

Interracial nativity brainchild of two Nashville Baptist pastors

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NASHVILLE (BP)—One-month-old Luke Molette was the nativity centerpiece, an African-American baby portraying Jesus in the arms of his mother Mary as a white Joseph sat at their side, flocked by an interracial chorus.

The 2018 Christmas parade float was the latest collaboration between First Baptist Church in Nashville, a majority white congregation led by Senior Pastor Frank Lewis, and nearby First Baptist Church Capitol Hill, a majority black church led by Senior Pastor Kelly Miller Smith Jr. The longtime friends point to a shared church history predating the Civil War, when Nashville's First Baptist Church established Capitol Hill as a mission congregation.

At a college dinner announcing two scholarships in honor of their leadership in racial unity, the pastors explained the Christmas float's creation. Luke Molette is Smith's grandson, born in November to Smith's daughter Valerie Hayes, who portrayed Mary.

"Frank said, 'Well, why don't you just use that child to portray Jesus?'" Smith said. "But I also told Frank ..., 'Why don't we have a white Joseph, as well?'"

Chuck Satterwhite, recruited to portray Joseph, is a member of Nashville First Baptist, a Southern Baptist congregation marking 200 years in 2020.



Frank Lewis (left), pastor of First Baptist Church in Nashville, and Kelly Miller Smith Jr., pastor of First Baptist Church Capitol Hill in Nashville, were honored for their racial unity leadership by Williamson College, which established two \$10,000 scholarships in their names. (BP Photo / Diana Chandler)

The two pastors caught the eye of Williamson College, a small nonprofit, nondenominational Christian school in Franklin, Tenn., after an April 22 pulpit and choir swap. Williamson honored the pastors Dec. 6 at “Uncommon Leadership: One Race. One God” at Vanderbilt University Club, describing the two as catalysts for the college’s new curriculum on biblical unity. The school announced two \$10,000 biblical unity scholarships, one in each pastor’s name, and honored both men with an Uncommon Leadership Award for their efforts to build greater trust and understanding.

The goal is longstanding for Lewis, who grew up in Birmingham, Ala., during the civil rights movement, and Smith, who grew up at the center of the struggle for racial equality in Nashville.

The two met while serving on the board of trustees of Belmont University when Smith was pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church (East), a Southern Baptist congregation in Knoxville, Tenn. Today, Smith's pastorate in Nashville is triply aligned with the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the American Baptist Churches USA and the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.

Growing up in a racist culture

Lewis realized the inappropriateness of the derogatory terms for African-Americans when he heard the language as a second-grader in the 1960s segregated South, he said.

"I grew up in a culture that was very much opposed to racial reconciliation," Lewis said. "I heard messages from my family and my church and in every other imaginable context that said I was better than others because of the color of my skin. ... However, God was at work in the events of my life."

During Lewis' high school days in the 1970s, a black man quietly entered a revival service at Lewis' home church, a small Baptist congregation in a Birmingham suburb. Lewis' father was deacon chairman.

"He entered after the service began and left during the closing prayer quietly without making a sound," Lewis recalled. "The next day, our phone rang off the wall as other deacons and church leaders called to say that they would be at revival services the next night with a gun if necessary to make sure that he would not be allowed to enter the church again."

“I made a commitment then that I would never pastor a church where a person was not welcomed, regardless of the color of his or her skin.”

Father encouraged racial reconciliation

Smith’s father was pastor of First Baptist Church Capitol Hill from 1951 until his death in 1984, with Smith beginning his pastorate there in 2010. Smith said his father encouraged racial reconciliation during the civil rights struggle, and his work is recorded in historical accounts.

“I was very much aware of the dynamics of what Nashville was going through in the ’60s and ’70s in terms of desegregation ... and the mood of that time,” Smith said. “My father often sought for there to be help from across racial lines, without compromising the ultimate goal of providing access and opportunities for all people regardless of race.

“I don’t recall much about the role of First Baptist Church Nashville in this matter. ... I do recall my father mentioning something about the possibility of there being some sharing between the congregations,” Smith said. “This current collaboration was born more from the idea that with our congregations having the same root, there should be some intentionality of our establishing fellowship and sharing the gospel in word and deed.”

The pastors’ April pulpit swap culminated with the evening celebration ‘Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit ... A Night of Spirituals.” The churches celebrated First Baptist Capitol Hill’s sesquicentennial in 2015, with Lewis preaching an evening sermon there and members of both church choirs combining in worship music.

“We’re brothers and sisters in Christ, and it really matters what we do today,” Lewis said at the Dec. 6 dinner. “In the event that anything

horrendous happens in the news, and we've seen events like that around our country, we want to be prepared in advance of that to say that as spiritual leaders, and as spiritual leaders represented by our churches that are here tonight, we want to be out in front of anything that might be negative."

Intentionally building a relationship

Smith described their relationship as intentional.

First Baptist Capitol Hill emerged from a mission congregation Nashville First Baptist established in 1847. In 1853, First Baptist Nashville ordained Nelson Merry and appointed him as pastor of the First Baptist Colored Mission. Merry led the church until his death in 1884, successfully gaining the church's independence from First Nashville in August 1865.

"If my understanding of history is correct, it was not that our group forced their way out of First Baptist. It was one that was done with understanding and with blessing of the larger congregation. Even though that was not necessary, that was appropriate to know that it happened," he said.

"So we've had our connection, even over 150 years ago," Smith said. "Our desire is to make sure that we do continue, and obviously not in the same context in which it was originally, but in the context of brothers and sisters on equal footing, sharing and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Churches can spread gospel-based reconciliation by beginning with genuine hearts that encompass more than combined programs, Smith said.

"Understanding that people should be treated as human beings with dignity, decency and respect creates the right context for there to be an honest collaboration that blesses God," Smith said. "If they were on the 'wrong' side of these matters, they should follow the Christian principles

that include confession and repentance.

“Denial and ignoring are dishonest and ... antithetical to what the Christian faith is all about,” he said.

Jesus affirmed the humanity of all people regardless of their station or situation in life, Smith said, and thus attracted people to himself.

“As we constantly seek to be Christ-like, that should be our aim and goal as well,” Smith said. “I think that is part of the foundation of our collaboration with First Baptist Church Nashville.”