First Baptist Church, Savannah Couldn’t Avoid Civil Rights Debate

Like many congregations in the antebellum American South, First Baptist Church, Savannah, Ga., was composed of white, slave and free black members. At the end of the Civil War, however, most African-American members withdrew to form their own churches.

Segregated public and private facilities were the order of the day in Savannah until the modern civil rights movement was launched in the 1940’s. Dr. Ralph Mark Gilbert, pastor of the First African Baptist Church, and later, Hosea Williams and W. W. Law were key local leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who led the effort to desegregate the city.

A boycott of downtown business establishments from March 1960 until October 1961 made Savannah the first city in Georgia to have desegregated lunch counters. Houses of worship would prove to be a greater challenge.

On Sunday, Aug. 21, 1960, 16 young members of the NAACP staged a “kneel-in” campaign at 10 predominantly-white downtown churches. In two instances, demonstrators were seated with the congregation, while at the other churches they were offered seats in the balcony or not welcomed at all.

Patricia Quarterman and Leroy Douglas presented themselves at First Baptist Church and were asked why they did not attend a Negro church instead. The Savannah Morning News reported the following day that “as they started to leave, a policeman appeared and hastened their departure.”

In succeeding months, black people attended worship services. Yet, when William Forrest Lanier became pastor in 1962, he faced a congregation which had taken no official position. At his very first deacons’ meeting, someone proposed an immediate decision that blacks would not be admitted to church membership. Lanier opposed such a stance and said the church should be open to all people.

Law frequently visited First Baptist Church throughout this period as did groups of young black Girl Scouts, all without incident. So much racial progress had been made in the city that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared in an Emancipation Day address on Jan. 1, 1964 that Savannah was “the most integrated city in
However, on Sunday, May 2, 1965, a large group of demonstrators tried to desegregate the worship service and two ushers thought to stop them by closing the doors. Since the church had adopted no official policy, Lanier argued that two members could not decide the matter for the entire congregation and that the doors should remain open to all.

At a deacons’ meeting in February 1967, Lanier spoke of the challenges ahead: “It will require a growing feeling of redirection in the congregation to turn the church over to the Holy Spirit. We must stay abreast of developments and build our church in prayer, love and sacrifice.”

One year later on Sunday, March 17, 1968, the deacons presented resolutions to the church for a vote by secret ballot. They included:
1. Be it resolved that all people be admitted to public worship services in the First Baptist Church.
2. That this resolution be presented to a called meeting of the church after properly instructing them of the intent of this resolution.
3. That all future candidates for membership in the First Baptist Church, not previously so cleared, be referred to a committee composed of the Chairman of the Board of Deacons, the Vice-Chairman of the Board of Deacons, and three (3) members to be appointed by the Chairman of the Board of Deacons. This committee will make recommendation to the Church before membership is granted and this must be approved by a vote of the congregation.

The vote of the members was decidedly positive even though it may have been slow to come. While church leaders reserved the right to approve candidates for membership on a case-by-case basis, the doors of the church were now open to all people by official vote of the congregation.

As was true with many other all-white churches, major social change was achieved by the persistence of black advocates for civil rights, the courage of local congregational leadership and a Gospel which welcomes all people.

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Buy *Defining Baptist Convictions* from Amazon.com now!

*Pilgrims Through the Years: A Bicentennial History of First Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia* is available at [www.fbc-sav.org](http://www.fbc-sav.org) or through the church office at P.O. Box 9551, Savannah, GA 31412 for $40.00 plus $5.00 shipping and handling.