

THE SHADOWS OF SEGREGATION: THE INTEGRATION OF PERKINS SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA¹

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Situated in the heart of Dallas, Texas, Perkins School of Theology was part of a thoroughly segregated context. The story of the integration of Perkins; its impact on the future development of the Seminary; and its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement is remarkable, complicated, and relatively unknown.² How did a Southern institution that was imbedded within other thoroughly segregated institutions such as the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and Southern Methodist University manage to voluntarily integrate two years before *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, ten years before James Meredith was allowed to attend the University of Mississippi, and thirteen years before Candler School of Theology at Emory University integrated their student body? The present essay narrates the events that led to the integration of Perkins School of Theology in the fall of 1952, with particular emphasis on the motivations and experiences of the administrators and students who integrated the school. As such, this essay seeks to provide a focused institutional history of the integration of Perkins School of Theology, as well as an oral history of the same, particularly from the perspective of Merrimon Cuninggim, the Dean at the time of integration, and the five African-American students who “led the way.”³

¹ A portion of this paper was presented in the Wesleyan Studies Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion on October 30, 2010, in Atlanta, Georgia.

² I am particularly indebted to a conversation with Joseph L. Allen at the beginning of my research when Allen pointed me to several of the key archival resources I used for the part of the paper that focuses on the institutional history. Allen has recently published *Perkins School of Theology: A Centennial History* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 2011). From pages 113-125, Allen narrates the history of the integration of Perkins from a primarily institutional perspective.

³ The primary method of investigation for this paper was interviews I conducted with people who were present at Perkins during the period under investigation. Primary and secondary literature was used to strengthen the understanding of the institutional history of Perkins School of Theology. This approach has both strengths and weaknesses. One advantage is that the paper focuses on what was highlighted by the subjects of my research. And yet, I am aware that the questions I asked and the way I interpreted the answers I received are both influenced by my own social location as a white male who was not alive during any of the events covered in this paper. The major weakness of my approach is that the narrative is limited by the people I was able to get in touch with who are still living. Unfortunately, many valuable voices have already been lost. However, the realization that voices of key figures from the Civil Rights Era who were integral to the integration of Perkins was another motivation for focusing primarily on personal interviews. Aside from telling the story of the role of Perkins School of Theology in the Civil Rights Era, another major concern of this research was to preserve as many of the voices as possible that were a part of this history.

Background

In 1939, in Kansas City, Missouri, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church united to form The Methodist Church. This merger, however, further separated black and white Methodists, as the Central Jurisdiction formally segregated the newly constituted Church.⁴ The wound of racial segregation was largely ignored at subsequent General Conferences, until it was addressed explicitly and at some length at the 1952 General Conference.

Historian Peter C. Murray has noted that it was at the 1952 General Conference that the church began to wrestle more immediately with the segregation of its own structures. Rev. Edgar A. Love, of the Central Jurisdiction, urged Methodist “churches, colleges, universities, theological schools, hospitals and homes, [to] take steps immediately to open their doors to all people alike, without distinction as to race, creed or color.” While Murray notes that the “Love initiative would have been a bold departure for the church and a significant challenge to segregation” it ultimately failed. When the desegregation of Methodist seminaries came up the next day, a loophole was introduced that exempted Emory and Duke because “State laws would force an undue hardship upon the institutions involved.”⁵ Thus, segregation was allowed to continue in precisely the southern seminaries where it was most entrenched. Given just how immovable segregation was in institutions in the South with The Methodist Church at the time, the integration of Perkins School of Theology in 1952 is surprising, even astonishing, making the lack of attention given to the story of the integration of Perkins by Methodist historians all the more perplexing.⁶

“Perkins Led the Way”

The School of Theology at Southern Methodist University is as old as SMU itself. A major event in the history of Perkins School of Theology occurred when Joe J. Perkins and Lois Craddock Perkins committed \$1,350,000 to the School of Theology for the construction of new buildings and the establishment of an endowment in 1944. In honor of the gift, Bishop Paul Martin moved at the Board of Trustees meeting on February 6, 1945, that the name of the School of Theology be changed to Perkins School of Theology.⁷ Over time, Mr. and Mrs. Perkins gradually increased the amount of their gift

⁴ For an extended and exceptional study of the formation of the Central Jurisdiction see Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York UP, 2008).

⁵ Quoted in Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race 1930-1975* (Columbia, MO: U Missouri P, 2004), 67-68.

⁶ Murray, for example, mentions the integration of Perkins only in passing, not noting just how unusual this was. He wrote, “For instance, Perkins School of Theology, at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, had quietly desegregated by September, 1952” (Murray, 67).

⁷ Lewis Howard Grimes, *A History of the Perkins School of Theology*, ed. Robert Loyd (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist UP, 1993), 85.

so that the Perkins assets were valued at more than \$12,000,000 in 1988.⁸ The Perkins gift marked a key step towards Perkins's efforts to become a nationally respected school of theology.

The President of SMU at the time, Umphrey Lee, sought to further improve Perkins' institutional footprint by improving the quality of the faculty. With this end in mind, Lee hired Merrimon Cuninggim to become the Dean of the School of Theology, starting on September 1, 1951. Key to Perkins' involvement in Civil Rights was Cuninggim's stipulation that he "wanted no part of the job at Perkins unless the way was open for Negroes to be admitted to the School as regular students."⁹ According to Cuninggim's recollection, then, "It was, therefore, in answer to my pointed question along this line that Dr. Lee gave me assurance that the way was indeed open [to integrate Perkins]."¹⁰

One of the reasons that Lee could commit to allowing Cuninggim to integrate Perkins was because of key actions that had already occurred. On November 10, 1950, Cuninggim's predecessor, Dean Eugene B. Hawk "offered a resolution so that black students could be admitted to regular classes."¹¹ The result of Hawk's action was that the SMU Board of Trustees passed the following resolution:

The Board of Trustees of Southern Methodist University committed to the administration the matter of the admission of Negroes to Perkins School of Theology with the approval of the principle and with the direction that the administration be given power to act if, as and when it seemed to be timely and proper.¹²

Due to this action two black students were admitted to Perkins in January of 1951. However, these two students did not graduate because, in the words of one historian of Perkins, they "did not prove equal to academic demands."¹³ In the fall of 1952, five African-American students were enrolled as students at Perkins School of Theology: John W. Elliott, James A. Hawkins, James V. Lyles, Negail R. Riley, and Cecil Williams.¹⁴ All five students successfully graduated.

Despite the crucial first steps that Hawk took, the key architect behind the integration of the student body at Perkins was Merrimon Cuninggim (1911-1995), who became the Dean of Perkins in 1951. Cuninggim recruited the

⁸ Grimes, 87.

⁹ Merrimon Cuninggim, Letter to Charles Braden, August 7, 1964. Merrimon Cuninggim Files, Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

¹⁰ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 7. An interesting side note to this story is that Cuninggim recalled that the Lee asked Cuninggim to try to bring some people along with him. Cuninggim succeeded in bringing Albert C. Outler to SMU, who had been full Professor of Theology at Yale. According to Cuninggim, the possibility of desegregating a southern school was a major motivation for Outler's decision to come to SMU. See Merrimon Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way: The Story of Desegregation at Southern Methodist University* (Dallas: Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, 1994), 10.

¹¹ Grimes, 77.

¹² Quoted in Grimes, 77.

¹³ Grimes, 111.

¹⁴ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 10.

first class of black students who successfully graduated by writing letters to “Negro educators and visiting a number of the stronger black colleges across the South.” Cuninggim’s recruitment efforts were based on a desire to enroll more than one or two African-American students in the first class and to find students who were prepared for the academic environment at Perkins.¹⁵

Institutionally, Cuninggim’s work was crucial to the enrollment of five African-American students at Perkins in the fall of 1952.¹⁶ From the beginning, Cuninggim was committed to treating these students “as regularly enrolled students in the Seminary.”¹⁷ He recalled that “so far as I was concerned arbitrary limits as to their participation in the life of the School, to apply to them alone, would not be set.” Though Cuninggim’s approach was very progressive for the time, it was obvious that the new students were not simply “regularly enrolled students” as Cuninggim immediately outlined a process for dealing with situations that might arise as a result of their presence on campus. He proposed to the five students that

We agree to discuss together any matter of behavior about which they or I should have question; that we try to do so in advance, rather than wait for the question to arise; that I give them my advice freely on the matter in question; and that they take what little freedom of decision which such a method allowed them—for my advice would inevitably be a strong pressure upon them—in determining their course of action.¹⁸

These discussions led the students to attend SMU home football games, where they sat in the regular student section, which at that time was segregated under Jim Crow laws.¹⁹ They also ate in the Perkins cafeteria, participated in Perkins Student Body activities, and played many intramural athletics. As a result of these conversations, they also restricted themselves by deciding not to eat in the SMU Student Union, play intramural football, or swim at the University pool.²⁰

The major challenge to the successful integration of Perkins School of Theology actually came more than a year after the school had been integrated when objections were made to black students rooming with white students. Ironically, this was one of the few things that was not discussed ahead of time because it “developed in an altogether natural way: the Negroes made friends with other students . . . [and] their friends invited them to be their

¹⁵ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 10. This concern was largely motivated by the fact that Cuninggim’s predecessor, Eugene B. Hawk, had admitted two African-American ministers from Dallas to register and attend some classes but on Cuninggim’s account “they were not academically ready and had to drop out before the year was done.”

¹⁶ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 10.

¹⁷ Merrimon Cuninggim, “Memorandum on the Negro Problem, Perkins School of Theology, S.M.U., September 1, 1953,” 3, Merrimon Cuninggim files, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

¹⁸ Cuninggim, “Memorandum,” 3.

¹⁹ The African-American students sat in the middle of the student section, with the seats immediately around them reserved for white students who were sympathetic to the presence of African-American students. Merrimon Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 1.

²⁰ Cuninggim, “Memorandum,” 3; Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 12.

roommates.”²¹

The issue of white students living with black students was resolved when the black students, based on an extensive conversation with Dean Cuninggim about the concern, determined on their own that they would room with each other, rather than with the white students. However, the concern about the so-called “Negro problem” did not die down after the African-American students took this self-restrictive step. Former Dean of Perkins, Eugene A. Hawk, wrote a letter to Mr. Joe J. Perkins, which, according to Cuninggim’s recollection, said that “if something were not done . . . major donors would lose their faith in the University.”²²

After receiving Hawk’s letter, Perkins wrote the following brief, but pointed letter to Bishop William C. Martin:

Dear Bishop Martin:

I was in Dallas Friday and Saturday of last week and I found the negro situation as affecting SMU had never been worked out.

To my way of thinking this is a matter of extreme importance and it should not be delayed any longer. I hope you will get in behind this actively and help work it out. I rather think the time may come when the Universities of our Nation may find it necessary and desirable to permit negroes to attend but we are a long way from that situation now. My interest and zeal in SMU would suffer a very severe “heart attack” if this is not straightened up in the very near future.

I hope you will actively interest yourself in this and work it out in a way that will be pleasing to all of us.

Your friend,
J. J. Perkins²³

Due to the financial support that the Perkins’s had given to the school which had been named after them, Joe Perkins’s letter immediately caught the attention of those in power at both the University and the School of Theology. In fact, Perkins’s letter was immediately copied and sent to key leaders involved in the church, university, and seminary. Cuninggim recounted that “in the succeeding days there were many anxious conferences.

²¹ Cuninggim, “Memorandum,” 4.

²² Cuninggim, “Memorandum,” 8. This is Cuninggim’s summary of Hawk’s letter in his own letter to Charles Braden. I was unable to find Hawk’s original letter to Joe Perkins. Cuninggim reports that Perkins initially shared Hawk’s letter with him, which is why he knew of its contents.

²³ Joe J. Perkins, Letter to Bishop Wm. C. Martin, August 17, 1953, Merrimon Cuninggim papers, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX. I suspect that Perkins’ letter to Bishop Martin was prompted in part by Eugene Hawk, because Cuninggim notes in a letter to Bishop Martin that he has received a copy of a letter from Dr. Hawk to Perkins, as well as Perkins’ response to Hawk and the letter that I have just cited that Perkins sent to Bishop Martin. See, Merrimon Cuninggim, Letter to Bishop William C. Martin, August 19, 1953, Merrimon Cuninggim papers, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX. Further, in Bishop Martin’s reply to Perkins on August 24, 1953 Martin closes his letter with the following, “I have a feeling that if Dr. Hawk could bring himself to the point where he would cease agitating the issue, it would be easier to find a satisfactory solution.” Bishop William C. Martin, Letter to Mr. J. J. Perkins, August 24, 1953, Merrimon Cuninggim papers, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

Though nobody wanted to buck Mr. Perkins, nobody wanted to tell me to get the Negroes out of the dormitory or to issue the order over my head.”²⁴ Apparently because Perkins did not receive the response he expected to his initial letter, he wrote to Cuninggim directly on August 27, 1953, as follows:

Dear Dean Cuninggim:

I have been quite considerably disturbed over the Negro question in connection with the University. I think you now know the Board of Trustees never at any time approved or authorized the action which was taken. Our problem now is to make the best of it in whatever way we can and get rid of the Negroes as soon as possible.

I presume we are obligated to take care of these four Negroes if they show up, which they may do and which they may not do, but under no conditions do we want to take on any others and we want to get rid of these four just as soon as we can. We certainly have no quarters available now or at any time in the future for any additional Negroes. There is no way to remedy what has been done and all we can do is make the best of it but we should not under any conditions have a repeat performance.

Am quite sure that the action which has been taken, if it had been submitted to the Trustees, would never have been approved by the Trustees.

Yours very sincerely,
J. J. Perkins²⁵

Just over two months later, Perkins again wrote Cuninggim, part of the letter read as follows:

I have the very definite opinion that the negroes should never have been permitted to enter the Theological School. You will no doubt feel that I am narrow in this matter but I can not help it if I am.

I would like to know how many negroes there are in the Theological School, their names, how much longer they will likely be there, and if you are taking care of them in one of the dormitories, let me know which dormitory it is. Will the negroes that are in the school now finish up with the current year or when will you be through with them?

At the end of this letter, Perkins reiterated his sense of where he believed the Board of Trustees stood on the question of integration. He wrote, “I did not want to bring up the negro question in the Trustees’ meeting because I know they would take a rather definite action contrary to what has been permitted.”²⁶

When Perkins’ initial letter was written on August 17, 1953, Cuninggim was attending a conference in Pennsylvania. Upon his return he had conversations with several University officials, who voiced arguments “as to why we should bend to the pressure of Mr. Perkins as provoked by Dr. Hawk, Bishop Selecman, and others in the background.” Cuninggim felt confident that the outcome was secure. He was confident that

The choice before us was not whether we would or would not take restrictive mea-

²⁴ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 8-9.

²⁵ Joe J. Perkins, Letter to Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, Dean, August 27, 1953, (copy), Merrimon Cuninggim papers, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

²⁶ Joe J. Perkins, Letter to Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, November 6, 1953, Merrimon Cuninggim papers, Box 31, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

tures against the Negro students. In my mind, that was settled: we would not do so. The choice was simply as to how that decision would be ultimately arrived at by all the participants: Would it be arrived at as the result of a knockdown, dragout public fight, with Hawk and his company as the inevitable losers (as I saw it), or would it be arrived at as a result of a slow process of education?²⁷

In this matter, Cuninggim ultimately prevailed, as “no change was made in . . . [the previously adopted policies] at any time.”²⁸

According to Bishop Paul Martin, the crucial meeting that resolved the tension over the integration of Perkins occurred when Martin met with the Perkins family over Christmas. Martin recalled a conversation when Joe Perkins asked him, “Do you believe if this matter is not settled in an amicable manner, it will hurt the University?” Martin responded that he believed it would. Perkins then said, “This is the only consideration. The University must rise above any hurt feelings that can develop. The School of Theology is our first love.”²⁹

Formally, the issue was resolved rather uneventfully at a meeting of the Trustees Committee on the School of Theology on January 25, 1954. Cuninggim summarized the meeting, “Mr. Perkins stated that he had been unhappy, and I described our policy in as mild and as peacemaking a way as possible, and that was that.”³⁰ The highlight of the meeting came after Joe Perkins had expressed his displeasure when Lois Perkins, his wife, said, “I don’t agree with my husband on this particular matter. And if he had shared with me the letter from Dr. Hawk last summer, we never would have had any trouble.”³¹ This was not the last time Lois Perkins played an important role in diffusing tensions related to integration at Perkins.

The Students Who Led the Way

Missing from most accounts of the process that led to the integration of Perkins are the voices of the students who integrated the school: John W. Elliott, James A. Hawkins, James V. Lyles, Negail R. Riley, and Cecil Williams.³² A glimpse of the experience of all five students is captured in *Black Seminarians at Perkins: Then and Now*, a short publication with letters each student wrote to Cuninggim during or shortly after their time at Perkins.

A few months after graduating in 1955, Negail Riley reflected on his experience at Perkins in a letter to Cuninggim, “In retrospect . . . I feel that two characteristics undergirded those years of unique adjustments toward

²⁷ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 10.

²⁸ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 12.

²⁹ Quoted in Grimes, 115.

³⁰ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 12.

³¹ Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 12. Also quoted in *Perkins Led the Way*, 26.

³² Unfortunately, only two of these five men were still living at the time this research was conducted in October, 2010, James V. Lyles and Cecil Williams. I was unable to get in contact with Rev. Williams.

integration: (1) honesty, (2) discretion.”³³ Riley appreciated the honest communication he had with Cuninggim, describing the system of mutual consultation as “rich and rewarding, for here we met, not necessarily concerned about ourselves, but about the precedents that our actions would set, about the long range effects of our deliberations.”³⁴

However, being one of the first African-American students also involved compromise. Riley wrote:

Because there were local pressures being exercised against integration at S.M.U. that had to be handled within the framework of sound thinking and within the perspective of the Christian ideal, there had to be manifest a positive effort toward being discreet and honest. The doors could not be “flung open” and left as though the problem was then solved; instead, conscientious long-range thinking took into consideration the various problems that would have to be faced.

Riley also expressed disappointment that the integration of Perkins did not have a wider impact on the larger community. He asked, “Why didn’t S.M.U. take advantage of this experiment to indicate (to the outside) that it was moving in the right direction? It never did make a public statement as to its having Negro students (as far as I know).”³⁵

Indeed, one of the more puzzling aspects of the story of Perkins’ integration is its relative obscurity. More than forty years after his involvement with integrating Perkins, Cuninggim wrote, “What really puzzles me . . . was why none of the scholars writing in the field ever mentioned anything about the first voluntary desegregation of a major educational institution in the South . . . the admission of blacks to Perkins.”³⁶ With the exception of two published histories of Perkins, the integration of the School has received almost no attention by Methodist historians.³⁷ One explanation for the lack of attention is that Perkins itself did not immediately publicize the integration of the seminary. Cuninggim, himself, confirmed that “one of the reasons the Perkins experience didn’t get out was that both sides in the local battle didn’t want it out.”³⁸

In fact, the integration of the seminary at S.M.U. was unknown to many parents of undergraduates at S.M.U. James Lyles, one of the two black students who is still living, remembers a controversy that resulted when Cecil Williams ate in the Student Union on a Sunday, sitting with a white undergraduate woman. Lyles recalled that the “young lady was so impressed that she could not wait to call her mother and tell her of the great experience she had had.” The woman’s mother, however, was “upset by this” and “called the president of the university and threatened to take her daughter out of

³³ Negail R. Riley, Letter to Merrimon Cuninggim, October 14, 1955, in *Black Seminarians at Perkins: Then and Now* (Dallas: Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, 1994).

³⁴ Riley, Letter to Cuninggim.

³⁵ Riley, Letter to Cuninggim.

³⁶ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 2.

³⁷ See Allen, *Perkins School of Theology*, and Grimes, *A History of Perkins*.

³⁸ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 2.

the school.”³⁹ This example illustrates the tension Cuninggim feared would have resulted from aggressive publicizing of the integration of Perkins. Cuninggim’s awareness of this tension led him to focus on the success of integration itself, rather than receiving credit for it.

Cecil Williams, another one of the first African-American students at Perkins, wrote to Cuninggim after graduation:

There were times I felt we could have engaged in a more complete brotherhood of activities and experiences. On the other hand, there were times that I felt the experiences were complete. Other times I felt we were going backward on what we were trying to do (the experiment of 1953 concerning housing). Because of the concern of the community this was alleviated. You recall our discussion of some six hours or longer on this matter.⁴⁰

Williams further reflects on his experience at Perkins in his autobiography, *I’m Alive!* Williams’ brief section on his time as a student at Perkins reveals the ambivalence he felt about his experience more than twenty years after graduating from Perkins. Williams remembered that when he arrived at Perkins, “they accepted me! . . . they went out of their way to show me . . . how much they wanted to protect and make things especially easy for us.”⁴¹ And yet, for Williams “from every pulpit, podium, angle, view, the message was clearly written: ‘Become like them.’”⁴² His time at Perkins was also impacted by the “hypocritical absurdity” that “despite its most lofty and Christian pronouncements, the Methodist Church was split down the middle solely on the basis of color.”⁴³ Williams’ autobiography provides a glimpse into some of the tensions and ambivalence that came with being a black student at what essentially continued to be a white seminary.

Williams was not the only one of the African-American students who commented on “the experiment of 1953” when the students attempted to integrate the dorms. James A. Hawkins, in the immediate aftermath of the decision not to press further on integration of the dorms, explained his feelings in a letter solicited by Dean Cuninggim. Hawkins wrote that he believed “a person should choose his roommate because of mutual interest.” He then described the process by which he and a white student had decided to room together:

Last spring before I left for my summer vacation Paul Chatman and I began to discuss the living conditions in Perkins and the various points where we wished improvements might be made. This discussion led to our talking about our interests. We found that we have many similar ones. We then decided to room together this fall. So you see, this idea of Negroes and Whites rooming together is not an issue we are forcing but one that is coming automatically now that we are understanding

³⁹ James Lyles, Interview with Kevin M. Watson, September 9, 2010.

⁴⁰ Cecil Williams, Letter to Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, October 22, 1955, in *Black Seminarians at Perkins*.

⁴¹ Cecil Williams, *I’m Alive! An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 58. Williams went on to become the pastor of Glide Memorial Church, a well-known congregation in San Francisco, California.

⁴² Williams, *I’m Alive!*, 58.

⁴³ Williams, *I’m Alive!*, 60.

each other as individual personalities.⁴⁴

The perspective of the four African-American students who lived on campus is further seen in the letter they wrote to the housing director, Bill Berner, explaining their decision to room with each other. In their letter Riley, Hawkins, Lyles, and Williams emphasized that the usual method of consultation with the Dean had been observed and they had made the decision based on these conversations. The students described this process in their own words:

Since we have been students of Perkins School of Theology, the four of us and Dean Cuninggim have established a practice of having face-to-face conversations in which we iron out both minor and major problems. Recently, one of the procedures carried last year in regards to us, namely, rooming arrangements, seemed to have been a matter that has provoked serious concern. In view of this concern, Dr. Cuninggim shared with each of us, as is usual, the problem.⁴⁵

At one level, then, the students, after consulting with the Dean of Perkins, were able to make their own decision. And yet, the students occasionally made decisions that were distasteful to them. The controversy over rooming with white students is one example. The letter continues:

After having discussed the problem and realizing its far reaching affects, we decided not to room with white students. In light of the situation, we regard our decision as a retreat; although we accept it, we realize that it is a compromise that should not have to be taken. It should be borne in mind that what was done during last year was pleasing; and the whole of Southern Methodist University should rejoice in having shared in such a forward, progressive, and fraternal step.⁴⁶

One aspect of Dean Cuninggim's policy on mutual consultation, then, is that it created a structure that helped the students address the complicated reality of being pioneers of integration while exercising their role as agents in the process.

An interesting postlude to this piece of the story of the integration of Perkins is that Merrimon Cuninggim's successor, Joseph Quillian, reintegrated the student dormitories. When a new housing director asked Quillian how roommates should be assigned, Quillian indicated they should be assigned as they were received, which resulted in their being four sets of interracial housing assignments. When Willis Tate, the current President of SMU, was made aware of this, he asked Quillian to revert to the previous practice. According to Grimes, Quillian refused, saying, "that he did not see how that could be done without causing a very negative reaction, and added that he felt he would have to resign if such a move were ordered." Tate responded, "Well, let's not get heroic about it" and took the matter to the Perkins Trustees. At the Trustees meeting Mrs. Perkins reportedly put the

⁴⁴ James A. Hawkins, Letter to Dr. Merrimon Cuninggim, August 6, 1953, in *Black Seminarians at Perkins*.

⁴⁵ Negail R. Riley, James A. Hawkins, Jim V. Lyles, A. Cecil Williams, Letter to Mr. Bill Berner, quoted in Merrimon Cuninggim, Letter to Dr. Charles Braden, August 7, 1964, 7.

⁴⁶ Cited in Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, p. 7.

matter to rest, in favor of leaving the interracial housing assignments. She said, “Now isn’t that grand? We’ve taken another step, and this is something we can be grateful for. Perkins is known around the world as a progressive school . . . Besides, what would I tell my Women’s Society in Wichita Falls if we went back on this advance?”⁴⁷ Lois Perkins’ statements and actions exemplify the important role of Methodist women in advancing social causes during this period.

James Lyles: A Living Witness

At least with the benefit of hindsight, Lyles was aware of his own agency as a black student in a white seminary. When asked in a phone interview in 2010 about how he felt about giving in on fully integrating the dorms, Lyles responded:

The decision to room together in the second year rolled off our backs like water off of a duck’s back. Because we respected each other, we liked each other. We were simply responding to a reality that could have become something that none of us would have been proud of So we didn’t look at it as something that was imposed on us, but we accepted it as the best solution to a problem. And it was the best solution because the end result was not injured by it.

Lyles’ response highlights his understanding of the “end result” or the ultimate goal of his presence at Perkins—“to get a significant theological education and to graduate.”⁴⁸ His focus on graduating kept Lyles from being sidetracked by lesser concerns, like who his roommate was.

Lyles’ account of how he was admitted as part of the first class of African-American students at Perkins is both humble and humorous. Lyles recounted that “Dr. Cuninggim asked Dr. Harris if he had a brilliant student and Dr. Harris said he did not have a brilliant student, but did have a good student who would not quit until the job was done.” Lyles continued by recounting that when Merrimon Cuninggim called Bishop Frank Smith about his desire to admit Lyles to Perkins, “Merrimon said he must have caught Smith when he was in the midst of something else. Smith said ‘Merrimon, how many have you already admitted?’ Merrimon said, ‘Four.’ Smith said, ‘one more won’t hurt.’”⁴⁹

Consistent with his mentor’s assessment that Lyles wouldn’t quit until the job was done, Lyles clearly remembered that there was one key goal or object to his time as a student at Perkins, “to get a significant theological education and to graduate.” Lyles also recalled the significance that this goal would be accomplished as “regular students.” In fact, Lyles recounted being singled out in a class with Joseph W. Matthews, the instructor in Ethics, where Matthews:

Confronted me right in the class . . . to remind me what I had been so well acquainted with, the victimization of white racism. And how in spite of the debilitating effect

⁴⁷ Grimes, 158-159. Grimes citation is based on a 1981 video interview of Quillian.

⁴⁸ Lyles, Interview.

⁴⁹ Lyles, Interview.

it may have had upon me, not to expect, nor would I receive any special teaching. That what would be expected of me would be the same that was expected of other students. That I was admitted as a regular student, which meant that I would not receive any preferential treatment whatsoever. Being singled out like that, being in a new environment, doing a new thing, shocked me greatly. But I never forgot it.

Lyles remembered this as a positive experience, “Although I was shocked, my response to it was positive in that I disciplined myself to do everything I could to meet the requirements of his course. And I appreciated what he said.”⁵⁰ Later in the interview, Lyles credited several of the key leaders at SMU during this period for his being consistently treated as a regular student. He commented:

I think that when you look back over an experience like that, there is something about the institution and the people who were involved in the institution at the time they decided to go in the direction that they went. I never met anyone who said that we were special students. That we should have been treated differently, or that we were different.⁵¹

The only time in the interview when Lyles disagreed with another person’s summary of his time at Perkins was related to his status as a regular student who did not receive special treatment. Having read *A History of the Perkins School of Theology* by Howard Grimes, Lyles remembered Grimes saying “that he had no doubt some of the professors may have given us preferential treatment. I take issue with that. Because if they did, I wouldn’t have had to struggle like I did.”⁵² It would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether a professor ever gave one of the African-American students preferential treatment in their grading. However, what is most significant is that Lyles did not feel like things were being made easier for him. And he recalled particular examples (such as Joseph W. Matthews’ class) where it was stated explicitly to him that this would not happen.

Lyles’s memory that a key part of the significance of his experience was that he was a regular student is consistent with Merrimon Cuninggim’s general strategy or approach to integration, as well as with the recollections

⁵⁰ Lyles, Interview. Lyles humorously further added that Joseph Matthews “was a confrontational person, even when dealing with angels, and he was even more confrontational when dealing with people.” That Matthews’ comments to Lyles were largely in keeping with his reputation is further confirmed by Howard Grimes in *A History of the Perkins School of Theology*, “Matthews was a unique character who liked to shock students out of their complacency and made a strong impression on the school in the first few years that he taught at Perkins,” 97.

⁵¹ Lyles, Interview.

⁵² Lyles, Interview. Lyles did not cite a specific reference to Grimes’ work, however, the relevant passage that Lyles had in mind was most likely, “In some instances, to be sure, they practiced ‘segregation in reverse’ by taking into account their inadequate undergraduate education in the giving of grades,” Grimes, 112. Lyles’ objection is understandable. In fairness to Grimes, however, the entire passage is a bit more balanced. It reads, “The students welcomed the new students enthusiastically. They had raised a special scholarship on their behalf, and so far as I could determine at the time treated them simply as fellow students. Faculty and staff in general acted similarly. In some instances, to be sure, they practiced ‘segregation in reverse’ by taking into account their inadequate undergraduate education in the giving of grades,” Grimes, 111-112.

of other students of the time and faculty members. One of the key themes of Cuninggim's approach to integration was that the African-American students were being admitted simply as students, there were no qualifiers. In the memorandum Cuninggim wrote defending the presence of the African-American students, he began by describing the action the Board of Trustees had taken, which made "it possible for Perkins School of Theology to admit Negroes to the student body." Cuninggim reasoned that the Trustees action would have been unnecessary if it were only to allow African-American students to attend class. He wrote, "Prior to this action, Negroes had been allowed to sit in the classrooms and listen to the lectures along with regular students, but had not been given regular academic credit. The Board's action would have been unnecessary, had it not meant that thenceforth the way was open for them to become regular students."⁵³

From the perspective of at least one other student, and one faculty member, it was also clear that the black students were seen as regular students, and treated as regular students. James M. Ward, a professor at Perkins from 1960 to 2001, remembered being accused of grading black students too harshly. Ward remembered that "about twice in my experience, I had black students accuse me of racism for the grade that they got . . . an unsatisfactory grade. I believe that I was able to disabuse them of that in a hurry . . . to my knowledge it (race) never had any effect whatsoever in my grading."⁵⁴ Ward was not on the faculty while Lyles was a student and he was speaking to the accusation of grading unfairly in a way that penalized black students, not in going too easy on them. Nevertheless, his recollection reinforces the idea that race was not considered by Perkins faculty in their grading.

Nathaniel Turner-Lacy offered yet another perspective to Lyles' concern to emphasize that black students were not given special treatment at Perkins. Turner-Lacy, who was the first African-American faculty member hired by Perkins School of Theology, was also a student at Perkins prior to being hired by the school. As a student, Turner-Lacy recalled a conversation with Dean Cuninggim that reinforces the importance that was placed on the black students being "regular students." Turner-Lacy recalled a meeting with Cuninggim and a group of black students where Cuninggim said, "Why are you telling people that you want to do these things? Why don't you just do it like other students?"⁵⁵ Turner-Lacy felt that by putting it in this way, it "just really opened everything up to us, you know. Because what he was saying to us is you don't need any permission, you're a student . . . that was just a wonderful permission he gave."⁵⁶

Thus, Lyles and others gave evidence that a serious attempt was made to treat the first class of black students at Perkins like regular students, though

⁵³ Cuninggim, "Memorandum," 1.

⁵⁴ James M. Ward, Interview with Kevin M. Watson, September 7, 2010.

⁵⁵ Nathaniel Turner-Lacy, Interview with Kevin M. Watson, September 9, 2010. These are Turner-Lacy's words, as he recalled Cuninggim saying them.

⁵⁶ Turner-Lacy, Interview.

the very process of mutual consultation that Cuninggim so often highlighted is a sobering reminder that the experience of the black students at Perkins was not, in fact, an entirely “regular” experience. From Lyles’ perspective, the important emphasis was not on whether or not there were obstacles or hurdles that were faced by the black students. The details of the story of their time at Perkins provide several examples that they were not treated exactly like every other white student. The key point for Lyles was that they were not treated as students of inferior intellectual ability. When Lyles was asked, “So, from your perspective you were treated like every other student?” His response was, “Every other student. No preferential treatment.”⁵⁷

The final theme from the 2010 interview with James Lyles was his emphasis on interactions with white faculty members who wanted to overcome their own racist heritage and to stand in solidarity with the black students. Lyles mentioned three particular instances. The first was related to the process of mutual consultation with Dean Cuninggim. During conversations in the Dean’s office, there was typically one less chair than there were people in the room. Lyles remembered that Cuninggim made sure each student had a chair and he sat on a trash can.⁵⁸

The second example involved what Lyles described as “a fearful encounter with some things that you don’t like to remember.” Word spread in the broader Dallas community that the black students at Perkins were “associating with the girls.” As a result, “A negative segment of the Dallas community threatened to come on campus.” In response to this threat, Joseph Matthews called a campus meeting to identify the threat and discuss possible responses to it. Lyles remembered that after Matthews laid out the issues he said, “We can’t keep them from coming on campus. We can’t keep them from rounding up the black students and doing them harm. But one thing I can say is if they come for the black students, they have to take me too.” Then, Matthews “invited the community to stand with him.” Lyles guessed that, “somebody in that room went and told the opposition the declaration that he made, for from that date to this one we have not seen or heard from that group.” For Lyles, this was “a very heroic stand.”⁵⁹

The final example of a professor seeking to move beyond his racist heritage involved one of Perkins’ most famous professors, Albert C. Outler. Lyles’ recollection of this encounter with Outler occurred in the context of his graduation ceremony and his memory of how important his graduation was for his parents. Just before graduation, Lyles received the award for outstanding achievement in the field of social ethics. After receiving the award, Lyles recounted that:

Albert Outler met me in the hall and said to me, “I couldn’t be prouder of any period in my life than this period, to see Negro students graduate from Perkins.” And I don’t know what my response was, but whatever my response was, it generated this

⁵⁷ Lyles, Interview.

⁵⁸ Lyles, Interview.

⁵⁹ Lyles, Interview.

sub statement from him. He said, "I want you to know that my great-grandfather was a General in the Confederate Army." I didn't think much of that either, because I was too interested in graduation. As I matured, I heard what he was saying. He was saying, "I, a professor, have come a long ways, baby!"⁶⁰

As Lyles surveyed his time at Perkins at the end of our interview, he concluded, "it was not easy, it was a major challenge. But if I had to do it over again, I would gladly do it."⁶¹

Conclusion

Though Perkins School of Theology was far ahead of its time in integrating in the early 1950s, the number of black students at Perkins did not markedly increase in the coming decade. In 1956, Zan W. Holmes, Jr., who would become the second African-American faculty member at Perkins, was the only African-American student in his class.⁶² More than a decade later, in 1969, a photograph of the entering class reveals that it was overwhelmingly white.⁶³ Robert E. Hayes, Jr. was one of the few African-American students in this class. Hayes, who became a Bishop in The United Methodist Church, remembered that 1969 was a "very volatile year." When Hayes came to Perkins, he remembered that "there were about half a dozen persons of color" when he arrived at Perkins. Having come from Houston-Tillotson College, a predominantly African-American school and having never attended an integrated primary or secondary school, attending Perkins "was a very difficult transition."⁶⁴ The transition was difficult for Hayes because there were few African-American students at Perkins and because there were no African-American faculty members at Perkins when he was admitted.

While Perkins' approach to the Civil Rights Movement was not without faults, it was far ahead of the curve for a southern institution. African-American students such as Cecil Williams and James Lyles recognized that Perkins was not a utopia. However, the administration and the students both recognized they were swimming upstream in a broader context that continued to be hostile to racial integration. Perkins was located in the middle of a campus that itself continued to be segregated. The first African-American students were able to integrate some aspects of the University experience, such as sitting in the student section for home football games at the segre-

⁶⁰ Lyles, Interview. Outler also fits into the story of the integration of Perkins because his joining the faculty itself seems to have been related to a desire to help integrate a southern Methodist institution. Cuninggim recalled that Umphrey Lee "gave me permission to try to secure at least one distinguished faculty addition, to join the faculty at the same time that I was to come. . . . Albert Outler was that person, and one of the matters that he himself was eager to get assurance on was this question of whether the School stood ready to welcome Negro students. I gave him the assurance that President Lee had given to me, and I dare say that this had some weight in persuading him to accept the invitation" (Cuninggim, Letter to Braden, 2).

⁶¹ Lyles, Interview.

⁶² Zan W. Holmes, Jr., Interview with Kevin M. Watson, August 24, 2010. The first faculty member was Nathaniel Turner-Lacy. See Grimes, 149 and Allen, 216.

⁶³ Grimes, photos between pages 124 and 125.

⁶⁴ Bishop Robert E. Hayes, Jr., Interview with Kevin M. Watson, September 13, 2010.

gated Cotton Bowl. However, many aspects of the broader S.M.U. experience continued to resist the full participation of black students. This reality was exemplified by the reaction of the white undergraduate woman's mother who, upon hearing that her daughter was eating in the Student Union with an African-American, objected strongly and contacted the school. Thus, despite the fact that Perkins was, "the first voluntary desegregation of a major educational institution in the South," this achievement was not broadcast or publicly celebrated.⁶⁵ Cuninggim and others felt that Perkins would succeed at integrating the school only if the integration they aimed for was a fairly well-kept secret. With the benefit of several decades of hindsight, the magnitude of the integration of this school at this period in American history can begin to be fully appreciated.

In his 2010 interview, James Lyles put his own postscript on his experience as a student at Perkins. He described an encounter with a Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Kirkland, who graduated from Perkins in 1963. When Bishop Kirkland was introduced to Lyles and told he was a member of "the first five," Lyles remembered Kirkland saying he was "a historical figure, a trailblazer." Lyles matriculated at Perkins in the fall of 1952, more than three years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He and his colleagues began attending Perkins ten years before James Meredith was allowed to attend class at the University of Mississippi in the fall of 1962. And within the world of Southern Methodist theological education, the first black student did not enroll at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, GA until 1965.⁶⁶ Trailblazer, then, is not too strong a term for Lyles and the role that he and his colleagues played in integrating a school of theology at a Southern Methodist university.

⁶⁵ Cuninggim, *Perkins Led the Way*, 2.

⁶⁶ Boone M. Bowen, *The Candler School of Theology: Sixty Years of Service* (Atlanta: Candler School of Theology, Emory University, 1974), 115.