

Church black ar

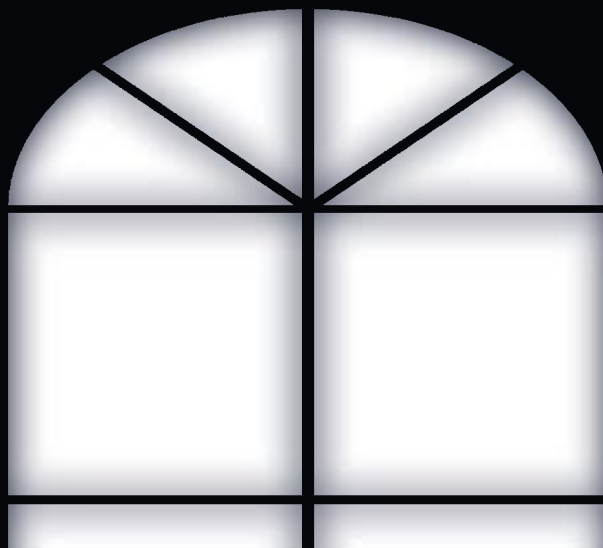
**Rural North
Carolina
congregation
breaks down
societal
segregation**

rich and white

By John W. Kennedy

On the surface, impoverished rural northeastern North Carolina looks much like it did in the Civil War era. Cotton fields line the roadway, at least where timber and swamps don't mount an incursion. Residents grow collard greens in their small gardens.

In other cultural ways, not much has changed from the



Church in black and white

John W. Kennedy photos

'Racism is a spiritual problem, it's not a social problem. If you have a heart for God, then you realize all the ground at the cross is level.'

Pastor Wallace Phillips



Pastor Wallace Phillips

civil rights era of a century later. Certainly federal legislation enacted during the 1960s changed the reality of segregation. African Americans can now drink at the same water fountains and sit in the same movie theater sections as whites.

But socially — and religiously — some antebellum attitudes remain entrenched. Legislation didn't alter heartfelt generational traditions. Fact is, many white and black people in Hertford County don't associate with each other.

Assemblies of God Pastor Wallace Phillips has shaken the status quo in the county and in the town of Ahoskie. He believes community reconciliation and healing can't take place unless residents worship together, regardless of skin color.

Thirteen years ago Phillips, an energetic, good-natured man with a booming voice, took over as pastor of The Carpenter's Shop. The church had gone through 11 pastors in 15 years and dwindled to a dozen white attendees.

Today, The Carpenter's Shop is the largest — and most racially diverse — congregation in the town of 4,500. About 450 people attend — half of them white. According to the U.S.

Census Bureau, Ahoskie is 59 percent black and 37 percent white.

Barbara Rice drives each Sunday to Ahoskie from Windsor, an even smaller town 24 miles south on Highway 13. Rice, 66, recalls knowing only one white child during her formative years in Windsor before moving to Hampton, Va.

Forty-five years ago, Rice participated in a sit-in at a Hampton Woolworth's lunch counter in protest of the store's racist policy. When she retired back to the Tarheel State two years ago, Rice didn't want to attend an all-black congregation.

"The church too often has been a bastion of segregation," says Rice, who at The Carpenter's Shop teaches a women's Bible study, leads an intercessory prayer group and conducts a sewing class that is open to the community. "I love the mixed congregation."

A decade ago, Allie Valentine became the first African-American to start attending The Carpenter's Shop. Wallace repeatedly invited Valentine to church services when she worked as a clerk at the local Wendy's restaurant. She finally relented.

"He and his family drove over to get me," recalls Valentine, a 35-year-old single mother. "He didn't even

tell me he was the minister."

Valentine, now activities director at an assisted living facility, says the church has helped her overcome various personal problems. She says Phillips didn't shun her when she continued struggling with alcohol before the Lord delivered her seven years ago.

"Pastor Phillips never made me feel like I was unworthy to come to church. He never belittled me," Valentine says. "If I hadn't come to church I don't know where I'd be today."

During Sunday morning worship services at The Carpenter's Shop, attendees are interspersed in the pews, seemingly not giving skin color a second thought.

The worship team sets the tone for ministry, with half a dozen black singers and half a dozen white ones. Worship is a little bit of everything: gospel, contemporary Christian, country, hip-hop.

The spacious church is open to the community seven days a week for such gatherings as hospice care meetings, food giveaways, concerts and family birthday parties. That might not seem like a big deal most places, but here it is.

On one end of town, a billboard along Highway 13 invites drivers to

Continued on page 28



The Carpenter's Shop, "the church where all are welcome." On the other end of town, another sign complete with children's handprints reads, "Red, yellow, black and white. They are precious in His sight."

For a town that has worshipped largely along racial lines, it's a radical concept.

"Anyone who attends here faces comments from others in the community," says Chris Rule, a 66-year-old white elder who has been in the church for a decade. "If you're black they say, 'Oh, you go to that white church.' If you're white, it's 'Oh you go to that black church.'"

"In this area segregation is the norm," says Daphne Lewis, whose husband, Thomas Two Feathers, is chief of the Meherrins, the smallest recognized Native American tribe in North Carolina. The blonde Lewis, 45, met her husband in a singles group at church and they wed four years ago. The interethnic couple has found acceptance at The Carpenter's Shop.

"But in most churches around here we'd still be an oddity and receive a lot of stares," she says.

Two Feathers, 62, leader of the 800-member tribe, says Meherrins often feel unwelcome by both whites and blacks. Half a century ago they weren't allowed to use either the white or "colored" public accommodations.

Roland and Shirleen Garcia are

Church black and white

Ministry leaders pray for needs at the altar (left); member Barbara Rice (below left) and the worship team in a Sunday service.



another interethnic couple at the church. He is Puerto Rican; she is African-American. Roland, who plays percussion on the worship team, also is in charge of a Friday night "Raise the Praise" music group for young people ages 7-16. The mixed-race hip-hop, rapping and drum line crew has been invited to perform at various churches. Of the 35 in the group, only five come from two-parent homes. Roland, 30, also has set up a weight room in the church to give youth something to do with their free time.

"Our goal is to get kids off the street and save them from being devoured," says Roland, who started a separate youth service in April.

The Carpenter's Shop has become a regional draw, with members from all directions driving up to 60 miles to attend. Phillips has a daily radio program, a column carried in several area newspapers and he is the author of *Just Plain Vanilla*, a book offering practical ministry helps.

In the process, Phillips has become a sought-after speaker not only in Hertford County but also around the country.

Still, The Carpenter's Shop faces real local opposition from those who don't want to see blacks and whites get along. Phillips receives a steady flow of hate mail; his life is occasionally threatened; there are warnings that the church will be torched. He doesn't plan to back down.

"The purpose of ministry is people, not selective people," Phillips says. "Racism is a spiritual problem, it's not a social problem. If you have a heart for God, then you realize all the ground at the cross is level."

Joy Phillips, the pastor's wife of 23 years, says many start attending The Carpenter's Shop because of a small group outreach. "A lot of people won't come to a church service at first," she says. "But they will come to something like a mom's night out."

Racism isn't the only barrier between people and church. As in much of the country, apathy keeps many people away, according to Sandra Bishop, one of two black deacons at The Carpenter's Shop.

"A lot of people just won't come to church," says Bishop, who at 59 still remembers days when even walking into a "white" church would have caused a disruption. "They say they belong elsewhere, but they never attend."

"People are quick to tell you they are Christian, but slow to show you they are a convert," Phillips says.

He isn't deterred. Phillips knows the best way to grow a church is to keep inviting people to a service, regardless of what they look like. ■

John W. Kennedy is news editor of Today's Pentecostal Evangel.

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.