

By **NAFARI MORRIS**

Staff Writer

It's said that one of the most segregated hours in America is Sunday morning, at around 11 a.m. Indeed, in Wilmington, most churches are mostly black or mostly white. And while in some cases, faith can overcome that separation, history is still a stumbling block.

Dr. James J. Megivern, professor of religion and philosophy at UNCW, says a look at Wilmington's past may shed some light on the situation. Some people here still have living memories of Jim Crow, for instance, and others have heard of or read about the 1898 race riots that took place here.

Dr. Megivern says the South is in a unique situation because of the institutional racism that took place.

"The North never had Jim Crow," he said. Though there was racism in the North during the early part of the century, "there wasn't the same explicit racism. They didn't have as much cultural residue," he said.

Family, even the congregation itself, can stand in the way of those wanting to attend a multi-cultural church. Robert Salzgeber, pastor of the mostly white St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, recalls a white parishioner from another church whose daughter married a black man. When he expressed a desire to bring both of them to his church with him, he was ostracized by the congregation.

Pastor Salzgeber believes a reason churches remain segregated in a society that has moved forward in so many other areas is a matter of human nature.

"People have a tendency to go where they're comfortable," said Pastor Salzgeber. Sunday, he said, is the one day of the week when people can forget about the work week's stress, and they don't want to be uncomfortable. This becomes a major roadblock for a church like St. Matthew's, which wants to integrate the congregation.

Pastor Ron McGee of The Rock in Wilmington agrees, though he leads a 600-member multi-racial congregation with members who sit together in church and even vacation together.

"It's a thing of comfortability, it's a thing of neglect." He remembers being told by another pastor, "I wish I could do what you're doing, but I would lose my job and



Staff photos/NICOLE CAPTELLO

pension."

"Pastors have to get to the point where they're willing to set down and teach racial tolerance," said Ralph Moore, pastor of New Life Christian Center.

Dr. Megivern calls the cultural comfort zone "a fascinating phenomenon" that takes place not only in church, but at work and in schools all over America. What can change things, he says, is a common bond strong enough to penetrate cultural and racial barriers.

Dr. Tom Schmid, another philosophy professor at UNCW, says the "comfort zone and institutional racism go hand in hand." He says there are other factors that will divide churchgoers, however, like economics and cultural differences, as well as people's tastes in music and church environment. But he says that "faith can and ought to unite people."

That's what it took to bring Catholics together. The Catholic church in Wilmington has a history of being racially mixed. The reason, Dr. Megivern says, is there were few Catholics, and blacks and whites worshiped together in one building, St. Thomas, because of their common faith. After the riots, St. Mary's was built for white parishioners, but the two races were reunited when St. Thomas was destroyed by fire.

The Rock's mixed congregation was a result of a planned effort.

Eleven years ago, the pastors felt a burden to unite people during one of the most segregated hours of the week. Pastor McGee said that at the church's first gathering, he told an all-white congregation that his goal was to see different kinds of people in service. Even today, with a church that's roughly 60 percent white and 40 percent black, he says he still teaches racial unity.

Admittedly, it's easier for nondenominational churches that don't have to deal with traditions, Pastor McGee said.

Some denominations were established by certain ethnic groups. The Lutheran Church, for example, historically has been composed of people of Germany, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

And when a white person walks into a mostly black church or vice versa, "real love can be picked up by anyone. False love can be picked up by anyone," Pastor Moore

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says.

Helen Fuller attended The Rock as a teen-ager. While at college, she met and married a black man, and found that her congregation embraced them.

"(Racial unity) definitely has to start in the church. It's hard to ask everyone else to do something we can't even do."

Pastor McGee says people must deal with their prejudices before this can happen everywhere.

A common phrase people use, he says, is "I'm not a racist, but ...". That, he said, usually means one is prejudiced.

The Rock also makes a point of recognizing racial culture rather than ignoring it.

The church has blacks in leadership positions, which Pastor McGee says is important.

But while he has seen success, most of the area still spends Sunday morning with their own race.

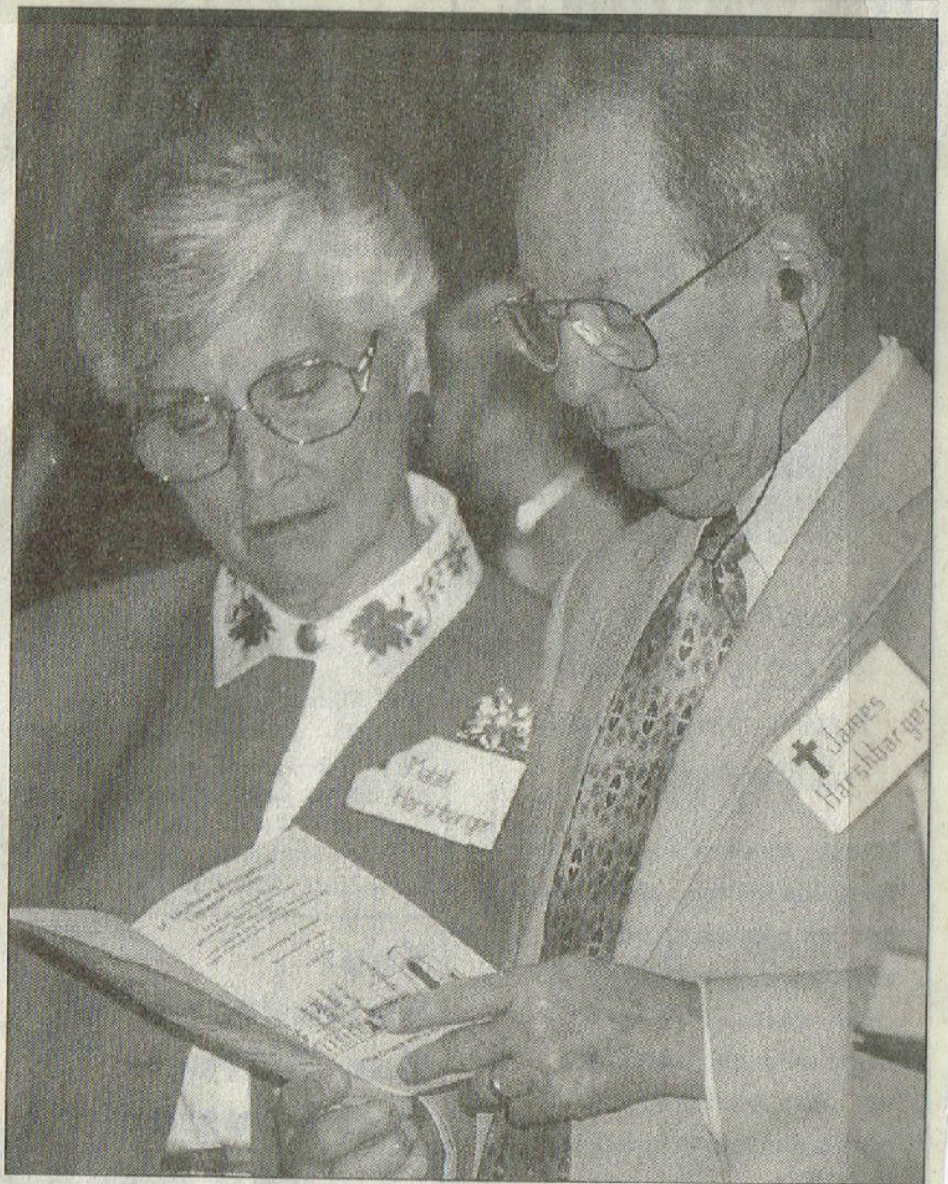
For instance, Pastor Moore and his wife, Lucille, who have been leaders of a multi-racial congregation, now lead New Life Christian Center, a mostly black church. They hope that will change.

The pastors say that already-existent racial tension often prevents people from mixing in church.

"There's more segregation in churches than on the job," said Mrs. Moore, also a pastor.

"The separate, but equal that applied to schools now applies to churches," her husband added.

Most pastors agree that needs to



Staff Photo/NICOLE CAPPELLO

Mabel and James Harshbarger share a bulletin during a recent St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church service. St. Matthew's is mostly white, but seeing a small increase in its minority visitors.

change. Church integration is not "something (churchgoers) want, but something they desperately need," Pastor McGee said, adding that God wants the church to be open to peo-

ple's differences.

Mainly, in order for people to worship together, Pastor McGee says a lot of prayer is needed. "It's got to be a change of the heart."