

Marvin Griffin... a citizen Christian through the years

By Ferrell Foster

The United States has changed a great deal during Marvin Griffin's 81 years, especially in how the nation treats its African American citizens.

"I think we've come a long way," says the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Austin. "I would not have dreamed that I would see the things I've seen in my lifetime."

Griffin was pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Waco from 1951 to 1969, a time that encompassed some of this nation's greatest civil strife as African Americans and others sought to tear down years of legally sanctioned injustice and decades of discrimination. But Waco didn't make the headlines that other cities did.

"It was never in the paper," Griffin says. Blacks and whites worked together "quietly" behind the scenes to open businesses, schools and a hospital to African Americans, as well as deal with other cases of racial discord. "That's how we integrated."

Griffin was chairman of a seven-member black committee that stayed in touch with a group of white leaders, and they got things done. There was Goldstein's restaurant, Cameron Park, Hillcrest Hospital, Lester's Chicken Shack and other places that gradually opened their doors.

Civic-minded Christians sat on both committees. "I loved Abner McCall," Griffin said of the white man who then led Baylor University's law school and later became president of the college. "He was frank, open and usually said the right things and did the right things. ... We always understood each other."

The Christian faith of men like Griffin and McCall played a vital role in the civil rights movement beyond Waco.

The black church was "sort of the foundation" of the movement, Griffin says. "Martin Luther King came out of the black church. The movement grew out of the church and was maintained largely by the church."

While the movement embraced "all who were willing to join it, ... it was based on moral and spiritual foundations" laid down by the church, the pastor says. It also was built on "basic foundation principles of this nation. Therefore it was inclusive of all who shared these hopes and dreams."

The civil rights movement provided an example of how Christian values can have an impact on society while functioning within the framework of principles spelled out in the Constitution.

Griffin is a strong believer in the separation of church and state, but he knows that not all church leaders are as committed to that principle. "Many of the churches are violating the law" that prohibits non-profit entities from being involved in partisan politics while maintaining tax exempt status. "It bears investigating."

Recently a prominent national figure came to Austin and spoke against a political candidate in a number of congregations. "He didn't speak here. I wouldn't let him."

The historic position of Baptists on separation of church and state is clear, the pastor says. But, "we have begun in many instances ... to depart from that position."

One problem Griffin sees is that this separation is not being discussed in churches. "The only time you get this discussion is when one party is getting ahead of the other. I seriously doubt you have among our churches much consideration being given to this."

Griffin's view about separation of church and state does not mean he personally has been uninvolved or that his church is not seeking to make a difference in the community.

The pastor served a term on the Austin school board and has been appointed to various boards and commissions by both Democratic and Republican governors.

As for the church, Ebenezer Baptist has proved itself to be a good citizen, as well. The church building is in a portion of East Austin once called "The Legacy of Shame," says Van Johnson, a church member. Over the years the church has purchased almost an entire city block and part of another. It has used the land to build buildings that house an economic development corporation, a day care center, an elder care ministry and a charter school.

The church has invested \$4 million in the community, and now \$25 million in outside investments is flowing into the area, says Johnson, who is executive director of East Austin Economic Development Corp. "It shows how an inner city church can serve as a catalyst for redevelopment."

Ebenezer, however, is like other churches. It still struggles with change. Pastor Griffin would like to start a ministry to people with drug problems, but the church has balked. "Too often we shy away from those programs because we want to have peace and progress."

Churches need to "discover ways to perform meaningful ministry," Griffin says. "Jesus called us to minister to all people."

So ministry provides yet another intersection where the church and world meet and gives the congregation another venue for expressing Christian citizenship.

Believers "should work both within the church and without," Griffin says. "Jesus Christ is Lord both of the church and the world."