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September 28, 1970

300 Walk Out, Two Resign  
When Church Rejects Negroes

by Jack Brymer

**BIRMINGHAM (BP)**--About 300 members of Birmingham's First Baptist Church walked out of the morning worship service "in moral protest" after two Negroes were denied membership and the pastor and youth director had resigned.

The walkout came after Dr. Byrn Williamson, Birmingham physician and staunch supporter of Southern Baptist foreign missions, read a statement expressing disapproval of the church's action in rejecting the two Negro membership applications.

"Dr. Gilmore, many of the church members feel as you do, that we have no moral right to deny membership to these Christians solely because they are black," Dr. Williamson said.

"We would like to show our disapproval of this action the church has taken now by standing and leaving this service immediately to assemble in room 100 of the (church's) education building for prayer," Dr. Williamson said.

The action taken by the church climaxed a four-month struggle which began when Mrs. Winifred Bryant, a Negro, and her 11-year-old daughter Twila, presented themselves for membership in the church.

Twila was one of the first students enrolled in a tutoring ministry of the church, directed by Miss Betty Bock, youth director.

In July, during a quarterly church conference, T. R. Lawson, formerly a coach at a Birmingham high school, called for the resignation of the pastor and youth director. Vote on his motion was delayed because the pastor was attending the Baptist World Congress in Tokyo.

In a meeting in August after eight hours of debate and 10 ballots, the congregation refused to dismiss the church staff by a vote of 241-237, a margin of four votes.

Although a majority, according to observers, voted to accept the two Negro applicants as members, the church's bylaws required a two-thirds majority on any contested action after the deacons had reviewed the action.

Gilmore, pastor, ruled there was not a two-thirds majority and apologized to the prospective members.

Gilmore then read his resignation as pastor of the church for the past two years. In his resignation statement Gilmore said:

"My understanding of the Christian faith compels me to believe that God is the father of us all, that he is no respecter of persons, that Christ died for all and that all persons therefore are of infinite worth; that in Christ, neither color, condition, race or sex are significant; that the church is the body of Christ commissioned to reconcile all men to God because it is a group of men and women who are already at one with God and each other.

"By your action in rejecting these two people because they are black, you have denied these fundamental truths of Christian faith," Gilmore continued.

"I have said that I would not be the pastor of a racist church," he added. "I meant what I said. So this morning I respectfully request that you accept my resignation effective Nov. 1.

Youth Director Betty Bock then presented her resignation to the church saying: "I cannot lead in ministries in which evangelism and ministry must be separated. To minister to any individual in the name and to be unable to share with them the good news for fear they will respond contradicts the most basic concepts of the Christian faith.

"Twila was one of the first students to participate in our tutoring program," Miss Bock continued. "We sought to communicate God's love for her and she responded. Now she is unacceptable for church membership."

One of the most vocal opponents of the pastor's position, Birmingham attorney Ollie Blan, objected to both resignations.

Moderator Marvin Prude responded to Blan's objections saying he was surprised "that you would be the one to object, since this has been one of your objectives since the beginning."

Blan told a news reporter later he did not object to the resignations, but opposed the resignations being presented at that particular time since emotions were so high. He added that he felt any resignation should be effective immediately, not a month later.

The group which walked out "in moral protest" met briefly for a period of prayer and then shared a basket lunch. More than 290 were served.

The group indicated no plans to start a new church at this time, but are waiting to see how things go after Nov. 1, and are designating their offering take care of the staff and maintain the church's current ministries to the inner city area, observers said.

At this point it is not certain what the group that walked out will do, but all indications are that a new church fellowship will be formed which will have an open door policy on church membership, observers here said.

At the luncheon, they adopted a five-point resolution submitted by former U. S. Fifth Circuit Court Judge Hobart Grooms, now retired.

The resolution stated that (1) we maintain our ministries, (2) we support our ministries, (3) we retain a downtown location, (4) we extend our company of the committed, and (5) we dedicate our efforts to building a new fellowship.

"To achieve these objectives, we will devote our efforts, tithes, gifts and offerings," said the resolution approved by the group.

Gilmore said in an interview later that he had nothing to do with the suggestion of the group which left the church in protest "to pull out," and he had no plans after Nov. 1.

"I believe that the battle for the Christian faith at this point in our history is going to be won or lost at the local church level," Gilmore said. "I could hope there would be a church somewhere that wants an honest and compassionate pulpit that seeks to make Christ Lord of life."

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Evangelists Head List  
Of Missionaries Needed

9/28/70

RICHMOND (BP)--Evangelistic response and rapid church growth shaped priorities for new foreign missionaries in an annual session between area administrators and personnel secretaries at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board here:

Field evangelists for Korea, where over 17,000 professions of faith have been recorded during the first nine months of the year, received top priority from the planners.

The field evangelist role calls for seminary-trained men with experience in evangelism and church development who will work in inner city, metropolitan and rural situations.

The organizations of missionaries in South America, where rapid church growth has characterized Baptist efforts in many countries, lodged nearly all their requests for new missionaries to the field evangelist category.

An opportunity to place three field evangelists in Pakistan, where visas have been difficult to secure, garnered significant attention from the administrators, along with similar personnel to strengthen new work in West Africa.

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Baker James Cauthen, executive secretary of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, said "We desperately need dozens of youth seminary graduates to man the opportunities open to us at this time."

The staff group, which reviewed request lists from missions in 75 countries processed during recent weeks, was faced with the task of establishing priorities and job requirements. Their findings are to be used during the coming year in information and promotion throughout Southern Baptist life. The SBC Foreign Mission Board sent abroad a record 261 missionaries in 1969, and it had commissioned 136 new missionaries through August 1970.

Louis R. Cobbs, the board's secretary for missionary personnel, noted that 590 requests for additional missionaries had been received by Sept. 15.

The work in the East Asia area was given top priority for field evangelists by Winston Crawley, director of the board's Overseas Division.

"Considering the lack of significant expansion in the missionary force in Korea, Japan and Taiwan during recent years and the strategic importance of these countries, East Asia has to be pushed to the top of a list in which every area includes critical needs," Crawley explained.

The annual meeting also featured a listing of specialists needed in many countries around the world.

The list was dominated by requests for young men trained in business to serve in Vietnam and Korea, medical personnel (doctors, nurses, administrators) for hospitals in Colombia, Nigeria, Paraguay and Indonesia; college teachers and secondary teachers for Japan and Taiwan; and student workers in Peru and Taiwan.

A radio and TV programmer was requested for Taiwan, a music specialist in Malaysia.

Other missionary categories needed include religious education specialists, theology teachers, social workers, dormitory parents, book store managers, dietitians, agriculturalists, artists and secretaries.



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