

Duncan Gray Jr., 53 years after the Ole Miss riot

By [Gary G. Yerkey](#)

September 30, 2015

I recently had the honor of sitting down with a fourth-generation Mississippian who knows a thing or two about racial injustice because he's spent his life fighting it: Duncan M. Gray Jr., bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi from 1974 to 1993.

We didn't talk about the controversy over whether the Mississippi state flag, with its Confederate emblem, should continue to be flown over the state and local buildings. I think I know what he would say about that.

What we did talk about was what motivated him, as a Christian, to promote integration in perhaps the most aggressively segregationist state in the nation—at great risk to himself, his family, and his life as an Episcopal priest. We also talked about forgiveness. And love.

"It wasn't easy," Gray said, speaking of—and understating—the challenges he and others faced as civil rights activists in Mississippi in the 1960s. "They were rough times."

Gray turned 89 last week. He was born in Canton, Mississippi, the son of another bishop of the Diocese of Mississippi. His own son, Duncan III, served in the same role until this February. And his grandson, Peter W. Gray, is currently the rector of the Episcopal Church of the Nativity in Greenwood, Mississippi.

At the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where Gray graduated with a bachelor of divinity degree in 1953, he worked with the faculty to overturn the school's longstanding policy of banning African Americans. The next year, he drafted a then-radical document urging the then-segregated Episcopal Church to take a stand against racial discrimination, following the Supreme Court ruling against segregation in public schools. He continued to speak out wherever and whenever he could, telling an ecumenical group in 1958, for instance, that segregation is simply "incompatible with the Christian gospel."

In the early 60s, Gray rose to national prominence as a leading Christian voice in the civil rights movement. Fifty-three years ago this week, as rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Oxford, Mississippi, he sought to help quell a riot that broke out among white students when James Meredith was admitted as the first African American student at the University of Mississippi. Gray, attempting to calm the crowd, clung to the Confederate statue at the entrance to Ole Miss as he spoke. But eventually he was pulled down and beaten badly. Two people were killed in the ensuing melee.

Earlier that day, from the pulpit of St. Peter's, Gray told his parishioners that the seeds of "anger and hatred, bitterness and prejudice" were "widely sown," and as Christians, "we need to do our utmost to uproot and cast them out." His stance—and subsequent action that night—so enraged the congregation that half of them left.

The next week, Gray told the shrunken congregation that "you and I, along with every other Mississippian, are responsible...for what happened [at Ole Miss because] we are responsible for the moral and political climate in our state which made such a tragedy possible."

Today, he recalls with some satisfaction being admired by many white Mississippians, a fact that—along with his Christian faith and the unwavering support of his wife, Ruth, who died in 2011—helped him survive.

Gray told me he has always believed that those who supported segregation were not necessarily "un-Christian." He said that the crux of their argument was simply, "'Look at tradition.' They were saying things like, 'Our ancestors who supported segregation were not devils....They were good Christian people like we are.' It's not hard for me to understand how they could be wedded to the past....They were sincere. They were not un-Christian...but they were just badly mistaken about segregation."

Breaking with tradition, particularly in the South, meant that you were "breaking with the family," said Gray. But he realized as early as his student days in Sewanee that other relationships were also important. "I was very close to my faculty [who fought against the school's trustees for integration]," he said. "They had a profound influence on me. I had a profound respect for each of them....They reminded me of what God's will really was."

Gray said that race relations in the United State have certainly improved since then. "We've still got a way to go," he said. "But we've come a long way from where we were back then....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....But we live and learn."