

## **Pastor leaves after church turns away biracial boy**

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SALTILLO - Twelve-year-old Joe recently asked Jesus to live in his heart.

Yet the church where Joe accepted his Savior not even two weeks before will no longer allow the biracial boy to enter.

On Aug. 6, during its scheduled Sunday night business meeting, Fellowship Baptist Church in Saltillo voted not to accept blacks within the church. More specifically, the congregation also voted Joe out and said he could not return.

That evening Fellowship Baptist did not just say goodbye to Joe and an entire race of humans. With that decision the church's pastor, the Rev. John Stevens, resigned, and at least one other family decided not to return to the Baptist Missionary Alliance congregation that averages 30 people.

The church was "afraid Joe might come with his people and have blacks in the church," Stevens said. "I could not go along with that. There would always be a wall between us, so I resigned that night."

Cliff Hardy, an officer with the Tupelo Police Department, left the church, too. He and his family had been going to Fellowship Baptist for about a year and had been praying about becoming members there.

"I was asking the Lord to lead us," Hardy said.

The police officer says there are good people at Fellowship Baptist, and the Bible was preached there.

However, "You see, my best friend is a black man," he said. "I wouldn't be comfortable going to a place where I couldn't ask my best friend to go to church with me."

Hardy says he knows there are still a lot of folks who are not comfortable with people from other races, there is still a lot of holdover from the past, there is still a lot of fear.

"But that's not what Christ died for," he said. Jesus' death and resurrection "is supposed to be a uniting force, not a separating thing."

We're all God's children'

In July Joe moved in with his uncle and aunt, Saltillo residents Jason and Melinda Kirk. The Kirks, who had been attending Fellowship Baptist for almost five months, were Joe's temporary guardians until recently, when his stepmother moved here from Ohio.

During the week of July 23-26, Fellowship Baptist held revival services, and on July 26, Joe became a Christian.

The following Sunday, people at the church asked the Kirks if they would become members, and the family started praying about it.

The next Sunday morning, Aug. 6, the Kirks went to church. When company arrived at their house that afternoon, they decided not to go to the 143-year-old church that night.

Later that evening, the Kirks received a phone call from their pastor, Stevens, who said Joe had been voted out of the church and could not come back. The minister, 72, who has now retired, said he had resigned from the church over the decision.

Joe overheard the telephone conversation.

"We explained to him that everybody didn't feel like that," Melinda Kirk said. "But it really bothered him. He felt like our pastor had to quit his job because of him."

The Kirks reassured their nephew that Stevens was just standing up for what is right.

"People have got to realize we're all God's children," Jason Kirk said. "It's not God so loved the white people; it's God so loved the world."

Since Stevens' resignation, one church member who was not at the Aug. 6 meeting has called the former pastor and told him he was in favor of what he did. Stevens estimates 80 percent of the church is against having blacks in the congregation.

"It's between them and God," police officer Hardy said. "I love those folks, but I can't agree with them."

Fellowship Baptist Church members were contacted for this article but declined to comment.

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