

RECORD REVIEW

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PULLOUT:

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SCOTT MULLIN PHOTO

Pastor Rufus A. Strother Jr. in the chapel of the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills.

PIC #2

Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, the congregation where Pastor Rufus A. Strother Jr. has presided for 38 years.

Pastor to retire after shaping town’s spiritual path

By ABBY LUBY

On Sunday, Jan. 4, 2004, Pastor Rufus A. Strother, Jr. will deliver his tenure-ending message at the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills. Pastor Strother has led Antioch Baptist’s congregation for 38 years. It was a tenure that began at the height of the civil rights movement in this country, a movement that became integral in shaping the spiritual path of the pastor’s leadership.

The church itself has had deep roots in the community for over 100 years. It grew from small services in people’s homes to small chapel spaces, and then to larger churches to house a growing congregation. The current location at Church and Main streets in Bedford Hills has been the church’s home since 1976.

When Pastor Strother was invited to lead the congregation in 1965, the church had been struggling to keep the congregation together and was just getting back on its feet.

“I was blessed to come in at a time when they wanted leadership,” said Pastor Strother. “They gave me great opportunities to move in areas that they may have been reluctant to move prior to that time. I thought it was a quaint area, a quaint town, the church had quite a history in this town.”

Rufus A. Strother Jr. was born in Orange County, Va., but moved at an early age to Millbrook in Dutchess County.

“At that time African Americans were migrating north, and my mom and dad came up as service workers,” the pastor said. “They came to Poughkeepsie first then they moved out to the farm

area. My mom worked as a domestic and my dad worked on a dairy farm. Most of my elementary and high school was done in Millbrook.”

The pastor served two years in the U.S. Army after high school. When he got out of the service, he married and started to work at what he called a “secular job” in Poughkeepsie. He thought he wanted to be a lawyer, but got the calling to go into the religious field.

“I started taking different theological courses at Dutchess Community College, Pace, and at the Biblical Seminary in New York City,” said Pastor Strother. “I also studied at the Manhattan Bible College and attended the International Theological Seminary at Plymouth in Florida. All these schools got me in touch with my heritage.”

Pastor Strother’s first parish was in 1960 at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Stormville, where he was a student pastor. In 1965 he was invited, or “called,” to lead the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills. Three years later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

“After the assassination of Dr. King, of course the morale went down because we felt the world was not a friendly place,” said Pastor Strother. “That was 1968, and out of that came a lot of good things. The community came together and formed what was known as the Northeast Westchester Council on Equality, where churches and individuals came together to deal with things like education and employment. It was a marvelous time as far as people coming together to try to make up for what had gone on in this nation for many years.”

The council had an “attitude committee” to deal with race and religion problems. They also had a housing committee and an employment committee that dealt with discrimination. “We had people come to us where a black would go for an apartment that was advertised and all of a sudden it was gone,” said Pastor Strother. “Then we would send a white person and it became available. I imagine those things still go on, but we don’t get much reporting on it.

“The council was a great piece of machinery for that time,” said Pastor Strother. “It bought something to this community that was needed and it lessened the polarization between people. We could sit down and talk about our problems rather than throwing stones.”

In 1973, there was a proposal for a project called “The Nine-Town Housing Program” geared for moderate and low-income families. The Northern Westchester Council on Equality was a major player, but somehow the deal fell through. “That was during Rockefeller’s reign and we tried to make that happen but it never did come to pass,” said Pastor Strother. “There are a lot of regrets about it now, because we still have the same problem with housing — not just for minorities but for working people who can’t afford to live in Westchester.”

In the aftermath of the King assassination, the church saw support from various local corporations like Reader’s Digest. “Because of the unrest in the country, Reader’s Digest was extremely involved in helping our church,” said Pastor Strother. “They were trying to reach out to the African American Community to give more opportunities for jobs. They were extremely involved with our youth — they had a summer program where teens had a chance to work at Reader’s Digest for the summer. It wasn’t just for one or two teens, they took as many as I could give them. It was a wonderful time, it gave courage to the young people.”

Pastor Strother has seen many changes over his 38 years in the Bedford community. Themes for his sermons over the last three decades have dealt with a plethora of societal issues, but all have spoken to the equality of all human beings and the need to reach out and communicate our differences. In discussing a recent sermon, Pastor Strother addressed religious tolerance.

“I think people need to be a little more tolerant of other faiths, other beliefs and other traditions,” he said. “We can’t think that we have God locked up. We’re not the only part of God’s creation and people have to be given the opportunity to get to know God through themselves through whatever vehicle God has allowed them to do that. Usually Baptists are considered to be very

fundamentalist, almost to a fault. At one time we thought that we had the last word. That's not true. God works through people, period."

In the post 9/11 world, words from the pulpit have taken on a new meaning, and Pastor Strother has spoken at length to his congregation about religious intolerance.

"It's a tough time for the whole world because most of us believe that God created us, but now we want to create God. It's like saying 'I want my God to be pretty much like me,' and 'if I'm angry and I harbor hatred toward certain people, I attribute that to my God.'

"For example, after 9/11 they said 'Allah or God told me to do this,'" said Pastor Strother. "That is also Judeo-Christian thought and maybe, not intentionally, we want our God to pretty much feel the way we feel. That means that if I hate you, my God also hates you. We don't like to talk about that, but we human beings want gods of our making."

Countering religious intolerance, Pastor Strother speaks to his congregation about the love of God and how it is all inclusive. He says that the strength of the church's beliefs is based a great deal on the idea of love for mankind and love for God.

"What's frightening about the religious climate now is we try to lock God into a certain pattern," said Pastor Strother. "But if you talk about the god of the emotion called love, then you must emulate that God and our love for each other. One of our scriptures says 'you can't love God whom you've never seen and never love your fellow man who you see every day.' That love has to be transferred to your fellow man.

"We want God to think like we think, act like we act, carry out our missions. That's a serious problem, because as long as that thought is there, I can justify what I'm doing. I can mistreat you without any remorse because my God told me to do it. It's not just true of the Islamic faith, it's true of all of us to a certain degree."

The Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills has a large youth component, and members of the youth group come to many of the teaching sessions. Pastor Strother believes that youth are reflections of their parents and many of his talks with parents address today's child rearing difficulties.

"It's just like when you buy a toy for your kids that you have to put together," said Pastor Strother. "On the box it says 'assembly is necessary.' It's the same with the children."

The bigger picture for Pastor Strother looks at our permissive society and the age of technology that exposes youngsters to an alarming amount of information. The issue for the pastor is one of control.

"Parental control is not an easy task anymore," said Pastor Strother. "You can't take away parental influence or parental control because that control is what our creator wanted. We learn from the lower animal kingdom that parents have a responsibility for the young. When you give that control up to whomever — the drug dealer or whomever — you are losing control. I try to work with the parents and children together and really emphasize that the parents are the ones that are responsible for their children. Take a child that's not disciplined at home and thrust him on the poor teachers at school and expect the teachers to do something with him. You can't do that. We teach that parental guidance is very important. The parent has a responsibility to the child, a child has responsibility to the parent, and the community has a responsibility to both." Since the composition of the community has changed over the years, Pastor Strother has recognized the different problems that have surfaced. He has examined the church's role in keeping the lines of communication open in the community. His concerns about problems among the diverse student population in Bedford is ongoing.

"The schools have been doing a good job, they are improving," said Pastor Strother. "At one time, there was a major problem in our school system. In the three hamlets that make up the

school district, you have people with different racial backgrounds, different economic backgrounds — you have the real wealthy and you have the real poor. Sometimes the less fortunate of the students don't feel that they are a part of the school. If you take a child from Mount Kisco who is just above the poverty line, or just below it, and throw him into a situation like Fox Lane, he's got to compete with a kid whose been to Europe three or four times already. The child feels pretty much out of place. Here he is in this super wealthy community, yet he hasn't experienced that himself. It's not conducive to learning, unless you have a special program to try to deal with that problem. I know the schools have tried and I don't have any real complaints from the kids in my church."

The pastor has a caveat that he learned from his mother when he was in elementary school. It was about a game called the "race-game."

"When I went to elementary school, it was a very small school and I was one of two blacks there," he said. "I learned to play the race game even then. I would come home and say to my mom, 'Look, the teacher doesn't like me.' Do you know what she said to me? 'I'm not sending you to school so the teacher could like you, I'm sending you to get what the teacher has to give you.' We play the race game when it's not race at all, it's just human beings having a misunderstanding."

Pastor Strother sees the church as a stronghold in the community and as a place where problems are dealt with, either within the confines of the congregation or outside in the community. "This church is a seasoning force in this community that makes us all aware of the fact that all people of all races, creeds must come together as one community. Even though we have our differences, we still have one community. The strength comes from the 'oneness'. I've seen things go haywire, groups in this community have been able to come together and communicate — they can say 'this is why I'm hurting' or 'this is what's causing the problem.'"

The pastor remembered when two men from his congregation went into a bar and were told by another patron who was white — and happened to be a person of authority in the community — that this bar was not for "niggers."

"The two men brought it to the church, because we are the center of the African American Community," said Pastor Strother. "The church intervened. We pursued it and at that time the Northern Westchester Council on Equality was still intact, and it resulted in having a judge removed from the bench. It really shook this community up."

He said the incident brought about a healing. "Unfortunately, the healing didn't come about until they lost their position, although we tried to save the position of that person," said Pastor Strother. "If the lawyer had allowed us to sit down and talk together, we would have tried to bring about forgiveness and understanding. People do not come into the world like this, they are taught intolerance and react in a way that they shouldn't. It sent a message that said 'you can't do this anymore, you can't abuse folks just because you feel like it and because you think they are less than yourself.'"

For Pastor Strother, there have been great strides in civil rights in America since the 1960's, but he believes the society has, in part, turned away from the issues of race.

"I grew up in a racist society and we all are marred by that society. As we try to overcome racism, as we mature, we see that it's already taken a toll on us. So we still think the wrong thoughts and say the wrong things as it relates to other people. The anger is there and the ignorance is there — all that's still very much there. You would think that Dr. King's 'Dream' and America has had an awakening during the civil rights struggle and that we have arrived. Not so. Not so. It's very subtle now and things are going on now that still convey racial division in

our society. I don't think our society is quite as supportive of racial intolerance and racial hatred as it was back during the struggle."

In the chapel of the Baptist Antioch Church in Bedford Hills is a special area just for musicians and an opposite stage for the choir. For years the music of this church choir has been known as one of the area's most celebrated choral groups. The choir has even recorded with Andre Previn. "We have a very musical family in our congregation, the Brown family. Earl Brown is the father and is our minister of music," said Pastor Strother. "All people love music and can relate to music. We have two major concerts a year, a benefit for the community center, and our own annual concert in November which is probably the largest gathering in the town of Bedford with 400 to 500 people."

He said the church's choir is involved in the community, singing at nursing homes and special events. Recently the choir performed in the Ecumenical Advents Session at St. Mary's in Katonah. Coming up for Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a memorial service at Yorktown's Presbyterian Church, where many church choirs will come together and form a mass choir. The effort is administrated and put together by the Antioch choir.

Pastor Strother plans to retire to a new home in Dutchess County. "I may want to do some writing, and I have a lot of subject matter to choose from," he said. "From my experience as a minister, I used to do a lot of lecturing in the church circuit. I may give a few seminars here and there."

In the next few weeks the church will announce who the new pastor will be.

Although Pastor Strother will not be living in the area, he hopes to stop in from time to time to say hello to many old friends. "This has been a great tenure and a great congregation," said Pastor Strother. "They've given me freedom and flexibility to lead them and to direct them.

They've supported me 100 percent in all my efforts. I don't regret one moment I spent here for 38 years. It's difficult for me to bail out because they've been great people."