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Pastor's Fruit Not In Numbers,
But He Leads In Race Relations

By David R. Wilkinson

LOUISVILLE (BP)--The fruits of his labor will probably never appear in any denominational "record books," and the story of his church, measured in statistics alone, would be an embarrassment for particularly ambitious preachers.

But for the past 16 1/2 years, Joe Priest Williams has worked patiently in the poverty area of west Louisville, sharing the gospel with the "brokenness of society" that surrounds The Baptist Tabernacle, a Southern Baptist church he serves as pastor.

With his home located in an all-black neighborhood and his church situated between a black area and the poor white section of the city, the white pastor is one of those unheralded persons who took the racial reconciliation talk of the 1960s, put it into practice and then stuck with it.

It hasn't been easy.

When he came to The Baptist Tabernacle in 1961, the church was averaging about 600 in Sunday School and was on its way to becoming the "First Baptist Church" of west Louisville. Then, in the midst of the turbulent civil rights years, the neighborhood surrounding the church changed. Blacks began to move in and whites moved out. A riot near the church sent most of the holdouts, many of them The Baptist Tabernacle members, scurrying for the suburbs.

Today Williams preaches on Sunday mornings to 160 or 170 persons scattered across the 800-seat auditorium.

Though the numbers have waned, his commitment to racial reconciliation has not. And he is genuinely proud of the indigenous church he pastors--a congregation led by a core group of persons who have struggled to be consistent with the demands of the gospel and to sustain a ministry to a changing community within a changing society.

On Feb. 12, when The Baptist Tabernacle and other churches across the Southern Baptist Convention observe Race Relations Sunday, Williams may find special significance in the 1978 emphasis taken from Galatians 6:9. The theme selected by the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission is "Let us not be weary in well doing."

Williams, a product of the depression years from Zion, Ky., quickly admits to "speaking pretty plainly" on racial issues--a characteristic that earned him "controversial" and "liberal" labels from some fellow pastors. A friend once told him that his very presence in most Baptist meetings is "disturbing."

In the 1940s, as a Baptist Student Union director, he helped stage a protest at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center when several African students were not allowed to eat in the then still segregated dining room. And as a pastor two decades later he marched with civil rights demonstrators down the streets of Louisville--the kind of act that sent many preachers packing in the 1950s and 1960s.

He was, in fact, "called on the carpet" by his deacons, where he told them that "there comes a time when talking isn't enough."

"At seminary I was introduced to the impact of the ethics of the gospel," explains Williams, who earned two degrees at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville and now teaches ethics at Boyce Bible School on the seminary campus. "That really

cranked me up for what I believe being a Christian is all about."

Later he accepted the pastorate of The Baptist Tabernacle and found himself in a situation familiar to many pastors. A wide gap existed between his feelings on a major social issue and those of most of his church members. The particular issue during the 1960s, of course, was racial integration.

Williams, however, was patient and although The Baptist Tabernacle was the first Southern Baptist church in Louisville to integrate, it didn't happen because its pastor forced the issue on his congregation. "I don't think it was even discussed when the pulpit committee talked to me," he says. "I just began preaching what I thought the Bible said, and there it was. I'd say, 'Here's what the gospel says. Now what do we do? How do we relate to it?' I think by doing that I became a part of the solving of the problem instead of the problem."

Williams feels the Sunday his church voted to accept its first black member was a victory for his views but he warns that involvement in race relations at the community level is not for the impatient or the faint of heart. For every moment of success, there were many setbacks. "I've been turned down on a lot of things," Williams admits. "I mean there's a lot I've projected for the church which they haven't voted for."

"But I've never been turned down as a person," he adds. Some of the people who have the hardest time accepting what I project are some of the best friends I have in the church."

That's not to say that Williams hasn't considered running at times. Although there have been other opportunities, Williams, only the church's third pastor since 1918, has really never seriously pursued any opportunity to leave. "I've wanted to leave; "I'd be telling a story if I didn't admit that. Sometimes you just want to hang it all up."

When those feelings have come, Williams has turned to his family--the decision to remain as pastor of the church through the integration struggle was a family decision, he says. And he tries to get away from the office and the church building into the neighborhood to mix with "ordinary people who have no fronts on them."

Williams says that pastors in ministries such as his "may have to get their identification from somewhere other than the church. You can't create a record here, a reputation that gives you an identification of who you are," he explains. "I forgot about building an institutionally successful church a long time ago and concentrated on working with what's really happening in the lives of the people."

Ministry to the community and reconciliation of all people, not simply integration, have been the cornerstone of Williams' efforts as a pastor. The Baptist Tabernacle, in fact, has fewer black members now than a few years ago. The neighborhood has undergone yet another transition, bringing the church into contact with a community of poor white people more than blacks.

"We never have made a big thing out of black and white," Williams says. "We've just tried to respond in Christlike ways to the crises people go through. It's not how many blacks we have but how many people are ministered to--how well we are giving an expression to what we think the gospel is all about."

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**ABC-TV Executive Confirms
Alterations in 'Soap'**

NASHVILLE (BP)--ABC-TV apparently has decided to scrub the sexually offensive themes in its "Soap" comedy series, a move that a denominational agency here sees as further evidence that Southern Baptists and others involved in the protest over "Soap" have won a victory.

According to an article in the Dec. 30-Jan. 2 issue of "TV Guide," ABC has dropped its "parental discretion" advisory which appeared at the beginning of each episode of "Soap." Alfred Schneider, ABC's vice president for programming, told "TV Guide" that the show's content has been changed, and the series will now be a "whodunit program."

"The episodes," says Schneider in the article, "do not deal with the adult themes that concerned us originally."

The Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which has been one of the primary leaders in the "Soap" protest, claimed victory two months earlier after learning that ABC had notified its affiliates that radical changes were being made in "Soap."

In a speech last November before the Baptist Convention of Maryland, Harry N. Hollis Jr., the commission's director of family and special moral concerns, said that as a result of grass roots protests ABC "has pulled away from its goal to make 'Soap' a forerunner of things to come on TV."

Schneider's public statements now confirm that report, said Foy Valentine, executive secretary of the SBC social concerns agency.

Valentine expressed thanks to "every concerned Southern Baptist who protested to advertisers, local television stations and national network officials about this morally offensive program."

He also praised editors of state Baptist papers for their "highly effective" role in keeping their readers informed on the entire "Soap" issue.

"We're glad the medium seems to be getting the message," Valentine continued. "At the same time, we plead for continued and now substantially increased local church, family, and personal efforts to communicate our Christian moral concerns about television."

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North Central Baptists
Plan New ChurchesBaptist Press
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KALAMAZOO, Mich. (BP)--Just five days into the new year 440 Southern Baptist pastors, missionaries, and state convention leaders from seven north central states gathered here to proclaim 1978 as "The Year of the New Church" and commit themselves to beginning 397 new congregations before the year is out.

The North Central Missions Thrust is an effort by Southern Baptists to double the number of SBC churches and members in the seven states adjacent to the western Great Lakes (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Ohio) by 1990. Yearly emphases include Sunday School enlargement (1977), church extension (1978) and evangelism (1979).

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The thrust is part of an overall effort by Southern Baptists to enable every person in the world to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ by the year 2000.

Grady Cothen, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, Tenn., opened the January 5-7 conference by calling Southern Baptists to "look at the people for whom Christ died," and emphasized the Biblical imperative of the church being a redemptive force in society.

Cothen and SBC President Jimmy Allen, who challenged the conference in a closing address on Saturday, were joined by six pastors who gave testimonies about how their churches are beginning new missions in their communities. About 200 new churches have been started in the north central states since the emphasis began in 1974.

Some of the 70 congregations which began meeting across the north central states in 1977 grew out of fellowships initiated by Sunday School ACTION campaigns conducted during the year with assistance by the Sunday School Board and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Fifty-three new Sunday Schools have been started in the area since Oct. 1, 1977, according to Frank Smith of the Sunday School Board.

Conference sessions were filled with "how-to" presentations on starting new churches and reaching across ethnic and cultural boundaries with the gospel.

It is estimated that several hundred volunteers, including lay persons, seminary students and summer missionaries, will be involved in extending Southern Baptist ministry around the Great Lakes during the on-going North Central Missions Thrust.

Allen said he hopes to see Southern Baptists have 1,200 volunteers on the field as part of the newly initiated Mission Service Corps by the time the Southern Baptist Convention meets in Atlanta in June. "This idea (volunteerism) has found its day," he said.

The current emphasis on church extension will lead into a year of evangelism set for 1979, which will be officially kicked off on January 4-6, 1979 in Columbus, Ohio. The thrust will seek to lead churches in the seven states to baptize 31,000 people in 1979. Simultaneous revival meetings April 1-8, 1979 are planned for the nearly 2,000 SBC churches in the north central states as part of the evangelism emphasis.