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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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November 1, 1976

76-184

**Racial Confrontation Faces  
Baptist Deacons in Plains**

FORT WORTH (BP)--While deacons at Jimmy Carter's Southern Baptist congregation in Plains, Ga., were cancelling services to avoid confrontation with blacks over membership, Carter was attending integrated worship services at another Southern Baptist church in Fort Worth.

The already hectic final two days of the Ford-Carter presidential race took a bizarre turn on Halloween--Oct. 31-- when a 60-year-old black pastor of the Interdenominational Divine Mission Church in Albany--about 45 miles from Plains--showed up at the Plains Baptist Church, accompanied by three other unidentified blacks.

The pre-announced intention of the reportedly unsuccessful politician, who has had a somewhat checkered career according to news accounts, was to present himself that Sunday morning for membership in the small Baptist church.

Earlier that week, however, the deacons of the church, despite opposition from pastor Bruce Edwards, voted to revive a 1965 resolution, passed in the heat of the civil rights era, which would bar all blacks and civil rights agitators.

The deacons also decided to cancel Sunday morning services at the church--but kept it secret until Sunday morning.

King, who reportedly recently ran simultaneously and unsuccessfully for offices in state county and city government in Georgia, has attempted to run for president of the U. S. twice--in 1960 and 1972. In 1960, reports said he asked then vice president Richard Nixon to be his running mate on the Afro-American Unity Party ticket.

In 1970, according to news reports, he unsuccessfully petitioned the U. S. Supreme Court to allow his name to be entered in the Republican race for governor in Georgia. News reports also indicate he has been in prison in California for four years for failing to support his family, in jail for a month in Kenya, and briefly in a mental institution in Mississippi.

Carter, who opposed the 1965 resolution, is an inactive deacon at the church and would have had no vote in the matter if he had been present.

"The only thing I know is that our church for many years has accepted worshippers who came there," Carter responded when questioned. "My own deep belief is that anyone who lives in our community and wants to be a member of our church, regardless of race, ought to be admitted. I know that the pastor agrees with me. I hope this will be the outcome of the problem at Plains."

Meanwhile, Edwards was facing a tense situation following a vote by the church's 12 active deacons to ask for his resignation. Reports said they objected that he told reporters the church's resolution had stated that "all 'Niggers' and civil rights demonstrators" be barred. They contended the resolution said, "Negroes."

Later, Edwards told Baptist Press he had been in error about how the resolution was worded. He said he discovered it did say "Negroes" in print but that the chairman of deacons had said "Niggers" on several occasions while referring to it and that he had mistaken that for the actual wording.

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Edwards said he believes his opposition to the resolution and the fact "that I preached the gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise (on the race issue) are behind the move to ask for the resignation."

He said he will ask that the action be taken to the church, since deacons have no authority to fire a pastor in a Baptist church. The church requires a week's notice, he said, and he had received no official word of the request for resignation as of Nov. 1.

Several attempts by Baptist Press to reach deacons for comment failed, but one deacon's wife said the deacons and their wives are under intense pressure. "We really don't understand it," she said. "Please pray for us."

"I'm caught between a group of politicians who want to destroy Governor Carter and deacons who want to maintain the segregationist policy of the church," Edwards told Baptist Press.

Edwards said he feels "political dirty tricks" lie behind King's confrontation with the church and said he told King he would do "everything in my power" to bring his application before the church if he would delay it one week beyond the election.

While Edwards was meeting King at the closed door of the Plains church, Carter worshipped at University Baptist Church, Fort Worth, where James G. Harris, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, serves as pastor.

Harris and the church and the Carter workers took every precaution to see that it did not turn into a media event, Harris told Baptist Press.

Although he specifically noted that he did not want to be pitted against W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, who had preached three weeks earlier to Gerald Ford, the two visits were strikingly different.

Like Ford, Carter heard a message on stewardship. But unlike Ford, who was told by Criswell, a former Southern Baptist Convention president, "I am for you," Carter received no endorsement for the presidency. Instead, Harris simply offered him and "others who seek high office" his prayers.

Carter, came to the Fort Worth church in the midst of a whirlwind Texas tour in the waning hours of the election campaign. Mrs. Carter, who accompanied him, said they needed the worship time "in a church of our faith." Other family members also attended.

Carter had insisted that his church attendance not be made a "media event." No photos were allowed of the worship service. The Carters were ushered into the sanctuary moments before the service began, and they were escorted to the foyer by Harris after the service.

There was no public appearance by Harris and Carter together, in contrast to the church steps endorsement by Criswell of Ford three weeks earlier.

Harris said at Texas Baptist Convention two weeks earlier in San Antonio that he would endorse no candidate for office, and he stuck to the pledge, observers said.

He and Carter spoke briefly after the service in the church foyer. Carter asked for and received Harris' pledge to pray that he (Carter) "might do the right thing."

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. NOTE TO EDITORS: Please insert the following after graph five on this page.

Southern Baptist leaders, although noting they have no authority to tell any Southern Baptist church what to do, joined Carter and Edwards and others in their dismay at the barring of King--but also sounded a note of caution about his motivations.

SBC President James L. Sullivan of Nashville, noting that his own congregation in Nashville admits blacks, said, "I'd be greatly disappointed to think that any Southern Baptist church would refuse membership to any qualified person of any race or ethnic group who presents himself or herself in sincerity, with the desire of being sincere and faithful to the church. On the other hand, as president of the SBC, I, myself, would not be admitted into any Southern Baptist church if I was insincere or tried to coerce the church into receiving me for membership, as apparently happened in this case."

SBC Home Mission Board chief executive Arthur B. Rutledge of Atlanta expressed "deep regret" at the episode, but noted that it seems so "mixed up in politics I wouldn't want to sit in judgement. I would hope a church, however, would turn away no worshipper." And Foy Valentine of the SBC Christian Life Commission, Nashville, blasted the "blatant racism" of the 1965 resolution but said the episode could be opportunism or a "Nixon-style dirty trick of desperation."

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76-184

Missionary Found Negligent  
In Freak Accident in Korea

TEJON, Korea (BP)--Southern Baptist missionary Rolla M. (Ronnie) Bradley, was found guilty of negligence in a freak accident that occurred here earlier this year. He was fined about \$200 and his driver's license temporarily suspended.

According to George H. Hays, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's secretary for East Asia, Bradley was accused of being negligent when his car supposedly sideswiped a drunken pedestrian last February, causing the pedestrian's death.

"Neither Bradley nor the Korean pastor riding with him was aware an accident had occurred." explained Hays.

Bradley said the road near the demilitarized zone, north of Seoul, was in very poor condition containing many potholes. He furthered explained that the night of the alleged accident was also rainy and visibility was poor.

"The court did establish Bradley's car was in the general vicinity," Hays said. "However, beyond that, all evidence was circumstantial." No one actually saw the accident. Two boys who served as witnesses for the prosecution reportedly found the body. They said they had seen a vehicle like Bradley's come that way.

Bradley's trial began on Oct. 4 and the fourth session was on Nov. 1 when he was sentenced. Bradley said the trial was conducted fairly and said he was even able to question the witnesses.

He was fined 10,000 "won" (approximately \$200) and has had his driver's license suspended since the accident occurred. It will be returned in February 1977, Hays said.

Hays said that missions (organizations of Southern Baptist missionaries) are protected in cases such as this one. He said that the Korea Baptist Mission's insurance will cover the fine and will provide some compensation for the family of the deceased man.