of the college.

³³ Rhodes College, “Our History.” <http://www.rhodes.edu/about/26877.asp>.

There were specific committees for students and educational programming as well as institutional planning. The president acted as a “liaison between the Board and the college’s administrative officers and faculty.” The President was responsible for helping to shape institutional policy by making recommendations to the Board of Directors. He was also responsible for nominating offers of instruction and administration as well as delivering an annual report to the Board. The administration of the college offered little transparency to the student body.³⁴

The university was struggling to thrive in Clarksville and the Presbytery of Clarksville felt a geographic move was a strategic and appropriate choice. In 1925, the college was relocated to Memphis, Tennessee. President Charles Diehl, a Presbyterian minister and respected scholar, was selected to lead the college in the move to Memphis. Diehl embodied the values that the college hoped to develop in the new institution in Memphis.³⁵ Following this move, the college shortened its name to Southwestern. As the college transitioned to a new location, President Diehl would reclaim Southwestern’s values of Christian faith and academic excellence. On November 26th 1925, during the college’s two day “Jubilee and Inaugural Celebration” in Memphis, Diehl articulated the values that would define the newly relocated and redesigned Southwestern. With the construction of new buildings and dormitories came the formation of values that were most important to the college. He spoke in Palmer Hall, a building named after a well-known Southern Presbyterian figure and advocate of slavery. His address described what kind of college Southwestern would aspire to be under his leadership:

³⁴ Southwestern at Memphis, “Institutional Self-Study Report.” Prepared for the Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. February 1969.

³⁵ Waller Raymond Cooper, *Southwestern at Memphis: 1848 to 1948*, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1949), 102.

The institution we were planning was not a state or a municipal or an independent institution, but a Presbyterian institution which is avowedly Christian, and which as such is shot through with that passion for honesty and that hatred for all sham which is really fundamental for any interpretation of Christianity, and without which no institution can be regarded as Christian, whatever be its claims, its forms of government, its courses of study, or its ceremonies.³⁶

Diehl's address to the Southwestern community as "[Southwestern] opened her doors in Memphis," was spoken with confidence and a profound sense of purpose. He truly believed in an institution that would "bear an unfaltering testimony to the value of spiritual ideals" in addition to the pursuit of academic excellence. Diehl passionately described the various aspects of the college that would be developed in accordance with these Christian values. The faculty would have a "whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus Christ."³⁷ As the 1940 Southwestern mission statement notes, "it [was] essential" that faculty members share the religious beliefs of the college."³⁸ The college sought to provide an environment that both challenged incoming students and yet presented them with a narrowly defined set of Christian values.

The decision to emphasize Christian values among faculty also that ensured the financial support of the college and appeased the regional Presbyterian synods to which the college was deeply connected. The students would be selected based on moral and academic criteria. Diehl firmly believed that the doctrines and spirit of Christian practice were essential to the formation of a liberal arts school. In his view, these two concepts were not opposed to one another—rather they worked in harmony to produce young

³⁶ Charles Diehl, "The Ideals of Southwestern." Speech given at the new location of Southwestern at Memphis. November 27, 1925. <http://hdl.handle.net/10267/20591>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Southwestern at Memphis, "Institutional Self-Study Report." Prepared for the Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. February 1969.

people with sound beliefs and character. The Christian values that were proclaimed by Southwestern are best represented in the college's mission statement adopted in 1940:

This institution is founded for the glory of God and is dedicated to the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be an ideal liberal arts college where knowledge shall be exact and complete, character robust and gracious, and Christianity not only a welcome guest, but the ruling spirit within its walls. It is a cooperative undertaking on the part of several Synods of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, their agency for advancing the Kingdom of God through educational processes. The purpose of this institution is to promote Christian higher education. To this end, it is essential that members both of the Board of Directors and of the Faculty be in manifest sympathy with the religious spirit and aim in which the college was founded.³⁹

One of the implications of the religious affiliation and commitment of the college was the decision that students engage in biblical study during their four years of study. Although this element of the curriculum had been required since the 1870s, it was officially funded in 1950. The Bellingrath endowment supported the college's efforts to teach a "sound and comprehensive knowledge" of the Bible to every student, who was required to take four semesters in the subject. For Southwestern, Christianity would continue to be a complicated commitment. Like other PCUS higher education institutions, the college struggled with what it meant to be both a liberal arts institution and an explicitly Christian college.⁴⁰

Morals, Civility, and Exclusion

The college's fundamental values were a synthesis of biblical, theological claims and western, humanistic ethics. Diehl and other leaders articulated a broader set of ideals that included basic integrity, good character, and honesty. These ideas were loosely

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

connected to Christian doctrine, but not inherently theological or religious. Rather, Southwestern's definition of morality reflected notions of genteel character. The mission statement noted that the character of the Southwestern community should be "robust and gracious."⁴¹ Notions of good character were almost equally important to the college's identity as specific doctrinal beliefs. Diehl envisioned a college "vitaly concerned with scholarship, but which [is] even more concerned with character and manhood."⁴² These values were also rooted in a masculine definition of good character. Southwestern was a place where primarily young Christian men would be formed.

President Diehl helped to implement distinctive values and an academic reputation at Southwestern that would later attract a wide variety of students, including African-Americans. The commitment to honesty, integrity, and truth helped to form a campus that was protected from the potential confrontations of the outside world—a safe environment to learn and grow in. However, the college's respectable institutional values also fostered a commitment to segregation. The college's values were rooted in a commitment to civility, safety, and gracious character. These values of "good character" did not encourage or require bold action. One's morality was not inherently connected to one's engagement in issues of civic injustice. The college that promoted good character was closed to non-white students. The "gracious and robust" character described by Diehl in 1925 did not require the inclusion of African Americans. Despite its embedded commitment to integrity and compassion, Southwestern did not officially integrate its campus until ten years after the PCUS's call to integrate church-related colleges.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Charles Diehl, "The Ideals of Southwestern." Speech given at the new location of Southwestern at Memphis. November 27, 1925. <http://hdl.handle.net/10267/20591>.

Southwestern was formally connected to the opinions of the Church and yet as a private institution its theological and moral values emphasized kind words over just action.

Southwestern's implicit commitment to civility and exclusion was most clearly seen in Hortense Spillers' encounter with the admission representatives of the college a few years prior to its integration. In the fall of 1961, Hortense Spillers, an African American woman from Memphis, decided to inquire about attending Southwestern. Spillers had spent her freshman year at Bennett College, a predominantly black college for women in Greensboro, North Carolina. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, Spillers became more passionate about being involved. She found the leaders of Bennett to be conservative and felt that if she stayed at Bennett, she would "run afoul with the administration."⁴³ So Spillers decided to search for a new college to attend. Her parents, who still lived in Memphis, encouraged her to attend Memphis State, which had recently integrated, or Lemoyne, an African American college in the area. Spillers decided to find out if Southwestern was admitting black students. Her interaction with the college reflects its commitment to segregation in the early 1960s. As other PCUS college campuses began to open their doors to non-whites, Southwestern remained segregated.

She states:

I actually visited the campus. My sibling took me to the campus one day in the spring of 1961. I spoke to two people, a man and a woman, and they were very cordial. Nobody ran me off with dogs and water hoses. They were very cordial. We talked a while and I told them what my mission was. We must have talked for at least twenty or thirty minutes, perhaps more. I remember the bottom line in what they said to me is that: 'we are not admitting black students at Southwestern until 1964.' I told them, '1964 is the year I planned to graduate. By then I will be leaving college.'⁴⁴

⁴³ Hortense Spillers, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, February 17, 2015.

⁴⁴ Hortense Spillers, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, February 17, 2015.

The representatives of the college were polite, demonstrating the pervasive commitment to civility. Southwestern was not tolerant of outright hostility or explicitly racist remarks. However, their polite smiles could not conceal the college's refusal to admit blacks—even those who were qualified and arrived at its front steps. Assuming Spillers remembers this incident correctly, it is unclear how these representatives knew the exact year that Southwestern would integrate. The Board of Directors did not officially decide until the spring of 1963, two years after Spillers visited. Regardless, in 1961, the college was not ready to implement the change called for by the Presbyterian Church (US). Spillers would go on to receive her doctorate and become a professor of English literature at Vanderbilt University. She appears to have been every bit as qualified as other applicants. The college did not have to recruit her or exert much effort in securing her attendance. The reality remained that blacks of any background or character were not allowed to attend Southwestern. Hortense Spillers experienced the darker side of civility, in which exclusion was inevitable.

Provocative Prayers: Editorial Debates and Emerging Student Activists

While much of the Southwestern student body was apathetic towards matters of integration, a select group of students was instrumental in pressuring the administration to integrate. A majority of student activism happened on the pages of the *Sou'wester*, the college's weekly campus newspaper. The editorials of student activists stirred debate on campus and gave insight into the larger student discourse regarding integration on campus. These counter-cultural students were becoming engaged in the budding civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Many PCUS colleges had a student chapter of the

Westminster Fellowship, a Presbyterian collegiate ministry.⁴⁵ The chapter at Southwestern served as a place for students to organize and engage in activism in Memphis. The organization was less centered on doctrinal beliefs and instead encouraged civic action and engagement. Many of the young activists involved in the group were children of Presbyterian ministers.⁴⁶ Their interpretation of Christian faith required bold action and questioned Southwestern's commitment to civility.

For most students at Southwestern, the month of September 1962 was like any other month of college life. The school dance was scheduled for September 29th; the men unaffiliated with Greek life had selected their 1962-1963 sweetheart, a "pretty blue-eyed Chi Omega from Paris, Tennessee." In the midst of this mundane and lighthearted newspaper coverage, Roger Hart's call for integration stood out. His controversial piece was entitled, "A Call for Courage."⁴⁷ Hart was perhaps the most vocal advocate for integration in the student body. A minister's son, he was heavily involved in the leadership of the *Sou'wester* and wrote several controversial articles about the topic of race and integration. Hart would later inspire awe in Coby Smith, one of the first black students to attend Southwestern in 1964. Smith remembers Hart as a "dynamic divinity student."⁴⁸

In this article, Hart argued that blacks did not have the same educational opportunities as whites in America. He claimed, "Negro elementary schools in the South

⁴⁵ Joel L. Alvis, *Religion and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Jacqueline Dowd Hall, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, February 16, 2015.

⁴⁷ Roger Hart, "A Call for Courage," *Sou'wester*, September 21, 1962.

⁴⁸ Dr. Coby Smith, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, April 6, 2015.

[had] never caught up with the white ones.”⁴⁹ Hart went on to argue that Southwestern was in a good position to integrate the campus. He recognized the political and religious tensions that the college faced but claimed that integration was the courageous decision to make. Hart believed the college was capable of acting “from conviction.”⁵⁰ Hart boldly challenged the Southwestern community to consider the implications of remaining committed to segregation. He asked a question that most students were not interested in asking:

Is the door to Southwestern open or closed to qualified Negro applicants? There is doubtless much segregationist pressure from slow-thinking conservative presbyteries and rich contributors. It may even be difficult for the administration to make an open statement regarding the matter. However, the choice is clear-cut: right or wrong. Southwestern should not use race as a qualification for admission.⁵¹

For Hart, there was a “right or wrong” decision to be made. The answer was simple to him. Financial and political pressures aside, he believed that his college had a moral obligation to act. Hart was being formed and educated in a college that continued the values Diehl had articulated in 1925. He boldly challenged Southwestern to take its moral commitments seriously and integrate the campus. Hart recognized the tension between the college’s commitment to righteousness and moral distinction, and the “slow-thinking” administration that failed to act with urgency.

Roger Hart’s words would not resonate with the sentiments of the student body as a whole. The following week, the *Sou’wester* printed a response to Hart’s article from student Sandra Sanders. Sanders argued that segregation actually benefited both blacks

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

and whites. Sanders' words reflected the popular belief among Southern whites that segregation was not harmful to blacks. It was, instead, God's natural plan for the organization of society. Sanders asked Roger Hart, "Why, Mr. Hart, must a Negro come to a white school to get a good education?" Sanders argued that there was no need to bring blacks to white schools; instead, there was a need to improve black schools. According to Sanders, "Negroes are waking up [and] the building of the Negro Educational system has just begun." She claimed that the decision of *Brown v. Board* in 1954 was an attempt "to put a stop to it at its birth."⁵²

Sanders described African Americans' plight for equality as if it were a distant narrative—the "Negroes" were a group of people in a faraway land who simply needed to be left alone to improve themselves. The metaphor of African Americans "waking up" implies that they had been lazily sleeping for the past few centuries, incapable of educational progress. Despite her minimal contact with African Americans, Sanders spoke as an expert on the topic of their struggles. Sanders' argument in particular attempts to show that segregation and the racist traditions of the South were in fact beneficial to blacks. Interestingly, she claims that by admitting black students to Southwestern, the school would be preventing blacks from new opportunities to grow.

She writes:

You believe, Mr. Hart, that the Negro, in awakening ought to attend the white schools. If I were a capable Negro I would be insulted by this suggestion. I would want to pour all of my energy, all of my talents, all of my spirit into building up Negro schools, not white. What an opportunity! What a frontier! I would seek to make the Negro educational system equal to or better than that of the white. I would seek to preserve the best parts of my own race's culture and to improve other parts of it, not to mix it with another.⁵³

⁵² Sandra Sanders, "An Open Letter to Roger Hart," *Sou'wester*, September 21, 1962.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

At first glance, Sanders' cunning argument appears to be a statement of benevolent and passionate solidarity with African-Americans. As demonstrated by the admission representatives who spoke with Hortense Spillers, it was impolite to be explicitly racist at Southwestern. But at a closer glance, Sanders' words appear to be rooted in a profound fear of blacks as the Other. She desperately tries to convince Hart that there is a "frontier" of opportunity for blacks in the future—as long as this frontier is kept miles away from the safe boundaries of her Southwestern dormitory. Sanders' pseudo-advocacy attempted to conceal her refusal to accept blacks into mainstream society. Unlike Roger Hart, Sandra Sanders represented the portion of the Southwestern community that was deeply afraid of the imminent changes in the South. Sanders' claims reflected a long tradition of white "support" for black education. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, some whites claimed that developing black schools was the ultimate solution. Many whites even gave financially to support the development of schools for African Americans.⁵⁴ However, this movement concealed an implicit belief that blacks were intellectually inferior and therefore incapable of participating in the same educational system as whites. Leon Litwack writes:

What underlay the movement for black education among some whites was clearly the pressing need to inculcate a new generation of blacks with proper moral and religious values...Not only must blacks be given the right kind of education, but also they should not be overeducated.⁵⁵

Sandra Sanders was not the only Southwestern student who felt that she knew what was best for African Americans. Bonnie Davis also replied to Roger Hart's editorial

⁵⁴ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

and demonstrated the tradition of white pseudo-advocacy. She primarily claimed that African Americans were just not prepared for equality. According to Davis, those who “busy themselves trying to give the Negro equal social, political, and educational status are making a mistake, because, for the most part, the southern Negro is not yet ready for such equality. This new status and the responsibility which goes along with it would only confuse him.”⁵⁶ Davis illustrated the lingering paternalism of the Jim Crow South. Davis portrays “the southern Negro” to be child-like and unintelligent. Davis claimed to be working for the best interest of blacks, when instead she insulted them with paternalistic language.

Although these women were more vocal than others, they represented a prevalent student response to discussions of integration on campus. However, students at Southwestern did not all respond to these changes in the same way. Some were less outspoken and more ambivalent about the topic in general. These women’s writings were examples of polite, paternalistic, and clever arguments to keep African Americans out of the student body.

Activist students at Southwestern responded creatively to these pro-segregation sentiments published in the *Sou’wester*. In 1962, a student named Howard Romaine wrote an anonymous regular editorial in the *Sou’wester* entitled, “A Southwestern Student Prays.” Unlike other editorials, the series was written from the perspective of a fictitious pro-segregation student. The character was Romaine’s creation—a satirical personification of the widespread racism he perceived on campus. Romaine later confessed this was his writing, although his name never appeared with the editorial. The

⁵⁶ Bonnie Davis, “Answer to ‘A Call for Courage,’” *Sou’wester*, September 21, 1962.

“prayers” were humorous and yet disturbing. In the midst of the James Meredith crisis of 1962 in Mississippi, Howard Romaine published a “prayer.”

O God, thank you for Southwestern and this wonderful educational opportunity. God, help James Meredith to see the error of his way. Help him to understand that he must not stir up trouble...Help him to understand that we are not used to sitting next to niggers in school and that he should retain a Christian attitude in accommodating this old custom.⁵⁷

Romaine manages to relay a significant message through this strange, fictitious character. Readers are both entertained and amused at the sarcasm in the “prayer,” and yet deeply disturbed at the truth disguised by humor. To some extent, “A Southwestern Student Prays” violates the boundaries of politeness demonstrated by Bonnie Davis and Sandra Sanders. Unlike the women who argued that segregation was better for blacks and whites, “A Southwestern Student” simply asks God for what he or she really wants. It is the exaggerated honesty of the character that is most shocking—the unspoken desires of segregationist students are articulated without regard for politeness or secrecy. And yet, Romaine’s character is a “devout” Christian engaging in a relationship with God, albeit a problematic one. Romaine mocks this version of Christianity that bolsters segregation in higher education. He could have used many forms to communicate this message, but a “prayer” seems to be the most evocative choice. Perhaps Romaine hoped that readers would laugh at the ridiculous nature of the prayer and therefore question the underlying ideology of segregation. Later in the editorial, the “prayer” explicitly petitions for sustained segregation on the campus of Southwestern:

Dear God, above all don’t let any niggers apply to Southwestern or there may not be any new towers or student centers or Gothic bird baths or anything because

⁵⁷ Howard Romaine, “A Southwestern Student Prays,” *Sou’wester*, September 21, 1962.

these are very important to the ‘development of a society of individuals dominated by the Christian spirit.’⁵⁸

It is quite astounding that these words appeared on the same pages of the *Sou’wester* that described mundane school happenings and campus social news. By describing the outlandish preservation of “gothic bird baths,” Romaine exposes the absurdity of segregation itself. The “prayer” was particularly provocative at Southwestern because it questioned the morality of students’ Christian faith—surely *they* would not pray in such a way. Some students interpreted it as a sacrilegious editorial. Student Michael G. Simmons responded the following week saying, “It was nothing more than a feeble attempt at humor which turned out to be a poorly-written sacrilege.”⁵⁹ Simmons acknowledged the humorous nature of the editorial but rejected its overall point. The editor responded to Simmons’ note, saying that the prayer was “certainly not meant to be funny... It was presented in this paper with the hope that it would cause the reader to think of whether or not he is taking this attitude.”⁶⁰ It is unlikely that Romaine’s editorials were written without humor or ridicule in mind. However, perhaps the editor sought to ensure that Simmons knew the deliberate goal of the “prayer” series. Each of these debates and conversations show that race was a delicate issue. When Romaine wrote his series of “prayers,” he struck a sensitive nerve within the student body—the nexus of personal Christian identity and segregation. No matter the ultimate intention behind the “prayers,” they certainly provoked consideration and debate among the student body in the years preceding integration.

⁵⁸ Howard Romaine, “A Southwestern Student Prays,” *Sou’wester*, September 21, 1962.

⁵⁹ Michael G. Simmons, “SW Prays,” *Sou’wester*, Friday October 5, 1962.

⁶⁰ “Editor’s Note,” *Sou’wester*, Friday October 5, 1962.

Howard Romaine also wrote another provocative editorial series entitled “The Seeker.” The content of the series was decidedly more illustrative and disturbing than “A Southwestern Student Prays.” In the October 5th, 1962 edition of the *Sou’wester*, a narrative appeared in “The Seeker” that described two individuals talking while one character beat a “black dog” violently.⁶¹ The story appears to be a metaphor for violence against African-Americans. It is an unsettling narrative that is not resolved by the author. The final lines read:

‘Leggo me. I’m gonna beat his damn head in. Take that you black...I’m gonna smash...look at his damn ole head cave in! I’m gonna smash his head—right—into—the—ground. Goddam dog!’⁶²

Students who read this editorial were disturbed and appalled that such material had been printed in the school newspaper. While extreme racial violence happened elsewhere in the South, Southwestern at Memphis was not an explicitly hostile or dangerous place for African Americans. Perhaps the author sought to expose white students to more explicit forms of racism so they might evaluate their own attitudes. Bob Sessum complained the following week, writing that “The Seeker” “[did] not support [the college’s] purpose of fostering Christian higher education.”⁶³ For him and other opposing students, the material was too offensive to his traditional understanding of Christian values. From their perspective, profanity, no matter the purpose, was unacceptable. Even President Rhodes received a letter from the pastor of Second Presbyterian in Memphis, Henry E. “Jeb” Russell, which addressed his concerns about the editorial. He described the author of “The Seeker” as “some individual who is

⁶¹ Howard Romaine, “The Seeker,” *Sou’wester*, October 5, 1962.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bob Sessum, “Seeker,” *Sou’wester*, October 12, 1962.

frustrated because they didn't get in the Fraternity or Sorority that they wanted." The college was deeply indebted to Second Presbyterian financially, placing President Rhodes in an uncomfortable position. In the spring of 1964, before the first semester of integration, student activists would begin "kneeling-in" at Second Presbyterian to protest its segregation policies. Ultimately, "The Seeker" was perhaps more impactful than its author predicted; its provocative message resulted in heated conversations both on and off of the Southwestern campus.⁶⁴

The editorial staff of the *Sou'wester* was forced to thoughtfully defend its decisions to publish "The Seeker" and "A Southwestern Student Prays." In October of 1962, the staff published a response to general complaints about the nature of the controversial editorials. The Student Council had been asked to address these issues with the *Sou'wester* staff. The author of the editorial responds to Bob Sessum's complaints:

The writer goes on to say that Southwestern was founded for the purpose of fostering Christian higher education and that "The Seeker" does not support that foundation. "The Seeker" refers to a great social problem of our time, that of the relationship between races of men. Nothing could be more in keeping with higher Christian education than this.⁶⁵

Southwestern students debated the meaning of Christian education in the midst of racial change in the South. For some like Bob Sessum, Christianity was a call to morality and tradition. It did not require addressing racism or injustice on campus. For the writers of the *Sou'wester*, Christianity was a call to awaken their fellow students to injustice and prejudice on campus. These two factions represent the tension between what biblical

⁶⁴ Stephen Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

⁶⁵ "Education in Controversies," *Sou'wester*, October 12, 1962.

scholar Marcus Borg referred to as “[a] gospel of compassion or purity.”⁶⁶ One “gospel” seeks to preserve systems of tradition and purity while the other primarily values acts of empathy and social change. Differing perceptions of Christianity would continue to shape the attitudes and actions of students in the years prior to integration.

Polite Petitions: Student and Faculty Acts of Protest

In the fall of 1963, student activists at Southwestern began to pressure the administration to change the school’s segregation policy. Among others, the group consisted of Roger Hart, Jim Bullock, Bob Wells, Howard Romaine, and Jacqueline Dowd Hall. The group decided to protest by making consecutive appointments with President Rhodes, so that they would fill up his schedule on a particular day. Rhodes met with the students individually, who each spoke with him about integrating the college. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, who attended the college from 1961-1965, recalls this story “with great amusement and fondness,” saying, “it was our version of a super polite sit-in.” Politeness was clearly a characteristic of Southwestern students, even the most conscientious ones. According to Hall, President Rhodes was cordial but somewhat uncomfortable with these student meetings. She recalls that Rhodes wrote down the name of each student and asked whether or not their fathers were ministers. Her father was not a minister and so Hall was curious why he found this to be a helpful question. She describes her perception of President Rhodes at the time:

We saw him as ancient—practically out of a different century. He said something to me completely out of context about Indians—“well its sort of like the Indians,

⁶⁶ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus for the First Time*

the problem will just go away.” He was incredibly out of touch and inappropriate. Although, he probably didn’t mean it the way I heard it.⁶⁷

No matter the exact words of Rhodes that day, it is clear he was perceived as being detached from the direct experience of students like Hall and her peers. However, the protest most likely suggested to him that some students would hold him accountable to racial progress. Many of the student protesters in the group were motivated by faith. Hall remembers that when speaking to Rhodes, “[they] were saying it was the Christian thing to do.” Although somewhat motivated by religious conviction, Hall was in the midst of a transformation in her personal beliefs about the Church and her role in it. She stepped down from her position as president of the Protestant Religious Council after the summer of 1963, after feeling “alienated with a change of consciousness.”⁶⁸ Perhaps Hall was an example of what some southern Presbyterians feared: participating in the integration movement could threaten the faith of good Christian students. Regardless, Hall and her peers demonstrated a distinctive “consciousness” that challenged the institution to change its segregation policies. Unbeknownst to many of the student activists, some members of the faculty were also working for the cause of integration.

In September of 1962, a year prior to the students protest in President Rhodes’ office, the faculty signed a letter and petition that would influence the process of integration. The letter petitioned for the immediate integration of the college. Faculty members Charles Bigger and Jack Farris wrote the letter. It was addressed to President Rhodes and stated:

⁶⁷ Jacqueline Dowd Hall. Interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, February 16, 2015.

⁶⁸ Jacqueline Dowd Hall. Interview by Jenna Sullivan, Rhodes College, February 16, 2015.

We have felt for some time that the present policy of segregation of the Board of Directors should be abandoned, and we have now taken this means of expressing our sentiments. We know there is never a right time to pursue an unpopular course of action, but we also feel that we can better live with our consciences if we can begin the year with an expression of conviction.⁶⁹

The letter then described the values of Southwestern as an “institution of higher learning, committed in explicit and ideal ways to serve the community and best interests of mankind.” Finally, the faculty letter recommended a course of action to the Board of Directors in a “Statement of Principle”:

We believe that immediate steps should be taken, and an appropriate public announcement made, declaring that Southwestern at Memphis is open to all qualified students, regardless of race or creed.⁷⁰

The “Statement of Principle” requested immediate action from the Board of Directors. This group of faculty members could not predict it would be another two years before the first African American students would step on to the campus. The letter and statement of principle also noted the moral and religious reasons the college should integrate. It claimed that the “implicit and effective” policy of segregation “[repudiated] in subtle ways the religious and professional responsibilities which this institution embrac[ed].”⁷¹ Similar to the arguments of student activists like Roger Hart, the faculty included Christianity as an impetus to integrate the college, rather than a reason to maintain a policy of exclusion.

48 faculty members signed the letter. This was a large majority of the faculty as the college had 52 professors. Interestingly, the letter describes the current procedure of

⁶⁹ Southwestern at Memphis Board of Directors, Minutes of Meeting, October 17, 1962, Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

admission as “a policy of segregation of the Board of Directors.”⁷² The letter designated the Board of Directors as having primary responsibility for maintaining segregation at Southwestern. The statement was likely worded this way to appeal to President Rhodes and distinguish his own beliefs from those of the Board. Perhaps the faculty perceived the Board of Directors as more of an obstacle to integration than the president himself.

This correspondence was discussed at the meeting of the Board of Directors the following month on October 17th. The minutes of the meeting note that after “a full and free discussion,” a committee of trustees was appointed to study the matter and report to the Board of Directors at a later date. It is not surprising that the decision to integrate was not made immediately, as the letter requested. The Board responded cautiously with a decision to think the matter over. However, the letter and statement to the Board acted as a catalyst for action. The creation of the committee was a step towards the eventual integration of the college. President Rhodes responded to the faculty petition with a brief and ominous statement, saying, “I am sorry you did not see fit to discuss this with me in advance, for I would have been able to suggest some pertinent facts worth considering.”⁷³ It appears that President Rhodes may have felt caught off guard by the collective protest of the faculty. While it is unclear what Rhodes was referring to, he may have been insinuating that there were important financial aspects of the decision of which the faculty was unaware.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Memo from President Rhodes to the Faculty of Southwestern,” Southwestern Board of Directors, Minutes of Meeting, October 17, 1962, Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

The Price Tag of Segregation: Financial Incentives to Integrate the College

The faculty was likely unaware that President Rhodes had been considering the prospect of integrating the college. On July 20, 1962, just a few months before the faculty would send the letter of petition, Rhodes sent a memorandum to the Board of Directors regarding Southwestern's eligibility for a major grant from the Ford Foundation.

According to the memorandum, in 1961, the Ford Foundation requested that Southwestern prepare a profile study "of its last decade of operations and its projected needs and financial picture generally for the next decade." The memorandum states that Southwestern was not selected for a grant after the Foundation reviewed the college's financial profile. According to Rhodes, "conferences with the individual in charge of directing these grants" made it clear that there were specific reasons the college was not selected. President Rhodes describes one of these reasons related specifically to race:

[The college's] long tradition of no Negroes in the student body. Although the Charter and By-Laws say nothing about this and although there have been no Negro applicants, Foundation has decided upon a policy of social action in this regard.⁷⁴

The memorandum noted that several other Southern colleges were receiving Ford grants. Among them were Austin College in Texas, Sewanee in Tennessee, Stetson in Florida, and Berea in Kentucky. Additionally, Vanderbilt and Tulane University had also received aid. Each of these colleges had an open admission policy for African Americans. These Ford grants were quite large—President Rhodes was hopeful that Southwestern

⁷⁴ Peyton Rhodes, "Memorandum to Board of Directors of Southwestern at Memphis," July 20, 1962. Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

could receive “the stimulus of one or two million from the Ford Foundation on a contingent basis.”⁷⁵

A grant this large could provide the college financial security after years of difficulty raising sufficient funds. The operating budget for the year of 1962 was just over a million dollars (\$1,104,314), thus the grant from Ford could support the entire college for one full year. The college was supported financially by the surrounding Presbyterian synods of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. However, some conservative Presbyterian ministers opposed Charles Diehl during his presidency and even attempted to remove him from the college’s administration. This controversy inhibited the college’s fundraising efforts and placed much of the financial burden on alumni in Memphis and surrounding local Presbyterian congregations. Ultimately, Southwestern could have used support from outside funding sources such as the Ford Foundation in a time of controversy, uncertainty, and financial instability.⁷⁶

This discovery marked a significant transition in the movement towards integration at Southwestern. Although the Presbyterian Church (US) had encouraged Southwestern to integrate in 1954, there was no financial incentive to implement the change in policy. And yet, in the early 1960s, the college could no longer remain financially stable with its policy of exclusion. The Board of Directors, made up of Presbyterians, now faced a difficult decision. In reality, the financial consequences of delaying integration profoundly outweighed the moral consequences articulated by the Presbyterian Church ten years prior. No matter how committed the college was as an institution to “providing a sound Christian education,” its decisions as an institution were

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Last Segregated Hour, p. 84

deeply affected and perhaps determined by the politics of money. The Board of Directors' meeting in October of 1962 was a turning point in racial history of the college. The administration was forced to consider integration after months of internal debate and protest from students and faculty alike. In addition, the administration faced the financial consequences of maintaining the status quo of segregation. This decision would not be made without controversy.

Committees in Conversation: Working Toward a Final Decision

On March 20, 1963, the Board of Directors met in the Directors Room of Palmer Hall and began the meeting with a prayer, as they had done for many years. However, this meeting was unlike previous meetings, as the committee would present the information found after months of studying the prospect of integration at Southwestern. The committee was formed at the October Board of Directors meeting that would study the question of integration in further detail over a period of months. The committee, composed of members of the Board of Directors, met in Evergreen Presbyterian Church three times during the spring of 1963. Prior to the committee's first meeting on January 11, President Rhodes and the Chairman of the Board of Directors crafted a questionnaire to be sent to sixteen surrounding colleges in the region "in order to discern their experience with this problem."⁷⁷

The questionnaire was mostly concerned with reactions to integration, primarily those of white students and alumni. It was also concerned with finding out whether or not the official admission policies of these colleges excluded African Americans. It was sent

⁷⁷Southwestern Board of Directors, Minutes of the Meeting, March 20-21, 1963: 8. Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

to mostly private colleges in the South, with the inclusion of Memphis State University, now known as the University of Memphis, to “learn of the local climate concerning this problem.” The report found that of the fifteen church-related, privately owned colleges, nine of them had admitted all qualified students without regard to race. Of the sixteen colleges total, fifteen “did not forbid the admission of Negro students by charter or by-laws.” The report notes that the nine who had integrated did so “by action of the Board of Directors.” Two of these colleges were in Tennessee; although it is unclear to which colleges the questionnaire was sent. The report found that Memphis State University had 200 black students in attendance. Interestingly, the report notes, “[Memphis State] had no ‘incidents’” as the “the Negroes have enrolled for the sole purpose of getting an education and not proving a point.”⁷⁸

This statement reflects the pervasive assumption among white Southerners that African Americans were seeking to intentionally disrupt the lives of whites by protesting segregation. The actions and motives of African Americans who challenged segregation were thoroughly scrutinized. This was especially seen in churches, whose pastors and congregations questioned the motives of African Americans who sought to attend the church.⁷⁹ The committee used the word “incident” as a vague and ominous descriptor of what might go wrong should the policy be changed. The use of words like “problem” and “incident” reveal the Board’s perception of the decision to integrate the college. Primarily, the committee viewed this decision as a “problem” to deal with that could result in trouble on the campus of Southwestern. The question of integration was not

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Stephen Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

primarily viewed as a moral or religious decision; instead it was perceived as an unpredictable child who might become unruly and needed to be handled with proper care.⁸⁰

The committee was also concerned with reactions from white students and alumni. According to the report, white students at surrounding colleges were generally “passive and cordial” in response to integration, but one college reported students as “hostile” in response to the admittance of African Americans. The report suggested that the alumni from surrounding institutions responded in a variety of ways—from “violently opposed” to “enthusiastically for.” The report also asked about the effect on fundraising of the surrounding colleges. To this question, the participants noted “some alumni support is expected to decrease or disappear.” The Board of Directors, as well as President Rhodes and the administration, were clearly concerned about a change in support from alumni, particularly financial support. The prospect of integration was seen as a potential threat to the security of the college, its legacy and connection to alumni, and its public reputation.⁸¹

The report also investigated the opinions of both students and faculty on campus. In light of the faculty petition presented to President Rhodes and the Board of Directors in the previous fall, the committee was particularly interested in understanding the opinions of the faculty. The committee interviewed five faculty members who signed the petition and four members who “refused to sign it.” The report notes:

⁸⁰ Southwestern Board of Directors, Minutes of the Meeting, March 20-21, 1963: 8. Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

⁸¹ Southwestern Board of Directors, Minutes of the Meeting, March 20-21, 1963: 8, Digital Archives at Rhodes College.

Of the four who refused to sign the petition, none was opposed to teaching Negroes or admitting them into the student body—they refused to sign the petition because they believed it was a matter of policy concerning which the faculty was not in a position to examine all of the ramifications.⁸²

Although the statement seems to resolve discrepancies in faculty opinion, there were likely a number of complicated reasons that the four faculty members refused to sign the petition. It is unlikely that they all reported the same cautious response to the question. The faculty members were also unlikely to pronounce their prejudice in the interviews with the Board of Directors. Once again, it was impolite at Southwestern to simply disapprove of the presence of African Americans. Nonetheless, the opinions of the faculty were complicated. It is unclear what their true motives were in refusing to sign the petition; although it is probable their decisions had more to do with racism and fear than this document suggested.

The committee also interviewed three Southwestern students who all “agreed that Southwestern should admit all qualified students without regard to race.” The students disagreed on when the college should officially admit students of color. Two students proposed that the college integrate in the coming fall semester of 1963. One student, however, “preferred to delay it five years.” According to the report, the students “all agreed that Negro students would be accepted in stride by the other students.”⁸³ The committee gathered a relatively small sample of individuals on campus to interview. However, these responses gave some representation of student and faculty opinion. In general, the participants who were interviewed by the committee appeared to be in favor

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

of integrating the college, despite some caution and disagreement concerning how it should be done.

The Board of Directors Consults the Opinion of The Church

After the members of the committee reported on the findings of recent surveys and interviews, they considered the opinion of members of the Presbyterian Church. It is noteworthy that the committee, comprised of Presbyterian members of the Board, did not present the opinion of the Church first in its report. The report states: "Since Southwestern is owned and controlled by the four Synods of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, it was thought advisable to ascertain the position of the Church on this matter." The committee appeared to consult the opinion of the Church primarily out of obligation rather than deep affiliation or religious conviction. After presenting some information from the PCUS Committee on Christian Relations Dealing with Higher Education, the committee presented, "A Statement to Southern Christians," the document adopted by the Presbyterian (US) General Assembly nearly a decade previously. A section of the statement and its recommendations were read and recorded in the minutes of the meeting:

1. That the General Assembly affirms that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics and that the Church, in its relationship to cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow.
2. That the General Assembly, therefore, submit this report for careful study throughout the church, and that it especially urge:
 - (a) That the trustees of institutions of higher education belonging to the General Assembly adopt a policy of opening the doors of these institutions to all races.

- (b) That the Synods consider earnestly the adoption of a similar recommendation to trustees of institutions of institutions under their control.⁸⁴

The statement, which was officially released ten years earlier in 1954, explicitly asked the trustees and directors of higher education institutions to integrate their respective colleges. The Board of Directors at Southwestern consulted this document nearly a decade later after months of increasing pressure to integrate the college. The statement also clearly articulated a theological argument for the integration of higher education institutions. This was a seminal moment during the conversation concerning integration. After weeks of conversations about finances and potential “incidents,” the Board was faced with a theological and moral component to the discussion of integration. This document reminded the members of the Board of the college’s official affiliation with the Presbyterian Church and its commitment to Christian integrity.

The committee appointed by the Board of Directors also included another statement from the General Assembly’s report on “The Church and the Supreme Court Decision on the Racial Integration of Public Education.” The excerpt read: “Our Christ was and still is ahead of the times; the customs, traditions and laws of it. The Church must strive to keep apace of its Master or become bereft of His spirit.” In hearing these words, the Board of Southwestern found itself in a peculiar place. The denomination to which it had long been affiliated and which supported it, explicitly described the practice of segregation as in opposition of Christianity. The Presbyterian (US) denomination claimed officially to follow a Christ that transcended segregation and discrimination. In the spring of 1963, Southwestern at Memphis was still committed to a denomination to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 10.

whose official doctrine and theology it did not fully adhere. According to the Presbyterian (US) Church, Christ himself “was ahead of the times” in which Southwestern still stood.⁸⁵

After consulting the official opinion of the Presbyterian (US) Church, the minutes of the meeting state “the minds of the Committee were refreshed concerning the purpose of the college by reading a statement from the By-Laws.” The committee read the purpose of the college aloud, which primarily establishes the college’s purpose “of advancing the Kingdom of God through educational processes” and “the promotion of Christian higher education.”⁸⁶ The committee and larger Board of Directors were reminded of the college’s original purpose and commitment to Christianity. Herein lay the growing tension—Southwestern was officially committed in word and practice to Christianity and yet the nature and function of that commitment was ambiguous.

The committee also included an excerpt from the 1962-63 catalog which stated the “Objectives and Ideals” of the college. Among these, the document described Southwestern as a distinctive liberal arts college which “has always given prominence to religion” through required biblical studies. The document described the college as being “rooted in the Christian philosophy of life [which] encourages breadth of vision, ability to weigh evidence, a sense of values, and a due respect for the opinions of others.” The recorded minutes of the meeting do not disclose the ways in which these objectives were discussed among the members of the Board of Directors. However, it is clear that it was

⁸⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

important to the Board of Directors to reevaluate the college's mission and better understand how it informed the decision to integrate.⁸⁷

The report also mentioned that out of the 53 PCUS-accredited colleges and seminaries, “only six; namely, Belhaven, Hampden-Sydney, King, Mary Baldwin, Presbyterian College, and Southwestern make any distinction in applicants of different races.”⁸⁸ This likely meant that these colleges, regardless of their official admission policies, had not yet enrolled an African-American student. Southwestern was one of only six PCUS institutions that remained segregated in 1963. The Board of Directors was now well aware of its position in relation to other similar church-related colleges. Ultimately, the college was behind the times. After the presentation of months of investigation, the committee finally presented its conclusions to the Board of Directors.

The conclusions seem to primarily address the opinions of the faculty:

1. That the faculty members who did not sign the petition feel no opposition to an integrated student body but declined to sign either because they did not want to appear to join a pressure group or because they felt there was presented a policy matter in which they were not involved;
2. That the faculty who did sign the petition felt no sense of urgency about an immediate change in policy but rather considered that this was an appropriate way to bring the matter to the attention of the Board for consideration and study leading to a change at a proper future time.⁸⁹

It is hard to believe that the nearly 50 faculty members felt “no sense of urgency” when signing a petition that asked for “immediate steps” to be taken towards integration. The committee portrayed the faculty's protest as much more cordial and conciliatory than it was in reality. The committee desired to portray the tone of the faculty and the wider

⁸⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 12.

campus as being devoid of extreme opinions. Southwestern, clearly, was not a place for extremes. There could be “no opposition” and “no urgency.”⁹⁰ Both factions of faculty, those who signed the petition and those who did not, were discouraged from having any sort of “extreme” opinion. Southwestern was ideally a place of passive and cordial people who did not really have any strong opinions. Although this was an illusion, it helped to ensure a smooth, incident-free conversation concerning integration.

The conclusions of the committee continued:

3. That the reasons for faculty desire for change range from a deep sense of Christian conviction to an urge to keep pace with overall changing conditions both in the country generally and in the field of education specifically;⁹¹

The committee acknowledged the range of motivations of faculty members, including Christian belief and conviction. This confirmed some members of the faculty were motivated by faith and actively expressed their conviction to the Board of Directors in individual interviews. The additional conclusions of the committee acknowledged the official position of the PCUS as documented in “A Statement to Southern Christians.” The committee also concluded “the experience of Memphis State University in this field prevents any fear of upheaval in the community if a sound program is adopted.”⁹² The conclusions addressed some of the most important elements of the decision: faculty opinion, the position of the Presbyterian Church, and the likelihood of unrest on campus and in the Memphis community. Ultimately, the committee concluded with caution that integration appeared to be the best policy for Southwestern at Memphis.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Hopes for a “Sane Integration”: The Board of Directors Makes a Final Decision

Late in the morning of March 21st, 1963, the Board of Directors made a final decision concerning integration at Southwestern. After much conversation and deliberation, the committee appointed by the Board presented a final description of “basic concepts of Southwestern’s mission and future” as it related to integration. These statements relied heavily on metaphorical language describing the college as a Christian institution. Perhaps the gravity of the college’s imminent decision called for symbolism.

Southwestern was first described as an institution that “can choose its students with more discrimination than can a public college and thereby can attain a higher level of instruction in a higher caliber student body.” It is curious that this aspect of Southwestern’s mission was seen as relevant to integration. It seems to imply that discrimination, even among races, was a justifiable way to advance the college.⁹³ The second “basic concept” noted:

As a church-related institution Southwestern not only can emphasize in its curriculum courses of study and practices of life that teach the principles of Christianity but also must create an atmosphere in which these principles may bear fruit.⁹⁴

Interestingly, the committee used theological language without explicitly condemning segregation or supporting integration. Rather, this statement refers to a more general goal of creating a Christian atmosphere. Perhaps this was a subtle way of encouraging the college to integrate so that it might “practice what it preached.” Regardless, it is noteworthy that these statements do not explicitly mention race or integration. And yet, they are religious in nature and seem to transmit subtle messages

⁹³ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

concerning integration. Finally, the committee presented a confusing theological statement that more specifically addressed integration itself:

To paraphrase other church thinking at the moment, Southwestern is both a witness and an instrument. As an instrument of Christian education she is a witness to Christ. If her value as such an instrument is impaired so will be her value as a witness. It cannot be doubted that sane integration embodies a Christian principle and serves as a witness. But also does the sound academic education in a broad curriculum by the church of any student, white or Negro, stand as a witness. It is in this latter sense and through the Christian men and women who have been trained here that Southwestern has been a continuing witness to Christ through the generations. The importance of broadening that witness in the future by broadening the area of student selection does not justify impulsive change which could injuriously affect the institution's witness and influence throughout the country. The desire to witness by integration must not destroy the witness of education and thereby destroy Southwestern's usefulness both to the field of education and to the Christian community.

It is in this framework of ideals that Southwestern should gradually seek the most qualified students available to her without regard to race.⁹⁵

The statement was far from a robust and passionate acceptance of African Americans. Instead, it was a convoluted argument fraught with uncertainty. Clearly, the college was experiencing a sort of identity crisis. The committee argued that integration, though it was in keeping with the role of the college as Christian witness, should not be pursued in a way that threatened its Christian "usefulness". While acknowledging with the Presbyterian Church (US) that segregation was a threat to Christian witness, this statement appears to claim that integration could pose a threat to the college's "witness and influence." The only sentence of the statement that explicitly supports integration does so with a condition: only "sane" integration is an accepted Christian witness.⁹⁶

This hope for a "sane" integration underlined the entire conversation surrounding race and integration at Southwestern. The committee wanted Southwestern to be a place

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

that was safe, passive, cordial, and “sane.” This could be accomplished through the exclusion or control of African-Americans. The very presence of African Americans on campus, in the minds of the Board, posed dangers. The committee sought to make a Christian argument for caution in approaching integration. Unlike student activist Roger Hart, who understood the decision to integrate to be purely a choice between right and wrong, the committee collectively argued that moral decisions were not so simple. In addition to the supposed “Christian usefulness” of the college, the identity and traditions of the college were at stake. Southwestern’s reputation, financial security, and comfortable campus culture among white students were all at stake. The committee cautiously approached integration with a fear that it could actually “destroy” the college altogether.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The college founded in 1848 as a religious institution carries a legacy of exclusion. Racism and exclusion were part of its very foundation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1909, the students of Southwestern who sat in the classrooms of the Clarksville, Tennessee campus uttered racist remarks in academic essays that reflected a deep belief in the inferiority of blacks. These remarks demonstrated the pervasive “racial creed” that spread throughout a new white generation of the post-Emancipation South—a creed that gave whites a false sense of authority in an age of uncertainty. This “racial creed” would be carried to Memphis and would continue to impact students, faculty, and daily administrative decisions. President Diehl, although

⁹⁷ Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, March 20-21, 1963. Page 13.

progressive in some aspects, continued to emphasize values of genuineness and good character, which did not require systemic change or bold confrontation of injustice.

Diehl's successor, Peyton Rhodes, continued to uphold institutional values that supported segregation. Students at Southwestern were to be good people, not necessarily good activists. The college's constant maintenance of reputation and image did not nurture strong opinions or unpredictable actions.

Some Southwestern students approached integration with a Presbyterian theology of activism and challenged this commitment to civility and segregation. Their faith motivated them to consider civic issues toward which many Southwestern students, faculty, and administrators were apathetic. Students like Roger Hart, Howard Romaine, and Jacqueline Dowd Hall embodied a more progressive Presbyterianism that challenged the status quo. The *Sou'wester* provided a space for conversations about Christianity and integration. Throughout the 1960s, students passionately debated the topic of integration.

Some Southwestern students in the 1960s held beliefs about African Americans similar to those of students in Carl Holliday's class fifty years previously, although these beliefs were communicated with more "civility." Although their words were not as violent or explicit, many students in the 1960s still believed that blacks were inferior and undeserving of equal educational opportunities. Instead of explicitly asserting the inferiority of blacks, students used arguments that claimed to be in "the Negro's" best interest. Some students argued that blacks should develop their own schools instead of attending white schools. The debates in the *Sou'wester* demonstrate the range of opinion amongst Southwestern students. Students interpreted their own religious faith in different ways and came to quite different conclusions. Pro-integration students were motivated by

their faith to include African-Americans, while segregationists were convinced that God had a different plan.

Those students in favor of integration eventually organized a protest in 1962, in which they made consecutive appointments throughout the course of a school day with President Rhodes to tell him their opinions on the topic. The politeness of this “demonstration” shows that civility made its mark on every aspect of integration, even in the actions of protesters. President Rhodes was already considering integration from a different perspective after learning that the college’s segregation policy made it ineligible for a major grant from the Ford Foundation. Balancing the interests of students, faculty, and the financial security of the college, President Rhodes was placed in a difficult position.

When the Board of Directors finally approached the topic of integration in their official meetings, they did so with great caution. The Board first examined its options by reaching out to other church-related colleges and interviewing some students and faculty on the Southwestern campus. In this process of gathering information, the Board demonstrated a fear that there was much at stake in this decision. They considered many concerns: How would this impact alumni donation? What was the risk of “unrest”? In the midst of other questions, the Board also consulted the policy of the Presbyterian Church (US). It appears that this was primarily out of obligation. Although the college was formally connected to the PCUS, it faced its own set of concerns as a private institution. The college was more concerned with its own commitment to civility and its financial security. The position of the PCUS was not regarded with urgency—it was merely a suggestion that could or could not be acted upon.

Ultimately, Southwestern, a Presbyterian institution, faced a dilemma when the Board of Directors approached the decision to integrate. The college that had been governed by the Presbyterian Church (US) for over a century appears to have made major decisions that had little to nothing to do with the PCUS's positions. This was the reality; and yet, there was a deep desire among members of the Board to justify their decision theologically with respect to the college's Presbyterian identity. The Board of Directors described its decision to integrate with a cautious theological metaphor: Southwestern's Christian witness in integration must not destroy its effectiveness as a Christian college. This deceptive statement embodied the college's commitment to civility—Southwestern did not wish to be explicitly racist. And yet it did not wish to take substantial action that could threaten the safety of the college. The Board was describing the concern that was present in the conversation all along. There was something at stake with integration—Southwestern, as an institution could be damaged in the process. This anxiety about the future of the college impacted the entire journey towards integration.

Epilogue

I wrote this paper out of a deep concern for my college's past and present regarding the treatment of African Americans. My research led me to believe that a commemoration event was necessary to honor the bravery and unique experiences of the individuals who first integrated the college. In the fall of 2014, in celebration of fifty years of integration at Rhodes, I hosted a panel in Hardie Auditorium. The panel consisted of Reverend Jim Bullock, Julian Bolton, Herman Morris, and Dr. Coby Smith. It was an interesting and meaningful conversation in which these men were able to share

their memories, both fond and painful, of integration. Their courage was inspiring to me; they spoke of companionship with one another with laughter and delight. This companionship helped them to overcome the challenges of racism they each experienced. Interestingly, they generally spoke fondly of their time at Rhodes. Despite the challenges, they were shaped immensely as students and people in their four years.

I was grateful to be a part of this moment in my college's history, but I never imagined how relevant this commemoration event and my own research would be. Just a few weeks after the event, several racial slurs appeared on an anonymous social media app called Yik-Yak. These violent and disturbing posts demonstrated that racism was not simply a problem of the past. I was continually surprised at some white students' shock in response to the racial slurs. I heard some white students say things such as, "These few students are making the rest of us look bad." In contrast, African American students were generally not surprised to see these posts as they resonated with other instances of racism on campus they had experienced. There was a temptation among some white students to reduce a systemic problem of racism to the distasteful actions of a few "bad people." Yik-Yak had disrupted the commitment to civility on campus and therefore was noticed. It was an explicit example of the racism that often goes unseen in daily campus life. I found students were largely unaware of the racial history of the college.

Interestingly, in response to the racial crisis on campus in the fall of 2014, President Troutt created a committee to address the issues and report back at a later date. In 1962, as my paper examined, the Board of Directors formed a committee to study integration and report back at a later date. These parallels can show us something—our college, though constantly in evolution, faces similar questions over the years. Though

the form of those questions has changed since 1963, we still face a struggle to respond quickly and with conviction to racism on campus.

It is my hope that this paper can serve as a resource to our current and future conversations on campus climate and racism. Remembering our own institution's historical legacy of racism and exclusion can help us to understand where we are today and where we want to be in the future. I still believe that Rhodes College is capable of being a more inclusive place for all people. Students from another era, who both advocated for and participated in integration, can act as examples for activism and justice today. As Reinhold Neihbur states, institutions are always less moral than the individuals that compose them. This perspective can help us to better understand our college's past without solely blaming the acts of particular individuals. Prejudice and exclusion sweep through institutions, affecting each of us, and therefore cannot be easily diminished. However, with an awareness of the ambiguous and imperfect moral identity of our institution, we can actively work toward the college that we want to attend, rather than the college we have inherited from the past.

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