

RACE AND RELIGION IN THE BAYOU CITY:  
LATINO/A, AFRICAN AMERICAN, AND ANGLO BAPTISTS IN HOUSTON'S  
LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

While studies that examine religion in movements for social justice have increased in recent years, the intersections of race and religion remain understudied. Therefore, this dissertation is a relational and comparative study of Mexican American, African American, and Anglo Baptists in the Houston area as they engaged the struggle for civil rights through religious associations, churches, and leaders. It demonstrates that race and religion in Houston's long civil rights movements produced changes in two directions: religion influenced Baptists' involvement with the movements, and the movement itself influenced Baptists' religious lives. I argue that from the 1910s through the 1970s, religion played a central role in Baptist efforts to both uphold and challenge the color line in Houston. Influential white Baptists attempted to protect white privilege and power by using their influence, religious organizations, and doctrine to enforce and protect the Jim Crow system toward both black and brown communities. At the same time Mexican American and African American Baptist leaders attempted to use the religious resources at their disposal to mitigate the effects of inequality and push back against racism. However, the long civil rights movement opened a space, a window of opportunity, for white, black, and brown Baptists to challenge racism in churches and in their denominations and to find new and creative ways of taking religious identity politics into the surrounding communities. And black and brown Baptists, sometimes with the help of progressive white Baptists, capitalized on the moment to mobilize religion and weaken the power of the color line and racial inequality.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, the Reverend James Arthur Wray (1922-2017), whose love for God and dedication to equality inspired my interest in this topic; to my wife, Devon Michelle Cameron, who has walked this journey with me and without whose support, encouragement, and love, this project would not have been possible; and to my sons, Caleb and Benjamin, who have grown up with this dissertation and who motivate me to finish well.

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The research process has a tendency to incur many debts along the way. I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without the help of archival experts: Bill Sumners and Taffey Hall at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Alan LeFever and Naomi Taplin at the Texas Baptist Historical Collections, and Mika Selley and the staff of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. I am grateful for their extensive knowledge of manuscript evidence and for being so generous with their time.

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Most of all, I would like thank my wife, Devon, and our two sons, Caleb and Benjamin. Devon, it is hardly enough to say that this dissertation (and my entire graduate career) would have been impossible without you. Thank you for your sacrifices, your untiring support and encouragement, your unwavering faith, and your love. This is for you. Caleb and Benjamin, I am thankful for your patience and understanding, as you have had to grow up alongside my dissertation. But most of all, I am thankful for all the sounds of laughter and discovery on the other side of my office door. It reminds me that there are only so many hours in any day and that they must be spent on things that really matter. My hope is that one day in the future, what I have written will speak to you and that you will grow up to be men dedicated to love, mercy, faith, and justice.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

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## NOMENCLATURE

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| BGCT  | Baptist General Convention of Texas              |
| CLC   | Christian Life Commission                        |
| HMRC  | Houston Metropolitan Research Center             |
| SBC   | Southern Baptist Convention                      |
| SBHLA | Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives |
| TBHC  | Texas Baptist Historical Collections             |
| UBA   | Union Baptist Association                        |

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In Houston, race has been the determining factor in much of the city's political and social history, shaping social norms, political representation and influence, and the distinctive residential patterns manifested in the city wards.<sup>1</sup> As of 2010, the U.S. Census showed that Latinos accounted for more than half of the population growth in the United States from 2000 to 2010, which makes Latinos the fastest growing segment in the nation.<sup>2</sup> Over the next few decades, this trend will mean that whites will no longer represent a majority in the United States. In Houston, this shift has already occurred.<sup>3</sup> The most recent figures show that Latinos now comprise at least forty-four percent of the city's population, compared to approximately twenty-six percent for whites and twenty-four percent for African Americans.<sup>4</sup> This means that Latinos and African Americans have a greater opportunity than ever to disrupt white dominance in housing, education, hiring, and local, state, and national politics.

If race has been a determining factor in Houston's political and social history, religion has had an equally important role in shaping political power, determining the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Houston officially abolished the ward system in 1915, Houstonians continue to refer to and identify with the historical six wards of the city. Jeannie Kever, "Pride Lives on in Houston's Six Historical Wards," *Houston Chronicle*, September 7, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *The Hispanic Population: 2010 Census Briefs*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, by Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Rios-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert (Washington, DC, 2010), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 207; Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., Yolanda Flores Niemann, and Nestor Rodriguez, *Black-Brown Relations and Stereotypes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 2, 17, 111.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *State and County Quick Facts, Houston, TX, 2010*, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4835000.html> (accessed November 17, 2014).

direction of politics, and the structures of authority that have governed the city. In Houston, religion is ubiquitous. Houston is home to the largest church in the United States, Lakewood Church, whose relevance and power can be seen in the billboards throughout the city.<sup>5</sup> More than simply a presence in the city, however, religion has been a potent political force as well. In 2014, for example, a coalition of African American, Latino, and Anglo pastors, the Houston Area Pastors' Council, led a citywide campaign from their religious spaces against the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, which would have expanded the reach of non-discrimination laws in Houston's workplaces and public facilities to include protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-first century developments demonstrate religion's potential to bolster conservative politics, and my dissertation highlights the ways in which that has developed over time. But I also underscore how religion has fueled progressive change as well. Race and religion have been important factors in Houston's history. Considering their implications during the most transformative decades of the twentieth century, my dissertation seeks to disrupt the traditional narratives of civil rights in the Bayou city.

This dissertation is a relational and comparative study of the intersections of race and religion in the history of twentieth century social movements in Houston. Specifically, it examines African American, Mexican American, and Anglo Baptists in the Houston area as they engaged civil rights movements through religious associations,

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<sup>5</sup> Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Database of Megachurches in the U.S.," Hartford Seminary, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html> (accessed September 4, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Driessen, "City Subpoenas Pastors' Sermons in Equal Rights Ordinance Case," *Houston Chronicle*, October 14, 2014. While it extends protection for all LGBT individuals, much of the debate has centered on what these protections would mean particularly for transgendered individuals, a point highlighted by the moniker given to the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance: "the bathroom bill."

churches, and leaders from the early 1900s until the 1970s. I begin the analysis in Houston around the turn of the twentieth century because those decades coincide with both the making of a three-part racial structure in Houston and an expansion of white, African American, and Mexican American Baptist churches and ministries in the city.<sup>7</sup> My analysis ends in the 1970s with the white flight, demographic change, and the rise of the Black and Brown Power movements. This dissertation attempts to understand how racial and religious identity politics shaped the beliefs and actions of Houston Baptists concerning race, civil rights, and social justice. It reveals how black and brown Baptists have resisted and challenged racial inequality in the twentieth century, as well as how white Baptists in power have often used religion to uphold and protect inequality and white privilege.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing black, brown, and white Baptist activity in Houston demonstrates how what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has called “the long civil rights movement” elevated social concerns and revealed important fissures along lines of race and ethnicity within

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<sup>7</sup> The early 1900s, particularly in the late 1910s and 1920s, mark the moment when Houston’s *colonias* took root after two decades of Mexican and Mexican American migration into the city, and it is also when the “other Great Migration” of southern blacks more than doubled the existing African American population in Houston. These migrations included the men and women responsible for much of the growth of black and brown Baptist institutions. Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 18-23, 25; Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 29; Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013). De León also points to the 1920s as the beginning of a shift in Mexican American ethnicity from one of simply “lo mexicano” to one embracing “lo americano” as well. He argues that even into the late twentieth century (when his study ends) that “lo mexicano” continues to live alongside “lo americano” in Houston’s Mexican American community. De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 61, 71, 114, 221.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term “Mexican American” to refer to Mexican-origin people residing in the United States; sparingly, I also use term “brown.” “Mexican Baptists” refers to Mexican American Baptists in Texas, which is reflected in the Mexican Baptist Convention of Texas’s title, although I more frequently use “Mexican American Baptists.” I use “African American” and “black” interchangeably. Likewise, I use “Anglo” and “white” interchangeably; I acknowledge that both of these terms can be problematic, but they were synonymous for the majority of the period under investigation.

churches and moved religious activism into the community.<sup>9</sup> It illuminates, for example, what happened among Baptist leaders and within these churches and organizations as they encountered the rising tide of political and social tension characteristic of the late 1950s and 1960s in a city well known for its racial injustice and religious fervor. Some of the important questions that this dissertation addresses include the following: What role has religion played with regard to the color line in Houston? Did the critical decades of the civil rights movements create a space among Baptists to interrogate issues of inequality? What did that space mean for Mexican American, Anglo, and African American Baptists? How did Baptist engagement with civil rights movements differ from or converge with secular activism? And what limits to organized religious engagement in issues of race and ethnicity remained?

### **Thesis and Argument**

This dissertation demonstrates that the intersections of race and religion in Houston's long civil rights movements produced changes in two directions: religion influenced Baptists' engagement (participation in and reaction to) the movements, and particularly in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the movement itself influenced Baptists' engagement with religion. I argue that from the 1910s through the 1970s, religion played a central role in Baptist efforts to both uphold and challenge the color line in Houston.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March, 2005): 1233-1263.

Influential white Baptists attempted to protect white privilege and power by using their influence, religious organizations, and doctrine to enforce and protect the Jim Crow system toward both black and brown communities. At the same time Mexican American and African American Baptist leaders attempted to use the religious resources at their disposal to mitigate the effects of inequality and push back against racism. However, the long civil rights movement opened a space, a window of opportunity, for white, black, and brown Baptists to challenge racism in churches and in their denominations and to find new and creative ways of taking religious identity politics into the surrounding communities. And black and brown Baptists, sometimes with the help of progressive white Baptists, capitalized on the moment to mobilize religion and weaken the power of the color line and racial inequality.

To explore these issues, I focus on the major Baptist leaders, churches, organizations, and associations in the Houston area. In Baptist doctrine, the local church operates as an autonomous, democratic church made up of a body of Baptists on equal spiritual standing, so it is often challenging to make definitive statements about all Baptists.<sup>10</sup> So one way to see how Baptists have organized beyond the local church is to look at their denominational organizations and associations. This is also important considering the decentralized nature of Baptist churches and denominational organizations. The primary religious site of exploration will be Baptist churches and organizations associated with Union Baptist Association. This was the largest and most

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<sup>10</sup> Union Baptist Association, *Minutes of the First Session of the Union Baptist Association: Begun and Held in the Town of Travis, in Western Texas, October 8, 1840* (Houston: Telegraph Press, 1840), 9-10; C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 67, 91, 98; Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 194, 222.

significant religious organization in the area. It encompassed the majority of white and Latino Baptist churches throughout the period under investigation. Associations in Baptist denominational structure allow like-minded churches to work together toward common goals, namely evangelization and expanding Baptist membership. Given the autonomous nature of the local church in Baptist doctrine, sometimes churches and leaders pushed back against programs and directives from the state or national levels. Thus, associations allowed churches on par with one another to pursue collaborative programs together. Aside from the local church, then, associations tended to be where citywide or community-wide change originated.

At the associational level, I focus on the committees and several influential organizations Union Baptist Association formed and maintained during the twentieth century for particular groups of people, such as the Brotherhood Training Union, the Women's Missionary Union, and the city mission board. I will also investigate the Anglo and Mexican American churches within this association most involved in questions of race. Union Baptist Association prohibited African American churches from joining between the late 1860s and the late 1960s, so this dissertation looks beyond Union Association to examine the most prominent African American Baptist pastors, churches, and organizations involved in the long civil rights movement. I also focus on other influential Baptist organizations, such as Baptist pastoral fellowships. Both Anglo and African American Baptists maintained influential pastoral fellowships: white Baptist pastors belonged to the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference, and black Baptist pastors belonged to the Baptist Ministers Association. While no records exist of a separate



Mexican American Baptist pastoral fellowship, at least one Mexican American pastor, the Reverend James L. Novarro, was a member of the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference. Particularly for African American Baptists, these fellowships became some of the most formidable religious organizations on Houston's political scene.

### **Significance of the Problem**

This study of the intersections of race and religion in Houston's long civil rights movement is important for three primary reasons. First, religion in civil rights movements, especially for the Mexican American civil rights movement, remains understudied. Second, the current demographic boom of Latinas/os in Houston and other major urban centers has altered the dynamics of urban politics in the last fifty years. Third, this dissertation's relational approach to race, religion, and civil rights constitutes an important intervention in the literature on civil rights movements, urban history, African American history, Chicano/Latino history, and histories of the South and the Southwest.

First, while studies that examine religion in movements for social justice have increased in recent years, the intersections of race and religion remain understudied. Civil rights historians have noted the prevalence of religion as the moral justification for the African American struggle for civil rights and the source from which the movement

gained momentum.<sup>11</sup> Yet, many civil rights historians tend to treat the religious nature of the movement in terms of intellectual history, demonstrating how the rhetoric of the movement and its leaders often reflected the influence of the black church. My dissertation attempts to address this by focusing on the methods of religious civil rights activism. Historian David Chappell has identified yet another shortcoming in the scholarship on religion in civil rights struggles: the tendency to explore religion as a tool for the benefit of the poor or marginalized in a given historical moment but to ignore its influence for the privileged and powerful. This dissertation's attention to the religious beliefs and practices of Anglo Baptists attempts to address this shortcoming.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the literature on religion in the African American civil rights movement, the paucity of religion-focused works in Mexican American civil rights historiography is striking.<sup>13</sup> However, Mario T. García, Felipe Hinojosa, Roberto

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); R. Drew Smith, ed., *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Johnny E. Williams, *African American Religion and the Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003); Juan Williams and Quinton Hosford Dixie, *This Far by Faith: Stories from the African-American Religious Experience* (New York: William Morrow, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> A few recent exceptions to this were influential for this dissertation, including works by Stephen Haynes, Carolyn Renée Dupont, and Paul Harvey, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter IV. Wilfred M. McClay, "The Church of Civil Rights," *Commentary* 117, no. 6 (June 2004): 44; David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 317; Stephen Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Mario T. García, "Religion and the Chicano Movement: Católicos Por La Raza," in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 125; Mario T. García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 12; Treviño, *The Church in the*

Treviño, and others have been at the forefront of analyzing the importance of religion in Mexican American and Chicano Movement history.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, there has also been an effort to shed light on how the movement transformed the religious and political lives of Latinas/os. For example, Felipe Hinojosa's *Latino Mennonites* and his recent chapter on church takeovers highlight how the politics of the civil rights era and the Black and Brown Power movements influenced religious Latinas/os and transformed the relationship between the Latina/o community and religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> My dissertation attempts to join this conversation. My twentieth-century urban perspective of Latina/o evangelicals, of Southern Baptists in particular, in the civil rights movement challenges a traditional focus on Catholicism and on nineteenth-century rural Protestant institutions and demonstrates that Mexican American Baptists have their own long and important history apart from the work of Anglo missionaries and institutions.<sup>16</sup>

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*Barrio*, 14; Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith & Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>14</sup> García, "Religion and the Chicano Movement"; García, *Católicos*; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*; Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, Richard Martinez, *PADRES: The National Chicano Priest Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Rudy V. Busto, *King Tiger: The Religious Vision of Reies López Tijerina* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Lara Medina, *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Gastón Espinosa and Mario García, ed., *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Paul Barton, "¡Ya Basta! Latino/a Protestant Activism in the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*; Felipe Hinojosa, "Sacred Spaces: Race, Resistance, and the Politics of Chicana/o and Latina/o Religious History," in *A Promising Problem: The New Chicana/o History*, ed. Carlos Blanton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 111-134.

<sup>16</sup> The studies that have directly engaged the longer history of Mexican American Protestantism, especially in mainline denominations, have generally focused too narrowly on church history, denominational developments, and Anglo Protestant missionary efforts before the twentieth century. See, for example, R. Douglas Brackenridge and Francisco García-Treto, *Iglesia Presbiteriana: A History of Presbyterians and Mexican Americans in the Southwest* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press,

Second, Houston and other urban centers across the United States have seen a surge in the Latino population since 1965. Houston alone saw an eighty-eight percent increase in its Latino population from 1970 to 1980. The census data from 2000 and 2010 suggest that this Latino population boom has continued, which means that historically marginalized groups now have a numerical advantage in places like Houston.<sup>17</sup> Even so, African American and Latino Houstonians continue to experience persisting patterns of racial, economic, and political inequality. In spite of the narrative of conflict in public and scholarly discourse over black and brown relations, historical evidence of the potential for coalition building provides an alternative framework from which to fight for civil rights in era of declining white dominance.

Third, this dissertation's relational approach examines Mexican American and African American racializations and civil rights movements simultaneously as they unfolded together and shaped one another in Houston. The historiography of the civil rights era tends to treat these movements separately even though they occurred at the same time, often in the same places. Recent scholarship on the subject has attempted to address this gap, but some scholars have emphasized conflict between African Americans and Mexican Americans. Instead of focusing on the presence or failure of the "presumed alliance" among black and brown Houstonians, this dissertation highlights

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1974); Joshua Grijalva, *A History of Mexican Baptists in Texas 1881-1981: Comprising an Account of the Genesis, the Progress, and the Accomplishments of the People Called "Los Bautistas De Texas"* (Dallas: Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1982); Mark T. Banker, *Presbyterian Missions and Cultural Interaction in the Far Southwest: 1850-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea la Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006); and Daisy Machado, *Of Borders and Margins: Hispanic Disciples in Texas, 1888-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 207; Mindiola, et al., *Black-Brown Relations*, 2, 17, 111.

the “juxtaposition” and “coexistence” of these groups to understand more clearly the potential for coalition building.<sup>18</sup> This work treats them not as presumed allies nor as natural enemies, but as two groups who experienced similar patterns of discrimination and marginalization and who built strategies for resistance on top of one another’s victories.<sup>19</sup>

Baptist history in Houston reveals fleeting moments of black and brown coalition building but moments that were short-lived and relatively minor in their place and time. More often, however, African American and Mexican American Baptists lived out their experiences within “constellations of struggle.” In her article on Charlotta Bass and Luisa Moreno in the 1940s Sleepy Lagoon case, Gaye Theresa Johnson uses the phrase to understand “Afro-Chicano coalitional politics.” Although the two women in her study left no records of interactions with one another, they shared the same “mutual moment.” She considers them in a “common framework of World War II-era interracial, antiracist

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<sup>18</sup> Josh Kun and Laura Puidlo, eds., *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 2, 7; Nicolás C. Vaca, *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means for America* (New York: Rayo, 2004). Scholars such as Neil Foley, Michael Phillips, and Brian Behnken offer comparative civil rights histories that tend to blame marginalized groups for their failure to put aside their own concerns and form black and brown coalitions to fight for equal rights. Neil Foley, *The Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Brian Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> My approach is consistent with Max Krochmal’s *Blue Texas*, in which he writes about black and brown coalition building “as a *process* rather than making totalizing claims about inherent cooperation or mutual discord.” Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 9. Scholars in Chicano and Latino studies have been on the cutting edge of this alternative framing. Felipe Hinojosa, Carlos Blanton, and John Marquez, for example, demonstrate that inter-ethnic politics can be complicated and “tricky,” that a lack of direct collaboration does not necessarily signal hostilities, and that intra-ethnic solidarity can sometimes be difficult enough to find on its own. Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 79; Carlos K. Blanton, “George I. Sánchez, Ideology, and Whiteness in the Making of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, 1930-1960,” *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 3 (2006): 569-604; John D. Márquez, *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 37.

struggle.” Their work together on the Sleepy Lagoon case “generated new political sensibilities and alternative identities among the women and men in their respective racial/ethnic communities.”<sup>20</sup> In that vein, this dissertation considers the “mutual moment” of African American and Mexican American Baptists’ “common framework,” or their “constellations of struggle,” as a way to see how the experiences of each group shaped the other.

## **Definitions of Terms**

### *Urban, Space, Place*

An urban “space” such as Houston is not merely an industrialized backdrop against which this story unfolded. Rather, its particular spatial formation is the product of social construction, conflict, and reconstruction. This process has shaped the segmented layout of the city, the ubiquitous infusion of public religious advertising, the demographic composition of each neighborhood and community, and how residents use their spaces.<sup>21</sup> Although the socially constructed space of the city is fundamental to understanding race and religion in Houston, its particular “place” is also important for understanding how the city’s distinct factors shape how larger processes have played

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<sup>20</sup> Gaye Theresa Johnson, “Constellations of Struggle: Luisa Moreno, Charlotta Bass, and the Legacy for Ethnic Studies,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 155.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991). Lefebvre’s “trialectic” of space (conceived, perceived, and lived spaces) has influenced the work of urban historians immensely, and that influence will be evident in this dissertation as well. See also, Janice L. Reiff, “Rethinking Pullman: Urban Spaces and Working-Class Activism,” *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 7-32.

out.<sup>22</sup> Since Houston is located along the borders of multiple regions, it bears the evidence of being a Southern, Western, and Southwestern city and has the potential to complicate notions of what those regional forces mean for a specific place, particularly for the formation of racialized identities.<sup>23</sup>

### *Identity and Racial Formation*

Influenced by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's Theory of Racial Formation, this dissertation treats race as "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle," a process known as racialization. Although race is socially constructed, it continues to have genuine, measurable consequences for the way society is organized and managed.<sup>24</sup> In much of the United States, race is the representation of social conflict based heavily on phenotypical differences. Racial Formation Theory understands race, class, and gender as "'regions'

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<sup>22</sup> James Connolly suggests that a focus on place, which is both a location and the outcome of political, economic, and social interaction that defines a particular space, highlights how factors of distinctive locales direct larger processes. James Connolly, "Bringing the City Back in: Space and Place in the Urban History of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1, no. 3 (July 2002): 273-274. See also, Charles Tilly, "What Good Is Urban History?" *Journal of Urban History* 22 (September 1996): 702-719; Andrew R. L. Cayton, "On the Importance of Place, or, A Plea for Idiosyncrasy," *Journal of Urban History* 24 (November 1997): 79-87.

<sup>23</sup> Referring to Houston's "polyglot scene," Roberto Treviño argues that the Mexican American community in Houston "took root in a society that had been black and white but one that increasingly became tri-ethnic – black, white, and brown," which suggests that Houston began to exhibit more southwestern qualities. Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 29; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*; Joseph A. Pratt and Christopher J. Castaneda, *Builders: Herman and George R. Brown* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Walter L. Buenger, *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas between Reconstruction and the Great Depression* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

of hegemony” that “overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other.” In other words, “race is gendered, and gender is racialized.”<sup>25</sup>

Although this dissertation emphasizes the mutually constitutive relationship between racial and religious identities, it also considers how these are rearticulated and experienced along lines of gender and class. As Paul Gilroy has suggested, “gender is the modality in which race is lived.” Therefore, it is essential to understand how structures of power intersect to reproduce social relationships connected to social structure and meaning.<sup>26</sup> Religious beliefs exert a powerful influence on the development of men’s and women’s identities as well as their roles, power, and agency. Thus, in the context of this dissertation, Baptist manhood and womanhood cannot be understood apart from the understandings of racialized masculinity and femininity embedded deeply in Protestant Christianity, particularly in interactions across racial lines.

In addition to Racial Formation Theory, I will use a “relational” approach to understand the processes of racialization since it “allows us to analyze different racial projects happening at the same time or across time.” Moreover, as historian Natalia Molina makes clear, “a relational treatment recognizes that race is a mutually constitutive process and thus attends to [the ways] groups intersect.”<sup>27</sup> One part of this

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

<sup>27</sup> Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 3. See also, Natalia Molina, “Examining Chicana/o History through a Relational Lens,” *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 4 (November 2013): 520-541; Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).



relationality suggests that different racial identities signify something only as they relate to each other. Natalia Molina uses the term “racial scripts” to represent another aspect of relational racialization, which is that processes of racialization build on prior or ongoing racial projects, or other political projects, in a given context. Finally, racial scripts also help us understand “counterscripts” as well. These are the relational strategies marginalized peoples have used to recast their racializations and resist them.<sup>28</sup>

Since the meanings of race are context specific, it is important to note that in Houston, as in much of the Southwest, ethnic and cultural differences could play as much of a role as physical characteristics in shaping social and political conflict.<sup>29</sup> This dissertation takes a constructivist view of race and ethnicity, which Joane Nagel defines as a construction of group identity based on a complex of language, culture, religion, ancestry, appearance, and regionality that coalesce out of internal *and* external boundary work.<sup>30</sup>

### *Religion*

In this dissertation, I consider what religion *is* and what religion *does*.<sup>31</sup> In terms of religion’s substance, it includes institutions, practices, and beliefs relating to a moral community that emphasizes a way of living according to a supernatural reality.

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<sup>28</sup> Molina, *How Race Is Made*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Neil Foley, *White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 19; Richard White, “Race Relations in the American West,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1986): 397; Carlos Kevin Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* (Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *Social Problems* 41, no. 1 (February 1994): 152-153; Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (University of Texas Press, 1983).

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, “What Isn’t Religion?,” *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 3 (July 2013): 313.

Additionally, religion acts in several different ways, but many scholars point to religion's use in overcoming challenges, creating a sense community, providing meaning to one's life, structuring power, and "confront[ing] suffering and intensify[ing] joy."<sup>32</sup>

I approach the study of religion from a "lived religion" perspective, which sees it as it is molded and understood in the interaction among sites of "everyday experience ... in the necessary and mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the broader communities of practitioners."<sup>33</sup> Religion itself also constitutes an integral aspect of identity that intersects in ways this dissertation seeks to highlight. The lived religious experiences of Baptists in Houston shed light on what it means to be Baptist and Mexican American, African American, or Anglo.<sup>34</sup>

### *Activism and Resistance*

To understand political activism outside of public and noticeably confrontational moments, I will apply the notion of "infrapolitics" developed by James C. Scott.

Infrapolitics is the "circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups ... beyond

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 9. See also, Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Instead of seeing religion as merely an aspect of ethnicity, this dissertation approaches religion and ethnicity as separate but mutually constitutive. Historians of Latino religion, Roberto Treviño and Felipe Hinojosa have both emphasized the intersections of faith and identity by using the terms "ethno-Catholic" and "ethno-religious." Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 4; Felipe Hinojosa, "Making Noise among the 'Quiet of the Land': Mexican American and Puerto Rican Ethno-Religious Identity in the Mennonite Church, 1932-1982" (PhD diss., University of Houston, 2009), 1-2. These concepts both emphasize a Mexican American or Latino/a way of being religious, which is a way of studying the lived religion of particular ethnic communities. See also, Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith & Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

the visible end of the spectrum” or “the offstage discourse of the powerless.”<sup>35</sup> The “everyday forms of resistance” are often informal, covert, non-confrontational acts, largely aimed at immediate returns, are reinforced by “a venerable popular culture of resistance and multiplied many thousand-fold.”<sup>36</sup> Scott’s effort to unearth how oppressed or marginalized people resist allows scholars to consider how subaltern communities engage politically outside of those few and rare revolutionary public rebellions. Aside from these everyday forms of resistance, I also look at traditional forms of resistance as well, including organizing, political participation, marches, vocal protests, and others.

### **Methodology and Sources**

This project uses documents acquired primarily through historical and archival research methods. By documents, I mean letters, journals, periodicals, newspapers, church records, government documents, and other forms of written and oral communication housed in archives or other historical repositories. In addition, I used archived oral history interviews and conducted several with individuals related to the events and institutions under investigation as a way to supplement other sources and add to my understanding of key events.

While in the archives, I looked at documents related to the Baptist churches, organizations, and associations that figure most prominently in issues of race in

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<sup>35</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183-184.

<sup>36</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi, xvii, 33, 35.

Houston. The main archival collections I used are located at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), the Texas Baptist Historical Collections (TBHC), the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA), the Texas Collection at Baylor University, and the William A. Lawson Jr. Papers housed in the Woodson Research Center at Rice University.

The HMRC holds important collections related to African American and Mexican American life and culture in Houston history. These archives also house community newspapers and several relevant church histories. The TBHC maintains collections pertaining to committees and organizations in the statewide denominational convention, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and the local Houston-area association, Union Baptist Association. TBHC is also the only repository for documents relating to the Mexican Baptist Convention, the separate Texas-based Baptist convention for Mexican American Baptists.

The collections at the SBHLA are quite similar to those at the TBHC but are often much broader in scope and significance. I collected documents related to denominational agencies (Home Mission Board, Executive Committee, Christian Life Commission) and annual meeting minutes, educational pamphlets and other materials used to promote racial understanding. The SBHLA also had the association and statewide meeting minutes that were missing from other archives. The Texas Collection at Baylor University provided access to denominational newspapers and magazines, such as the *Gulf Coast Baptist* and *Baptist Messenger*, which were integral to my understanding local Baptist issues in the Houston area from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Access to digitized Texas newspapers came through the Portal to Texas History associated with the University of North Texas Libraries. Finally, the William A. Lawson Jr. Papers at the Woodson Research Center provided a new depth of insight into the life and ministry of the Rev. William Lawson. It also contained documents related to the establishment of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and its early activities.

In addition to manuscript collections and print sources, I also used archived oral histories. The Texas Baptist Oral History Institute at Baylor University and the HMRC both maintain substantial oral history projects that intersect my topic in many ways (the Religion and Culture Project at Baylor and the Houston Oral History Project at HRMC). I also used interviews from the oral history initiative led by Max Krochmal, *Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Oral Histories of the Multiracial Freedom Struggles in Texas*.<sup>37</sup>

### **Houston at the Turn of the Century**

Historians of Houston point to the decades around the turn of the century as the moment when Houston transitioned from a frontier city to a modern metropolis, and three major events contributed this shift. In 1900, a devastating hurricane decimated Galveston, Houston's major competitor in the race to become the most important city in Texas, and left investors wary of choosing such a vulnerable port city for development.

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<sup>37</sup> Oral histories from the Baylor Institute for Oral History are available here: <https://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=931703>. The Houston Oral History Project can be found here: <http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/Interviews>, and here: <http://www.houstonoralhistory.org>. Interviews conducted by the Civil Rights in Black and Brown project are digitized and publicly accessible via the *Civil Rights in Black and Brown Interview Database*: <https://crbb.tcu.edu>.

The railroad and banking infrastructure had already developed in Houston by the turn of the century, making it the center of commerce for lumber, cotton, and grain. But the discovery of oil at Spindletop (ninety miles east of Houston) in 1901 helped make Houston a major player in the oil and gas industry as well.<sup>38</sup> Then, with the completion of the Houston Ship Channel in 1914, Houston literally became the “workshop of Texas” where “seventeen railroads meet the sea.”<sup>39</sup>

The ascendancy of Houston as an industrial city coincided with major population shifts nationwide during the first three decades of the twentieth century. At the state level, the industrialization and growth of Houston and other new urban centers in Texas (Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio) signaled a shift in the state’s internal demographics from mostly rural small town residents to a growing number of Texans living in urban industrial centers. As a major hub for shipping on both land and water and a center for agriculture, petroleum, lumber, refining, and manufacturing, the Bayou City became an attractive place for both commercial development and people looking for work.<sup>40</sup>

The influx of people into Houston led to significant changes to the city’s demographics. African Americans had always been a major component of Houston’s

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<sup>38</sup> David McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969, 1981), 63, 65-85; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 6-8; Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 25-29; Thomas Kreneck, *Del Pueblo: A History of Houston’s Hispanic Community* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 15-16. On the Houston-Galveston rivalry, see David McComb, “The Houston-Galveston Rivalry,” in *Houston: A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier*, ed. Francisco Rosales and Barry Kaplan (New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), 7-21.

<sup>39</sup> Houston Chamber of Commerce, “‘Heavenly Houston’: The Workshop of Texas, Where Seventeen Railroads Meet the Sea,” *The Houston Informer*, June 14, 1919; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 26-27.

<sup>40</sup> Randolph Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 306-310, 327-328; McComb, *Houston*, 84-85.

total population. Before the Civil War, white Houstonians brought African American slaves with them to the city, and by 1860, Houston was home to 1,060 enslaved African Americans, which made up 22 percent of the total population on the eve of the Civil War (4,845 total).<sup>41</sup> After 1870, African Americans represented nearly forty percent of the total population (3,961 of 9,382).<sup>42</sup> The largest influx of new black residents in Houston began with the First Great Migration (1910-1930). According to historian Bernadette Pruitt, this event brought thousands of southern African Americans from rural Texas and Louisiana to Houston. Pruitt argues that Houston offered migrants more lucrative employment, better schools, and insulated urban black communities. And Houston's familiar southern culture and proximity to friends and family in Texas and Louisiana made it even more attractive to migrants who wanted to stay connected to the places they left behind.<sup>43</sup> The thousands of new residents in Houston during the first few decades of the twentieth century increased the city's total population from 44,633 in 1900 to 292,352 in 1930. In the same period, the population of African American Houstonians quadrupled as it grew from 14,608 to 63,337.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Tamara Miller Haygood, "Use and Distribution of Slave Labor in Harris County, Texas, 1836-60," in *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston*, ed. Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 46; Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 89; Charles Orson Cook, "Harlem in Houston," in *The Harlem Renaissance in the American West: The New Negro's Western Experience*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud and Cary D. Wintz (New York: Routledge, 2012), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Although historians of the Great Migration typically understand it as the movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, Pruitt's *The Other Great Migration* follows the overlooked migrations of black Americans from rural southern communities to Houston. Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 10-12, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 27-29, 39; Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 88-89; Tyina Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 27-28; James SoRelle, "The Darker Side of 'Heaven': The Black Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945," (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1980), 17-18.

After slavery ended in Houston on Juneteenth in 1866, thousands of free African Americans moved to Houston and established Freedmen's Town, an area in the Fourth Ward along the Buffalo Bayou, where they began buying land and building homes.<sup>45</sup> Struggling with postwar economic hardship themselves, white landowners in the Second, Third, and Fourth Wards seemed eager to sell portions of their property to black buyers. However, much of the land that they initially sold was prone to flooding or otherwise undesirable.<sup>46</sup> By 1910, African Americans lived in all six of Houston's wards, but the highest concentrations resided in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards.<sup>47</sup> Over the next decade, the Third and Fifth Wards became the cultural hubs and landing sites for black Houstonians. Moreover, these wards became the main areas for businesses and job opportunities that catered to black communities.<sup>48</sup>

Although demographic shifts in the African American population meant a significant growth in an already well-established Houston black community, conflict south of the U.S.-Mexico border and agricultural and industrial opportunities north of the border caused Houston's Mexican American community to take shape. The first Mexicans to live in what became the City of Houston were prisoners of war in 1836 that were forced to complete the arduous work of clearing the land to prepare for Houston development. During the city's years as the capitol of the Republic of Texas (1836-

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<sup>45</sup> Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 did not reach Texas, a region firmly under Confederate control, until after the end of the Civil War. On June 19, 1865, United States General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston and read General Order No. 3, informing those in attendance of Lincoln's original proclamation. Called, "Juneteenth," African Americans have historically celebrated this as the beginning of freedom. Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 23; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 65.



1839), government officials kept approximately one hundred of these prisoners as servants. Then by 1850, there were only six Mexican-born residents of Houston, and the total Latina/o population in the city grew slowly until the 1910s.<sup>49</sup> By then, Houston had a population of around two thousand Mexican Americans just as war broke out at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>50</sup>

From 1910 to 1930, the number of Mexican Americans in Houston grew from 2,000 to over 14,500.<sup>51</sup> Historians attribute this population growth to a combination of push and pull factors. In Mexico, after more than three decades of destructive political, economic, and social policies, the regime of dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) began to crumble, and a revolution broke out near the end of 1910. Mexicans fleeing from violence and economic devastation began to seek refuge across the border.<sup>52</sup> Even as economic hardship and violence drove Mexicans across the border, Mexicans and Mexican Americans born on either side of the border saw unprecedented opportunities for economic gain in booming agricultural industries in South Texas and the Winter Garden region and in related industries in shipping and textiles in places like Houston.

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<sup>49</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 5-6. De León notes that in the 1860 census, there were fewer than ten Mexican-origin individuals in the city limits, and he estimates that by 1900, that number had grown to approximately five-hundred.

<sup>50</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 7; Thomas Kreneck, *Del Pueblo: A History of Houston's Hispanic Community* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>52</sup> F. Arturo Rosales, "Mexicans in Houston: The Struggle to Survive, 1908-1975," *The Houston Review* 3, no. 2 (1981): 227; Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 25-28; De León, 10-11, 22-23; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 79-80; Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 29; Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., *Brown Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 4; Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 23-24.

Although many who arrived in Houston had been dislocated by the revolution, they picked Houston for many of the same economic reasons as African Americans.<sup>53</sup>

Mexican American settlements were just forming as the twentieth century began. After 1910, immigration to Houston accelerated, and many new arrivals mostly from Mexico and other areas in Texas tended to gravitate to the Second Ward (east of downtown Houston), which they called El Segundo Barrio. This area had once been home to popular neighborhoods of mostly German, Jewish, and Italian Houstonians, but many of the area's wealthy residents vacated the Second Ward as it began to industrialize at the turn of the century. As they left, many either abandoned their homes and property or sold them to prospective buyers. Mexican immigrants took up residence in large homes that had been subdivided into small units or in improvised shelters on cheap tracts of land neglected by the city government.<sup>54</sup> Many newcomers after 1920 settled in Magnolia Park, a suburb of Houston just east of Segundo Barrio along the Houston Ship Channel, for easy access to jobs associated with expanding the ship channel. They also settled near railroads in the First and Sixth Wards and in Denver Harbor (called "El Crisol"), a Fifth Ward neighborhood near the Southern Pacific rail yard.<sup>55</sup> The living conditions, especially early on, featured dilapidated houses and

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<sup>53</sup> Rosales, "Mexicans in Houston," 227-231; Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 25-28; De León, 8-14; Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 23-37; San Miguel Jr., *Brown Not White*, 4-6.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas McWhorter, "From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward," *Houston History* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 38-41; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 12. In addition to industrialization, the changing demographics in the Second Ward stemmed from relatives of the original German American immigrants in Houston who began selling large tracts of land as the last of those oldest wealthy landowners began dying out.

<sup>55</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 14; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 79-80; Jesus Jesse Esparza, "La Colonia Mexicana: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston," *Houston History* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 2; Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 30-31. The name, "El Crisol" derives from the word, creosote, which was a pungent, brown, tarry substance used to preserve railroad ties.

systems of empty boxcars installed near the railroad lines that crossed through the neighborhoods.<sup>56</sup> Mexican neighborhoods tended to lack paved roads and access to city utilities, such as running water, gas, and electricity.<sup>57</sup>

### *Segregation*

As elsewhere in the South and the Southwest, white Houstonians responded to the major demographic changes by reinforcing the city's racial hierarchy through discrimination and segregation written into the city's laws and customs. This influenced where people of color lived, what jobs they could hold, and how they could interact in public.<sup>58</sup> While both African Americans and Mexican Americans initially found places to live without residential segregation laws to restrict their choices, other forms of racism and discrimination tended to keep them from moving elsewhere. Structural racism against black and brown Houstonians was most obvious in occupational trends that funneled them into the lowest rungs of the economic structure; in the legal and illegal segregation of schools, public places, and businesses; in the everyday interactions with white Houstonians; and in religious institutions as well.

The majority of black workers in Houston traditionally held low-paying unskilled jobs in the service industry as cooks, custodians, and domestic servants. Others worked as laborers on railroads and docks, in manufacturing industries, and in the oil and gas

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<sup>56</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Esparza, "La Colonia Mexicana," 2-3; Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 26, 37; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 11-13.

<sup>58</sup> SoRelle, "Darker Side of 'Heaven,'" 19-20; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 29; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 26-27; Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 31.

industry.<sup>59</sup> African Americans who held skilled jobs still made significantly less money than white workers did.<sup>60</sup> Semi-skilled and skilled African American laborers faced an additional obstacle in the form of union opposition. There were also black professionals and those working in business and management, but they made up a small portion of the total black workforce. Like African Americans in other sectors, these workers tended to earn less than their white counterparts. The largest class of professionals among the black workforce was composed of teachers and clergy, who along with those in many other professions performed services exclusively for the black community.<sup>61</sup>

Like the majority of black workers, Mexican laborers primarily held low paying jobs. Young men could find work in construction and in various facets of the railroad industry in track maintenance or in the railroad shops.<sup>62</sup> Houston also had a Mexican labor agent that provided local businesses and farms with “laborers” to perform a host of various jobs.<sup>63</sup> Other men found work in restaurants and hotels or in stores and shops. Mexican women who worked outside the home found jobs in manufacturing or in domestic service. After the 1920s, as a middle-class began to emerge, a professional class of business leaders, teachers, physicians, and artists found jobs that earned a living wage.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 44.

<sup>60</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 91; Robert Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 90-92; James SoRelle, “The Emergence of Black Businesses in Houston, Texas: A Study of Race and Ideology, 1919-45,” in Beeth and Wintz, 103-104; Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 45-52.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Kreneck, *Del Pueblo: A History of Houston’s Hispanic Community* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 16-17.

<sup>63</sup> Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 17; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 9, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 78

Legal segregation of black Houstonians from white residents in Houston initially began with schools in 1876 when the state of Texas adopted its “Redeemer” constitution.<sup>65</sup> Statewide segregation on railroads came in 1891, and political disfranchisement came in the form of the 1902 poll tax and the 1923 all-white primary.<sup>66</sup> Although black Houstonians were not legally barred from voting in municipal elections, white Houstonians intimidated potential black voters from casting votes in elections for city officials as well.<sup>67</sup>

Segregation at the city-level took the form of various codes that dictated where African Americans could and could not go. Houston passed a city ordinance that segregated streetcars in 1903, and the Houston City Council passed laws in 1907 that segregated restaurants, theaters, hotels, and public facilities (pools, drinking fountains, restrooms). A set of 1922 ordinances also segregated public parks and banned black-white cohabitation.<sup>68</sup> City ordinances permitted African Americans to visit the one park designated for them, Emancipation Park, at any time but only allowed them to visit one other park, Hermann Park, on select days to enter the zoo. While at Hermann Park, though, black visitors could not sit on the park benches since the park was usually

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<sup>65</sup> SoRelle, “Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 22-23. “Redeemer” refers to the group of conservative Texas Democrats who were determined to undo the gains during Republican rule in Texas. The Texas Constitution of 1876 is often called the “Redeemer” Constitution because it attempted to “redeem” Texas from the centralized, activist, and financially liberal governments since 1869. This marks the beginning of a return to former Confederate leadership at the highest levels of state government. See Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 284-286.

<sup>66</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 88; McComb, *Houston*, 110; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 29-30; Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 148.

<sup>67</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “Source Material for *Patterns of Negro Segregation: Houston, Texas*,” Research Memoranda for Use in the Preparation of Dr. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, New York, 1940; B. T. Brooks, interviewed by H. J. Walker, August 10, 1939, in Johnson, “Source Material.”

<sup>68</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 88; McComb, *Houston*, 110; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 29-30.

reserved for white patrons.<sup>69</sup> Customarily, blacks and whites were also separated in city hospitals and jails. Although the Houston Negro Hospital opened its doors in 1927, black patients also visited Houston's white hospitals like the Baptist Sanitarium and Memorial Hospital. However, doctors treated black patients in separate wards.<sup>70</sup>

Although Mexican Americans were considered legally white, most customary Jim Crow measures applied to them as well. By the 1920s, Mexican Americans, whom Anglos considered the unmeltable ethnic group in an intense era of Americanization, faced exclusion from most establishments owned by and intended for whites, including public facilities, restaurants, hotels theaters, pools, and parks.<sup>71</sup> Legally, Houston's segregation ordinances did not include codes specifically for ethnic Mexicans. On city streetcars and busses, for example, Mexican Americans sat in the "whites only" sections.<sup>72</sup> The illegal segregation of ethnic Mexicans in schools began through discrimination based on cultural and linguistic differences. Spanish-speaking children and other Mexican-descent students were forced to attend school in separate classes and were classified as "subnormal."<sup>73</sup> These practices developed throughout Texas as public schools in the 1920s transitioned to a curriculum of subtractive Americanization for students whose first language was not English, which attempted to remove students' ethnicity by forcing an English-only environment that taught students their "ethnicity

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<sup>69</sup> Brooks interview in Johnson, "Source Material"; Writers of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Texas, *Houston: A History and Guide* (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), 172.

<sup>70</sup> Brooks interview in Johnson, "Source Material."

<sup>71</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 26; Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Christia Adair, interview by Dorothy R. Robinson, April 25, 1977, Houston, TX, box 4, folder 2, Christia Adair Collection, MSS 109, HMRC; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 85, 97-98.

<sup>73</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 30; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 95-96.

was . . . un-American . . . [and] dangerous.”<sup>74</sup> Similar practices funneled Mexican American students at other majority-white public schools into separate classes. Even at schools where the majority of students were ethnic Mexicans, teachers and school administrators continued to stigmatize the linguistic and cultural differences of their students.<sup>75</sup>

Black and Mexican American Houstonians faced discrimination and exclusion from white Houstonians in religious contexts as well. African American, Anglo, and Mexican American churchgoers attended separate institutions in for most of the twentieth century. Many separate African American churches in the city formed during Reconstruction and grew rapidly apart from white institutions. There were separate churches among nearly every Christian denomination, and only on rare occasions did they attend church together. Separate Mexican American churches in Houston developed mostly as a result of custom as well. Anglo Catholic churches either completely rejected Mexican Catholics, or they admitted Mexican Americans but forced them to sit in segregated sections at the back of the sanctuary.<sup>76</sup> In Protestant denominations, Mexican Americans attended separate churches that often developed as Spanish-speaking missions of some larger nearby Anglo church. Even though Mexican Americans were not expressly prohibited from most Protestant churches in Houston, Anglos tended to

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<sup>74</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas*, 59–60; See also, Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. and Richard R. Valencia, “From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to *Hopwood*: The Educational Plight and Struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 68 (Fall 1998): 353–412.

<sup>75</sup> For the long history of racist educational policies and practices toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Houston, see San Miguel Jr., *Brown Not White*, 19–34. For a broader look at the evolution of bilingual education in Texas, see Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas*.

<sup>76</sup> Roberto Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 32.

reject Mexican Americans and their churches as culturally inferior and treated them as mission opportunities, as a childlike group of people on their way to maturity.<sup>77</sup>

These separate institutions formed partly as a response to the intense racism of churchgoing Anglos. White religious individuals and institutions were major contributors to the racializations of African American and Mexican American Houstonians. As we shall see, white churches applied their Jim Crow sensibility to relationships in and out of religious contexts. And it is within this context that “Race and Religion in the Bayou City” unfolds.

### Chapter Outline

The first two chapters provide the longer historical context for the role of religion in the emergence of the color line in Houston and the responses of black and brown Baptists. Chapter II, “‘Christian Dignitaries’: White and Black Baptists in Jim Crow Houston,” focuses on the relationship between the power and influence of white Baptist pastors in Houston and the black Baptist community. I show how the all-white Houston Baptist Pastors Conference used a doctrine of segregation to justify their support of Klan efforts to terrorize and marginalize the black community. They later distanced themselves from the Klan in the late 1920s, but the doctrine of segregation continued to shape their beliefs about and relationships with African Americans. The second half of

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 28, 35-38, 43-44, 79. Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea la Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2006), 22-26, 145-147; “Houston’s ‘Little Mexico’ Is a City within a City,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 9, 1930; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 28.



the chapter explores how black Baptist pastors organized using their religious institutions to fight back against the racism they faced through both religious and political avenues. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the role of religion in the racial framework of Houston, an idea I extend in the next chapter.

Chapter III, “Other Tongues and Foreign Blood: Anglo and Mexican American Baptists and Race,” shows how white Baptists built on anti-black racial scripts in their interactions with Mexican Americans. The first half of the chapter focuses on the interwoven histories of white Baptists’ racism in Mexican American missions through their embrace of the doctrine of segregation. I explore how the doctrine of segregation and its implications influenced Anglo-led Mexican American ministries in Houston, particularly through the Americanization programs at the Mexican Good Will Center. In the second half of Chapter III, I turn to the Mexican American Baptist-led efforts to establish and expand Spanish-speaking ministries in the greater Houston area. In the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican American Baptists worked within the racist and paternalistic white Baptist structures to create a place for themselves on their own terms. These efforts flourished under Mexican American leadership and provided a space to alleviate the effects of racism outside of the church and to begin challenging racism from within it.

The last three chapters follow the different responses of white, black, and brown Baptists to the civil rights movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In Chapter IV, “Keeping White Churches White: White Baptists and the Status Quo,” I show that some white Baptists responded positively to the civil rights movements by taking moderate

steps to improve race relations by investing more time, money, and resources into their ministries for Mexican Americans and by creating a Baptist Student Union position and hiring African American minister William A. Lawson, Jr. at Texas Southern University, Houston's lone opportunity for people of color to seek higher education in Houston. When the momentum of the movement carried the fight literally to doorsteps of white churches, some congregations even removed racial barriers from membership requirements. However, most white Baptists actively resisted desegregation and civil rights through ongoing racist doctrine, by barring people of color from their churches, and by resisting integrated churches and fleeing from what they referred to as the encroachment of black and brown populations.

Chapter V, "Rev. William A. Lawson Jr. and Religious Civil Rights Activism," explores the role religion played in Houston's Black Freedom Struggle by focusing on the leadership of the Rev. William A. Lawson, Jr. He arrived in Houston as the director of the Baptist Student Union at Texas Southern University (TSU) in 1955. His influence among students grew just as the civil rights movement intensified throughout the South. Lawson eventually became the sponsor of a student-led sit-in movement to desegregate Houston's restaurants, theaters, and businesses. He later worked with others in the community surrounding TSU to establish Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, a church intentionally focused on social justice. From his position as a community leader and pastor, Lawson used his church to fight for civil rights on many different fronts. I argue that Lawson's experience working with students in Houston's sit-in movement, his subsequent activism, and his experience as the pastor of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church

led him to perceive his role as a civil rights leader and as a pastor as one in the same God-ordained mission.

Chapter VI, “From the Church to the Streets: Rev. James L. Navarro and *El Movimiento*,” follows the Rev. James Navarro as the civil rights movement transformed him from a primarily religious and denominational leader to one intimately involved in civil rights politics beyond church walls. It begins with an analysis of how Navarro and other leaders in the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas* challenged inequality in religious circles by fighting for a seat at the table in the 1950s and early 1960s. It also demonstrates that Navarro’s fight for integration within church walls paralleled his growing involvement in Mexican American political organizations, which exposed him to the growing civil rights movement in new ways. The centerpiece of the chapter is Navarro’s co-leadership of the 1966 Minimum Wage March and the aftermath. It highlights his shift from evangelism to religious civil rights activism outside of strictly religious circles. Unlike for Lawson, religion, at least institutional religion, was a roadblock for Navarro, and he found himself increasingly at odds with white denominational leaders and drawn toward activist movements beyond church walls.

The conclusion, Chapter VII, summarizes the preceding chapters, highlights the primary contributions and implications of my research, and discusses the limitations and the new directions for future studies in the fields related to my dissertation.

## CHAPTER II

### “CHRISTIAN DIGNITARIES”: WHITE AND BLACK BAPTISTS IN JIM CROW

#### HOUSTON

In the early hours of Sunday morning, January 23, 1921, black residents of Houston’s Third Ward found placards signed by the “Knights of the Ku Klux Klan” nailed to telephone poles and buildings in their neighborhoods. The signs warned “all persons alike living within the jurisdiction of this klan” to avoid “the intermingling of the white and black races.”<sup>1</sup> The sudden appearance of the placards in the historically black community prompted black ministers from the area to host a “racial harmony meeting” between both black and white religious leaders at Antioch Baptist Church on February 25, 1921. The black Baptist ministers had organized the event to publicly denounce the Klan, and they used the pulpit to repudiate the evil that such an organization represented. However, white pastors took the stage near the end of the evening to voice their support of the Klan and their message. One of the white ministers said he knew who was responsible for posting some of the placards and that “colored people who obey the law and do right need have no fear for the Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>2</sup>

Following the meeting, Clifton Richardson Sr., the editor of the *Houston Informer*, the city’s premiere black newspaper, published an editorial that exposed the

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<sup>1</sup> “Proclamation of Ku Klux Klan Appears in Houston,” *Houston Post*, January 23, 1921, the Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries ([texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph608844/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph608844/)).

<sup>2</sup> Clifton Richardson Sr., “Evangelical ‘Harmony’ Meeting,” *Houston Informer*, February 26, 1921, the Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries ([texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph523761/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph523761/)).

white pastors' hypocrisy. For Richardson, the white pastors' support of the Klan during the "racial harmony" meeting "proved conclusively that they and their ilk are in hearty accord and sympathy with such a clandestine order," and that the white pastors in attendance were probably members themselves. It was widely rumored that several members of the all-white Baptist ministerial association, the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference, were Klansmen. Richardson suggested that readers familiar with Southern history would likely not be shocked to learn of the white ministers' stance. Rather, they would recognize that "just such an attitude ... by these 'Christian' dignitaries ... has been a potent factor in fomenting and propagating racial strife, hatred, antipathy, and prejudice in Dixie."<sup>3</sup>

The white Baptist pastors' support of the Klan in Houston and the black Baptist pastors who organized the racial harmony meeting point to the central argument of this chapter. In the early twentieth century, religion was central to both white maintenance of and black resistance against the color line in Houston. White Baptist leaders provided the moral legitimacy to the Ku Klux Klan's platform through racial scripts that mobilized a religious doctrine of segregation that reinforced the color line and white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> For black Baptists leaders, religion was the source of shelter, hope, and community. They also used religious institutions of their own making—particularly their

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<sup>3</sup> Clifton Richardson Sr., "Evangelical 'Harmony' Meeting," *Houston Informer*, February 26, 1921, 4, Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, [texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph523761/](http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph523761/) (accessed January 3, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Natalia Molina's concept of racial scripts highlights that racializing projects are "linked across time and space: once attitudes, practices, customs, policies, and laws are directed at one group, they are more readily available and hence easily applied to other groups." Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 6-7; Natalia Molina, "The Power of Racial Scripts: What the History of Mexican Immigration to the United States Teaches Us about Relational Notions of Race," *Latino Studies* 8, no. 2 (Summer, 2010): 157-158.

churches and their ministerial alliance—to work for the improvement of black life and organize politically against white supremacy.

Historians of religion and the American South have demonstrated that white America's renewed search for order around the dawn of the twentieth century was a reaction to the major social, economic, political, and demographic changes in the decades following Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Particularly in the South, southern white Protestant Christianity and organizations like the Ku Klux Klan grew up together as they both pushed back against a perceived loss of white power and influence.

Given that a former Methodist minister, William J. Simmons, was partly responsible for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915, it should come as no surprise that Southern white Protestants would find an affinity for an organization that professed a desire for “law and order” and a return to a Protestant moral code.<sup>6</sup> Historians such as

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009). As Charles Postel has argued, even Jim Crow laws were considered modern Progressive Era solutions to the “race problem.” Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>6</sup> There is a rich historiography of “law and order” as the tools for protecting whiteness by criminalizing blackness. Historically, as Edward Baptist has recently argued, “Black freedom and white freedom were understood by many whites, it seems, as opposite terms linked in an inverse or zero-sum relationship. It was the job of the law, of law enforcement, and all white citizens to police black people so that white people could be free.” Edward E. Baptist, “Creating White Freedom by Hunting Enslaved Africans” (paper presented at the 2016-2017 Jepson Colloquium: Reconstruction and the Arc of Racial (In)Justice, Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, September 15-17, 2016). See also, Manisha Sinha, “U.S. law Has Long Seen People of African Descent As Fugitives,” *Aeon*, August 19, 2016, <https://aeon.co/ideas/us-law-has-long-seen-people-of-african-descent-as-fugitives> (accessed March 13, 2017). On the origins of “law and order” as a tool for the protection of white supremacy in Colonial North America, see Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975); Edmond Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Cynthia Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station:

Paul Harvey, Mark Newman, and Donald Mathews have highlighted the ways in which white Protestants in particular contributed to the widening color line and the rise of a Jim Crow order between Reconstruction and the end of the 1920s. Harvey and Mathews both show that white Protestant theology became inextricably linked to white supremacy, which, as Mathews argues, means that we should explore “segregation *as* religion.”<sup>7</sup> In Houston, white Baptist leaders assumed the position of moral authority at the city level and provided the moral legitimacy to the Ku Klux Klan by joining the organization and supporting its platform. Even after the Klan’s influence in city and state politics diminished at the end of the 1920s, white Protestant churches and leaders continued to

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Texas A&M University Press, 2007); William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1896-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Barbara J. Fields, “Whiteness, Racism, and Identity,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 48-56; for a discussion of post-1950s law and order rhetoric, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2011). The works of Walter Buenger, Paul Harvey, and Donald Mathews outline the ways that religion, particularly Southern white Protestantism, reinforced the push for law and order. Walter L. Buenger, *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas between Reconstruction and the Great Depression* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Donald G. Mathews, “‘Lynching Is Part of the Religion of Our People’: Faith in the Christian South,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Harvey, Mark Newman, and Donald Mathews have written about how southern Protestants shaped post-Reconstruction racial politics by variously ignoring, condoning, and supporting the most violent expressions of racism. Both Harvey’s and Newman’s works focus primarily on the twenty-five years after Reconstruction, and Mathews focuses almost entirely on lynching. Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 41-46; Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Mathews, “‘Lynching Is Part of the Religion of Our People,’” in Schweiger and Mathews, 153-194; See also, Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Arno, 1929, 1969); Buenger, *The Path to a Modern South*, 24-26; David Chappell, *Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Although historians of religion in the American South have written about the connections between southern evangelical Protestantism and widening color line, these and other works are missing an analysis of the mechanisms at work at the level of city politics, where the effects of bigger picture narratives unfold in tangible ways.

uphold its precepts through paternalistic and racist religious doctrine, which dictated their ministry relationships with African American Baptists.

While religious beliefs and institutions played a major role in reinforcing white supremacy and segregation, historians of black religious history help us understand how African American communities relied on religion to resist.<sup>8</sup> The influence of black churches and black religious leaders in social activism is well documented. Noted scholar of black religious history Fredrick C. Harris once wrote, “an activist cadre of clergy and congregations mobilizing urban black communities for social change has been constant from the antebellum period to Reconstruction and then on to the modern civil rights movement.”<sup>9</sup> Historians Paul Harvey and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, among others, have demonstrated that from Reconstruction through the early twentieth century, religion was central to Southern black Protestant culture, politics, and identity. Harvey’s work shows that black ministers attempted to provide “moral uplift and racial

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<sup>8</sup> Religion, of course, was more than its instrumental function. Although religious people have relied on their beliefs and practices to accomplish something, such as using a church building or community of faith to organize against discrimination, religion also provides shelter, meaning, hope, strength, joy, and community. Nevertheless, this chapter primarily explores how groups and individuals have used religion to accomplish political and social ends.

<sup>9</sup> Fredrick C. Harris, “Introduction: Black Churches, Activist Traditions, and Urban Political Contexts,” in *Black Churches and Local Politics: Clergy Influence, Organizational Partnerships, and Civic Empowerment*, ed. R. Drew Smith and Fredrick C. Harris (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), ix. See also, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Juan Williams and Quinton Hosford Dixie, *This Far by Faith: Stories from the African-American Religious Experience* (New York: William Morrow, 2003); Robert Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 114-119. My focus on this coalition of black Baptist ministers, however, points to another arena of religious political activism, which has not yet been told for Houston’s history.



leadership” even as new secular organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took root. And Higginbotham’s study of black Baptist women from 1880 to 1920 underscores how the “public arm of the church” expanded in those years to become a powerful and effective force for developing community leaders.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter builds on the work of these others scholars as it explores the different roles religion and religious leaders played in Jim Crow-era Houston for white Baptists and black Baptists in two sections. The first demonstrates that in Houston, white Baptist pastors were precisely the “‘Christian’ dignitaries” who were responsible for “racial strife” in “Dixie.” Individual Baptist pastors and associations, such as the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference and Union Baptist Association, played a key role in reinforcing the color line by relying on a doctrine of segregation to uphold white supremacy and the protestant moral order characteristic of the South. They allied themselves with the Ku Klux Klan early in the 1920s to accomplish those ends, and once the influence of the Klan began to diminish after 1925, white Baptists carried on the major tenets of the organization in their doctrine of segregation. This doctrine defined God-ordained social distinctions and hierarchy, and it governed the relationships white Baptists maintained across the color line.

The second section shows that African American Baptists, like those who organized the interracial harmony meeting, attempted to resist the racism and

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 167; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 1, 5.

discrimination they experienced on a daily basis.<sup>11</sup> They sought autonomy in religious, social, and political organizations of their own making such as churches and a black ministerial fellowship, the “Colored Baptist Ministers Association,” whose leaders worked in tandem with groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to attack political disfranchisement. The members of the Baptist Ministers Association rejected the ideology of white protestant superiority and mitigated the influences of racism for black communities by advocating on their behalf. Beginning in the 1910s, black Baptist leaders associated with the Baptist Ministers Association used their churches and their association to support political organizations as a way to actively oppose racial violence, political disfranchisement, and the everyday forms of structural inequality they experienced.

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<sup>11</sup> While African Americans in Houston certainly employed “everyday” means of resistance through forming churches, clubs, schools, and organizations of their own making, this chapter tends to also highlight what we would consider classic forms of resistance: using those religious institutions for political organizing, public protests in person and in print, and mobilizing congregations to influence the democratic process. Still black Baptist ministers used what Luis Alvarez has called “a politics of refusal,” dignity as resistance. They refused to accept the racist narratives about them and refused to put up with their treatment any longer. They took pride in what they were building and presented an image of themselves to the rest of the world that they were respectable, dutiful, and patriotic—in short, they were citizens who had that the right to a voice in the world around them. The pages that follow highlight a resistance that is both “everyday” and traditional, but one that claimed a measure of dignity on its way to political access. On everyday resistance, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). For the politics of refusal, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). In the context of the South in the 1910s-1930s, the activities of the black Baptist leadership in Houston appear consistent with what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham refers to as a “politics of respectability” as a means of “uplift.” Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

## White Baptists, Moral Authority, and the Ku Klux Klan in Houston

White religious leaders wielded considerable influence in Jim Crow Houston, particularly those who belonged to the Houston Baptist Pastors' Conference.<sup>12</sup> The Houston Baptist Pastors' Conference was an informal fellowship of white Baptist pastors in and around the city. Organizations like the Baptist Pastors' Conference had existed in Houston on and off at least since 1837, when pastors of the first Protestant churches around Houston formed a vigilance committee to drive out heretical preachers from the area. As the membership of different Protestant denominations began to grow, some formed their own separate groups. The Baptist group became more formal and influential at the beginning of the 1900s; they began to hold regular weekly meetings, elect officers, and issue resolutions. And most of the pastors led churches that belonged to the Union Baptist Association (Union Association).<sup>13</sup>

Although there were four Baptist churches in Houston that were members of Union Association at the turn of the century with a combined membership of over one thousand, that number grew along with the population and job growth citywide. By

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<sup>12</sup> Writers' Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Texas, *Houston: A History and a Guide* (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), 189; George Fuermann, *Houston: Land of the Big Rich* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951), 103.

<sup>13</sup> The earliest accounts of a ministerial fellowship in Houston come from the *Telegraph and Texas Register*. In May 1837, several ministers of various denominations from around the Houston-area formed "Ecclesiastical Committee of Vigilance for Texas" to collectively ensure that only credentialed ministers preached from church pulpits. As denominations increased in membership, each came to form its own ministerial fellowship. The Houston Baptist Pastors Conference had existed since at least the early 1900s, and its activities appear frequently in the pages of local Houston newspapers. W. W. Hall, "Houston, Monday, May 8, 1837," *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston, Texas), May 16, 1837; Z. N. Morrell, *Flowers and Fruits in the Wilderness*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Commercial Printing Company, 1882), 74; John A. Held, "Constitution of Baptist Pastors' and Workers' Conference," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 8, 1947.

1920, there were seventeen white Baptist churches located in Houston that were members of Union Association with more than ten thousand members. As white churches and congregations grew in the early 1900s, white Baptists became increasingly vocal about what they saw as a decline in the moral standards of the city, a general break down in law and order, and a growing population of “foreigners.”<sup>14</sup> At the associational level, white Baptists responded by committing themselves to social reform initiatives – chief among these were city mission work to end “vice” and campaigns that promoted temperance and law and order.

At the 1913 annual Union Association meeting, messengers approved a resolution that praised Houston District Attorney Richard Maury for his “strenuous effort to enforce the law, and stop [the] alleged evils” of “clubs fostering vice” and drunkenness. They further resolved, “that we, as believers in law and order, and in civic righteousness ... pledge our support to any and all righteous efforts to bring about a better condition of civic affairs in our city.” This commitment to law and order intersected with white Baptists’ notions of white supremacy and racial segregation just as the Ku Klux Klan was making its way into Texas. For many white Baptists, the

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<sup>14</sup> Union Baptist Association, “Numerical Statement,” *Minutes of the Sixtieth Annual Session of the Union Baptist Association, August 10 and 11, 1900* (Hempstead: Texas Baptist News Print, 1901), 23; UBA, “Numerical and Home Expense Table,” *Minutes of the Eightieth Annual Session of the Union Baptist Association, October 20-21, 1920* (Houston: Immigration Mission Press, 1920), 84-85; UBA, “Report of the Corresponding Secretary,” *Proceedings of the Seventy-sixth Annual Session of Union Baptist Association, September 21-22, 1916* (Houston: Gray, Dillaye & Young, 1916), 27-28; UBA, “Report of Mrs. Palmay,” *Minutes of the Seventy-eighth Annual Session of the Union Baptist Association, September 25-26, 1918* (Houston: Gray, Dillaye & Young, 1918), 29; UBA, “Report C – Temperance and Sabbath Observance,” *Minutes of the Eighty-Second Annual Session of the Union Baptist Association, October 11-12, 1922* (Houston: Union Baptist Association, 1922), 7-8. Subsequent references to UBA’s annual meetings minutes will be cited as follows: UBA (Year of meeting), “Specific Report Title” (when appropriate), page numbers.

Klan's platform seemed like the kind of "righteous effort" that could improve the city's moral character.<sup>15</sup>

### *White Baptists and the Ku Klux Klan*

The Ku Klux Klan that emerged in the 1920s was founded outside of Atlanta, Georgia, in 1915 by William J. Simmons, a former itinerate Methodist minister. While it took on the symbolism and attire of its nineteenth-century namesake, the second Klan should be understood as a reaction to the social and cultural changes of the 1910s and 1920s. As one of many such outlets for pent up racial frustration, the Klan was a self-proclaimed cleansing force that would return American society to a time of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant racial and cultural dominance. As historian Thomas Pegram has argued, the white supremacy and religious bigotry found in much of the Klan's rhetoric and platform largely reflected the "common white Protestant prejudices of the era." And a popular strategy for building its membership was to target Protestant churches. Recruiters were so successful at garnering white Protestant support that by 1924, the Klan boasted more than thirty thousand Protestant ministers in its membership nationwide.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Klan began in 1915, it took another five years before it became a national phenomenon. In Houston, a climate of anxiety and frustration among the white population set the stage for the movement to take hold in the Bayou City. An influx of

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<sup>15</sup> UBA, (1913), quoted in D. R. Pevoto, *The Union Baptist Association: Centennial History, 1840-1940* (Brenham, Texas: Banner-Press, 1940), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 6-9.

job seekers at the end of World War I, an escalation in racial tensions, and an increase in crime led white Baptists and other Houstonians to call on city leaders to get control of the city. Since job opportunities had been abundant in the 1910s, many people looking for work viewed Houston as an ideal destination. However, the end of World War I brought a major increase in unemployment nationwide, as industries transitioned out of wartime production. A flood of individuals looking for work ended up in Houston expecting to find a job in one of Houston's booming industries. What they found instead was an ever-growing unemployment roll. According to historian Casey Greene, the combination of this growing number of unemployed people in the city and a major crime wave in the city from December 1920 until May 1921 led many in Houston to call for a return to order and sound morals.<sup>17</sup>

The Klan made its debut in Houston on October 9, 1920, during a parade through downtown streets on the final day of the United Confederate Veterans reunion. Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons and Klansmen of Atlanta, Georgia, marched through downtown streets, carrying signs that read, "We were here yesterday, 1866," "We are here today, 1920," and "We will be here forever." That evening, hundreds of candidates for membership joined through "naturalization ceremonies" and formed Sam Houston Klan, No. 1; the Houston Klavern was the first one established west of the Mississippi.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of November 1920, Simmons returned to Houston with Nathan Bedford Forrest III to hold an open meeting at the First Christian Church in downtown

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<sup>17</sup> Casey Greene, "Guardians against Change: The Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County, 1920-1925," *Houston Review* 10, no. 1 (1988): 5-7; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 242; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 274, 286.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 37-38.

Houston. He invited Houston's prominent and powerful to hear about the purpose of the new Klan and join the secret fraternity.<sup>19</sup> According to historian David Chalmers, "the Klan's first recruits literally constituted a Who's Who" of the Houston elite, and prominent among them were the city's religious leaders.<sup>20</sup> The pastor at First Christian Church, the Reverend H. R. Ford, presided over the event and introduced Simmons, who delivered a speech titled, "The Ku Klux Klan, Yesterday, Today, and Forever."<sup>21</sup> The crowd listened as Simmons and Forrest told recruits of the conditions that threatened their peace and safety and warned them that they knew of black Houstonians who had armed themselves and were prepared for a race war. The meeting ended with a benediction from the pastor of St. John's Methodist Church, the Reverend John E. Green. In a scene that resembled an alter-call at the end of a church service, many attendees responded at the end of the meeting and joined the Klan in order to protect the "God-given supremacy of the white race" and help "the country and city police departments in maintaining law and order."<sup>22</sup> The following Saturday night, police officers blocked traffic along Main Street as around two hundred new Klan members,

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<sup>19</sup> "Houston Ku Klux Klan to Have Open Meeting," *Houston Post*, November 22, 1920.

<sup>20</sup> David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Chicago: Quadrangle Paperbacks, 1965), 40.

<sup>21</sup> "Imperial Wizard of Ku Klux Tells Purpose of Klan," *Houston Post*, November 27, 1920.

<sup>22</sup> "Imperial Wizard of Ku Klux Tells Purpose of Klan," *Houston Post*, November 27, 1920; "Mayor Joined Ku Klux Klan in Early Days," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 1923; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 39. The Reverend John E. Green's church and denomination were not mentioned in the newspaper article, but that information was available in the Houston city directory. *Houston, Texas, City Directory, 1920*, 48, Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995*, database on-line (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

donning white robes, marched through the streets of downtown Houston behind a fiery cross.<sup>23</sup>

Some of Houston's leading citizens joined after the meeting, such as Mayor Oscar Holcombe, Chief of Police Gordon Murphy, Baptist Temple pastor the Reverend E. P. West, and scores of others.<sup>24</sup> During a "naturalization ceremony" in December 1921, around 2,000 more joined the Klan in a single night. Many of those who first joined the Klan, including Holcombe and West, later claimed that they attended a single meeting and ceased affiliation with the organization once they learned of the Klan's agenda.<sup>25</sup>

At the height of Klan influence in Houston, Klansmen in high positions embarked on a campaign of terror and intimidation to protect white supremacy and white

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<sup>23</sup> "After 50 Years Ku Klux Klan Marches again in Houston," *Houston Post*, November 28, 1920; The Reverend John E. Green became a member of the Klan, and he was named in a *Houston Chronicle* article in 1923 that sought to publicize a recent Klan-led attack in Goose Creek. "A Letter to Twenty Citizens," *Houston Chronicle*, January 24, 1923, 1.

<sup>24</sup> "'Banishments' Feature Klan Rally," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 1923. Although the identity of most Klansmen was a secret, a few names came out in the press. For example, on June 29, 1923, a speaker at a Klan rally began to read a list of names of members who were to be banished. They had either stopped participating, or they had opposed Klan directives. As the speaker reached the fourth name on the list, the audience shouted him down, and they agreed to accept the entire list without reading any more names.

<sup>25</sup> "Mayor Joined Ku Klux Klan in Early Days," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 1923; "'Banishments' Feature Klan Rally," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 1923. White men's calls to protect white womanhood and women's sexual purity have a long history. In his discussion of white racial thinking in colonial North America and the Caribbean, Winthrop Jordan argued, "...white women were, quite literally, the repositories of white civilization." So white men typically placed their protection "on a pedestal." Walter Buenger's work on the Ku Klux Klan sheds light onto this tendency in the early twentieth century. He shows that the Klan's focus on white women's sexual purity rested on a collective memory that connected them to knights of medieval England tasked with the protection of the white (read, Anglo Saxon) race by policing white women's and black men's sexuality. What is more, the Klan's emphasis on sexual purity meshed with the broader Protestant population's proclivity toward the fundamentalist Christian movement, something white Houston Baptist ministers were deeply involved in. Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 148; Walter Buenger, "Memory and the 1920s Ku Klux Klan in Texas," in *Lone Star Past: Memory and History in Texas*, ed. Gregg Cantrell and Elizabeth Hayes Turner (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 122-123.



women's sexual purity and enforce the Protestant moral order.<sup>26</sup> Klansmen and their supporters made their way into most areas of city leadership. According to longtime activist Dr. Ray Daily, the first woman to serve on the Houston School Board, the Klan "had taken over the PTA. The Parent Teacher Association was all Ku Klux Klan." The Klan's involvement in the city's schools prompted Daily to run for a spot on the school board in opposition to the Klan. Once elected in 1928, she and a group of other new school board members forced the Klan out of school decision-making.<sup>27</sup>

Klan influence seeped into city law enforcement as well. According to one Klansman, L. E. Ogilvie, who was also a vice inspector for the Houston Police Department, the Houston Klan controlled the police department while Chief of Police Gordon Murphy was at the helm. Instead of taking orders from the mayor or commissioners, Murphy took orders from "Exalted Cyclops" H. C. McCall, a former deputy sheriff in Houston. Klan-controlled police officers tapped telephone lines of those they wished to track, such as the phones of every Catholic priest in Houston, the Knights of Columbus Hall, and *Houston Informer* editor Clifton Richardson Sr. They also maintained copies of all telegrams received and sent in Houston and even had spies

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<sup>26</sup> The Sam Houston Klavern reacted to its declining membership by selling its downtown Houston building, Klan Hall (later called Eagle Hall), to the City of Houston. "Mayor Doubts Hall Purchase," *Houston Post-Dispatch*, December 4, 1924, 7, (Portal to Texas History); "City Will Realize \$5000 Profit Year on Klan Hall," *Houston Post-Dispatch*, December 20, 1924, 20 (Portal to Texas History); Howard Jones, *The Red Diary: A Chronological History of Black Americans in Houston and Some Neighboring Harris County Communities – 122 Years Later* (Austin: Nortex Press, 1991), 87; Greene, "Guardians against Change," 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Ray K. Daily, interview by Don Carleton, Houston, Texas, December 10, 1974, OH044, Houston Oral History Project, HMRC Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

in the post office.<sup>28</sup> A former Klan leader, George B. Kimbro, admitted that McCall had developed a plot to arrest Richardson, drive him to Wharton, and shoot him.<sup>29</sup>

Richardson as well as at least six others experienced Klan violence directly, and many others experienced intimidation and the threat of violence as long as the Klan remained strong in Houston.<sup>30</sup>

The Klan reminded Houstonians of its presence through nighttime parades, letters announcing its presence, placards posted around town, and regular racist editorials in its weekly paper, *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*. The paper's editor, Billie Mayfield, a former colonel in the Texas National Guard, filled his paper with religious and racial bigotry and targeted African Americans, Mexican Americans, Catholics, Jews, and Anglos who did not conform to Klan ideals.<sup>31</sup> It was through the pages of *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly* that the Klan's push for political dominance became entangled in white Houston Baptists' role as the custodians of morality in the city.

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<sup>28</sup> "How Mayor Fought Klan Control of Police," *Houston Chronicle*, March 25, 1925. Another important difference between the Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was that while the nineteenth century iteration largely targeted African Americans in the South and white Republicans from the North and the South, the second Klan embraced an ethos of one hundred percent Americanism and white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. Thus, they defined both American and white as Protestant men and women who claimed membership to an Anglo-Saxon lineage. Across the country, this second Klan also targeted Jews, Catholics, non-English speakers, and people of color. The Klan opposed Catholicism because of what they believed to be its followers' obligation to bend their will to a foreign ruler, the Pope. According to Pegram, in areas of the Southwest that had a significant Mexican Catholic population and a large European white Catholic population, the Klan sometimes tolerated the Mexican population as a controllable and necessary workforce, but they tended to target European Catholics because they were seen as a viable threat to WASP hegemony. See Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 58-59. This seems likely for the case in Houston since, as we will see in Chapter III, the Sam Houston Klan tended not to focus on Houston's Mexican population even as they targeted its ethnic white Catholics.

<sup>29</sup> "How Mayor Fought Klan Control of Police," *Houston Chronicle*, March 25, 1925; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 161; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 42; James SoRelle, "Race Relations in 'Heavenly Houston,' 1919-1945," in *Black Dixie*, ed. Beeth and Wintz, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Casey Greene, "Guardians against Change: The Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County, 1920-1925," *Houston Review* 10, no. 1 (1988): 9-11; Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, 193.

### *The Houston Baptist Pastors Conference and the Hearing*

When Mayor Holcombe ran for re-election in 1922, Klan leaders offered not to oppose him in the election if he would agree to fire three Catholics in his administration. Holcombe refused. The Klan responded by nominating Judge Murray B. Jones, a well-known Klansman, and the Sam Houston Klavern initiated a smear campaign against Holcombe. In *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, Mayfield attempted to discredit Holcombe as an immoral and inept leader. Mayfield claimed that he had received sworn affidavits stating Holcombe attended a drinking and gambling party on either Christmas Day 1921 or New Year's Day 1922. Not only did Holcombe participate in the illegal activities, alleged Mayfield, but the mayor also supposedly blocked a police raid on the party. Mayfield and Holcombe's other opponents argued that this incident was yet another stain on the record of a leader responsible for the growth of vice and the destruction of morality in his city.<sup>32</sup>

In an effort to clear his name, Holcombe called on the deacons of his church, First Baptist Church Houston, to hold a hearing on the charges against him. Following the hearing, the deacons announced that the allegations were completely false and that Holcombe was an upstanding and moral man of good standing in his church. However, Mayfield and Jones countered that the deacons had "whitewashed" the mayor, and that they were Holcombe supporters in the upcoming municipal election. Next, Holcombe

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<sup>32</sup> Billie Mayfield, *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, December 9, 1922; "Mayor Holcombe Is Exonerated by Baptist Pastors," *Houston Post*, December 27, 1922; Greene, "Guardians against Change," 14.

demanded an investigation and a hearing by all of the members of the Houston Baptist Pastors' Conference.<sup>33</sup>

Holcombe's advisors had misgivings about inviting all fifteen members of the Baptist pastors' conference since most of them were Klansmen and ardent supporters of Jones, but Holcombe persisted.<sup>34</sup> Although the pastors said that they preferred to avoid "becoming involved in any political aspect of the matter," they agreed to conduct the hearing since the charges against Holcombe "reflected upon and impugned his personal moral character."<sup>35</sup> In other words, they agreed to hold a hearing only about Holcombe's character since the charges against him would have affected his standing as a member of a Baptist church.<sup>36</sup>

On Tuesday, December 26, 1922, nearly a year after the alleged gambling party had supposedly taken place, the fifteen members of the pastors' conference, Holcombe and his campaign manager, and Mayfield and his lawyer met in private at the Rice Hotel

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<sup>33</sup> "Mayor Proves Falsity of Charges against Him, Fifteen Baptist Pastors Give City's Executive Complete Exoneration," *Houston Chronicle*, December 27, 1922.

<sup>34</sup> The exact number and names of the pastors involved in the Klan is difficult to determine. A 1922 editorial supporting Holcombe wrote, "Some of [the Baptist pastors] are supporters of Mr. Jones." "The Mayor Completely Exonerated," *Houston Post*, December 28, 1922. At least three secondary sources report that nine of the pastors were members of the Klan. "Texas: The Man with Nine Terms," *Time*, December 27, 1948; Fuermann, *Land of the Big Rich*, 103; Diana J. Kleiner, "Holcombe, Oscar Fitzallen," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June 4, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fho21>. Of those nine, I have confirmed the name of one Baptist pastor who was certainly a member of the pastors' conference and a member of the Klan when the hearing took place: The Reverend E. P. West (then pastor of the Baptist Temple and later Second Baptist Church) was named during a Klan meeting during which H. C. McCall read a list of members who had fallen out of favor with the Klan and were, therefore, banished. "Banishments' Feature Klan Rally," *Houston Chronicle*, June 29, 1923. Four years after the hearing, the Reverend W. R. McCann, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church (1924-1926, 1928-1931) publicly endorsed the Klan as one of its members in 1926 during a speech by Attorney General Dan Moody. However, McCann was not one of the pastors at the 1922 hearing. "K. K. K. Flayed by Dan Moody," *Dallas Morning News*, January 19, 1926; Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 253; Fuermann, *Land of the Big Rich*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> "Mayor Holcombe Is Exonerated by Baptist Pastors," *Houston Post*, December 27, 1922.

<sup>36</sup> "Ministers' Verdict Brings Pleasure Declares Mayor," *Houston Chronicle*, December 27, 1922; "Holcombe Exonerated," *Houston Chronicle*, December 28, 1922; "The Mayor Completely Exonerated," *Houston Post*, December 28, 1922.

and heard from twelve different witnesses over the course of seven hours. All but one of the witnesses testified that Holcombe had not even been at the party.<sup>37</sup> After the pastors deliberated, they unanimously agreed that since the evidence “failed utterly to substantiate the charge[s],” they “absolve, acquit, and exonerate Mr. Holcombe” and stated that the charges against Holcomb were “without any foundation of fact.”<sup>38</sup> The word of the Houston Baptist Pastors’ Conference proved to be good enough for the voters of Houston. Holcombe won the election and openly opposed the Klan’s presence in city politics and government for another seven years.<sup>39</sup>

In the years after the hearing, a series of well-publicized stories appeared in local papers about particularly violent incidents involving the Klan. The fact that several of the victims were white men, and that some of them were brutally beaten, tortured, and castrated caused enthusiasm for the organization to dissipate. According to historian Casey Greene, the Klan’s penchant for abusing the law as it meted out its vigilante justice clashed with its supposed commitment to upholding law and order. Additionally, the 1924 primary election for governor featured a Klan-endorsed candidate, Dallas judge and Klansman Felix Robertson, and an anti-Klan candidate, Mariam “Ma” Ferguson, the

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<sup>37</sup> The one witness who testified against Holcombe, Houston police officer L. E. Ogilvie, was later deposed as part of a lawsuit against the Klan in 1924. In his deposition, he revealed his role in the Klan-influenced corruption of the Houston Police Department from 1921-1922. “Mayor Proves Falsity of Charges against Him, Fifteen Baptist Pastors Give City’s Executive Complete Exoneration,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 27, 1922; “Mayor Holcombe Is Exonerated by Baptist Pastors,” *Houston Post*, December 27, 1922; “How Mayor Fought Klan Control of Police,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 25, 1925; “Texas: The Man with Nine Terms,” *Time*, December 27, 1948.

<sup>38</sup> Houston Baptist Pastors’ Conference, quoted in “Mayor Holcombe Is Exonerated by Baptist Pastors,” *Houston Post*, December 27, 1922, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Greene, “Guardians against Change,” 14-15; David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969, 1981), 113. The year 1929 actually marked the end of Holcombe’s first series of terms as Houston’s mayor. All together, Holcombe won eleven non-consecutive elections for a twenty-two-year career as the mayor (1921-1929, 1933-1937, 1939-1941, 1947-1953, and 1956-1958). Kleiner, “Holcombe.”

wife of former Governor of Texas James “Pa” Ferguson. Although Robertson had campaigned well leading up the election, Ferguson vowed an all-out fight against the secret order. She even promised to pass an anti-mask law as a way to curtail their night-riding activities. In the end, she won the primary election and easily defeated the Republican candidate in the general election. The Klan’s decline after 1924 was partly a result of Ferguson’s campaign against it.<sup>40</sup>

The Baptist pastors’ involvement in both the Klan and Oscar Holcombe’s hearing underscores not only how white Baptists wielded considerable political power and influence as moral standard-bearers, but also how their notions of social order and white supremacy melded seamlessly with the Klan’s platform. And they supported the Klan from their position of power. For example, when the Ku Klux Klan fliers appeared in black neighborhoods in January of 1921, white Baptist pastors responded by accepting an invitation to speak before an audience of black Baptists and dismissed the concerns of their black peers. Instead, they parroted the warnings typically issued by the Klan: African Americans in Houston simply needed to adhere to the doctrine of segregation, obey the law, and no harm would come to them.<sup>41</sup> White Houston Baptists also accepted money from the Klan. In July 1922, a women’s group in Union Association accepted a donation of two thousand dollars from the Klan for the Houston Baptist Sanitarium fund,

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<sup>40</sup> Greene, Greene, “Guardians against Change,” 9-10, 18; John D. Huddleston, “Ferguson, Miriam Amanda Wallace [Ma],” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 01, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ffe06>.

<sup>41</sup> Richardson, “Evangelical ‘Harmony’ Meeting,” *Houston Informer*, February 26, 1921.

which suggests that as an organization, white Baptists in Houston believed the Klan's goals and their own were consistent enough to accept their financial support.<sup>42</sup>

Many of them may have resigned from the Klan shortly after joining, but they originally became members because they agreed with the organization's purpose. Whatever misgivings some of them may have had about the Klan's use of violence later on, white Baptist pastors certainly aligned with its stance on white supremacy, segregation, the protection of white womanhood, one hundred percent Americanism, and the spread of Protestant Christianity.

### **White Baptists and the Doctrine of Segregation**

In the 1910s and 1920s, the Klan and white Baptist churches played similar roles in maintaining the city's Jim Crow social order. Many white Baptists in the early half of the twentieth century believed not only in the divine mandate of racial purity, white supremacy, racial segregation, white woman virtue, and white Protestant morality, but also in their duty to enforce these ideas. Even after the Klan's influence diminished, their platform found a more effective enforcer in the form of southern white Protestantism. From their position as keepers of the moral order, prominent white Baptists in Houston wrote articles in their Baptist newspaper, *The Gulf Coast Baptist*, about how Houston Baptists should think and behave toward people of color in light of how they interpreted the Bible. At least until the mid-1940s, their rhetoric endorsed the separation of white

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<sup>42</sup> "Ku Klux Give \$2,000 to Fund," *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, July 8, 1922; Alexander, *Klan in the Southwest*, 92.

people from people of color.<sup>43</sup> However, the rhetoric focused primarily on white and black interactions and provided the moral legitimacy to notions of black inferiority and white supremacy.

### *The Race Problem and the Doctrine of Segregation*

In May 1939, the Reverend J. D. Brannon, district missionary and editor of the *Gulf Coast Baptist*, wrote an article titled, “Are We Practical Missionaries?” which expressed his reaction to a recent meeting of the interdenominational Houston Ministerial Alliance. As part of the alliance, Brannon served on a committee on interracial relationships, which included “Methodist, Baptist, and other Negro ministers and Baptist, Presbyterian, and other white ministers.” Following the meeting, Brannon wrote, “Negroes and Mexicans make a very large percentage of the population of Houston, and indeed of all South Texas. *It is but proper that they have their own churches, and they have them.* There are three good Mexican Baptist churches and scores of Negro Baptist churches in this city.”<sup>44</sup> This was the key: separation was *proper*, even in churches.

“The test of our missionary zeal,” argued Brannon, was the attitude white Christians held toward “these churches of other races or nationalities.” Since, as he said, the African American churches in Houston worship in the same language as white

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<sup>43</sup> I mention the mid-1940s here because after 1944, I did not encounter expressions of the doctrine of segregation in their local denominational newspapers. Still, the work of David Chappell suggests that rhetoric along those lines continued into the 1950s from the likes of the Rev. Carey Daniel, a Dallas pastor, who made a name for himself arguing that God had ordained racial segregation, and any efforts to the contrary were destined to lead the world into sin. See Chappell, *Stone of Hope*, 108-109.

<sup>44</sup> J. D. Brannon, “Are We Practical Missionaries,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 24, 1939 (emphasis in original).



churches do, then white Christians ought to “appreciate the religion of a religious Negro.” If white Christians appreciated the religiosity of black folks, then “What are we doing about these people who are in our midst?” Brannon asked his readers whether white Baptists were “helping these people with our means, our council, our prayer and our influence to maintain their institutions?” Since white Baptist churches held regular training programs in their churches, Brannon asked, “Are we helping others to have the same training for their people?”<sup>45</sup> Brannon’s article highlights the terms under which white Baptists were willing to relate to their black peers. Although Brannon acknowledged the religiosity of people of color, his propositions for moving forward only included ways that white Baptists could help Baptist churches of other races build ministries similar to the ones white Baptists maintained. Such a proposal shows that white Baptists assumed a superior position in these interactions.

Lest his readers think Brannon was suggesting that white people and people of color should work and worship together on a large scale, however, he emphasized that “[s]ocial relationships are not and should not be involved in this matter of religious opportunity and responsibility.” To illustrate his point, he argued that when Apostles Paul and Peter preached among the Gentiles, they never became so involved with people who were different from them that “we could imagine them leading about Gentile wives or otherwise breaking down certain social barriers which were Divinely established.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting just as much about what is not said in this passage. Pointing out the shared language and beliefs between white and black Christians, Brannon is subtly suggesting a greater social distance between white Baptists and Spanish-speaking Baptists. J. D. Brannon, “Are We Practical Missionaries,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 24, 1939.

<sup>46</sup> J. D. Brannon, “Are We Practical Missionaries,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 24, 1939.

Furthermore, Brannon's mention of interracial "social relationships" as an allusion to sexual ones underscores a persistent theme in white Southern Christianity. For many white Christians in the South, integration and "social comingling" became euphemisms for interracial sex between black men and white women. White Baptists' obsession with racial purity rested on white women's sexual purity and the supposed divine obligation of white men to protect it. Brannon's question of how white Baptists should respond to "these people who are in *our* midst" suggests that he and other white Baptists in Houston saw people of color as infiltrating white spaces.<sup>47</sup> White Baptist men responded with phrases like Brannon's in which they voiced the connection they saw between southern white religion and segregation, a connection that historian Donald Mathews described as "complementary halves of a pervasive sensibility that gushed from the human springs of religious devotion."<sup>48</sup> In other words, racism was so ingrained in white southern Christianity that segregation was doctrine.<sup>49</sup>

Historian David Chappell has argued that a lack of Biblical support for segregation contributed to the inability of Southern white Protestants to contribute to an anti-civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, while there were ample biblical passages that at least addressed the issue of slavery, there seemed to be fewer, if

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid (emphasis added).

<sup>48</sup> Donald Mathews, "Lynching Is Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South," in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 164.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Harvey, "God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Interracialism in Southern Religious History," in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 286.

any, that could be construed as dealing with racial segregation.<sup>50</sup> This did not keep segregationist Baptists from looking at scripture in ever more creative ways. Historian Paul Harvey's work on the "folk theology of segregation" suggests that those Southern white Protestant proponents of segregation took evidence from beyond scripture to inform their readings of the Bible. The "folk" part of this theology was that it would likely never have passed for theology in any serious institute for religious training. Yet, the practitioners of it adopted a "set of assumptions about the divine ordering of the social world" and chose to find defenses of segregation, racial hierarchy, and social order in the Bible that resonated with their common sense understandings of the world.<sup>51</sup> Around the beginning of the twentieth century, this folk theology of segregation worked its way into church pulpits and became teaching points that filtered biblical lessons through the lens of segregationist doctrine. In this sense, the Klan of the 1920s and the doctrine of segregation grew up together, but the doctrine demonstrated a significantly longer shelf-life than the Klan, lasting at least into the 1940s.

In 1944, Houston minister W. L. Robertson outlined this doctrine of segregation and its potential consequences in a Sunday School lesson titled, "The Christian and the Race Problem," for readers of the *Gulf Coast Baptist*. In the lesson, Robertson used a story from Acts 10:9-16 where the Apostle Peter became hungry and fell into a trance. During the trance, Peter had a vision of God lowering a sheet full of all kinds of animals and telling him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Initially, Peter refused, arguing that he had

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<sup>50</sup> Chappell, *Stone of Hope*, 112.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 41-43; Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 81.

never defiled himself by eating unclean things. After God insisted that he had made all animals clean and that no man may declare those things unclean, Peter awoke to find messengers at his hosts' door waiting to take him to the home of a Roman Centurion, a Gentile and someone Peter would not have previously agreed to visit. Because of Peter's visit and his change of heart toward "unclean things," the Centurion and his household became Christians.<sup>52</sup>

The point of the lesson, according to Robertson, was that white Christians must not let prejudice get in the way of delivering the message of the Gospel to people with whom they would otherwise refuse to associate. In this sense, the "race problem" in the lesson was that racial or ethnic prejudice hinders evangelism, but not that racism was a sin. At the end of the lesson, Robertson deviated from scripture to extend his point. He wrote, "This lesson did not teach social interracial commingling." He explained that racial differences and segregation were not only beneficial but also designed by God when he separated different races of people according to the sons of Noah. "The sons of Shem founded the yellow races. The sons of Canaan, the son of Ham, formed the black race. The sons of [Japheth] formed the white race." And the "white race," according to Robertson, "has always been a happy race that has kept its generations pure, and free from interracial mixture." Even though prejudice should never keep a white Christian from preaching to people of other races, wrote Robertson, "neither is it ever necessary or wise to try to blend bloods which God hath made different." According to the doctrine of

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<sup>52</sup> W. L. Robertson, "Next Sunday's Lesson: The Christian and the Race Problem," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, October 19, 1944. Paul Harvey refers to this as a "theology of class, blood, and sex [that] was premised on God-ordained inequality." Harvey, "God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation," in Schweiger and Mathews, 286.

segregation, racial prejudice and racism were not sinful; rather, they kept groups of people in their divinely ordained places. As a final warning to those who believed otherwise, Robertson ended the lesson arguing that the flood in Genesis was the result of interracial sex.<sup>53</sup> In folk segregationist thought, the only act of corruption that could have caused that level of anger and judgment from God was sex across the color line since they believed that God's intention was to keep these groups apart.<sup>54</sup>

*The Doctrine of Segregation and Relationships with Black Houstonians*

Because the doctrine of segregation, rooted in a black-white binary, played on southern white Christian fears of black sexual violence, it largely dictated how white Baptists interacted with black Baptists. It also restricted the kind of relationship white Baptists would seek with their black peers. Typically, white Baptist men, usually pastors, participated in formal, but infrequent, interracial meetings with pastors of nearby black Baptist churches. White Baptist men also led educational programs that involved both black men and black women. Less often, white Baptist women engaged black Baptist men and women solely through financial support.<sup>55</sup>

After the end of the Civil War, white Baptist leaders initially attempted to continue the same kinds of paternalistic ministries among African Americans that they had pursued during slavery. However, as black Baptists distanced themselves

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<sup>53</sup> Robertson, "The Christian and the Race Problem."

<sup>54</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 42-43.

<sup>55</sup> Most of these interactions are discussed in more detail below. The exception to this is the interactions between white Baptist women and black Baptist men and women. A review of Baptist records (associational minutes, denominational newspapers, Houston newspapers) from 1900-1950 yields only a few passing references to white women donating money to "Negro work" or to a "Negro church." See, UBA, (1900-1950); *Gulf Coast Baptist*; *Baptist Messenger*.

particularly from white Southern Baptists during Reconstruction and white Baptists continued to insist that they should intervene in the religious lives of African Americans, yet they retreated almost entirely from work related to racial interchange.<sup>56</sup> Historian Rufus Spain argued that “with monotonous regularity,” Southern Baptist leaders across the South proclaimed their duty to look after African American Baptists. They “advocated training Negro preachers, and pretended to see a decline in racial prejudice and a growing willingness on the part of Negroes to receive aid from Southern whites; but very little work on behalf of Negroes followed.”<sup>57</sup> Such was the case in Texas and in Houston.

Until the 1920s, neither Union Baptist Association nor individual white Baptist churches appointed anyone to be responsible for the work with the black community in the Bayou City after the Civil War.<sup>58</sup> The statewide convention, the Baptist General

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<sup>56</sup> Historian Paul Harvey defines “racial interchange” as the biracialism in southern religious culture. It refers to the black and white gatherings that occurred outside of normal church services on Sunday mornings during which white Protestants mostly gazed upon the religious practices of their black counterparts. Harvey, “God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation,” 284-285.

<sup>57</sup> Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 1967), 57.

<sup>58</sup> Although Noah Hill was appointed the missionary to slaves in Texas, no other such missionary was appointed after the Civil War (until the late 1940s). J. M. Law, J. B. Link, and William Carey Crane were perhaps the few ministers who appear in the sources in the mid- to late-1860s working with freedmen and freedwomen. However, they appeared to have been working in their capacity as ministers of FBC Houston. UBA, (1866), 9; The Reverend F. L. Lights, “Brief Sketch of Houston Baptists,” in *The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston's Colored Population* (Houston: Sotex Publishing Company, 1915), 24; UBA, (1921), “BYPU Work in Union Association for Year Ending September 30, 1921,” 23. The situation was similar with respect to Mexican Americans and Tejanos after the Civil War in the Houston area. However, that had more to do with a lack of a sizeable Mexican American population in the Houston area until the 1910s and 1920s. On a statewide level, white Southern Baptists appear to have been more engaged in evangelism toward Spanish-speaking populations shortly after Reconstruction. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter III.

Convention of Texas (BGCT), fully discontinued its “Negro work” at their 1896 annual convention because Anglo Baptists were dissatisfied with the progress.<sup>59</sup>

From the beginning of the twentieth century until after the Great Depression, white and black Baptist interchange in Houston was exceptional, and even in those few instances, a white presence at black events or a black presence at white events was largely a formality. For example, a white Baptist pastor from Union Association would usually make an appearance at local black Baptist associational meetings.<sup>60</sup> White and black Baptist leaders in Houston also encountered one another in the 1930s as part of the “Houston Ministerial Alliance,” an interdenominational organization that organized an interracial cooperation committee.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond those rare instances, the only other recurring interaction in Houston between white and black Baptists took place during an annual Bible institute for African American pastors and ministry workers funded by the BGCT. As early as 1912, white Baptist pastors assisted black Baptist pastors during a ten-day training session held in local black churches. According to an article in the *Houston Post*, “The object of the institute is to give the [N]egro ministers and other Christian workers the benefit of lectures on various Bible and other subjects that pertain to missionary, evangelical, and other Christian work.” During the sessions, white pastors were responsible for teaching

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<sup>59</sup> B. F. Riley, *History of the Baptists of Texas* (Dallas: B. F. Riley, 1907), 386; Charles A. Israel, “From Biracial to Segregated Churches: Black and White Protestants in Houston, Texas, 1840-1870,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (April 1998): 455-457.

<sup>60</sup> “Negro Meeting Begins Today,” *Houston Post*, September 11, 1912.

<sup>61</sup> J. D. Brannon, “Are We Practical Missionaries,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 24, 1939.

on various topics while black pastors were in charge of the musical aspects of ministry and hosting the event.<sup>62</sup>

The doctrine of segregation shaped the relationships between white Baptists and the black community in Houston. It led its adherents to avoid any kind of contact that could be perceived as breaking “God-ordained” social barriers. Long after the Klan’s influence in Houston had declined, the central tenants of their organization lived on in the pulpits of white Baptist pastors. The ideology of the Klan and white Baptists’ notions of race and segregation fit so well together because they were part of the same response to the social, political, and demographic changes surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. In this sense, southern white Christianity and the Ku Klux Klan grew up together. Even though the Klan no longer played a major role in city politics after the 1920s, different groups, such as white Baptist churches, the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference, Union Baptist Association, and many others, enforced the color line and black inferiority with far more effectiveness because they did not carry the negative reputation associated with the Klan. White Baptists placed the veneer of morality on racism and white supremacy and used their positions of influence to drive a wedge between white and black Houstonians in and out of churches.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> “Negro Bible Institute,” *Houston Post*, March 7, 1912; “Bible Institutes,” *Houston Post*, February 20, 1913.

<sup>63</sup> The doctrine of segregation and its effects laid a foundation for the organized opposition that white Southern Baptists mounted against integration in the 1950s and 1960s, a subject that Chapter IV engages in detail.



## **Black Baptist Ministers: Organizing for Resistance**

African American Baptists used their autonomous religious institutions and organizations to oppose the racism of Anglo Baptists and the larger white community in Houston. These separate institutions—their churches, associations, and organizations—mitigated the influences of white supremacy. The beginnings of separate African American Baptist traditions and institutions in Houston are rooted in the changes produced by the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Jim Crow southern order emerged after the Civil War, and the division of black and white southerners had ramifications even in the structure of religious institutions. While the norm in most antebellum southern Protestant churches had been that African Americans and Anglos attended church together in biracial churches, after the war, African Americans broke away from white churches partly to exercise their new independence and partly as a response to the reluctance of white church leaders to accept the idea of black political and social equality.<sup>64</sup>

### *Churches of Their Own*

Such was the case in Houston as the newly free black members of First Baptist Church Houston separated from the church of their former masters and organized

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<sup>64</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 22; Israel, “From Biracial to Segregated Churches,” 429-431; John B. Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 2.

Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>65</sup> On January 14, 1866, six months after Juneteenth, twelve initial members organized themselves into a separate church with the Reverend William Carey Crane, a white missionary and minister from First Baptist, as their pastor. In August 1866, after eight months of irregular meetings, the members called on the first black Baptist missionary in Texas, the Rev. Israel S. Campbell, who led the congregation to build a temporary house of worship on the banks of the Buffalo Bayou. They reorganized themselves as Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>66</sup>

From 1865 through 1915, the number of organized black Baptist churches grew from one to fifty-four with approximately ten thousand members in the City of Houston. The earliest churches that formed after the organization of Antioch (1866) were Mt. Zion in the Second Ward (1866), Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in the Fourth Ward (1872), and Fourth Missionary Baptist Church in the Third Ward (1877). A period of revival from 1870-1872 evidently led to several more churches in the following few decades. That pattern of growth continued. By 1946, there were more than 130 black Baptist churches listed in the city directory. Each of the churches developed similar

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<sup>65</sup> The Reverend F. L. Lights, "Brief Sketch of Houston Baptists," in *The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston's Colored Population* (Houston: Sotex Publishing Company, 1915), 24, Texas Room, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas. Black and white Baptists had been attending church together as members of the same church since First Baptist Houston was founded in 1841. Of the twenty people who joined the church in its first year, six were listed as slaves. Although some of their owners do not appear to be members at First Baptist, most of them were listed as having the same last name as the white members. First Baptist Church Houston, Minutes, April 1841-October 1841, *Minutes of the First Baptist Church Houston, from Organization (April 10, 1841) to Death of William Milton Tryon (Nov. 16, 1847)* (Houston: First Baptist Church Houston, undated), HMRC.

<sup>66</sup> Lights, "Brief Sketch of Houston Baptists," 24-25; "Houston Churches: Antioch Baptist Church," in *The Red Book of Houston*, 72-73; Vanita E. Crawford, "Dramatic History of Antioch Baptist Church," 1975, box 1, file 1, Vanita E. Crawford Antioch Baptist Church Collection, MSS 192, HMRC; Antioch Baptist Church, "Eighty-two Years of Torch Bearing: Antioch Baptist Church, 1866-1948," 1948, box 1, folder 18, Rev. Jack Yates Family & Antioch Baptist Church Collection, MSS 281, HMRC; Israel, "Biracial to Segregated Churches," 450-452.

components as they matured: church covenants, Sunday schools, training unions (Bible studies), and missionary societies.<sup>67</sup>

According to Richard Grovey, a longtime political activist and member of Antioch, black churches were “the first field in which the Negro had a chance to do any organizing. They organized and found a bit of freedom from the white man back in the early days.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to the incredible growth in the number of congregations, black Baptists also established or contributed to the formation of several more district associations, and a statewide convention, the Baptist Missionary and Education Convention of Texas. By the 1920s, they had also formed missionary societies, mutual aid societies, and formidable political and religious coalitions.

#### *African American Ministers Associations*

By 1919, African American Baptist ministers in Houston had created an association called the “Negro Baptist Ministers’ Association” for mutual support and fellowship, and it served as a representative of the black community to the public. As leaders of their churches and prominent members of their communities, the ministers of this association held a unique position in the city. They were among the most educated

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<sup>67</sup> Lights, “Houston Baptists,” 24-25; “Houston Churches,” 72-75; *Houston, Texas, City Directory, 1946*, Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line] (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Richard R. Grovey, interviewed by Joseph Taylor, August 1939, in Charles S. Johnson, “Source Material for *Patterns of Negro Segregation: Houston, Texas*,” Research Memoranda for Use in the Preparation of Dr. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, New York, 1940. Grovey is an important figure in Texas civil rights history. In 1935, his case, *Grovey v. Townsend*, was the third in a series of cases known as the Texas primary cases. See, Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas*, New Edition (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979, 2003), 111-248; James M. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven’: The Black Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945” (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1980).

and financially secure, and together, they represented the voice of thousands of black Baptists in the Houston area. Led in the beginning by prominent pastors like the Reverends F. L. Lights of Antioch Baptist Church and N. P. Pullum of Bethel Baptist Church, they supported their local community by funding and hosting religious and social events.<sup>69</sup>

The ministers' association in Houston became one of those first areas of organizing for black Baptists in the early twentieth century. After nearly two decades of frequent, highly publicized incidents of mob violence, ongoing racism and segregation, and a new politicization following World War I, "New Negroes" flocked to organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a way to fight inequality through grassroots activism. Black Baptist leaders in Houston also began to embrace an ethos historians and contemporaries referred to as the "New Negro." According to historian Bernadette Pruitt, from 1918 to 1919 alone, Texas branches of the NAACP grew from four to thirty-one; the Houston branch formed in August 1918.<sup>70</sup>

Although some African American Baptist leaders certainly joined the NAACP in its early years, they also used their existing organization to speak out against the same concerns. The "Negro Baptist Ministers' Association" established itself as an advocate for church-supported civil rights and racial equality. In many ways, these ministers stood

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<sup>69</sup> "Among the Churches," *Houston Informer*, June 14, 1919; "Among the Churches," *Houston Informer*, June 28, 1919; "Soul-Saving Meeting," *Houston Informer*, February 19, 1921; "YMCA to Sponsor Father-Son Meet," *Houston Informer*, October 13, 1923.

<sup>70</sup> Pruitt, *Other Great Migration*, 156-160; Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 14, 43-44, 244; N.A.A.C.P. Office Secretary to C. F. Richardson Sr., August 20, 1918, C. F. Richardson Sr. Papers, MSS 1457, HMRC, Houston Area Digital Archives, Houston Public Library (<http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/archival/id/806/rec/90>).

between white Houston and their own communities and confronted racism and injustice directly, and one of the earliest moments came in the spring of 1919.

On April 16, 1919, the *Houston Post* printed an open letter signed by members of the “Negro Baptist Ministers’ Association.” Addressed to white religious leaders, the letter focused on the racial situation in Texas, the increase in mob violence against African Americans, and the role they believed white ministers should take to address it. They wrote, “We are living in a crucial period. This is a time that men should be firm and take a stand for that which is right.” They noted that African American soldiers had recently proved their worth by fighting in World War I, yet black Americans were still the primary targets of mob violence. The ministers praised Texas Governor William P. Hobby for recommending an end to mob violence and other elected state officials for attempting to curb lynching with legislation. Regardless of whether any anti-lynching measures actually became law, members of the association understood that there needed to be a deeper change, particularly within the hearts of white people. To that end, they called mob violence “a curse to civilization and disgrace to our commonwealth” and implored “our white ministers to cry aloud from their pulpits against mob violence. We believe that if this is done mob violence will soon disappear.”<sup>71</sup>

Members of the ministers’ association understood the enduring power that white ministers held in the city and believed that they could easily turn the tide in the fight against racial violence. The petition also underscores the black ministers’ refusal to

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<sup>71</sup> “Ask for Sermons on Mob Violence: White Ministers Requested by Negro Baptists to Protest from Pulpit,” *Houston Post*, Wednesday, April 16, 1919. The ministers who signed the letter were F. Lawrence Woodard Sr., R. L. Williams, J. R. Burdette, Alexander Oliver, E. D. Norris, G. Porter, M. Miller, J. M. Weaver, N. P. Pullum, W. B. Witfield, J. W. Edwards, and F. L. Lights.

accept an inferior social position as they carefully asserted their role as masculine, spiritual leaders of their communities. As men, they were taking a firm stand against injustice. They highlighted the patriotism and citizenship of other black men by recalling their record as United States soldiers. By framing their petition as dutiful American men directing a request to fellow citizens in a language of citizenship and moral obligation, pastors of the ministers' association publicly shamed white religious leaders for condoning mob violence with their silence.

### **The Baptist Ministers Association: Rev. L. H. Simpson and Direct Action**

Organizations like the Baptist Ministers Association became the backbone for direct opposition to discrimination, disfranchisement, and inequality. The black ministers association evolved over the next decade to emerge in the 1930s as a mutual aid and fellowship union, as well as an advocate of civil rights and a potent political force. A major contribution to the group's shift was the leadership of the Reverend Lee Haywood Simpson beginning in the 1920s. Born in Calvert, Texas, in 1884, Simpson moved to Houston around the turn of the century. He began his lengthy career as a pastor in 1925 after he formed Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in the Fifth Ward. He started with just six members but attracted a following of 2,792 by 1943 as he led one of Houston's largest and most productive black Baptist churches.<sup>72</sup> Both his church and his influence

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew Webster Jackson, *A Sure Foundation: A Sketch of Negro Life in Texas* (Houston, [1940?]), 145-147, Texas Room, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (hereafter cited, HMRC), Houston Public Library, Houston, TX; Senimel Williams, *History of the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Organized A.D. 1925: Where the Holy Spirit Abides* (Houston, [1943?]), 4-9, box 1, folder 1, Rev. Lee

grew, and Simpson's peers began to see him as a leader. One of his colleagues, the Reverend A. W. Jackson, wrote that Simpson was "among the outstanding leaders and builders of Negro religious life in Texas."<sup>73</sup> He was also responsible for making the black Baptist ministers' association into a major player on the religious and political scenes of Houston.

Members of the association officially named themselves the Colored Baptist Ministers Association of Houston and elected Simpson as president in 1937 for the following year.<sup>74</sup> According to Jackson, as the president of the ministers association, Simpson "recommended more progressive plans for the progress of the Association than any previous executive."<sup>75</sup> His vision for the association was that it should be a conduit for activism on behalf of African Americans "in the nation, state and most especially in the city of Houston." Such an approach, he believed, would give the association "a new emphasis, new approach, a new outlook ... according to the trend and progress of this age." One of his first recommendations for his new administration was the formation of

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Haywood Simpson Papers (hereafter cited, Simpson Papers), MSS 239, HMRC; Julie Simpson, *The Clever Leader: Dr. L. H. Simpson, D.D.* ([Houston], 1963), 27, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX; Merline Pitre, *In Struggle against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 48. Julie Simpson's biography of Rev. Simpson sets the membership of the church at over 4,000 in 1963.

<sup>73</sup> Jackson, *A Sure Foundation*, 146.

<sup>74</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, documents from the black ministers association bear the name "Colored Baptist Ministers Association of Houston." In the 1950s, that name only appears as the formal title of the group, but members of the fellowship tended to refer to the organization simply as the "Baptist Ministers Association." By the mid-1960s, the fellowship appears to have completely dropped "Colored" from their official title and adopted the name "Baptist Ministers Association of Houston and Vicinity." G. H. Guyton, "Colored Baptist Ministers Association: Secretary's Report for 1940," box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers, HMRC; "6th Annual Institute and Evangelical Campaign of the Colored Baptist Ministers Association of Houston, Texas," box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers, HMRC; L. H. Simpson and G. H. Guyton, "The Colored Baptist Ministers Association: Financial Statement, 1959," box 1, folder 3, Simpson Papers, HMRC; L. H. Simpson, C. H. Howard, and B. B. Zeigler, "Financial Report of the Baptist Ministers Association of Houston and Vicinity for the Year 1965," box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers, HMRC.

<sup>75</sup> Jackson, *A Sure Foundation*, 146.

an interracial commission, “composed of white and colored Baptist ministers to confer on inter-racial matters, civic and denominationally.” While he believed such a commission might lead to a better relationship between white and black Baptists, he also thought the commission “might be able to place some of our laymen in a position to get some of the better jobs.”<sup>76</sup>

As the leader of over 150 ministers, representing the majority of Houston’s churchgoing African Americans, Simpson took the role of protecting his community seriously. In 1937, shortly after his election, he led fellow association members to fight against making black neighborhoods the dumping grounds for the city’s unwanted problems. Simpson and the members of the Baptist Ministers Association heard news that Mayor Richard Fonville, along with the chief of police and the city council, planned to re-open the north-side police substation on Gregg Street in the heart of the Fifth Ward’s black neighborhoods. The station would be used as a prison as well as a clinic and detention center for white prostitutes. Simpson wrote a letter of protest to Fonville and other officials explaining the detrimental effects such an establishment might bring to Houston’s black community.<sup>77</sup>

The substation was just across the street from Phillis Wheatley High School, a school where the majority of the city’s black students attended high school. The ministers believed that a clinic and detention center for white prostitutes so near the

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<sup>76</sup> L. H. Simpson, “President’s Annual Message,” Houston, Texas, March 1, 1938, reprinted in Simpson, *The Clever Leader*, 52-53.

<sup>77</sup> Colored Baptist Ministers’ Association, L. H. Simpson, and G. H. Guyton to Mayor Fonville, City Commissioners, and Police Chief Williams, February 23, 1937, reprinted in Simpson, *The Clever Leader*, 54-55. Richard H. Fonville succeeded Oscar Holcombe as Houston’s mayor in 1937 after Holcombe’s second series of terms as mayor. David McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 198.



school would cause “lawless characters” to interact too frequently among “silly boys of high school age,” which would “easily amount to the disruption of the peace and dignity of our entire community.” Not only did the ministers object to city officials using their Fifth Ward neighborhood as a dumping ground for the white community’s “vulgar” problems, but they also feared that the presence of white prostitutes in their neighborhoods would awaken white fears of black and white sexual encounters. Such an arrangement, they believed, would put them directly in harm’s way.<sup>78</sup>

*Working Together: The Baptist Ministers Association and the NAACP*

The Baptist Ministers Association also had the ability to mobilize church congregations to support civil rights causes. In the 1940s, the Baptist Ministers Association became the conduit for activism that Simpson wanted it to be. The Reverend Albert A. Lucas, a leader within the Baptist Ministers Association, became president of the Houston branch of the NAACP and led a strategic campaign to increase local involvement with the NAACP and make it an influential force in the fight for racial equality. Lucas moved to Houston in 1934 to become the pastor of Good Hope Baptist Church where he honed his skills as a leader, fundraiser, organizer, delegator, and networker. Historian Merline Pitre and others have written about the central place black churches and black clergy held in mobilizing civil rights campaigns.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Colored Baptist Ministers’ Association, L. H. Simpson, and G. H. Guyton to Mayor Fonville, City Commissioners, and Police Chief Williams, February 23, 1937, reprinted in Simpson, *The Clever Leader*, 54-55.

<sup>79</sup> Pitre, *In Struggle*, 33-36; Merline Pitre, “In Retrospect: Darlene Clark Hine’s *Black Victory*,” in Hine, *Black Victory*, 36; SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 309-321.

For many African Americans, the church was central to their identity; it symbolized their experiences and offered them a sense of hope, dignity, and community. Pastors like Lucas knew their church members, understood how to inspire them, and could mobilize them to work on particular projects. So leaders of those churches were particularly successful at building support from their congregations for civil rights causes and organizations.<sup>80</sup> As an active leader in the Baptist Ministers Association, Lucas was well placed to mobilize his peers as NAACP organizers.<sup>81</sup>

In 1939, the Houston branch of the NAACP elected Lucas as president and capitalized on his role as a pastor and his connections to the Baptist Ministers Association to build its membership and its strength as a political force. Thelma Scott Bryant, a member of Houston's black community for most of the twentieth century, remembered Lucas as a "rabble rouser," who organized the NAACP using the pastors of local churches to build membership, particularly those who were also members of the Baptist Ministers Association: "He saw to it that every minister got his members to join." With the help of the former acting president of the Houston branch, Lulu B. White, Lucas led his administration in adding over 1,400 new members to Houston's NAACP in his first year. In 1943, White became the executive secretary and worked

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<sup>80</sup> Pitre, "In Retrospect," 36; Hine, *Black Victory*, 220-221; Jackson, *A Sure Foundation*, 45-47.

<sup>81</sup> Rev. Albert Lucas helped direct the Annual Institute and Evangelical Campaign in 1940 organized by the Baptist Ministers Association and was a member of the Institute Committee that planned the event in 1941. And he remained an integral part of the organization until his death in 1963. The Baptist Ministers Association paid \$200.00 to his wife following after he died, which was the largest amount paid to any deceased member's family during that year. Guyton, "Colored Baptist Ministers Association: Secretary's Report for 1940," Simpson Papers; "6th Annual Institute," Simpson Papers; "Installation Services of the Colored Baptist Ministers Association," 1940, box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers; Baptist Ministers Association of Houston, "Eighteenth Annual Fellowship Conference," 1960, box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers; Baptist Ministers Association of Houston, "Twenty First Annual Fellowship Conference," 1963, box 3, folder 1, Simpson Papers; L. H. Simpson, C. H. Howard, B. B. Zeigler, "Baptist Ministers Associatio[n] Finance Report for Year 1963," box 1, folder 3, Simpson Papers.

diligently to make Houston a serious contender in the fight for full suffrage. While ministers like Lucas stirred their congregations into supporting the NAACP, White busily recruited ministers with opportunities for elevated leadership and with acclamations for successful members.<sup>82</sup> White's strategy and the support of Houston's black ministers led to an increase in membership from approximately 2,000 in the early 1940s to over 12,000 by the end of the decade.<sup>83</sup>

Lucas's success in expanding Houston's NAACP helped position it to be a major player in fighting for racial equality through a successful attack on the all white primary in Texas.<sup>84</sup> Although the Houston NAACP had previously led an unsuccessful bid to undo the all-white primary in 1935, when the issue finally reached the United States Supreme Court in 1944, the political and social climate had changed considerably in the previous decade. When the United States joined World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, many African Americans began to embrace the idea of a "double V" campaign. They believed that victory against an enemy who had risen to power on racism and white supremacy abroad would mean the ability to achieve major civil rights

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<sup>82</sup> Thelma Scott Bryant, interview by Patricia Smith Prather, August 3, 2007, Houston Oral History Project, Mayor Bill White Collection, Houston Public Library Digital Archives, <http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/oral-history/thelma-scott-bryant.php>; Pitre, *In Struggle*, 33-36; Pitre, "In Retrospect," in Hine, *Black Victory*, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Pitre, *In Struggle*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> The all white primary was the most effective means of "legally" disfranchising black Texans. Since the end of Reconstruction, Texas was a one-party state, dominated by the Democratic Party, so statewide elections would almost certainly go to Democratic candidates. In this sense, the only elections that mattered were the primaries. A series of three legal cases from 1927 to 1935 affirmed that as a private entity, the Democratic Party had the authority to decide who its members could be, so to limit black political power, party leaders restricted membership to whites only. The Texas primary cases of the 1920s and 1930s include *Nixon v. Herndon* (1927), *Nixon v. Condon* (1932), and *Grovey v. Townsend* (1935). Since only members of the Democratic Party could vote in the Texas Democratic primary, barring black voters from membership effectively took away their ability to influence the outcome of an election already determined by the primary. For an in-depth analysis of how the NAACP dismantled the Texas white primary, see Hine, *Black Victory*.

victories at home. Furthermore, the federal government had made modest concessions to civil rights activists during World War II in an attempt to minimize any reduction wartime production, such as Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in the national defense industry.<sup>85</sup>

### *Rev. L. H. Simpson Running for Office*

The international mood surrounding World War II and the swelling momentum of civil rights activism in Houston during the 1940s carried the Baptist Ministers Association to yet another phase of religious civil rights activism. In 1946, Rev. Simpson became the first African American since Reconstruction to run in a Houston election. He ran as an independent candidate, sponsored and endorsed by the Baptist Ministers Association, for an at-large position on the Houston City Council in 1946.<sup>86</sup> He had spent the previous decade building alliances with Houston's powerful in the white and black communities. And he gained the respect and support of Mayor Oscar Holcombe, the NAACP, and organized labor.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Hine, *Black Victory*, 231, 252; SoRelle, "The Darker Side of 'Heaven,'" 213; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 326, 327n9, 329, 767-768, 774-775.

<sup>86</sup> The Baptist Ministers Association officially funded Simpson's campaign, and his campaign advisors were also members of the association's executive committee. "Negro Becomes Candidate for Houston City Office," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 28, 1946; "Rev. Simpson Draws Second Place on City Election Ballot," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 5, 1946; Carter W. Wesley, "Challenging Fate, an Editorial," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 8, 1946; Worth Gatewood, "Houston Votes Tuesday after Noisy Prelude," *Houston Post*, November 3, 1946.

<sup>87</sup> "Rev. Simpson Makes Acceptance Speech," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 8, 1946; "National Maritime Union Endorses Rev. Simpson for City Councilman," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 19, 1946; "Holcombe Challenged by Rev. Moore, Frank Mann," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, November 2, 1946; Simpson, *Clever Leader*, 73-74; Pitre, *In Struggle*, 46-47.

During the campaign, he promised to represent everyone in the city, not just African Americans. However, he said that it was time for Houston's black community to have someone in city leadership who understood the needs of their communities. Since he ran for an at-large seat, he still needed to attract white voters as well, so he assured them that he wanted "no special favors" and that African Americans "only want[ed] our right as citizens."<sup>88</sup> And while the political and social standing of black Houstonians had certainly changed dramatically in the previous few years, Houston was still a highly segregated city. During an October 31 rally at the City Auditorium, Simpson attempted to reduce the potential backlash from white voters by telling the white candidates that he was not interested in "social mixing." He said, "If they are worried about eating luncheons with me, I can eat at home. If they are worried about riding in an auto with me, I can ride in a private car."<sup>89</sup>

Many Houstonians, including leaders in the black community, believed Simpson's campaign was both "premature and ill-advised."<sup>90</sup> Despite his assurance to white voters and his confidence in his ability to win black votes, he finished second-to-

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<sup>88</sup> L. H. Simpson, quoted in Gatewood, "Houston Votes Tuesday after Noisy Prelude," *Houston Post*, November 3, 1946.

<sup>89</sup> "Huge Crowd Expected at Political Meet," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 29, 1946; C. W. Rice, "Big Vote Forecast," *Houston Press*, [November 1, 1946], reprinted in Simpson, *Clever Leader*, 77.

<sup>90</sup> Editor of the *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, Carter W. Wesley, campaigned relentlessly against Simpson's campaign and the platform adopted by the Baptist Ministers Association through regular editorials in his paper. Carter W. Wesley, "Challenging Fate, an Editorial," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 8, 1946; "Rev. Simpson Makes Acceptance Speech," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 8, 1946; Carter W. Wesley, "City Management: The Ministers Take the Wrong Pew," *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, October 26, 1946; "Houstonians Split Vote in Three-Way Campaign," *San Antonio Register*, November 15, 1946, Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph399943/>; accessed July 26, 2016).

last among candidates for the at-large position.<sup>91</sup> Some black voters opposed Simpson's choice to run as an independent following a two-decade-long fight to join the Democratic Party. And his close ties to white leaders led others to wonder if they could trust him. Simpson's campaign advisers, the Reverend L. V. Bolton and Lulu B. White, also drew criticism for their management of the voting process. Bolton and White circulated marked ballots that advised voters to scratch out all the other candidates for the at-large spots except for Simpson, but some voters used those ballots at the voting booth instead of blank ones.<sup>92</sup> White believed that casting a ballot with only Simpson marked would mean three votes per ballot for Simpson, but election officials destroyed the marked ballots instead.<sup>93</sup>

Despite Simpson's loss in the 1946 city council election, his campaign represented major changes in Houston's racial politics. While the majority of white Houstonians had not yet warmed up to the idea of a black man serving on the city council, Simpson did manage to draw votes from nearly every voting precinct, including the all-white River Oaks precinct.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, the increasing involvement of the Baptist Ministers Association in representing and protecting Houston's black community, grassroots organizing, and city politics showed that the influence of African American Baptist leaders grew considerably during the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>91</sup> "Houston and Harris County Vote Totals," *Houston Post*, November 6, 1946; "All State Amendments Appear to Be Carried," *Galveston Daily News*, November 6, 1946; "Holcombe Rolls Up 2042 Clear Margin in Official Count," *Houston Post*, November 7, 1946; Carter W. Wesley, "Ram's Horn: The Loser, the Winner?" *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, November 16, 1946.

<sup>92</sup> Jon D. Davis, "Lone Star Week: Even the Shouting Is Over," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 16, 1946; Pitre, *In Struggle*, 49-50.

<sup>93</sup> Pitre, *In Struggle*, 49-50.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, "Lone Star Week: Even the Shouting is Over."

## Conclusion

The white Baptist churches and their pastors attempted to maintain inequality by sanctifying racist discourse and practice both in and out of churches. As part of the city's moral authority, they affirmed segregation and white supremacy with the doctrine of segregation. The programs they established to minister to people of color exuded these sentiments and provided legitimacy to the Jim Crow system that permeated cities like Houston. Nevertheless, African American Baptists initiated separate religious organizations and communities as insulated from white influence as possible, and organizations like the Baptist Ministers Association became beacons for the surrounding community. In the 1930s and 1940s, under the leadership of the Rev. L. H. Simpson, the black ministerial fellowship became the foundation from which they challenged inequality.

The doctrine of segregation, built along a white-over-black color line, was pervasive in the South. Yet in a place like Houston, on the borders of the South and the Southwest, the color line was more complex. After a visit to Houston in the 1930s, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "the color line showed wide and clear" there, but in Houston, "one sees the triple color line between the whites and the Mexicans, between the whites and the Negroes, between the Mexicans and the Negroes."<sup>95</sup> As the Mexican American population increased through the first few decades of the 1900s, noticeable Mexican

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<sup>95</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Journey to Texas and New Orleans," ca. April 1934, typed draft of article published in *The Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, MS 312, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b211-i120> (accessed July 12, 2016).

American communities began to take shape. As we will see in the next chapter, when Anglo Baptists interacted with Spanish-speaking Houstonians, they applied the doctrine of segregation to their relationships with Mexican Americans, a group they perceived as foreign and underestimated as inferior.



CHAPTER III  
OTHER TONGUES AND FOREIGN BLOOD: ANGLO AND MEXICAN  
AMERICAN BAPTISTS AND RACE

“The people of other tongues, if not assimilated and evangelized, constitute a grave menace to our civilization,” warned the Rev. C. D. Daniel, a former missionary to Spanish-speaking Texans, as he read the “Report on Citizens of Other Tongues” at the 1911 Baptist General Convention of Texas Annual Meeting.<sup>1</sup> Speaking for the Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board during the following year’s meeting, Daniel clarified what “grave menace” he believed they posed:

The tide of foreign immigration in large measure is turning toward our beloved Southland, and the admixture of our Anglo-Saxon blood with that of other nations is giving a complex condition to our southern citizenship which, but for the grace of God, may betoken ill to our entire land.<sup>2</sup>

Daniel’s pronouncement placed the threat of immigrants, the majority of whom were from Mexico, in terms that resonated with the doctrine of segregation. Non-white, non-English-speaking people would put white supremacy and racial purity in jeopardy. Daniel and other Anglo Baptist leaders framed the situation in terms of a looming cultural and racial battle: white Americans would either assimilate Mexicans and other immigrants, or they would face destruction.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Anglo Baptists needed to support ministries that targeted Spanish-speaking residents of Texas so they could

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<sup>1</sup> Baptist General Convention of Texas (cited hereafter as BGCT), *Annual* (1911), 83.

<sup>2</sup> BGCT, *Annual* (1912), 130

<sup>3</sup> BGCT, *Annual* (1911), 83; BGCT, *Annual*, (1912), 152.

neutralize the threat. Mexican American racial scripts were built on top of the same ideas that undergirded white Baptists' relationships with African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

As we read in Chapter II, white Baptists in Houston reinforced the white-over-black color line by supporting efforts to uphold law and order (including the Ku Klux Klan) and by preaching a doctrine of segregation. This not only influenced the kinds of ministries they pursued toward African Americans, but as this chapter demonstrates, it also established the foundation for their interactions with Mexicans and Mexican Americans at both local and statewide levels. White Protestants built their understandings of Mexicans on the foundations of anti-black racism and the doctrine of segregation, and they applied their same sense of white supremacy and cultural superiority to their relationships with Mexican Americans.

This chapter argues that Anglo Baptists projected these racist and paternalistic ideas in their statewide convention, the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT); in their missionary relationships; and in their local programs in Houston intended to Americanize Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, in the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican American Baptists worked within the racist and paternalistic white Baptist structures (the Southern Baptist Convention, Home Mission Board, BGCT, Union Association, and local churches) to create a place for themselves on their own terms. This meant relying on Anglo Baptist personnel and money to create a separate Mexican American Baptist convention, to sustain Mexican American Baptist churches, and to

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of racial scripts, see Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 6-7; Natalia Molina, "The Power of Racial Scripts: What the History of Mexican Immigration to the United States Teaches Us about Relational Notions of Race," *Latino Studies* 8, no. 2 (Summer, 2010): 157-158.

fund a robust Mexican American-led mission program. These efforts flourished under Mexican American leadership and provided a space to alleviate the effects of racism outside of the church and to begin challenging racism from within it.

The denominational records and early histories produced by Anglo Baptists reflect a perspective of the past distorted by their racist and paternalistic relationship. They tell a story of Mexican Baptist history with patient and good-natured Anglos devoting their lives to build Mexican Baptist ministries *for* helpless and inferior Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Critical scholarship since the mid-1970s has drawn attention to realities beneath Anglo Baptist narratives: while some Anglo Protestants responded to the biblical call of the Great Commission to “go and make disciples of all nations,” they often merged the gospel they preached with messages and practices of Americanization.<sup>5</sup> The history of Mexican American Baptists in Houston and throughout Texas demonstrates that they often organized and established their own religious institutions, sometimes with the help of Anglo Baptist leaders, churches, and

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<sup>5</sup> This perspective appears in much of the Anglo missionary records and related denominational records. Early Baptist historians parroted this view as well. For example, see Benjamin F. Fuller, *History of Texas Baptists* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1900); Morrell, *Flowers and Fruits*; B. F. Riley, *A History of Texas Baptists* (Dallas: By the author, 1907). More recently, historians who have written about the interactions between Anglo Protestants and the peoples of the American Southwest have highlighted the presence of this mentality among missionaries, and they have uncovered the realities beneath the narrative. For example, see Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea la Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Susan M Yohn, *A Contest of Faiths: Missionary Women and Pluralism in the American Southwest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); George J. Sanchez, “‘Go after the Women’: Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant Woman, 1915-1929,” in *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History*, ed. Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 475-494; Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Gastón Espinosa, *Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

associations. But it was their initiative, dedication, and determination that led to permanent Mexican American Baptist congregations in the Bayou City.

Part one of this chapter focuses on the interwoven histories of white Baptists' racism in Mexican American missions and of their embrace of the doctrine of segregation. Because Mexican American Baptist ministries in Houston began in the 1920s, after these patterns were in place, I take a broader regional and temporal look at this history by focusing on one of the earliest architects of Mexican Baptist missions in the Southwest, Rev. Charles D. Daniels. Next, I explore how the doctrine of segregation and its implications influenced Anglo-led Mexican American ministries in Houston, particularly through the Americanization programs at the Mexican Good Will Center.

In part two, I turn to the Mexican American Baptist-led efforts to form their own statewide convention in 1910, which led to a flurry of new Mexican American Baptist churches from Central Texas to Houston and the Gulf Coast. Next, I explore the creation of those first Spanish-speaking Baptist churches in Houston. Finally, the chapter ends with an exploration of how Mexican Americans used their churches to mitigate racial discrimination in the local school system by establishing day schools in their churches and to challenge their continued exclusion from Anglo Baptist denominational circles by pressing for a greater role in the organization as insiders.

## **White Baptists, the Doctrine of Segregation, and Mexican Americans**

Anti-black racism and white supremacy were the foundations for the perspective expressed in the Rev. C. D. Daniel's pronouncements about the dangers posed by the foreign blood and other tongues of non-white, non-English speaking residents of Texas. Although there were several groups that his Committee on Citizens of Other Tongues included in the 1910s, such as Mexicans, Germans, Czechs, Italians, Russians, and Swedes, the group that constituted the largest "problem" for white Baptists was Mexicans, both numerically and culturally. The chairman of the Committee on Citizens of Other Tongues, the Rev. A. Finch, explained the dilemma in his 1912 report. He said that "they of the strange tongue" come to Texas "to teach or be taught; to assimilate or be assimilated." And that if Baptists in Texas do not lead the way in teaching and assimilating, then they "will neglect it at [their] peril."<sup>6</sup>

The "problem" was not that Texas's shores and borders would be teeming with unsaved souls but that these newcomers (even though many of them were, in fact, not new at all) could possibly overwhelm the Anglo Protestant way of life, and in Daniel's parlance, may lead to the dilution of white Anglo-Saxon bloodlines. White supremacy was at stake. Just as it had served them in their relationships with African Americans, the doctrine of segregation was the guiding principle in their efforts to win the cultural battle against Mexican Americans. The doctrine of segregation rested on the belief that God had ordained white supremacy and racial purity, and the church had a responsibility to

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<sup>6</sup> BGCT, *Annual* (1912), 152.

police it. Power and control were the chief characteristics of the doctrine of segregation in relationships between white Baptists and Mexican Americans.

### *The Roots of the Problem*

The first permanent Mexican American Baptist ministries in Houston began in 1926, nearly forty years after the first successful Spanish-speaking congregation formed in San Antonio in 1887. Yet the patterns that governed Anglo-Mexican interactions in Houston developed in those forty years before, as Anglos like C. D. Daniel sought to control the leadership and development of Mexican American Baptist evangelism as a means of reinforcing the doctrine of segregation and employing Americanization and evangelization programs. This section, therefore, follows the early interactions of Rev. C. D. Daniel and the pioneering Mexican American Baptist ministers to understand the context out of which Houston ministries emerged.

C. D. Daniel was born in 1857 in Alabama but grew up among *Confederado* emigrants in Brazil until he was a young man. He later served as a missionary in Brazil and Cuba, where he developed a perception of Latin Americans as inferior. These early experiences influenced his approach as a missionary in Texas when he became the general missionary of Spanish-speaking work in 1891. Daniel's leadership of Spanish-speaking Baptist ministries on behalf of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board exemplifies Anglo Baptist paternalism toward

Mexican Americans.<sup>7</sup> In his early interactions with Mexican Americans in Texas in the 1890s, Daniel used his position as a Baptist General Convention of Texas missionary to police the work of Mexican American Baptist ministers and missionaries who were leading churches and preaching in South Texas.

One of the first Mexican Baptist ministers to lead a church in Texas was Manuel Treviño, the pastor of *Primera Iglesia Bautista de San Antonio*. Treviño, a former Methodist deacon and minister, became an ordained Baptist minister in 1888 and began leading the church in San Antonio. Treviño also established churches in San Marcos and New Berlin in the following year, and he seemed to be just the spark Baptist missionaries were looking for to build a successful ministry. At the annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention a year later, the state mission board listed Treviño as a missionary to the Mexicans of Texas and reported, “Bro. Traveno [*sic*] is a mighty man of God among [Mexicans in Texas]. Intelligent, pious, an impassioned orator and an

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<sup>7</sup> *Confederados* were southerner slaveholders who fled the American South before and after the Civil War to avoid the changes that a Confederate loss would bring to their ways of life, particularly their slave society. For more on this emigrant community, see Cyrus B. Dawsey and James M. Dawsey, ed., *The Confederados: Old Immigrants in Brazil* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995). C. D. Daniel began working as the “general missionary to the Mexicans” in 1891 and was later appointed as the statewide director of Spanish-speaking missionary work in Texas in 1899, but the Home Mission Board of the SBC assigned Daniel to work in Cuba in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, an assignment they believed would last three months. Five years later, Daniel returned to Texas and resumed his work among Spanish-speaking Texans. Una Roberts Lawrence, *Winning the Border: Baptist Missions among the Spanish-Speaking Peoples of the Border* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist Convention, Home Mission Board, 1935), 70, 79-81; Benjamin Díaz, *Compendio de Historia de la Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas* (San Antonio, TX: Casa Evangélica de Publicaciones, 1961), 15-21; Joshua Grijalva, *A History of Mexican Baptists in Texas, 1881-1981* (Dallas: Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1982), 15-16; Harold Greer, “Baptists in Western Cuba: From the Wars of Independence to Revolution,” *Cuban Studies* 19 (1989): 64-65; Southern Baptist Convention, “Appendix B. Forty-First Annual Report of the Foreign Mission Board,” *Proceedings (Thirty-First Session—Forty-First Year) of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist Convention, 1886), xxv-xxx; Southern Baptist Convention, “Appendix B. Forty-Third Annual Report of the Foreign Mission Board,” *Proceedings (Thirty-Third Session—Forty-Third Year) of the Southern Baptist Convention, May 11-15, 1888* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist Convention, 1888), xxv; Wayne Flynt, “The Baptists: Southern Religion and Émigrés to Brazil, 1865-1885,” in *The Confederados: Old South Immigrants in Brazil*, ed. Cyrus B. Dawsey and James M. Dawsey (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 113.

intrepid worker, he has won a place in the hearts of all who have heard him, both among our people and his own.”<sup>8</sup>

However, in 1891, when the Baptist General Convention of Texas initially assigned C. D. Daniel to work among Mexicans in Texas, a rivalry developed between Daniel and Treviño. Although contemporary sources offer little insight into the situation, sources familiar with the history of Mexican American Baptists point to a difference in doctrinal issues. Una Roberts Lawrence, an editor for the Home Mission Board, wrote that Daniel had discovered that Treviño and the Mexican American Baptists he had attracted were preaching a doctrine known as Campbellism, a term used by Baptists to describe the doctrines of Alexander Campbell who preached, among other things, that baptism was necessary in order to receive salvation. By contrast, Baptist doctrine held that a believer’s baptism was an outward expression of salvation and not a prerequisite for it.<sup>9</sup>

The state mission board replaced Treviño as pastor of *Primera Iglesia* in San Antonio with Daniel, and it reappointed Treviño as a travelling evangelist among Mexicans in Texas. Daniel evidently remained concerned that since Treviño was such a compelling preacher and that so many Mexican American Baptists supported him, Daniel would have a hard time changing anyone’s views on this doctrinal issue. Daniel resigned as a missionary and accepted an invitation from an Anglo church in San Antonio. Although Treviño continued to preach among Mexicans central and south

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<sup>8</sup>BGCT, *Proceedings* (1889), 19. Between 1888 and 1891, minutes from annual meetings show Manuel Treviño’s name spelled in various incorrect ways, which is reflective of the lack of committed interest from the BGCT leadership in the language and culture of their Mexican American brethren.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, *Winning the Border*, 98-100.



Texas for another two years, he disappeared from Baptist records after 1894. Daniel eventually returned to direct the missionary work among Spanish-speaking Texans in 1907, but Treviño left the Baptist church and resumed his work as a Methodist missionary pastor in Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

*Policing Mexican Americans: Supervision and the Ku Klux Klan*

Daniel used this experience to justify the need for Anglo supervision and formal theological training for Mexican Baptist converts who wished to work in ministry. He began holding intermittent Bible training institutes in San Antonio, Bastrop, and later El Paso after he moved there in 1907. These institutes brought Mexican Baptist ministry workers together for two weeks at a time and focused on basic Baptist theological training.<sup>11</sup> Daniel became the architect of Anglo Baptist missionary work among Mexican Americans. He helped establish the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas* and served as its first president in 1910. Praised by Anglo and Mexican American Baptists alike for his ardent support and leadership on behalf of Texas Mexicans, Daniel nevertheless described Mexicans as lazy, divisive, superstitious, intellectually deficient, doctrinally weak, and “so utterly helpless that unless guided by a wise hand it is a waste of money to undertake work among them.” He even promoted the idea that employing Mexicans was more cost effective because they could work and live on far less than their

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence, *Winning the Border*, 98-100, 105-106; Mexico Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Twenty Second Session of the Mexico Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Mexico City: Mexico Conference, 1906), 9-10, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence, *Winning the Border*, 98-100; Martínez, *Sea La Luz*, 72-74, 78, 135, 165; Oscar Romo, “Hispanic American Southern Baptists: A Historical Overview,” undated, c. 1980, box 16, folder 39, “Hispanic American Baptists – A Historical Overview,” AR 631-4, Home Mission Board, Language Missions Collection, SBHLA.

Anglo counterparts.<sup>12</sup> After more than a decade in El Paso, Daniel had established the Anglo-Mexican Baptist Institute, a mission school for Mexican Baptist religious training, and he had developed a reputation as an advocate of Anglo leadership in local government, an influential religious leader, and an outspoken anti-Catholic publicist.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1920s, Daniel's presence in El Paso brought him into the orbit of a growing movement by Anglos and the Ku Klux Klan to fight the political and cultural influence of Catholics in city government and society. Among the Klan's most ardent supporters in El Paso (as elsewhere) were some seventy-five Protestant ministers, including C. D. Daniel. In the Spanish language Baptist newspaper, *El Atalaya Bautista*, Daniel and other El Paso Baptists wrote impassioned defenses of the Klan, which they viewed as the best hope against a Catholic Church bent on controlling all of American society.<sup>14</sup> After city leaders launched a campaign to remove any and all Klan members from city government, Daniel and other Protestant ministers passed a resolution that condemned the mayor's actions.<sup>15</sup>

Even the local newspaper, the *El Paso Herald*, began publishing stories that attempted to unmask Klansmen and their supporters. In October 1922, the newspaper surveyed Daniel and twenty-one other Protestant ministers to gauge their support of and involvement in the Klan. When asked whether Daniel was or had ever been a member of

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence, *Winning the Border*, 79-81; C. D. Daniel to Mrs. J. B. Gambrell, June 29, 1906, box 14, folder "Correspondence, 1906-1918 (Xerox Copies)," Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas.

<sup>13</sup> Shawn Lay, *War, Revolution, and the Ku Klux Klan: A Study of Intolerance in a Border City* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, University of Texas at El Paso, 1985), 90-91; "Church Propagandists Arrested; Freed by Police Court Judge," *El Paso Herald*, January 10, 1922; C. D. Daniel, "Sermon Predico por el Dr. C. D. Daniel, en la Primera Iglesia Bautista Americana de El Paso, el 22 de Enero de 1922," *El Atalaya Bautista*, February 16, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel, "Sermon."

<sup>15</sup> Lay, *Ku Klux Klan*, 140-141.

the Klan, he replied, “I have a right to join any organization I want to without being questioned about it.” He followed this veiled admission of membership saying, “I’m in sympathy with the Klan, with Americanism, with the enforcement of the laws, and with the cutting out of everything that swears allegiance to a foreign institution.”<sup>16</sup> Although the Klan’s influence began to decline in El Paso and throughout Texas during the following few years, Daniel continued to promote the Klan and its ideology. On behalf of the organization, he translated the Klan’s message into Spanish at Mexican American Baptist churches and at *Convención* meetings between 1922 and 1925.<sup>17</sup>

In July 1923, for example, Mexican American Baptist pastors and ministry workers from churches throughout North, Central, and South Texas gathered at *Templo Bautista* in San Marcos for the annual meeting of the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas (Convención)*. On the second evening, as the president of the *Convención*, Donato Ruiz, led the crowd in a devotional service, a group of fourteen men clad in white robes and hoods filed into the church and marched silently to the front of the sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> The Klansmen’s unexpected visit frightened many of the attendees and put them on edge.<sup>19</sup> The leader of the group handed Ruiz an envelope with fifty-three dollars and took the

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<sup>16</sup> “El Paso Ministers Sympathize with Ku Klux Klan Work,” *El Paso Herald*, October 11, 1922.

<sup>17</sup> C. D. Daniel, “Sermon Predico por el Dr. C. D. Daniel, en la Primera Iglesia Bautista Americana de El Paso, el 22 de Enero de 1922,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, February 16, 1922; E. G. Dominguez, “Los Ku Klux Klan,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, October 19, 1922; Billie Mayfield, “Mexican Congregation Visited by Members of Ku Klux Klan,” *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly*, August 16, 1922; “Los Klanes en San Marcos,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923; Josías Villarreal, “Cronica de la Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, San Marcos, Julio 18 de 1923,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923; Donato Ruiz, “Paso Y Volo La Convección,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 16, 1923.

<sup>18</sup> “Los Klanes en San Marcos,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923, 498; Josías Villarreal, “Cronica de la Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, San Marcos, Julio 18 de 1923,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923, 501; Donato Ruiz, “Paso Y Volo La Convección,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 16, 1923, 517-518.

<sup>19</sup> Ruiz, “Paso Y Volo La Convección,” 517.

pulpit to address the crowd.<sup>20</sup> As the Klansman spoke in English, Rev. C. D. Daniel translated his message to Spanish.<sup>21</sup> The Klansman told them that his organization valued the principles of Jesus Christ and that the Klan stood for justice and freedom of conscience. Before the Klansmen left, the speaker told the crowd of anxious listeners that people of good conduct who followed the law had nothing to fear from the Klan.<sup>22</sup> During similar visits between 1922 and 1925, the Klan interrupted Mexican American Baptist gatherings to assert their status as keepers of “law and order,” and they did so at the invitation of local white Baptist churches and associations who acted as spokespersons for the group and sometimes donned white robes themselves.

Policing the activities of Mexican American Baptists fell squarely within the platforms of both the Ku Klux Klan and white Southern Baptists. Although the Klan of the 1860s targeted mainly African Americans and white Republican sympathizers, the second Klan adopted a different stance to support its more complex identity. By the 1910s and 1920s, Klan members and supporters embraced a white identity based on one

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<sup>20</sup> “Los Klanes en San Marcos,” 498; Villarreal, “Croncia de la Convención,” 501; Ruiz, “Paso y Volo la Convención,” 517-518.

<sup>21</sup> Ruiz, “Paso y Volo la Convención,” 518.

<sup>22</sup> From 1922 until 1925, the Ku Klux Klan terrorized and intimidated Mexican American Baptists during similar visits at churches in El Paso (1922), Bastrop (1922), Pearsall (1923), and Uvalde (1924), and at another *Convención* meeting in Kerrville (1925). Each time, Klansmen arrived during an evening service, invaded the sanctuary, and addressed their shocked audiences from the pulpit with the help of an Anglo Baptist translator. Their message was always that they supported Mexican American Baptists’ evangelism among Spanish-speaking Texans as anti-Catholic work and that as long as they were honest and respectful of the law, they would not experience any harassment from their local Klan. Villarreal, “Croncia de la Convención,” 501; Billie Mayfield, “Mexican Congregation Visited by Members of Ku Klux Klan,” *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly*, August 16, 1922; “Los Klanes en San Marcos,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923, 498; Josías Villarreal, “Cronica de la Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, San Marcos, Julio 18 de 1923,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 9, 1923, 501; Donato Ruiz, “Paso Y Volo La Convección,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, August 16, 1923; F. B. Fernandez, “Pearsall, Texas,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, September 20, 1923; Miguel Liñan, “Uvalde, Texas,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, September 4, 1924; E. G. Dominguez, “La XVI Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, July 30, 1925.

hundred percent Americanism and an assumed Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage. This identity required the new Klan to broaden its targets to include groups of people who were outside of those categories. In Texas and the Southwest, this meant Mexicans and Mexican Americans. In the minds of many white Texans (including Baptists), Mexican Americans' linguistic differences, a preponderance of Catholics among them, their alleged obedience to a foreign Pope, and a supposedly inferior bloodline disqualified them from any share of white or American identity. Their presence in the Southwest made them a potential threat to white supremacy and white Protestant cultural dominance. Just as white Baptists supported the Klan's platform against African Americans, they also supported the organization's efforts to control Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Anti-Mexican racism and Klan activity went hand-in-hand in places like El Paso, San Antonio, Bastrop, and San Marcos. In the 1920s, these areas became cultural battlegrounds as the populations of both Anglo and Mexican Texans increased. As in El Paso, Anglos who had recently arrived recoiled over the numerical and cultural presence of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. But in places like Houston or Dallas, the major axis of racial conflict was on the black-white color line. Klan activity (often in the form of vigilante mob violence or other extra-legal policing) occurred in places where Anglos formed a small majority over a significantly large minority population.<sup>23</sup> In Central and

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Buenger, *The Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas between Reconstruction and the Great Depression* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 22-24; Stewart Emory Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Cynthia Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

South Texas in the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican Americans had sufficiently large enough populations to become targets; in places North and East Texas, African Americans composed a much larger portion of the population than Mexican Americans did.

The majority of Klan activity in Houston targeted African American and white Catholic communities, and local Anglo Baptist support of their platform largely reflected the prevalence of a black-white dynamic in the city's racial structure. In areas of Texas with a larger proportion of Mexican Americans, Anglo Baptists showed remarkably similar tendencies to project their fears of losing what they perceived as their racial and cultural purity onto Mexican Americans. And while each of the Klan visits to Mexican American Baptist churches occurred over one hundred miles from Houston, some of the Mexican American Baptist pastors who attended the *Convención* meetings in 1923 and 1925 were the same people who established the first Mexican American Baptist missions in the Bayou City in 1926. The first pastor of *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston*, the Reverend Miqueas D. Godinez, left his church in San Marcos to lead the Houston church.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, an absence of such overtly intimidating actions by the Klan against Mexican American Baptists in Houston likely indicates that they did not register as a problematic population for Anglo Baptists the same way African Americans

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<sup>24</sup> Matias Garcia, "The Baptist Mission Fields in Texas," n.d., box 13, folder 39, "Articles," AR 361, Una Lawrence Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN; Concepción Gutierrez and Victoria P. de Hernandez, "Historia de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Houston, Texas," June 1960, box 24 of 40, folder, "Esteban L. Flores (1 of 7)," Hispanic Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; Emma Villanueva, Maria Torres, and Daniel Torres, "Breve Resumen Historico de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston, Texas," box 13 of 40, folder, "Houston, TX – P.I.B.," Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas.

did. Still, Anglo leaders like Daniel played a major role in developing a pattern of relating to Mexican American communities.

Although by the 1920s, Daniel was no longer an executive official of the *Convención*, he was still influential: he presided over the ordination of new Mexican Baptist ministers; he supervised the formation of new churches throughout the state; he remained involved in the preachers' institutes in Bastrop and San Antonio; and he directed his Anglo-Mexican Baptist Institute in El Paso. Daniel also spoke to Anglo Baptist audiences on behalf of Mexican Baptists, and what they heard was often filtered through Daniel's perspectives.<sup>25</sup>

As we read in Chapter II, Union Association missionary J. D. Brannon confirmed the influence of perspectives like Daniel's in his 1939 *Gulf Coast Baptist* column, "Are We Practical Missionaries?" He wrote, "Negroes and Mexicans make a very large percentage [sic] of the population of Houston, and indeed of all South Texas." Still though, "*It is but proper that they have their own church, and they have them.*"<sup>26</sup> Anglos in Union Association believed that through separation and supervision, they could provide the kind of ministries people of color would need in order to flourish on their own. In Houston, Anglo Baptists exhibited a sense of racial and cultural superiority through mission programs that focused on Americanization, and they adopted a paternalistic supervision over Mexican American Baptist churches.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see Estaban Torres, "Navasota, Texas," *El Atalaya Bautista*, November 9, 1922; Tiburcio Ruiz, "Bryan, Texas: Organización de Una Nueva Iglesia Bautista," *El Atalaya Bautista*, September 14, 1922; C. D. Daniel, "Mexican Bible Institute," *Baptist Standard*, August 8, 1912; B. Díaz, "Marlin, Tex.," *El Atalaya Bautista*, September 18, 1924.

<sup>26</sup> J. D. Brannon, "Are We Practical Missionaries," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 24, 1939 (emphasis in original).

## Anglo Baptists in Houston: Missionaries of Americanization

In the 1920s and 1930s, Anglo Baptists in Houston tended to interact with Mexican Americans only from a distance. Houston's highly segregated residential areas determined, to a certain extent, which Anglo churches directly engaged Mexican American communities and which ones either contributed the Mexican American missions only financially or not at all. Anglo churches adjacent to the growing Mexican American neighborhoods east of downtown Houston, such as First Baptist Church, Second Baptist Church, and Magnolia Park Baptist Church, tended to be the ones that contributed to the growth of Mexican American Baptist churches in *Segundo Barrio* and Magnolia Park.<sup>27</sup> The relationships established between Anglo churches or Union Baptist Association and Mexican American Baptist churches reflected the paternalism and racism emblematic of those interactions throughout the state. One of the earliest organized attempts to minister among Spanish-speaking Houstonians was the Mexican Good Will Center, a community center and clinic similar to other settlement houses in

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<sup>27</sup> M. D. Godínez, "Historical Outline of the Foundation of Baptist Work among the Mexicans in the City of Houston, Texas," undated, c. 1930, box 14, folder 35, "Pamphlets – Texas," AR 631, Una Lawrence Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN; Concepción Gutierrez and Victoria P. de Hernandez, "Historia de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Houston, Texas," June 1960, box 24 of 40, folder "Esteban L. Flores (1 of 7)," Hispanic Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; "Breves Datos de Historia – Segunda Iglesia Bautista de Houston, Texas," in "Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston, (Brochure) – 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, 1976," box 13, folder "Houston, Texas – Segunda I. B.," Hispanic Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; El hermano Arnulfo González, de Houston, Texas, "El Atalaya Bautista," June 17, 1920; Silverio Linares, "Memoria Orales de Silverio Linares," interview by Alcides Guajardo on two occasions from 29 January to 12 February 1979 in Houston, transcript (Waco, TX: Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 1980).



the early twentieth century. The major components of the program and work at the center were evangelization and Americanization.

### *Settlement Houses and Americanization*

Motivated by a sense of religious duty, Baptist women in Houston, just like many other Protestant, middle-class men and women throughout the Southwest, initiated programs designed partly to alleviate the effects of poverty, particularly for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, but primarily to convert and Americanize Spanish-speaking Texans through Protestantism, American culture, literacy, job training, and English language instruction. The most significant programs at the community level were settlement houses and neighborhood centers. Southern Baptist women in the Women's Missionary Union established settlement houses as well but called them Good Will Centers to avoid pushback from the Southern Baptist Convention over too close an association with the social gospel.<sup>28</sup> In 1928, the Anglo women of First Baptist Church Houston established the Mexican Good Will Center in the Second Ward as part of Union Association's city missions program.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wayne Flynt, "Not an Island unto Itself: Southern Baptists and the New Theological Trends (Liberalism, Ecumenism, and the Social Gospel), 1890-1940," *American Baptist Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2003): 172.

<sup>29</sup> The settlement house movement began in England at the end of the nineteenth century and made its way into northern industrial cities in the United States as a way for religiously motivated Progressives to apply the social gospel to the problems related to the growth of large cities. Although most of the well-known settlement houses were in northern cities, religious and secular men and women in the Southwest established similar institutions in places like El Paso, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, Corpus Christi, and Houston. But these institutions combined their programs with an Americanization program that would replace visitors' culture with that of Anglo Protestants. Teresa Palomo Acosta, María-Cristina García, and Cynthia E. Orozco, "Settlement Houses," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pwsgr>; María Cristina García, "Agents of Americanization: Rusk Settlement and the Houston Mexicano Community, 1907-1950," in *Mexican*

Most of the settlement house workers in Texas were white women from middle and upper class, Protestant backgrounds, who were among the growing group of affluent women to earn college degrees at the turn of the century. In an era of rather limited career opportunities for women, the settlement house movement provided an outlet for their training and moral concern. Many of the women who chose settlement house work moved from their sheltered and privileged neighborhoods and lived near the settlement houses, located amid the poor areas of the city.<sup>30</sup>

The settlement house movement took root in Houston in 1907 with the establishment of the Rusk Settlement House and the Settlement Association of Houston. Historian Maria Christina Garcia's study of Rusk, a long-standing settlement in Houston, demonstrates that like similar northern institutions, Rusk focused on providing social services, public education, day care, food, recreation, English language instruction, and American "culture" to the Mexican families living in *Segundo Barrio*. Sybil Campbell, an elementary school teacher at Rusk Elementary, helped establish Rusk and an umbrella organization, the Houston Settlement Association, in 1907 with other women from her First Presbyterian Church Ladies Association.<sup>31</sup>

In the Houston Settlement Association's 1909 annual report, leaders of the association defined their work as a "social settlement" as opposed to a "religious

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*Americans in Texas History: Selected Essays*, ed. Emilio Zamora, Cynthia Orozco, and Rodolfo Rocha (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2000), 121-122; Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33-50.

<sup>30</sup> Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 38; García, "Agents of Americanization," in Zamora, Orozco, and Rocha, 122; Acosta, García, and Orozco, "Settlement Houses."

<sup>31</sup> Settlement Association of Houston, *Settlement Association of Houston: Year Book, 1909* (Houston: Houston Settlement Association, 1909), 12.

settlement or institutional church.”<sup>32</sup> Even so, by the summer of 1926, an upswing in Methodist volunteers led to the introduction of two Bible classes.<sup>33</sup> By the 1920s the major thrust of the Houston Settlement Association and Rusk was “teaching [Mexicanos] to be Americans” as a way to help immigrants avoid stigmatization by unfriendly Anglos, primarily through English classes.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Mexican Good Will Center*

While the Houston Settlement Association downplayed evangelism or religious training in its institutions for Mexican Americans, Baptists and other denominations also maintained similar institutions. But these prioritized proselytization and Americanization alongside providing the kinds of social services found at Rusk. Two years after Mexican Baptists started a church in *Segundo Barrio* in East Houston, an Anglo woman who was a city missionary at First Baptist Church Houston, Mrs. E Creekmore, led a campaign among fellow Anglo Baptists in the city to raise money to buy land and build a church that could support Mexican Baptist evangelism and accommodate a settlement house. In December 1928, the Mexican Baptist congregation opened the doors to its new two-story house of worship. The first floor housed regular church services and activities, and the second floor held *el Centro de Buena Voluntad*, the Mexican Good Will Center.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Settlement Association of Houston, *Year Book, 1909*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Corrinne Tsanoff, *Neighborhood Doorways: Neighborhood Centers Association of Houston and Harris County* (Houston: Neighborhood Centers Association of Houston and Harris Country, 1958), 17, 19.

<sup>34</sup> García, “Agents of Americanization,” in Zamora, Orozco, and Rocha, 131.

<sup>35</sup> H. L. Davis and Robert E. Pugh, UBA (1930), “Report of Mexican Mission of Houston,” 51-52; Mrs. R. C. Nitze, “Mexican Baptist Good Will Center,” in Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 85-86; Emma Villanueva, Maria Torres, and Daniel Torres, “Breve Resumen Historico de la Primera Iglesia

The Good Will Center maintained a program that emphasized medical services, Americanization, and evangelism to “reach those who attend in Christian service and training, and to direct them into the ministry and activity of nearby churches.”<sup>36</sup> During the week, the Good Will Center operated a medical clinic equipped with experienced nurses, volunteer doctors and dentists, medicine, and medical equipment. The center treated at least 471 patients in the first six months of operation, 2,957 during the following year, and an average of 35 per week by 1940.<sup>37</sup> The Good Will Center’s Americanization programs, however, centered on English instruction, job training (mostly through cooking and sewing classes), and mothers’ clubs. The “Mothers Club” taught parenting skills and attempted to build community among younger Mexican women. They also provided childcare and education in the form of a kindergarten, daily afternoon children’s clubs, and a drama club.<sup>38</sup> Targeting mothers and children was a strategic decision on the part of Baptist missionaries in Houston and similar locations elsewhere. According to the Woman’s City Union, they adopted this plan to reach entire homes and make cultural and religious changes through the future generation.<sup>39</sup> By the

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Bautista Mexicana de Houston, Texas,” 1977, box 13 of 40, folder “Houston, TX – P.I.B.,” Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; Concepción Gutierrez and Victoria P. de Hernandez, “Historia de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Houston, Texas,” 1960, box 24 of 40, folder “Esteban L. Flores (1 of 7),” Hispanic Baptist Archives (TBHC).

<sup>36</sup> Loyd Corder, “The Good Will Center,” n.d., file 8.11, “Corder, Loyd (Director-Missions, Spanish Missions) – 1946-1961, Folder 1 of 2,” AR 631-3, Home Mission Board Executive Office Files, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (hereafter cited as SBHLA), Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>37</sup> Davis and Pugh, UBA (1930), “Mexican Mission,” 51-52; Nitze, “Mexican Baptist Good Will Center,” in Pevoto, 85; Villanueva, Torres, and Torres, “Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston, Texas,” Hispanic Archives (TBHC).

<sup>38</sup> “Boletín Bautista: Houston, Texas, Noviembre de 1930,” box 14, folder 7, “Clippings (Mexicans),” AR 631, Una Lawrence Papers (SBHLA).

<sup>39</sup> Mrs. R. C. Nitze, “Mexican Baptist Good Will Center,” in Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 85. George J. Sanchez argues that Americanization programs routinely targeted Mexican immigrant women in an effort to transform the cultural values of an entire community because of the role that

end of the 1930s, the Good Will Center's non-medical programs had enrolled 303 individuals, representing approximately 150 different families in the area.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, the health and educational services that the neighborhood center provided were reaching an acute need.

A major difference in the goals of secular and religious community centers was that the Good Will Center prioritized conversion, believing that the solution to social problems could be found through changing individual hearts. In her 1931 annual report, the first chairwoman of the Good Will Center stated that the primary objective was to attract visitors to evangelize, or "to win souls for Christ."<sup>41</sup> To that end, the pastor of *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana*, the Rev. M. D. Godínez, and his wife were usually at the center, along with volunteers from Union Association, to preach and evangelize among the visitors. From 1930 until 1940, Union Association reported annual church

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Mexican women played in raising children and managing homes. George J. Sanchez, "'Go after the Women': Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant Woman, 1915-1929," in *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History*, ed. Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 475-494.

<sup>40</sup> Nitze, "Mexican Baptist Good Will Center," 86.

<sup>41</sup> Mrs. E. Creekmore, J. P. Rutledge, A. K. Pevoto, UBA (1931), "The Mexican Baptist Mission," 51; Carol Crawford Holcomb, "Mothering the South: The Influence of Gender and the Social Gospel on the Social Views of the Leadership of Woman's Missionary Union, Auxiliary to Southern Baptist Convention, 1888-1930" (PhD diss, Baylor University, 1999), 197-203. Holcomb points to an emphasis on conversion, a lack of nonsectarian programs, non-resident social workers as a way to break down barriers, and a lack of engagement with ideas of democracy as a reasons why Good Will Centers have not been considered part of the settlement house movement. Nevertheless, my research into Good Will Center in Houston shows that it shared many of the settlement house movement's broader goals and structure. Moreover, the women of Houston who worked at the center also lived there or in the same neighborhood and applied an Americanization curriculum and program consistent with similar institutions elsewhere, especially in Texas. The 1940 Federal Census lists the address of Lilly Tracy, who had worked at the Good Will Center since 1935, of 2720 Bering Street, which was the location of the Mexican Good Will Center. Lilly Tracy, 1940 United States Federal Census, Houston, Harris County, Texas, T627, roll 4194, page 10B, ED 258-137, Ancestry.com, *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2012). See also, Carol Holcomb, "The Kingdom at Hand: The Social Gospel and the Personal Service Department of Woman's Missionary Union, Auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention," *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (Spring 2000): 49-66; Betsy Flowers, "Southern Baptist Evangelists or Social Gospel Liberals? The Woman's Missionary Union and Social Reform, 1888-1928," *American Baptist Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (June 2000): 106-128.

membership additions through the Good Will Center ranging from fifteen to thirty individuals.<sup>42</sup> Compared to the number of people who visited the center annually for the health and social services, the results of the proselytizing efforts suggest that the visitors to the center were more interested in the social services than they were in the Bible studies and religious services. Even so, the total membership at *Primera Iglesia* had risen from 78 in 1927 to 267 in 1933.<sup>43</sup>

The Good Will Center was located near other similar institutions and several different churches for Spanish-speaking Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. By 1930, there were at least two other community centers within a short distance: the Rusk Settlement House and a community center and clinic operated by the National Catholic Women's Association were located a few blocks closer to downtown.<sup>44</sup> There were also several other Protestant churches in the area: two Mexican Presbyterian churches, a Mexican Methodist Episcopal church, two Mexican Pentecostal churches, and the Catholic church designated for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.<sup>45</sup> Baptists were in tight competition for the souls of Mexican Americans in Houston, so it should come as no surprise that the Good Will Center was unable to draw in more members through its health and social services.

Sometimes that competition was particularly challenging, even violent. The missionaries who worked at the Good Will Center reported early on that they “found

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<sup>42</sup> “Boletín Bautista: Houston, Texas, Noviembre de 1930,” box 14, folder 7, “Clippings (Mexicans),” Una Lawrence Papers (SBHLA).

<sup>43</sup> Membership statistics from UBA (1927) and UBA (1933).

<sup>44</sup> “Houston’s ‘Little Mexico’ Is a City within a City,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 9, 1930.

<sup>45</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 28, 57.

some people very hostile to [the] cause, especially among the active Catholics.”<sup>46</sup> And “[w]hen the new buildings were first established and occupied, frequently stones and brick bats were hurled against the sides and walls of the building during worship. Many times lights were broken and other damage done.”<sup>47</sup> The fact that Catholics were openly hostile to Baptist efforts in the *colonia* could indicate that they were making a sizeable enough impact to make Catholic leaders feel threatened. It also underscores what historian Gastón Espinosa has argued: converting “to any tradition other than Catholicism came at a price.”<sup>48</sup>

While to some extent, the religious economy of downtown Houston made it a “buyer’s market,” choosing a faith tradition outside of the Catholic tradition could alienate fellow community and family members and even attract outright hostility.<sup>49</sup> Yet, because the market was so saturated with options, Mexican Americans could be selective, engaging in what historian Vicki Ruiz calls “cultural coalescence.” They could

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Cheney, “Report of Mexican Work, from July 1 to September 30,” in UBA (1921), 30-31. Walter Cheney had attempted to distribute religious information among Spanish-speaking Houstonians in 1921 and conducted a survey of Mexican neighborhoods, which yielded the following information: “Magnolia Park, 3,273 by actual count; Height annex, 700 estimate; between Main and Heights, 1500 estimate; between Main Street and Central Park, 1,000 estimate; all others, 500; total estimated, 6,973.”

<sup>47</sup> Mrs. E. Creekmore, J. P. Rutledge, A. K. Pevoto, “The Mexican Baptist Mission,” in UBA (1931), 51.

<sup>48</sup> Accounts of antagonism between Mexican Catholics and Protestants are common in first hand accounts and the secondary literature. Most recently, in *Latino Pentecostals in America*, Gastón Espinosa describes several instances of Catholic antagonism, some of which resulted in murder. Gastón Espinosa, *Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 147-148, 220. For a discussion of how the relationship between Latino Catholics and Protestants has changed over time, see Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists*, 115-136.

<sup>49</sup> Felipe Hinojosa similarly argues that ethnic Mexican conversions to the Mennonite Church through social ministries was part of trend in which Mexican Americans changed religious affiliation for their families’ best interests. Those best interests sometimes were driven by their immediate and long-term physical needs. Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 24; Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 49. For a discussion of the longer history of America’s religious economy, see Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

“pick, borrow, retain, and create distinctive cultural forms.”<sup>50</sup> Even in spite of the Americanization program that accompanied many of the benefits the Good Will Center provided, Mexican Americans engaged because the services it offered met real and immediate physical needs. Sometimes, as the membership numbers attest, they also engaged in the spiritual services as well.

The Anglo Baptist missionaries who worked at the Good Will Center and those who supported it through volunteer work and donations may have intended to help Mexican Americans adjust to life in Houston. Yet the program they advanced emphasized in both implicit and explicit ways that Anglo Baptists perceived ethnic Mexicans as childlike, inferior, and deficient. While the doctrine of segregation as applied to Mexican Americans did not preclude interactions between white and Mexican Houstonians, it did call for separation and supervision. Despite the inherent racism in Anglo Baptist missions to Mexican Americans, the Spanish-speaking communities that became Baptists had other visions for what Mexican American Baptists could do and achieve with their own ministries.

### **Mexican American Baptists: Institutions of Their Own**

Mexican American Baptist history includes more than simply what Anglo Baptists did to or for Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The story of Mexican American Baptists in Houston, in particular, highlights how Mexican

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<sup>50</sup> Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 50.



Americans led the way in initiating their own ministries, which they used to address the racism they faced in the city and to challenge their marginalization from within Baptist denominational circles. Although most Mexican American Baptist churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began under the supervision of a supporting Anglo-led Baptist church and association, Mexican American Baptist leaders began forming and managing their own institutions after the 1910s. Therefore, the first Mexican American Baptist church in Houston began in 1926 as an independent autonomous church thanks to the initiative of *Convención* leaders. This church and those that formed in the following years became shelters from the challenges of the Great Depression, and they became the anchors of community formation for small groups of Mexican Americans in Houston.

#### *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas*

During a preachers' institute in Bastrop in 1909, Mexican Baptist ministers began to consider forming a convention of their own that could support and promote Mexican Baptist ministries throughout Texas and the Southwest. The ministers chose a committee to study the situation and report to the entire group with recommendations the following year. With the help of select Anglo Baptist leaders who were particularly drawn to ministries with Spanish-speaking communities, such as Paul C. Bell, Mary Gambrell, and C. D. Daniel, Mexican American Baptist ministers in Texas gathered in San Antonio at *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana* on May 25, 1910 to organize an official statewide convention for Mexican American Baptist churches, *Convención*

*Bautista Mexicana de Texas*.<sup>51</sup> At the meeting in San Antonio, the committee delivered its report, which emphasized that the ability to efficiently and collectively manage their own ministries was the primary motivation behind their desire to form a convention of their own. And they also expressed, “We believe that since many of our people do not speak English, we do not always profit from the English-speaking associations and conventions.”<sup>52</sup> They understood that Anglo Baptists perceived Mexican Americans as a population to convert, but rarely as potential collaborators in “winning the border.”<sup>53</sup>

Anglo Baptists viewed Mexican American Baptists as a gateway to making inroads with Protestantism in Mexico. Anglo missionary strategies in the early twentieth century assumed that Mexican American Baptists were in the United States temporarily and that they would spread the Baptist message when they returned to Mexico.<sup>54</sup> In reality, Mexican Americans and Mexicans who became Baptists were the ones responsible for the growth and maintenance of sustained Baptist ministries among

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<sup>51</sup> Joshua Grijalva, *A History of Mexican Baptists in Texas 1881-1981: Comprising an Account of the Genesis, the Progress, and the Accomplishments of the People Called “los bautistas de Texas”* (Dallas: Baptist General Convention of Texas, 1982), 25. Mrs. J. B. Gambrell was an ardent supporter of Mexican Baptist institutions throughout Texas and was instrumental in the formation of the Mexican Baptist Convention. Paul C. Bell was the personal financier and longtime director of a Mexican Baptist Bible Institute in Bastrop, Texas.

<sup>52</sup> *Minutas de la Primera Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, el Día 25 de Mayo de 1910* (San Antonio: Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, 1910), 2. A translation of this report is reprinted in Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists in Texas*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> The phrase “winning the border” comes from the title of a 1935 publication written by Una Roberts Lawrence. Lawrence was a missionary to Latin America, and she was a denominational worker and author for the Women’s Missionary Union and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Her book on Southern Baptist work along the U.S.-Mexico border, *Winning the Border: Baptist Missions among the Spanish-Speaking Peoples of the Border*, was intended to facilitate Anglo Baptist mission study groups.

<sup>54</sup> Although the reality was the reverse of this (with the first *Mexicano* pastors coming from Mexico), Southern Baptists assumed that Mexican Americans were foreigners in their own cities and communities. This perspective appears in both the primary and secondary literature. Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Seventy-First Session, Eighty-First Year, Houston, Texas, May 12-16, 1926* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1926), 269; Martínez, *Sea la Luz*, 33-36.

Spanish-speaking Texans. Therefore, based on the committee's report, Mexican American Baptist messengers to the first convention approved the establishment of the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas (Convención)*.<sup>55</sup>

The *Convención* proved to be a boon for Spanish-speaking Baptist work in Texas, especially in Central Texas.<sup>56</sup> One particularly significant pastor and missionary from the region was the Reverend Guillermo Ibarra, who began his ministry after he became a Baptist around 1890. Before 1910, he led Spanish-speaking Baptist churches in Cotulla and Pearsall, and also preached at churches in Devine, Frio, and Laredo. He later moved to Bryan after 1911 and established *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Bryan* in 1922, the first Spanish-speaking church of any kind in the Brazos Valley. After the Home Mission Board hired him in 1920, Ibarra expanded Mexican American Baptist

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<sup>55</sup> *Minutas de la Primera Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, el Día 25 de Mayo de 1910* (San Antonio: Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, 1910), 2. A translation of this report is reprinted in Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists in Texas*, 25. The *Convención* formed just two years after a similar Presbyterian organization formed in 1908, the Texas-Mexican Presbytery. Like the Tex-Mex and Mexican Methodist work in Texas, Mexican Baptists struggled to fund their churches, which required financial support from Anglo churches and denominational organizations. They also relied on Anglo-led theological institutions for pastoral training and ordination. However, some of many differences between the two organizations were the make-up of its core leadership and its rate of growth. According to historians R. Douglas Brackenridge, Francisco García-Treto, and Paul Barton, the Tex-Mex Presbytery was mostly dominated by Anglo Americans. Conversely, while there were Anglo American leaders of the *Convención*, the majority of its executives were Mexican Americans. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of Baptist churches' emphasis on the autonomy of local congregations meant that there was a greater ability to control their own churches, even if they were receiving financial support from the SBC or BGCT. While the Tex-Mex churches dwindled as the twentieth century wore on, Mexican Baptists multiplied. According to Paul Barton, the number of Baptist churches grew from 25 in 1920 to 60 (with 66 missions) by 1926. By 1963, there were 418 churches and 68 missions. See R. Douglas Brackenridge and Francisco García-Treto, *Iglesia Presbiteriana: A History of Presbyterians and Mexican Americans in the Southwest* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 23, 108, 122; Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists*, 152-154, 157-160.

<sup>56</sup> The Tex-Mex Presbytery also experienced an initial boom in Central Texas in the years after its founding. More than likely, this was partly a result of immigration increases, internal migration, and the agricultural successes related to the Winter Gardens regions of South Texas that pulled more migrants farther North. Brackenridge and García-Treto, *Iglesia Presbiteriana*, 90-91; Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists*, 158. See also, David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 106-128.

ministries throughout Central Texas in towns along the Brazos River Valley. He also organized the first Spanish-speaking Baptist association in 1925. Along with the pastors of Mexican Baptist churches in Hearne, Somerville, Rosebud, Cameron, and Navasota, he formed the Central Mexican Baptist Association for mutual aid and to create greater strength and unity in their collective missionary efforts.<sup>57</sup>

### *Mexican American Baptist Beginnings in Houston*

The leadership of Ibarra and a cadre of other Mexican American Baptists in Central Texas nurtured the first Mexican Baptist missions along the Gulf of Mexico, including in the Houston area. Ibarra, fellow pastor Miqueas D. Godínez from San Marcos, and an influential Anglo missionary among Mexican Baptists, Paul C. Bell, began visiting the budding Mexican *colonia* in 1925 to initiate a permanent Mexican American Baptist church in Houston. In their initial visits, they found countless Anglo churches in Magnolia Park, *Segundo Barrio*, and other neighborhoods with significant Mexican populations, and they also located a few groups of Mexican American Baptists. Yet they found no evidence of sustained ministries by Anglo Baptist churches in the area. According to Godínez, when they reported to the *Convención*, “Baptists from other cities almost took offense to hear that no Baptist work among Mexicans existed [in Houston], although the American Baptist Churches of Houston were strong enough to

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<sup>57</sup> “Central Baptist Association of Mexican Churches,” *Bryan Eagle*, May 14, 1925; Brazos County Baptist Association, *Minutes of the Third Annual Meeting of the Brazos Co. Baptist Association, October 22–23, 1925*, 19; David J. Cameron, “The Reverend Guillermo Ibarra: A Legacy of Accommodation and Resistance through Religion and Education in the Brazos Valley,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (April 2016): 355-376.

sustain the work.”<sup>58</sup> On May 2, 1926, Ibarra brought a young pastor he had been training, Rudolf Gutierrez, and his wife to Houston and established the first Mexican Baptist mission on Schrimpf Alley, in *el Barrio del Alacrán*, with the couple as the two charter members.<sup>59</sup>

Later that month, from May 12-16, 1926, the Southern Baptist Convention held its annual meeting in Houston. Ministers supported by the Home Mission Board and the *Convención*, including Ibarra, Donato Ruiz, Victor Gonzalez, Leonardo Ortiz, Paul C. Bell, and A. N. Porter, attended the meeting to voice their concerns about the lack of interest in Mexican American evangelization among Anglos churches. Speaking on behalf of the group, Porter and Ruiz reported to the convention attendees about the state of Mexican Baptist ministry in Texas and implored them to devote more attention and resources to the work.<sup>60</sup> Their presence at the Houston meeting began to stir interest among mission-minded Houstonians, particularly among the Anglo Baptist women who later contributed to the Mexican Good Will Center.

In the weeks that followed, Ibarra, Bell, and Gutierrez held regular tent meetings throughout the barrios, which began to attract potential followers. However, in June, Gutierrez’s wife gave birth to a daughter, Aurora Gutierrez, who soon became ill and passed away a few weeks later. The death of Gutierrez’s daughter proved too much for

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<sup>58</sup> M. D. Godínez, “Bosquejo Histórico de la Fundación de la Obra Bautista entre los Mexicanos de la Ciudad de Houston, Texas,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, May 1930; M. D. Godínez, “Historical Outline of the Foundation of Baptist Work among the Mexicans in the City of Houston, Texas,” undated, c. 1930, box 14, folder 35, “Pamphlets – Texas,” AR 631, Una Lawrence Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN.

<sup>59</sup> Godínez, “Historical Outline,” Lawrence Papers, SBHLA.

<sup>60</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, Seventy-First Session, Eighty-First Year, Houston, Texas, May 12-16, 1926* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1926), 97-98, 268-269.

his young family, so they decided to leave Houston. Over the next three months, Ibarra, Bell, and other ministers from Central Texas continued to visit *el Barrio del Alacrán* and attracted a steady following. At the beginning of August, a small group of three families gathered to organize the mission into a church. During a worship service in a small house on Buffalo Street on August 10, 1926, fifteen initial members established *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston (Primera Iglesia)* and chose Godínez as their pastor.<sup>61</sup>

Although records exist of sporadic Mexican Baptist evangelism supported by Anglo Baptists in Houston before the 1920s, no permanent Mexican Baptist churches took root until Mexican Americans took over the work themselves in 1926.<sup>62</sup> The pioneering efforts of the Mexican American Baptist leaders who formed the *Convención* in 1910 created the network of Mexican American ministers who could tend to the early Houston churches. From these initial foundations, Mexican Baptists established another two churches in Houston by the early 1930s, *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana* and Central Mexican Baptist Church.<sup>63</sup>

It is worth noting that *Primera Iglesia* began as an independent church and not as a mission of any particular Anglo church. However, the small church lacked the resources necessary to sustain itself, so the pastor worked with a group of women from

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<sup>61</sup> Esther Alvarado, “Grandes Bendiciones del Señor en Houston, Texas,” *El Atalaya Bautista*, October 10, 1926, 723.

<sup>62</sup> Godínez, “Historical Outline,” Lawrence Papers, SBHLA.

<sup>63</sup> “Breves Datos de Historia – Segunda Iglesia Bautista de Houston, Texas,” *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston*, Brochure, 1976, Box 13 of 40, folder, “Houston, Texas – Segunda I. B.,” Hispanic Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; “Central Mexican Baptist Church Needs Help,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, May 1, 1940; Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 203-206; “Mexican Baptist District Meet in Bryan on Sunday,” *The Eagle* (Bryan, Texas), December 30, 1947.

First Baptist Church Houston for the financial assistance to secure a place of worship.<sup>64</sup> *Segunda* and Central Baptist churches were both established as missions of Anglo churches and also relied heavily, especially in the 1930s, on the financial aid of Anglo Baptist groups. This financial relationship also represents a major difference between the situations of black and Latino Baptist churches in Houston. Whereas black congregations have historically owned the properties in which they worship and have been mostly financially independent, that was not the case with Latino Baptist churches in Houston.<sup>65</sup> The population of Mexican Americans who were Baptist tended to lack the same financial resources as their black peers, so they have had to rely on Anglo Baptist churches and the Union Baptist Association for financial support. Nevertheless, *Primera Iglesia* and the other Mexican American Baptist churches that formed later have worked hard to retain control over the direction of their ministries.<sup>66</sup>

As we will see in the following section, however, the financial insecurities in Mexican American Baptist churches in the early 1930s meant that Mexican Americans might not have initially seen their Baptist churches as a potential source of shelter from the harsh conditions they faced in Houston. As they became more secure later in the decade, Mexican American Baptists looked to their churches to address the effects of the racism and discrimination they faced in the city.

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<sup>64</sup> The women of First Baptist traveled with Godínez and paid the rent for a house in the heart of *el Barrio del Alacrán*, covered the cost of five hundred invitations for the church's first worship service in their new location, and secured thirty-five seats from the city auditorium to accommodate visitors.

<sup>65</sup> Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> These efforts appear later in this chapter and in Chapter VI.

## **Mexican American Baptist Churches: Shelters from Discrimination**

The appearance of many new Mexican Baptist churches across the state of Texas in the 1920s indicated a decade of growth and success. And although new churches formed in Houston in 1932, the decade of the 1930s signaled a period of particularly challenging circumstances. There are no records available for the annual meetings in 1931, 1932, or 1933, and the *Convención* of 1932 was cancelled all together. Former *Convención* President and Mexican American Baptist historian Joshua Grijalva characterized these years as “a lean decade of statistics” for the denomination. The years of the Great Depression were particularly challenging, not just for Mexican Baptists, but for most of the Mexican American communities throughout the Southwest. Mexican Americans in Houston responded to the challenges by initially turning to labor and political organizations and later by turning to their churches to meet their needs.

### *Mexican American Baptists in LULAC*

For Mexican Americans in Houston, the economic hardships characteristic of the Great Depression were compounded by deportations and an increase in racism. As resources and jobs became more difficult to acquire, nativists came to see Mexicans, a group they had once seen as a source of valuable labor, as liabilities and outside competition. Houston-area Mexican Americans were often the first to lose their jobs and faced the added threat of deportation. Mexican and United States agencies at the local and national levels moved to repatriate Mexicans and encourage struggling families to



return to Mexico. Historians Roberto Treviño and Arnolde De León estimate that around two thousand Mexicans, or fifteen percent of Mexican population in Houston, left the city to return to Mexico in the 1930s.<sup>67</sup> Racism in the 1930s took the form of over-policing as well.<sup>68</sup> The compounded effects of these experiences among Mexican Americans in Houston, according to historian Arnolde De León, meant that by the early 1930s, “the Houston *colonia* was a community whose time for a LULAC council had come.” Regular League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) propaganda from South Texas and the personal visit to Houston by leading LULACers like M. C. Gonzalez found a receptive audience, particularly among Mexican Americans in the Magnolia Park barrio.<sup>69</sup>

In 1932, Felix Quiñones, a founding member of *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana* in Magnolia Park, began attending meetings with a group of Mexican American men who eventually organized LULAC Council 60 to oppose the increased racism and discrimination facing the Mexican American community in Houston. Quiñones had lived in Houston as a child in the 1910s and returned to Houston as a young man in 1929. Although he had been working in textiles as a slubber hand for the Southern Bagging Company, he lost his job when the Great Depression hit Houston in the early 1930s. He began working with his nephew as a truck driver for a Houston-based company that imported terrazzo tiles from Mexico.<sup>70</sup> As the financial and social

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<sup>67</sup> Treviño, *Church in the Barrio*, 34-35; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 46-47.

<sup>68</sup> F. Arturo Rosales, “Mexicans in Houston: The Struggle to Survive, 1908-1975,” *The Houston Review* 3, no. 2 (1981): 240; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 82.

<sup>69</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 82.

<sup>70</sup> Felix Quiñones and Herminia Quiñones, interview by Thomas Kreneck and Cynthia Orozco, December 16, 1983, OH 316, HMRC Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center,

stress increased, Quiñones and others like him began to seek other avenues to find a political voice.

Looking for financial and occupational security in the early 1930s, Quiñones joined the local Woodmen of the World. There, he met Manuel Crespo and Mariano Hernandez, the two men who proposed the idea of organizing a Houston chapter of LULAC to protect Houston's Latino community. In 1932, Quiñones and other Mexican American men began meeting at the funeral home where Crespo worked and organized what eventually became LULAC Council 60 (it was originally called Magnolia Council 60).<sup>71</sup> Officially chartered in 1934, LULAC Council 60 became a political voice for Mexican Americans, especially those living in the Magnolia Park area. Quiñones recalled, "From then on people weren't afraid to talk or ask for their rights."<sup>72</sup>

Amid an upsurge in tensions between Houston police and Mexican Americans, Mayor Oscar Holcombe approached Mariano Hernandez to find men from LULAC who might be willing to join the police force. Hernandez asked for volunteers, and Quiñones and two other men agreed to apply for a position with the Houston Police Department. After Quiñones passed the exam, he went to visit the doctor who conducted the physicals. As Quiñones waited at the doctor's office he overheard the doctor skeptically ask the receptionist, "*Mexicans?* On the police force?" After the exam, he received a notice that he had failed his physical because of high blood pressure and was, therefore,

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Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas, [http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/herminia-quinones\\_OH316.php](http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/herminia-quinones_OH316.php) (accessed June 23, 2014) (cited hereafter as Quiñones Interview).

<sup>71</sup> Quiñones Interview; Manuel Crespo, interview by Thomas Kreneck, August 21, 1980, OH 0298.1, HMRC Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas, [http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/manuel-crespo\\_OH298-1.php](http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/manuel-crespo_OH298-1.php) (accessed July 5, 2016). De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 82-83.

<sup>72</sup> Quiñones interview.

unqualified for a position as an officer.<sup>73</sup> A second physical exam that he sought out on his own revealed that he was in fine health and did not have high blood pressure. When LULAC Council 60 heard the news, they were ready to fight back; however, Felix preferred to avoid a conflict. “Well, it’s no use going where you’re not wanted,” he told them. “If I’m not wanted in the police force, why should I insist on being there?” This incident and possibly the competition that arose later between competing groups of LULACers turned him off to political organizations.<sup>74</sup> Instead, he began taking a larger role in church work.<sup>75</sup>

Herminia Quiñones, Felix’s wife, was involved in community activism in the 1930s and 1940s as well. In 1935, a year after LULAC Council 60 began, Mexican American women in Magnolia Park established Ladies’ LULAC Council 14 as an outlet for their concerns and as an auxiliary to the local men’s LULAC.<sup>76</sup> Herminia and other members of the organization primarily focused on fundraising activities. However, just as her husband had done, Herminia Quiñones found other avenues through which to address her concerns.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Quiñones Interview.

<sup>74</sup> Quiñones Interview; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 83-89. Arnaldo de León’s discussion of the beginnings of LULAC in Houston shows that competing groups of Mexican Americans, one in Magnolia Park and another closer to Downtown Houston, emerged to split the activists in the community. The downtown group grew tired of travelling all the way into Magnolia Park and hoped to attract members from other barrios using a downtown location. This group eventually formed the Latin American Club of Harris County and became far more active than the Magnolia Council 60. The two groups eventually merged in 1939 to form LULAC Council 60.

<sup>75</sup> Quiñones Interview.

<sup>76</sup> Quiñones Interview. Ladies’ LULAC Council 14 appears to have lasted only a short time. According to Thomas Kreneck, Ladies’ LULAC Council 22 formed as a successor to the first organization, and it took on a far more active political agenda than the group of the 1930s. Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 48, 62-63; De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 84-85.

<sup>77</sup> Quiñones Interview.

*The “Lord’s Work”: Community and Kindergartens*

Although the Quiñoneses participated in political organizations, they gravitated more toward their church once it became a stable body of members. The Quiñoneses were part of a small group of Mexican American Baptist families that established the first Mexican Baptist church in Magnolia Park, *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana* (*Segunda Iglesia*). The church had been a mission of the local Anglo church, Magnolia Park Baptist Church, whose pastor, the Reverend Cecil B. Stephenson, had developed a reputation as a minister who reached out to the people living near his church, particularly Mexican Americans and those who were poor. Situated in the heart of the growing Mexican American neighborhoods of *Segundo Barrio* and Magnolia Park, Stephenson’s church began providing logistical and intermittent financial support to a local Mexican Baptist mission, which became *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana* in 1932, the same year that LULAC Council 60 started in the same neighborhood.<sup>78</sup>

Although *Segunda Iglesia* continued to receive some financial support from the local Anglo church, the Great Depression was especially challenging for the small congregation. In 1933, *Segunda Iglesia* invited the Reverend Silverio Linares to lead their church. However, before he accepted the job, the main families of the church told him that they could not offer him any salary since they were already struggling to meet their own financial needs. Instead, the church members offered to pay the rent for his

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<sup>78</sup> “Breves Datos de Historia – Segunda Iglesia Bautista de Houston, Texas,” *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston*, Brochure, 1976, Box 13 of 40, folder, “Houston, Texas – Segunda I. B.,” Hispanic Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas; Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 205-206; Silverio Linares, “Memoria Orales de Silverio Linares,” interview by Alcides Guajardo on two occasions from 29 January to 12 February 1979 in Houston, transcript (Waco, TX: Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 1980), 19; “Union Association Puts Missionary to Work on Field,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, March 6, 1940.

house and to feed him from the food of their own tables. So for the next three years, Linares led the small church and sustained himself with his congregation's generosity until Magnolia Park Baptist Church began to pay Linares ten dollars per month as a salary in 1936.<sup>79</sup>

Silverio Linares and Herminia Quiñones both noted that in the first few years of the church's history, the men of the congregation seemed apathetic about church-related work. The men's lack of attention meant that the kinds of tasks required to sustain a church fell to women like Herminia Quiñones. In a 1983 interview, she said that the "women used to do most of the work. My husband wasn't as involved as I was."<sup>80</sup> Linares believed that it was because the men were "passive Christians."<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the men began to take on a greater leadership role in the church as the 1930s wore on. They began to organize the church's business meetings and make regular financial contributions. It was this commitment to church work that drew men and women like the Quiñoneses away from LULAC and into building a community of faith. Herminia Quiñones said that although both she and her husband joined LULAC and remained active members for a few years, they stopped participating because they "just really didn't have time to cooperate with others because there was just so much to do there, the Lord's work."<sup>82</sup>

The "Lord's work" that kept Herminia Quiñones so busy was her leadership of the church's women's society, *Union Femenil Misionera* (Women's Missionary Union),

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<sup>79</sup> Linares, "Memoria Orales," 22-23.

<sup>80</sup> Quiñones interview.

<sup>81</sup> Linares, "Memoria Orales," 22 (translation mine).

<sup>82</sup> Quiñones Interview.

and she also served as the church secretary, vacation Bible school director, children's ministry director, and a Sunday school teacher. She jokingly recalled that "[she'd] teach anything except the old men," a job she believed was better left for her husband.<sup>83</sup>

However, what most occupied her was the kindergarten at *Segunda Iglesia*. Since there were no public school kindergartens available to Mexican American school children in the 1940s, the members of *Segunda Iglesia* expanded their church building and began teaching young children during the week. Funded by the Union Association, Quiñones taught school at the church for over sixteen years.<sup>84</sup>

Herminia Quiñones and other Mexican American parents knew that public education for Mexican American children would be an uphill battle. In the 1910s, Anglo parents in Magnolia Park objected to the presence of an increasing population of poor Spanish-speaking children who attended Magnolia Elementary and Central Parks Elementary. At schools in Magnolia Park and other schools throughout Texas, where significant numbers of Mexican American children lived, Anglo parents expressed their concerns in terms of fears about miscegenation and racial prejudice.<sup>85</sup> So school officials in Harrisburg, which was later incorporated into the City of Houston, responded by creating a small, two-room schoolhouse especially for children of Spanish-speaking parents, citing instructional challenges of teaching Spanish-speaking students in a school

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<sup>83</sup> Quiñones Interview.

<sup>84</sup> Quiñones Interview.

<sup>85</sup> San Miguel Jr., *Brown, Not White*, 22; Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., "The Origins, Development, and Consequences of the Educational Segregation of Mexicans in the Southwest," in *Chicano Studies: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Eugene E. García, Francisco Lomeli, and Isidro Ortíz (New York: Teachers College Press, 1984), 195–208.

comprised of only English-speaking students and teachers.<sup>86</sup> In these segregated schools, Spanish-speaking children faced what scholars of Mexican American education call “subtractive Americanization,” which included learning that their ethnicity was antithetical to American identity and must be replaced with a substandard and harsh English-only education.<sup>87</sup>

Mexican American parents like the Quiñoneses attempted to fight for their children’s education many different ways. When her daughter was in elementary school, Quiñones joined the Parent-Teacher Association at the local Mexican school, De Zavala Elementary School. As an active member of the PTA, Herminia Quiñones and other Mexican American parents formed committees to confront city leaders about substandard facilities for Mexican American students. In the early 1940s, she and her committee met with the mayor of Houston to ask for a park that Mexican American children and their parents could access. The De Zavala PTA continued working with city leaders and eventually acquired the city block adjacent to the elementary school. And in 1945, the City of Houston officially created De Zavala Park, and Mexican Americans near the school finally had a public recreational space of their own.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “Houston’s ‘Little Mexico’ Is a City within a City,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 9, 1930; Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 12, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Carlos Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 59–60; See also, Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. and Richard R. Valencia, “From the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to *Hopwood*: The Educational Plight and Struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 68 (Fall 1998): 353–412.

<sup>88</sup> Quiñones Interview. In 1934, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Magnolia Park also built a park on a 10-acre stretch of land at the turning basin. It was officially known as Hidalgo Park, but known to Houston Mexicanos as the “Mexican Park.” Rudy Jasso, interview by Thomas Kreneck, June 14, 1983, OH 306, HMRC Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas, [http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/rudy-jasso\\_OH306.php](http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/rudy-jasso_OH306.php) (accessed June 23, 2014); De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 61.

But they also turned to their churches. There were kindergartens for Mexican children at the Mexican Good Will Center and *Segunda Iglesia* in the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s, Union Association records indicate that there were also kindergartens at *Primera Iglesia* and at a Mexican Baptist mission of Manchester Baptist Church. The kindergarten at the Good Will Center was directed by the Anglo Baptist missionary who supervised all of the activities at the center, but Mexican American Baptist women ran the kindergartens at their churches and missions. According to denominational records, these schools stressed “religious, rather than literary education.”<sup>89</sup> But Quiñones explained that their goal at the *Segunda Iglesia* kindergarten was to help Mexican children prepare for public school when it was time for them to go the following year. Although the sources offer no clear indication of the curriculum teachers followed at these kindergartens, women like Quiñones believed they were giving their children and children from other Mexican American homes a better chance at succeeding in public schools. Thanks to these Mexican Baptist kindergartens, Mexican American children who attended were taught in a nurturing and supportive environment.<sup>90</sup> Mexican American Baptists were able to rely on their churches and the resources connected to

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<sup>89</sup> W. T. Turner, “News of Mexican Work in Houston,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 25, 1945.

<sup>90</sup> Quiñones Interview; UBA (150), 34-35; UBA (1952), 47-48; UBA (1954), 45; Concepción Gutierrez and Victoria P. de Hernandez, “Historia de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Houston, Texas,” June 1960, box 24 of 40, folder “Esteban L. Flores (1 of 7),” Hispanic Archives, TBHC; “Breves Datos de Historia – Segunda Iglesia Bautista de Houston, Texas,” in *Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston, Brochure – 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, 1976*, box 13 of 40, folder “Houston, Texas—Segunda I. B.,” Hispanic Archives, TBHC.



them to resist the effects of segregated Mexican schools and substandard educational experiences.<sup>91</sup>

### **Rev. James L. Novarro: Building Ministries and Challenging Exclusion**

In 1938, Silverio Linares resigned from *Segunda Iglesia* to resume his formal religious training at the Mexican Baptist Bible Institute in Bastrop.<sup>92</sup> Shortly after, the members of *Segunda Iglesia* invited a young Mexican American pastor, the Reverend James LaVois Novarro, who had recently finished his seminary training at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.<sup>93</sup> Novarro was born in Michigan in 1919, but he grew up in Fort Worth.<sup>94</sup> After high school, he attended college at Texas Christian

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<sup>91</sup> Felipe Hinojosa's work on Mexican American Mennonites in South Texas reveals similar themes. Mennonite Voluntary Service workers offered kindergartens at the Mennonite church in Mathis. These were a positive and appealing alternative to the segregated Mexican schools they would otherwise have attended. Felipe Hinojosa, "Making Noise among the 'Quiet in the Land': Mexican American and Puerto Rican Ethno-Religious Identity in the Mennonite Church, 1932-1982" (PhD diss., University of Houston, 2009), 43-45; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 30-32.

<sup>92</sup> Linares, "Memoria Orales," 19.

<sup>93</sup> Quiñones Interview; James Novarro, interview by Thomas Kreneck, December 13, 1984, OH 379, HMRC Oral History Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas, [http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/james-novarro\\_OH379.php](http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/james-novarro_OH379.php) (accessed June 23, 2014); Pevoto, *Union Baptist Association*, 206.

<sup>94</sup> "Ennis Mission Is Established: Navarro Is Head," *Waxahachie Daily Light*, April 14, 1936; Ancestry.com, *U.S. Public Records Index, 1950-1993, Volume 1*, database on-line (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2010); James LaVois, 1940 United States Federal Census, Houston, Harris County, Texas, T627, roll 4199, page 8A, ED 258-272, Ancestry.com, *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2012). According to the 1940 census, Novarro's legal name was James S. La Vois. However, it is not uncommon for census takers to misspell a person's name. Still, he appears to have later gone by James Lavois Novarro as early as 1936, but people who wrote his name regularly misspelled it as Navarro. On official documents (international travel forms, city directories, etc.), Novarro's name is listed as "James N. Lavois." His wife and three sons all retained the name Lavois socially and officially. National Archives and Records Administration, *Passenger and Crew Manifests of Airplanes at Miami, Florida*, NAI 2788541, *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004*, RG 85, roll 191, Ancestry.com, *Florida, Passenger Lists, 1898-1963* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com); *Houston, Texas, City Directory, 1953*, Ancestry.com, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2011).

University and seminary at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>95</sup> Navarro's career as a minister began in 1936 when he became the missionary among Mexican Americans in Ennis, Texas (near Fort Worth).<sup>96</sup> While he was a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he met an Anglo woman from Fort Worth, Blanche Morton. The two married in 1938 and moved to Houston together.<sup>97</sup> Navarro was the first Mexican American Baptist minister in Houston to have earned his seminary degree from an Anglo institution. His predecessors and peers mostly received their training in Mexico or at one of the Mexican Baptist Bible institutes in Texas. With Navarro at the helm of Mexican American ministries in the Houston area, it flourished as never before, giving Navarro increasing opportunities to press Anglo leaders to pay attention to them.

Navarro arrived in Houston amid a particularly challenging decade for the local Mexican American community. They had weathered most of the Great Depression, faced the daily threat of deportation, and struggled to find work unless they could prove their citizenship. Although the growth rate in the Mexican American population was at its lowest during the 1930s, the economic hardships of the decade led to a general concentration of Mexican Americans from across Houston into *Segundo Barrio* and Magnolia Park. This shift led the two neighborhoods to meld into one large "East End"

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<sup>95</sup> "Texans Still Talk about Jim Navarro," *Pampa Daily News*, November 25, 1955; "Mexican Work: Latin Firebrand," *Baptist Standard*, July 1, 1954; Joseph Stiles and Roy C. Carley, "A Resolution of the Executive Board of Union Association," December 13, 1946, printed in "James L. Navarro Dedicates Himself to the Service of the Community," *El Sol*, November 7, 1969.

<sup>96</sup> "Ennis Mission Is Established: Navarro Is Head," *Waxahachie Daily Light*, April 14, 1936, 4. In this article, the reporter identifies Navarro as a "young Mexican."

<sup>97</sup> "James L. Navarro Weds Fort Worth Girl," *Waxahachie Daily Light*, May 19, 1938, 3. In Navarro's wedding announcement, he takes care to identify his and Blanche Morton's heritage. He explains that Morton "comes from a French and German descent," and Navarro was "descended from French-Spanish ancestry." He also highlights Morton's strong ties to American history as well: "her grandmother's cousin was the wife of one of the presidents of the United States, Grover Cleveland."

area. Some Anglos nearby responded by moving out. However, the changes in local populations sparked an interest among some Union Baptist Association leaders from areas of Houston east of downtown.<sup>98</sup>

In 1939, Union Baptist Association elected C. B. Stephenson as its new Association Missionary, and he led the association to focus more on Mexican American evangelism.<sup>99</sup> Shortly after Stephenson became the Association Missionary, he recruited Mexican Americans to work among the Spanish-speaking populations of Houston. And in 1941, he hired Novarro to work full time as the association missionary to Spanish-speaking communities in the Greater Houston area.<sup>100</sup> During his seven years in the position, Novarro expanded Mexican Baptist evangelism in the Bayou City to unprecedented heights.<sup>101</sup> He attended mission stations throughout Greater Houston from the downtown area all the way to the coast. He also established the Kashmere Mexican Baptist Mission in 1944 and *Calvario Templo Bautista* in 1948.<sup>102</sup> With financial support from Union Association, he also created the area's first Spanish language Baptist radio

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<sup>98</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 55-56; Kreneck, *Del Pueblo*, 39-41.

<sup>99</sup> "Union Association Puts Missionary to Work on Field," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, March 6, 1940.

<sup>100</sup> In 1937, Union Baptist Association recommended appointing a missionary to work exclusively with Mexican Americans in Houston, and the associational records show that Union Baptist paid a missionary named George Hank for about eighteen months of work as the "Mexican Missionary." UBA (1937), 14; UBA (1938), 14; UBA (1939), 16. UBA later hired C. B. Stephenson from Magnolia Park Baptist Church after the previous associational missionary retired at the end of 1938. UBA (1940), 17, 24-25. The minutes show that he appointed Trinidad Armendariz Bast and C. G. Rodriguez as missionaries. The minutes also report that Stephenson made \$250.00 per month, T. A. Bast earned \$75.00 per month (with a \$25.00 per month stipend for rent), and Rodriguez made \$50.00 per month with a \$25.00 stipend for rent.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Stiles and Roy C. Carley, "A Resolution of the Executive Board of Union Association," December 13, 1946, printed in "James L. Novarro Dedicates Himself to the Service of the Community," *El Sol*, November 7, 1969.

<sup>102</sup> James Novarro, "Annual Report of James L. Novarro, the Associational Missionary to the Spanish-speaking People of Union Association," in UBA (1946), 21-22; "Missionary Jas. L. Novarro," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, November 9, 1944; "First Church Height Has Launched a Mexican Mission," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 29, 1948.

program, *La Hora Bautista*, in the early 1950s, which covered issues of self-improvement, family, and spirituality.<sup>103</sup>

In addition to Navarro's work with Mexican American Baptist churches and missions throughout the area, he also organized citywide revivals among the various Mexican Baptist congregations. For example, in 1944, Navarro led a "tent revival" with the pastors of *Primera Iglesia*, *Segunda Iglesia*, and Central Mexican Baptist churches. Including both the churches and the mission stations, the revival would involve a combined Mexican American Baptist membership of over five hundred. Navarro advertised in the daily newspapers and attempted to spread the word of the revival among Mexican American communities directly in the days leading up to the event.<sup>104</sup> During the previous summer, he initiated an annual youth camp, which he organized and led at Baptist encampment in Palacios, Texas.<sup>105</sup>

Although Navarro's role as a missionary primarily involved working with the Mexican American Baptist community in Houston and elsewhere, his official position within the Anglo-led Union Association also brought him into regular contact with Anglo Baptists during association meetings and the monthly meetings of the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference. Navarro capitalized on those opportunities to influence Anglos' perceptions of Mexicans and other Latinos. In 1945, Navarro wrote a three-part

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<sup>103</sup> Oscar Romo, "Hispanic American Southern Baptists: A Historical Overview," 96, undated, c. 1980, box 16, folder 39, "Hispanic American Baptists – A Historical Overview," AR 631-4, Home Mission Board, Language Missions Collection, SBHLA; "La Hora Bautista," newspaper clipping, February 1953, box 9, folder 3, Felix H. Morales Collection, MSS 122, HMRC; Chrystal Pit, "Deal with Us: The Business of Mexican Culture in Post-World War II Houston" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2011), 154.

<sup>104</sup> "Big City Mexican Baptist Revival Planned," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, August 24, 1944; "Mexican Baptist Tent Meeting in Full Swing," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, September 29, 1944.

<sup>105</sup> "Missionary Jas. L. Navarro," *Gulf Coast Baptist*, November 9, 1944.

series of articles in the *Gulf Coast Baptist* called, “In Season and Out of Season: A Point of View – A Missionary’s Message for You.” In these columns, he urged readers to no longer dismiss Catholics as potential church members simply because they are already devoted to a particular faith.<sup>106</sup> He also wrote that Anglo Baptists needed to learn about and understand the culture, history, and religion of Spanish-speaking peoples, for “Our missionary work is conditioned by the sympathies springing forth from understanding.”<sup>107</sup> The majority of his columns attempted to inform his readers about Spanish-speaking Catholics and encourage Anglo readers to invest in ministries designed to attract Catholics to the Baptist faith.<sup>108</sup>

By 1946, the population growth throughout Houston had brought more churches into Union Baptist Association. So the executive board decided to restructure the association’s territory. A new association, the Gulf Coast Baptist Association, formed in 1946 and assumed responsibility for the territories of southern Brazoria County, and another formed in Tri-cities (the cities of Pelly, Baytown, and Goosecreek were incorporated as Baytown in 1949) to take over the Baptist work in areas to the southeast of Houston. This also meant that associations other than Union Association would cover the majority of Navarro’s responsibility beyond Houston. So the association voted in 1946 to discontinue Navarro’s position and its Mexican missionary work in 1947.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> James L. Navarro, “In Season and Out of Season: A Point of View – A Missionary’s Message for You,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 4, 1945.

<sup>107</sup> James L. Navarro, “In Season and Out of Season: A Point of View – A Missionary’s Message for You,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 11, 1945.

<sup>108</sup> Navarro, “In Season and Out of Season,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 4, 1945; Navarro, “In Season and Out of Season,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 11, 1945; Navarro, “In Season and Out of Season: A Point of View – A Missionary’s Message for You,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, January 25, 1945.

<sup>109</sup> “Report on Plans, Policy, and Budget Committee,” in UBA (1946), 27.

As the association missionary, he built relationships with the Anglo Baptist leadership as a way to inform, educate, and connect the white community with the Mexican American community. Many of those efforts focused on funneling money and support to the Mexican American Baptist, which he used to fund new church buildings for Mexican American Baptist churches, ministries devoted to education and fostering leadership among the youth, and collaborative revivals.<sup>110</sup> After Union Association cut his position, Novarro became the full-time pastor of both the Kashmere Baptist Temple and *Calvario* and took on leadership roles within the *Convención*.<sup>111</sup> He also maintained his connections with the Anglo Baptist community in the years to come, which he used to raise money for Mexican American Baptist churches and Mexican American communities in need. As we will see in Chapter VI, Novarro began to use those connections and his elevated position in the *Convención* to call on Anglo churches to make their relationships with the Mexican American Baptist community reflect the biblical picture of a beloved community.

## Conclusion

The history of Anglo and Mexican American Baptists demonstrates how white Baptists adapted the anti-black scripts they had developed to marginalize African

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<sup>110</sup> “Big City Mexican Baptist Revival Planned,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, August 24, 1944; “Mexican Baptist Tent Meeting in Full Swing,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, September 28, 1944; Novarro, “Annual Report of James L. Novarro, the Associational Missionary to the Spanish-speaking People of Union Association,” 21-22.

<sup>111</sup> “James L. Novarro Dedicates Himself to the Service of the Community,” *El Sol*, November 7, 1969.

Americans to fit their experiences with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Anglo Baptists projected their sense of white supremacy and a belief in Anglo cultural superiority through denominational leaders in the Baptist General Convention of Texas, through missionary relationships, and through local Americanization programs. Despite Anglo Baptists' attempts to control Mexican American Baptists, Mexican American Baptists organized and maintained their own religious institutions, churches, and associations. Early on in the 1930s, individuals like the Quiñoneses found shelter from institutional racism in their churches. As Mexican American Baptists, such as Rev. James Novarro, became more successful and influential, they began to push for inclusion within the Anglo-led BGCT and their local Union Association.

## CHAPTER IV

### KEEPING WHITE CHURCHES WHITE: WHITE BAPTISTS AND THE STATUS

#### QUO

On February 6, 1961, the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference met to discuss the role white Baptist ministers could play in leading their congregations through the turmoil of the nationwide movement for civil rights.<sup>1</sup> In the end, they settled on a statement that urged Baptist colleges and universities in Texas to accept any qualified student regardless of race, and the motion passed without dissent.<sup>2</sup> Baptist schools were exempt from the Supreme Court's desegregation rulings, but a growing voice in favor of ending longstanding race-based discriminatory practices in their schools had emerged across the state.<sup>3</sup> Responses from church members in the Houston area were generally positive following the statement.<sup>4</sup> Still, not everyone in the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference agreed.

The most publicized backlash following the motion came from within the ranks of Houston's white Baptist pastors. At the meeting after the resolution passed, opponents of the move attempted to retract the desegregation motion of the previous week. When

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<sup>1</sup> K. Owen White, *Oral Memoirs of K. Owen White*, K. Owen White interviewed by Alfred Ronald Tonks, January 17, 1974 and February 1, 1976 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1996), 104.

<sup>2</sup> "15 Baptist Pastors Quit Group Over Racial Issue," newspaper clipping, dated February 21, 1961, Box 3, Folder 7, "Civil Rights, NAACP, Labor, Church," Christia V. Adair Collection (Adair Collection), MSS 109, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), Houston Public Library.

<sup>3</sup> The Houston resolution coincided with similar statements from Waco Baptist Association and Lubbock Baptist Association. "Texas Pastors Taking Stand on Desegregation," *Baptist Press*, February 24, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> "15 Baptist Pastors Quit," Adair Collection, HMRC; White, *Oral Memoirs*, 104. K. Owen White suspected that they supported the pastors' action because it had little bearing on their lives or their churches.



that failed, about fifteen members walked out in protest and created a rival organization. J. M. McDonnel, pastor of Clay Road Baptist Church and a spokesperson for the dissenters, said that he and the other pastors were “very upset at the actions taken in this meeting,” and their new group would “have no resolutions or controversial discussions.” Although Union Association leaders argued that integration was “just a smokescreen” for long-simmering conflict among the pastors, the dissenters’ concerns told a different story: R. P. York, a layman from Long Point Baptist Church, said that he was “irate” about the pro-integration statement because he had a daughter at Baylor, and “I don’t want her to go to school with a black man.”<sup>5</sup>

The split in the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference over race highlights the central argument of this chapter. Some white Baptist leaders in Houston made concerted attempts to mitigate racial issues in the city and in Baptist churches and schools throughout the state of Texas, and they took moderate steps toward racial equality. However, others consistently resisted attempts to change the status quo. The majority of white Baptists organized to preserve racial segregation and white supremacy by continuing to exclude people of color from their places of worship and by moving their churches out of neighborhoods where people of color were moving and into white suburbs.

The first two sections focus on white Baptist efforts to improve race relations as well as the limits that continued to inhibit progress. In section one, I explore the changes in Union Association’s mission strategies that focused more money and personnel on

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<sup>5</sup> “Texas Pastors Taking Stand on Desegregation,” *Baptist Press*, February 24, 1961; “15 Baptist Pastors Quit,” Adair Collection, HMRC.

Mexican American Baptist work. Yet, the limits that remained in spite of these changes reflected white Baptists' ongoing notions of Mexican Americans as inferior and marginal. In section two, I explore the token efforts of Union Association to reach out to Houston's black community and the barriers that remained. The third and fourth sections focus on the two main ways white Baptists collectively resisted the civil rights movement: by closing their doors to people of color and refusing to accept them as members, and by leaving their churches and forming new ones out of town to avoid sharing a church with African American and Mexican American communities.

Divisions at the local level in Houston reflected tensions among white Protestants throughout the South. Historian David Chappell argues that the split among southern Protestants who opposed civil rights and those who supported racial equality was more like a "compound fracture" than a neat break into recognizable camps. Yet, historians have disagreed over exactly how white churches responded to the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Mark Newman, David Stricklin, and David Chrisman, for example, have demonstrated that although the majority of southern white Protestants remained silent on issues of race, progressive southern white Baptist leaders lagged behind the civil rights movement but succeeded in pushing the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist General Convention of Texas to express moderate support for desegregation and opposition to the immorality of racial discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 107; Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001); David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); David Chrisman, "The Price of Moderation: Texas Baptists and Racial Integration, 1948-1968," Ph.D. diss., Texas A&M University, 2001.

Instead of exploring how white Protestants supported or, more often, remained indifferent to the civil rights movement, however, Chappell suggests that given the long history of white Protestant support for white supremacy, historians ought to ask why they failed to mount the same kind of pro-segregation movement during the civil rights era. He argues that the “hopeless disarray and confusion over racial matters” produced by the “compound fracture” kept segregationist white churches from contributing “in any meaningful way” to an anti-civil rights movement. Yet, Carolyn Dupont’s recent study on local southern white evangelicals in Mississippi contradicts Chappell’s premise, as it shows that “white religion played an important role in the fight against racial equality.” Dupont contends that the “façade of silence” we often find from southern white evangelicals obscures the reality that “they labored mightily *against*” civil rights.<sup>7</sup> This was true for the story of white Baptists in Houston as well.<sup>8</sup>

Although white Houston Baptist leaders had marshaled a vocal and robust defense of racial segregation and white supremacy in the first half of the twentieth century, they tended to call on subtler methods after World War II. The national currents of the civil rights movements and the impact of an international conflict over universal human rights began the conversation for white Baptist moderates in denominational leadership, but ongoing pressure from local communities of color and demographic changes in Houston’s urban population brought the struggle right to doorsteps of white

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<sup>7</sup> Chappell, *Stone of Hope*, 107; Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Dupont’s focus on more than just racist rhetoric is instructive for what happens with white Baptists in Houston. Her work highlights the everyday methods segregationists used to mobilize religion in defense of inequality beyond biblical defenses of racism as they worked tirelessly to defend white supremacy in their churches, schools, and community. Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*.

Baptist churches. Many within Houston's white Baptist community remained silent on issues of race in and out of their churches, and others did attempt to rectify the sins of inequality. However, from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, white Houston Baptists more often resisted changes to their segregated world and, in Dupont's words, "labored *mightily*" to preserve racial inequality in their churches and communities.

### **Union Association and Token Improvements with Mexican American Baptists**

Progressive white Baptist denominational leaders in the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) attempted to steer the white Baptist flock toward racial reconciliation, a task complicated by the autonomy of the local church in Baptist doctrine. In Houston, as in many other southern locales, individual churches decided how to implement plans and programs designed by denominational leaders. Houston's Union Association attempted to address racial issues through investment in Mexican American ministries, but it mostly ignored directives from denominational leaders to engage African Americans.

In a statement following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the director of the Texas Christian Life Commission (CLC), Foy Valentine, wrote, "it is high time the churches assume the spiritual leadership which is rightfully theirs with regard to the race problem." Remaining silent would be "derelict in Christian responsibility." So the CLC issued an official resolution that affirmed the Supreme Court's constitutional authority and called on white Baptists to reach across racial lines

with fellow believers to “work out constructively the application of the Christian spirit” in desegregation.<sup>9</sup>

Founded in 1950, the Texas CLC was a progressive Baptist General Convention of Texas organization that focused on applying Christian principles to issues of daily life by speaking *to* not *for* other Baptists. It produced educational materials, hosted workshops on a variety of social issues, organized and promoted events intended to bridge racial divides, and issued statements regarding applied Christian principles. Yet, because of Baptist church polity, the motions and resolutions of denominational bodies beyond the local church were non-binding and often difficult to implement, so smaller denominational units like associations and individual churches held the greatest potential to influence how Baptists applied biblical principles to their daily lives.<sup>10</sup>

In Houston, Union Association took small steps in an attempt to improve their relationship with their Mexican American and African American co-faithful, but local white leaders did so according to how they defined the problem. Those definitions shaped how Union Association chose to implement the initiatives that organizations like

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<sup>9</sup> Foy Valentine, “Segregation: A Christian Solution,” *Baptist Standard*, July 15, 1954. Denominational leaders in Texas and in the Southern Baptist Convention were quick to respond with support for the desegregation ruling. See, “Christian Life Commission: Convention Action,” *Baptist Standard*, June 17, 1954; “Convention Report: Segregation Ruling Endorsed,” *Baptist Standard*, June 17, 1954.

<sup>10</sup> James M. Dunn, Phil Strickland, and Charles Petty, “The Christian Life Commission, 1950-1970,” Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission, 1970 (<http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cs-vert/id/839>) Baylor University Institute of Church-State Studies Vertical File, Baylor Digital Collections, Baylor University, Waco, Texas; David Chrisman, “Religious Moderates and Race: The Texas Christian Life Commission and the Call for Racial Reconciliation,” in *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and Their Quest for Justice*, ed. Debra A. Reid (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 97. For the histories of the Texas and Southern Baptist Christian Life Commissions, see Newman, *Getting Right with God*; John W. Storey, *Storey, Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity, 1900-1980* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986).

the Texas CLC promoted. In 1953, the Texas CLC urged associational members of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to create standing committees that would cooperate with the CLC and assume the responsibilities of committees of civic righteousness and interracial work. The local Christian Life Committees were supposed to promote the practical application of Christian ethics during association-wide encampments and workers' conferences. By 1954, Union Association had created its own Christian Life Committee, but it primarily focused on juvenile delinquency and family life, a carry-over of the chief concerns of its former Civic Righteousness Committee.<sup>11</sup> So while the denominational agencies at the state and regional levels sought to mediate the "race problem" for Baptists through local CLCs, Union Association's committee remained silent on issues of race until the mid-1960s, and it emphasized other things. Instead, Union Association moved forward through its mission agencies by investing more time, money, and personnel into its ministries with Mexican Americans.

### *Investing in Mexican American Ministries*

In 1946, Union Association retooled its associational missionary work among Mexican Americans. Their first step was ending Rev. James Novarro's position as associational missionary at the end of the year, a move that initially appeared to signal a lack of interest in the work. However, Union Association's decision to terminate his position had more to do with the growth and stability among the Mexican American

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<sup>11</sup> Union Baptist Association, *Minutes of the 114th Annual Session of Union Baptist Association, October 1954* (Houston: Union Baptist Association, 1954), 55, 50, 78 (Union Association minutes cited hereafter as UBA (year), page); UBA (1958), 47. The descriptions of the Committee on Christian Life in the Union Association by-laws make no mention of social issues beyond juvenile delinquency and family life.

Baptist churches and their pastors both locally and throughout the state. Instead of paying a missionary to coordinate the work for the entire association, Union shifted its funding directly to Mexican American churches and pastors. This change signaled that Union Association recognized the success of the Mexican American church leaders and the growth of the Mexican American Baptist churches in the association. As associational missionary, Novarro had established multiple churches and was the sole pastor for two of them: *Templo Calvario* and Kashmere Baptist Temple. Without the responsibility of managing all of the additional churches in the association, Novarro was able to focus more of his time on the work of being a pastor. The following year, Union Association introduced a new committee, the Interracial Committee, to coordinate Spanish-speaking ministries, African American outreach and education, and ministries among “other minorities.” The Interracial Committee would promote new ministries and “supervise work already established.” It would also make recommendations to the Union Association Executive Committee about funding and building new properties for mission churches and select the personnel in charge of each station.<sup>12</sup>

The new Interracial Committee began to provide direct financial support for three Mexican American Baptist churches in its territory: *Primera Iglesia, Segunda Iglesia,*

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<sup>12</sup> “Report on Plans, Policy, and Budget Committee,” in UBA, (1946), 27; UBA (1947), 7; UBA (1949), 52. The state missionary board recommended that each association in Texas create such a committee to organize productive relationships across racial lines without duplicating the work of other committees. See, A. C. Miller, “Training the Preachers among Racial and National Minorities,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, June 27, 1946. The Interracial Committee’s oversight in the hiring process was one major drawback to the new emphasis. Even though the ministers whom they selected were committed to Mexican American ministries and most of them were Mexican or Mexican American themselves, the congregations at the mission stations were not always able to call the pastor they wanted. In some cases, this led to discord between the pastors and their churches, as congregations viewed their pastors as temporary workers and themselves as responsible for the success of the church. See, UBA (1949), 52; Eva Laredo interview by author, telephone, May 22, 2015.

and Central Mexican Baptist Church. The money funded pastors' salaries and the rent for their homes, salaries for kindergarten workers at *Primera Iglesia* and *Segunda Iglesia*, and the costs of additional mission properties and other buildings. Other Union Association organizations, such as the Brotherhood and the Women's Missionary Union (WMU), also contributed to Mexican American Baptist ministries.<sup>13</sup> In February 1953, Union Association's monthly magazine, *Baptist Messenger*, reported that the WMU had raised money for a complete renovation of the two buildings associated with the Good Will Center: the main two-story building and a residence.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood, a men's service auxiliary, coordinated donations for building supplies to renovate Central Mexican Baptist Church and *Primera Iglesia* and construct other necessary buildings as well. Men from Calvary Baptist, Manchester Baptist, North Main Baptist, and First Baptist worked with the men from several Mexican Baptist churches to build a pair of three-bedroom homes for their new pastors, who had recently moved to Houston that June. Calvary and Manchester were both located in *Segundo Barrio* and had substantial Mexican American Baptist ministries. Calvary sponsored a Mexican American Baptist mission, *Templo Calvario*, one of the two churches led by Rev. James Novarro at the time. And Manchester offered a weekday kindergarten for Spanish-speaking children and worship services in Spanish on Thursday

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<sup>13</sup> UBA (1946), 22; UBA (1950), 34-35; UBA (1952), 36-37, 47; Woman's Missionary Union, "Report of the Forty-Second Annual Meeting of the Woman's Missionary Union Auxiliary to Union Baptist Association" in UBA (1946), 6, 10, 42.

<sup>14</sup> "Good Will Buildings Being Renovated," *Baptist Messenger*, February 1953; Mrs. A. D. White, Mrs. A. L. Peyton, and Mrs. E. M. Murphy, "Report on Mexican Baptist Good Will Center," *Baptist Messenger*, June 1953.



evenings. The Brotherhood also took on the costs of Novarro's Latin American Baptist Radio program, *La Hora Bautista*.<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-1950s, as he reviewed the successes of the preceding years, Novarro proclaimed, "Baptist work among the Spanish-speaking people of Houston is flourishing as never before," and he credited the success to five key factors. First, Union Association had taken a greater interest in the work by organizing effective organizations to take it on. Second, the association and individual churches had established more Spanish-speaking churches and missions than in previous decades. Third, this greater interest and financial support from Anglo Baptists was largely because of the guidance of Union Association's new executive secretary, Ross Dillon (1950-1963), who prioritized church expansion through new missions. Fourth, the missionary personnel on the field were better trained thanks to "better all around circumstances." And fifth, Novarro credited much of the growth to his own contributions through the Latin American Baptist Radio Program, *La Hora Bautista*, for its ability to access the homes of people who may otherwise have remained out of reach.<sup>16</sup>

Union Association's embrace of Mexican American ministries also led to Novarro's elevated role as a local denominational leader and a broker between white and Latino Baptist communities. Even though he was no longer employed as the missionary to Mexican Americans, he remained a pastor in the association. He had built important connections in the association that lasted, and he was able to continue to make himself

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<sup>15</sup> "Mexican Parsonages Nearing Completion," *Baptist Messenger*, February 1953; "Two New Parsonages for Mexican Pastors," *Baptist Messenger*, August 1953; Estelle Hall, "With the Churches," *Baptist Messenger*, February 1953; UBA (1952), 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> James Novarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger*, September 1955.

heard among Union Association leaders. The success of his radio program and ministries won the support of influential white Baptists in Union Association. And his leadership locally and at the state level among other Spanish-speaking Baptist ministry workers in the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas (Convención)* allowed him to speak to white Baptists from the standpoint of a religious insider in a way that many of his peers in Houston could not, particularly through his column in the local Baptist news magazine, the *Baptist Messenger*. Novarro began writing a new monthly column in the mid-1950s called, “Latin American Activities,” which featured content similar to his earlier contributions to the *Gulf Coast Baptist* in the 1940s. He primarily reported the activities of the local Mexican American Baptist congregations and the *Convención*, and he offered regular commentary on news from Latin America. Novarro’s reports of success were consistent reminders to the readers of the *Baptist Messenger* that Mexican American Baptists were an integral part of Houston’s religious landscape that should not be ignored.<sup>17</sup>

### *Limits Remain*

Although Union Association’s adjustments in its relationship with Mexican American Baptists contributed to the continued growth of Mexican American-led churches and programs, there were still limits. Anglo Baptists continued to treat their

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<sup>17</sup> For the *Gulf Coast Baptist*, see Chapter III. The earliest copy of the *Baptist Messenger* that I have been able to locate in which James Novarro’s column appears is June 1955; however, Baptist archives (Union Baptist Association’s current headquarters, the Texas Collection at Baylor University, the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, and the Texas Baptist Historical Collection) did not have a full run of the publication, so he may have begun writing the column in 1954. For one of the many reports of success, see James Novarro, “Latin American Activities,” *Baptist Messenger*, October 1955.

Mexican American counterparts as inferior outsiders and mission opportunities. In the 1950s and 1960s, Houston experienced enormous demographic shifts in its urban population. Union Association's response to these changes reveals the limits to Anglo Baptist progress in their relationship with Mexican Americans.

In Navarro's February 1956 column, he offered his first of several critical evaluations of Anglo Baptists' approach to Spanish-speaking ministries. He acknowledged that Houston was poised to become "one of the most advanced centers of Spanish-speaking work in the state," with its sixteen Mexican American churches and missions and another three missions under construction, but he urged readers not to "relax or become complacent." As an immediate improvement, though, he called on each pastor of local Anglo churches in areas with Mexican American residents to genuinely consider Spanish-speaking people as "prospective church members to be won to Christ and enlisted in his own church."<sup>18</sup> His proposal pointed out that despite the growth among Mexican American Baptist ministries, Anglo Baptists were still reluctant to embrace Spanish-speaking Baptists as co-laborers in Christian service, and Anglo Baptists tended not to welcome Mexican Americans into their churches.

More damning, however, was the persistent and obvious inequality between Union Association's methods for creating new Anglo churches and its methods for planting new Mexican American churches. In his May 1957 column, Navarro leveled a pointed critique of this disparity. He argued that while Union Association's investments were better than they used to be, Anglo Baptists still needed to "make proper

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<sup>18</sup> James Navarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger*, February 1956.

investment[s] in the buildings and equipment of our Spanish-speaking churches.” The problem, he argued, was that when Union considered developing an English-speaking mission, they thought in terms of “worthy, well-born, Baptist witness[es].” These considerations led to major investments in acres of land and hundreds of thousands dollars devoted to construction. Yet when they contemplated new Mexican American missions, white Baptist leaders thought, “well if it has to be done we may do something.” They would make plans to purchase “one lot or even half a lot if possible” and “some rundown shack that can be patched up so ‘it will do.’” For Novarro, this showed that Anglos in Houston believed Mexican Americans were less valuable, and it explained why Mexican American missions and churches were not growing faster.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Union Association’s history of mission development from 1950 through the mid-1960s confirms Novarro’s assertion. From 1940 through 1970, Houston’s total population more than tripled from 384,514 in 1940 to 1,232,802 in 1970. The total growth included 476,930 new white residents, 230,249 new black residents, and 130,000 new Mexican-origin residents.<sup>20</sup> Many of the new white residents in Houston congregated in the new suburban developments beyond the metropolitan center. In 1949, Union Association created a Church Expansion Committee, which advised the associational executive board on the location of new churches and missions “not otherwise provided for” by the Interracial Committee. In other words, the Church

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<sup>19</sup> James Novarro, “Latin American Activities,” *Baptist Messenger*, May 1957.

<sup>20</sup> Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 98-99; Roberto Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 217.

Expansion Committee focused solely on white churches and missions.<sup>21</sup> Although the budgets for both committees started at about ten thousand dollars annually, the actual expenses for the Church Expansion Committee began to far outstrip what Union Association committed to Mexican American ministries.<sup>22</sup> When white Baptists in Union Association envisioned the future of Baptist life in the Houston area, they saw white neighborhoods with white families who would fill the pews of these newly built white churches. Even with the opportunity to conceptualize new spaces in Houston suburbs, the way they perceived of that space revealed how little had actually changed in terms of their relationships with Mexican Americans.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars of American religious history have demonstrated that after World War II, there were major demographic and social changes taking place that drastically affected life in American cities. As GIs returned home from the war and took advantage of the new educational and vocational training opportunities available to them through the GI Bill, they were able to take hold of the general economic prosperity that accompanied the post-war era as well. Many of these men and women were part of a new (mostly white) middle class that left their old neighborhoods in city centers for the new suburban oases on the outskirts of the city. As families moved out of town, they built new homes in large sprawling neighborhoods. A boom in the number of churches of various denominations ensued as well. According to historian Sydney Ahlstrom, “As

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<sup>21</sup> UBA (1949), 52.

<sup>22</sup> UBA (1950), 32; UBA (1952), 48; UBA (1955), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre’s three modes of space—conceived, perceived, and lived—work together to create socially constructed spaces. Here, white Baptists conceived of new spaces in terms of new white neighborhoods away from the city, which they perceived as dangerous, non-white, and poor. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991); Janice L. Reiff, “Rethinking Pullman: Urban Spaces and Working-Class Activism,” *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 7-32.

a direct result of these social trends, virtually all of the churches were confronted with the vast new responsibilities for ‘home missions.’”<sup>24</sup> Baptist denominations in the North and the South turned their attention to church extension and growth programs to meet the needs of their far-flung flocks.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, as white flight led to the growth of suburbs and suburban churches, demographic shifts meant a more substantial population in the downtown areas made up of people of color – another target for renewed home mission strategies. White churches and denominations could engage cross-racial ministries in the city center from a greater distance, without risking changes to the racial makeup of their church bodies.<sup>26</sup>

To fund new churches and missions for these growing white communities, Union Association formed the Union Baptist Foundation in 1955, which raised money to buy land and finance building costs for future growth. The Church Expansion Committee made recommendations to the executive board, and the board used money from the foundation to obtain new properties and increase the number of white churches in the Greater Houston area.<sup>27</sup> From 1954 to 1955, they had organized seven new missions,

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<sup>24</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 951. See also, Peter W. Williams, “Community: Religious Life in the Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century United States,” in *Religion in American History*, ed. Amanda Porterfield and John Corrigan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 292; Wilbert R. Shenk, “Missions,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed. Philip Goff (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), 238.

<sup>25</sup> George D. Younger, “‘Not by Might, nor by Power’: Urban Ministry in American Baptist Churches,” in *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States, 1945-1985*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmens Publishing, 1996), 24-25; R. G. Commander, *The Story of Union Baptist Association, 1840-1976* (Houston: D. Armstrong Publishing, 1977), 42-44, 55-57; Harry Leon McBeth, *Texas Baptists: A Sesquicentennial History* (Dallas: Baptistway Press, 1998), 224-225, 227-228, 242, 254; Newman, *Getting Right with God*, 129-130.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew J. Price, “Place, Race, and History: The Social Mission of Downtown Churches,” in *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City*, ed. Lowell W. Livezey (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> UBA (1956), 33.

bringing the total count of white missions to seventeen, and it had approved loans of over seven thousand dollars for down payments on construction costs for those properties. Union Association had also approved an additional \$95,000 for the construction of future white churches.<sup>28</sup>

By 1959, Union Association had already obtained tracts of land on the far northwest and southeast fringes of Houston for future church plants. A newly formed Missions Survey Committee also recommended another five and a half acres of land in Sharpstown and over four acres of land in Pasadena. In 1962, the association made plans to purchase a mission site where a new high school in the Spring Branch area would draw more residents. The Mission Survey Committee predicted that they might not build a new church in the area for at least another two years. In the same year, Union Association purchased a large tract of land near NASA's new Manned Space Craft headquarters but reported that "no building [would] be constructed until 200 homes [were] erected."<sup>29</sup>

The activities of the committees point to a pattern of careful and intentional planning to support the growth of the white Baptist communities connected to Union Association. Although it had supported the establishment of new missions financially and logistically in the past, the creation of the Union Baptist Foundation and new committees devoted specifically to encouraging church growth marked a new phase for

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<sup>28</sup> UBA (1955), 19-20, 36.

<sup>29</sup> UBA (1959), 45-46, 48; UBA (1960), 42, 62; UBA (1961), 59; UBA (1962), 33-34. Perhaps one of the largest single investments for one of these suburban churches was a loan of \$250,000 in 1967 for Westbury Baptist Church, a new church on the southwest fringes of the city, UBA (1967), 25.

the association. In the ten years following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, eighty new churches had joined Union Association.<sup>30</sup>

In the same period, however, Union Association's attention to Mexican American churches under the Interracial Committee and Latin American Committee reveals the problems that Navarro expressed. Although Union Association sponsored the construction of a new church auditorium for Central Mexican Baptist church for \$18,000 in the early 1950s, new church buildings for Mexican American congregations were rare.<sup>31</sup> Rather than raising money for new buildings, Union Association called on its other churches and their members to consider donating old buildings, properties, and supplies for use in Mexican American ministries. In 1955, the Interracial Committee advised the Union Executive Board to purchase the buildings formerly occupied by North Side Baptist Church with the intention of salvaging materials to create needed buildings for two Mexican American missions. Half of the lumber went to build a small auditorium and education building for the Kinwood Mexican Chapel located on the far north side of Houston, and the rest of the materials went toward a small addition to a house on a small lot that the Interracial Committee had recently purchased on the far southeast side of Houston at Manchester Baptist Temple. All completed at minimal cost in labor and materials.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> R. G. Commander, *The Story of Union Baptist Association, 1840-1976* (Houston: D. Armstrong Publishing, 1977), 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> UBA (1950), 11; "Central Mexican Church Dedicates New \$18,000 Auditorium and Parsonage," *Baptist Messenger*, September 1953.

<sup>32</sup> UBA (1955), 7, 21; "Associational Reports," *Baptist Messenger*, October 1955; Navarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger*, December 1955; Hall, "With the Churches," *Baptist Messenger*, December 1955.



When Union Association did commit to new buildings for Mexican American churches, they made only very small financial investments partly because white member churches failed to contribute financially to the growing Spanish-speaking ministries. In 1961, the Latin American Committee reported that a major “deficiency” in the association’s work among Mexican Americans was a lack of sponsor churches and money for educational buildings to hold Bible studies and Sunday school programs. Their lack of money meant that their property developments were consistently small. That year, Union Association spent three thousand dollars on a new mission on the northwest side of Houston called the Acme Brick Mission. The committee’s solution to the lack adequate educational buildings was to plan on moving Union Association-owned buildings to sites already underway.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, compared to the acres of land the Church Expansion Committee purchased in suburban Houston in areas that promised future neighborhoods, the meager commitment Union Association to Mexican American communities already bursting at the seams signaled to Mexican American Baptists that they were not a priority. It also reaffirmed their position as both outsiders and missionary projects. Therefore, while Union Association attempted to improve its ministry efforts among Mexican Americans by investing in individual churches, building properties, and supporting other Mexican American-focused ministries, their unequal treatment of Mexican Americans signaled the limits to these new initiatives.

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<sup>33</sup> UBA (1961), 57.

## **Black and White Baptists: The Rev. Bill Lawson and Tokenism's Limits**

Although the Interracial Committee also contributed to African American Baptist ministries, the only regular financial commitment was toward the Union Association seminary, which offered seminary extension classes for African American ministers seeking further education. The seminary was an outgrowth of the Negro Bible Institutes that began in the 1910s as a missionary outreach program funded by Union Association.<sup>34</sup> In 1945, Anglo Baptist ministers established the seminary as a more permanent institution. And the seminary received financial support from the Interracial Committee and local black Baptist churches and associations.<sup>35</sup> Two white ministers, M. M. Wolf and A. L. Ingram, ran the seminary and taught most of the courses. They also made regular reports to the association as a way to attract more donations for the program.<sup>36</sup>

### *Lawson and the BSU*

The most significant step Union Association took in the 1950s toward improving relations with African American Baptists was its cooperation with black Baptist ministers to create a new Baptist Student Union (BSU) and hire a Chair of Bible and BSU director at Texas Southern University (TSU) in 1955.<sup>37</sup> The Baptist General Convention of Texas established the Department of Student Work in 1920 as a way to

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<sup>34</sup> As discussed in Chapter II.

<sup>35</sup> W. P. Durnal and W. R. Estep, "The Baptist Story in Houston," *Baptist Messenger*, May 1953, 23.

<sup>36</sup> UBA (1946), 7.

<sup>37</sup> UBA (1955), 22-23.

connect Baptist college students with Baptist churches and mold them into adults with Baptist loyalties through the Baptist Student Union (BSU).<sup>38</sup> In the 1930s, several state-owned campuses with BSUs also had Bible Chairs. While every Texas Baptist-sponsored college or university had faculty who taught courses on the Bible, some public schools also allowed for-credit Bible courses taught by qualified and denomination-approved teachers. As college enrollment skyrocketed after World War II, Baptists scrambled to keep up. By 1954, there were BSU directors at thirty-five different campuses that served more than 35,000 Baptist college students spread across the state.<sup>39</sup>

In Houston, Union Association funded student ministries at Rice University, Baylor College of Medicine, and the University of Houston.<sup>40</sup> In 1954, the association began to explore the possibility of expanding its student ministries to include enrollees at Houston's only institution of higher education available to black students, Texas Southern University.<sup>41</sup> Messengers at that year's annual meeting approved the formation of a special committee on "cooperation with Negroes in our area," which called together the heads of several existing committees including the committees on the Christian Life,

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<sup>38</sup> BGCT (1956), 149-150; McBeth, *Texas Baptists*, 177-179, 214.

<sup>39</sup> BGCT (1955), 141-143; William A. Lawson Jr., "Establishment of Baptist Student Union at Texas Southern University," 1955, box 1, folder 18, "TSU Bible Chair," Rev. William A. Lawson Papers, MS 532, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University; William A. Lawson Jr., "Bible Courses," 1955, box 1, folder 18, "TSU Bible Chair," Rev. William A. Lawson Papers.

<sup>40</sup> UBA (1954), 43.

<sup>41</sup> The school was first established as Houston Colored Junior College in 1927, and it became a four-year college with its own campus in 1935. After *Sweatt v. Painter* (1946), the Texas Legislature purchased Houston College for Negroes and created a state-funded institution for black students, the Texas State College for Negroes, to avoid integration. Thomas R. Cole, *No Color Is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 24; Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 96; Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 11; Cary D. Wintz, "Texas Southern University," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kct27>.

Christian Education, Interracial Work, and Student Work. Their purpose was to coordinate with leaders of the local black Baptist churches to establish a permanent Baptist presence at TSU.<sup>42</sup> In 1955, the Special Committee on Negro Work reported that they had successfully acquired the services of a young black seminary graduate, the Rev. William A. Lawson Jr., to direct the BSU and teach Bible classes for college credit at TSU. The Baptist General Convention's director of the Department of Student Work, W. F. Howard, hired Lawson and served as his supervisor. Union Association and the BGCT split responsibility for Lawson's salary with the expectation "that the Negro Baptists will have an integral part in the finances in the near future."<sup>43</sup>

Lawson was born in St. Louis in 1928 and grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. He went to college at Tennessee A&I State College, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1950. Over the next five years, he completed two seminary degrees from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City.<sup>44</sup> Lawson was the first black student to attend the school, which also made him the first black senior class president when his class elected him.<sup>45</sup> While Lawson was a student at Tennessee State, he had become involved in the Baptist Student Union on campus, and his later stint at Central Baptist Theological Seminary put him in touch with white Southern Baptist

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<sup>42</sup> UBA (1954), 9, 10. The members of the committee were W. E. Denhem of the Special College Committee, K. Owen White of the Christian Education Committee, Joseph Stiles of the Christian Life Committee, John Taylor of the Interracial Committee, and E. H. Westmoreland of the Committee on Student Work. The UBA minutes from 1955 mention that the majority of the exploratory work was carried about by the Christian Life Committee. See UBA (1955), 22-23.

<sup>43</sup> UBA (1955), 23.

<sup>44</sup> "Biographical Sketch: William A. Lawson," folder, "Lawson, William A.," Biographical Files, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas (TBHC); Tennessee A&I State College later became Tennessee State University in 1968.

<sup>45</sup> William "Bill" Lawson to Audrey Anne Hoffman, September 29, 1952, Rev. William "Bill" and Audrey Lawson Correspondence 1952 to 1954, volume 1, Lawson Collection, Houston Public Library, <http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/cdm/ref/collection/lawson/id/757>.

leaders throughout the South. So when Union Association approached W. F. Howard and the BGCT Executive Board about finding someone who might work with the students at TSU, Lawson seemed like an obvious choice.<sup>46</sup> Lawson agreed to move to Houston and take the job at TSU because he felt that God had called him to work with students. He said that when he arrived in Houston in late August and saw the campus, a collection of temporary buildings from nearby Ellington Field, he “just fell in love with the school” and thought that this “was an important investment to make in young black kids.”<sup>47</sup>

*“The Tradition Had Not Changed”*

The addition of Lawson to the BGCT Department of Student Work and the TSU students to the statewide annual convention made the Department of Student Work the first state-level Baptist agency to integrate. W. F. Howard, who had been Director of Student Work since 1943, remarked that working with students, who were “not as inflexible” as older generations of white Baptists were, put him and other denominational leaders in a “good position” to push college students to apply Biblical principles to the changes unfolding around them.<sup>48</sup> Howard began incorporating the few black BSU students they had into the local programs, which meant that the program

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<sup>46</sup> Reverend Bill Lawson, interview by Jane Ely, March 14, 2008, Houston Oral History Project – Mayor Bill White Collection, HMRC Oral History Collection, HMRC; Wilbur Forrester Howard, interview by L. Katherine Cook and Katy Jennings Stokes on four occasions from July 8 to July 9, 1982 in Waco, Texas, transcript, 115-116, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/buiroh/id/1717>.

<sup>47</sup> Lawson interview, 2008. Incidentally, Lawson mentions in the interview that he arrived in Houston on August 28, 1955, the same day that Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Mississippi. Although Lawson was not aware of it at the time, in retrospect, he discusses his arrival in Houston in terms of being on the cusp of major changes.

<sup>48</sup> Howard interview, 115-116; McBeth, *Texas Baptists*, 215.

planning committee needed to think about accommodations for black attendees to the Texas State BSU Convention in the fall of 1955, held that year in Waco. The white Baptist student visitors shared dormitories with Baylor students on campus, but since Baylor was still an all-white school, Lawson and the TSU students had to stay elsewhere. Howard was unsuccessful in finding them rooms in hotels around Waco, so he called on Baptist families in the area to host them instead.<sup>49</sup>

Lawson's relationship with the white Baptist leaders he interacted with was largely supportive and in many cases even positive.<sup>50</sup> Yet, Lawson also faced the limits of his and the TSU students' inclusion in white spaces. For example, First Baptist Church Houston agreed to host the 1958 Texas State BSU Convention, but only after the deacons held a meeting to decide what to do about the black students who would surely be part of the convention.<sup>51</sup> First Baptist, like many other churches throughout the South at the time, was not a welcoming place for black visitors. The understood, yet unwritten, policy of First Baptist was to exclude any person of color. With a long history using the church to support segregation, First Baptist had only occasionally had black visitors in its church since Reconstruction. However, before the BSU Convention in 1958, the

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<sup>49</sup> Howard interview, 116-117.

<sup>50</sup> Lawson received numerous invitations from white student organizations from various Texas Baptist schools, and he maintained a close relationship with the congregation of South Main Baptist Church in Houston and its pastor, E. H. Westmoreland. "BRH Resumes with Lawson Guest Speaker," *Baylor Lariat*, October 16, 1957; Joe Early, *The Building of a Church: 100 Years of South Main* (Houston: South Main Baptist Church, 2004), 64.

<sup>51</sup> First Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, *A Church in the City Reaching the World*, edited by Kate Atkinson, Christine Hall Ladner, Joanna Williams Poor, and Mona Petronella (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc, 1985), 48.

deacons met and agreed on a new policy: Lawson and his students would be allowed to enter the church, but they could only sit in the back of the auditorium or in the balcony.<sup>52</sup>

Lawson played an integral role in the planning and logistics of the convention that year since he was one of the four BSU directors in the host city. One of his responsibilities was to put up and take down the decorations in the church auditorium. On Sunday morning, the final day of the convention, Lawson wanted to remove the signs and banners in the auditorium after their program had ended but before the regular congregation arrived for Sunday morning services. However, when he entered the sanctuary to begin removing the decorations, one of the ushers approached him and said, “You can’t take these signs down now.” When Lawson protested, the usher told him that he was not allowed to be in that part of the auditorium. Instead, Lawson had to sit hidden in the baptistery during the service, and he was only allowed to come out when the congregation had left. When Lawson spoke about the incident several decades later, he remarked that even though the church had allowed black students to be in the church for the convention, it was clear that First Baptist’s “tradition had not changed.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Keeping White Churches White: Barring the Doors**

The “tradition” of keeping white churches white had pervaded southern white churches since the years after Reconstruction. As the civil rights movement intensified in

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<sup>52</sup> First Baptist Church Houston, *Church in the City*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> William Lawson, interview by the author, August 4, 2010, Houston, Texas; William A. Lawson Jr., “Gentiles Join Christian Church,” n. d., box 3, folder 10, “Sermon + Lecture Notes; Envelope 10 of 40,” Lawson papers.

Houston, activists targeted the institutional expressions of racism and inequality in the city. In Houston this meant the city's largest churches.<sup>54</sup> When forced to deal with the issue of desegregation, white Baptist churches tended, with few exceptions, to mount tremendous resistance in two main ways: first, by closing their doors of worship to African American visitors; second, by using white church flight to avoid African American and Mexican American "encroachment."

*First Baptist Church Houston and the Congress of Racial Equality*

At the end of the Sunday morning service on May 19, 1963, at downtown Houston's First Baptist Church, Don Henderson, a young African American man associated with the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), walked to the front of the all-white church to seek membership at the city's most conspicuous symbol of racial hypocrisy.<sup>55</sup> At the time, First Baptist's pastor, K. Owen White, was the president of both the Baptist General Convention of Texas (1962-1964) and president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1963-1964). The director of the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Rev. A. Edward Bell, pastor of Grace Methodist Church in Houston, chose First Baptist because its downtown location, its segregationist policies, and White's high profile made the church a prime target to pressure southern white churches to face the moral dissonance in their ongoing policies of exclusion and

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<sup>54</sup> Charles A. Israel, "From Biracial to Segregated Churches: Black and White Protestants in Houston, Texas, 1840-1870," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (April 1998): 429-460; Chapell, *Stone of Hope*; Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*.

<sup>55</sup> "Negroes Picket Houston First Baptist Church," *Baptist Press*, July 30, 1963; "Negroes Picket Houston's First Baptist Church," *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, Monday, July 29, 1963; Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership*, 192; Chrisman, "Religious Moderates," 108-109.



segregation.<sup>56</sup> Bell felt that if they could get First Baptist to desegregate, it might lead other white churches to embrace integration as well.<sup>57</sup>

White and the deacons at First Baptist had expected something like this. They were aware of similar movements elsewhere in the South and decided that it would be wise to have a plan in place. The deacons instructed White that in the event that black visitors attempted to join the church, he should tell them, “This is a matter which I need to discuss with my deacons.”<sup>58</sup> Normally, when people came to join the church, White would greet them at the front, inquire whether they were believers or a member of another church, and then he would present them to the congregation for vocal approval. When Henderson made his way forward on the Sunday after White was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, White announced to the congregation, “This young man, [Don Henderson], has presented himself for membership by transfer of letter from a local church in our city, and there is a problem that he and I need to discuss with the deacons.” White was certain that if he had presented Henderson for membership, the

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<sup>56</sup> K. Owen White to T. A. Patterson, undated [c. August, 1963], White, K. O., File 646, T. A. Patterson Papers, Archives and Special Collections, A. Webb Roberts Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>57</sup> Varea Shields Jr., “Houston CORE Chapter Has Sights on Downtown Church,” *Houston Forward Times*, August 10, 1963.

<sup>58</sup> K. Owen White, *Oral Memoirs of K. Owen White*, K. Owen White interviewed by Alfred Ronald Tonks, January 17, 1974 and February 1, 1976 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1996), 105. For a discussion of the kneel-in movement with particular attention to Memphis, Tennessee, see Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). In his work, Haynes notes that CORE tactics at Houston stand apart from the other cases he has examined in that it was the one place where black church visitors may have meant to create a disturbance through protests. Haynes, *Last Segregated Hour*, 255n34.

members would have overwhelmingly voted not to receive him, an outcome he felt would have damaged First Baptist's reputation, influence, and effectiveness.<sup>59</sup>

White had several long meetings with Henderson over the following days. He pled with Henderson to wait patiently, and that perhaps he may be able to work something out in the next few months. According to White, Henderson "was reasonable at first" but became impatient with the idea. Instead, Henderson asked White to let the congregation accept or reject him just like anyone else. During these meetings, White also learned of Henderson's association with CORE and reported it to the deacons. The deacons met three weeks later and rejected Henderson's membership bid since they felt he had "selfish motives" for joining.<sup>60</sup>

In response, Bell wrote a letter to White and his church on behalf of CORE with an ultimatum: "unless Negroes were admitted as members [they] would picket the church, stage kneel-ins, and pack the pews with Negroes."<sup>61</sup> The letter also closed with a bold claim to the moral high ground in the fight: "We take this stand in clear [conscience] as Americans, as Negroes, as members of [CORE], but essentially as Disciples of Jesus Christ. What then shall be the outcome? The verdict is yours."<sup>62</sup>

White and his church chose to dig their heels in. Some of the deacons favored barring African Americans from visiting all together, but others preferred to allow black visitors to sit only in the upper balcony or at the back of the auditorium. According to

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<sup>59</sup> White, *Oral Memoirs*, 106.

<sup>60</sup> White to Patterson, undated [c. August, 1963]; First Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, *A Church in the City Reaching the World*, ed. Kate Atkinson, Christine Hall Ladner, Joanna Williams Poor, and Mona Petronella (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1985), 49.

<sup>61</sup> K. Owen White to T. A. Patterson, July 11, 1963, White, K. O., File 646, T. A. Patterson Papers; White to Patterson, undated [c. August, 1963]; FBC Houston, *A Church in the City*, 48-50.

<sup>62</sup> Shields, "Houston CORE Chapter Has Sights on Downtown Church."

White, the deacons feared that since First Baptist was in downtown Houston, near where a large number of African Americans lived, “Negroes would move in and take over the church.” But White countered that any restrictions on African American visitors would only embolden their campaign (but not that discrimination was immoral). In the end, the deacons agreed to open the services to anyone who wanted to attend, but they still refused to consider a black person for membership. They also created a new screening committee that would examine every new candidate for membership regardless of race. The committee took into account each person’s “salvation experience, motivation, former church experience, etc.”<sup>63</sup>

Each Sunday after Henderson’s failed membership bid, different groups of black visitors arrived at First Baptist to attend Sunday school and worship services, and they sat scattered throughout the auditorium in pairs. During the invitation at the end of each service throughout June and July, at least one of the visitors would ask to join the church, and the screening committee would turn them away. According to the men and women who had tried to join, the screening committee rejected them because they were attempting “to stir up strife,” and the church “would not yield to overt pressure.”<sup>64</sup>

After the new applicants were rejected, CORE members arrived at the church with picket signs in-hand on Sunday, July 28. The signs read, “Respect for Human

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<sup>63</sup> White, *Oral Memoirs*, 108-109; “Negroes Picket Houston Church,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, Monday, July 29, 1963, 11; “Negroes Picket Houston First Baptist Church”; KHOU-TV, “Anti-Integration First Baptist Church,” KHOU-TV Film Box 6301, Reel 16: footage from May to June 1963, KHOU-TV Film Collection, RGD033, HMRC.

<sup>64</sup> Shields, “Houston CORE Chapter Has Sights on Downtown Church”; White, *Oral Memoirs*, 106-108.

Dignity Is All We Ask” and “How Can a Christian Church Be Segregated?”<sup>65</sup> Protests continued each Sunday for more than a month. For the most part, church members ignored the protestors, but a few fired angry retorts on their way in. One person shouted, “Go pray in your own closet,” and another spat, “Dirty stinking communists!”<sup>66</sup> White made a statement the following September that he and the church would not consider an African American for membership as long as CORE kept up what he called “pressure tactics” because as he said in June, “there can be a wrong time to do a right thing.”<sup>67</sup>

The demonstrations at First Baptist eventually died down, but the stress of leading the BGCT and SBC along with one of the largest churches in Houston amid one of the most contentious periods in Houston’s history took its toll on White and his wife. White suffered a heart attack in December of 1963, and he later said that even apart from the race issues, he could tell that his wife “was breaking under the heavy pressure of the work” required by a downtown church.<sup>68</sup>

Beyond the walls of First Baptist, others registered their support and protest.

Many initially questioned White’s presumption about Henderson’s motives for seeking

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<sup>65</sup> “Negroes Picket Houston Church,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, Monday, July 29, 1963, 11; “Negroes Picket Houston First Baptist Church”; White, *Oral Memoirs*, 108.

<sup>66</sup> Shields, “Houston CORE Chapter Has Sights on Downtown Church.”

<sup>67</sup> “K. Owen White Dies in Tucson at Age 83,” *Baptist Press*, July 29, 1985; “Pastors Doubtful of Survey,” *The Galveston Daily News*, Saturday, September 21, 1963, 12; K. O. White to T. A. Patterson, June 17, 1963, “Statement Releases to Baptist Press,” White, K. O., File 646, T. A. Patterson Papers, Archives and Special Collections, A. Webb Roberts Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>68</sup> In his SBC interview, White claimed to have convinced the demonstrators to see the error of their ways, which led them to relent. James E. Taulman, “Preface,” in *Oral Memoirs of K. Owen White*, K. Owen White interviewed by Alfred Ronald Tonks, January 17, 1974 and February 1, 1976 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1996); K. Owen White, *Oral Memoirs of K. Owen White*, 101, 111, 188-189. In the interview, White mentions that his church (First Baptist) was one of three powerful and prominent churches in the city during the 1950s and 1960s; the other two were Second Baptist and South Main Baptist. He says that South Main Baptist was by far the strongest, particularly in terms of financial support and Sunday school attendance. White also mentioned his heart attack amid the stress of the preceding months.

membership. They argued that if questioning potential members' motives had not been a regular part of the membership process for white visitors, then White should never have even questioned Henderson about his.<sup>69</sup> It seemed like a convenient way of dodging the race question by making an issue out of his motives or politics. Others, like E. S. James, the editor of the *Baptist Standard*, acknowledged that "Negroes have a right to seek membership in white churches," but he believed that picketers were driving a wedge between themselves and those who would want to accept them in other circumstances, that they were damaging the cause of desegregation by sinfully "coercing" white Baptists to accept a new member.<sup>70</sup>

As white Baptists throughout the state of Texas witnessed the events at First Baptist, many of their churches adopted formal policies about race and membership. At the end of that summer in 1963, the Texas Christian Life Commission sent a survey of churches' racial policies to over four thousand churches in the state, and 1259 participated. The survey found that 747 of the churches that returned answers accepted black visitors, but 147 did not. The survey also revealed that 368 of those churches whose policies were based on official action had adopted them as of 1963. Although most of the respondents had guidelines about black visitors, only 412 churches had formal or informal policies about black membership, and 178 stated that they would refuse to admit an African American as a member. Of those that would, 85 churches had adopted a screening committee like First Baptist's that examined every candidate for

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<sup>69</sup> K. Owen White to T. A. Patterson, July 11, 1963, White, K. O., File 646, T. A. Patterson Papers.

<sup>70</sup> E. S. James, "Coercing the Churches," *Baptist Standard*, September 4, 1963.

membership regardless of race. In general, the results of the survey showed that larger, metropolitan churches were more likely to welcome African Americans than smaller churches located in rural areas.<sup>71</sup>

Two years later, in April 1965, an African American woman in her fifties came forward one Sunday to join the church on profession of faith. She had been attending the church for some time because she enjoyed White's style of preaching, but she wanted to become a member of the church that had led to her salvation. White met with her and found her motives to be sincere, and he also felt that her timing represented the right moment to change the church's policy. After White recommended her for membership, some of the deacons were still adamantly opposed to the idea. Instead of debating the issue among themselves, the deacons decided the entire church should vote on the issue on April 21, 1965. According to official First Baptist histories and White's SBC presidential interview, segregationist members of the church "shook the timbers" and rallied as many people as possible to show up to participate in the Wednesday night vote. White remarked that he saw people at the church that night whom he had never seen before.<sup>72</sup>

By a vote of 206 to 182, church members voted not to accept "members of the colored race." After White announced the outcome of the vote, a group in the corner of

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<sup>71</sup> "Survey on Racial Policies of Texas Baptist Churches," enclosed in Jimmy Allen to T. B. Maston, September 24, 1963, file 1783, "Christian Life Commission, Miscellaneous," T. B. Maston Collection, Archives and Special Collections, A. Webb Roberts Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. The results of the survey were also published in various Baptist news sources. For example, see R. T. McCartney, "Texas Baptist Churches Slowly Accepting Negroes," *Baptist Press*, September 20, 1963.

<sup>72</sup> White *Oral Memoirs*, 110. Blaming outsiders for negative outcomes on racial matters was a common theme among many of the instances I examined. Somehow, it was never the members in good standing who were responsible for such deplorable actions.

the auditorium erupted in applause, to which White responded, “You know something; I’m ashamed of you.”<sup>73</sup> In a press conference following the vote, White told reporters that he felt that the negative vote did not “reflect the true spirit of the church.”<sup>74</sup> On the following Sunday, April 25, White announced his resignation from First Baptist effective at the end of May for a job as the coordinator of Southern Baptist metropolitan missions in Los Angeles. Some of the local papers assumed that he had resigned in protest, but as White explained in a letter to his colleague, T. A. Patterson, he and his wife had decided that leading a downtown church had become too difficult for both of them. Several weeks before the vote took place, White had already accepted his new position.<sup>75</sup>

K. Owen White shared with those close to him that he personally felt that racial barriers had no place in a Christian church, but his hands were relatively tied as the pastor of a democratic autonomous Baptist church. In a denomination without an ecclesiastical hierarchy, Baptist pastors often walked a precarious line between conscience and action in times of social change, a dilemma that required what the Texas CLC called “keeping the tension in the right direction.”<sup>76</sup> Socially conscious pastors had to find a way to press their churches to respond to moral conscience without losing the support of their congregations. White chose not to budge or mobilize his church to do so when he felt that people outside of the church were forcing them.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> White, *Oral Memoirs*, 110.

<sup>74</sup> “K. Owen White Dies in Tucson at Age 83,” *Baptist Press*, July 29, 1985.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Oral Memoirs*, 110-111.

<sup>76</sup> K. Owen White to T. A. Patterson, July 11, 1963, T. A. Patterson Papers; T. B. Maston, “Southern Baptists and the Negro: Part II,” *The Baptist Student*, April 1967, 32-34.

<sup>77</sup> E. S. James, “Coercing the Churches,” *Baptist Standard*, September 4, 1963.

*In the Bible, "There Is No Color Line": South Main Baptist Church*

Another downtown church, South Main Baptist Church, had a different experience. Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling in 1954, deacons at South Main asked their pastor, Rev. E. H. Westmoreland, "What shall we do if a black person comes to the door?" According to a 1975 interview with Westmoreland, the pastor replied, "Ask them where they want to be seated, and take them there." When he noticed that black visitors were being seated in the loft of the sanctuary, Westmoreland believed it would damage the potential relationship their church could have with the black community. Instead, he insisted that deacons and ushers should sincerely welcome people of any racial identity to their church because "there is no distinction in the Bible as to the person that is to be reached. There's no color line, no racial line." And black visitors did arrive at South Main "from time to time," and Westmoreland said that he always made a point to personally thank them for coming and convey how pleased he was that they decided to visit.<sup>78</sup> One regular visitor was Rev. William Lawson, who worked closely with Westmoreland since he was the committee chairman in charge of student work in the association.<sup>79</sup>

In the mid-1960s, as news of the drama unfolding at First Baptist spread, Westmoreland called a meeting with his deacons to head off any trouble at South Main Baptist. He acknowledged that he had been leading the church to welcome black visitors, but he wanted to the deacons to make a decision about the church's membership policy.

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<sup>78</sup> E. H. Westmoreland, interview by Louis Marchiafava, September 12, 1975, Houston, Texas, Houston Metropolitan Research Center Oral History Collection, available online, <http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/cdm/ref/collection/Interviews/id/431>.

<sup>79</sup> Westmoreland interview.



He presented what he considered the three possible options they could take if an African American asked to become a member: he could refer the matter to the deacons; he could accept them like they would anyone else; or the church could turn them down. He asked the deacons to vote on the matter without discussion to avoid heated arguments. After all eighty-four deacons cast their votes and counted them, seventy-two had voted to accept any potential member regardless of race. Even the few who Westmoreland was certain would oppose the idea of black membership acknowledged to the rest of the group that the Bible contained no mention of accepting believers on account of color or race.<sup>80</sup>

By 1969, the church had included its policy on the official church publications. The Sunday bulletin included a note that said, “[South Main Baptist Church] is dedicated to enriching the spiritual lives of all it serves, without regard to race, nationality, or social condition.”<sup>81</sup> In the decade following the church’s decision to welcome black members, Westmoreland estimated that four or five black families and at least a few other single men and women had joined the church.<sup>82</sup> By the 1970s, South Main’s reputation for being a welcoming church had grown so much that Elmer West, the program director for the SBC Christian Life Commission, asked Westmoreland if he would write an article for an upcoming Race Relations Sunday packet that described “what South Main Church is doing with the ‘everybody’ who comes” and how South Main had transitioned from a segregated church to one without racial barriers.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Westmoreland interview.

<sup>81</sup> South Main Baptist Church, scanned copy of the bulletin, summer 1969, South Main Baptist Church records (SMBC records), South Main Baptist Church, Houston, Texas.

<sup>82</sup> Westmoreland interview.

<sup>83</sup> Elmer West to E. H. Westmoreland, September 28, 1971, SMBC records.

*Pastors in Trouble over Race*

Stories like South Main Baptist's were rare. Far more common were stories of conflict between white Baptist congregations and pastors who attempted to move their churches away from segregationist policies. After 1954, denominational leaders reported hearing an increasing number of cases where pastors were under fire with their congregations.<sup>84</sup> The Christian ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, T. B. Maston, reported in a letter that the pastor of Oak Grove Baptist Church near Waco, Texas, Joe R. Boles had resigned in the mid-1950s because he and his church held conflicting views.<sup>85</sup> In 1966, the congregation of Tattnell Square Baptist Church in Macon, Georgia, voted to oust their pastor, Thomas J. Holmes, and two other ministers for allowing two black students from Mercer University to attend a Sunday morning worship service.<sup>86</sup> And in 1970, the congregation of First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, only narrowly voted to retain its entire pastoral staff after deacons moved to oust church leaders when a black woman and her daughter presented themselves for membership.<sup>87</sup> These examples demonstrate that tackling race issues in white churches could be contentious.

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<sup>84</sup> At the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, there is an entire folder in the Christian Life Commission resource files labeled "Pastors in Trouble over Race"; T. B. Maston to L. Emanuel Rish, November 9, 1956, file 956, "Race Relations," T. B. Maston Collection; William M. Dyal Jr. to Dr. Thomas J. Holmes, August 4, 1966, box 21, folder 24, "Race – Pastors in Trouble over Race," Southern Baptist Convention, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, AR 138-2, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>85</sup> Maston to Rish, November 9, 1956, Maston Collection, SWBTS.

<sup>86</sup> Dyal to Holmes, August 4, 1966, CLC Resource Files, SHBLA; Jack U. Harwell, "Georgia Church Fires Staff over Integration," *Baptist Press*, September 26, 1966, clipping, box 21, folder 24, CLC Resource Files, SBHLA.

<sup>87</sup> "Birmingham Church Votes Narrowly to Retain Staff," *Baptist Press*, August 20, 1970, clipping, box 21, folder 24, CLC Resource Files, SBHLA.

In some instances, however, it was also dangerous. On Easter Sunday in 1968, the pastor of Poplar Springs Drive Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, Rev. Harold O’Chester, learned that Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church had been bombed the night before, the fourth black church to be attacked in his county over the preceding two months. The acts of violence against black Christians moved him to respond. He urged white pastors in his local community to pass a resolution condemning the violence, and he formed a Committee on Conscience, which included city officials and religious leaders of all faiths and races. O’Chester began receiving threatening calls at his home, and the local police informed him that he and his family had been found on a hit list. After he continued to press the community and his congregation to embrace cross-racial ministry, someone tossed poisoned hotdogs and candy into his backyard on two occasions. Neither of his children picked up the tainted food, but his dog ate it and became deathly ill.<sup>88</sup>

Several states over on Saturday, December 13, 1969, the teenage daughter of John Wesley Shipp, the pastor of Ridgecrest Baptist Church in North Carolina, hosted a party at their home that included several black students. Deacons at the all-white church had warned Shipp not to let the party happen. That night, just after the partygoers left the living room, a shotgun blast tore through the house. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but deacons at the church decided that Shipp “was a disruptive influence in the community” and fired him because his “views on racial matters would hurt the church.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Harold O’Chester to Floyd Craig, October 22, 1968, file 21-24, CLC Resource Files, SBHLA; “An Open Letter to Shannon,” Poplar Springs Drive Baptist Church Bulletin, file 21-24, CLC Resource Files, SBHLA.

<sup>89</sup> “Church Fires Pastor after Shotgun Blast Rips Home,” *Baptist Press*, December 19, 1969.

*Steps Forward and the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship*

While the threat of violence was never an issue for White in Houston, he failed to push his congregation to face the immorality of their choices and left behind a deeply divided congregation that was on the verge of splitting apart. The next permanent pastor of First Baptist, Robert L. Smith, arrived in 1965 and began a new initiative of making visits to nearby apartment complexes. But with a policy that barred people of color from membership still on the books, he knew he needed to make changes. His pulpit ministry featured a strong emphasis on Biblical lessons tied to social application. Attention to these issues amid a divided congregation made him unpopular to many in the church. During his pastorate from 1965 until 1969, attendance in Sunday school declined to its lowest level in over fifty years, tithing fell by \$20,000, baptisms dropped by more than 30 per year, and membership declined from 3,699 to 3,504. Yet, in 1968, some of the members who remained seemed committed to Smith's new program, but they viewed its ongoing racial barrier as a major impediment to actually drawing in the people they now sought to reach. At a Wednesday night meeting, church members affirmed a motion to have the church "consider and receive into the membership of our church any person who comes for membership, without regard to race, color, or nationality."<sup>90</sup>

Even amid the drama at First Baptist, a new possibility emerged. Just as word of Henderson's failed membership bid hit newsstands in 1963, Union Association workers and members of First Baptist's pastoral staff began working in earnest to create new lines of communication with African American Baptists. In June 1963, Union

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<sup>90</sup> First Baptist Church, *A Church in the City Reaching the World*, 51.

Association formed a Race Relations Committee, which immediately began meeting with the representatives of the Baptist Ministers Association, the local black Baptist pastors' conference. During their meetings, pastors exchanged literature, discussed areas of possible collaboration, and took tentative steps toward finding common ground.<sup>91</sup> These small meetings evolved into something more formal in 1965 as the Race Relations Committee organized official joint meetings between the black pastors of the Baptist Ministers Association and white pastors of the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference.<sup>92</sup> Intermittent meetings over the following four years led to the formation of an interracial Baptist pastors' alliance, the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship.<sup>93</sup>

On May 15, 1969, African American, Mexican American, and Anglo Baptist pastors in the Houston area gathered for the first official meeting of the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship, which they defined as “an inspirational and fellowship body meeting for the purpose of discussing denominational and community problems of Christian concern, and striving to arrive at common solutions.”<sup>94</sup> Speakers at the monthly meetings urged pastors in attendance to see that they had a duty to bring social issues before their congregations, arguing that church leaders had a responsibility to move their congregations into action if there was to be any hope of positive change.<sup>95</sup> As the Reverend Floyd N. Williams, longtime African American pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, put it at a 1971 meeting, “If you are going to have clean clothes, you have to put

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<sup>91</sup> “Committee on Negro Work,” in UBA (1963), 30.

<sup>92</sup> “Report of the Race Relations Committee,” in UBA, (1965), 30.

<sup>93</sup> “Report of Negro Ministry Committee,” in UBA (1969), 36-37.

<sup>94</sup> “Report of Negro Ministry Committee,” in UBA (1969), 36-37.

<sup>95</sup> “Baptist Pastors Organize Integrated Fellowship,” *Baptist Press*, October 8, 1969, 3.

an agitator in the washing machine. . . . Jesus told us to agitate situations and make the world better.”<sup>96</sup>

Members of the fellowship engaged issues of racism along with other problems relevant to the areas surrounding local church bodies.<sup>97</sup> In the first two years of fellowship’s activities, Odem Dyess, Chairmen of the Union Association Negro Ministries Committee, reported that African American, white, and Mexican American pastors in the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship had led their churches to participate in a pulpit exchange event called Race Relations Sunday to promote “interracial understanding.”<sup>98</sup> Although Dyess underscored how beneficial the event was for those who participated and how much African American and Mexican American pastors were involved, he also lamented, “We cannot but observe that the participation of the Anglo pastors in these activities is minimal.”<sup>99</sup> The Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship was largely ineffective. It continued to exist, and meetings occasionally brought black, brown, and white Baptists together. But because white Baptists showed little interest, progress toward racial understanding (much less, equality) through the fellowship remained out of reach.

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<sup>96</sup> “Ministers Urged to Use Politics to Do Good,” *The Kansas City Star*, July 3, 1971, 4.

<sup>97</sup> “Report of Negro Ministry Committee,” in UBA (1969), 36-37.

<sup>98</sup> “Report of Negro Ministry Committee,” in UBA (1970), 32.

<sup>99</sup> “Report of Negro Ministry Committee,” in UBA (1971), 32.

## White Church Flight and Resisting Integration

The experiences of Rev. Harold O'Chester in Mississippi and Rev. K. Owen White in Houston stand out largely because they both received a significant amount of media coverage. However, white Baptists throughout Houston resisted the end of segregation in their communities and churches in ways that have received less attention both then and now. Union Association's strategies for developing ministries among people of color and the limits to their progress largely differed along racial lines. White Baptist leaders pursued closer ties with Mexican American Baptists as a way to bolster Spanish-speaking (and increasingly bilingual) ministries through missions and churches apart from their white churches. Yet there were no recorded instances in Houston of a white, English-speaking Baptist church closing its doors to a Mexican American visitor in the 1950s and 1960s, nor is there evidence that a Mexican American had attempted to enter or join a white Baptist church.<sup>100</sup>

While Union Association made modest steps to reach out to Houston's black community, the response of First Baptist Church's members in the 1960s did more to

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<sup>100</sup> To a certain degree, even though Mexican American churches were segregated, they were still part of Union Association and oftentimes members of the same state and regional conventions as well. More importantly, though, the Chicano moment came later than the direct action phases of the Black Freedom Struggle. As the work of historian Felipe Hinojosa demonstrates, confrontations between Chicano activists and white-led denominations did occur, but they came to Houston in 1970. At the least until the late 1960s, Latina/o Baptists were mostly absent from civil rights struggles, which I discuss in Chapter VI. For Chicano church takeovers, see Felipe Hinojosa, "Sacred Spaces: Race, Resistance, and the Politics of Chicana/o and Latina/o Religious History," in *A Promising Problem: The New Chicana/o History*, ed. Carlos Blanton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 111-134; Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 206. For the Chicano "moment," see Ernesto Chavez, "*¡Mi Raza Primero!*": *Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3, 119.

drive the two groups apart. The main trend after 1950 that connects white Baptist racism toward both Mexican American and African American communities was the changing urban demographics and white church flight out to the fringes of Greater Houston. The declining membership, attendance, and financial contributions at First Baptist in the middle of the 1960s were actually part of a trend among churches in the urban core that started at least a decade before with the creation of the Union Baptist Foundation and Union Association's commitment to suburban white church growth. As the population of African American and Mexican American communities expanded and transformed the lived spaces of formerly majority-white areas, white Baptist churches fled to newly formed churches out of the downtown area to avoid the possibility of integrating their worship spaces. African American and Mexican American presence near white churches transgressed white Baptist perceptions of the urban spaces in downtown Houston. White Baptists saw the changes unfolding around them and expressed their fears of invasions and "takeovers" by people of color. Conversely, the renegotiations over the meaning of downtown spaces led black and brown Baptists to see their place in the urban core in new ways.

In 1956, Union Association's executive secretary, Ross Dillon, explained the process in the *Baptist Messenger*. He reported that Faith Temple Church in the Second Ward was on the cusp of realizing the fruits of a two-year long process of moving to a new development called Scenic Woods, northeast of downtown. "It became necessary to change location on Lockwood," wrote Dillon, "due to [the] encroachment of [the] Negro



population.”<sup>101</sup> Leading up to the decision to move, the church had experienced a steady drop in both membership and attendance. Faced with this “problem,” the congregation attempted to sell their property to a nearby African American church, Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church. Eventually, Mt. Olive agreed to purchase Faith Temple’s property, and the white congregation moved out. A similar sequence of events unfolded at Liberty Road Baptist Church, which moved to a site near Scenic Woods as well. And a year before, North Side Baptist Church voted to sell its buildings to Union Association “due to the encroachment of the Negro population,” which they used to construct buildings for Mexican American churches.<sup>102</sup> Facing African American “encroachment” in the 1950s, white churches consistently packed up and moved out. However, when white congregations anticipated a larger presence of Mexican Americans, their churches typically transitioned from Anglo to Latino, often retaining the same church name.

In Magnolia Park, as the population of Mexican Americans increased, Magnolia Temple Baptist Church, a white church with a long history of sponsoring Mexican American ministries, voted to dissolve its congregation. Seventy-five of the former members formed a new church in South Houston, a growing suburb of Houston along the newly constructed Gulf Freeway. Union Association purchased the property and buildings from the congregation with the intention of converting it to a Mexican American church.<sup>103</sup> In April 1956, James Novarro and other Mexican American Baptist pastors hosted a weeklong revival to generate interest in the church at Magnolia Temple,

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<sup>101</sup> Ross Dillon, “Two Years of Work and Effort Pay Off When Faith Temple Moves to New Location,” *Baptist Messenger*, September 1956.

<sup>102</sup> Ross Dillon, “Highlights in a Great Associational Year,” *Baptist Messenger*, October 1956.

<sup>103</sup> Estelle Hall, “With the Churches,” *Baptist Messenger*, February 1956.

and Rev. L. W. LaRive held the first Sunday service in June. In Novarro's report of the transition the following July, he wrote that "for the last five years, the Magnolia Temple Church has anticipated the day when its location and equipment would be best suited to minister to the Spanish-speaking people." Novarro felt that this new church "assure[d] a bright future" for Mexican American evangelism. However, when Union Association officials made their report, they focused on what they viewed as challenging circumstances and the loss of one of its churches.<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, in 1956 as the African American and Mexican American populations increased in Kashmere Gardens, an area on Houston's northeast side, members at Kashmere Baptist Church began making plans to relocate. Several months earlier, the pastor of the church had supported a building campaign that would lead to a massive new structure for its Mexican American mission, Kashmere Baptist Temple, led by Novarro. Midway through the construction, however, some members of the white church opted to purchase a new site farther out of town and allow the church that remained to transition with the population around it. The pastors of the two churches worked out an agreement with the help of Union Association: Novarro and the members of the Mexican American congregation would merge with the remaining white congregation, and they would worship together in bilingual and English language services. After a one-year probationary period, Novarro would become the sole pastor of Kashmere Baptist Church. Novarro planned to hold services in both Spanish and English as a way to attract a broader array of members, but it soon became clear that the white members had no

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<sup>104</sup> Novarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger*, July 1956.

intention of staying behind. In the end, Novarro's congregation remained primarily Mexican American, and the majority of the white members of Kashmere Baptist moved to other churches.<sup>105</sup>

Even the oldest Baptist churches in the association, such as First, Second, Trinity, Calvary, and South Main Baptist churches, faced similar issues as new churches in the suburbs threatened to siphon their members in droves. Second Baptist Church was one of the first to move from its downtown location. It had been in its historic church building at the corner of Milam and McGowan (the former St. Paul Methodist Church building) since 1927. But in 1957, it opted to relocate to a new location west of Memorial Park and joined with the membership of its church mission in Woodway just beyond the newly constructed West Loop. Because it made the move out of downtown so early, Second Baptist did not experience the same drastic decline in its membership as some of the other downtown churches. Instead, from 1950 through the 1960s, the church maintained between 5500 and 6200 members.<sup>106</sup> In 1956, First Baptist considered selling its building on Lamar Street for two million dollars, but the congregation opted to renovate and build an addition to its existing structure instead.<sup>107</sup> Over the next two years, as Second Baptist moved out of downtown, First Baptist's membership fell from 5717 in 1956 to 3467 in 1958.<sup>108</sup> While South Main Baptist Church avoided any significant loss of membership, according to Cliff Nickel, a longtime member of the

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<sup>105</sup> "Progressive Kashmere Baptist Temple Presents Challenge," *Baptist Messenger*, April 1956; "Missionaries Enjoy Quarterly Meeting," *Baptist Messenger*, August 1956; Ross Dillon, "Two Years of Work and Effort Pay Off When Faith Temple Moves to New Location," *Baptist Messenger*, September 1956; "Kashmere Buys Site in Home Owned Estates," *Baptist Messenger*, November 1956.

<sup>106</sup> UBA (1958), 14; Union Baptist Association, *Statistical Tables*, (1950-1969).

<sup>107</sup> First Baptist Church Houston, *A Church in the City Reaching the World*, 47-48.

<sup>108</sup> UBA, *Statistical Tables* (1956, 1957).

church, many of its members left the church in the 1950s to form River Oaks Baptist Church and other new churches elsewhere because of fears that African Americans would want to join their church.<sup>109</sup>

Calvary Baptist and Trinity Baptist both experienced a steady decline from the 1950s to the 1970s. Calvary lost around five hundred members in 1954 following the *Brown* ruling, and then its membership remained around one thousand until 1970. Located in the Second Ward near the edge of downtown at the corner of York Street and Preston Street, the church was in the thick of the expanding Mexican American communities. *Segundo Barrio*, while traditionally heavy in Mexican-origin residents had essentially merged with Magnolia to its east and had extended several streets to the west.<sup>110</sup> In 1974, Calvary reached out to Union Association for assistance with the sale of their church property. The congregation had voted to disband and wanted Union Baptist Foundation to purchase their church. The stipulation they had for the sale was that the proceeds or the buildings needed to go toward Mexican American ministries, either as a church or through other ministry avenues.<sup>111</sup> Trinity stands out as an exceptional case among large, longstanding, downtown Baptist churches. While churches facing the “crisis” of “encroachment” often abandoned their downtown location for the suburbs and sacrificed a potentially fruitful interethnic church for a traditionally white one, Trinity attempted to transition with the demographics around it. The white membership slowly trickled out of the church as the congregations of

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<sup>109</sup> Cliff Nickel, “Diversity at South Main Baptist,” typed summary of South Main Baptist Church records, in possession of the author.

<sup>110</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 99.

<sup>111</sup> UBA (1974), 42, 57.

Kashmere Baptist Temple and Bethel Mexican Church merged with the Latino membership of Trinity. Although the membership declined, the church remained intact as a downtown presence that reflected the community outside its doors.<sup>112</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the 1950s and 1960s, some white Baptists began to take modest steps forward in their relationships with both African American and Mexican American Baptist communities in Houston. Union Baptist Association ended its decades-old missions program for Mexican Americans and replaced it with a committee that put more money, resources, and personnel directly into the hands of Mexican American Baptist leaders. This shift reflected a statewide move toward the unification of the Mexican American Baptist and Anglo Baptist conventions and a general trend among the Mexican American Generation to pursue integration and inclusion within the existing system. Union Association also established and funded a Baptist Student Union at the newly renamed Texas Southern University, and they hired a young black minister named Rev. William “Bill” Lawson to direct the BSU and teach courses on the Bible at TSU.

Nevertheless, the majority of white Baptists continued to see the race problem as the threat that they believed people of color posed to white supremacy and the status quo. So they responded to the changes around them by moving their families and churches away from “African American encroachment,” and they closed their church

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<sup>112</sup> UBA (1971) 20, 21, 31.

doors to black worshippers, whom they believed wanted to infiltrate their churches and take control of their white spaces. In neighborhoods where Mexican Americans began to increase, white Baptists left their churches as they transitioned to primarily Mexican American congregations. Although white Baptists did not formally shut their doors to Mexican American Baptists, they nevertheless continued treating them as mission opportunities and outsiders in spite of the enormous growth and achievement among Mexican American Baptists.

## CHAPTER V

### REV. WILLIAM A. LAWSON JR. AND RELIGIOUS CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM

In 1982, when Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church had more than outgrown their renovated and expanded church building, they made plans to construct a multi-million dollar church building that could house at least a thousand churchgoers. But the Rev. William and Audrey Lawson knew their church was still on a tight building budget, so they looked for ways to save money where they could. When the Lawsons heard that the recently defunct Rice Hotel was selling its valuable interior decorations and fixtures, they traveled downtown to see what they could find.<sup>1</sup>

The Rice Hotel had been one of the premiere hotels in Houston since the early twentieth century, hosting such famed individuals as Groucho Marx, Liberace, Neil Armstrong, and President John F. Kennedy.<sup>2</sup> It had also been segregated until 1963. African Americans were prohibited from entering through the grand front doors into its marble-covered lobby. Instead, they had to enter through the fire exit in the back on the rare occasions their presence was permitted. The Lawsons purchased several rectangles of one-inch thick marble from the floor of the hotel lobby that they placed underneath the church pulpit. While they were at the Rice Hotel, they found out that a similar sale was going on just down the street at the old Loew's State Theater, the same theater that Lawson and the Progressive Youth Association had targeted with demonstrations in May

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Gray, "The Quiet Revolution to Open Segregation's Doors," *Houston Chronicle*, January 12, 2012, <http://www.chron.com/life/gray/article/Gray-The-quiet-revolution-to-open-segregation-s-2494635.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Webb, "Deconstructing the Rice," *Cite 44* (1999): 14-20; David Westheimer, "Rice Memories," *Cite 44* (1999): 21-22.

1963. In Jim Crow Houston, white patrons entered the theater through a bank of massive brass doors while black moviegoers were forced to enter through the back alley. The Lawsons purchased six of those large brass doors for the front entrance to their new church building. Each Sunday since, hundreds of worshippers have poured into Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church through a set of doors they had been unable to enter a few decades earlier, doors that their pastor worked so hard to break open. And they sat down on the church pews to listen to their pastor as he stood preaching on top of marble from a hotel foyer floor he had never been permitted to walk on.<sup>3</sup> So connected was Lawson's identity, his church, and the civil rights movement that Bill and Audrey Lawson incorporated the legacy of the movement into the physical structure of the church itself.

In this chapter, I argue that Lawson's experience in the movement led him to embrace his role as a religious leader, pastor, and civil rights activist as parts of the same God-ordained mission. In the 1960s, Lawson emerged as a leader in his community and established a church through which he worked toward social justice and equality in the Bayou City by helping lead the movement to desegregate the City of Houston, by attempting to spiritually empower the black community, and by leading his church and community to participate in civil rights campaigns.

Houston's civil rights movement tends to play a small part in most scholarship on the movement. And those scholars who have written about Houston, mention Lawson as a reluctant leader in the student sit-ins and later the dynamic and outspoken foe of

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<sup>3</sup> Gray, "The Quiet Revolution."



inequality in Houston's schools and businesses.<sup>4</sup> Historian Brian Behnken has written about the civil rights movement in Texas, and his work sheds light on what happened in Houston. He has also explored the role of another religious leader, Rev. Moses L. Price, the longtime pastor of one Houston's largest black Baptist churches, Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church, whom Behnken characterizes as a middle-course civil rights leader. In his study of Price, he argues that Lawson's confrontational and "radical" activism alienated the white community (and Mexican American activists), thereby damaging his potential to collaborate with diverse groups to find common ground. However, the evidence demonstrates that Lawson was adept at working with people of all races and ethnicities, including those who opposed his approach and perspective. He also acknowledged Mexican Americans' shared struggle and supported it in ways that overlapped with his agenda.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987); Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, ed., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992); Thomas R. Cole, *No Color Is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); David Chrisman, "Religious Moderates and Race: The Texas Christian Life Commission and the Call for Racial Reconciliation, 1954-68," in *Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and Their Quest for Justice*, ed. Debra A. Reid (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 97-122; Brian D. Behnken, "Elusive Unity: African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Civil Rights in Houston," in *Seeking Inalienable Rights*, ed. Reid, 123-146; Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Wesley Phelps, *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics, Grassroots Activists, and the Struggle for Democracy in Houston, 1964-1976* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 99-103.

<sup>5</sup> The crux of Behnken's assertion about Lawson appears to be based primarily on a 1972 study on biracial politics by Chandler Davidson, who argued that Lawson represents an example of a ministerial leader who was the extreme opposite of his conservative counterpart, the Rev. L. H. Simpson. He suggests, though, that Lawson was no better equipped to achieve results than Simpson was. Although Lawson was (and remains) a confrontational activist in favor of direct action and has not been involved in elected city leadership, he was still very successful at building alliances and coalitions across color lines and social classes. Brian Behnken, "'Count on Me': Reverend M. L. Price of Texas, a Case Study in Civil Rights Leadership," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 1 (2005): 61-84; Chandler Davidson,

Even so, Lawson as a religious civil rights leader in both his church and in the community remains underexplored. However, the civil rights movement in Houston cannot be understood apart from the Rev. William Lawson's story. He was integral to efforts that broke through segregation and challenged inequality in the city, and he provided leadership in the movement as a pastor. Therefore, this chapter explores the relationship between black Baptist leadership and civil rights activism by following the career and ministry of Rev. William A. Lawson Jr.

The first section begins with Lawson's arrival in Houston as the director of the Baptist Student Union at Texas Southern University in 1955 and follows the moments that shaped his vision for ministry and activism as the freedom movement emerged in the Houston area. The next sections explore Lawson's beginning as a pastor and how he used his religious influence and resources to lead and support campaigns for civil rights. Lawson, his career, and his church reveal the ways that religion, racial identity, and civil rights shaped one another during a moment of tremendous social change. Lawson envisioned the church as a keeper and purveyor of black culture as well as an institution that could provide black Christians with a sense of deep pride and a measure of protection from the oppression they faced.<sup>6</sup> But for Lawson, the role of the church also involved transforming the world. He also saw the church as a vehicle through which he could mobilize his congregation and wider community to realize human equality and

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*Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972). See also, Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 207-209.

<sup>6</sup> William Lawson, interview by Veronica Perry, August 12, 1974, Houston Oral History Project, HMRC Oral History Collection, HMRC; William A. Lawson, "The Black Church," typed manuscript, dated February 26, 2003, box 2, folder 1, "Rice U. – Reli 272; Lawson Sermon, Speech Material," Rev. William A. Lawson papers, MS 532, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University (hereafter cited as Lawson Papers).

social justice, and his approach emphasized the shared responsibility all people have in making that a reality.

### **Students and Missions: Rev. William Lawson's New Direction**

William "Bill" Lawson along with his wife, Audrey, and their newborn daughter, Melanie, moved to Houston in 1955 so he could begin work as the director of the Baptist Student Union (BSU) and the Chair of Bible at Texas Southern University (TSU). The BSU at Texas Southern, a Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT)-sponsored student ministry, represented one of the most cooperative interracial endeavors of the convention. Lawson's first five years in Houston as the BSU director shaped the direction of his career both as a minister and as a community activist in the years that followed. He began to see himself as an agent of change in the world, something he found in his experience as a missionary abroad. He also grew to see the TSU students as his "mission field," which led to his role as the religious mentor for the student-led sit-in movement in 1960.

#### *Missionary Impulse*

In the fall of 1955, Lawson began offering a variety of courses for TSU students in the Old and New Testaments. He organized activities for the approximately five hundred BSU members at a temporary Baptist Student Center near the campus, including "two daily devotional meetings, a weekly fellowship, ... a mission activity and

several committee, council, and personal meetings.”<sup>7</sup> He regularly led groups of students to attend the statewide Baptist Student Union gatherings and the larger regional conventions held each year at a Baptist conference center in Glorieta, New Mexico. He also received invitations for speaking engagements among primarily white audiences to discuss Christian principles of human rights and the value of missions. He was the featured speaker for multiple programs at Texas Baptist universities.<sup>8</sup>

However, according to Lawson, the experience that influenced his early trajectory the most was a 1959 mission trip to Southeast Asia. He volunteered to be the evangelist for the summer-long mission trip through his connections in the Texas Baptist Department of Student Work, which regularly sponsored students and staff on mission trips during their time away from school each summer. Lawson’s travel partner was a graduate student from Baylor University named Don Pratt, and the two were part of a “singing-witnessing” crusade to Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> He described his experience to a group of students at the 1964 Student Missions Conference: “I remember that there were people whose skin was brown like mine, and they ... sat on the edges of their seats” as Pratt sang and “the brown-skinned preacher stood up to talk

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<sup>7</sup> UBA (1959), 35.

<sup>8</sup> “Mission Emphasis Week Concludes, Lawson to Speak in Services Tonight,” *Baylor Lariat* (Waco, Texas), December 9, 1959; “State BSU Begins Planning Session at Latham Springs,” *Baylor Lariat*, April 8, 1960; “International Student Conference Features Outstanding Speakers,” *H-SU Brand* (Abilene, Texas), March 13, 1959; “Missions Week Set for Return,” *Howard Payne College Yellow Jacket* (Brownwood, Texas), November 20, 1959.

<sup>9</sup> William A. Lawson Jr., speech at the 1964 Student Missions Conference, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, [c. October 1964], typed transcript, enclosed in Jocelyn Ard to Ms. [Melanie] Lawson, April 17, 1996, box 2, folder 20, “Sermon + Lecture Materials, Folder 14 of 16,” Rev. William A. Lawson papers, MS 532, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Texas; “Baylor Students Go to Foreign Missions,” *Waco News-Tribune*, July 11, 1959; “TSU Teacher to Speak at Meeting Here,” *The Eagle* (Bryan, Texas), November 17, 1959; “BSU Choir May Tour Far East,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, October 16, 1960.

to them.”<sup>10</sup> He was so moved by the potential in the exchanges between people of color from different parts of the globe that he wanted to become a fulltime missionary. And the missionaries stationed in Indonesia with whom Pratt and Lawson worked were so excited to see a black man and a white man travelling and working together that they invited the two of them back the next year.<sup>11</sup>

When Lawson returned from the trip, he immediately wrote to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board to request his appointment as a Southern Baptist missionary. The mission board rejected Lawson’s request. They explained that they could only appoint a Southern Baptist as a missionary, and he was not a member of a church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The mission board encouraged Lawson to address this “minor technicality” by joining a Southern Baptist church. Although Lawson believed that their decision “was not intended to keep Negroes away,” it had the same effect since most Southern Baptist Churches did not accept black members in 1959. He pointed out that “[t]here were no [Southern Baptist] churches in Houston which I could join then. I could preach in some of them, but I couldn’t go in and even sit down on the back row as a visitor.”<sup>12</sup> Only two years before, Lawson was forced to spend an entire Sunday morning service in the baptistery of First Baptist

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<sup>10</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, box 2, folder 20, “Sermon + Lecture Materials, Folder 14 of 16,” Lawson papers.

<sup>11</sup> “BSU Choir May Tour Far East,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, October 16, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, box 2, folder 20, “Sermon + Lecture Materials, Folder 14 of 16,” Lawson papers.

Church Houston because they would not allow a black person to remain visible to white churchgoers.<sup>13</sup>

Lawson was disappointed. However, he looked for other outlets for his newfound missionary impulse. As racial tensions increased in the late 1950s, Lawson began to receive invitations to speak about race relations from a Christian perspective. In 1959, for example, the Citizens Fellowship, an interracial, interdenominational activist group in College Station, invited Lawson to speak about how both white and black citizens could contribute to solving the problem of discrimination. The Citizens Fellowship billed itself as “a local group composed of White and Negro people who are interested in keeping the channels of communication open between the races,” and they were led by black and white clergy and a progressive white professor at Texas A&M College, Frederic O. Sargent.<sup>14</sup> The group invited Lawson because of his reputation of working closely with the white community and because he was one of the only black employees of the largest white religious denomination in the state, the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

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<sup>13</sup> In my 2010 interview with Lawson, he recounted this story as it pertained to him only, but in his sermon notes (on a undated note card) in the archives at Rice University, he wrote, “Blacks allowed in First Baptist; Melanie and I in baptistry.” So it is also possible that his daughter, Melanie Lawson, was forced to remain in the baptistry as well. For a full description of this event, see Chapter IV. William Lawson, interview by the author, August 13, 2010, Houston, Texas; William A. Lawson Jr., “Gentiles Join Christian Church,” n. d., box 3, folder 10, “Sermon + Lecture Notes; Envelope 10 of 40,” Lawson papers.

<sup>14</sup> The Citizens Fellowship was a short-lived (1959-1961) interracial and interdenominational civil rights group in the Bryan and College Station communities. They supported pro-integration school board candidates, petitioned city leaders to pay attention to the neglected areas of the city inhabited primarily by African Americans, hosted public meetings to inform their supporters and opponents about the value of human equality and the need for fair and equal education, sponsored an integrated summer Bible school at First Baptist Church College Station, and made modest inroads in bridging the communication gap between the black and white religious communities in the area. “Inter-Racial Bible School Will Be Held,” *The Eagle* (Bryan, Texas), June 21, 1959; “TSU Teacher to Speak at Meeting Here,” *The Eagle* (Bryan, Texas), November 17, 1959; “Inter-Race Group Firms up Program,” *The Eagle* (Bryan, Texas), October 18, 1959; Frederic O. Sargent, *The Civil Rights Revolution: Events and Leaders, 1955-1968* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 51-52.

### *TSU Students and a Growing Movement*

He also turned his missionary energies toward his students at Texas Southern University just as a new phase of civil rights activism was taking hold of Houston. The students of TSU were enrolled at a state-funded institution of higher learning for black students partly because of a previous generation's activism: the Houston NAACP's case against the University of Texas School of Law, *Sweatt v. Painter*, led to the creation of TSU in 1947. But there had only been minor changes on the civil rights front in Houston since then. In fact, the Houston NAACP of the 1950s was a considerably weaker version of the group that had tackled the all white primaries a decade before. The group's membership rolls suffered from redbaiting and extreme anti-Communist hysteria. Red scare leaders in Houston took aim at the NAACP for allegedly subversive activities, a common tactic used by segregationists throughout the South in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>15</sup> They also faced a heavy dose of infighting and questionable leadership within the organization as well as the Texas Attorney General's all out campaign to rid Texas of the NAACP. This put the group on the defensive and seemed to diminish whatever voice the Houston branch may have had in the movement to desegregate public schools and facilities after 1954.<sup>16</sup>

Still, cracks had begun to form in the wall of racial segregation in the Bayou City. A 1950 lawsuit by five African Americans led to the desegregation of the municipal golf course. In 1953, the Houston Public Library quietly removed racial

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<sup>15</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 154-155.

<sup>16</sup> Merline Pitre, *In Struggle against Jim Crow: Lula B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 71-74; "The Drama of the Houston NAACP," *Houston Forward Times*, June 15, 1963.

barriers for adult readers, and segregation on city transportation ended in 1954.<sup>17</sup> In 1958, the first black person to win a city election since Reconstruction, Hattie Mae White, was elected to the Houston school board in spite of the city's conservative political establishment, chiefly because of an energized and motivated black voter turnout.<sup>18</sup>

Black voters in Houston were more organized and determined in 1958 thanks to a contentious mayoral election the year before. In 1957, eleven-term mayor of Houston Oscar Holcombe made an unsuccessful bid for a twelfth term. Holcombe had enjoyed long-standing support from Houston's black voters, and he was a close friend of the Rev. L. H. Simpson—the president of the Baptist Ministers Association, a NAACP official, and someone who could always swing voters into Holcombe's camp. However, 1957 was different from previous years. White Houstonians were on edge after 1954, eager to save segregation wherever possible, and they had just witnessed the drama of Little Rock's Central High School. They wanted a mayor who could protect Houston from the same kinds of changes. After a successful primary, Holcombe began to indulge white voters' "fear and hysteria" about integration. He claimed that his opponents had conspired with black voters to integrate the city's swimming pools and take over its schools and city government. Holcombe's move led to a landslide defeat in which his opponent, Lewis Cutrer, carried all but one of the twenty-three black-dominated voting precincts and won the election by more than 28,000 votes. The significance of the

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<sup>17</sup> David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 166; Cheryl K. Malone, "Unannounced and Unexpected: The Desegregation of Houston Public Library in the Early 1950s," *Library Trends* 55, no. 3 (2007): 670.

<sup>18</sup> Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly*, 106-110; McComb, 166-168.



Cutrer's victory was less about Holcombe's defeat and more about the awakened political power of a united black electorate. The foundation laid in 1957 led to Hattie Mae White's victory in 1958.<sup>19</sup>

Outside of Houston and the state of Texas, however, the civil rights movement was growing. In December 1955, Rosa Parks' arrest in Montgomery for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the first mass demonstration against racial segregation in the United States. And onto the scene emerged the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who inspired a generation of marginalized people all over the country. Although he was an activist and organizer, he was, by his own account, primarily a Baptist minister. His message of social justice as the fulfillment of the Christian message found within "agape" and "the beloved community" was the powerful foundation of his leadership.<sup>20</sup> In 1957, King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and used it to pursue a new wave of civil rights activism, led by Christians committed to justice, to break down social and economic

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Neal Parker, "The Politics of Race and the 1957 Houston Mayoral Campaign: Oscar Holcombe's Last Hurrah," *Houston Review* 6, no. 2 (1984): 83-90.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. made agape, a Greek word for love, the center of his approach to social activism and non-violence. In essence, agape for MLK meant "Christian love" or "the highest love," and it was the means through which he could act with love even toward those who continued to hate him. According to King, it seeks "understanding, good will for all men." What is more, agape rested on the premise that "the universe is on the side of justice." Together, then, a commitment to Christian love and ultimate justice were necessary to realize the beloved community, which could be described as a world that no longer tolerated racism, hatred, suffering, and poverty and worked against those evils through non-violent methods. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," *Missions: An International Baptist Magazine*, February 1958, 23, The King Center Imaging Project, Digital Archive, The King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/out-long-night-segregation>; Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Birth of a New Age," August 11, 1956, address delivered at the fiftieth anniversary of Alpha Phi Alpha in Buffalo, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume III: The Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Dana Powell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 339; Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 274; Rufus Burrow, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 5.

barriers with direct action and civil disobedience. As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, it was clear that the movement had intensified considerably when black students in North Carolina began a series of sit-in movements to challenge longstanding practices of unequal treatment. Lawson eventually encountered these changes face to face in 1960, when TSU students asked for help as they prepared their own movement to desegregate the Bayou City.<sup>21</sup> This moment in particular highlights how the civil rights movement moved Lawson, a campus minister, into the movement and created an opportunity for him to begin funneling the religious resources at his disposal into leading campaigns for racial equality.

### **Blackout Houston: Sit-Ins and Backroom Negotiations**

On February 1, 1960, four black students from North Carolina A&T walked into the Greensboro Woolworth grocery store, bought a few items, and then sat at the lunch counter and asked to be served. The non-violent protest of the “Greensboro Four” and the others who joined them inspired a student-led sit-in movement that spread across the country.<sup>22</sup> Students at Texas Southern watched newspaper headlines with interest and began planning a movement of their own. Eldrewey Stearns, Holly Hogrobrooks, Ted Hogrobrooks, Jessie Purvis, and Eddie Rigsby were among the students at TSU who

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<sup>21</sup> Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, ed., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992); Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Thomas R. Cole, *No Color Is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 71.

were ready to depart from the tactics of Houston's black establishment and plan something more confrontational.<sup>23</sup> In late February, they decided that they would begin their sit-in campaign at the Weingarten's lunch counter near the TSU campus on March 4, 1960. Owned by Joseph Weingarten, a wealthy Jewish man with a reputation for supporting human rights, the store was known to be friendly to its mostly black clientele, so the students believed they might be able to compel Weingarten to integrate his lunch counter.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Reluctant Mentor*

On the night before the sit-in began, the students sought the counsel of their campus religious mentors Bill and Audrey Lawson. The couple arrived at their home, which doubled as the Baptist Student Center, on the evening of March 3 and found "a hoard of angry students" downstairs. Stearns and the other students told Lawson what they planned to do and asked him for guidance on non-violent tactics.<sup>25</sup> Lawson initially tried to discourage the students. He told them that their parents had not pulled themselves out of poverty and sent their children to school to see them arrested for causing a disturbance.<sup>26</sup> Stearns replied, "We're not here to ask your permission," and "if you're not going to lead us, we'll find somebody who will."<sup>27</sup> Lawson later explained that he just stood there and "stammered and stuttered, once again trying to tell them something about the hazards of this kind of unprepared, unarmed confrontation. And

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<sup>23</sup> Cole, *No Color is My Kind*, 21-25.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *No Color is My Kind*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Cole, *No Color is My Kind*, 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> William Lawson, interview by the author, August 4, 2010, Houston.

<sup>27</sup> Eldrewey Stearns, quoted in Cole, *No Color is My Kind*, 27; Lawson interview (2010).

they walked out of the Baptist Student Center and left me there. And I still didn't understand that a page in history had turned."<sup>28</sup>

Although Lawson's pleas rattled a few of the students, Eldrewey Stearns and sixteen others walked into Weingarten the following afternoon, sat down at the empty stools, and politely asked for service.<sup>29</sup> Within a few minutes, several more protestors filled the remaining stools. Angry white customers stormed out before finishing their food, and the manager ran into to his office to call for help. He returned moments later and placed signs on the counter indicating that it was closed. Police and news reporters were on the scene, but the situation escalated no further. Over the following few days, students targeted other grocery store lunch counters with well-organized, systematic sit-in demonstrations. Nightly news coverage of the growing movement caused tensions to rise throughout the city, and the police and city leaders were determined to prevent anything that would damage Houston's reputation as a free enterprise city. The police initially refused to arrest the protestors, and the chief of police stationed uniformed and undercover officers in and around each demonstration for their protection.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, Cutrer attempted to deflate the protests through an idea he called "vertical integration."

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<sup>28</sup> Bill Lawson in Thomas R. Cole, David Berman, Tom Curtis, and Lorenzo Thomas, *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1998). *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow* is a documentary film featuring the key players in the movement to desegregate Houston from 1960 until 1963.

<sup>29</sup> The original thirteen students who planned to march into Weingarten included Earl Allen, Roger Ash (the lone white student among them), Guy Boudois, Clarence Coleman, Curtis Graves, Holly Hogrobrooks, Ted Hogrobrooks, John Hutchins, Rev. Charles Lee (the Methodist chaplain on campus), Jimmy Lofton, Deanna Lott, Pat Patterson, Jessie Purvis, Eddy Rigsby, Eldrewey Stearns, Harold Stovall, and Bernice Washington. As they marched in pairs toward the grocery store, another four students joined them. Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 29-31; Cole, Berman, Curtis, and Thomas, *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow*.

He directed lunch counter owners to remove all of the stools at their establishments and serve everyone who stood, vertically, at the counter.<sup>31</sup>

Although some African Americans in high places like TSU President James Nabrit supported what the students were doing, others did not.<sup>32</sup> Rev. L. H. Simpson, for example, was a vocal opponent of the sit-ins. He had been a longtime friend to city hall and wanted to maintain the relationship he had built with the white community. Simpson was certainly no fan of unequal treatment, but he had historically fought to keep the separate black accommodations on par with those offered to the white community. And he was well placed to make things happen. He still led the Baptist Ministers Association and wielded a certain amount of influence within the NAACP. Simpson's leadership over so many other Baptist ministers, his access to other important members of Houston's black elite, and his connections to the white community made for a powerful combination. Beginning with Mayor Oscar Holcombe in the 1920s, Simpson enjoyed a close partnership with City Hall. Simpson would deliver black votes when asked, and city leaders would respond to his requests for infrastructure improvements in black neighborhoods, appointments for public school teachers, and access to official city committees.<sup>33</sup> Simpson's opposition to the student protests, therefore, likely had more to

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<sup>31</sup> His reasoning was that things like elevators were already desegregated. If white Houstonians were fine standing next to African Americans in an elevator, maybe they would tolerate standing next to them at a lunch counter. However, Lewis Cutrer's primary objective was to diffuse the protests and return to business as usual. Cole, Berman, Curtis, and Thomas, *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow*.

<sup>32</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 33-34.

<sup>33</sup> Rev. L. H. Simpson's personal correspondence from the 1930s through the 1960s highlights the depth of his connections to powerful white leaders in Houston. James Anderson to Rev. L. H. Simpson, January 12, 1937, box 3, folder 8, "Correspondence, 1929, 1937, 1941, 1943-47, 1949," Rev. Lee Haywood Simpson Papers, MSS 239, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas (cited hereafter, Simpson Papers); (Rev.) L. H. Simpson to the Honorable Members of the School Board, Houston, Texas, July 7, 1953, box 3, folder 9, "Corres., 1950, 1952-1959," Simpson

do with the way they sidestepped established black leaders like Simpson, who would have preferred to use his connections to reach a compromise.

Simpson was not alone in his desire for a compromise. Lawson, Nabrit, and others close to the students initially urged them to let their elders in the community take over and handle negotiations with city leaders. They were pleased that the students had gained so much ground so peacefully and raised national awareness of the movement in the Bayou City, but they were afraid that the students would get hurt or that what black Houstonians had worked so hard and so long to achieve would be lost if violence broke out. They saw their own efforts as distinct from those of the students, and they wanted the students to be patient and step aside.<sup>34</sup> Another influential Baptist minister was Rev. Moses L. Price, who according to historian Brian Behnken, epitomized a middle-course bridge between activist and conservative camps. Price was president of the Missionary Baptist General Convention of Texas, a longtime member of the NAACP, and on the executive board of Simpson's Baptist Ministers Association. Although he supported equal rights for African Americans and preached about it from the pulpit of Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church, he preferred to work behind the scenes with black leaders

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Papers; Mayor Roy Hofheinz to Reverend L. H. Simpson, March 15, 1954, box 3, folder 9, "Corres., 1950, 1952-1959," Simpson Papers; Mayor Roy Hofheinz to Whom it May Concern, November 26, 1954, box 3, folder 9, "Corres., 1950, 1952-1959," Simpson Papers; Mayor Lewis Cutrer to Reverend L. H. Simpson, February 4, 1958, box 3, folder 9, "Corres., 1950, 1952-1959," Simpson Papers; Dr. John W. McFarland (Superintendent of Houston Independent School District) to Dr. L. H. Simpson, April 24, 1959, box 3, folder 9, "Corres., 1950, 1952-1959," Simpson Papers; Louie Welch to Mr. Eugene Maier, Director Public Works Department, [nine separate letters discussing different improvements requested by Simpson] April 25, 1960, box 4, folder 1, "Corres., 1960-1962," Simpson Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Halycon O. Watkins, interview by Moisés Acuña-Gurrola, Houston, Texas, July 23, 2015, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Interview Database (<https://crbb.tcu.edu>), Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Oral Histories of the Multiracial Freedom Struggles in Texas; Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 49.

such as accomplished businessman Hobart Taylor, South Central YMCA Director Quinton Mease, and TSU President James Nabrit.<sup>35</sup>

In an attempt to end the demonstrations and win concessions from Houston officials, Simpson arranged a meeting between one of the older protestors, Methodist chaplain at TSU Rev. Charles Lee, and top city officials. They told him that if he would call off the protests, they would appoint a biracial committee to work out a solution. Lee prevailed on several of the other protestors to draft a letter agreeing to the proposal. The mayor appointed a Citizens' Relations Committee, only a quarter of which was African American including both Price and Simpson, and it immediately sought ways to diffuse the situation and return to the status quo. It became clear, however, that white city leaders also intended to delay until the students went home for the summer, which led many of the African American members of the committee to pursue other channels to effect change.<sup>36</sup>

### *From Moderation to Confrontation*

Meanwhile, Lawson grew impatient and departed from his restrained stance once it became clear that moderation would not lead to justice. He suggested to the students that they should organize a boycott of downtown retailers, a "No Shopping Day," and he offered his home as a base of operations as well as his assistance as they moved forward.<sup>37</sup> Stearns and the other students planned the boycott for May 7, 1960, the

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<sup>35</sup> Behnken, "Count on Me," 74-75; Rev. M. L. Price, "The Christian Church and Contemporary Change in Social Life," 1961, box 1, folder 2, Rev. M. L. Price Collection, MSS 277, HMRC.

<sup>36</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 44-49.

<sup>37</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 53.

Saturday before Mother's Day, to show downtown businesses just what was at stake.

Thanks to the assistance of influential black leaders like Price who urged his congregation to support the students any way that they could, many African Americans participated in the boycott and supported the demonstrations outside of Foley's and other businesses.<sup>38</sup> Although the economic impact of a single boycott was negligible, it caught the attention of Foley's Vice President Bob Dundas, who had been a power broker in the white business community for a long time. He was afraid of a potential race war or an imposed federal intervention unless black and white Houstonians found a way forward.<sup>39</sup>

Over the next few months, Dundas convinced operators of seventy lunch counters at department stores, pharmacies, and grocery stores to integrate quietly. But he also wanted to make sure that there would be no media coverage of the change because he feared that white segregationists might intervene and cause a race war. Dundas contacted John T. Jones, head of the *Houston Chronicle* and the Houston Endowment, which controlled local radio station KTRH. Jones agreed to a ten-day media blackout. Dundas also convinced Oveta Culp Hobby's *Houston Post*, KPRC-TV, and KPRC-AM, and he was able to convince the other reluctant news outlets by threatening to cancel all of Foley's advertising if they refused. So during the last week of August 1960, lunch counters in Houston were integrated, and the majority of Houstonians only found out

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<sup>38</sup> Behnken, "Count on Me," 75.

<sup>39</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 54.



about the monumental change several days later, mostly from outside sources, and well after anyone could do anything about it.<sup>40</sup>

The back room negotiations and media blackout significantly weakened the student movement because it thrived on media coverage. It also meant that students were unable to take credit for their victory. Still, there were other establishments beyond grocery lunch counters that were still segregated. Their next target was the Union Station café and downtown movie theaters. When students staged sit-ins and refused to leave, Cutrer ordered their arrest on charges of unlawful assembly. Once students were in jail, Bill and Audrey Lawson, James Nabrit, Quinton Mease, M. L. Price, and others went door-to-door raising bail money to get students out of jail and back to class. Lawson hosted protest poster making parties in the BSU building and his home, and he began to offer advice and counsel for the growing movement.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, this meant that the still segregated Union Baptist Association was indirectly funding and supporting the sit-in movement by financing Lawson's salary and his work at the BSU.

### **Growing Up Together: The Civil Rights Movement and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church**

Throughout the 1959 and 1960 school year, as the sit-in movement gained momentum, Lawson was still working on becoming a fulltime missionary. Although

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<sup>40</sup> "Blackout in Houston," *TIME*, September 12, 1960; Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 26-28, 38, 53-55, 95; Chrisman, "Religious Moderates," 106-107; David Chrisman, "Texas Baptist Leaders in the 1960s: Theological Conservatives and Political Moderation," *Texas Baptist History* 23 (2003): 121-125.

<sup>41</sup> Lawson interview (2008); Lawson interview (2010); Chrisman, "Price of Moderation," 171.

there were still no Southern Baptist churches in Houston that would allow a person of color to join, Lawson received news of a different kind of opportunity. He learned that he had received a nine-month Danforth Foundation fellowship to further his theological training. His top two choices were both outside of the South, so Lawson thought he might be able to join a Southern Baptist church in some other city and become a missionary after all.<sup>42</sup>

### *Urban Theology and a New Perspective*

He chose the University of Chicago School of Divinity where, according to Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church records, he could study urban theology. It also had a Southern Baptist church nearby. Lawson wrote to Cornell Avenue Baptist Church, a white church, requesting membership. A church official showed up at his Chicago apartment and explained that racial tensions in and around their church were at an all time high, and having a black family join the all-white church would only make things worse. It would be unwise for Lawson to even visit the pastor in his office, he explained. Lawson began to give up on the idea of ever becoming a missionary. He opted instead to visit the only church around that would welcome him: a black church affiliated with the National Baptist Convention. When he arrived at the church, he saw dozens of black children without a program tailored to them. So he took charge of the children's ministry

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<sup>42</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers.

in that church, and those young students became his mission field as he studied at the University of Chicago.<sup>43</sup>

Although it is unclear precisely which courses Lawson took or what books he was reading, courses on urban theology around 1960 most likely would have included works that touched on the social gospel, the role the church in society, and the influence of social location on the human experience.<sup>44</sup> A hallmark of urban theology has been a movement toward theology from the bottom-up, which would emphasize the influence of social location and experience in encounters with the divine and a need to address the concerns of even the most vulnerable in society. Walter Rauschenbusch, famous for his *Theology of the Social Gospel*, would likely have been part of Lawson's curriculum. Rauschenbusch understood the role of Christianity as more than simply soul saving. It also needed to address the physical needs of human beings and social systems that produced the kinds of suffering he witnessed as an urban pastor. In this sense, then, Rauschenbusch would understand social work and Christian work to be one in the same. This meant that the church, by focusing on more than individual conversion, might be able to transform the world through addressing the ills of society.<sup>45</sup>

Another important urban theologian was H. Richard Niebuhr, whose *Christ and Culture* is one of his most widely read works. In it, Niebuhr outlines five typologies for

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<sup>43</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers.

<sup>44</sup> In Lawson's papers, there are only references to the fact that he studied "urban theology" while in Chicago, but I have not found specific information about what "urban theology" would certainly have included. However, given the trends in urban ministry and theology by 1960 and given the direction in which he took his church once he became a pastor, I believe it is likely that his education would have included (among other things) the teachings of Walter Rauschenbusch, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Howard Thurman. Even if he had not read these things specifically, his orientation as a pastor in a city reflects the influence of the type of thinking contained in these theologians' perspectives.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan, 1917); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: MacMillan, 1913).

understanding the relationship between Christ (through the church) and culture (the world). The typology most closely associated with the direction that urban ministry was headed in the 1950s and 1960s would have been “Christ the transformer of culture,” in which Christians have the ability to be amid culture and transform it for the better. Finally, black theologian Howard Thurman probably influenced Lawson as well. Thurman was a forerunner of what emerged at the end of the decade as black liberation theology, expressed by such influential theologians as James Cone. The central idea of Thurman’s theology, best expressed in his 1949 classic *Jesus and the Disinherited*, is “the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall.” In other words, Christianity is on the side of the downtrodden and offers them a power within themselves, through the Gospel, to transcend their circumstances. This perspective emphasizes the power of human liberation within the Christian message, something that Lawson believed would be of profound help for the “disinherited” in his own community. Thurman’s ideology was also a major influence in the theology of one of Lawson’s best known contemporaries, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>46</sup>

Lawson came home from that nine-month stretch a different person with a different vision. His brief experience as a missionary in Southeast Asia, his involvement in the Houston sit-in movement, and his nine months working among black Baptist children in Chicago reoriented Lawson’s vision for himself as leader of students and as a missionary among Houston’s Third Ward black community. And his courses in urban theology at the University of Chicago laid the foundation for how he perceived the role

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<sup>46</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951); Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1949, 1996).

of a church within a community. He realized that he could change lives without travelling to the other side of the world; he simply needed to look at the “mission field” in front of him that was “whitest to harvest.” When he returned to Houston to work with the students of TSU again, he finally realized that Houston’s Third Ward, the neighborhood in which TSU and the Baptist Student Center were located, was his mission field.<sup>47</sup>

### *Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church*

The Third Ward neighborhood where TSU and the Baptist Student Center were located was known as Riverside, and it had once been a white and Jewish enclave. However, according to Lawson, after the State of Texas established Texas Southern University in 1947, “‘For Sale’ signs popped up on the lawns like dandelions and people began to move out, and into the vacuum there came Negroes.” But this Third Ward neighborhood was separated from the traditional black communities of the Fourth and Fifth Wards. And the black newcomers in the Riverside neighborhood were primarily middle and upper class individuals and families who could afford to pay the higher prices of the homes in that area. One major component missing from the area, however, was a black Baptist church.<sup>48</sup>

Bill and Audrey Lawson met with several people associated with TSU, such as Charlotte and James Bryant, Edward and Dorothy Booker, Jesse and Helen Cashaw, and

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<sup>47</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers.

<sup>48</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers; William A. Lawson Jr., interview by Dorothee Sauter, Houston, Texas, October 20, 2004, transcript, University of Houston, Oral Histories from the Houston History Project, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/houhistory/item/500/show/499>.

Richard and Frances Jackson, to consider starting a church in their neighborhood.<sup>49</sup> Lawson had worked with Southern Baptists for so long that for him, it was “second nature to think of a daughter church being born for the new neighborhood.” So he reached out to black pastors and asked them to establish a church near TSU. However, he found that many of the black churches elsewhere in Houston had no interest in starting a new church so far from their bases. Part of the issue, according to Lawson, was that many black Baptist churches were not mission-oriented, so they felt no need to set up new churches in growing neighborhoods. Furthermore, they told Lawson that the construction of the new freeways in the city had already cut their neighborhoods and church membership in half, so it would be foolish to take on an expensive investment in such difficult times. They were also worried that the small number of middle class black families and the large number of relatively cash-poor college students would not produce enough income to sustain a new church.<sup>50</sup>

When no established churches were willing to commit, it fell to Lawson to start the church himself. He was initially very hesitant. He had only ever been a weekend preacher, Bible study leader, or a teacher, but he had never led a church of his own, nor had he wanted to. After continued pressure, though, he finally agreed; he would help them establish the church, but he only wanted to lead it until they could find someone to take charge of it permanently. On March 11, 1962, thirteen people, several of them

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<sup>49</sup> While there were others whom the Lawsons contacted, the names listed here come from the Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church historical video and a list of the original members of the church. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “WABC Charter Service,” Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church website, digital video of the church’s history, <http://wheelerbc.org/about/history-mission> (accessed December 15, 2016); Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “Women’s Day, ’76,” 1976, box 5, folder 6, “WABC Women’s Day, 1976,” Lawson papers.

<sup>50</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers

professors or teachers at TSU, joined together in Bill Lawson's living room and agreed to start a church called Riverside First Baptist Church. They continued meeting together at the TSU Baptist Student Center for another twelve Sundays. And after it was clear that no one else would come to lead the church, Lawson finally agreed to assume the role of pastor.<sup>51</sup>

One of the initial hurdles facing the young church was that they lacked a meeting place of their own. While Lawson's home and the Baptist Student Center worked temporarily, they knew they would quickly outgrow the small space. Union Association's Committee on Student Work had recently learned that once the University of Houston became a public institution, all of its denominational clubs and services would move onto the campus. So the building formerly used by the University of Houston BSU, just down the street from Lawson's house, would be unoccupied.<sup>52</sup> Union Association planned to keep the building and maintain it until a Baptist church came along in need of a chapel. Since Lawson was still employed by Union Association as the BSU director at TSU, he reached out to his white Baptist contacts and asked about the building. They agreed to sell it to Riverside First Baptist for a bargain, but with so few members, there was no way they could afford to pay for it. According to Lawson, a wealthy white Baptist "oil man," W. H. Justice, approached Lawson about using his Kingdom Building Foundation to help the church pay for its new building. His daughter,

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<sup>51</sup> Lawson speech, Student Missions Conference, 1964, Lawson papers; Lawson interview (2008); Lawson interview (2004); Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "WABC Charter Service," Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church website, digital video of the church's history, <http://wheelerbc.org/about/history-mission> (accessed December 15, 2016); Tomiko Meeks, "We've Come This Far by Faith: Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church," *Houston History Magazine* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 30-32.

<sup>52</sup> UBA (1963), 36; UBA (1964), 36; Lawson interview (2008).

a college student at Baylor University, had heard Lawson speak on several occasions and spoke very highly of him to her father, so Justice offered to buy the building and issue bonds that the church could pay on for no interest. The small congregation agreed, moved into its new building on Wheeler Avenue, and renamed themselves Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.<sup>53</sup>

### *A Civil Rights and Community-Oriented Church*

Just as the civil rights movement in Houston opened the door for Lawson to become a leader in his community and led to his pastorate, the movement also shaped his vision of how Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church should be organized. From its beginning, Wheeler Avenue Baptist was an intentionally different kind of church. It was committed to the community that surrounded it. Lawson first developed this vision of a community church while studying urban theology at the University of Chicago the year before.<sup>54</sup> He wanted Wheeler to be “something other than the old-style floor-stomping religious carnivals of earlier generations.” Instead, “it would need to be able to identify with the transient poor, the young marrieds, the angry university student, the frisky child.”<sup>55</sup>

The original proposed program of the church exemplified Lawson’s vision for role of the church in the world: “When a church program is so designed and carried out

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<sup>53</sup> Lawson interview (2008); “Wheeler Ave Baptist Church Celebrates One Year,” *Houston Forward Times*, August 24, 1963.

<sup>54</sup> “Force Field Auxiliary Present a Testimonial Dinner Honoring Reverend William A. Lawson,” brochure, 1977, box 7, folder 20, “Testimonial Dinner Honoring W. A. L.,” Lawson papers.

<sup>55</sup> William Lawson, “A Story of a Child – Church,” Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church Directory (c. 1968), box 5, folder 1, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968,” Lawson papers.



that all the needs of all the people in its community are considered and made its concern, then that program is complete.” And their example for such a stance was the life of Jesus. They noted that through Jesus, God had met “every human need from an embarrassing depletion of feast wine to the need for human redemption.” Therefore, if Jesus was concerned about meeting the most basic of human needs and if the church was the body of Christ, then the church must be committed to meeting the needs of the human community. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church demonstrated that commitment partly through an emphasis on ministries geared toward the poor.<sup>56</sup>

It was apparent early on that Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church was unique. It catered to students by holding services at ten o’clock in the morning and by making student visitors associate members of the church. It even served real wine with communion, an oddity for a Baptist church. It also established itself as a legal corporation and vested the power of the church in the congregation itself. In short, the first members of the church wanted to make it as independent of outside influence as possible so they would be free to minister to those around them however they saw fit. Rather than investing in a grand new sanctuary, the church launched a building campaign to construct educational buildings to house its Sunday school programs and community service ministries. According to Lawson, “the following years built for us an image of community service and involvement, with programs focusing on youth, children, the poor, and the suppressed.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “Proposed Program of the Church,” in “The Third Year,” (c. 1964), box 5, folder 1, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968,” Lawson papers.

<sup>57</sup> Lawson, “A Story of a Child,” Lawson papers; Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “The Third Year,” (c. 1964), box 5, folder 1, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968,” Lawson papers.

The church wrote a constitution that articulated its vision for itself to fellow churches and potential members. In addition to expressing its beliefs and defining church polity, the constitution also outlined the kinds of relationships that Wheeler would maintain. It declared that the church would be free to unite or work with any other congregation regardless of denominational difference to advance the program of the church. Although it would not compete with other Houston churches for members, the congregation would gladly welcome local college students with their “clear commitment to university students in our purview.” Of particular importance to many of these college students in the 1960s was how the church could address civil rights turmoil, and Wheeler was poised to speak to that as well. Its constitution declared the church’s emphatic support “where community need arises, whether tragedy, socio-political crisis, or community project demanding popular support. It shall make neither apology for its connections nor disclosure to its antagonists.”<sup>58</sup>

Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church stood apart from other black Baptist churches in the Houston area in important ways. Churches like L. H. Simpson’s Pleasant Hill Baptist Church and M. L. Price’s Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church were much larger than Lawson’s, and their congregations were composed of folks from all levels of the black community. Lawson’s church, however, was initially quite small, and many of the church’s members were connected to TSU and shared a strong commitment to social justice and civil rights activism. These factors played a role in Lawson’s ability to mobilize his church and its resources in support of the civil rights movement in a way

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<sup>58</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “The Third Year,” (c. 1964), box 5, folder 1, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968,” Lawson papers.

that Simpson and Price did not or could not.<sup>59</sup> For his part, Lawson's experience working with Simpson and Price during the student-led sit-in movement also showed him how reluctant black religious leaders in Houston could be about upsetting the status quo. He maintained cordial and professional relationships with Simpson, Price, and many other conservative black leaders, but he did not join the Baptist Ministers Association, opting instead to retain his ability to lead his church freely.<sup>60</sup>

### *Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in the Movement*

During Wheeler Avenue's first few years, it was involved in ongoing support for the movement to desegregate Houston businesses. Lawson's initial reluctance to support the student-led sit-in movement in March 1960 turned into all-out support as the students attempted to build on their victory over segregated lunch counters. In the years after the sit-in movement, the student protestors, who named themselves the Progressive Youth Association (PYA), had carried their fight for an end to racial barriers to hotels, theaters, restaurants, and bus and train terminal cafes. While they had been able to repeat the same combination of student agitators and older black negotiators in ending segregation in local hotels, they had found nothing but disappointment with downtown restaurants and theaters.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Chandler Davidson, *Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 38-39; Behnken, "Count on Me," 61-84.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, *Biracial Politics*, 39; Lawson interview (2008); Lawson interview (1974). His cordial relationship with these ministers included asking them for their financial contributions to the TSU's Baptist Student Union and the college students it served. See, for example, Bill Lawson, BSU Director, to All Members of the Board of Directors, Baptist Student Union, Texas Southern University (including Simpson), October 11, 1962, box 4, folder 1, "Corres., 1960-1962," Simpson papers.

<sup>61</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 60-80, 93.

But a new opportunity came in May 1963, when Houston officials scheduled a parade to celebrate the homecoming of astronaut Gordon Cooper, who had just completed the final Mercury mission. The parade would take place on May 23 and feature major television coverage. Lawson, along with PYA activists, planned to stage a massive protest as leverage to end continuing Jim Crow practices and used Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church as the base of operations. They told John T. Jones and Bob Dundas that unless they could guarantee complete desegregation of the major downtown movie theaters and restaurants, protestors planned to spontaneously flood the parade route with sign-wielding protestors, blocking both sides of the procession and causing an embarrassment for city leaders on national television. If Jones and Dundas could come through by eleven o'clock on the morning of the parade, then they would call off the demonstration.<sup>62</sup>

On the day of the planned demonstration, black and white student protestors from TSU and Rice University gathered in their strategic locations along the route, and others waited at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church to relay any news they might hear. With minutes to spare, students on the scene received word from folks at the church that racial barriers in theaters and restaurants would come down within thirty days, so they called off the protest. Just like with the integration of lunch counters, the end of Jim Crow in restaurants and movie theaters included backroom negotiations, a media blackout, and a careful orchestration of black visitors to formerly all-white establishments.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 94-96.

<sup>63</sup> Cole, *No Color Is My Kind*, 95-99; Chrisman, "The Price of Moderation," 171.

In the weeks before the planned demonstration, Lawson wrote an article for the *Houston Forward Times* in his regular column, titled, “Destiny of the Colored Man.” In it, he recounts the recent events that had been unfolding in Birmingham in the days before, the standoff between non-violent protestors and the brutality of the local police force. Referring to the movement itself, he asks, “But what good is all this?” He responds, saying that it “opens doors to our children through which we could never pass,” and it achieves freedom, true citizenship, and a final end to a system of slavery that had lingered since the 1860s. “But more than anything,” he argues, “it gives the colored man an opportunity to serve God.” Urging his readers not to forget the role that God has played and will play in the fight ahead, he writes, “We shall be delivered out of the hands of our enemies. God will make the whole world aid us in such a deliverance.” But as the Gospel of Luke says, “That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear.” For Lawson, the civil rights struggle was a God-ordained struggle. It was a struggle that would redeem the people of God.<sup>64</sup> So Lawson understood his role as a pastor leading his church and community to seek God’s visions for justice on Earth. And Lawson played that role by using his leadership abilities and his church to support the movement to end racial inequality in Houston, a pattern that came to define both Lawson and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.

In 1964, Lawson successfully orchestrated a visit by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to Texas Southern and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. In the 1960s, many Texas

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<sup>64</sup> Bill Lawson, “Destiny of the Colored Man,” *Houston Forward Times*, May 18, 1963. He makes a similar point in a column the following month, in which he reminds his readers that God had brought them to where they were and “how dare [they] fight [their] civil rights battles with [their] own ungodly methods.” Instead, he argues, they must remember that human rights can only be found in the context of the church. Bill Lawson, “Civil Rights and the Godly,” *Houston Forward Times*, June 29, 1963.

Baptists, black and white, wanted nothing to do with King. Rumors abounded that King was a Communist, and black Baptist pastors in Houston were afraid of being associated with someone like that, particularly since the National Baptist Convention had already distanced itself from the controversial civil rights leader.<sup>65</sup> King had accepted an invitation to speak at Hughes Business College on May 17, so Lawson reached out to King through his longtime friend Erma Jewell Hughes to ask him to speak to the United Ministries of Texas Southern University, an interdenominational group of campus ministries headed by Lawson.<sup>66</sup> King accepted Lawson's request and even stayed at his house and spoke at his church while he was in town. Their meeting in 1964 led to several more visits in the following years. In 1965, King invited Lawson to join him in Atlanta to work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the new Progressive National Baptist Convention. But Lawson had only just started Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and felt that the church would struggle if he left, so he declined. Instead, King designated Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church the Houston chapter of the SCLC and named Lawson president, firmly placing the stamp of civil rights on the church and its pastor.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> William A. Lawson Jr., interview by Dorothee Sauter, Houston, Texas, October 20, 2004, transcript, University of Houston, Oral Histories from the Houston History Project, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/houhistory/item/500/show/499>; Lawson interview (2008); Chrisman, "The Price of Moderation," 186-189.

<sup>66</sup> William A. (Bill) Lawson to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., May 1, 1964, The King Center Imaging Project, Digital Archive, The King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-william-lawson-mlk>.

<sup>67</sup> William A. Lawson Jr., interview by Dorothee Sauter, Houston, Texas, October 20, 2004, transcript, University of Houston, Oral Histories from the Houston History Project, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/houhistory/item/500/show/499>; Lawson interview (2008). For the beginnings of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, see Sandy Dwayne Martin, "The Formation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention: Gardner Calvin Taylor and the PNBC in Historical Context," *Baptist History and Heritage* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 18-27;

## Schools, Breadbaskets, and Visions Across Racial Lines

As the civil rights movement intensified in Houston, activists continued to target the institutional expressions of racism and inequality in the city, and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church supported efforts to improve schools, address poverty, and seek justice for all people. For the Bayou City, one of the most obvious symbols of ongoing inequality was the public school system. Many in the black community were dissatisfied with the status of school desegregation by the mid-1960s. Although the Houston Independent School District (HISD) had made a desegregation plan to comply with *Brown v. Board* by desegregating one grade per year beginning in 1960, there had been only token desegregation, and what little had occurred still forced students and families of color to shoulder most of the burden.<sup>68</sup> The fight for school integration was one of the most important campaigns for equality that Lawson and his church led.

### *PUSH, Panthers, and “Riots”*

In May 1965, leading up to the tenth anniversary of “Brown II,” which had ordered schools to desegregate with “all deliberate speed,” Lawson, along with others in the NAACP in Houston, and the Harris County Council of Negro Organizations (HCCO) formed an ad hoc organization called People for the Upgrading of Schools in Houston

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Clarence G. Newsome, “L. V. Booth as the Founder of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc: A Religious Perspective,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 28-48.

<sup>68</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

(PUSH).<sup>69</sup> They planned to organize a protest march that would demand complete and immediate desegregation of all Houston schools and for the district to accept federal aid. Lawson, who had recently joined the NAACP, said in a statement about the march, “We will be calling for an end to school segregation at both faculty and student levels, and for the establishment of one good system—the end of two mediocre ones.”<sup>70</sup> PUSH leaders decided that Lawson and four others would gather a crowd of people for a march on May 10, which would begin at the South Central YMCA near Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. Lawson was in charge of organizing high school students, and the others were responsible for gathering supporters from their respective components of the community (e.g., government, labor, civil rights organizations, etc.).<sup>71</sup>

Lawson immediately got to work getting the word out to students and hosting a sign-painting party the night before the march at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.<sup>72</sup> On the day of the march, Lawson had gathered about ninety percent of black high school students and other supporters inside the YMCA, but the other organizers had failed to gather many other supporters. Lawson believed that since “the NAACP had never been very much involved in public demonstrations, . . . they had soft-pedaled it and had left me out in front.” After a moment of indecision, Lawson decided to lead the students from the YMCA toward HISD headquarters in downtown Houston despite the lack of

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<sup>69</sup> William Lawson, interview by Veronica Perry, August 12, 1974, Houston Oral History Project, HMRC Oral History Collection, HMRC.

<sup>70</sup> “Brown II,” *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955); “Cut Monday Classes, Negro Pupils Urged,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, May 7, 1965.

<sup>71</sup> “Cut Monday Classes,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, May 7, 1965; “2000 to Picket Houston School Board Meeting,” *Houston Informer*, May 8, 1965; Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 208-209.

<sup>72</sup> “The Response of Gratifying,” *Houston Informer*, May 10, 1965; Lawson interview (1974); Lawson interview (2004); Lawson interview (2008); Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly*, 154-155; Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 208.



other marchers. Along the way, passersby joined the students so that by the time they reached their destination, their crowd had grown to about two thousand. In predictable fashion, Superintendent John McFarland closed the district office, canceled the planned school board meeting, and refused to meet with the marchers. To avoid dealing with the concerns represented in the demonstration, he scheduled a meeting between PUSH representatives and the district's Community Relations Committee.<sup>73</sup>

Even though HISD continued to drag its feet to desegregate schools, the march itself drew more attention to what was happening in one of the nation's largest public school systems. Behind Lawson's leadership, PUSH held several more rallies and continued to pressure the school district leaders to come up with a plan that would immediately remove the barriers restricting the opportunities for students of color. According to Lawson, the demonstrations "turned the city upside down, and concessions cascaded upon" them. Indeed, by the end of the summer, it appeared as though PUSH had influenced the school board. Board members modified their desegregation plan and moved up the timetable by four years. This put Houston on target to desegregate by the fall of 1967, rather than 1971 under the one-grade-per-year plan. Still, 1967 was not immediate, and Lawson and other PUSH leaders scoffed at these "bones of tokenism."<sup>74</sup>

PUSH was not alone in its dissatisfaction. Southern District Judge Ben C. Connally agreed with PUSH that HISD's new plan fell short of its standards for "deliberate speed" and imposed its own "freedom of choice" plan that would be begin in

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<sup>73</sup> "The Response of Gratifying," *Houston Informer*, May 10, 1965; Lawson interview (1974); "Meeting on Integration Is Postponed," *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, May 14, 1965;

<sup>74</sup> "Houston School Integration Plan Called Unsatisfactory," *San Antonio Express*, June 17, 1965; "Houston Public Schools to Be Integrated by 1967," *Pampa Daily News*, June 22, 1965.

the fall of 1965. Although this allowed parents to send children to any school of their choice, there were so many restrictions that very little integration actually occurred. What followed was a series of attempts by HISD to desegregate its schools as slowly and as minimally as possible, including measures that overburdened families and children of color such as forced busing, faculty reassignment, black-brown school pairings, and magnet school programs.<sup>75</sup> Historian Guadalupe San Miguel's book, *Brown Not White*, demonstrates that Mexican Americans were just as outraged about the HISD's attempts to subvert integration. They opposed the district's efforts to make their legal racial classification as white a convenient way to ignore Mexican American concerns about unequal education and to shift the burden of integration on to their children. African American leaders, such as Texas State Representative Curtis Graves and Rev. Bill Lawson, were outspoken supporters of Mexican American resistance to ongoing racism in public education.<sup>76</sup>

Lawson's involvement in direct action protests increased after 1965 as he led both his church and the SCLC into continued resistance to unequal treatment. And his increased involvement and ongoing work with college students brought him into contact with the growing anti-establishment nature of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. He worked in the same circles with the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and he even welcomed the local Black Panthers into the church and allowed them to use Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church's

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<sup>75</sup> Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly*, 155-177.

<sup>76</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., *Brown Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 105-106, 170-173.

fellowship hall as a meeting space.<sup>77</sup> Although his embrace of individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. and groups like SNCC and the Black Panther Party alienated some black Baptists and opened his church up to police intimidation, Lawson's own congregation supported their pastor. However, some members, including Audrey Lawson, worried constantly about what might happen to Bill Lawson. A charter member of the church, Helen Cashaw, said, "He was so much out front that he could get hurt."<sup>78</sup> The congregation had good reason to fear for Lawson's safety.

In 1967, Lawson and Rev. Earl Allen were arrested along with several student protestors during a demonstration near the TSU campus. Police officers manhandled the clergymen and some of the protestors during the arrest, which angered an already tense student body. News of police brutality made its way back to campus, and some students reacted by throwing rocks at police officers. Chief of Police Herman Short called in officers in riot gear, which further escalated tensions between the officers and the students. Mayor Louie Welch agreed to release Lawson and Allen so they could diffuse the situation, something the press later referred to as a "riot." Neither could convince the students to disperse, and shortly after the pastors left the building where the protestors had gathered, shots rang out as students and officers exchanged fire, killing one officer.<sup>79</sup> Even after the end of PUSH and the so-called "riot" at TSU, Lawson continued to use his position as the pastor of a self-proclaimed radical church and as the head of

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<sup>77</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "WABC Charter Service," Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church website, digital video of the church's history, <http://wheelerbc.org/about/history-mission> (accessed December 15, 2016); William Lawson and Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "The Sixth Year," 1968, box 5, folder 1, "WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968," Lawson papers.

<sup>78</sup> Helen Cashaw in Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "WABC Charter Service."

<sup>79</sup> Phelps, *A People's War on Poverty*, 101-103.

Houston's SCLC to lead campaigns to advocate for equal employment opportunities and quality in education for black Houstonians.

### *Breadbaskets*

In September 1966, Lawson wrote a letter to Martin Luther King Jr. detailing his plan to bring King to Houston for another visit. In it, he describes his knowledge of the “Houston situation,” gained from his involvement in more than five years of direct-action protests. Although Houston was “extremely sensitive about her image and economic tranquility” and an “ultra-conservative ... stronghold of [White Citizens] Councils and [John Birch Societies],” it was “making concessions in open manifestation of her insecurity about the perpetuation of racism.” Most importantly, though, Houston was “ripe to be required to unshackle her minorities.”<sup>80</sup> Several months before, Lawson and three other Houston pastors attended a meeting in Chicago during which King introduced Operation Breadbasket to the city of Chicago under the leadership of the young Rev. Jesse Jackson. The four of them returned home following the meeting, and with the help of Rev. Sherman Douglass, Rev. Robert Felder, and Rev. Edward Lott, Lawson established Houston's Operation Breadbasket as an extension of the SCLC. Their goal was to use Houston's insecurities about its own image as leverage to improve the economic conditions of its black communities.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> William A. Lawson to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., September 25, 1966, The King Center Imaging Project, Digital Archive, The King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-pastor-william-lawson-mlk>.

<sup>81</sup> Cecile E. Harrison and Alice K. Laine, “Operation Breadbasket in Houston, 1966-1967” in *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston*, ed. Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 226-227, 234n14.

As in local Breadbasket operations in other cities, Houston's Operation Breadbasket sought to correct the economic effects of institutional racism by stimulating and supporting black businesses and economic growth. Although the group initially struggled to launch the organization over the next few years, it began to win several major victories by 1969.<sup>82</sup> Since Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church was the SCLC affiliate in Houston, it also became one of the first congregations to support the initiative. In his annual report to the congregation in 1970, Lawson included a summary of Operation Breadbasket's activities. "One of its programs," he explained, "is confrontation of businesses which profit from the ghetto, to require that they return to the community some of what they extract from it." They would pressure businesses in the black community to "hire us, bank with us, advertise with us, and use our services" by boycotting their businesses or products until they agreed. Earlier in the year, they had received commitments from three major companies: Union Bottling Company, Rainbo Bakeries, and Schlitz Brewing Company. All of them had agreed to hire more people of color and promote those who were already employed, bank at the local black-owned banks, and prioritize services offered by African Americans in the Third Ward, including anything "from newspapers to custodial services."<sup>83</sup> After 1970, Operation Breadbasket matured under the leadership of Pluria Marshall, a longtime Houston-area activist and community organizer, who eventually pulled Operation Breadbasket away from Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and the SCLC in favor of an independent organization. Even

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<sup>82</sup> Harrison and Laine, "Operation Breadbasket in Houston," 227.

<sup>83</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "The Eighth Year," 1970, box 5, folder 2, "WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1969-1975," Lawson papers.

after the shift, Lawson remained on the executive board and continued to play a crucial role, particularly during negotiating sessions. Lawson typically played the role of peacemaker who would keep negotiations from falling apart.<sup>84</sup>

### *Visions Across Racial Lines*

Lawson's attention primarily to Houston's black community did not preclude his engagement with other marginalized communities in the city. Lawson crossed paths and worked with Mexican Americans through his work for social, educational, economic, and political equality, but his connections with them came more often in the form of solidarity than collaboration. Lawson's experience working with black leaders like Rev. L. H. Simpson had taught him that intra-ethnic solidarity was often elusive enough, and inter-ethnic connections were sometimes just as challenging. Lawson described the relationship between black and brown communities in Houston as "a hot/cold kind of relationship. There are times when blacks and browns work together very well. There are times when they will be almost hostile towards each other."<sup>85</sup> Still, they were part of the same set of struggles and faced many of the same barriers to justice and equality. Lawson's commitment to using the church to transform the world led him to seek solidarity with Mexican Americans and support their efforts particularly when their agendas aligned.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Harrison and Laine, "Operation Breadbasket in Houston," 228-229.

<sup>85</sup> Rev. William "Bill" Lawson, interview by Jane Ely, Houston, Texas, March 14, 2008, Houston Oral History Project: Mayor Bill White Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

<sup>86</sup> My thinking here is guided by Gaye Theresa Johnson's notion of "constellations of struggle." It comes from her study of Charlotta Bass and Luisa Moreno during the Sleepy Lagoon case in the 1940s. Although the two women in her study did not necessarily work together, they shared the same "mutual

When Lawson wrote to Martin Luther King Jr. and asked him to consider another visit to Houston in the fall of 1966, one of his chief justifications was that the Minimum Wage March, *La Marcha*, from the Rio Grande Valley to Austin a few months earlier signified that black and brown activists were poised to mount a unified statewide push for equality.<sup>87</sup> As historian Max Krochmal has demonstrated, the final push of the long march to Austin culminated in a multi-racial show of solidarity as Mexican American marchers were joined by a group of African Americans from Huntsville, and they made their way to the state capitol together.<sup>88</sup> Organizers of King's visit hoped to build on that success by orchestrating a major event at the Houston Astrodome that could unite poor people in Texas through "a massive coalition" of black, white, and brown Americans.<sup>89</sup>

Lawson demonstrated a sense of solidarity with Mexican Americans again in 1971 when he issued the "Manifesto on Behalf of Black Children in the Houston Independent School District." Following a season of setbacks and continued foot-dragging by Houston school officials over desegregation, Lawson's manifesto blamed conservative white school board members for attempting to subvert real integration by pairing black and brown schools while leaving white schools relatively undisturbed. As HISD attempted to integrate school faculty and staff personnel, they had primarily

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moment." Their work together on the Sleepy Lagoon case "generated new political sensibilities and alternative identities among the women and men in their respective racial/ethnic communities." See, Gaye Theresa Johnson, "Constellations of Struggle: Luisa Moreno, Charlotta Bass, and the Legacy for Ethnic Studies," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 155.

<sup>87</sup> Lawson to King, September 25, 1966, The King Center Imaging Project. A detailed account of religion in *La Marcha* can be found in Chapter VI.

<sup>88</sup> Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 400.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. to Harry Belafonte, November 22, 1966, The King Center Imaging Project, Digital Archive, The King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mlk-harry-belafonte>.

moved white teachers into black and brown schools, and teachers of color had generally been dropped or reassigned elsewhere. “The only children hurt by this,” argued Lawson, “would be black and brown children who would lose role-images and people who could understand and care.” Lawson’s manifesto also included a set of recommendations that would relieve the uneven burden placed on children of color in Houston. He proposed a pairing system that joined “black and white or brown and white schools, and recognizes both blacks and browns as legitimate minorities who must also be dealt with realistically in any integration program.”<sup>90</sup>

Lawson’s recommendation for black-white and brown-white pairings was a direct response to a program that unfairly paired black and brown schools in understaffed, substandard facilities to preserve segregation.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, it came after a mid-summer meeting at TSU between Mexican American and African American education advocates. Members of both communities met in an effort to build support and understanding for one another in the fight ahead. As historian Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. has shown, misunderstandings about one another did not erode black and brown rhetorical support in opposition to integration plans that sought to use black and brown people as pawns. By 1973, a short-lived Black and Brown Coalition worked together to oppose the pairing plan, advocating instead for high quality community and

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<sup>90</sup> William A. Lawson (SCLC Coordinator, Houston Chapter) to Members of the Board of Education, Houston Independent School District, “Manifesto on Behalf of Black Children in the Houston Independent School District,” (n.d., c. 1971), box 4, folder 23, “Black/Mexican-American Project Report, July 1972,” Leonel J. Castillo Collection, HMRC.

<sup>91</sup> Brian Behnken has argued that this proposal shows how Lawson did not foresee black and brown integration or black, white, and brown integration, and that he “saw unification in a limited capacity.” However, such an assertion distorts the content of Lawson’s manifesto and ignores the nature of his activism throughout his career. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 221.



neighborhood schools.<sup>92</sup> Lawson's manifesto was a clear indication that one of the major players in the school integration fight saw black and brown children linked together in the same harmful situation and pressed the school board to formulate a plan that would acknowledge the needs of both groups.

### *Beyond Schools and Breadbaskets*

Even beyond direct action protests and civil rights demonstrations, Lawson led his church and surrounding community to embrace a race-conscious religious identity. Each year, his congregation convened in Montgomery, Texas, an hour north of Houston at place called "Failing Farms" to hold their worship services "in the woods where our fathers worshipped and in the same fashion." Lawson began this annual retreat as a way to recreate the same worship experience the congregation's ancestors had practiced during slavery. The daylong event included a motorcade procession from the Wheeler Avenue, a worship service in the fields, Sunday school classes, baptisms in the lake, and an outdoor feast.<sup>93</sup> In 1968, the church also made plans to build a library in the choir room stocked "with the best in Negro history and literature and the finest children's materials to help our boys grow up proud and our girls to grow up ladies." In 1969, Lawson played a constructive role in establishing the Afro-American Studies program at the University of Houston and became one of its first instructors. He regularly taught classes on a variety of topics, including "Black Identity" and "The Black Religious

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<sup>92</sup> San Miguel, *Brown Not White*, 105-106, 170-173, 188.

<sup>93</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, "The Sixth Year," 1968, box 5, folder 1, "WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968," Lawson papers; Charlene Warnken, "Memories, Ideals Part of Worshipping in Woods," *Houston Post*, August 14, 1976.

Experience.”<sup>94</sup> Then in 1970, Lawson partnered with several other churches in the Riverside area to host weekly classes on “the Black experience.”<sup>95</sup> And at the center of Lawson’s activism and pastorate was his understanding that what his church was doing meant “an interweaving of the Civil Rights Movement and [their] work as Christians.”<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

For Lawson, then, the civil rights movement created the conditions for his leadership where he used his access to the BSU, Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, and Union Baptist Association to support civil rights activities and organize campaigns to pressure white leaders in business and education to change. He shaped the civil rights movement in Houston through his religious beliefs, resources, and leadership. He came to Houston to work as the Baptist Student Union director at TSU, and his sense of himself as a missionary among college students and the community around the university informed his work. Although he initially hesitated to get involved in the emerging student sit in movement, he later stepped in as an organizer, sponsor, and mentor. His civil rights activism led the community around him to ask him to start a

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<sup>94</sup> “Force Field Auxiliary Present a Testimonial Dinner Honoring Reverend William A. Lawson,” brochure, 1977, box 7, folder 20, “Testimonial Dinner Honoring W. A. L.,” Lawson papers; Robbie Washington, “Haynes Outlines Afro-American Studies Plan,” *Houston Summer Cougar*, June 19, 1969; “PC Black Emphasis Brings Julian Bond,” *Houston Daily Cougar*, November 18, 1969; “Schedule of Black Events,” *Houston Daily Cougar*, February 8, 1974. For the birth of the African American Studies Department at the University of Houston, see Robinson Black, “Afro-Americans for Black Liberation and the Fight for Civil Rights at the University of Houston,” *Houston History Magazine* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 24-28.

<sup>95</sup> Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “The Sixth Year,” 1968, box 5, folder 1, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1962-1968,” Lawson papers; Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, “The Eighth Year,” box 5, folder 2, “WABC Anniversary Booklets, 1969-1975,” Lawson papers.

<sup>96</sup> Lawson interview (2004).

church. As pastor of WABC, a streamlined and pro-movement church, Lawson launched movements to press for equal rights in education, housing, and employment.

For Lawson, religion was central to his fight for equality, and social justice was a central component of his vision for Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. It comes as no surprise, then, that Bill and Audrey Lawson incorporated the physical relics like the marble floor and the brass doors as symbols of struggle and victory into the design of their new church building in the 1980s. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, its pastor, and the civil rights movement itself came of age in the same moment, and they collectively strived for equality. Lawson's legacy in Houston continues through his church, the African American Studies Program at the University of Houston, and countless community initiatives begun by Lawson or started in his name. The story of Lawson's involvement in the civil rights movement shows just how much inspiration, power, and potential that Lawson was able to find in the church. However, as we will see in Chapter VI, religion in an institutional sense could also be a roadblock to positive change, as it was for the Rev. James Novarro.

## CHAPTER VI

### FROM THE CHURCH TO THE STREETS: REV. JAMES L. NOVARRO AND *EL MOVIMIENTO*

On the morning of September 4, 1966, folks all over Texas found a news article in their Sunday papers with the headline, “Valley Marchers near Austin.” The picture that accompanied the article showed the Rev. James L. Novarro, a Mexican American Baptist minister from Houston, clutching a large American Flag leading hundreds of marchers and a donkey named “One Twenty-Five.” *La Marcha*, a 490-mile, two-month trek to the Texas capitol began in Rio Grande City on July 4, 1966. Novarro and another Houston clergyman, Catholic priest Antonio Gonzalez, led the march after a melon pickers’ strike in South Texas stalled. The marchers planned to arrive in Austin on Labor Day to confront Texas lawmakers and draw support for a minimum wage bill of \$1.25 for farm workers.<sup>1</sup> As the marchers reached Austin on the following day, thousands of students, politicians, and members of the American GI Forum (AGIF), LULAC, and the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO) joined their ranks. Although the minimum wage march did not achieve its immediate goals, it led to a new Mexican American protest movement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Valley Marchers Near Austin,” *San Antonio Express/News*, Sunday, September 4, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> The American G.I. Forum, led by Hector P. Garcia, formed in 1948 to secure civil rights for Mexican Americans. The Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations formed after the election of John F. Kennedy in November 1960. In the months that followed, several chapters formed in Texas and then the rest of the Southwest, and then a national organization formed in April 1961. Its purpose was to increase the political power of Mexican Americans as a way to influence improvements to their lives through pressuring elected officials and by running their own candidates for office. V. Carl Allsup, “American G.I. Forum of Texas,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed April 01, 2017,

Historians of the Chicano Movement have shown that the 1966 Minimum Wage March unified Mexican Americans in Texas and catalyzed a Chicano movement in the state. However, the presence of a Mexican American Baptist minister leading the march leads us to ask how faith and identity politics intersected in the Chicano Movement, a subject that remains underemphasized in Chicano Movement historiography. Among others, historian Felipe Hinojosa has been at the forefront of scholars whose work explores the tensions between faith, identity, and politics among Latino Protestants. His recent study, *Latino Mennonites*, demonstrates that the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s were central to the emergence of faith-based activism to reshape the fabric and purpose of church life for black and brown Mennonites. As the politics of race and faith merged, it inspired Mennonite leaders to question the racial status quo in and out of the church and reconsider their engagement with communities of color.<sup>3</sup> Historian

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<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/voa01>; Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed April 01, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/vep01>; "Valley Farm Workers Reach Austin for Rally," *Odessa American*, Tuesday, September 6, 1966, 7; Marilyn D. Rhinehart and Thomas H. Kreneck, "The Minimum Wage March of 1966: A Case Study in Mexican-American Politics, Labor, and Identity," *The Houston Review* 11 (1989): 27-44; Arnolde De León, *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History* (Wheeling, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 2009), 139.

<sup>3</sup> Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 3-7, 12-13, 70-72; Mario T. García, "Religion and the Chicano Movement: Católicos Por La Raza," in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 125; Mario T. García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 12; Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 14; However, Mario T. García, among others, has been at the forefront of analyzing the influence of religion on the movement. García, "Religion and the Chicano Movement"; García, *Católicos*; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*; Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, Richard Martinez, *PADRES: The National Chicano Priest Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Rudy V. Busto, *King Tiger: The Religious Vision of Reies López Tijerina* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Lara Medina, *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo and Jesse Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Gastón Espinosa and Mario García, ed., *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Paul Barton, "¡Ya

Paul Barton's work on the Chicano movement and Chicano Protestants shows us that the farmworker moment in 1965 and 1966 "created a turning point in the identity formation of some Mexican American 'mainline' Protestants," during which they realigned the anchor of their identities from their denomination to their ethnic community.<sup>4</sup>

This is precisely what the story of longtime Baptist minister and Mexican American activist Rev. James L. Novarro shows us. For Novarro, as for many other Mexican Americans in Texas, the march to raise support for a minimum wage was indeed a turning point in the movement.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I argue that the tumultuous decades surrounding the civil rights movement transformed Novarro from a primarily religious leader, who was chiefly concerned with denominational ministry, to one intimately involved with civil rights politics beyond church walls.

Novarro arrived in Houston in 1938 to lead Second Mexican Baptist Church in Magnolia Park and demonstrated early on that he was a transformative figure. He moved to the position of missionary to Spanish-speaking people for Union Association, where he helped expand Mexican Baptist ministries in Greater Houston. Within just seven years of his arrival, he had established two other churches and a mission. After his position as missionary ended in the late 1940s, Novarro continued to be a major influence in local and state denominational life. With financial support from Union

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*Basta! Latino/a Protestant Activism in the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements,*" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Barton, "¡Ya Basta!," 137-138.

<sup>5</sup> Rhinehart and Kreneck, "The Minimum Wage March of 1966," 31, 35; Arnolde De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 169-170; Roberto R. Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 187-188.

Baptist Association, he also created the area's first Spanish language Baptist radio program, *La Hora Bautista*, which covered issues of self-improvement, family, and spirituality.<sup>6</sup> In 1954 and 1955, Navarro gained significant attention for single-handedly organizing and managing two relief-drives for flood and hurricane victims in the Rio Grande Valley and in Tamaulipas, Mexico. From 1955 until at least 1957, Navarro also wrote a recurring column, titled "Latin American Activities," in Houston's *Baptist Messenger*, a monthly magazine published by Union Baptist Association for its primarily Anglo readers.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his considerable success as a church and denominational leader, his experiences in the 1950s and 1960s began to change the way Navarro understood working as an activist minister within his denomination, a system that had marginalized him and other Mexican Americans. Leading up to the 1960s, Navarro's political consciousness swelled as he became more involved with organizations like LULAC and PASO. At the same time, he still expressed hope that pressing toward integration and assimilation in denominational ministries would open doors for Mexican Americans, hope that the white Baptist racism that supported the Klan and preached segregation was on its way out. Instead, he became a casualty of the lingering problem of racism in Baptist circles. During and after his participation in *La Marcha*, Navarro faced extreme

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<sup>6</sup> Chrystel Pit, "Deal with Us: The Business of Mexican Culture in Post-World War II Houston" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2011), 154.

<sup>7</sup> James Navarro, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, December 13, 1983, Houston Oral History Project: "A Great City Voices Its Past," Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, TX; R. G. Commander, *The Story of Union Baptist Association, 1840-1976* (Houston: D. Armstrong Publishers, 1977), 70; "Texans Still Talk about Jim Navarro," *Pampa Daily News*, November 25, 1955; "Mexican Work: Latin Firebrand," *Baptist Standard*, July 1, 1954; "Texas Pastor Aids Mexican Refugees," *Baptist Standard*, December 1, 1955.

pressure from Anglo and Mexican American Baptists who opposed his politics and cut ties with him. The black and brown freedom movements pulled Novarro away from denominational activities and into faith-informed activism in increasingly secular political circles, where he came to believe he could have the most influence.

This chapter explores this story beginning with an analysis of how Novarro and other leaders in the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas* challenged inequality in religious circles by fighting for a seat at the table in the 1950s and early 1960s. Fed up with their perpetual mission status, Mexican American Baptists sought unification with the Baptist General Convention of Texas as a way to gain control of their own institutions. The second section shows that Novarro's fight for integration within church walls paralleled his growing involvement in Mexican American political organizations. It explores his activities as a part of LULAC, PASO, and city politics, which exposed Novarro to the growing civil rights movement in new ways. Sections three and four focus on his leadership of the 1966 Minimum Wage March, the aftermath, and his shift from evangelism to religious civil rights activism. Section four also follows similar shifts among Mexican American Baptists in Houston and beyond. Although Novarro's political awakening occurred sooner than many of his peers, others took a noticeable turn to social ministries, identity politics, and community activism in the late 1960s and the 1970s.



## Resistance Within the Boundaries of Church and Denomination

“The policies of ‘Paternalism,’ ‘Colonialism,’ and ‘Subjugation’ that in the past have characterized the establishment, supervision, and personnel relationship in the mission work among the Spanish-speaking people is gradually becoming a thing of the past,” proclaimed Novarro in his monthly column in the *Baptist Messenger*. Although such practices continued even in 1956 “under the guise of ‘proper administration’ or ‘wise supervision,’” Novarro believed that “human progress” would eventually spur Anglo Baptists to abandon even those “vestiges of an unsound foundation and philosophy.” Novarro called on his primarily white Baptist audience to go further and “be more diligent at the task of evangelizing the Spanish-speaking people while they can yet be reached for Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Yet in the 1950s, Novarro’s attention was on evangelism, adhering to the Southern Baptist tradition of seeing the central mission of the church in terms of Jesus’s world mandate to “make disciples of all nations.”<sup>9</sup>

Novarro’s optimism came from living through the enormous growth among Mexican American Baptist churches in Houston and throughout the state of Texas. Across the state, Mexican American Baptists had grown from about 125 churches and missions with over 8,500 members in 1942 to 285 churches and missions with over

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<sup>8</sup> James L. Novarro, “Latin American Activities,” *Baptist Messenger* (Houston), November 1956, 10.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of Southern Baptist Convention affiliated churches, associations, and conventions adhered to this evangelism-first vision for their churches. They tended to view social action and the physical needs of people to be a distraction from transforming individuals into disciples who would then work hard to transform themselves and the world around them. In this sense, then, social ills would be solved through individual salvation and not through social programs (offered by the church or otherwise).

12,000 members in 1954.<sup>10</sup> When Novarro first arrived in Houston, there were three Mexican American Baptist congregations with about 240 members in regular attendance in the Greater Houston area. By 1955, there were fourteen Mexican American Baptist churches and missions with over 1,200 regular members.<sup>11</sup>

Novarro had presided over the addition of several new missions and churches for Spanish-speaking Baptists as both a missionary and later a pastor. He was also personally set to take over Kashmere Baptist Church. This had been an all-white congregation with a Mexican American mission, but changing neighborhood demographics had caused the Mexican American portion of the church body to outpace the Anglo portion. By the mid-1950s, the church had slowly become a mix of Anglo and Mexican American churchgoers. He had expected to lead the church as a unique bilingual, multi-ethnic church, an arrangement that would lead to what he and other denominational leaders called the “Progressive” Kashmere Baptist Temple. However, the majority of the Anglo members opted to relocate out in suburban Houston, and Kashmere Baptist remained primarily Mexican American.<sup>12</sup> His own success aside, Novarro also knew that even with the absence of the Anglo church members, his situation was exceptional. He believed that a greater degree of interaction between Anglo and Mexican American Baptists could open the door to integration and equality.

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<sup>10</sup> By 1964 that number had grown to 484 churches and missions with 33,530 members. Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists*, 69, 98, 121.

<sup>11</sup> “Baptist Sunday School and Other Church Reports,” *Gulf Coast Baptist*, October 18, 1939; UBA (1955), “Tables and Statistics”; “Interracial Committee,” *Baptist Messenger*, July 1955.

<sup>12</sup> “Progressive Kashmere Baptist Temple Presents Challenge,” *Baptist Messenger*, April 1956; “Missionaries Enjoy Quarterly Meeting,” *Baptist Messenger*, August 1956; Ross Dillon, “Two Years of Work and Effort Pay Off When Faith Temple Moves to New Location,” *Baptist Messenger*, September 1956; “Kashmere Buys Site in Home Owned Estates,” *Baptist Messenger*, November 1956. For a discussion of these shifting demographics, see Chapter IV.

More often than not, however, Union Association continued to treat Mexican Americans within their denomination as Americans-in-the-making, unfinished products on the way to dropping their cultural values and practices in favor of blending in with their Anglo counterparts. Such a reality created what longtime *Convención* archivist Ernest Atkinson referred to as “a strong feeling of ‘peripheriness’” among Mexican American Baptists.<sup>13</sup> Both locally and throughout the state, Anglos tended to devote minimal resources to the long-term growth of Mexican American Baptist ministries, particularly when compared to those invested in Anglo Baptist growth after 1950.<sup>14</sup> Navarro used his monthly column in the *Baptist Messenger* to raise his and other Mexican American Baptists’ concerns, which highlight the reality that their struggle with Anglo Baptist paternalism and racialization was both ongoing and mostly unacknowledged by Anglos themselves.

### *Challenges from the Periphery*

He began writing the column in June 1955, and he used it to keep readers up to date on the activities in the Spanish-speaking world both in Texas and beyond, to announce activities and ministry initiatives involving Houston-area Mexican Baptist churches, and to offer his expert opinion on Baptist ministries among Houston’s Mexican American community. By 1956, Navarro’s column had become increasingly critical of what he saw as both a missed opportunity for Baptists and an unequal and

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<sup>13</sup> Ernest E. Atkinson, “Hispanic Baptists in Texas: A Glorious and Threatened History,” *Apuntes: Reflexiones Teológicas Desde El Margen Hispano* 17, no. 2 (1997): 41.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter IV.

unhealthy relationship between Anglo Baptists and their Latino neighbors. In March of 1957, he wrote a critique of his denomination's approach to evangelizing Spanish Speaking Texans, arguing that "establishing a separate mission [creates] a perennial bottle-neck," highlighted by the fact that after nearly forty years of concerted effort toward Spanish-speaking Texans, nearly every Mexican Baptist church and mission was still "financially dependent and numerically small."<sup>15</sup> Two months later, he wrote on behalf of the Mexican Baptist pastors in the Gulf Coast area and called for Anglo Baptists to do more with their resources. He wrote, "Spanish Speaking Baptists are hungry for Christian fellowship...[and] there is a strong yearning for training and development." However, Anglo churches, particularly those in the southwestern areas of the city, near the growing Mexican American population, simply were not doing enough.<sup>16</sup>

The following year, Novarro was the invited speaker for the chapel gathering at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. Novarro had completed his seminary training there two decades before and returned to address the newest crop of ministers and church workers about the importance of Spanish-speaking ministries. His main point for his mostly white audience was that it was time to "change our way of thinking in schools, churches, and seminaries," that Baptists must "disregard sympathies that do not welcome *all* people in [their] communities." He pled with the seminary students to respond to the needs of Mexican Americans both in their midst and on the fringes of their towns and cities. It was time, he urged, for them to build churches and

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<sup>15</sup> James L. Novarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger* (Houston), March 1957.

<sup>16</sup> James L. Novarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger* (Houston), May 1957.

congregations that were prepared to adapt to changing peoples around them instead of ones that would run away because of “shortsighted and limited” understandings of Mexican Americans. Most importantly, he told them it was time “to cross the tracks” into Mexican American communities, “bring them *into* a church, your own church, and baptize them.” This way, they could stop establishing missions and establish “Baptist churches.”<sup>17</sup>

Novarro spoke to future pastors and ministry workers from the standpoint of a Southern Baptist pastor. What he and his audience had in common was that Southern Baptists generally adhered to the Baptist doctrine outlined in the “Baptist Faith and Message.” And portions of that doctrine addressed the role of the church in missions and the role of every Christian in society. Originally drafted in 1925, the “Baptist Faith and Message” uses scripture to assert that “duty of every Christian man and woman, and the duty of every church of Christ is to seek to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.” Since all Christians experienced “the new birth of man’s spirit” through God’s grace, they must demonstrate “the birth of love for others.” Therefore, Christians must constantly work for the salvation of every person on earth. Furthermore, every Christian is obliged “to make the will of Christ regnant in his own life and in human society” by providing for “the orphaned, the aged, the helpless, and the sick.” They should also strive with “all means and methods used in social service for the amelioration of

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<sup>17</sup> James Navarro (sic), “Latin American People in Texas,” February 26, 1958, Mission Day Chapel Sermon, sound recording, audiocassette, Roberts Media Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas (emphasis in original). As was often the case, James Navarro’s name was recorded incorrectly (Navarro) in the permanent record of this event. In addition to expressing his perspective on Spanish-speaking evangelism, Novarro also used this opportunity to recount his experience at SWBTS. He evidently had trouble maintaining the necessary funds to continue his education, so L. R. Scarborough, President of SWBTS and a professor there, paid for his tuition and books.

society,” which rests on the conversion of individuals. As a Southern Baptist pastor trained at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Novarro understood his role as a minister in these terms as well. He believed he had a duty to minister to every soul and work to make the world around him better. Yet, where he and his audience may have differed was in their definition of what an improved society would look like and who might be included among “the helpless.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Unification and Integration as the Way Forward*

There had been an enormous amount of growth in Houston’s white and black Baptist churches over the previous decade because of post-World War II economic and demographic developments throughout the city. However, the level of revenue for Mexican American Baptist churches was still far below that of Anglo churches in their own association. For example, in 1954, the average revenue per white Baptist church was about \$47,000, and the average per Mexican American church was \$5,700.<sup>19</sup> The difference in the average total revenue came down to several factors, including congregation sizes and the income level of church members who tithed or donated money regularly. Since Mexican American congregations were substantially smaller

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<sup>18</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 1925); Southern Baptist Convention, “Comparison of 1925, 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp> (accessed April 3, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Some white churches, such as South Main Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, and Second Baptist Church, brought in upwards of \$300,000 to \$400,000 in that same year. There were also several churches that recorded receipts between \$20,000 and \$50,000, depending on the size of their congregations. For the Mexican American churches, the church that generated the most income was Second Mexican Baptist Church with nearly ten thousand dollars. But the other three churches that reported receipts brought in between three and five thousand dollars apiece. “Table F – Church Receipts and Expenditures,” in UBA (1954).

than most of the white congregations, there would already be a limitation in terms of the source of revenue. Additionally, income disparities between white and Mexican American workers would also mean a lower per member contribution to the church for Mexican American Baptist churches.<sup>20</sup> This meant that Mexican Baptist pastors often had little choice but to rely on Anglo associations, conventions, churches, and organizations for financial support.

For Novarro and other *Convención* leaders, the solution to their problems and the way to resist their unequal treatment was through integration and through unification with white denominational entities. They believed that if they could unite with the Anglo-led Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), they would be able to take hold of an equal portion of leadership and determine the direction of Baptist ministries in the state from the inside, particularly where Mexican Americans were concerned.<sup>21</sup> At the annual meeting of the *Convención* in 1958, Novarro moved to form a committee that would investigate the possibility of merging the *Convención* with the BGCT, a notion that had been circulating among Mexican American Baptist leaders. The motion passed and *Convención* members chose *Convención* President Carlos Paredes along with Pablo Cuevas, Pascual Húrtiz, Jonás González, James Novarro, Ignacio E. González, and

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<sup>20</sup> In 1954, this meant that each Mexican American Baptist church member gave about thirty-four dollars, and each white Baptist church member gave fifty dollars. "Table F – Church Receipts and Expenditures," in UBA (1954). This is consistent with the differences in the median income per family in Houston between 1959 and 1964. In 1959, Spanish-surnamed families earned \$4339 per year compared to the total average in Houston of \$6040 per year. In 1964, Spanish-surnamed families earned \$5350 per year (compared to the total average of \$6700 per year). Mary Ellen Goodman, Alma Beman, Don des Jarlais, Robert S. Guerra, Tatcho Mindiola, Susan Parnam et al., "The Mexican-American Population of Houston: A Survey in the Field 1965-1970," *Rice University Studies* 57, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 115.

<sup>21</sup> James L. Novarro, "Convención Bautista Del Sur Unidad de Fuerzas Bautistas Para La Evangelizacion Del Mundo," n. d. [c. 1958-1959] box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Commissions: Unification," Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collections, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas.

Mario Grimaldo to form the Committee of Understanding, which would make a report at the next meeting in 1959.<sup>22</sup>

The *Convención* had operated as an independent fellowship of Spanish-speaking churches in Texas since it began in 1910. The purpose of the *Convención* was to unite Spanish-speaking pastors and churches to coordinate the work of their ministries and build new churches together. It also reinforced their work by providing fellowship and encouragement for the member pastors and ministry workers and allowed them to share in one another's successes and setbacks. Meanwhile, the BGCT led its own programs for Spanish-speaking evangelism through its Home Mission Board and State Missions Commission. Mexican Baptist churches typically joined local Anglo associations even as they established their own *Convención* associations, called *compañerismos*. However, in spite of their dual membership in the BGCT and the *Convención*, many Mexican Baptist churches faced challenges in their attempts to collaborate with the Anglo convention, associations, and churches. What Novarro and his peers experienced in Houston was familiar to many Mexican American Baptists statewide. Although some Anglo associations accepted Mexican Baptist churches into "full fellowship," where the Anglo pastors and churches recognized their Mexican American counterparts as co-workers in their ministries, most tended to treat Mexican American churches and members as an inferior part of their work. They chose not to collaborate with them and embarked at the

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<sup>22</sup> Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, *Actas* (1959), 52; Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, "History of Unification, 1964-1984," pamphlet, n. d. [c. 1984], box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Commissions: Unification," Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC; Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists*, 110, 113.



state and local levels on their own programs to evangelize Spanish speakers in their midst, often without consulting Mexican American leaders in their associations.<sup>23</sup>

From the fall of 1958 until the spring of 1959, the Committee of Understanding met sporadically and quickly encountered serious divisions in their ranks. Pastors who had pioneered Mexican Baptist evangelism during the first half of the twentieth century tended to be the more outspoken critics of unification.<sup>24</sup> Longtime editor of *El Bautista Mexicano* Carlos Hernandez Rios and the founder of Baptist churches all over Texas, Fred Montero, both fought vehemently against the merger for several years. They feared that becoming subsumed within the BGCT would lead to a loss of cultural identity amid continued discrimination from Anglo Baptists.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rev. Fred Montero, "The Mexican Baptist Convention of Texas and Unification: A Special Address by Rev. Fred Montero to the Committee of Ten and BGCT Representatives on His Viewpoints on Unification, at Their Invitation on February 23, 1978, Dallas, Texas," box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Unification (Assorted)," Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC; Grijalva, *A History of Mexican Baptists*, 93; Atkinson, "Hispanic Baptists in Texas," 41-44.

<sup>24</sup> Mexican American Baptists were not alone in this regard. In the 1950s, Presbyterian leaders were mulling the possibility of dissolving the Texas-Mexican Presbytery and integrating Mexican Americans into Anglo churches. Feelings of opposition from Mexican Americans ranged from believing that separate organizations were essential for the maintenance of Mexican culture to believing that the Tex-Mex made it possible to save the best of Mexican culture while embracing the best of American culture. The reason that many of the Mexican American Baptists who opposed unification were of the pioneering generation seems to come down to a generational divide. Historians who study the Mexican American Generation have noted that the Mexican American Generation embraced American identity in a way that their predecessors had not. Men like Navarro and the others on the committee who were in favor of unification had been born in the United States, come of age during the Depression, lived through World War II, and begun to embrace an identity far removed from the Immigrant Generation before them. On the Tex-Mex, see R. Douglas Brackenridge and Francisco O. García-Treto, *Iglesia Presbiteriana: A History of Presbyterians and Mexican Americans in the Southwest* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 115-123. On the Mexican American Generation, see Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology & Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Mario Grimaldo, Secretario, Comisión Especial de Entendimiento, Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, "Reunión Extra Ordinaria de la 'Comisión de los Siete,'" May 11, 1959, box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Unification (Assorted)," Hispanic Baptist Archives; Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas, "History of Unification, 1964-1984," pamphlet, n. d. [c. 1984], box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Commissions: Unification," Hispanic Baptist Archives; Forrest C. Feezor and J. Woodrow Fuller, "The Latin American Mission Picture in Texas," paper presented for district and city association staff meeting at Glorieta, New Mexico, August 1959, box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Unification (Assorted)," Hispanic Baptist Archives; Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists*, 114-121.

In response to the opposition, Novarro issued a pamphlet emphasizing the merits of unification to convince *Convención* churches to support it. His support of unification rested on two main points. First, in a practical sense, unified or not, most Mexican American Baptist churches, missions, institutions, and personnel already relied on the moral and financial support of Anglo Baptists. “Even the largest and strongest ‘self-sustaining’ churches,” Novarro wrote, “receive financial subsidies in one form or another.” So unification would only broaden their access to those lines of revenue and assistance they were already receiving. Second, he believed that society, as a whole, was moving toward a more inclusive plane. So while the previous generation of Mexican Baptists might have needed to rely on their “nationalist” conventions of the past, future generations would pursue assimilation. He argued that just as this new generation of young Mexican Americans sought “identification and integration within the social, economic and political landscape of the nation in which they live, . . . they will seek that same integration in the religious and spiritual level of their life.” He warned that if the *Convención* did not adapt and work more closely with the BGCT, it would lose the younger generation altogether and dissolve. It would be left to join the fate of other such “nationalist” Baptist organizations in Texas as the German Baptist Convention, which, according to Novarro, had disappeared as the youth of their conventions blended into mainstream society.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> James L. Novarro, “Convención Bautista Del Sur Unidad de Fuerzas Bautistas Para La Evangelizacion Del Mundo,” n. d. [c. 1958-1959], box 10, file 1.9.16, “Commissions: Unification,” Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collections, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas.

### *Working from the Inside*

Novarro pushed for unification because he believed it was the most effective way to address the disparities that he saw within Baptist denominational work in Texas. Still, his support reflected an over-confidence both in the openness of Anglo Baptists and in changes to the broader racial climate that would mean an acceptance of Mexican Americans as equal peers. Novarro's history of close partnerships with the executive board of Union Association, the support he had received from the Union Baptist Brotherhood, and his inclusion within the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference suggest that he was confident that other such scenarios could exist elsewhere. Novarro also feared that if Mexican American Baptists continued as a separate organization, they would continually be the childlike partner to the parent Anglo-led BGCT. They would still not control their own churches or missions, and they would still not be free to determine their own future. Novarro and other supporters of unification saw it as the best opportunity to gain control of the institutions they had worked so hard to build.

In 1959, the two conventions entered into serious discussions about the possibilities of a merger even as significant division within the ranks of the *Convención* led Mexican Baptists to initially vote down a formal unification with the BGCT. Nevertheless, the *Convención* elected a new Committee of Seven to explore unification as it continued to struggle against meager financial resources. Leaders of both conventions negotiated the specifics of the unification process and how it would work over the next few years. After a trial period, the BGCT officially welcomed the members of the *Convención* at the BGCT annual meeting in 1964. The *Convención Bautista*

*Mexicana de Texas* unified with the Baptist General Convention as a department on par with the Sunday School Department and brought a member of the *Convención* into every major department and committee in the BGCT.<sup>27</sup>

In some respects, unification was an immediate success. Churches like *Primera Iglesia Bautista de Houston* found that working as part of the BGCT meant an increase in revenue and resources. The pastor of the church, Rev. Esteban Flores, came to Houston from Sonora, Texas, in 1957 and began working with the BGCT's programs to encourage the growth of small churches. From 1958 until 1963, Flores and his church excelled in the Church Achievement Program, which encouraged smaller churches to create Sunday school departments, Bible study programs, and other initiatives that would lead to increased attendance, membership, financial support, and community development. At the BGCT 1963 annual meeting in final year before unification began, Flores earned the distinction of being "Pastor of the Year" for the BGCT, and the meeting had what the *Baptist Press* described as a "Latin American flavor." In 1964, the two conventions launched their new partnership with a Latina/o-focused collaborative evangelism initiative called the Latin American Baptist New Life Crusade.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> W. H. Colson, *Mexican Baptists in Texas*, 1997, Mexican Baptist Oral History Project, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 6; Leobardo Estrada, *Oral Memoirs of Leobardo Estrada, Sr.*, 1984, Mexican Baptist Oral History Project, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 140; Baptist General Convention of Texas, "History of Unification, 1964-1984," undated pamphlet [c.1984], box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Commission: Unification," Hispanic Baptist Archives; "Mexican Baptists Vote Unification Approval," *Baptist Press*, June 24, 1960; "Texas, Mexican Baptist Conventions May Unite," *Baptist Press*, May 6, 1960; T. A. Patterson, *Oral Memoirs of Thomas Armour Patterson*, 1978, Texas Baptist Oral History Consortium, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 216; Grijalva, *Mexican Baptists*, 114-122.

<sup>28</sup> Esteban Flores also led his church participate and excel in the Cooperative Program, which was a way of supporting missions locally and globally by combining financial resources at church, association, and convention levels. Oscar I. Romo to Esteban Flores, April 7, 1965, box 24 (Esteban Flores), Hispanic Baptist Archives; "Baptists Pick Flores Pastor of Year," *San Antonio Express*, Friday, November 15, 1963;

Nevertheless, the unification of the two conventions failed to produce the kinds of partnerships and collaboration that folks like Navarro had hoped to see. While the BGCT was supposed to appoint a Mexican American to every committee, Anglo executives confessed that they often forgot about or ignored that stipulation. Many Mexican American Baptists, particularly among the older generation, also deeply resented what they viewed as a major step backward. They had devoted years and immeasurable resources to building the *Convención* only to see it reduced to a department within an organization that had shown them little more than paternalism.<sup>29</sup>

### **Move Toward Political Engagement, 1950-1966**

Navarro's push for integration in religious circles and his vocal critiques of Anglo-Mexican American Baptist relationships coincided with another major development in his life. As his denominational influence in the Houston area and throughout the state grew, so did his involvement in Mexican American political organizations. One of the most apparent products of this parallel transformation appears in Navarro's critical editorials in Baptist publications. As the civil rights movement

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"Texas Convention Starts Latin American Crusade," *Baptist Press*, November 15, 1963; "Texas Latin American Crusade Planned in '64," *Baptist Press*, June 30, 1963; Maria Portillo, Josefina Roman, Emma Villanueva, Esteban Villanueva, "Breve Resumen Historico de la Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston, Texas," 1976, box 13, folder "Houston, T.X., P. I. B.," Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC.

<sup>29</sup> W. H. Colson, *Mexican Baptists in Texas*, 1997, Mexican Baptist Oral History Project, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 6; Leobardo Estrada, *Oral Memoirs of Leobardo Estrada, Sr.*, 1984, Mexican Baptist Oral History Project, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX, 140; Rev. Fred Montero, "The Mexican Baptist Convention of Texas and Unification: A Special Address by Rev. Fred Montero to the Committee of Ten and BGCT Representatives on His Viewpoints on Unification, at Their Invitation on February 23, 1978, Dallas, Texas," box 10, folder 1.9.16, "Unification (Assorted)," Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC.

unfolded, he began to apply his considerable religious energy and resources to political concerns rather than denominational ones. In the early 1950s, Novarro joined several local Mexican American political organizations while still leading several churches at once. His motivation for joining these types of associations was to be the moral and religious influence for people who would be in a position of power.<sup>30</sup>

### *Novarro and LULAC*

Novarro first attended a LULAC Council 60 meeting in March 1950 to hear what the organization was doing about frequent newspaper reports of juvenile delinquency among Mexican American youths in Houston. Two weeks later, leaders of Council 60 extended an honorary membership to Novarro, and he began attending meetings and attempting to influence the direction of the organization. On behalf of Trinity Baptist Church and Union Association, he offered to give Council 60 an American and a Christian flag as a gift. At a meeting in 1951, he announced a “Spiritual Awakening Revival” that he was planning and enlisted the support of LULAC Council 60 members. LULAC members also assisted Novarro and his church in choosing summer camp attendees and scholarship recipients as an outside selection committee.<sup>31</sup> Because of his

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<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Liebrum, “Burial Set Today for Hispanic Activist James Novarro,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 23, 1993, Biography, General N, Vertical Files, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes, LULAC Council 60, March 9, 1950, box 2, folder 5, “Minutes of Meetings of LULAC Council 60, 1950,” LULAC Council 60 Papers, RG E 21, HMRC; Minutes, LULAC Council 60, March 23, 1950, box 2, folder 5, “Minutes of Meetings of LULAC Council 60, 1950,” LULAC Council 60 Papers; Minutes, LULAC Council 60, undated [c. April 1950]; Minutes, LULAC Council 60, January 18, 1951, box 2, folder 7, “Minutes of Meetings of LULAC Council 60, 1951,” LULAC Council 60 Papers; Edward Eguia, LULAC Council #60 Secretary, to Rev. E. H. Harrison, Rev. Novarro, and Dr. Ross E. Dillon, February 6, 1951, Box 10, Folder 17, “Outgoing Correspondence, Telegrams, & Related

regular attendance and participation, Novarro became a fixture within the organization. LULAC Council 60 made his presence official in 1952 by electing him as the local council chaplain, a position he maintained on-and-off at the local, district, and national levels for more than two decades.<sup>32</sup>

His role as the chaplain led to other opportunities for him to become more involved, and his activities in the 1950s paint a picture of a pastor attempting to merge his two worlds. He attempted to bring his Protestant influence into an organization that was primarily Catholic, but he also tried to bring LULAC and its concerns into the mainstream white Baptist circles, concerns he believed should matter to Baptist churches. In 1956, he announced to readers of the *Baptist Messenger* that LULAC's national publication, *LULAC News*, had asked him to become a contributor. He believed that this "privilege" would give Baptists "a voice and representation within this influential group."<sup>33</sup>

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Documents, 1951," LULAC Council 60 Papers; Minutes, LULAC Council 60, July 26, 1951, box 2, folder 7, "Minutes of Meetings of LULAC Council 60, 1951," LULAC Council 60 Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Novarro was not the only Mexican American Baptist to join LULAC in the Houston area. Felix Quiñones (see Chapter III), a Mexican American Baptist was one of the first members of what became LULAC Council 60. At least one other Mexican American Baptist contemporary of Novarro's also joined the organization. Lupe Maciel, who later worked on War on Poverty initiatives in Houston, was also a member. Further study would be required to see how prevalent Protestants were in the organization and what their presence meant for LULAC identity in general. Felix Salazar Jr., LULAC Council #60 Secretary, to Mr. Gilbert Sanchez, Regional Chief of W.O.W., February 21, 1952, box 10, folder 18, "Incoming Correspondence, Telegrams, & Related Documents, 1952," LULAC Council 60 Papers; League of United Latin American Citizens, Minutes of the National Supreme Council Meeting, Galveston, Texas, June 23, 1976, box 8, folder 1, John J. Herrera Papers, HMRC, Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth251177/?q=minutes%20lulac%201976>. For Lupe Maciel, see League of United Latin American Citizens, "Quarterly Report, Council 402," Houston, Texas, October 1969, box 4, folder 4, "National LULAC – Correspondence, 1954-1997," David Adame Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin; Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 195, 261n50.

<sup>33</sup> James L. Novarro, "Latin American Activities," *Baptist Messenger*, September 1956.

His connections in both Anglo and Mexican American circles allowed him to act as an intermediary between Mexican Americans and the Anglo community. In June 1954, LULAC Council 60 selected Novarro as a “missionary of goodwill” to investigate an instance of racial discrimination against Mexican Americans in Houston. On a team that included Felix Tijerina, Gilbert Gómez, Mike Zepeda, and Joe G. Medellín, Novarro confronted the owner of a swimming pool on South Main who had “flatly refuse[d] to accept Mexicans in his pool.” Following the investigation, Novarro issued a statement condemning ongoing practices of racial discrimination. It was “illogical,” he said, for Americans to continue believing that some races are entitled to better treatment than others, especially since the United States had just played a decisive role in a war “aimed specifically at combating the German idea of racial superiority.” Moreover, he stated emphatically that Mexican Americans “are a race as any other” and certainly culturally and physically equal to anyone who claimed to be superior. The representatives of LULAC Council 60 successfully convinced the swimming pool operator to stop his discriminatory practices.<sup>34</sup>

### *Political Consciousness and Denominational Work*

Novarro’s denominational activities towards the end of the 1950s demonstrate that his association with LULAC and encounters with discrimination had shifted his agenda as a leader in the *Convención*. At the annual meeting of the *Convención* in June

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<sup>34</sup> “Sociales de Houston, Tex.: Discriminan a los Mexicanos de Aqui,” *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), June 6, 1954 (translated by the author); LULAC Minutes, May 20, May 27, July 15, 1954, LULAC Council 60 Papers, HMRC; Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 163.



1955, Navarro, the president of the Civic Rights Committee at the time, introduced a resolution on human rights and religious liberty. He recommended that “this convention go on record highly commending the decision of the Supreme Court in upholding the [principles] of human rights ... by guarantying equal education opportunity to all people through integration in the public schools.” A few weeks before, the Supreme Court affirmed its 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling and offered its opinion on the local implementation of school desegregation – that school districts must begin admitting students “on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed.”<sup>35</sup> According to Navarro, integration was a “basic” step in “the development and unification of all ethnic groups in our country,” something that would finally secure “true democracy.”<sup>36</sup>

The following month, Navarro penned an editorial in his weekly “Latin American Activities” column on the subject of racial prejudice. He argued that prejudice was the primary cause of conflict between people. It was “undoubtedly ... one of the greatest sins of the spirit, which blights the spirit, dwarfs the mind, and reduces to bestiality the body.” Navarro pled with his readers to “exterminate” every “vestige of prejudice toward our fellowman.”<sup>37</sup> And at the 1959 *Convención* meeting, as secretary of the *Comision de Accion Cristiana*, Navarro affirmed the African American struggle for equality as both “logical and natural.” He argued that guarantying the rights of African

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<sup>35</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

<sup>36</sup> James L. Navarro, “Civic Rights Committee Report,” June 22, 1955, box 9, folder 1.17, “Executive Board,” Hispanic Baptist Archives, Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, Texas.

<sup>37</sup> James L. Navarro, “Latin American Activities,” *Baptist Messenger* (Houston), July 1955.

Americans would promote “the general good of all ethnic, cultural groups” because “the strength of this nation lies in the unity of equal citizenship.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Political Avenues*

The increasingly critical tone of Novarro’s columns through the late 1950s seemed to fall on deaf ears. So Novarro began to look for other ways to make an impact. He pushed his congregation to become involved in politics, regularly urging them to register to vote so they their voices could be heard.<sup>39</sup> And in 1960, Novarro entered politics himself as a candidate for the school board of Houston Independent School District. He united with two other candidates to form a slate called the “Independent Moderates.” As leader of the group, Novarro announced that the Independent Moderates would transcend political factionalism by eschewing the labels “conservative” or “liberal” so they could focus on the business of educating students and supporting teachers. As a newcomer in a hotly contested election and a relatively unknown entity in citywide politics, Novarro had a poor showing on election day.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Novarro continued to run for positions on the school board several more times over the next two decades.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> James L. Novarro, “Informe De La Comisión De Acción Cristiana A La Honorable Convencion Bautista Mexicana De Texas,” *Actas de la Convencion Bautista Mexicana de Texas, 1960*, 42, box 8, Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC.

<sup>39</sup> Eva Laredo, telephone interview by author, May 22, 2015, Houston, Texas; Rev. Johnny Muzquiz, interview by author, June 25, 2015, Houston, Texas.

<sup>40</sup> “Independent Moderates Disavow Labels in School Board Race,” *Bellaire Texan*, October 26, 1960; Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 276-281.

<sup>41</sup> Elect Novarro Committee, “James L. Novarro Dedicates Himself to the Community,” *El Sol*, Friday, November 7, 1967; “Elections Set for Thursday,” *South Belt Leader*, October 28, 1981, Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph706992/m1/1>.

Although Novarro had served as the local chaplain for LULAC since the 1950s, he also became the statewide chaplain for PASO after the Harris County chapter formed in 1961.<sup>42</sup> As part of LULAC in the 1960s, Novarro also worked on various committees and helped establish LULAC's Houston Jobs for Progress Center. This program later developed into a joint operation with LULAC, the American GI Forum, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, called Operation SER-Jobs for Progress, Inc. Novarro chaired the job placement program in Houston for several years and used his access to the radio station KLVV to help connect potential employers to individuals looking for work.<sup>43</sup> Once the program developed into a national entity, Novarro transitioned to the evaluating committee but remained an integral part.<sup>44</sup>

And in 1965, Novarro cofounded and chaired the Anti-Poverty Council of Houston, an organization dedicated to the local implementation of War on Poverty programs and to building a unified voice for the Latino community. Novarro and other members of the council used the organization to pressure Houston Mayor Louie Welch to move forward on connecting Houston's minority communities, who tended to experience the effects of poverty more acutely, to federal relief programs.<sup>45</sup> However, the event that really put Novarro in the spotlight and contributed the most to his political

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<sup>42</sup> "Attendance at the February 25, 1966, Meeting with Representatives of the Spanish-American Community," PASO Meeting Minutes, box 1, folder 1, John Castillo Collection, MSS 208, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

<sup>43</sup> James L. Novarro to Mr. Roy Rathers, April 1, 1965, Jobs for Progress, box 33, folder 18, "LULAC Council 60 Jobs for Progress," LULAC Council 60 Papers; "Jobs for Progress, Inc.: Operation SER," Jobs for Progress, Inc. Operation SER (Brochure), box 7, folder 1, Alfred J. Hernandez Papers, MSS 159, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; "History of SER-Jobs for Progress," <[http://www.lulac.org/programs/economic/ser\\_jobs/index.html](http://www.lulac.org/programs/economic/ser_jobs/index.html)>. See also, Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 104.

<sup>44</sup> "SER Board of Directors Meet for Evaluation Report," captioned photo, *El Sol*, March 7, 1969.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley Phelps, *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics, Grassroots Activists, and the Struggle for Democracy in Houston, 1964-1976* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 24-25.

shift was his co-leadership of the 1966 Minimum Wage March, *La Marcha*. News of a melon picker strike in South Texas reached Houston in the summer of 1966, and Novarro and others representing PASO and LULAC headed down to show support.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Reverend and *La Marcha***

Houston Mexican Americans had known about the deplorable conditions facing farmworkers in Texas for some time, but the successes of César Chávez in 1965 and 1966 cast a brighter light on the struggle of farmworkers in the Southwest. In March 1966, Eugene Nelson, a National Farm Worker Association (NFWA) organizer, traveled to Houston to gather support for a boycott of a major California grower. While he was there, he met with local labor organizers who encouraged him to help them unionize farmworkers in South Texas. He traveled to Rio Grande City and helped organize a new local NFWA, which launched a strike on June 1, 1966, for an eight-hour workday, a minimum wage of \$1.25, and collective bargaining rights.<sup>47</sup>

As the strike continued over the following weeks, growers hired strikebreakers from across the border and alerted the Texas Rangers who harassed and abused the strikers and picketers. By the end of June, negotiations between strikers and growers had clearly stalled, so labor and civil rights leaders decided to organize a march to San Juan

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<sup>46</sup> Oral History Interview with John Castillo, June 26, 1996, by José Angel Gutiérrez. CMAS No. 50, Tejano Voices Project, University of Texas-Arlington, [http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS\\_050.xml](http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_050.xml); Novarro interview.

<sup>47</sup> Marilyn D. Rhinehart and Thomas H. Kreneck, "The Minimum Wage March of 1966: A Case Study in Mexican-American Politics, Labor, and Identity," *The Houston Review* 11 (1989): 29-30; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 398.

and then Austin to confront state leaders and raise support from Texans along the way. Back in Houston on the day before the march was supposed to begin, Catholic priest Antonio Gonzalez and a newspaper photographer met with Novarro at Kashmere Baptist Church following his Sunday evening service, and together, the three of them decided to drive through the night down to Rio Grande City to march with the farmworkers in a show of support.<sup>48</sup> They arrived early the next morning, just in time to join the marchers at the end of the line. Novarro and Gonzalez planned to stay with the group for a full day's march from Rio Grande City to Mission and then return home. However, shortly before the procession reached its first stop in Mission, Texas, Nelson found the two clergymen and turned the leadership of the march over to them. He asked Novarro to move to the front of the group and lead them into the city. That night, Nelson convinced Novarro and Gonzalez to stay on at least until they reached San Juan.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Confrontation with the Governor*

Their ultimate goal from there was to march into Austin on Labor Day to pressure Texas Governor John Connally and state lawmakers to call a special session and pass a minimum wage bill that would include agricultural workers. Connally informed the marchers that he would not meet with them when they arrived. Instead, in

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<sup>48</sup> James Novarro, "NiKito NiPongo," *El Sol*, July 4, 1968.

<sup>49</sup> Novarro Interview; Weston Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," Christian Life Commission (Minutes), File #1782, T. B. Maston Papers, Archives and Special Collections, A. Webb Roberts Library, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas; "Minutes, Christian Life Commission, July 25-26, 1966," File #1782, Christian Life Commission (Minutes), T. B. Maston Papers; "Valley Marchers Near Austin," *San Antonio Express News*, September 4 1966; Sherrill Smith, *Oral Memoirs of Sherrill J. Smith*, 1972, Religion and Culture Project, Baylor Institute for Oral History, Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX; Marilyn D. Rhinehart and Thomas H. Kreneck, "The Minimum Wage March of 1966: A Case Study in Mexican-American Politics, Labor, and Identity," *The Houston Review* 11 (1989): 27-44.

an effort to blunt the momentum of the marchers, Connally, Texas House Speaker Ben Barnes, and Texas Attorney General Waggoner Carr headed them off in New Braunfels several days before they reached the capitol. According to Barnes, “We did that to show them that a march is not the correct way to get things done.”<sup>50</sup> Connally made sure tell Novarro, Gonzales, and Nelson that he commended the marchers for their peace and order and for their motivations for marching. However, he would “not lend the dignity of [his] office” to a demonstration simply to “dramatize” something like this. Although the move was intended to “take the wind out of their sails,” it seemed to put new life into the movement.<sup>51</sup>

A San Antonio priest who was there at the confrontation, Sherrill Smith, described it as “a slap on the hand, a Great White Father-type of thing” that “really stirred up the Mexican Americans.”<sup>52</sup> Or in the words of Novarro, “The politicians came, they saw, they spoke, but they have not conquered or squelched the courage of the Valley farm workers.”<sup>53</sup> *La Marcha* ended in Austin on Labor Day, and thousands were there to join the farmworkers at a rally. A massive crowd listened to speeches from politicians, labor organizers, and the co-chairmen of the march. A second rally later that day in Zilker Park featured César Chávez as well.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ben Barnes, quoted in Greg Olds, “Labor Day in Austin: A Bad Day for the Establishment,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966.

<sup>51</sup> “The Confrontation,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966; Olds, “Labor Day in Austin,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966.

<sup>52</sup> “The Confrontation,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966; Olds, “Labor Day in Austin,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966.

<sup>53</sup> Olds, “Labor Day in Austin,” *Texas Observer*, September 9, 1966.

<sup>54</sup> Alan J. Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches: The Movement in Texas and California* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 143-144.

### *The Lone Baptist*

Unfortunately for Novarro, he was on his own as a Baptist throughout the march. With a few exceptions, Catholic churches along the way had been relatively supportive of the march and its goals, but Protestant support was hard to find, beyond money and assistance from the Texas Council of Churches. Protestant churches had a tendency to shy away from controversial issues, particularly because they needed the support of local congregants to stay afloat. But as historian Felipe Hinojosa has pointed out, they still had a record of ministries among migrant farmers for a several decades. This means that some Protestants, particularly among Mexican American Methodists, were key allies in the farmworker movement.<sup>55</sup> Reports of Texas Ranger violence against the strikers had reached religious circles in June. So the Rev. Leo Nieto, a Mexican American Methodist minister and representative the of the Texas Council of Churches (TCC), reached out to similar organizations, such as the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, to organize an ecumenical fact-finding mission in Starr County composed of the TCC, the Bishop's Committee for Work with the Spanish-Speaking, the American Jewish Committee, and the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.<sup>56</sup> The Baptists declined the invitation.

Although Baptists declined to work with the TCC, they sent their own representatives to investigate. Weston Ware, a young Anglo man who had grown up in South Texas, traveled to Rio Grande City and connected with local pastors to get a sense of what was happening. From his observations, Ware wrote a report and presented his

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<sup>55</sup> Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 125; Watt, *Farm Workers and the Churches*, 39-44; Barton, “*¡Ya Basta!*,” 128-131.

<sup>56</sup> Weston Ware, “Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike,” Christian Life Commission (Minutes), T. B. Maston Papers.

findings at the next Christian Life Commission meeting in July.<sup>57</sup> Ware's report began with a reference to California. Several months before Eugene Nelson arrived in Starr County, Texas, he had been working with César Chávez and the NFWA to organize the Delano grape boycott. At one point, Chávez remarked that the farmworker movement in California would not have been successful without the help of the churches. In South Texas, churches and other organizations had been keeping the strike alive with supplies of food, clothing, and other supplies. This, according to Ware, "places churches, Baptist or otherwise, in the strategic and uncomfortable position of holding keys to doors it is not sure it wants to open."<sup>58</sup>

In the end, Baptists opted to avoid getting involved in the march or in Texas Council of Churches activities, citing their refusal to participate in ecumenicalism of any kind and because Baptists were represented in both sides of the labor conflict. Although the majority of the farmworkers involved in the strike were Catholic, a "considerable number" of both strikers and farm owners were Baptist. Most problematic for the CLC was that Anglo Baptists' "economic views make it difficult for them and for the Baptist churches of the Valley to look positively" at the strikers' concerns. In particular, the CLC felt that it had little chance of convincing Anglo Baptists that their Christian responsibilities included providing their workers with a living wage and decent care.<sup>59</sup> In the end, Anglo Baptists missed an opportunity to turn their key in favor of justice.

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<sup>57</sup> Weston Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," Christian Life Commission (Minutes), T. B. Maston Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Weston Ware, "What About the Strike?" *Baptist Standard*, September 14, 1966; Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," T. B. Maston Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Ramiro Casso to Jimmy Allen, July 26, 1966, "Ramiro Casso," Correspondence 1966-70, BGCT-Christian Life Commission Papers (cited hereafter as CLC Papers), Texas Baptist Historical



### *A Baptist with a Crucifix*

With no help from Baptist headquarters, Navarro petitioned his fellow Baptist ministers along the way for help, but they promised only to pray. They told him that although he had a right to act according to his conscience, they disagreed with his actions and with the purpose of the march.<sup>60</sup> The strongest pushback from Baptist circles came from Navarro's peers in local Mexican Baptist churches and in the *Convención* following his continued collaboration with a Catholic priest. Not long after Navarro and Gonzalez took over the march, Gonzalez's diocese ordered him to drop out until it could reach a decision about what his presence would mean for the Catholic Church's support of a labor movement. In the priest's absence, Navarro agreed to hold the crucifix along with his own Bible and American, Texas, and Christian flags. As the marchers arrived at Corpus Christi at the beginning of August, newspaper and television reporters captured Navarro—crucifix in hand—leading the way. The local paper even published a picture of Navarro leading a prayer from the steps of the local Catholic cathedral holding a crucifix aloft.<sup>61</sup>

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Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, TX; Rudy Sanchez to Jimmy Allen, August 2, 1966, "Rudy Sanchez," Correspondence 1966-70, CLC Papers; Jimmy Allen to Rudy Sanchez, August 22, 1966, "Rudy Sanchez," Correspondence 1966-70, CLC Papers; Jimmy Allen to Rev. Leo Nieto of the Texas Council of Churches, July 29, 1966, "Miscellaneous 'N'," Correspondence 1966-70, CLC Papers; Weston Ware, "What About the Strike?" *Baptist Standard*, September 14, 1966; Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," T. B. Maston Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Navarro interview.

<sup>61</sup> News cameras also captured Navarro holding the crucifix for the absent Gonzalez when they arrived in McAllen a few days before. Gonzalez rejoined the marchers between Edinburg and San Juan, but he had to leave again after he received word that his father had been in an accident. Navarro interview; Spencer Pearson, "Bonilla and Backer of Gonzalez Join March," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, August 2, 1966, 13.

Novarro's apparent embrace of the Catholic Church on such a public stage angered and alienated both Anglo and Mexican American Baptists.<sup>62</sup> Local Baptist churches and associations in South Texas voted to disassociate themselves from Novarro's embrace of ecumenicalism and unity with the Catholic Church along with his leadership of a march that was beginning to take on civil rights movement qualities. The local Baptist association in Mission, Texas, voted on a statement, claiming "the Rev. James Navarro [sic] is not acting in any official capacity for ... any of the local Baptist churches in this area. His actions are on an individual citizen's basis."<sup>63</sup> Leaders in the *Convención*, such as Rev. Rudy Sanchez, also communicated their frustrations with Novarro's role in the march in their correspondence to BGCT executives.<sup>64</sup> For their part, Mexican American Baptists reacted so strongly against Novarro's ecumenical display because of long-simmering animosities between Catholic and Protestant Mexican Americans. As historian Paul Barton has argued, Mexican American Protestants mostly distanced themselves from the farmworker movement, which they perceived as a Catholic event because of the preponderance of Catholic symbols used in the marches and demonstrations. They did so because "Anti-Catholic sentiment

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<sup>62</sup> Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," T. B. Maston Papers; Rudy Sanchez to Jimmy Allen, August 2, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," Correspondence 1966-70, CLC Papers; Jimmy Allen to Rudy Sanchez, August 22, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," CLC Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Ramiro Casso to Jimmy Allen, July 26, 1966, box 34, file: "Ramiro Casso," BGCT-Christian Life Commission Papers (cited hereafter as CLC Papers), Texas Baptist Historical Collection, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Waco, TX; Sanchez to Allen, August 2, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," CLC Papers; Allen to Sanchez, August 22, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," CLC Papers; Jimmy Allen to Rev. Leo Nieto of the Texas Council of Churches, July 29, 1966, box 34, file: "Miscellaneous 'N'," CLC Papers; Ware, "Report on Rio Grande Melon Pickers Strike," T. B. Maston Papers; "Church Group Says Minister Acts Alone," *Valley Morning Star*, July 13, 1966.

<sup>64</sup> Sanchez to Allen, August 2, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," CLC Papers; Allen to Sanchez, August 22, 1966, box 34, file: "Rudy Sanchez," CLC Papers.

remained strong enough” to keep them from supporting something that seemed to have the backing of the Catholic Church.<sup>65</sup>

### *Parting Ways*

Things only got worse for Novarro when he got home from the march. When Novarro returned to Houston, Union Association leaders called a meeting to discuss his future with the association. They asked him to agree to several conditions, or they would force him out of the association: he must never march again, resign as chaplain of LULAC and PASO, stop running for elected positions, and cease participating in any other political organizations in the future. Since, as Novarro put it, they were asking “me to go against the very thing that I [was] supposed to do in serving my people,” he refused to accept their conditions. In addition to the pressure Novarro received from Anglo leaders in Union Association, he also faced resistance from Mexican American Baptist pastors in the Houston area. They were concerned that Novarro’s attention to politics had led him to disregard his duties as a pastor. Therefore, Union Association voted to cut off ties to him and remove his churches from fellowship, which contributed to the loss of his congregations. So in spite of his long history as a leader in his churches and association, the publicity he garnered cost him his church and his standing with Union Association.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Barton, “*¡Ya Basta!*,” 135. For a discussion of how those tensions still affect Latino Protestants and Catholics, see Mark T. Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerardo Martí, *Latino Protestants in America: Growing and Diverse* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 135-136.

<sup>66</sup> Novarro interview; Elect Novarro Committee, “James L. Novarro Dedicates Himself to the Community,” *El Sol*, Friday, November 7, 1967. The story of Novarro’s ouster from Union Association comes primarily from Novarro’s interview with Kreneck (housed at the HMRC). Still, the specific details

This was a brick wall for Novarro. He had served his denomination for decades, built several churches, and worked toward inclusion, but he faced constant rejection. This was the moment Novarro began to look for avenues of change beyond the boundaries of the church and denomination. Although Novarro eventually pastored another church and remained active among Mexican American Baptist ministries, he no longer participated in denominational activities with Anglo Baptists. The evidence from the rest of his life shows that he turned his prodigious skills as a leader toward political and community engagement. Unlike the Rev. William Lawson, Novarro found organized or institutional religion to be a barrier in his efforts to fight for the spiritual and material wellbeing his community.

### **Beyond Church Walls in Houston and Beyond**

After his fallout with the local Baptist association, Novarro redirected the greater part of his time and resources to political activism. Novarro's activism after the summer

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of how he lost his church remain unclear. Any records of the meeting or the outcome of Novarro's formal relationship with Union Association no longer exist (if they ever did). In 2001, Tropical Storm Allison dumped nearly three feet of rain in some parts of Houston over a five-day period. One of the many casualties of that storm was the former headquarters of Union Association and most of the records that UBA had before 2001. When I spoke with other Mexican American Baptists who knew Novarro in the 1960s, they could not confirm much of the details from the interview. However, their impression was that other Mexican American Baptist pastors in the area, such as Rev. Esteban Flores and Rev. Benito Villarreal, had grown tired of Novarro's politicking and wanted him to stop. Therefore, it is possible that some of his members felt the same way and called for his removal. In Baptist church polity, a local church congregation would have the ultimate say in the fate of its pastor. However, since Novarro was the pastor of churches supported by BGCT and SBC funds, it is also possible that an entity other than the churches themselves had the authority to make personnel changes at local churches like Novarro's. Muzquiz interview; Laredo interview; Manuel Urbina II, interview by author, February 28, 2015, Houston, Texas; Josh Ellis of Union Baptist Association email to David Cameron, April 29, 2015, in possession of the author.

of 1966 involved commemorative reenactments of *La Marcha* as a way to continue to press political leaders in Texas to hear and care about the concerns of Mexican Americans. Novarro also used the moments as opportunities to remain involved in the Chicano Movement in Texas. Some of these events also highlight how Novarro initially struggled to adjust to an agenda that was more radical than he was prepared for. During the first reenactment in 1967, he shouted down hecklers and chants of “Brown Power” and called Reies López Tijerina’s brand of leadership hateful “demagoguery,” arguing, “We have no room for a Latin Stokely Carmichael.”<sup>67</sup> He told them to return home and “get every eligible voter signed up to vote in 1968,” so they could correct the injustices Mexican Americans faced “within the existing framework.” Novarro preferred working with the system as model American citizens – a strategy at odds with the experiences and antiestablishment approach of the Chicano Generation.<sup>68</sup>

At the 1970 commemoration, he dedicated a historical marker at the site of the marchers’ confrontation with Connally, and he even attempted to alter the direction of Mexican American political loyalties. A few weeks before the event, Novarro announced that he would make a proclamation “of vast political consequences.” At the reenactment on September 7, Novarro referred to himself as a “grandfather of La Raza Unida” and declared that Mexican Americans would “no longer follow a political pied piper.” Speaking on behalf of Texas’ nearly two-and-a-half million Mexican Americans, he

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<sup>67</sup> Jon Ford, “Wage ‘Sellout’ Charged: Turnout in Austin Only 250,” *San Antonio Express*, Tuesday, September 5, 1967, 1, 16; “Tijerina Is Blasted at Texas Meeting,” *Albuquerque Journal*, Tuesday, September 5, 1967, 32.

<sup>68</sup> “Farm Workers Told No Need for Radicals,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 5, 1967; Ford, “Wage ‘Sellout,’” *San Antonio Express*, September 5, 1967; Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 299-300.

declared political freedom from both the Democratic and Republican parties.<sup>69</sup> Novarro believed that to keep state and national leaders attentive to Mexican American needs, they must remain independent and select their candidates based on a platform that would be most beneficial.<sup>70</sup>

Novarro also continued to work with LULAC's Jobs for Progress, connecting primarily Mexican Americans with job training and placement, and he remained the owner and director of *La Hora Bautista*. Yet, among his most significant moves was when he purchased the bilingual community newspaper, *El Sol*, which featured regular news coverage relevant to Mexican Americans in Houston. Novarro infused many stories and features in *El Sol* with his religious perspective, and his editorials regularly advocated for interracial and religious cooperation in fighting against social and political inequality.<sup>71</sup> Novarro also used the paper to promote himself and other Mexican Americans for political office, hoping to build a coalition of leaders dedicated fighting inequality.<sup>72</sup>

### *“Three Years Too Late”*

An *El Sol* editorial in 1969 summed up Novarro's change of course from traditional Southern Baptist concerns to community social ones. In January, the president

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<sup>69</sup> “Meeting Planned at New Braunfels to Note March,” *The Bonham Daily Favorite*, August 26, 1970; “Chicanos Hold Rally, Re-Crete 1966 Scene,” *Corsicana Daily Sun*, September 8, 1970; John Ford, “Mexican-Americans Eye ‘New Horizons,’” *San Antonio Express*, August 26, 1970, 1, 16. James McCrory, “The Winners Skipped Rally,” *San Antonio Express*, September 13, 1970, 5-H.

<sup>70</sup> “Novarro Backs Bush: Valley Farm March Leader Asks Raza Vote,” *San Antonio Express*, October 31, 1970.

<sup>71</sup> Jennifer Liebrum, “Burial Set Today for Hispanic Activist James Novarro,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 23, 1993.

<sup>72</sup> Elect Novarro Committee, “James L. Novarro Dedicates Himself to the Community,” *El Sol*, Friday, November 7, 1967.

of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. A. Criswell, told attendees of a Texas Baptist evangelism conference that it was time for Southern Baptists to be more involved in social issues. He said, “Let’s face it. Southern Baptists just haven’t been in the mainstream on social issues when we should have,” and the civil rights movements of the previous decade and a half had opened their eyes.<sup>73</sup>

Criswell announced a yearlong crusade of the Western Hemisphere replete with “preachers, agricultural experts, doctors,” and technological developers to meet both the spiritual and physical needs the people they encountered. In response to this unprecedented awareness of needs beyond the soul, Novarro expressed his lukewarm approval in an editorial titled, “Better Late Than Never.” He praised Criswell’s “180 degree turn” and the SBC’s “new awakening” to the needs of humankind. Yet, he wondered if institutionalized religion had missed its moment. Novarro believed that Christianity composed purely of the “Gospel of Christ is the most dynamic and revolutionary force” with the power to redeem the downtrodden of the world, but what the SBC had produced was a mere cultural tradition garbed with the ills of society and “devoid of the spiritual essence it should have.” Instead, with their “sanctimonious air of self-righteousness,” Southern Baptists had rejected and ignored the struggles of marginalized people, and had done so boldly since 1954. For Novarro, it was no mystery why folks sought the “solution to their problems outside of our churches.” And while Criswell’s proclamation marked a moment of both hope and expectancy, his words were

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<sup>73</sup> James L. Novarro, “Baptists to Join Social Reform Battle, Criswell Says,” *El Sol*, January 17, 1969.

still “three years late for a fellow Baptist ... who experienced the vicious pressures at the local and state level of this religious structure.”<sup>74</sup>

As Novarro became more involved with struggles and the politics of his own community, particularly through LULAC activities, and as his hopes in Anglo Baptist partnership fell apart, he transformed from a pastor focused primarily on denominational activities to a politically active religious leader. At the city level in Houston, his politicization appears exceptional among Mexican American Baptists. In the 1960s and 1970s, Novarro was virtually the only Mexican American Baptist from Houston whose social activism took him onto such a public political stage. While his Houston peers seemed averse to his politics and activism, and *Convención* leaders withheld their support of his involvement in the 1966 Minimum Wage March, the experiences of other Mexican American Baptists beyond Houston in the late 1960s and the 1970s help place Novarro in a wider context.

### *Beyond Novarro*

Novarro’s comment that the Southern Baptist Convention’s new attention to social issues was three years late was certainly true, but in some ways, Novarro’s efforts to push his denomination in a more progressive direction might have come three years too early. By 1969, Mexican Americans had begun to demand that the church (Catholic and Protestant) respond to the needs of its people and pay attention to the concerns expressed in the Chicano Movement. In October 1969, the Reverend Patricio Flores and

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<sup>74</sup> Novarro, “Baptists to Join Social Reform”; James L. Novarro, “Better Late Than Never,” *El Sol*, January 24, 1969.



around fifty other Chicano priests formed an organization called *Padres Asociados para Derechos Religiosos, Educativos, y Sociales* (PADRES) to pressure the Catholic Church to respond to Mexican American concerns and become involved in the movement. Similarly, as historians Felipe Hinojosa and Paul Barton have shown, the Black and Brown Power movements that blossomed at the end of the 1960s allowed many within Protestant denominations to express their faith and cultural identity in a way that prioritized social justice. This opened the door for Mexican American Mennonites and Methodists to hold their churches accountable for the ongoing marginalization of people of color within the church. At the same time, however, demands on the church were also coming from outside of it. Hinojosa's "Sacred Spaces" highlights the "religious awakening" that took place from mid-1969 until mid-1970 as Latino activists took over Catholic and Protestant churches in places like Chicago, New York, and Houston. They demanded access to the church so they could use it to attend to the physical needs of the community, highlighting the failure of the church in its responsibility to the people.<sup>75</sup>

*Rev. Rudy Sánchez*

Outside of Houston, other Mexican American Baptists from areas such as Dallas, Austin, Abilene, and Brownwood were influenced by the politics of their communities and by the Chicano Movement as well and experienced a shift in their political consciousness similar to Navarro's but not until the late 1960s and 1970s. For example,

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<sup>75</sup> Treviño, *The Church the Barrio*, 182-183; Martínez, *PADRES*, 11-12; Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*; Barton, "*¡Ya Basta!*," 139; Felipe Hinojosa, "Sacred Spaces: Race, Resistance, and the Politics of Chicana/o and Latina/o Religious History," in *A Promising Problem: The New Chicana/o History*, ed. Carlos Blanton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 111-134.

Dallas pastor Rev. Rudy Sánchez had been one of the more outspoken critics of Novarro's participation in the Minimum Wage March, but he reoriented his identity and the direction of his activism and emerged on a public stage in 1969. Shortly before the 1966 march had ended, Sánchez sent a copy of an invitation to the Corpus Christi Workshop on Human Rights along with a critical note to Jimmy Allen, the director of the Texas Christian Life Commission. In the note, Sánchez expressed reservations about the ecumenical nature of the program and the activities of some Baptists, such as Novarro, who were involved in public protests.<sup>76</sup> However, his years as the pastor of *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Dallas* taught him to see the community surrounding his church as his parish rather than simply working as a leader of his congregation alone.<sup>77</sup> And the politics and struggle of the community around his church caused him to take on a more public role in leading a fight against inequality, even embracing such tactics as ecumenicalism and political activism.

In 1969, Sánchez began working with Dallas officials to help address racial inequalities in the city's public schools system. His fight for equality for Mexican American students and faculty brought him into the world of interfaith and interethnic collaboration, where he built a reputation for himself and his church as an advocate for the Mexican American community in West Dallas. His track record for activism and history of leadership moved Sánchez into the role of community leader and

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<sup>76</sup> Rudy Sanchez to Jimmy Allen, August 2, 1966, "Rudy Sanchez," Correspondence 1966-70, CLC Papers.

<sup>77</sup> Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, "Bautistas, USA: Rudy Sanchez" *La Luz*, May 1975, 24; Albert Reyes, "Celebrating the Life of Dr. Rudy Sánchez: Pastor, Father, and Denominational Leader," *BucknerPrez* (blog), February 8, 2009, <http://bucknerprez.com/2009/02/celebrating-the-life-of-dr-rudy-sanchez-pastor-father-and-denominational-leader>.

spokesperson, a role he embraced following the murder of a young Mexican American boy at the hands of Dallas police officers in the neighborhood around *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana*.<sup>78</sup>

Early Tuesday morning on July 24, 1973, two Mexican American boys, thirteen-year-old David Rodriguez and his brother, twelve-year-old Santos Rodriguez, woke up to find Dallas police officers Roy Arnold and Darrell Cain in their bedroom. The officers were investigating reports that three young men had burglarized a vending machine at a nearby service station and stolen eight dollars. Since the Rodriguez brothers had both been in trouble with the law before, Arnold suspected that they had something to do with it. Although no evidence ever linked the boys to the service station in question, the officers handcuffed them, placed them in the police car, and drove them to the gas station for questioning. Officer Cain pulled out his revolver, opened the cylinder in his lap to empty the bullets, and then spun it before placing the barrel to the back of Santos's head to force him to talk. When the gesture failed to produce the answers he wanted, Cain pulled the trigger to intimidate the boy, but the chamber wasn't empty. The gun discharged, killing Santos instantly. Although Cain later testified that Santos's death was an accident, nothing could justify Cain's use of "Russian Roulette" as an interrogation method or his brutal treatment of Santos and his brother.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Tom Johnson, "Relations Group Hears Grievances," *Dallas Morning News*, July 2, 1969; "15 Appointed to Task Force," *Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 1969; Henry Tatum, "North Dallas Principal Expels Three Students," *Dallas Morning News*, March 20, 1970; "Observances Set at Mexican Baptist Church," *Dallas Morning News*, April 18, 1971; Marilyn Schwartz, "Mexican Americans Call School Meeting Today," *Dallas Morning News*, June 27, 1971.

<sup>79</sup> Robert O'Brien and Orville Scott, "Mexican-American Pastor Defuses Explosive Scene," *Baptist Press*, August 10, 1973; Robert Finkela, "Officer Suspended, Charged," *Dallas Morning News*, July 25, 1973; Robert Finkela, "Fingerprints Don't Match, Investigation Fails to Link Slain Youth to

Shortly after news of the incident began to spread, Mexican American community leaders contacted Sánchez to ask for his help. Two days after Santos's murder, Sánchez and others organized a memorial service at the church the boys attended, *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Dallas*. During the service, Sánchez told the crowd of several hundred people that Santos and his brother David frequently attended the afternoon programs available at the Baptist church and that they had become Christians only a few months before Santos's death. Sánchez's message to the crowd was that he hoped "our community ... may come away from a great tragedy with a great victory." He hoped this moment would lead to racial equality for Mexican Americans in Dallas.<sup>80</sup> Following the funeral, Sánchez became the leader of an ad-hoc interracial committee that pressured the police department and city officials to respond to his community's demands.<sup>81</sup>

The next year, Sanchez and his family moved to Corpus Christi where he filled the pulpit at the country's largest Mexican American Baptist church, *Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Corpus Christi*. Although the demographics of Corpus Christi differed from Dallas, opportunities for Sanchez to be what he called "a catalyst, an enabler for my people" were just as plentiful. He defined his approach to ministry in Corpus Christi as a blend of evangelism and social ministry, a combination that he described as complementary: "They're not that different. A soul can't be won without it

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Burglary," *Dallas Morning News*, July 26, 1973; George Proctor, "Rodriguez Testifies Cain Used Gun for Pressure," *Dallas Morning News*, November 14, 1973; George Proctor, "Though Pistol Was Unloaded, Cain Tells Jury," *Dallas Morning News*, November 15, 1973.

<sup>80</sup> Jim Lewis, "Mexican-Americans Mourn Santos," *Dallas Morning News*, July 27, 1973.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph Abell, "Mexican-Americans Ask Probe of Policies," *Dallas Morning News*, July 27, 1973; Doug Domeier, "Ethnic Group to Address City Council," *Dallas Morning News*, July 30, 1973.

affecting society. I could never leave my social consciousness out of my service for God.”<sup>82</sup> Sánchez’s social consciousness had evolved through the mid-1970s as the politics of his congregation and his community influenced his approach to pastoral leadership and religious social engagement.

### *La Alianza de Bautistas Chicanos*

In 1974, Mexican American Baptist students in Texas formed *La Alianza de Bautistas Chicanos (La Alianza)* to directly address the struggles of their “Chicano brothers and sisters” as well as the struggles shared by all who suffered social injustices. Their platform aimed to establish a deep awareness of the social currents in the seventies, cultivate a renewed interest within Mexican American Baptist churches of their Mexican cultural heritage, address the unequal economic situation of Mexican American pastors, and reach across denominational divides and encourage church members to be more involved politically. *La Alianza* also wanted to increase Mexican American representation among Texas and Southern Baptist convention leaders and Baptist college and university faculty and to develop college programs that addressed Mexican American culture.<sup>83</sup>

One of their most visible initiatives was organizing retreats and seminars for Mexican American Baptist college students at Howard Payne College in Brownwood and Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene. Both of these schools were funded by the

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<sup>82</sup> Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, “Bautistas, USA: Rudy Sanchez” *La Luz*, May 1975, 24.

<sup>83</sup> Raul Garcia, “Chicano Baptist Alliance,” *El Bautista Chicano*, February 1975, box 19, folder “El Bautista Chicano,” Hispanic Baptist Archives, TBHC.

BGCT and attracted many Mexican American college hopefuls. *La Alianza* intended for their events to highlight their commitment to “Jesus Christ not only in word but in action directed at the spiritual, social, economical, and political advancement” of Chicanos. At the 1974 gathering, they hosted a screening and discussion of *Yo Soy Joaquin*, a 1969 El Teatro Campesino film based on a poem by Rodolfo Corky Gonzales. They also hosted panels led by *Convención* members that touched on Chicano history and culture, community involvement, and denominational activism.<sup>84</sup> Both the students’ and *Convención* leaders’ involvement in *La Alianza* demonstrate that by the mid-1970s, political identities of some Mexican American Baptists had shifted considerably.<sup>85</sup> The examples of Sánchez and the students and their shifting political consciousness helps us situate Navarro within a longer trend toward holding the church accountable for the social concerns of Mexican Americans that unfolded in the years after Navarro’s fallout with denominational leaders.

## Conclusion

Navarro’s transition from a religious leader to a politically active religious leader highlights some of the ways that the civil rights movement influenced a Mexican

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<sup>84</sup> “Baptist Chicanos to Meet,” *H-SU Brand* (Hardin Simmons University, Abilene, Texas), March 8, 1974; “Chicano Seminars Begin Today,” *The Yellow Jacket* (Howard Payne College, Brownwood, TX), March 8, 1974.

<sup>85</sup> A campus-based group at Howard Payne formed in 1972 calling itself the “Concerned Christian Chicanos.” However, after a student senate discussion, the group agreed to change its name to the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) “so not to alienate” other students. A chapter of UMAS also formed at Hardin-Simmons in 1970. The HSU group resembled more of a social club until 1975 when it decided to focus more on cultural awareness and community concerns. “Senate,” *The Yellow Jacket*, September 22, 1972; “UMAS Fete Sets Attendance Mark,” *H-SU Brand*, November 14, 1975.

American Baptist pastor from Houston, Texas. As the movement swelled, it elevated social concerns for Novarro and moved his religious activism beyond church walls and religious circles. Although he initially struggled to find a place within the Chicano Movement, his continued engagement in politics and civil rights activism led him to embrace an agenda that was far more radical than his Baptist peers were willing to accept.<sup>86</sup> Yet in the years that followed, other Mexican American Baptists exhibited a similar shift toward identity politics and social consciousness. The intersections of race and religion in Mexican American civil rights history reveals that being in the Chicano Movement changed what it meant to be Baptist, and Novarro's life was emblematic of the larger trend for religious leaders who participated in the movement.

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<sup>86</sup> Novarro interview.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation followed the intersections of race and religion in Houston from the early 1900s until the 1970s. “Race and Religion in the Bayou City: Latino/a, African American, and Anglo Baptists in Houston’s Long Civil Rights Movement” offered a relational and comparative study of those intersections by examining Houston-area Baptists’ engagement with the struggle for civil rights through religious associations, churches, and leaders. The history of their interactions reveals how black and brown Baptists have resisted and challenged racial inequality in the twentieth century, at times with the help of progressive white Baptists. It also reveals how those in power have used religion to reinforce inequality and racial hierarchy. From the 1910s through the 1970s, religion played a central role in Baptist efforts to both uphold and challenge the color line in Houston. I argue that as influential white Baptist leaders attempted to bolster white privilege and power, Mexican American and African American Baptists used the social space created by the movement and their churches as the political forums and sources of mobilization.

#### **Content Summary**

From the 1910s through the 1940s, white Baptist churches in Union Baptist Association, led by their pastors, attempted to maintain inequality by sanctifying racist



discourse and practice both in and out of churches. As part of the city's moral authority, the Houston Baptist Pastors Conference and other influential white Baptist ministers affirmed segregation and white supremacy with the doctrine of segregation. White Baptist leaders assumed the position of moral authority at the city level and provided the moral legitimacy to the Ku Klux Klan by joining the organization, supporting its platform, and employing "law and order" politics. Even after the Klan's influence in city and state politics diminished at the end of the 1920s, white Protestant churches and leaders continued to uphold its precepts through paternalistic and racist religious doctrine, which dictated their ministry relationships with African American Baptists. The limited programs they established to minister to people of color exuded these sentiments and provided legitimacy to the Jim Crow system that permeated cities like Houston.

African American Baptists attempted to resist the racism and discrimination they experienced on a daily basis. They sought autonomy in religious, social, and political organizations of their own making such as churches and a black ministerial fellowship, the "Colored Baptist Ministers Association," whose leaders worked in tandem with groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to attack political disfranchisement. The members of the Baptist Ministers Association rejected the ideology of white protestant superiority and mitigated the influences of racism for black communities by advocating on their behalf. Beginning in the 1910s, black Baptist leaders associated with the Baptist Ministers Association used their churches and their association to support political organizations as a way to actively

oppose racial violence, political disfranchisement, and the everyday forms of structural inequality they experienced. In the 1930s and 1940s, under the leadership of the Rev. L. H. Simpson, the black ministerial fellowship became the foundation from which they challenged inequality.

The doctrine of segregation, built along a white-over-black color line, was pervasive in the South. Yet as W. E. B. Du Bois noted in 1934, there was a “triple color line” in Houston.<sup>1</sup> As the Mexican American population increased through the first few decades of the 1900s, noticeable Mexican American communities began to take shape. The history of Anglo and Mexican American Baptists demonstrates how white Baptists adapted the anti-black scripts they had developed to marginalize African Americans to fit their experiences with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Anglo Baptists projected their sense of white supremacy and a belief in Anglo cultural superiority through denominational leaders in the Baptist General Convention of Texas, through missionary relationships, and through local Americanization programs at places like the Mexican Baptist Good Will Center.

Despite Anglo Baptists’ attempts to control Mexican American Baptists, Mexican American Baptists organized and maintained their own religious institutions, churches, and associations. Early on in the 1930s, individuals like Felix and Herminia Quiñones found shelter from institutional racism in those churches. For example, they found community in church activities, in “the Lord’s work,” and even used their

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Journey to Texas and New Orleans,” ca. April 1934, typed draft of article published in *The Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, MS 312, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b211-i120> (accessed July 12, 2016).

churches to run Mexican American-led kindergartens. After the late 1930s, Mexican American Baptists, such as Rev. James Novarro, became more successful and influential, and they began to push for inclusion within the Anglo-led BGCT and their local Union Association.

When the momentum of the civil rights movement reached Houston in the 1950s and 1960s, white, black, and brown Baptists responded differently to the movement. Among white Baptists, some began to take modest steps forward in their relationships with both African American and Mexican American Baptist communities in Houston. Union Baptist Association ended its decades-old missions program for Mexican Americans and replaced it with a committee that put more money, resources, and personnel directly under the leadership of Mexican American Baptists. This shift reflected a statewide move toward the unification of the Mexican American Baptist and Anglo Baptist conventions and a general trend among the Mexican American Generation to pursue integration and inclusion within the existing system.

Union Association also established and funded a Baptist Student Union at the newly renamed Texas Southern University, and they hired a young black minister named Rev. William “Bill” Lawson to direct the BSU and teach courses on the Bible at TSU. Even those modest steps forward had notable limitations. Despite the increased funding for Mexican American ministries, white Baptist perceptions of Mexican Americans continued to reflect the paternalism of past decades, and even as they expanded churches citywide, their visions of growth failed to consider multi-ethnic or multi-racial communities. Similarly, while the establishment of a BSU at a black university signaled

the first integrated white Baptist denominational department in Texas, Lawson and his students continued to encounter racism and exclusion from their Baptist peers.

When the momentum of the movement carried the fight literally to doorsteps of white churches, some congregations removed racial barriers from membership requirements. However the more prevalent trend among white Baptists was to deliberately resist changes to the status quo. The majority of white Baptists responded to the changes around them by moving their families and churches away from African American and Mexican American “encroachment,” and by closing their church doors to black worshippers, whom they believed wanted to infiltrate their churches and take control of their white spaces. The Rev. K. Owen White, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of First Baptist Church Houston, experienced this firsthand as he and his church dug their heels in following pressure from the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. Even as the drama died down and more of the church’s members began to embrace a more open attitude toward people of color, the less willing among them found new homes and churches far from the downtown core.

In neighborhoods where Mexican Americans began to increase, white Baptists left their churches as they transitioned to primarily Mexican American congregations. Although white Baptists did not formally shut their doors to Mexican American Baptists, they nevertheless continued treating them as mission opportunities and outsiders in spite of the enormous growth and achievement among Mexican American Baptists. For a brief moment, the Rev. James Novarro seemed to be on the verge of leading a “progressive” new church that would be composed of Anglos and bilingual Mexican Americans from

the surrounding neighborhoods, but Anglo members opted to relinquish Kashmere Baptist Church entirely and moved farther out of town.

For African American Baptists during the civil rights movement, the story of the Rev. William A Lawson helps us understand the role religion played in Houston's Black Freedom Struggle. For Lawson, the movement created the conditions for his leadership where he used his access to the BSU, Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church (WABC), and Union Baptist Association to support civil rights activities and organize campaigns to pressure white leaders in business and education to change. He shaped the civil rights movement in Houston through his religious beliefs, resources, and leadership. He came to Houston to work as the Baptist Student Union director at TSU in 1955, and his sense of himself as a missionary among college students and the community around the university informed his work. Although he initially hesitated to get involved in the emerging student sit in movement, he later stepped in as an organizer, sponsor, and mentor. His civil rights activism led the community around him to ask him to start a church. As pastor of WABC, a streamlined and pro-movement church, Lawson launched movements to press for equal rights in education, housing, and employment.

Religion was central to Lawson's fight for equality, and social justice was a central component of his vision for Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. So much so that Bill and Audrey Lawson incorporated physical symbols of struggle and victory into the design of their new church building when WABC expanded in the 1980s. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, its pastor, and the civil rights movement itself came of age in the same moment, and they collectively strived for equality. The story of Lawson's

involvement in the civil rights movement underscored just how much inspiration, power, and potential that Lawson was able to find in the church. However, religion in an institutional sense could also be a roadblock to positive change, as it was for the Rev. James Navarro.

The civil rights movement transformed Navarro from a primarily religious and denominational leader to one intimately involved in civil rights politics beyond church walls. His transition from a religious leader to a politically active religious leader highlights some of the ways that the civil rights movement influenced this Mexican American Baptist pastor from Houston. In the 1950s and 1960s, Navarro and other Mexican American Baptist denominational leaders in the *Convención Bautista Mexicana de Texas* challenged inequality in religious circles. They pushed for unification with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, essentially hoping for a seat at the table. Yet those hopes gave way to disappointment as unification failed to produce the kinds of changes they had wanted.

Navarro's fight for integration within his denomination coincided with his increasing participation in Mexican American political organizations. He joined groups like LULAC and PASO, and these groups exposed him to the growing civil rights movement in new ways. The extent of that exposure came into full view with Navarro's co-leadership of the 1966 Minimum Wage March. Yet the lack of support from white and Mexican American Baptists during and after the summer of 1966 led Navarro to pursue social justice from the standpoint of a community leader rather than a denominational one. The aftermath of the march was the turning point in his shift from

evangelism to religious civil rights activism outside of strictly religious circles. Unlike for Lawson, religion, at least institutional religion, was a roadblock for Novarro, and he found himself increasingly at odds with white denominational leaders and drawn toward activist movements beyond church walls.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with any project, there are notable limitations to this dissertation. First, each of the major groups I discuss merits its own study. There are still plenty of avenues left to explore in terms of how white Baptists (and other Protestants for that matter) in Houston handled issues related to race, inequality, and social justice. The weight of influence that larger churches tended to have in the Houston area meant that I was not always able to find information or sources for smaller churches or leaders from less well known churches. There were also more white Baptists involved in the religious life of the city than just pastors and church workers.

Among Mexican American Baptist churches, I was able to find significant sources about the Rev. James Novarro and a few other ministers in the city, but even those were sometimes sparse. During the research and writing phases of this project, the major archive I used for Mexican American Baptist history, the Texas Baptist Historical Collections, closed and prepared to relocate from Dallas to Waco. Although the archival staff gave me two very productive weeks to gather as much information as I could, I think there are more sources available that could lead to a more substantial study

focusing primarily on Latina/o Baptist history in the Southwest. Once they officially reopen to researchers, I plan to return to the archives to see what else I can find.

Recasting my research questions to encompass a greater geographical area will open the possibilities of locating more information about Mexican American Baptist history beyond central denominational figures like Novarro.

Additionally, I believe that I have only scratched the surface on the Rev. James L. Novarro. Early on, I knew that he was an important figure. But as I continued to research and write, I learned that he was involved in dozens of different programs, ministries, organizations, and initiatives. But he was also a difficult person to figure out. He was born in Michigan, but the circumstances of his birth and his parentage remain a mystery to me. Census records, city records from the places he has lived, and print and archival evidence failed to shed substantial light onto his personal history as a Mexican American man coming of age in Fort Worth and then living his professional life in Houston. Most of the people I spoke to who knew him when he was a pastor in Houston either did not wish to talk about him or could not provide many details.

My focus on religious leaders and denominational organizations privileged the voices of Baptist men at the expense of Baptist women. I focused on these men and groups because they were most prevalent in the sources that I found. While women played a major role in creating the sources that I used (particularly in Mexican American Baptist sources, women were primary authors of the churches' institutional histories I used), their stories were difficult to access. Nevertheless, a greater focus on the part women played in this story has the potential to further complicate our understandings of



race, gender, and civil rights in religious circles. Finally, because of time constraints and the nature of the sources I found, my study ended just as the 1970s began. Yet the recent political and social climate surrounding race, identity, and immigration suggests that there is study to be written about the history of Baptists and other evangelicals since the 1970s.

### **Implications**

The findings of this dissertation illuminate the underemphasized role of religion in the long civil rights movements of the twentieth century. The history of black, brown, and white Baptist interactions shows that religion has been central to the creation and maintenance of racial divisions in Houston's history, and it has played a leading role in movements to break through those divisions as well. In so doing, this dissertation fills a historiographical gap in the scholarship on the Black Freedom Struggle and Mexican American civil rights movements. It shows that historians have much to gain from incorporating the religious history of the movement into their analyses. My attention to Mexican American Baptists, particularly in the twentieth century, also fills a gap in the growing historiography of Latino Religion. Studies on Mexican American Baptists and other mainline Protestant denominations especially after the early years of the twentieth century remain limited.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Paul Barton's, studies that explore Mexican American Baptists and other mainline traditions tend to focus more on the early history of the denomination rather than how it has evolved in since late nineteenth century. Beyond that, the recent works on Latino religious history have focused more on Catholics and Pentecostals (for good reason – these faith traditions have been particularly

The history of white Baptists and the civil rights movement also provides new insights into the scholarly debate surrounding white religious involvement throughout the South. Although scholars like Paul Harvey, Andrew Manis, and Mark Newman have offered critical studies about the level of participation, or lack thereof, from Southern white Protestants, historian David Chappell has argued that we should be asking a different question. If Southern Baptists and other Southern Protestants had been so effective at using religion to support slavery and to bolster the subsequent Jim Crow order, why were they unable to mount a sustained attack to defend their way of life from the onslaught of the civil rights era in the 1950s and 1960s? Chappell argued that religious segregationists lacked the Biblical support they had been able to find for those earlier moments.<sup>3</sup> My dissertation joins the work of Carolyn Renée Dupont in arguing

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influential), yet Mexican American Baptist churches in Texas have continued to exist, and they have made recent inroads into the upper levels of leadership in the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Paul Barton, “¡Ya Basta! Latino/a Protestant Activism in the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gaston Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); Juan Francisco Martínez, *Sea la Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006); and Daisy Machado, *Of Borders and Margins: Hispanic Disciples in Texas, 1888-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001); Andrew Michael Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict: Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights, 1947-1957* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); David Chrisman, “The Price of Moderation: Texas Baptists and Racial Integration, 1948-1968,” Ph.D. diss., Texas A&M University, 2001; John W. Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity, 1900-1980* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1986); John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists*, Rev. ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1972, 1987); David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

that in fact, white Baptists *did* collectively resist integration. They did it at the local church and city levels by refusing to change their churches, by barring people of color, and by participating in white church flight. That Houston remains highly segregated and that segregation reaches even into Houston's churches today suggests that white Baptist resistance was effective.

My relational approach to race and religion in the Bayou City also provides a corrective to the overemphasis on conflict in black and brown histories.<sup>4</sup> Although the direct engagement between black and brown Baptists communities was relatively limited beyond the interracial gatherings of the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship, they were influenced by the same constellations of struggle. The Reverend William Lawson's story emphasized this by attempting to work with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to build a multiracial coalition on the heels of the 1966 Minimum Wage March and by supporting the Mexican American community in their shared struggle to fight educational inequalities. The Reverend James Novarro demonstrated this by calling for solidarity with the African American Freedom Struggle within his denomination and by using his newspaper, *El Sol*, to push an interracial slate of leaders into public office.

This dissertation also provides a potential roadmap for today's racial climate. When I first began the research for this dissertation, I came across a few references to the interracial Baptist ministerial group that formed in the aftermath of K. Owen White's

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as Neil Foley, Michael Phillips, and Brian Behnken offer comparative civil rights histories that tend to blame marginalized groups for their failure to put aside their own concerns and form black and brown coalitions to fight for equal rights. Neil Foley, *The Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Brian Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

debacle at First Baptist Houston, the Harris County Baptist Ministers Fellowship. Based on the group's activities and messages from its meetings, I thought I had found the shining moment of coalition building involving all three major racial/ethnic groups in Houston. As I continued to explore the sources, I realized this interracial organization had the potential to be transformative. For the first time, black, brown, and white Baptists were gathering together at least once a month specifically to talk about race and the problems of inequality. However, in an all-too-familiar pattern, white Baptists rarely turned out in substantial numbers. White churches here and there, particularly from diverse neighborhoods, participated in the events, but as the Union Association representative responsible for the group noted, their support in general was minimal at best.

While there were certainly exceptions to this tendency, such as the Rev. E. H. Westmoreland's downtown church, South Main Baptist Church, white Southern Baptists have generally proven themselves to be ill equipped to handle social change. My dissertation points to a long history of moments with the potential for churches and institutions in privileged positions to embrace an alternative path. Since the beginning of the Southern Baptist Convention, many of its members and churches have resisted social change by couching their protests in the protection of the sanctity and autonomy of their individual, democratic churches. Or they have done so by assuming that people of different racial or cultural backgrounds would prefer to worship "with their own

people.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth-century, there were Baptists committed to working for progressive change in and out of churches, who labored through departments and committees by speaking *to* rather than *for* Baptists on issues of moral conscience and social ethics. Although some of these at state and regional convention levels, such as the Christian Life Commission, have been very effective at mobilizing the conscience of many *individual* Baptists, the remaining chief impediment to success has been evangelicals’ aversion to social Christianity. A commitment to healing society’s problems only by saving souls can also mean the neglect of genuine problems and material needs.

Southern Baptists’ responses to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement put this in sharp relief. On December 3, 2014, a grand jury in Staten Island elected not to indict New York City police officer Daniel Pantaleo for killing Eric Garner with a chokehold. In response to this obvious injustice, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), Russell Moore, called for churches to respond to ongoing systemic racism and inequality by coming together across racial lines to know and be accountable to one another as parts of *one* body.<sup>6</sup> Several compelling statements followed from others in the ERLC that highlighted the sin of racism and the desperate need to finally end “separate but

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Cameron, “‘With Their Own People’: Mexican American, African American, and Anglo Baptists in Texas,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 53-66.

<sup>6</sup> Russell Moore, “Transcript: Eric Garner and the Case for Justice,” December 3, 2014, The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (ERLC), <http://erlc.com/article/transcript-eric-garner-and-the-case-for-justice> (accessed December 4, 2014).

equal.”<sup>7</sup> Although these statements likely stirred many concerned Baptists to respond in positive ways, the structure of the Baptist denomination means that there is little in place to effectively implement this kind of stance into individual churches as a way to mobilize countless more against ongoing structural inequality.

Since then, tensions over police brutality against people of color have only intensified. In July 2016, peaceful protestors organized a demonstration through downtown Dallas to oppose the fatal shootings by police against Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota. During the march, a heavily armed sniper opened fire from the roof of a parking garage, targeting and killing several police officers. The aftermath of the day seemed to indicate that racial tensions were at a breaking point. But in the days that followed, a black Baptist pastor from Concord Church in Dallas, Bryan Carter, and a white Baptist pastor from Park Cities Baptist Church, Jeff Warren, decided to host an interracial “Together We Stand” prayer service at Concord Church as a way to heal together across racial lines and discuss the next steps from there.<sup>8</sup> The two pastors had begun working together in Dallas just after Trayvon Martin was murdered in 2012. Then after Eric Garner’s murder in 2014, they started working to promote racial reconciliation. Before and after the 2016 shootings in Dallas, they have hosted regular Bible studies, pulpit exchange programs, and other interracial

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<sup>7</sup> Trillia Newbell, “The Sin of Racism,” December 4, 2014, ERLC, <http://erlc.com/article/the-sin-of-racism> (accessed January 22, 2015); David Prince and Rubén Cabrera, “Rejecting Separate but Equal Again,” December 5, 2014, ERLC, <http://erlc.com/article/rejecting-separate-but-equal-again> (accessed January 22, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Concord Church, “Together We Stand,” July 8, 2016, <http://concorddallas.org/events/details/2016/07/08/together-we-stand>; Andy Williams, “Pulpit Swap Changing the Racial Climate in Dallas,” The Leadership Network, July 11, 2016, <http://leadnet.org/pulpit-swap-changing-the-racial-climate-in-dallas>.

events involving a few dozen churches in the Dallas area. They continue to promote these kinds of gatherings because they believe that churches must lead the way in healing the deep racial divisions that still plague the church. And they believe that the primary way to do this is through relationships built on understanding within the church.

Other initiatives to address racial divisions have begun in the Houston area as well. Following the incident in Dallas, Union Baptist Association in Houston set up a “prayer room” at the police union headquarters in downtown Houston where they would have people pray continuously for racial healing in the city. Rickie Bradshaw, an African American church consultant employed by Union Baptist Association, said that the only answer to the racially charged police violence is a “revival and spiritual awakening.”<sup>9</sup> And Houston’s First Baptist Church hosted a roundtable discussion on racial reconciliation in October 2016.<sup>10</sup> These gatherings and initiatives in Houston have opened the door to talk about race and racism more openly, but they still largely fail to explore the systemic nature of racism and its effects. Rather, they continue to emphasize the oft-repeated phrase, “racism isn’t a skin problem, it’s a sin problem.” Yet such a perspective continues to frame the problem and solution in terms of interpersonal interactions, and therefore contains little in the way of substantive remedies to racism. My dissertation provides another approach: taking seriously the long term role that white Christians have played in creating, affirming, and protecting systems of inequality.

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<sup>9</sup> Diane Chandler, “‘Until He Comes’: Police, Clergy Pledge 24/7 Prayer,” *Baptist Press*, July 26, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/47284/until-he-comes-police-clergy-pledge-247-prayer>.

<sup>10</sup> Houston’s First Baptist Church, “Roundtable: Racial Reconciliation,” October 5, 2016, <http://houstonsfirst.org/news-stories/roundtable-racial-reconciliation>.

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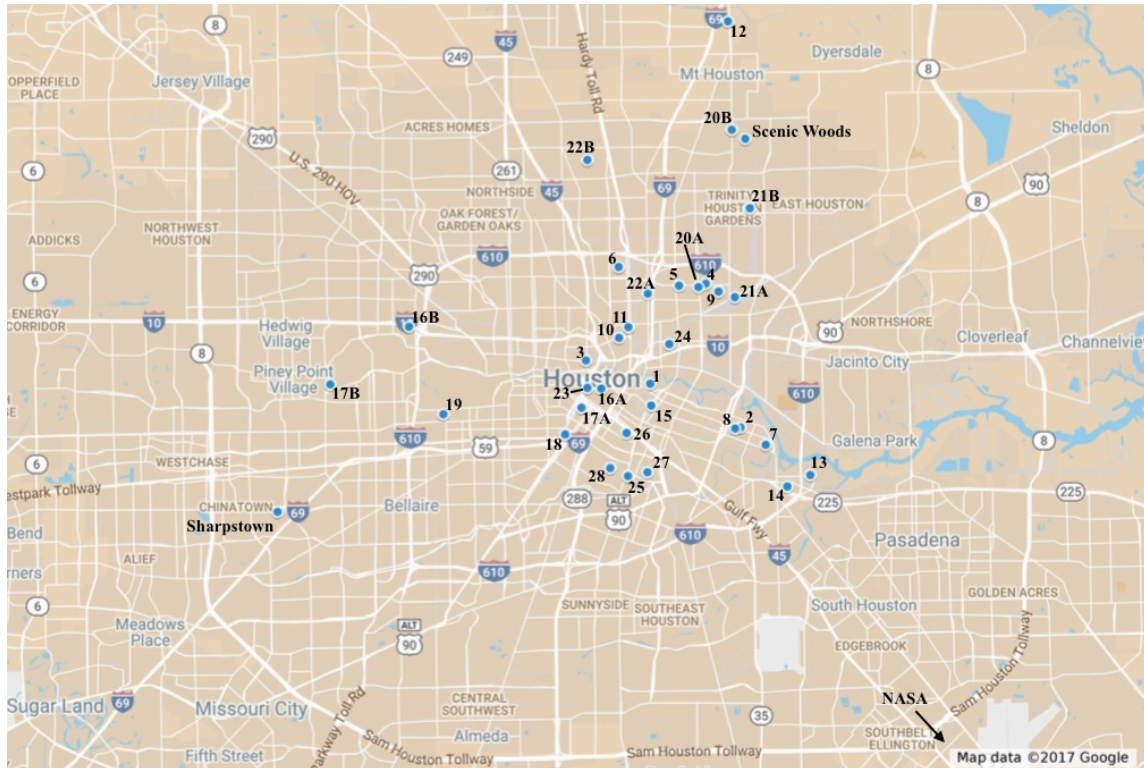
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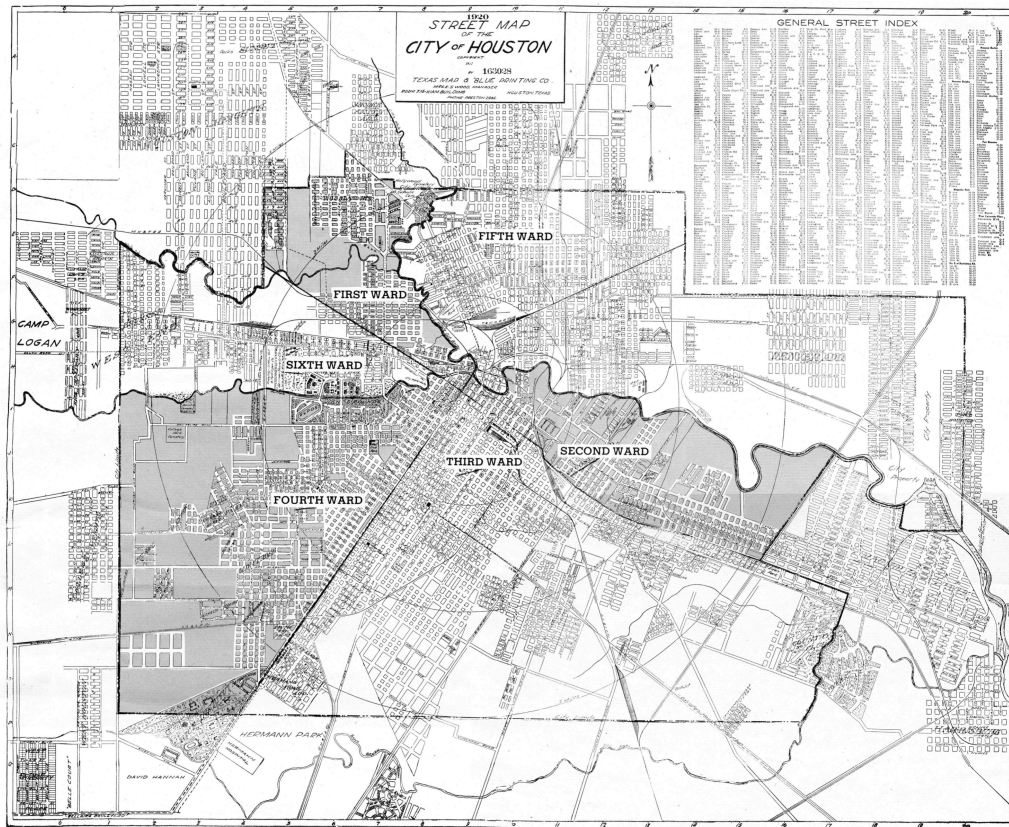
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## APPENDIX

### FIGURES



**Figure 1.** Houston Churches Map. 1: Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston; 2: Segunda Iglesia Bautista Mexicana de Houston; 3: Central Mexican Baptist Church; 4: Kashmere Baptist Temple; 5: Kashmere Baptist Church; 6: Iglesia Bautista el Calvario; 7: Magnolia Temple Baptist Church; 8: Magnolia Park Baptist Church; 9: North Main Baptist Church; 10: Trinity Baptist Church; 11: Bethel Mexican Baptist Church; 12: Kinwood Mexican Temple; 13: Manchester Baptist Church; 14: Manchester Temple Baptist Church; 15: Calvary Baptist Church; 16A: First Baptist Church Houston (Downtown); 16B: First Baptist Church Houston (Relocation); 17A: Second Baptist Church Houston (Downtown); 17B: Second Baptist Church Houston (Relocation); 18: South Main Baptist Church; 19: River Oaks Baptist Church; 20A: Faith Temple Baptist Church (Approximate original location); 20B: Faith Temple Baptist Church (Relocation); 21A: Liberty Road Baptist Church (Approximate original location); 21B: Liberty Road Baptist Church (Relocation); 22A: North Side Baptist Church (Approximate original location); 22B: North Side Baptist Church (Relocation); 23: Antioch Baptist Church; 24: Pleasant Hill Baptist Church; 25: Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church; 26: Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church; 27: University of Houston; 28: Texas Southern University. *Source:* Google Maps, 2017.



**Figure 2.** Six Wards of Houston Map. *Source:* Texas Map and Blue Printing Company, 1920 Street Map of Houston (Houston, Texas, 1917) public domain.