

Kathy Hillman: Trailblazing pastors Marvin Griffin & Harold Branch

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I answered my ringing office phone. Marva Carter explained her father was retiring after 42 years as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Austin. Earlier, he served 18 years at New Hope Baptist Church in Waco. Would we be interested in Marvin Griffin's papers? I thought I remembered him, but my eyes widened as search results appeared.



Kathy Hillman Marvin Collins Griffin died Christmas Day 2013 at age 90, two years after Baylor's Texas Collection received his materials.

Texas Baptist Heroes

This year, I'm adding Marvin Griffin and another African-American pastor to my list of Texas Baptist heroes. Harold T. Branch died Jan. 20, 2012, at age 92. Both fought for the spiritual and political freedom of all people. Both commanded such respect citizens elected them to political office, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas chose them as officers, the first African-Americans so recognized.

Branch led 19th Street Baptist Church to petition the Austin Baptist Association for membership. The *Baptist Standard* reported Oct. 22, 1955, the association voted into fellowship 19th Street and Ebenezer by a vote of 99 to 25. The two became the first predominantly African American churches in the BGCT, although both retained “affiliation with a Negro Baptist convention.”



Pastor Harold T. Branch in 1973. (Photo: *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*) St. John Baptist Church in Corpus Christi called Branch as pastor in 1956. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, the respected pastor visited troubled neighborhoods, maintaining calm. Two years later, when a fight broke out between two black men at a high school football game, about 50 spectators marched on the police station alleging police brutality. Branch stood before them and respectfully asked only the actual witnesses remain to give statements. That began a relationship between Branch and the police that helped ensure fair treatment for all.

In 1971, Corpus Christi citizens elected Branch a city councilman. He pushed for an open accommodation ordinance that led to integration of theaters, bowling alleys, restaurants and businesses. When the BGCT met there in 1973, messengers elected the local pastor as second vice president, the first African-American to hold office.

Harold Branch remained faithful to God, his calling and his commitment to equality. He loved all people, and they loved him. Shortly after his death, the Corpus Christi school district named its newest high school the Harold T. Branch Academy.



Pastor Marvin C.

Griffin (Photo: Marvin C. Griffin Papers, the Texas Collection, Baylor University) Griffin, like Branch, blazed trails. He didn't claim to be a civil rights leader. Yet he gently and fearlessly led. He wrote, "I am not disturbed about the white backlash, because I have lived all of my life under the front lash, and I doubt seriously if the backlash can be any more severe."

Although he already held a master of divinity degree from Oberlin, in 1955 he and Leon Hardee became the first African-Americans to be awarded master's degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Previously, blacks only received diplomas. The pastor later earned a doctorate from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He urged: "While we demonstrate, we must also educate. Instead of riots, we must read. We must develop the training, culture, dignity to match the status

which we seek.”

While pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Waco from 1951 to 1969, Griffin obtained Sunday bus service so people could attend church. He chaired the Progressive Community Council that worked with local businessmen to integrate stores and restaurants. With that success, the council actively promoted the desegregation of theaters, parks, hospitals and schools, including Baylor University.



Pastor Marvin C. Griffin (Photo: Marvin C. Griffin Papers, the Texas Collection, Baylor University) Yet, the pastor preached, “Our ultimate goal is not to eat at a lunch counter, nor get a single job, nor move into a given neighborhood, nor swim in a certain pool, but to be completely free and equal, and to stand unmolested and respected in the center of this culture and to move with dignity in the

mainstream of its total life.”

When Ebenezer Baptist Church called Griffin as pastor, Waco’s loss was Austin’s gain. Citizens elected him to the school board. He served as president during the Austin school district’s difficult integration. He led Ebenezer to begin Meals on Wheels and bus ministry, as well as to form the East Austin Economic Development Corporation to provide child development, elder services and affordable housing. In 2002, the corporation named its building for him.

In 1970, Griffin was the first African-American elected to the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. Gov. John Connally appointed him a regent of Texas Southern University, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas elected him a trustee of Hardin-Simmons University. In 1996, Griffin became the convention’s first vice president.

Harold Branch and Marvin Griffin blazed the trail in leadership and in life. In the intervening years, six other African-Americans have held BGCT offices, including President Michael Bell.

African Americans Elected as Officers of Texas Baptists

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Year Elected</u>
Harold T. Branch	Second Vice President	1973
Marvin C. Griffin	First Vice President	1996
C. Paul McBride	First Vice President	2001
Dennis Young	Second Vice President	2003
Michael Bell	First Vice President	2004
	President	2005
<u>John Ogletree</u>	Second Vice President	2009
Byron Stevenson	Second Vice President	2011
	First Vice President	2012
<u>Bedilu Yirga (Ethiopian)</u>	Second Vice President	2014

The Civil War ended 150 years ago, but still we struggle. Marvin Griffin preached: “God is good to all. The God who spread out the canopy of the

heavens is good to all his children. ... Let us with blessed assurance rededicate ourselves to the task of telling God's children that they are welcome to the Father's banquet hall."



Indeed, God is good to all his children, and Texas Baptists must welcome every one to the Father's banquet hall with open arms.

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