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### A God of Unity and a People of Division: Segregation in the Christian Churches of Arkadelphia, Arkansas

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A God of Unity and a People of Division:  
Segregation in the Christian Churches of Arkadelphia, Arkansas

Zackary Kelley

History 924: Research Seminar

April 8, 2019

## **Introduction**

“Civilizations have never gotten along healthily, and cannot get along healthily, without large quantities of factual information.”<sup>1</sup> Harry Frankfurt is professor emeritus at Princeton University and has spent ample time studying the nature of truth and the nature of “bulls\*\*t”, to use the same wording he uses. In *On Truth*, he explains the ins and outs of what truth is, what it really means, and just how essential it actually is. To spoil the book for you, truth is immensely important in the function of society and we should be doing everything to seek out the truth in all situations.

“Pastors have a lot of influence over their people... I believe it’s going to start with the leadership... The pastors have [the congregation’s] ears.”<sup>2</sup> This quote from pastor Hershall Williams shows just how much people from a small town like Arkadelphia are willing to listen to church leadership. I wanted to interview people and form relationships with the people that I would be studying and writing about, something that obviously cannot be done with every topic. And what better people to interview and form relationships with than the church leaders “who have the congregation’s ears”? As a Christian, I feel compelled to seek out the truth to help others, and myself, have a better relationship with God. As a historian, I feel compelled to seek out the truth in the past and bring to light what is hidden and has not been studied before for the purpose of bettering society with this newfound knowledge. Together, being a Christian historian, I want to bring into light a topic that has not been extensively studied that will give

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<sup>1</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Hershall Williams, (interview by Zackary Kelley, April 7, 2020, phone call interview).

God glory by bringing His people closer to one another, and I wanted a topic that affects my daily life in a spiritual way.

I have come a long way in my walk with Christ. I grew up in a household that went to church sometimes but was not an “every-week” thing. I never went to Sunday school or summer camps, and only went to vacation Bible school one summer because my friend did it. Saying all of this, I was not a strong Christian when I first decided to really try my best to live my life the way the Bible and God instructs us to live it. I slowly grew spiritually but until I got to OBU I did not see the importance of it and how much it really mattered. I was surrounded by Christ-like people who really cared for me and other students that lived for Christ. I joined a couple of Bible studies, started searching for a church home in Arkadelphia, started attending Refuge, a worship service for college students on Thursday nights, and started surrounding myself with other like-minded people seeking Christ. God continued, and thankfully still continues, to work on my heart for the rest of freshman year and every year since arriving at OBU.

God is not something that can be completely understood by the human brain. There are plenty of things that are created by man including racism, separation of people groups in communities, and prejudices. All of these human creations are rooted in sin and a part of human nature. If these things are so rooted in sin, then why is the Christian church as a whole not pursuing this problem with greater intensity? This question is one that I deeply want to get an answer to, especially in a community that has a Baptist university with over 1,500 students and about twenty-five Christian churches. Arkadelphia, Arkansas is a medium-to-smallish town an hour southwest of Little Rock and about an hour northeast of Texarkana and the Texas border.

This town in the “Bible Belt” was a part of the Confederacy during the Civil War and has a long history of segregated schools, businesses, and churches with its own rich history of slavery.

Segregation in American, Christian churches is my topic of choice. I had many interviews with pastors from Arkadelphia churches, predominantly black and white churches. The question that I raise is one of unity for the Christian religion as posed by the authors throughout scripture in the Old Testament as well as Jesus, Paul, John, Peter, and all of the writers in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> God clearly has set a future of complete unity through Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation as well as throughout the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament is a different story. God’s chosen people are Jewish and almost seem to be picked out and favored among those around them.

### ***Christianity Today***

Does this sense of division 2,000 years ago still affect the Christian religion today? Obviously, when looking at America, there is a long history of segregation in schools, workplaces, military settings, and yes - churches. The fuel for segregation in churches stems from the shipment of black Africans against their will to the British colonies in America and then the United States after independence, or at least, that is what Common Core history teaches us in grade school. The stemming of segregation in the Christian church might not stem from the Atlantic Slave Trade, but actually from long before the African slave trade. The European Catholic faith that once emphasized indulgences for sins, allowing for the rich to “buy their way

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<sup>3</sup> *Holy Bible*, New International Version, (The International Bible Society, 1973), Malachi 2:10, Exodus 4:22, Isaiah 28:16, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 12:12-13, Ephesians 4:11-13, 1 Peter 3:8, Matthew 23:8, Galatians 3:26-28.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 5:9-10, NIV Bible

into heaven” while the poor, including the serfs and slaves, were left to a longer sentence in purgatory, or even hell, because they could not pay for their sins in monetary value. Not even discussing the recognition of this false interpretation of the Bible, this system supported favoritism in the church for the rich.

Transitioning and fast-forwarding to America in the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th century, African Americans were (and still are), on average, making much less money as compared to their white counterparts. The question then arises, is there a separation in the church because of the long-term economic differences (still just an average) between African Americans and caucasians? Or does the separation come from the cultural differences from the times of slavery when African American slaves were converting to Christianity? Are the cultural differences so deeply ingrained that there might not be integration in American churches even today?

### ***The Importance of Discussing Segregation***

This paper is worth writing because I feel this is a very evident problem in Christianity, and in the words of Pastor Hershall Williams of Arkadelphia, “Whether people talk about it or not, it is an issue”.<sup>5</sup> Segregated churches are not a part of what God wants for His people and is not something that makes sense in any way from anything that God established through the New Covenant in his message for love for the lives of Christians.<sup>6</sup> We are commanded to love our brothers and sisters of the Christian faith but also to love our neighbor as ourselves, (a neighbor can be someone that we do not associate with ever because of their race, such as the Samaritan

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<sup>5</sup> Hershall Williams, interview.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 12:30-31, NIV Bible.

woman at the well).<sup>7</sup> So I cannot help but to question why Arkadelphia churches are so segregated. From small Arkadelphia churches to large Little Rock churches (where I am from), it seems to be the same; the most segregated time in America is Sunday morning before lunch. A time when Christians are supposed to be learning and growing in their spiritual lives from the God who does nothing but pour out grace, mercy, and love to people that are broken in their own sin and called to repent. So why don't these people unify in their own sinful nature with each other? Why is there such a division amongst people of all races?

I believe that every Christian needs to at least think about this topic of segregation in churches and should read this paper. The significance of this topic is nothing to brush off and pretend like it doesn't exist. We are not living in a time of slavery or a time of human ownership, (except for the rare, illegal cases), but white and black people are still separated from each other in a time of worship, praise, and communication with the same God that saves them both from the same sins. Without the religious aspect of this paper, someone could look into this through a sociological lens and read as to why humans interact the way they do with each other on a weekly basis as they decide on where to go to church and who to associate with in a certain location. While wearing an "economist hat," one can read this paper while looking at the economic differences that African Americans have compared to white people and how that might affect what church they attend.

Because I think that everyone should read this paper, maybe focusing on different aspects of it, depending on their interests, I intend to make the language of this paper easy to read. My vocabulary is already not the most impressive, by far, but my tone and the way I use my sentence

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<sup>7</sup> John 4, NIV Bible.

structure should make it so anyone will be able to read it with at least some understanding. The wording will not be the academic part of the paper, it will be in the topic, questioning, and research, instead, that I invest my heart into. The main primary source I use throughout the paper are the notes from interviews with the church leaders and other church members.

### **Methodology**

The methods I used to gather data were somewhat inhibited by restrictions placed by the government and by Ouachita Baptist University because of the pandemic known as COVID-19. I was able to attend a handful of Sunday services put on by different churches in Arkadelphia, but not as many as I would have liked. Gathering data from the World Population Review to see demographics of how many people live in the city, as well as the number of people classified as Caucasian, African American, as other races, was something I was still able to do away from the town. I was also able to interview church leaders from different churches and record our conversations so I could play them back and listen to them, but I would have much rather have had face to face conversations with local church pastors.

### **Historiography**

There are plenty of articles and scholarly writings on the segregation of churches in America, but there is a lack of historical articles or documents that record the segregation of churches in Arkadelphia. With a population of 10,000 people and most of which seem to go to a



church of some sort, Arkadelphia holds two universities, which have professors who are highly educated citizens that could have much to say on the topic of segregated churches. The only problem with this thinking is that most people do not look at Arkadelphia specifically. The broader topic of segregated churches seems to be appealing and leads article writers and discussions away from the town, and into the much larger area of Arkansas as a whole, or the United States.

The missing voices in the literature are the local church leaders. The African American church leaders in the community and the white church leaders in the community do not feel like segregated churches are a topic that should be discussed, because frankly, it's hard to talk about. It makes people uncomfortable. Jesus calls people to step out of their comfortable lives and to live a life of uncomfotability so that we can grow and strengthen our relationship with God, which would in turn strengthen our relationship with each other as we learn to love one another and see no boundaries. I plan on discussing this hard topic with those voices that need to be heard in the community and compiling their thoughts with other broader secondary sources as well as church records and the Arkansas Baptist State Convention notes to form this research paper that will hopefully put an end to segregated churches.

I want to eliminate the gap in literature that is found for segregated churches in Arkadelphia. I want to dive deep into this small town's rich history to discover why in particular this location has very segregated churches and possibly see why it is still the way that it is today. I want to eliminate this gap in the topic because I want segregation in Christian churches to end, to put it so plainly. It will not happen overnight and we might already be on our way to having very mixed churches in the rest of America, but it is very clear to me that Arkadelphia is not

close to having mixed churches. By bringing attention to the topic so close to where people live and by making it so real to them, I hope that my research and interviews will spark a movement in at least a few churches in Arkadelphia that will spread to other towns and potentially the rest of the segregated state.

The Arkansas Baptist State Convention Annuals are a great source for seeing what the topics of discussion throughout churches in Arkansas are dealing with. The Arkansas Baptist State Convention contains many churches in Arkadelphia and they are listed in the Annuals. The Red River district holds most of what we would think of as Arkadelphia's white churches in Arkadelphia and surrounding areas. There is a section that I focus on, that is sectioned off, titled "Race Relations." In the 10 years between 1958 and 1968, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention was using "Negro" still in its annuals and were separating talking about black people and white people. Even some Evangelical Christians were separating people based on their skin color, and even spent some time focusing on how to "save" black people through vacation Bible schools and missions. The end of the annuals are also full of how many people are added to specific church memberships and how many are lost. These can be compared with black churches in the area and why they are so much smaller.

Another source I used that was quite odd is an opinion article written for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette that wouldn't normally be seen and used as a primary source document, but Rex Nelson grew up in Arkadelphia and describes his childhood and the situation of segregation in town.<sup>8</sup> This first-hand account quotes from another boy, Robert L. Harris, who was the author's age at this time. Harris uprooted from Arkadelphia and left for California and Nelson

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<sup>8</sup> Rex Nelson, *Who's the RINO?* (Arkansas Online. Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, March 24, 2019).

describes why this was the case. The article is not long and does not specifically talk about churches in Arkadelphia, but this social history ties directly into the church community in the 1960's.

Out of all of the types of sources that I encountered and sought out, interviews are the bulk of my primary source information. My topic of segregated churches in Arkadelphia revolve around the church leaders in Arkadelphia who are over their separate church congregations and are seen as the leaders of the separate groups of people. I asked questions about what the churches are doing about the issue, if anything at all, how the church leaders feel about it being a moral issue and if it needs to be fixed by the churches or not, and get a feel for most of the churches that are mostly full of black church members as opposed to the ones that are full of white church members. Forming relationships by speaking with many leaders in the Arkadelphia community are what brings this paper to life. Real leaders talking about real problems in the community cannot be replaced with archives or journal articles.

### **Research and Analysis**

The topic of segregated churches in America has been brought to the popular spotlight among Christians and to the rest of America during the Civil Rights Movement in the 50's and 60's. There are plenty of Christian blogs today talking about the problem of segregated churches in America, and they are all seeming to talk about how much it is a problem and why it is a problem from a theological standpoint. These blogs bring up some good points, but they are lacking real, hard plans to fix the problem in small communities or cities. The classic - talk about

a problem but not fixing it. Other articles discuss the topic in a way of optimism, saying that America is on a track of having very integrated churches. Fairly well-known Christian icons in the music industry such as Lecrae, Propaganda, Clayton Jennings, and other Christian music artists/spokesmen are attacking the segregated church topic from an awareness standpoint. Raising awareness and rapping/singing/talking about the problem in all seriousness while quoting scripture and releasing these thoughts to fans around America. As a fan of Christian music artists, I tend to follow their thoughts while keeping my mind on what I believe is true in what God wants for my life and the lives of other Christians around me. Everything that I have heard personally, has opened my eyes to the problem through this awareness technique so that I see the sin in having a divided people every Sunday, and I hope it is also doing the same for other Christian listeners.

### ***The Role of Media, Culture, and Language***

When it comes to forms of media that are out there, there are plenty of people addressing the issue in the form of songs by African American artists. There are also church members and Christian church leaders that have spoken on the issue, not to mention Martin Luther King Jr.'s many speeches addressing the issue as well.

Language is another discipline that can be studied when it comes to segregated churches. There are a couple of Christian Korean Churches in Little Rock that are completely spoken in Korean which is cause for some division in race, mostly because the common American, no matter their race or ethnicity, does not speak Korean in the slightest. There are also plenty of Hispanic churches that only speak Spanish around the state of Arkansas. This provides the case

that language can and does provide a barrier that causes there to be some types of segregation in Christian churches. This is also not the case that I am directly looking at, for the churches in Arkadelphia, but this is also another theory to think about when it comes to plain non-language cultural differences in how churches are run.

Economics plays a role in the segregation of the American Christian church. There is plenty of data and research on neighborhoods and how they are often divided, if not always, by household income. Churches in Arkansas tend to be not as large as some megachurches you might find in Texas or other states in the US. Arkansas, and especially Arkadelphia churches tend to be close to neighborhoods and will attract members and visitors that live close by, because that's what people really care about right? Proximity and not the quality of the church leaders or body? Nevertheless, this ties directly into the economics and demographics of city layouts by household income and races within those city areas. Little Rock, for example, not a large city, but is so on the Arkansas-city scale, has parts of it that are more inclined to have households that house a richer, whiter population, and parts that are more likely to have a poorer population that just so happens to be mostly African American. Of course, there are exceptions in this scenario, as there almost always will be in these large scale cases, but the fact that there are divisions within the city by race based on income, prove that economics has a major role in the segregation of Christian Churches.

### ***Local Church Voices***

The purpose of this paper is not to cause more division in the Christian church over this topic, but to bring light to a topic that isn't brought up much and is hard to swallow sometimes.

In this section, I highlight conversations that I had with local church pastors from Third Street Baptist, Greater Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church, Gennesaret Missionary Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, and Second Baptist Church respectively. The interviews I conducted were by phone call and recorded on a separate device, not exactly how I had originally planned on meeting with the church leaders, but COVID-19 guidelines were followed by both parties during the interview process in all cases. I start with an interview with Greg Lathem from Third Street Baptist Church, the church that I was able to call home for most of my Junior and Senior year while attending Ouachita Baptist University.

### Third Street Baptist Church

Since 2004, Greg Lathem has been the pastor at Third Street Baptist Church, after serving as a student pastor in Carthage, Mississippi and a senior pastor in Philadelphia, Mississippi. According to Pastor Lathem, Third Street Baptist Church was started in 1953 by a group of Ouachita Baptist women, and still to this day, the church puts on a “Women’s Conference” every year. The church mails out letters and flyers about the conference to all the churches in Clark county, as well as putting it out on social media. In the last year that the conference was put on by the church, there were “right at 250 ladies this year at the conference... 60 to 65% would have been [women that came] from outside the church.”<sup>9</sup>

When asked about activities that Third Street Baptist participates in with other churches, pastor Lathem said, “We’ve just not had great communication, and I don’t think it’s because of not wanting to communicate, it’s just, we have not made the effort and we need to do better.”

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<sup>9</sup> Greg Lathem, (interview by Zackary Kelley, April 2, 2020, phone call interview).

Third Street does have something that other churches in Arkadelphia do not have, and that is a basketball gym. They utilized this space well and host Crossover Basketball every year.

Crossover Basketball replaced Upward Basketball because the price needed to be reduced for families to be able to afford being a part of the program. “We have between 175 and 200 kids... pretty much starting in October and going through the end of January coming through our program there, and I would say 85% of those are from outside of our church.”<sup>10</sup> There are devotions given throughout the year for the kids (and families that are attending). All families are given information for possibly attending Third Street Baptist Church.

“I think God’s people should be able to worship together and not see color as a separator.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly pastor Lathem feels as if there is a problem with racially segregated churches, but he understands why people may feel uncomfortable. When asked what he thought of the problem he said, “What I see more than anything is maybe an uncomfortableness... I don’t think it’s a matter of not feeling like [African Americans] are welcome, I think sometimes it’s a matter of looking around and going ‘ok there’s 90%, 95% caucasian and I’m the only African American here today.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Greater Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church

Pastor Lewis A. Shepherd Jr. is the lead pastor at Greater Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Having been at Greater Pleasant Hill for twenty years, and in Arkadelphia longer than that while he attended Ouachita Baptist to receive his bachelor’s

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

degree, he is a well known church leader and a scholar among church leaders in the area with his PhD. From 1980 -2009 Dr. Shepherd worked for Ouachita Baptist University's TRiO program.

I attended Greater Pleasant Hill for a Sunday morning service in March, before COVID-19 caused restrictions to be placed on gatherings. When I walked in the main sanctuary, I was the only white person in there. All of the greeters, church leaders, and congregation were not of my skin color, which made me immediately uncomfortable. Keep in mind that being uncomfortable is not a bad thing, especially in a situation like this one, it can be good to put yourself in uncomfortable situations to ultimately be comfortable with new situations. I was greeted when I walked in and sat by myself in one of the pews towards the back right. At the beginning of the service, new guests that had never been to Greater Pleasant Hill were asked to stand up, so 4 people stood up in the congregation, including myself. A microphone was passed around to each of us to tell the rest of the church our names. The rest of the service went on. We all sang songs, participated in communion, listened to Dr. Shepherd preached a message from *1 Peter 1:1-5*, and talked amongst each other on the way out the door after we sang more songs praising God for his goodness. My experience there was different than it was when I compared it to attending First Baptist, Second Baptist, Third Street Baptist, Fellowship Arkadelphia, and Park Hill. Not a bad different, just different. A different culture in the way we sang, participated in the lesson being taught, and talked to each other at the door when coming in and going out. A type of different that was really nice to experience, and one that I had wished I was able to go back to and experience again before leaving Arkadelphia for the rest of the school year.

I asked Dr. Shepherd what he thought of the racial segregation that occurs around Arkadelphia and around the American South, to which he replied, "My thoughts are very simple.



People should be comfortable wherever they worship and they should be able to worship wherever they desire.”<sup>13</sup> But he remains optimistic for the future as he believes that churches in Arkadelphia will become more integrated than they are today, and he believes the main cause for this integration will be the involvement of the two colleges in town. “I’ve seen dynamics change from twenty years ago, so I have no doubt in my mind in one-hundred years that it will certainly change... It’s not going as fast as I would like to see it go, but it is heading in the right direction.”<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Shepherd did a great job of welcoming me to Greater Pleasant Hill and so did the other church members, so when he told me in the interview that he tries his hardest to make sure the church doors are open to any and everyone, it rang true in my own experience. But I did not feel welcome as I was about to walk in the doors to the largest African American church in Arkadelphia. I felt nervous and a little worried about what people there might think or say, and this is not to do with anything Greater Pleasant Hill did or any actions other than my inner thoughts showing their fears. The welcome I received after walking through the doors and sitting in the service put my worries, concerns, and fears aside. But what if I had never walked in the church? Would that fear of being uncomfortable still live inside of me? I am certain it would.

### Gennesaret Missionary Baptist Church

Hershall Williams is an OBU graduate who worked with Dr. Lewis Shepherd in Camden, Arkansas before moving to Arkadelphia, where Williams followed him to work at the church where Dr. Shepherd is currently the pastor, Greater Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, before that he

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis A. Shepherd Jr., (interview by Zackary Kelley, March 21, 2020, phone call interview).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

worked with him at the New Haven Baptist Church of Camden, AR. Both Hershall Williams and Dr. Lewis Shepherd are African-American citizens in Arkadelphia. Williams eventually was asked to be the pastor of Gennesaret Missionary Baptist Church in Arkadelphia in 2018, but has owned Imperial Auto Inc. in Arkadelphia since 2013, so he has been a leader in the city for almost a decade.

The transparency of Pastor Williams's thoughts made our interview so raw and so real, something that is so hard to do with this topic, and he talks about the importance of being transparent with me and with each other in the community to fix the problem. When asked if he thinks Arkadelphia would ever come together in the church setting, he responded with a simple statement, "Do I think it will happen? No... I don't see leadership desiring to bring that restoration."<sup>15</sup> "You might have a pastor here and there," he says as he describes the relationship that he and Pastor Jimmy Darby share.<sup>16</sup> But, he makes it clear that he does not think there would be any real leadership stepping up to make the change. This does not mean he has no passion for it, and it certainly doesn't mean that he doesn't have any ideas of how it should be fixed. "The two cultures of people don't really understand each other... You don't understand anyone until you spend time with them."<sup>17</sup> Think about that. You don't really understand someone until you spend time with them.

If someone has not been to the beach, but they are told what it looks like, what the sand feels like, how hot it is in the summertime, and how many people are there, that someone would start to get an idea in their head of what that place might be like, even though they have not been

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<sup>15</sup> Hershall Williams, interview.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

there to experience it themselves. The same goes for people, same skin color or not, we are told what other people are like, all the bad things about them, and what their jobs are or what they like to do in their free time. By doing this, we are depending on whoever is telling us the information to be completely unbiased and truthful, which is usually never the case. Frankfurt said it well, “We suppose that our friends are generally honest with us, and we take this pretty much for granted. We tend to trust whatever they say... because we feel comfortable and safe with them.”<sup>18</sup> We listen to the people we trust to give us good information, but like Pastor Williams said, you don’t really understand someone until you spend time with them.

So how do we go about changing ourselves? Pastor Williams did not think that starting out worshipping the Lord through song would be a good start because of the cultural differences in worship, but instead said, “I think sitting down and eating would be a good start..... I think just sitting down and having a Christian fellowship... at a Lake DeGray.”<sup>19</sup> The solution, according to Pastor Williams, is having all of the local church leaders get together and form a relationship with each other, like the one he and Pastor Darby have. Next, they should do exactly what he said, do something that everyone likes to do across all cultures - eat.

The Arms Around Arkadelphia program is one way to unify churches in the form of activities. This program costs nothing for the people and is only offered to groups who can’t afford home repairs. They receive services from usually retired people with some sort of building backgrounds, from First Baptist and Gennesaret Baptist (along with other people in the community that offer to help). Pastor Williams also said that Greater Pleasant Hill offers a unity

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<sup>18</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*, 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> Hershall Williams, interview.

service every year with the National Baptists Convention, which mostly hosts predominantly African American Churches in Arkadelphia.

### First Baptist Church

Jimmy Darby is the current lead pastor at First Baptist in Arkadelphia and he has been at the church for about 12 years so far. Before coming to Arkadelphia, Darby lived in Fayetteville and then moved to Conway before moving to Arkadelphia in 2008. Our conversation was just like the rest of the interviews I had with other church leaders, over the phone and recorded on another device, because of meeting restrictions in place because of COVID-19. One of the first questions I asked pastor Darby was about any activities that First Baptist does to connect with other churches around town, to which he replied with the same answer that pastor Williams did; the Arms Around Arkadelphia program.

Arms Around Arkadelphia is a summer program that First Baptist started and is the head of. It is run completely by members of the church and opens it up for any other churches to help out as a group or just on their own, and Hershall Williams described the mission of Arms Around Arkadelphia, which is explained in the above section of this paper. Pastor Darby mentioned that Arms Around Arkadelphia is about reaching out and connecting churches in the area. “The design of that program is also that it would be one that people from different churches would participate in... Depending on the year, different churches will jump in and do that... First United Methodist has been really good in partnering with us on that. Gennesaret Baptist Church here in town has also been a good partner church with us.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Darby, (interview by Zackary Kelley, April 3, 2020, phone call interview).

This project is fairly well-known around Arkadelphia, but advertisement for the program around different churches happens organically by word of mouth. A downside to the program happening in the summer is how thousands of college students move out of their college dorms and apartments and out of Arkadelphia for the summer hiatus. Many churchgoing college students that attend Ouachita Baptist University or Henderson University miss out knowing that Arms Around Arkadelphia is an opportunity to mix churches and serve those in need.

I asked Pastor Darby about other activities that First Baptist participates in alongside other churches, “there are not really any on-going things they’re more just like occasional events,” to which he goes on to describe “back-to-school” drives, mixed worship events with St. Paul’s AME, the pastor from First Baptist (before Jimmy Darby was the pastor) and the pastor from St. Paul’s AME “switched pulpits for a day” to get to know the other congregation, and one event that stuck out to me that was described as “we basically changed up our morning worship schedule on this one sunday, so that our choir could go sing at [St. Paul’s] and we ended up doing a really abbreviated, stripped down version of our normal service... to accomodate people who wanted to go to both.”<sup>21</sup>

Pastor Darby described the church culture he has felt since living in Arkadelphia for over a decade and he has “felt like the churches here, in what I’ve experienced, get along really well... Even if we don’t have like a ton of, you know, specific events that we do on a regular like on-going basis.. the spirit of cooperation is really good.”<sup>22</sup> When asked why he felt like Arkadelphia had that spirit of cooperation like he mentioned he said that part of the reasoning for that would be the size of the town, which allows you to know and see a lot of people in town. He

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

said that having a Baptist College in a town the size of Arkadelphia helps, because there are so many students that are united by their school, but will sprinkle themselves to different churches around the town, which brings unity.

Pastor Darby then speaks on the topic of churches being competitive with each other and how that can be blinding to actual church problems that should accrue more focus from the members and pastors. “When churches get competitive with each other, it’s typically competitive in terms of membership size... A lot of that comes from... not seeing what the real issues and problems are in our communities and in the world.”<sup>23</sup> He is exactly right. Unity among churches should be something that comes naturally, instead of becoming individualized and racing to get something like a better coffee shop put in the lobby, or having a nicer kids hang-out place than the next church building. Not every church focuses on how many members they can get or other superficial things that can make them seem competitive, and that is not the message I am trying to send, but there are other problems and small issues that can take the fore-front of the church's minds instead of real issues that need to be discussed.

I questioned pastor Darby about the current state of Arkadelphia in terms of racially segregated churches and if it was a problem or if things were ok as it is, to which he replied, “Right now, it could be better.”<sup>24</sup> He backed up his statement by describing an instance that happened within the last 10 years or so, when a group pushed for Pine Street to have the honorary name “Martin Luther King Blvd.” According to pastor Darby, this was a pretty controversial issue that divided the town. Pine street is probably the most well known and well traveled street in Arkadelphia. It starts at Pine Square Apartments, close to OBU’s campus, and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

runs through Arkadelphia, past the exits to I-30, and turns into Arkansas Highway 8 connecting Arkadelphia to Glenwood.

Another very disturbing, racially charged issue in Arkadelphia was brought up by pastor Darby in our interview. “I was really taken aback when I found out that [Arkadelphia High School], they alternate white and black homecoming queens every year.”<sup>25</sup> If you have to reread that quote, feel free to do that. It is hard to believe in 2020 that a high school is alternating the possibility of winning homecoming queen based on the color of a student’s skin color.

The solution to mixing church cultures lies in the staff of the church, according to pastor Darby. Hiring people from different backgrounds would allow for mixed worship styles and a mixed culture within the church buildings. “I’ve talked to our church about it, I feel like our should probably be a good representation of our community in terms of race, and our’s isn’t.”<sup>26</sup> The first step in fixing a problem is recognizing that there is a problem. Pastor Darby recognizes that there is a problem in the community and in the separate churches around Arkadelphia.

### Second Baptist Church

Louie Heard has been the lead pastor of Second Baptist Church since August of 2017. Pastor Heard explains that Second Baptist is, “a majority white, while that certainly is not my desire, in fact it was one of the things when I came here, said ‘I’d really like us to, kinda, bridge that gap more’ and the more I have talked and the more I have tried to do that, there’s not resistance.”<sup>27</sup> Pastor Heard’s intentions are to “bridge a gap” as he said, to bring churches in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Louie Heard, (interview by Zackary Kelley, March 23, 2020, phone call interview).

community together, but there seems to be trouble communicating with other pastors in the city. Thinking back to pastor Williams' goal and first step to achieve mixed churches, which was having all of the church leaders in town gather together to have a conversation about race and how to fix the issue, we see that pastor Heard thinks there is a communication problem. Nevertheless, he has been reaching out to different churches and church leaders to try and form relationships in the short time he has been in Arkadelphia.

Pastor Heard's message that he said he would like all Christians to know is this; "There is a level of intentionality that has to take place, on both sides... If we just intentionally sit down and have a cup of coffee together and realize how closely aligned we really are. And I think that's the main thing I would want people to do is get to know each other."<sup>28</sup> Ultimately Pastor Heard has a pure mindset when it comes to the future of the Christian Church as a whole. "We have to see ourselves as God sees us... When we start putting our focus, on our determination on what God desires more than what we desire, then some of those walls will start coming down."<sup>29</sup>

### ***Division***

The people that have written about the topic of church segregation have either done so because of a strong personal significance or cultural significance. The nature of the topic of church segregation has a strong personal connection with some people that truly believe there is a moral and spiritual problem with the way that Sunday mornings are, from a racial viewpoint. The division strikes a tone in them (and me if we are being honest), that would cause them to feel compelled to raise questions, research, and write about the problem of segregation that continues

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



to go on today. From a cultural viewpoint, this racial divide makes the 1960's seem a lot closer than saying that the Civil Rights Movement was "50-something years ago." Having just attended Greater Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, a historically black church, I can tell you that the culture is quite different from the average "white" church in Arkadelphia or Little Rock.

I've attended a predominantly white church all of my life without having ever attended a black church, or any other church that might speak a language other than English. The church members of Greater Pleasant Hill Baptist Church were extremely welcoming to me. The pastor and reverends made sure that everyone in the church building heard my name at least once, something that was not familiar to me as I stood up at the beginning of the service as the only white person in a building of at least 100 churchgoers to speak into a microphone and tell everyone my name and where I was from. Culturally, I could go on and on about the many differences there were in my experience, and this could cause many to be curious as to how and why people worshipping the same God would be so separate and have very different ways of worshipping Him on a Sunday morning, right across the street from each other.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Research proved to be much harder than anticipated for a few reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many universities, including Ouachita Baptist, to close down and force the students to move out of university housing, which included me. Interviewing local pastors and trying to form relationships with them while being away took away some of the excitement of having face to face interactions. Thanks to technology, nevertheless, I was still able to contact

many pastors and speak with them over the phone, but I believed that if the church leaders were emailed or in other ways contacted by me, then they would have wanted to talk to me about the issue of segregation in church, because this is a real issue that I'm sure they care greatly about. It took a while for some of them to get back in contact with me, because of the crazy situation that the Spring of 2020 became, and no blame should be put on anyone for being too busy.

I had hoped to gain explicit knowledge about the church's congregation involving church member numbers (or access to them) as well as how each person feels about the topic of segregated churches. Also, I would have liked to see the amount of money that is tithed by each church, and compare them and what culture might have to do with segregation in the form of financial giving. I would love to go to the local churches (after social distancing has ended) to look up the church memberships and attend the local churches, like I was unable to do. It would also be great to have records and journals of slave owner's slaves that possibly went to church either with their owners or without in their own setting.

### **Conclusion**

The topic of segregation in American churches, if we are going to that broad, or that specific if you look at it that way, is not only a very historical topic, but it is quite the interdisciplinary topic when it comes down to it. The history of segregated churches in America spans back to the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, but as far as how it fits in with other disciplines, it goes further back than the 16th century. In the Old Testament of the Bible, it is made clear to someone that has read that part of the Bible that God has set apart from the rest of

the world, the Jewish people to be His people that he looks after. This is because of the Mosaic Covenant that God had with His people, in other words, God was looking out and protecting the Jewish people and had a plan for them to marry each other, worship Him, and live in a certain place that He prepared for them, outside of other religions and people groups. This type of segregation is obviously different from today's segregated churches, one reason being that Christians are not under the Old Covenant, but are under the New Covenant, which states that all are welcome (and encouraged) to accept Jesus Christ as God's son and savior, and that all people should be loved and treated as God's children on Earth.

My paper topic touches on the segregation of churches in America, but mostly hones in on Arkadelphia specifically. The fact that Arkadelphia is a small town that is mostly a Christian community with OBU and Baptist churches all over the place, provided plenty of church leaders for me to contact, that was consequently taken away from me because of restrictions placed by Governor Hutchinson and President Trump amidst COVID-19. Segregation in American Christianity is a topic that might be hard to talk about, but that makes me want to study and write about it even more. I have a lot of questions involving faith and the church and I understand that some of that will never be answered. God is not something that can be completely understood by human brain capacity, but there are plenty of things that are created by man. Racism, separation of people groups in communities, and prejudices are human creations that are rooted in sin.

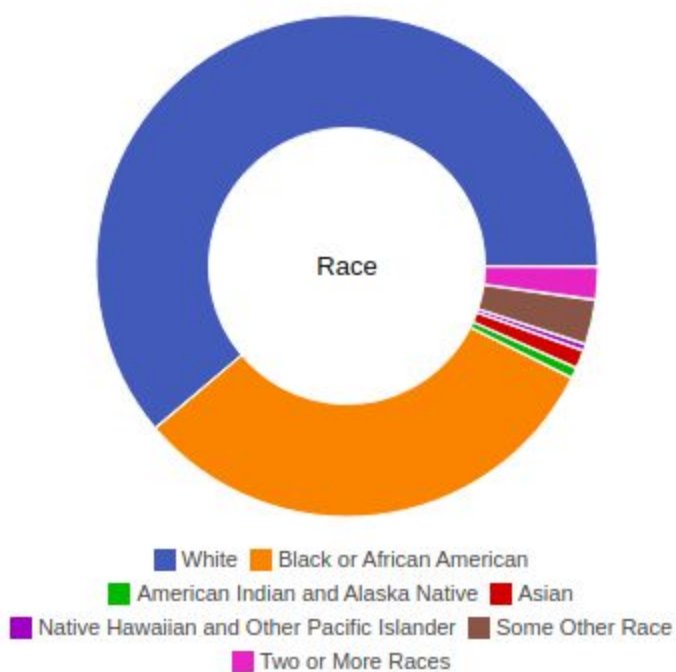
It seems to me that churchgoers in Arkadelphia are complacent in being segregated by choice and are not doing much to try and fix it. The first step in fixing something like this may be to start the conversation. One of the main reasons why I wrote this paper was to start this conversation and hopefully get the ball rolling with some change in the Arkadelphia community.

I want to bring light to this dark topic and start a conversation because I believe it should be fixed. Unity should be what Sunday mornings are about, but instead, people across the world are separating into different buildings to worship the same God. Our cultural differences are the result of who we choose to not spend our time with and who we choose to become. We cannot and we should not allow ourselves to live in ignorance, or to live in complacency. Frankfurt articulated the thought well when he said, “The problem with ignorance and error is, of course, that they leave us in the dark... We do not know where we are. We are flying blind. We can proceed only very tentatively, feeling our way.”<sup>30</sup> Without talking about the subject of segregated churches in a transparent manner, being completely honest with those around us, we will get nowhere.

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<sup>30</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*, 60-61.

Race	Population ▼	Percentage
White	6,619	62.38%
Black or African American	3,385	31.90%
Some Other Race	276	2.60%
Two or More Races	194	1.83%
Asian	91	0.86%
American Indian and Alaska Native	38	0.36%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	8	0.08%



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<sup>31</sup> *Arkadelphia, Arkansas Population 2020*, World Population Review, 2020.

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