

MAKING HISTORY TODAY

THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest

James S. Currie, Executive Secretary

A line in one of the Prayers of Confession in the ***Book of Common Worship*** reads: “we remain silent in the presence of evil.” Goodness knows, there are, no doubt, plenty of instances in which, both as individuals and as a church, that confession is more valid than many of us in the Presbyterian Church would like to admit.

In this country the history of race relations is a complex one and is not one that, for the most part, we can point to with pride, even in the church. We tend to focus on the times when the church did not distinguish itself by being on the right side of history. Too often prejudice rather than the gospel dictated the church’s attitude between the races. The church was silent when it should have spoken and it spoke when it should have been silent. “And there is no health in us,” as another Prayer of Confession puts it.

And yet, in the 20th century when race relations were strained, if not altogether broken, there were some who dared to speak out, often at no small risk to themselves and their family, on the side of what they believed the gospel demanded. In 1965 Donald Shriver, president of Union Seminary in New York City, edited a volume titled ***The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching Racial Crisis***. Most of the contributors were from the southeastern United States (from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia).

More recently, in 2012, Stephen Haynes published a book, ***The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation***, which describes the efforts of students from

Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College) in 1964 to desegregate one of the larger Presbyterian churches in Memphis, Second Presbyterian Church.

Even more recently Carolyn Crowder has produced a film “At the River” which focuses on Presbyterian ministers in the southeastern United States who spoke out against racial segregation. She interviews many of them 20-30 years later as they reflected on their experiences.

But what about Presbyterians in the Southwest? In 2014 the Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest published a volume of sermons by Presbyterian pastors and stories by and about Presbyterian ministers in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas (***Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, and Walking Humbly: The Witness of Some Southern Presbyterian Pastors for the Cause of Racial Harmony in the 1950s and 1960s***; it was re-printed in 2020).

In Arkansas Rev. Don Campbell (Crossett) and Rev. Marion Boggs (Second Church, Little Rock) preached sermons in the midst of the 1957 Central High School crisis. Although not included in this volume, the son of Rev. Dunbar Ogden, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, wrote of how his father walked with the seven African-American students to Central High School in September 1957. Because of that he was asked to leave his post as pastor. From a Cumberland perspective Rev. Claude Williams (1895-1979) was active in civil rights and labor unions in Arkansas in the 1930s and 1940s.

In Louisiana Rev. Granville Sydnor served the church in Ferriday from 1964-1968. While there, Sydnor sided with the African-American community in the face of threats from the Ku Klux Klan. He tells his story in this volume. In Oklahoma Mitchell Epperson served the Presbyterian church in Ada (1938-1948) where, as his son, Doug, writes, his experience with the local library board and the sermons he preached on race relations led to his leaving that church

In Texas pastors who refused to be silent included Thomas W. Currie (Oak Cliff Presbyterian Church, Dallas), Michael Murray (First Presbyterian Church, Kingsville), Rodney Sunday (Pines Presbyterian Church, Houston), Fred Swearingen (Parkway Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, and Larry Spencer (who served several churches in the Greater Houston area).

While we must hear the voices of those who remind us of where the church erred and fell down, it is also helpful to keep in mind those who stood on the right side of history and who preached the gospel in word and action and who, in many cases, suffered for it.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,”