



BAPTIST PRESS

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**Baptist Pastor's Prayer Calms
Mob During Racial Disturbance**

by Toby Druin

ELM CITY, N.C. (BP)--A young Baptist pastor was credited here with turning an angry mob into a prayer meeting, and at least temporarily bringing peace to this racially-troubled tobacco-belt town in eastern North Carolina.

The mob gathered near the police station after a 25-year-old Negro man was killed in a scuffle with a police officer following a high-speed chase.

About 150 blacks gathered in the business district of the 1,200-population town, shouting and yelling occasional threats at the police.

The Baptist pastor, D. Russ Myers Jr., 35, of Elm City Baptist Church, said he had been alerted to the possibility of a meeting to discuss the shooting, and had driven downtown.

Myers stopped when he saw the crowd, got out and walked among the blacks. He listened to their complaints and tried to calm them down.

"I simply tried to tell them I was deeply concerned," he said. "That seemed to be the thing that troubled them most--that nobody seemed to care that this black boy was dead."

Myers said that one man in the crowd asked him: "How do you feel--that just another nigger is dead?"

"I told him that if my church were having services that night, we would have prayed for him and his family," Myers replied. Then he added: "We can do that right now."

Myers led the crowd in prayer, asking God to bring healing to the community. The crowd dispersed and went home after the prayer.

Four days later, the community was still under tension, but the suspension of the policeman pending an investigation helped to further calm the black population.

An editorial in the Raleigh (N.C.) News and Observer praised Myers for his role in easing the tense situation. A native of Portsmouth, Va., Myers had been pastor of the church for two years--his first pastorate--and is currently studying at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, in converting his bachelor of divinity degree to a master's degree.

In an interview, Myers refused to take any of the credit himself for easing the potentially explosive situation. This is how he put it:

"Russ Myers didn't do anything. God did what was done. I wasn't prepared to do anything, and don't have the kind of wisdom for this kind of challenge. There is no doubt in my mind that God's spirit did it."

He said that he heard later that just before he walked into the mob, a Negro woman had been praying loudly, asking God to send someone to help solve the problem.

As he walked up, one of the blacks said, "Here's the preacher--let's hear what he has to say."

The Negro woman who was praying responded, saying, "Thank you, Jesus, Thank you."

Three White SBC Churches Admit Negroes; Another Ordains Deacon

By Robert O'Brien

DALLAS (BP)--Three large Southern Baptist churches here have accepted nine Negroes into their membership in recent weeks, and another Southern Baptist church in Del Rio, Tex., has elected a Negro deacon by unanimous secret ballot.

The quiet, unpublicized acceptance of the Negroes is in striking contrast to the events surrounding the recent refusal by First Baptist Church of Birmingham, to accept a Negro mother and daughter, as members.

That refusal resulted in the resignation of the pastor, J. Herbert Gilmore, and 10 other staff members of the Birmingham church, and the formation of a new church by about 300 members who walked out in "moral protest" after the two Negroes were rejected.

No exact figures are available on the number of Southern Baptist churches with Negro members or deacons. Indications, however, are that a growing number of churches have an open-door policy, and have accepted black members.

One of the three Dallas churches is the 15,500-member First Baptist Church, largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention, where W. A. Criswell, immediate past president of the SBC, serves as pastor.

Criswell's congregation accepted with no adverse reaction a 58-year-old Negro man, who came forward to make a profession of faith.

The 2,150-member First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff, in suburban Dallas, accepted six Negroes--two couples and two children--during a revival led by C. Wade Freeman, evangelism director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Two teenage girls were accepted by the 4,400-member Gaston Avenue Baptist Church on profession of faith, each at a separate worship service.

At First Baptist Church in Del Rio, George Abernathy, a staff sergeant at nearby Laughlin Air Force Base, was elected to the 35-man deacon body.

One of about 20 Negroes in the church membership, Abernathy also serves as an adult Sunday School department director and sings in the choir of the 1200-member church.

Pastor Fred Wiesen and other observers view Abernathy's election as deacon as an even more genuine expression of improving race relations than admittance of Negroes to church membership.

Wiesen said that four white deacon candidates, accepted at the same time Abernathy was elected, were approved overwhelmingly but, unlike Abernathy, not unanimously.

The two girls accepted by Gaston Avenue Baptist Church here are believed to be the first Negroes in the history of the church to present themselves for membership. Pastor Theron V. Farris declined to comment, preferring "to let the church's action speak for itself."

First Baptist Church has had Negro members in the past, including Negro students at local Baptist institutions and foreign-born nationals. "But this is the first time I know of," Criswell said, "that a Negro has walked in off the street, unannounced, and presented himself for membership."

Criswell said he was "delighted" the church responded positively.

First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff, located in a racially changing neighborhood in southern Dallas, already had seven Negroes in the congregation, the first of which made a profession of faith in March of this year on Home Missions Day after a sermon preached by Darwin Farmer, secretary of the Texas convention's direct missions department.

"Our experiences at Oak Cliff have been prophetic," said James Cooper, the pastor and newly elected first vice president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"Our first Negro member--a 12-year-old girl--made her profession of faith on Home Missions Day, and two others joined the same Sunday that Dr. and Mrs. Ed. Doshier, furloughing Southern Baptist missionaries to Nigeria, joined our church.

"Those two events said to me," Cooper continued, "that our church is not only interested in sending missionaries to blacks, but that we are also interested in ministering to black people across the street."

Of the 13 Negroes now in Cooper's congregation, four are children ranging in age from 10-14. All came on profession of faith. The remaining nine are the mothers and fathers of the children, eight coming on promise of letter from Negro Baptist churches and one on profession of faith.

Like First Baptist Church, Birmingham, First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff had resolved to minister to the surrounding Negro community.

The difference, observers have noted, came when the time arrived to face the membership question.

One of the two refused by the Birmingham church was an 11-year-old girl, Twila Fortune Bryant, who made a profession of faith after having been involved in the church's tutoring program.

The 12-year-old girl accepted on profession of faith by the Oak Cliff church on Home Missions Day had been involved in the church's Sunday School program.

The Oak Cliff church, surrounded by more than 80 per cent blacks, spent a year surveying the community, projecting needs and establishing goals and objectives.

The church stayed put while more than 30 churches of varying denominations relocated. Meanwhile, the church's long range planning committee drew up what was called the "Design for Destiny."

"Many of our ideas came from a church long-range planning seminar conducted in Nashville by the church administration department of the SBC Sunday School Board," Cooper said.

"During our entire preparation for this ministry," Cooper added, "there was no suggestion that we relocate. We hope to be a regional church for all of Oak Cliff with a ministry to all persons--black, white or Mexican-American."

Examples of the church's ministry include a tutoring program and a nurse's aide program for children in predominantly black elementary schools and a weekday program during the summer for children which features recreation, Bible study and refreshments. Cooper said an average of 100 children per week participated in last summer's weekday program.

"The average white Southern Baptist church may not be able to minister to the majority of black people because of a difference in culture and forms of worship," Cooper observed,

"But I believe that all our white churches should have the commitment to Jesus Christ to minister to all who can feel comfortable with our form of worship," he quickly added.

"It would be difficult to serve as pastor of a church," he stated, "which by its policy of segregation would in effect hang a sign on the door which said, 'This is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. No Negroes admitted.'"

Wiesen noted that the first Negro member of the Del Rio church came about two years ago after the church started bringing Negro children to Sunday School in buses.

"In spite of the warmth with which the Negroes have been received," Wiesen commented, "we have just as much trouble reaching them as anyone else. And we can't ignore the cultural factors that separate people, black or white."

The Del Rio pastor noted that his church makes no special effort at black evangelism. "We try to reach out to Negroes just like we do anyone else," he said.

Spokesmen for the churches expressed pride at the way their congregations responded but emphasized that they deserve no special praise for "doing the only thing a church true to the teachings of Christ can do," as Cooper expressed it.

One observer put it like this: "Patting yourself on the back for accepting Negroes as equals is sort of like patting yourself on the back for not robbing a bank."

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Birmingham Splinter Group
Organizes Church of Covenant

11/9/70

BIRMINGHAM (BP)--The "Company of the Committed," a splinter group that walked out of Birmingham's First Baptist Church "in moral protest" because two blacks were denied membership, now have something they can call their own--a new name.

The group approved the name--The Baptist Church of the Covenant--after voting to incorporate and electing 24 trustees for the congregation.

The action was taken during a worship service in a borrowed chapel, with no organ, very few hymnals, no official staff, no literature, and very little education space.

Meeting temporarily in the Baptist Student Center chapel of the Birmingham Baptist Association, a crowd of about 300 overflowed the auditorium designed to seat about 200.

Due to the lack of space, education programs were limited to children. Major emphasis for adults is being placed on "the spirit of the fellowship," congregation leaders said.

On Sunday evenings, the members meet to discuss their purpose for being and the direction they will take in fulfilling their objectives as a church.

Dr. Byrn Williamson, a physician and a strong supporter of Southern Baptist foreign mission work, is chairman of the executive committee of the group.

In their first discussion meeting on Sunday evening, Williamson thanked the group for allowing him to go along with them, calling this "...a most momentous occasion in Birmingham (and) in my life."

During the previous morning worship service, the congregation heard Carlisle Driggers, interim minister of Christian education, caution that "the responsibility we carry in our venture is frightening.

"Let us run the risk of faith," he stated, "and hopefully, we shall overcome." Driggers used a phrase made popular by Martin Luther King, the late Birmingham pastor and civil rights leader, who was jailed in Birmingham for his role in civil rights demonstrations.

Before choosing a name, the group held a lengthy discussion of name possibilities. A committee had submitted two names for possible approval--Covenant Baptist Church, and Downtown Baptist Church.

A large segment of the audience, primarily young people, did not want the distinction "Baptist" in the name, observers reported, but preferred the name, The Church of the Covenant.

A majority, however, felt the distinction "Baptist" should be in the name, and after several votes, they unanimously approved the name, The Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Applications for charter membership are being accepted, and "associate membership" is also available for people who are unable to participate locally in the program of the church, but who agree with the cause and wish to support it.

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Several Negroes have been attending the services, including Mrs. Winifred Bryant and her daughter, Twila Fortune, who were rejected for membership by a close vote of the First Baptist Church. Most of those attending the Baptist Church of the Covenant are former members of the First Baptist congregation who walked out after the vote rejecting the two blacks.

Plans have been scheduled Dec. 5 to formally organize into the Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Though the church has not called a pastor or staff, the former pastor of First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Herbert Gilmore, is serving as "temporarily spiritual advisor," and other staff members who resigned in protest are serving temporarily with the Baptist Church of the Covenant.

In his sermon to the congregation, Driggers said that the most encouraging thing about the formation of the congregation was that it was led by laymen who were dedicated to Christ and committed to carrying out his teachings.

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Mexican-American Evangelist
Warns Against Ethnic Hatred

11/9/70

SAN ANTONIO (BP)--A Mexican-American Southern Baptist evangelist warned here during the first Latin American Congress on Evangelism in the U.S.A. that the revolutionary element in ethnic groups poses a major threat to the spread of the Christian gospel.

Carlos Paredes of the evangelism division of the Baptist General Convention of Texas was one of the major speakers to address about 350 delegates to the congress. The delegates represented almost all major denominations in this country and many in Latin America.

The meeting was the first of six follow-up regional conferences for an organization called CLAUDE, which stands for Congresso Latino Americano de Evangelismo (Latin American Congress of Evangelism).

Paredes told the delegates, the largest number of whom were Cubans and Puerto Ricans, that the revolutionary element is a great obstacle to evangelism, whether among Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans or other groups.

Paredes said this was true because hatred is being emphasized to the point that people are hating one another rather than listening to the love of Christ.

"Not Chicano power or brown power," Paredes implored. "What we need to show people immediately is Christ's power."

Other present-day obstacles to evangelism, said Paredes, are modern ideologies, secularization of our society, materialistic values, degradation of morality, war and racism.

Pointing to the necessity of a clear-out Christian witness, Paredes, warned that "if the church conforms to the present-day ideologies, there is no hope for the world."

Another former staff member of the Texas Baptist Evangelism Division, Rudy Hernandez, now pastor of the First Mexican Baptist Church, Corpus Christi, Tex., also addressed the congress. Only a few days earlier, Hernandez had been elected second vice president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in nearby Austin, Tex.

Other speakers at the congress included Sergio Franco of California, Alfonso Rodriguez Hidalgo of New York, Ismael E. Amaya of Florida, and Roberto Ocamilla of Tennessee.

The Baptist Spanish Publishing House of El Paso, Texas, an institution operated by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, displayed about 400 of its 600 current Spanish language books, including its most recent work, Advance Evangelico En Latin America (Evangelical Advance in Latin America).

The conference's executive committee voted to continue the program by areas in the United States in 1971-72 in view of holding a national convention in California. A California minister, H. O. Espinoza, will continue as national coordinator.

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