

Opinion: Being Baptist—An Interracial Journey

June 2, 2011

One Sunday in January 1994, our family—Candyce, Stephanie and I—walked across the parking lot of the [Sixth Avenue Baptist Church](#) in Birmingham, Ala., after the morning service. An elderly African-American woman approached us and asked: “Reverend, you’ve been visiting our church for several months. Don’t you think it is time you walked?”

With that spontaneous, Holy Ghost-inspired encouragement, the very next Sunday we “walked” the aisle. Our family of English and Croatian lineage became members of one of Birmingham’s largest African-American Baptist congregations.

Bill Leonard

It all began when the church’s pastor, John Thomas Porter, invited me to speak there shortly after Candyce and I started teaching at Birmingham’s [Samford University](#). Porter, now deceased, was pastor of the Sixth Avenue Church 38 years. Martin Luther King Jr. preached at his installation. He went to jail during the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham and was one of the first African-Americans elected to the state legislature as Jim Crow culture collapsed.

Our family had moved from Louisville, worn out from the “Baptist wars” that descended on the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where I taught 16 years. In wonderful and mysterious ways, Sixth Avenue Baptist Church became a place of healing and grace. In 2003 when my book [Baptist Ways: A History](#) was published, I included this dedication:

“To Dr. John Thomas Porter and the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, who

taught me anew what it means to be a Baptist and what it means to be free.”

In 1996 after moving to Winston-Salem to teach at [Wake Forest University](#), we joined First Baptist Church, Highland Avenue, the community’s oldest African-American congregation (1879). Across the last 14 years, membership at First Baptist has nurtured deep friendships in the week-to-week, year-to-year experiences of shared church life. Our current pastor, Darryl Aaron, is one of several outstanding young African-American pastors who succeeded long-tenured ministers in various area churches. Aaron’s friendship, as well as his skill as preacher, pastor and community leader, gives me hope for the 21st-century church.

On one level, the membership of Caucasians in an African-American church is no big deal. At their best, churches welcome persons of varied ethnic and racial backgrounds into Christian community. For myself, the gifts are considerable, including:

- *A renewed understanding of and commitment to what it means to be a Baptist.*
- *The recognition that Christian worship is inseparable from community engagement.*
- *An opportunity to listen to and learn from diverse voices and cultures.*
- *An encounter with varied spiritualities that expand Christian experience.*
- *An extended network of relationships and shared ministry.*

Some experiences cannot be reconciled. At Sixth Avenue Church we often sang the hymn, “O freedom, freedom over me. ... and before I’d be a slave I’d be carried to my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.” I could

never let myself sing those words since I have no personal or familial links to the slave experience.

But on the first Sunday of each month, as members of First Baptist gather for Holy Communion and the celebration of Christian baptism, the pastor enters the water with the baptismal candidate the choir sings the old spiritual that begins:

Take me to the water,

Take me to the water,

Take me to the water,

To be baptized.

Singing that haunting melody, I know I'm home.

Bill J. Leonard is professor of church history and religion at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in Winston-Salem, N.C.