

Church denies entry to couple

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Mar 31, 2004

BEAZLEY - When Lori and Jasper Battle decided to join Rappahannock Indian Baptist Church, they didn't think it would be an issue.

The couple, who are raising Lori Battle's niece and nephew, approached the Rev. Clayton Custalow about joining the tidy brick church in this hamlet at the convergence of King and Queen, Essex and Caroline counties. "He prayed with us and was very nice and thought it was a good idea."

But later, two of the church's deacons, John Fortune Jr. and Daniel Fortune, called the Battles aside, pulled them into a room and closed the door, Lori Battle said. "They told me they did not want us to join the church because I had married outside my race."

Lori, 55, is a Rappahannock Indian; Jasper, 72, is black.

"I didn't understand why we couldn't join, because the church is of God, not a race of people," she said. "It just floored me. You don't expect that in God's house." Adding to her confusion is that the church has white members.

The deacons, who are distant relatives, would not comment.

The issue has divided the 40-year-old church, led to Custalow's resignation as pastor and reflects an existing fissure within the tribe. And it occurs as the tribe steps up its efforts for federal recognition.

Opponents of the Battles' admission to the church aren't talking.

Daniel Fortune was hushed and led away by his daughter before he could comment on the matter.

"We all have battles; we'll overcome this, too," Faye Fortune Deuber said as she guided her father, who walks with a cane, toward a waiting car. What did she mean? "God will explain it to you. Read the Bible."

Contacting The Times-Dispatch last night after repeated attempts to reach him over several days, John Fortune said he had no comment. Even supporters of the Battles are reluctant to speak.

"I don't want to make a big issue of this," said Susie Fortune, one of the founders of the church. "Our community and our church has already been hurt so much, because of the talk that has been out in the community about how the church wouldn't accept the Battles."

Susie Fortune, 68, said that to her knowledge, the church has never had a black member.

As for the Battles joining the church, "I didn't have a problem with it. I tell you this: If you are a good Christian, God don't look on your color," she said.

G. Anne Richardson, chief of the Rappahannock tribe, declined to comment on the matter before hanging up the phone. But one church member said that Richardson, though not an active member of the church, voted against changing its constitution at a March 3 meeting.

A subsequent call to Richardson was not returned.

The church's constitution says church members "do not believe in stressing integration nor segregation. We welcome into our worship services all who have a longing to study, to learn of and to bring praise unto our Lord. We encourage all races of people to join and support the local church built and supported by their own race of people."

Lori Battle says the church is selective in its interpretation of its bylaws.

"If you're not going to let black people in the church, you're not going to let white people in the church, right? Well, they got white people in the church."

Pastor Custalow says opponents of the Battles' joining the church "view it as a preservation of identity" but said he was troubled by the inconsistency of allowing white members.

But Custalow, a member of the Mattaponi tribe, and his wife, Karen, who is white, did not vote at the March 3 meeting.

"I know that a person who is a pastor is called to lead the people, not push them," he told the congregation. "I wanted to give the people of this fellowship the freedom to make a decision without feeling the pastor was taking sides."

"I must make it clear: I am not in favor of racism," Custalow told the congregation Sunday. But he said he had no option but to leave after the March 3 vote, and read a passage from a 1995 resolution by the Southern Baptist Convention.

That historic resolution stated that "racism has divided the body of Christ and Southern Baptists in particular, and separated us from our African-American brothers and sisters" and "excluded African-Americans from worship, membership, and leadership." The

convention resolved to "unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin."

Rappahannock Indian Baptist is one of 67 congregations in seven counties that belong to the Dover Baptist Association, which is an affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention. Steven Allsbrook, Dover's executive director, says each church has autonomy and the association cannot interfere. The only punitive action Dover could take would be to remove the church from the association.

"I can't say it's being considered at this point because the Rappahannock folks haven't finished addressing the matter themselves," he said.

"My personal feeling? I believe that the church should be open to all people," he said, citing the third chapter of Galatians: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.

Rappahannock Indian Baptist scheduled a meeting on Monday night to revisit the membership issue. But Karen Custalow said the opposing faction boycotted the meeting, in which John Fortune and Daniel Fortune were voted out as deacons.

The Battles still want to join the church. But without a pastor, their membership has been put on hold. Some church members cling to the hope that Custalow will return as pastor.

Some members also embrace the hope that the church will emerge stronger. Church member Barron Nelson called Jasper Battle "an angel in disguise.

"He's a black man, and God sent him here to show what kind of hearts people had," he said.

After Sunday's service, the Battles braved the late March chill as they stood on the church steps. Flanking them were niece Sarah Hedgeman, 14, and nephew Preston Hedgeman, 10.

What did she think of all this, Sarah was asked.

"It's terrible!" she replied.

Her brother piped in: "And in a church, too!"

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