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## Pastor claims church voted to reject black membership, resigns

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BY CHARITY GORDON

Daily Journal

SALTILLO - A pastor who says his congregation voted not to accept black membership has resigned. The church says it never made such a decision.

The Rev. John Stevens says Fellowship Baptist Church in Saltillo voted not to approve blacks as members during a scheduled Sunday night business meeting Aug. 6. Because of the decision, Stevens stepped down from the Baptist Missionary Alliance congregation that has an average Sunday morning attendance of 30 people.

According to Stevens, the church made race an issue after a biracial 12-year-old boy, Joe, began attending Fellowship Baptist with his temporary guardians.

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."

After the Daily Journal contacted Fellowship Baptist members, they gathered Aug. 17 to form a response. Mike Dillard, who acted as spokesperson for the church, said the congregation "categorically denies"



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accusations that the church took such a vote and feels the charge is an attempt by a party to do them harm.

Family leaves

After being told of the vote, Cliff Hardy, an officer with the Tupelo Police Department, left the church. 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

  
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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 Fellowship Baptist. When company arrived at their house that afternoon, they decided not to go to the church that night.

Later that evening, the Kirks received a phone call from their pastor, Stevens, who said the church had voted not to accept black membership. 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 as members of the congregation.

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

them."

Contact Daily Journal religion editor Charity Gordon  
at 678-1586 or [charity.gordon@djournal.com](mailto:charity.gordon@djournal.com)

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