

November 11, 1965

Church Suit Questions
Integration Legality

By Jim Newton

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--A suit filed in Chancery Court here questions the legality of the action of First Baptist Church of Richmond last January when it voted to admit two Nigerian students as church members.

Six church members, along with "other members of the church with similar opinions," filed the suit, asking Judge William A. Moncure Jr. to rule that the church's vote to admit the Nigerians was invalid.

They cited a church constitution dated in 1827, which stipulates that established policies of the church cannot be changed without the vote of two-thirds of the white male members.

They further charged that the vote required by Roberts Rules of Order, under which the church was supposedly conducting its business, necessitated a two-thirds majority to change established policies.

During the business meeting on Jan. 20 when the action was taken, a total of 1,487 persons out of the 4,000 church members voted, and most of these voting were women. The vote was 724 to 554 in favor of admitting the Nigerians as members, a majority but not a two-thirds margin.

The petitioners charged that all actions of the church on Jan. 20 were invalid because: (1) the votes were cast by a mingled participation of men, women and children; (2) less than two-thirds of the white male members were present; and (3) less than two-thirds of the white members voting were in favor of accepting the two Negroes as members.

Theodore F. Adams, pastor of the church for the last 30 years, said that no one even knew the 1827 constitution existed at the time of the vote. He said that legal counsel had advised him that the old constitution was invalid.

He explained that several of the church members were disgruntled over the admission of the Nigerians, and one had asked the church historian after the action if an old constitution existed. The historian, after much research, dug out the old records.

Adams, who said he deeply regrets the suit was ever filed, hopes the plaintiffs will drop the entire matter. He called the petition "a violation of Christian spirit."

A committee has been appointed by the deacons to ask the six petitioners to withdraw their suit, but Adams said the committee had not been able to contact the petitioners a week after the suit was filed.

The two Nigerian students, meanwhile, are faithfully attending church services, said Adams. "They're sorry all this trouble has come up, but they've got a wonderful spirit and attitude about it."

The Nigerians are Adedokun A. Oshoniyi and Gideon S. A. Adegbile, both students at Virginia Union University, a Baptist school, and both sons of Nigerian Baptist ministers.

Both were accepted into full church membership as exceptions to a church policy dating back to 1840 which stated Negroes would be members of their own churches, not the First Baptist Church. African slaves asked in 1840 to leave the church to set up their own church. Until then, Negroes worshipped with whites at the church.

Significantly, many staff members of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, which sent the missionaries to Nigeria who led the boys' fathers to Christianity, are members of the historic First Baptist Church of Richmond.

Had the two Nigerians been refused membership, Baptist mission leaders feared repercussions would have been heard around the world and Baptist foreign missions would have suffered losses.

Now there appears to be a chance that their membership might be declared invalid.

The same week the suit was filed, the church voted my mail ballot to create a special committee to consider all applications for church membership, regardless of race.

The committee, to be formed after a December deacons' meeting, will probably not be able to do much until after the court suit is settled, since the action setting up the procedure for creating the committee was initiated in the January meeting held invalid by the objectors.

The following week, about 300 members of the church voted unanimously to finance the legal defense for the six church members listed as respondents in the suit. The expenditure would be subject to approval of the church's finance committee or its chairman, but this approval is considered a formality.

Technically, the suit was not filed against the church, nor its pastor. Named as "respondents" were three trustees of the church, its chairman and secretary of the deacons, and the chairman of the special study committee which recommended creation of the committee to consider all membership applications.

The respondents have until Nov. 21 to answer the charges. Adams said he did not know when a hearing would be held.

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Illinois Convention
Debates Business

11-11-65

MARION, Ill. (BP)--The 59th annual convention of Southern Baptists in Illinois approved changes in its constitution, adopted a budget of nearly one million dollars, and debated routine convention business matters long and hard during sessions at the First Baptist Church here.

The discussions centered around three issues--a proposal to increase the convention's percentage of giving to Southern Baptist mission causes through the denomination's Cooperative Program, plans for construction of a Baptist student center complex at Southern Illinois University, and a study committee report dealing with the location of state offices.

Messengers voted to increase the percentage of the convention's contributions to Southern Baptist mission causes by five percent, by one per cent each year.

In five years, the division will be on a ratio of 60-40 per cent, compared to the current 65-35 per cent. Vote on the proposal, after lengthy debate, was 80 to 60 in favor of increasing the SBC percentage.

A proposal to delay construction of a new cafeteria and dormitory structure as part of a Baptist Student Center complex near Southern Illinois University in Carbondale was defeated in a voice vote. One pastor wanted a "serious study" of the matter by an outside group of consultants before construction would begin.

A special committee appointed last year to study the possibility of moving the state Baptist offices in Carbondale recommended no change be made and that the matter be referred to a long range program committee scheduled for appointment in 1969 if further study is desired.

A substitute motion calling for another committee to study the matter and report back next year was defeated.

The convention messengers were unanimous in electing Calvin Bryant, pastor from Clarendon, Ill., as the new Association president, and in re-electing J. C. Greer of Sparta, Ill., as clerk.

Other new officers are W. T. Brandon of Duquoin, Ill., vice president; and Gene Hale of Freeburg, Ill., assistant clerk. Both are pastors.

The convention elected Harrison C. Croslin of Carbondale as the new administrative officer of a newly-created Baptist foundation to serve as guardian of endowments, gifts, and estates given to the Illinois Baptist State Association.

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Croslin has been serving as secretary of the Association's stewardship and promotion department, and as interim executive secretary for the Association.

A sub committee of the Association's executive committee was appointed to nominate a new executive secretary to succeed Noel M. Taylor who resigned the convention's top administrative post this year under pressure. The committee is composed of C. C. Bryant, chairman; Maurice Swinford, Bill Fox, Everette Lemay, and C. R. Walker.

The budget approved by the convention for 1966 totals \$958,662, including a children's home budget of \$172,778 and a Cooperative Program goal of \$875,000. Thirty-five percent of the goal will go to SBC mission causes.

Constitution changes approved by the convention provided that (1) convention officers be board of directors officers, (2) all new employees must be elected by ballot of the board of directors, (3) board members will be nominated by a 12-member nominating committee appointed by the president, (4) a standing committee will be appointed to study the constitution, and (5) the directors are prohibited from spending more than \$50,000 without vote approval.

In other action, the convention approved the location a new Baptist encampment at a site near Effingham, Ill.

The 1966 convention will meet in Alton, Ill. , Nov. 2-4.

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CORRECTION

In the Cutline dated November 3, 1965, the following changes should be made:

Missionary Education Council Officers for the coming year are Johnni Johnson, Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Va. (left), chairman; Roy Jennings, Brotherhood Commission, Memphis, vice-chairman; Josephine Pile, Sunday School Board, Nashville, secretary.

The story mailed to accompany picture is correct. Roy Jennings was incorrectly listed as secretary in the cutlines.