

Alabama pastor resigns church after celebrating KKK leader

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PRATTVILLE, Ala. (BP)— A bivocational Southern Baptist pastor resigned from his church July 29 after backlash resulting from his participation in an annual birthday celebration for Nathan Bedford Forrest, a general in the Confederate Army and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.



Will Dismukes

Will Dismukes, who is also a first-term Republican state representative, resigned from his position at Pleasant Hill Baptist Church after a deacons' meeting. Four days earlier, he gave the invocation July 25 at a birthday celebration for Forrest held in Selma, Ala., on the same day as ceremonies honoring the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis.

Lewis, a leader in the civil rights movement and an Alabama native, was a longtime member of Congress from Georgia. In 1965, during a march in Selma that became known as "Bloody Sunday," Lewis suffered a fractured skull when he was beaten by Alabama state troopers.

In a July 26 Facebook post, Dismukes wrote: "Had a great time at Fort Dixie speaking and giving the invocation for Nathan Bedford Forrest annual

birthday celebration. Always a great time and sure enough good eating!”

Alabama Baptists denounce racism

The post was later removed, but Dismukes’ actions drew sharp rebukes and calls to resign both as a pastor and a legislator. He had been pastor at the church, in a rural area near Prattville, since February 2019.

“We are saddened and grieved to learn of the recent Facebook post by state Rep. Will Dismukes,” said Rick Lance, the executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. “... In the wake of tremendous controversy, we reaffirm our opposition to any kind of racism.”

After Dismukes’ actions became known, officers of the Alabama Baptist State Convention and State Board of Missions affirmed a blog post by Lance—originally published in June and republished July 27—titled, “A Personal Credo Concerning Racism.”

In a statement accompanying the republished blog post, the officers said they were “saddened and grieved to learn of the recent Facebook post” by Dismukes, adding: “We reaffirm our opposition to any kind of racism.”

Mel Johnson, lead mission strategist for Autauga Baptist Association, of which Pleasant Hill Baptist is a member, participated in the deacons’ meeting Wednesday evening. Johnson had also met with Dismukes a day earlier.

“Scripture is clear that all people are created in God’s image and therefore equal in every way before Christ and our personal need of him as Savior and Lord,” Johnson said. “Immediate effort was made to connect with Will on behalf of our leadership with commitment toward a biblically based process to mitigate controversy surrounding this issue. He was open and receptive to our call and subsequent in-person meeting on Tuesday

afternoon.”

Johnson said he was “grateful for the opportunity to have met with the church’s leadership for prayer and encouragement as many, through no fault of their own, have found themselves caught in the midst of this issue that has drawn national attention. I am also thankful that Autauga Baptist churches can move forward and remain focused toward Great Commission efforts to communicate the gospel and reach our world for Christ.”

Republicans distance themselves from Dismukes

The Facebook post included a photo showing Dismukes standing behind various Confederate flags. After initial criticism, he issued an apology.

According to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, he said in a statement that the post “was in no way related to disrespecting the passing of” Lewis.

“The post was in no way intended to seem as if I was glorifying the Klan or any party thereof,” Dismukes said in the statement. “The very atrocities and actions they committed are a disgrace to our country.”

But the apology, which did not address Dismukes’ participation in the event, was seen by many as insufficient. Terry Lathan, chairman of the Alabama Republican Party, said in a statement issued Tuesday that Dismukes “offered no explanation for why he participated in a birthday celebration of Nathan Bedford Forrest,” adding he found Dismukes’ “statement to be shallow in understanding why his activities are deeply offensive to so many Alabamians. His constituents will be the final decision-makers of his political future.

“It is one thing to honor one’s Southern heritage, however, it is completely another issue to specifically commemorate the leader of an organization

with an indisputable history of unconscionable actions and atrocities toward African Americans.”

Alabama Sen. Clyde Chambliss, R-Prattville, was among prominent leaders in both political parties calling on Dismukes to resign.

“The post is bad enough, the timing is even worse, but the real problem is that an elected official in 2020 would attend a celebration of life of someone that led a group that terrorized and killed other human beings,” Chambliss wrote in a Facebook post, as reported by the *Montgomery Advertiser*.

Wade Perry, executive director of the Alabama Democratic Party, told the *Montgomery Advertiser*, “It’s 2020 and it’s time for racial extremists like Will Dismukes to go away.” Perry and the party had called in June for Dismukes’ resignation from the state legislature because of his “public support of the lost Confederate cause,” including his role as a chaplain for a local branch of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.