

Race Not an Issue for Church In South Georgia

Defying regional sentiments, Southland Church in Valdosta opened its doors in 1997 to people of all races.

Don't tell Aundria Collins that racism in the Deep South is a distant page in history. But don't tell her God isn't moving to change hearts. Aundria found a unique racially mixed church in south Georgia—where peanuts, corn, tobacco and cotton were harvested by slave labor until the Confederacy lost the Civil War.

In Valdosta, Ga., 20 miles over the Florida state line along I-75, Aundria and her husband, Martin Collins, found racism. But God also led them to a mostly white church that is battling racism's stronghold with a silent campaign to embrace African Americans.

The Collinses, who both are on active duty in the U.S. Air Force, arrived in Valdosta in 1997 on orders to Moody Air Force Base. Their spiritual background is in the Church of God in Christ. They had driven down from their New Jersey home in November 1997 and immediately faced situations they had never faced before.

They had "real estate" problems, Martin said, because of "our color." And when they enrolled their children in school, they were surprised when a white teacher suggested pairing their daughter Monica with a black student.

"We told the teacher that Monica is a little sensitive, and the teacher said, 'We'll put her with a little black girl,'" said Martin. "We said, 'She doesn't pick friends by whether they're black or white.' I began praying, 'Lord, are You sure we made the right decision?'"

Pastor Lee Barnes of Southland Church in Valdosta believes God sent the Collinses and several other black couples his way because his mostly white church prays and strives to be a living bridge between Valdosta's segregated church—a split that mirrors the city's society.

Southland is an offshoot of New Covenant Church, an independent charismatic church located on Valdosta's north side—the predominately "white" side of town. Barnes pastored New Covenant for seven years.

In July 1997, New Covenant's 600 members were asked to seek the Lord about whether they should stay at the home church or join a church expansion at what today is Southland. Some 190 members left for the new church—and Barnes left New Covenant to pastor there. Southland, whose membership has grown to 600, is located on the south and predominately black side of town.

"We didn't plan it that way," Barnes said. "God gave us this former plant building in an industrial area. God just in His sovereignty placed us here."

How does a white church convince local residents that it's serious about opening its congregation to all races?

"You can preach until you're blue in the face that, 'We don't look at skin color here,'" Barnes told Charisma. "But if you

don't invite them into your leadership, they think you're lying. They will see right through it.

"When you see that God has called somebody to lead—let them. If they are called, if they are mature, if they are committed, let them lead."

Martin Collins, for example, is a leader of one of several home groups organized by the church to bring members into New Testament-style fellowship, and many who attend Martin's group are white.

Barnes learned firsthand about racism while growing up in Waycross, Ga. He had to ask permission of a white pastor to invite his black friends to a revival. And when a black high school student came to live with Barnes' family in 1973, while the student's family worked through some problems, the family was chastised for allowing a black person to stay with them.

"I just determined that we were not going to have that here," Barnes said. "We treat everyone equally."

Racism comes in different forms, Aundria pointed out. Her 10-year-old son, Adrian, has been accused by other black schoolmates of not "acting black enough" because he doesn't speak in today's rap lingo. And her 12-year-old daughter, Monica, had the same problem.

"We are not black or white. We are a Christian family," Aundria said. "I praise God for this church. My children's church friends, black or white, love them just for who they are."

Mary Frances faced some ridicule when her fellow African American neighbors learned she was attending a “white” church. But when they saw white folks helping her move to a new home, they saw the real Jesus.

“I knew this church was where I was supposed to be because on my second visit a white man came across the aisle to me and said God told him to tell me that God would use me as a bridge,” Frances said.