

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

"Downtown by history and by choice"



Sesquicentennial Snapshot No. 8

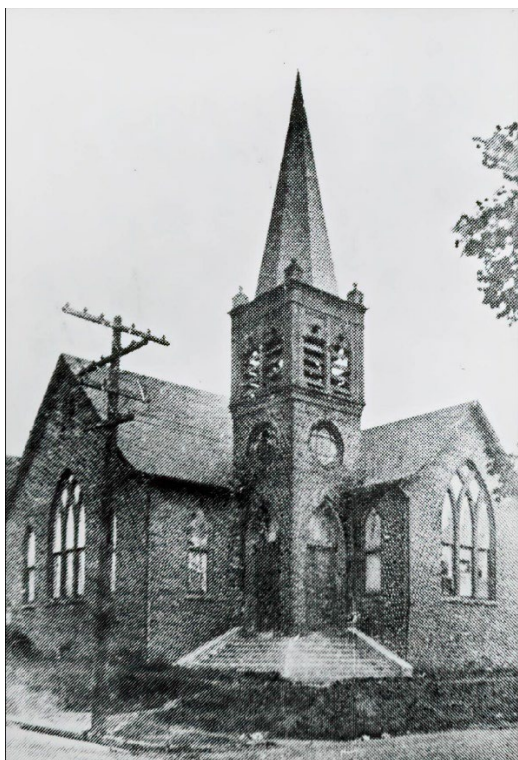
Our Church in Crisis Times: Race Relations from Jim Crow to *Brown* and Beyond

The post-World War II civil rights movement lay nearly a century in the future when eleven founding members gathered in 1871 to establish the “Durham Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The ensuing decades witnessed race relations that gradually became a persistent issue for the congregation, city, state, and nation as forces of social change encroached on the lodestar of tradition. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century unleashed myriad change forces that lay siege to community spirituality: industrialization, urbanism, secularism. What remained unchanged and seemingly unchangeable was the ever tightening “Color Line” separating the races. Racial segregation thus increasingly stood on a foundation of custom and law reinforced by North Carolina’s turn-of-the century constitutional revolution.

Beginning in the late 1870s, the tiny Durham Presbyterian church earmarked benevolences for the General Assembly’s “Colored Evangelism Fund,” and in the 1880s admitted two African Americans to its membership. As the “Color Line” drew sharper in the early 1900s, race relations faded as a salient issue as the church reached out to the white tobacco and cotton mill workers and undertook major construction projects. The arrival of **Rev. David Scanlon** (1920-1938) brought a change-oriented minister to the pulpit. He asserted the equality of the races in the teachings of Jesus Christ and decried the refusal of the Southern Presbyterian churches (Presbyterian Church in the United States) to join the Federal Council of Churches which included Black churches among its members. At the same time, empowerment of women following adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment spawned the development by the North Carolina Synod of a state-wide annual leadership conference for Black women sponsored by Woman’s Auxiliary chapters. The Durham chapter promptly undertook to sponsor delegates typically drawn from members of the city’s northern Presbyterian church (United Presbyterian Church of North America) variously named Twine Memorial, Pine Street, and Covenant. Interchanges with that church effectively breached the “Color Line” as delegates and even the Pine

Street pastor on one occasion addressed the Auxiliary and prominent Auxiliary leaders visited the then nearby Black church.

IMAGE: *Pine Street Presbyterian Church.*
Durham County Library



World War II brought new stresses to still frozen statewide race relations. Off duty Black GIs joined the throngs of white GIs from Camp Butner to avail themselves of Durham's welcoming hospitality. Jim Crow, however, still prevailed. City buses maintained racially segregated seating when, in 1944, a Black soldier refused to move to seats in the back of the bus. The driver reacted to the flagrant breach of tradition and rule by shooting and killing the GI. The driver's subsequent court-ordered acquittal roiled local race relations and led **Rev. Kelsey Regen** (1940-1960) to convene in the Church House a joint meeting of the Durham Ministers Association and the African American Durham Ministers Alliance to develop a peacemaking plan for the city and became the subject for Sunday sermons.

Although Rev. Regen successfully steered substantial and vital funding to both financially hard-pressed Covenant church and its predecessor, race relations issues among the congregation and the Ruling Elders on the Session produced periodic crises during the 1950s as the U. S. Supreme Court moved toward its historic 1954 public school integration decision (*Brown v. Topeka*). The "Color Line" still held, but it became inconsistently porous if not positively enigmatic in its application. Who among Black Christians would be admitted to First Church premises? Excluded in 1945 were African American youth and, in 1954, Covenant members seeking to attend a joint Presbyterian Leadership Training School held at the church. On the other hand, interracial ministerial meetings were acceptable as were delegates to the Synod's leadership conference who had been sponsored by the Women of the Church. Rejected as speakers were high status Black religious leaders who had previously addressed the Conference of Negro Women. Conversely, the Session approved opening the Church House to members of the Board of the Council of Church Women of the North Carolina Council of Churches, several of whom were Black. In some instances, Session approval or disapproval of a guest participant or speaker seemingly depended on the social status of the one who issued the invitation!

The sensational *Brown* decision put to the test the church's fine tuning of its race relations policy (or policies). Prominent local barrister, church trustee and Ruling Elder **Victor S. Bryant, Sr.** sprang into action in the wake of the High Court's decision by shepherding through the Session a motion to establish a

Permanent Committee on Segregation, which he chaired. No sooner had the committee been created than the General Assembly (PCUS) became the first major church body to endorse the *Brown* decision, thereby consigning the Permanent Committee to the dustbin of First Church history. Then, in 1955, the Session met the dramatic changes in law that supported the “Color Line” by adopting a non-discriminatory, secret open seating policy for anyone seeking a pew seat in the sanctuary.

The late 1950s featured a kaleidoscope of Black protests in Durham: a pioneering “sit in” at the Royal Ice Cream Parlor blocks from the church at Roxboro and Dowd streets; demonstrations against segregated seating at the Durham Athletic Park, theaters, recreation facilities, and the bus station at East Main and Dillard streets. Desegregation of Durham public schools began in 1959 while the highly public visit in 1960 of **Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.** and **Rev. Ralph Abernathy** who spearheaded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference weighed against the crumbling “Color Line.”



IMAGE: *Sabbath anti-segregation protest, 1962.*
Durham County Library

And, during 1962, 4000 protesters swarmed the segregated Howard Johnson restaurant on Chapel Hill Boulevard with 700 of their number arrested. That same year on the third Sunday in Lent, Black students from North Carolina College for Negroes (now NCCU) marked Religious Emphasis Week by challenging the historically segregated Sunday worship at nine of the city’s white churches including First Church. The ushers were prepared; they applied the secret 1955 seating policy welcoming the visitors as did five other Durham churches.

3 Turn Back NCC Students

6 Churches Here Admit Negroes

Several Negro college students attempted to initiate Religious Emphasis Week at North Carolina College here Sunday by visiting churches throughout the city, including nine white churches, but they were not admitted at three of the white churches.

Quinton Baker, NCC student, said ushers at three white Baptist churches declined to seat Negro students in their main congregations.

One of the three churches offered the Negroes seats in the basement to hear the sermon over a speaker, but the students declined the offer and left.

Baker said the Negro students received cordial receptions at the other six white churches, one of which was Baptist, and that some invited them to return.

Negroes were denied admission to the main sanctuaries. The pastor of the third was not available for a report.

Baker said the group received cordial receptions at Duke Memorial Methodist Church, Temple Baptist Church, Trinity Avenue Methodist Church, First Presbyterian Church, St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and Epworth Methodist Church.

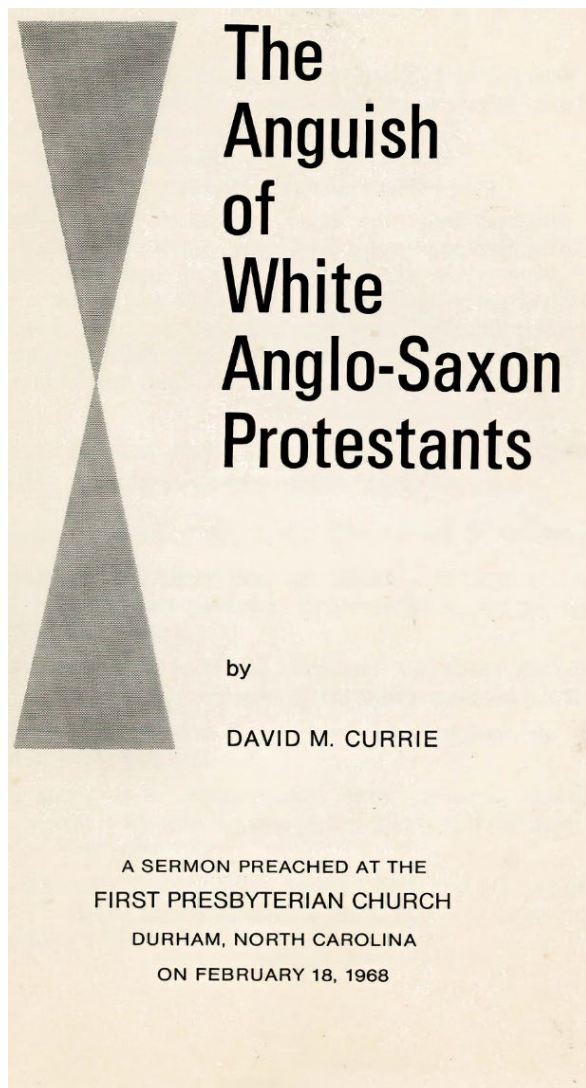
The three churches which did not seat the Negro visitors were Grace Baptist Church, First Baptist Church and Yates Baptist Church, Baker said.

IMAGE: Lenten "Worship-In" protest,
Durham Morning Herald, Mar. 26, 1962, p. 1

To a city in turmoil and with the church without a permanent minister for two years, Rev. Regen's successor ascended the pulpit at Roxboro and Main early in 1963. **Rev. David M. Currie** hailed from Texas and had been called to serve the 900-member congregation and moderate a sometimes-intractable Session. The new minister in his southwestern cowboy boots proved to be no friend of tradition as he struggled with a church and city in crisis while promoting racial reconciliation. Outspoken in the pulpit, he preached on "the Anguish of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants," whose status was suffering perceptible erosion. He drew for his Bible text the experience of the prophet Jeremiah who lived out his life in a changing world of politics, culture, and social relations, yet remained certain of the everlasting love and faithfulness of God. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, like Jeremiah, Rev. Currie declared, were caught up in pervasive and shattering turmoil. No longer were they God's chosen people. A Roman Catholic had won the presidency; American public education, long an arm of Protestantism, had withered in a pluralistic republic. As for segregation, the only remedy for it lay in desegregation and integration which, he contended, the church should lead. The church, however, had been resting on "false foundations" and must lay a new foundation in the best tradition of the reformed faith. The Civil Rights Act of

1964 provided a path: “Negro Christians are full-fledged members of the household of faith,” he told the congregants. Meanwhile, the minister pursued a reconciliation outreach by organizing interracial luncheons with Durham business and political leaders.

IMAGE: *Controversial sermon by Rev. Currie, 1968*



The Session, if not many in the congregation, dimly perceived any new foundations for race relations. The Elders rebuffed Rev. Currie’s placement in the Sunday bulletin of an excerpt from the General Assembly, “The Civil Rights Movement in Light of Christian Teachings.” Also defeated was a motion to invite the pastor of Covenant Church to preach on Race Relations Sunday in 1964. That same year, Rev. Currie presented to the Session for baptism and church membership Hillside High School junior **Ronald D. Boyd**. The Black student had participated in the 1963 summer Youth Activities Week at the church and worshipped with the congregation the following April. The Session in May openly, albeit reluctantly, voted unanimously to receive the first Black member in eighty years. The Boyd affair promptly ignited an uproar among the congregation. Rev. Currie attempted to quell the storm with an explanatory letter to the congregation while the Session dispatched a peace mission to offer solace to one church member who had gone into a deep funk over Boyd’s reception into church

membership. The ever-resourceful Elder Bryant responded to the crisis by winning Session approval for an anti-transparency rule that provided for votes on new member receptions in executive sessions.

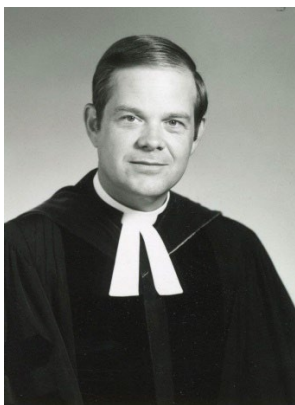
The expanding and unpopular Vietnam War and the assassination of Dr. King followed by urban riots across the nation marked the tumultuous year 1968. Durham was not spared. Fire bombings targeted businesses on Ninth Street while closer to the church the Southern Railway freight station at Roxboro and Pettigrew streets, the McGhee Coal Company at Roland and Pettigrew sustained damage. To meet the crisis, the mayor declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew that caused the Deacons to cancel their scheduled monthly meeting. In the wake of the crisis, church officers increased insurance coverage on the sanctuary’s invaluable and virtually irreplaceable stained-glass windows.

IMAGE: *Rev. David M. Currie (1962-1968)*



The following autumn, a frustrated Rev. Currie tendered his resignation but not before he brought to the well-attended monthly Fellowship Dinner two prominent local Black speakers to address the gathering on “Civil Rights and Human Rights: Perspective.” In the sunset of his controversial ministry, Rev. Currie delineated the path ahead for a church wedded to tradition, but which had remained in a downtown then in the throes of urban demolition-renewal accompanied by a race crisis. He invoked the words of the prophet Amos (RSV 5: 14-15, 24): “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so, the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you . . . establish justice in the gate; . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Yet, lamented Rev. Currie, Amos found his “society endlessly evil (tho’ much good was being done by many).” Thus, the prophet had addressed the “comfortably, relaxed, self-centered people of God.” What must his congregants do, he asked? His answer: recognize that “Negroes are brothers” and reach out to them in fellowship and “that Negroes are a recognizable group who have been discriminated against.” Doing so “will reduce discrimination of 350 years” while preparing, as he had experienced, to meet with “hostility, vindictiveness, even rejection.” Tension between tradition and change underwent dramatic transformation with the arrival of **Rev. Wallace McPherson Alston** (1969-1973) replete with Old South credentials but displaying a New South vision. His initial sermon was a call to action. The new minister warned that “we live in very dangerous times when there is no status quo. As the world is in revolution in our time, so is the church in revolution.” It was “twilight time for country club churches,” and time to heed God’s call to “let old things pass away in order to let the new come.” There was “no time for apathy. The chips are down on the table. God lives. He’s in the world calling us as a people to find him there and to follow him” into Durham to address the manifold needs of the poor and dispossessed thereby shaping, as Augustine proposed, the city of man into the City of God.

IMAGE: *Rev. Wallace M. Alston (1969-1974)*



And so, First Presbyterian Church leaders and congregation embarked on a pilgrimage to become Christ’s witnesses to the city in which they dwelled. Years later, in 1996, the choir and congregation sang the 125th Anniversary Hymn in celebration of an historic church that had embarked on a new mission: “As we rejoice, for heritage we cherish/ We’ve pledged to stay and witness in this place/ Certain that we will never truly perish/ Each one unique, united in God’s grace.”

By Peter G. Fish,
Member, 150th Anniversary Committee