

Duncan Gray Jr., Episcopal civil rights leader, dies at 89

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

Duncan Montgomery Gray Jr., an Episcopal priest who took risky stands for integration and endured a beating for the cause, died at age 89 at his home in Jackson on July 15, according to the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi.

He was a parish pastor from 1953 to 1974, and then Episcopal bishop of Mississippi until 1993, the diocese reported.

In addition to backing integration, Gray supported women in ordained ministry and worked for gender equality among laypeople serving on vestries and committees, according to the diocese.

Gary G. Yerkey, a journalist who has covered civil rights, [wrote for the *Christian Century* website about interviewing Gray](#), a fourth-generation Mississippian, in October 2015.

As a student in the early 1950s, Gray worked to reverse the ban on African Americans at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee.

“It just blows my mind when I stop and think about it, that the trustees of the University of the South behaved like they did,” Gray said.

In 1962 [Gray was rector of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Oxford, Mississippi](#). He lost half of his congregation, Yerkey wrote, after preaching that the seeds of “anger and hatred, bitterness and prejudice” were “widely sown,” and that as Christians “we need to do our utmost to uproot and cast them out.”

That year Gray spoke to white students who were rioting after the University of Mississippi admitted an African American, James Meredith. He tried to calm them while holding on to a statue at the entrance of Old Miss, but the crowd eventually pulled him down and beat him severely. Two others were killed.

Gray told Yerkey that Christians who supported segregation were essentially appealing to tradition.

“It’s not hard for me to understand how they could be wedded to the past,” Gray said. “They were sincere. They were not un-Christian . . . but they were just badly mistaken about segregation.”