

Interview with Mrs. Cris Williamson

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Interviewers: Dacia Collins, Drew Haynes, and Dana Ziglar

Dana: So how long have you been in Vineville Baptist Church?

Mrs. Williamson: 63 years.

Dana: 63 years. Wow. So what made you decide to become a member of Vineville?

Mrs. Williamson: Jim and I had just gotten married, and um, we moved to Macon, so we both had graduated together from Norman Junior College, which is now Norman, the secular school, Georgia Baptist. We met there, and we just gotten married and came to Macon, and I had a... what they call a teaching certificate with two years of college. And um, we couldn't afford the both of us to go to school. He was getting 90 dollars a month to go there, so we left to Mercer. Came here for him to go to Mercer. I started teaching 3rd grade out of Warner Robins. We went back and forth. I did that for three years, but we wanted to look around a little bit at different churches, and we decided that we felt like, you know, that would fit our needs. One Wednesday night, well, one Sunday morning was the first time we did visit... just visited Vineville, not knowing anybody or anything. We liked to hear much, so we sat, and people were nice to speak to, but you don't get to know anybody very well, so we said, "Lets go Wednesday night." So we went to the Wednesday night service because there would be a smaller group, so we did. So there was a man of the church named Claude Joyner, and he was teaching a college class of kids, and he, as soon as we got involved with him, he met us and from then on we were part of his wing the whole time, and we knew then that we felt so comfortable there, so the next Sunday we led worship there. We stayed all this time. I can tell you a lot of history about Vineville. All the changes, you know, that have come about. But anyway, we just visited there looking for a church, and we felt so comfortable, so we stayed.

Dana: When you joined, were there any African Americans that were at the church at the time?

Mrs. Williamson: No

Dana: I know that Sam Oni was the first African American that actually joined. Do you remember that at all?

Mrs. Williamson: Yes. I was there in that church when that happened. We knew he was coming. Dr. Walter Moore was our pastor. I will mention him a lot in this. If there was ever a saint in all this, I think it was him. He was an excellent preacher. He was a scholar. He knew how to work his people and get to know them, and he's the one to first really teach us, if you got a big project or something you really want to do, you got to take

your people with you. You can't just walk in and say, "Now we gonna change this. It needs to be done this way." You know, whatever it is. You got to have people that you can show what you're trying to do, you know, ahead of time. He was very good with us. But anyway, from the beginning, Jim and I were very involved. My dad was a Baptist preacher. So I was teaching kindergarten kids when I was barely a teenager. Just fell in love with that part of it. But anyway, Dr. Moore had told us, and of course, we had heard things the first time Sam Oni came to Mercer trying to go to the church there, and all of this was such a big uproar. He went to Tattnell Square, and they refused to let him in, and then, uh, we remember that distinctively, well not there, but it was just full of old news for a long time. But um, anyway, he had been here for several weeks. I don't remember the length of time. But anyway, he came to church one Sunday morning, and uh, when the invitation was given... and then... are ya'll Baptist? Anybody, by any chance?

Drew: Pentecostal.

Dana: Non-denominational.

Dacia: Non- denominational as well.

Mrs. Williamson: They're all basically the same. We all believe the basic important part of it, the main thing. But anyway, the pastor would give an invitation to those who wanted to join the church to go and have a talk with him, and several people came down, and Sam Oni was one of them.

The pastors did some things differently then. Because usually, while the people come down and stand in the front of the congregation, he just asked something about the view of the church body accepting them as members of the church. Of course, everybody said yes. And um, but when he did that, he put Sam over to the side, and he was not included in that group we voted on, you know, verbally voted on. And, of course, everybody was wondering what was going on, and what he was going to do. But after the others were voted in, then he said we have one other member, one other person coming for a membership, but he's special, and I wanted us to vote on him separately. And so he presented him to the church, telling them, you know, that he was from Africa, and he was very, very black. More so than most African Americans we see. Nice looking man, a big man. But anyway, Dr. Moore said uh, said, "I want to present him, and I want us to vote on him, but if we have any questions, or any discussions about him, I want you to feel free. We gonna just open the floor up to ask questions if you want to." And a few people did. And uh, but they stated that he came from Africa and we were told he was... he became a Christian because missionaries that had been there and had talked in his area to explain Jesus Christ. He joined that particular congregation there, but it was from missionaries that we send out all over the world, not just Baptists, but other denominations too. And um, so that was a good bit of discussion with him.

But anyway, I read it, and I supposed I couldn't, I didn't remember that. One person they talked to said that they thought the church waited a week for people to consider this, and another person said, "No, they voted on it on that day." I know that they voted on it that day. They didn't put it off, you know, so when you get out in the parking lot, you'd hear everything. But you're out just to people by themselves. But he was voted on that day, and he was voted in, by far, by the majority. We had people that had questions about him. We had two families that had left the church because of it. They said it was not right. It should not have been done in all the business. Even the worship services should be separate for them, black and to white. And we had two families that left the church. And one was a pretty wealthy family. Even when they left, they were taking money with them. They helped with the church a lot, but that was okay. You know, if that's the way they felt, they needed to be some place else. There was still, of course, an awful lot of discussion.

And one of my best friends, that I still have after all these years, is very, very racist. I mean she doesn't want to have anything to do with black skin of any kind. And she's supposed to be intelligent. But anyway, there's still... you still have people that are like this. And it's not just blacks. It's the Asians. You know, any other nationality that comes in, she's just opposes all of them, but yet she says she's fabulous, but she doesn't allow others at all.

But anyway, Sam did not stay at our church for very long. He was there for several weeks, and he was always accepted. People always talked to him, you know, when he was there, before and after the service and things like that. And uh, of course he was the topic of discussion for months because we had known what had gone on at Tattnell Square. Tattnell Square Church actually split wide open. Um, in fact, they ended up that one group went out and bought another building out here, but Tattnell Square was a building actually owned by Mercer. It was on Mercer campus. I say it was owned, but yet I'm not sure if they owned it or not. But it was on Mercer campus once. No, it's still there. But anyway, one group just totally left. And they eventually did give the church back to Mercer. It's used now for special things, just meetings at Mercer and all. But that didn't happen at Vineville. You know, we didn't, like I said, as far as I know, we had only two couples that left the church. And um, doesn't mean everybody's happy, but they were not so disappointed and wanted him gone that uh, they ended up leaving. And um, but he left. Sam didn't stay that long at our church.

He was very, very pleased with everything that had happened. Everything that went on at Vineville was totally opposite of what happened at Tattnell Square. It was just... just a different atmosphere. And I think, well, we knew Thomas Holmes, the pastor at Tattnell Square. And they actually fired him after all that was over because he was the one fighting, saying, you know, "How can we say we believe in sending missionaries off somewhere to convert people and then when they come here, say they're not part of us." Anyway, they fired a pastor or two. But, Walter Moore was our pastor at that time.

He was the kindest thing, the kindest person. And um, we knew that as long as he approved it, he presented it, you know, that he wanted it, than it was going to work, and that it would be all right. And so we did. We just followed him, his lead, with all the others because we believed in him and what he was doing.

But I think Sam left here. I can't remember where. Somewhere, I want to say Texas. Anyway, he moved some place else for a little while. But a part of his objective, I think, was to see if he could be accepted. You know if anybody, anywhere, would really accept him as a person. You know, he obviously is very smart. He was just a very smart man. And um, they got a picture of him in the book. But a time or two he came back to visit, but he really did not stay long enough to really become involved in a lot of things. But anyway, we were always proud to say, you know, Sam Oni came to our church. And it's interesting, uh, the little details about his name were just about Sam Oni, but he said when he came to the states, he realized most people had three names. You know, a middle name. And so, he just picked the name Jerry out of the air. So he signed Jerry Oni everything, everywhere. He signed officially Sam Jerry Oni. And uh, he was just a . . . just a nice young man, and I think he was just trying to make a point. Trying to show that he was willing to take the leap from whatever because he really got a lot of the news through some of the people at Tattnall Square. There are several stories that you would just be interested in reading. They got a book, *The Stem of Jesse* that came out like in '95, and it talks about all these people, and I was there.

I know most of these people. I'm 81 years old. So we, and many other people have been at this church for 63 years. So we've seen a lot, heard a lot, and we learned a lot along the way. And um, Jim and I were married for 62, well almost 63 years before he died. We moved here, to this place. We had three children. I said, they were born, raised, and baptized at Vineville. They didn't know anything except what Vineville had. And we had two little boys when we bought a beautiful house cuz the one we in was too small, and then we had a little girl. But we lived at that house for 55 years. And um, I had told Jim, somehow, that we needed to find a small place to downsize. And he wasn't interested in it cuz he loved his yard. We had a huge yard. And yard work was his therapy. It's what he did. It's beautiful landscape out there. But anyway, he had on January 17 of '09... he had a hip replacement cuz that had gone real bad. And the surgery itself had went well, and four days later, they send him to rehab, and the second they had rehab, he had a heart attack, and so that started it. Um, he had one heart attack after another. And he developed what they call congestive heart failure. And his body would fill up with fluids. You know we retain fluids. But anyway, we moved at the right time. And after we got it, we got a house fixed up a little bit and put it on the market and in three in a half months it sold. The man down the street right here had his house on the market two years already. It still hadn't sold. But ours sold in three in a half months, and it actually sold about three weeks before Jim died. And he knew, and he was so pleased to know all that was taken care of. You know, that was just something else I was gonna have to take care of. So we can look back and see how the Lord had things planned for us . . . to work

it all. I still don't believe he's gone. I still think I got to go tell Jim this, you know he would like this. You know, I think of things like that.

Dana: Right, being with him for so long...

Mrs. Williamson: Yes, just most of my life. You know? And um, we were both . . . we were both active in the denomination. We were what they called the special workers for the state and for the convention. Where we would teach leadership classes, I would teach teachers how to teach pre-school, cuz that is one thing I taught, kindergarten for twenty-years. He would teach teachers how to teach nuns. He was an excellent teacher. And when somebody would come, the first thing he would say is, "Well, what are reading that. Well, what are you reading?" He just had a fetish for what everybody read. But anyway, we had a good life, and a lot of good memories. And I know he's still there, and I don't want him back like he was because he was, his last couple months were terrible. He really suffered a lot. So I'm thankful for where he is.

Dacia: That's good

Mrs. Williamson: I'm sorry. I got off subject.

Dana: What was Sam Oni like in person? Was he very nice or gentle? Was he just quiet?

Mrs. Williamson: He was kind of medium with that. He wasn't real quiet, but he wasn't real loud. He had a good personality. He meets and talks. He talked and laughed with people. He just had a heart, what we thought, well what I had experienced with him. He was a nice guy.

Dana: What was the church's perspective on the Civil Rights? Um, was it a verbal perspective, or more of like a physical? Was the church saying, "Yes, we are all for the Civil Rights Movement," but then didn't show any actions besides accepting Sam Oni?

Mrs. Williamson: Well again, I think they were pretty much in the middle of that because people are... some of the people were active in the civil rights. Saying, you know, we got to do something about this. And we did have, but then again, we had a couple of black families that came, but the majority of us, we were busy doing our own thing. We were much too self-centered. We did not do what we could have done or should have done. I think overall the church was just kind of planning in the middle of the road.

Dana: Would you mind telling us your perspective was on race at that time?

Mrs. Williamson: Well, I could tell you that my daddy wasn't racial. I grew up in South Georgia which is really country, and before he . . . before there was much of an issue anywhere, my daddy was organizing and teaching vacation Bible schools in the black

churches. And he would preach in a black church when he would be asked to and such. And there's a girl, a lady in our church now, she came and stayed with us during the home mission board one week when we were both, I think we're 15 years old. It was 14 or 15, and she stayed with us a week. We talked together in Bible school in a black church, and part of the time, you know, my daddy was a preacher. And part of the time he'd have two churches. You know, small churches in South Georgia couldn't afford a pastor full time.

He had two different churches, and we also rented a house one time. It was on a farm. And uh, I had two brothers. My daddy tried to teach them how to farm because he grew up on a farm, but we had a family that lived on our land that we were renting. It was a black family. And my best friend was a little black girl that I grew up with. So I've never had, I've never been put in a situation were I felt uncomfortable with a black being around because I grew up with them, and they were just, you know, we were just kids together. You don't think about those things when you were little kids, unless your parents are teaching you something they did start with. And um, so Jim and I had never had any problems.

I don't think I've ever been racist. But I could have been and not known it about something, somewhere, sometime. But as far as I am consciously aware, we never have had any problem with it. We did have, we had a problem with it. We did have an aunt, who was really jealous of it. When the first baby was born, she talked to him. This aunt talked to him, Jim, and told him and said, " You gotta get some help in here. She can't do everything. " She said, " You gotta get someone to come in one day a week and help with cleaning. You gotta have somebody to help her." He would have never said it to me if I said it because he was working full time, and I wasn't then. I taught three years and then we started a family, and I stayed home. We had three children, two boys and a girl, and I stayed at home while they were small. When they started, well when my last one started kindergarten, that's when I went back to teaching kindergarten. But anyway, we got this lady, bless her heart, she was about three years older than I was, and she worked for us one day a week, 9-12, for thirty-five years. And uh, she was part of the family, and she called me the other day, and she had to stop working several years ago because she had a bad hip and a bad leg, but she called asking about my kids. You know, where they are, what they're doing. You know, we're still good friends. You know, she really was just part of our family. You know, I don't... God made us all. You know, we all leave the same way. So you know, we all were made the same way. Skin color doesn't matter.

Dana: Could you tell us some of the history about Vineville from when you joined? Any major events, besides Sam Oni joining, that occurred?

Mrs. Williamson: Gosh, we've had so many. Well, the one thing about Vineville is we have been very good about keeping a pastor a long time. Most of the pastors that we've had stayed about ten years, which is way above average. And because of that, we had

great continuity of things going on in our church. We built an additional educational building at the back of our sanctuary, and some few years later we built this whole big three story educational building. Then, when I was with the teenagers, they built a full sized gym in the back building, and it's multi-purpose for everything. We have so many things that meet in there, but it is used a lot for the community, like we have, like the upper - basketball. You know, churches would come around because we got a good gym. And there are not many churches that have a good gym. So we use it for quite a lot.

I'm co-chairman on the mission's team that we have, on the missions committee, and we have, we plan mission's trips all over everywhere. Then we have locally . . . we have a little black church, that's out here on Morgan Drive. And there's a young man who's the official administrator for them. And he and the pastor, a lady, sweet as she can be, I think she's older than I am, but anyway, they came to the church one time to ask if somebody could help them fix her house for something. Anyway, I happen to be up there, and they called me over, and they said, "This is the lady you should be talking to." So I did. We hit it off very well to begin with. And we've had about, I don't know, twelve to fifteen years we've been working with them. They've been to our church. She's talked on a Wednesday night at prayer meetings and things like that, and I think that is a big accomplishment for a church to be that involved. They don't want to come to our church, his members, because he said we do church different from them. He said, "Ya'll are so quiet." He said, "We're not." And when they have church, it lasts about two hours. And our people start getting finicky if you go five minutes over an hour. But anyway, we have a good relationship with them, and I think that type of a truce can help identify how a church feels like, how they support something like that. I can't think of anything especially big. We never had anything that compared to Sam Oni. That was the big thing back then. But we've had families, and we have families in our youth group now, half of them are black.

We got a young lady, which is a miracle in itself, a young lady, she just got married 'bout two months ago. She'd been a Mercer student, a music major, gorgeous voice. The young man we had at the position moved, and she came, and they elected her to be the youth director. And I've seen the youth do more missions than we do. I mean, she's really got them organized. On Wednesday night, we have a family supper and for our meeting we meet at the tables. We've got several of the big round tables, and she had two of them full the other night. Three-fourths of them were black. One of them had boys and girls, mostly boys, and than she takes them home. And we were so glad to see her get married, so she had a husband to help her with all the norm, all these trips, and new things, and such. I told him before they got married, "You know you're joining Vineville Baptist staff, don't ya? You'll be on the staff if you marry one of our girls. You'll be on the staff. People will except you to do like they do." But we do have one of the best youth organized in our church community. I can't think of anything major that we've done.

Drew: Tell us a little bit of what the church was like before Sam came.

Mrs. Williamson: It was just a plain good ol' Southern Baptist church. It really was. You always have when your . . . well, I was on the church staff for nine years, with the pre-school. And you always have a little division here, or there on something that comes up. Right now, we have a men's Sunday school class that has claimed their room. They don't have many men. We got lady's classes that are running over. They need to change places, but they refuse to do it. "This is our room. It's sacred. It's hallow." Overall, it really is an easy going church.

They really did a lot for college students at that time. We used to have a big old bus, the Chariot, we called it, and we'd go to Mercer, pick up and load it up Sunday mornings because back then everybody didn't have a car, and they couldn't go home on weekends and that sort of thing, so we'd have big active things with them, the students. That was one of the things Jim and I were so impressed with. When we went there, they had an awful lot of young couples, many young families there. And we did extremely well with all of that. I don't know.

Have you heard of Vineville north? It's um, Vineville North. It's that way. Well, we started that. Um, we wanted to . . . some people wanted to set it up as a mission. You know, have a mission church to work with, but the pastor at that time said no. He wanted it to be on its own. But, for ten years, we paid for it. We had a huge, huge field that we had. We paid for that. But, when they started that church, we finally finished and got started. Our pastor, really, at that time didn't really have a lot of help, either, with him that wanted to go out there. And he was pastor to both, really. He was preaching at both churches on Sunday morning. That didn't prove very successful because he didn't have the time to take care of two congregations. In fact my husband went out there as one of their teachers for a full year just to try an help them get organized to get them started. After that year was up, he came home back to Vineville, but being willing to... to put a lot of money and then to give a lot of our people our issues Sunday cuz we just... we went down in people to not even half of what we had when we started that. But we're growing it back now. You know, we have young people now, and they are bringing their children. And so, we are two totally different churches. In fact, they dropped their name. They were called Vineville North, and it was always confusion. They'd say, "Which Vineville?" We had trouble with the mail even in all of this. So finally, last year, they dropped the word Vineville, and it's just North Way Church, and it doesn't even say Baptist. Just North Way Church. And it's doing okay.

But we have a new preacher at our church. The one we had for eleven years moved. And we got a guy who is thirty-one years old. Just a kid, you know? We said, "We'll... we can teach him how to drive." Cuz he seems like such a young kid. But he's married and has a little boy. I think he just turned three this month. Anyway, just a week ago, they had another one. They got two little ones now. But he is so good. He's studying his theology, and he knows how to preach a sermon. He's making it applicable to what our

everyday lives are, but he's a people person. He calls everybody on their birthday. When Jim was in the hospital, he came to see him every single day. Just dropped in for a few minutes. But when I'm talking about building people to follow you, he's really doing that. So the church is coming along better now. Our budget was still behind our budget, but I don't know a church that isn't. But I think we all run over our budget.

Our oldest, both of our oldest went to seminary, studying in seminary. And uh, our oldest son is a minister at a First Baptist church. So he's been back and forth. We've had, our church has been, I think, real good about growing homegrown kids to go into the ministry. And we had two young ladies many years ago that wanted to preach before it was even thought about. You know, women didn't preach, so they changed denominations. They went to a Presbyterian, so they could preach. But anyway, we have several...we watched several of the kids grow up and go into the ministry somewhere. So I think our boys were a good reputation for being real effective and touching the lives of people.

Dacia: Do you think that's more so now than in it was in the Civil Rights Movement?

Mrs. Williamson: Yes.

Dacia: Yes?

Mrs. Williamson: Yes, it is more so now than it was then.

Dacia: You said the youth group is about three-fourths African American?

Mrs. Williamson: Yes.

Dacia: They don't attend the church. They're just involved in the youth group?

Mrs. Williamson: Right, we have a couple black families that are members that you know. In fact, back when I was on the staff, we had a young couple that was coming. They had been visiting a lot. They had two small children in our pre-school area where I was. They told me when I would go see them and talk to them, "Well, why don't you go to Sunday school here?" Because when they would come before, they had two small children and keep them with them. Sometimes that works and sometimes that doesn't depending on how that child's feeling that day. But anyway, I talked with our teachers in Sunday school and told them that this couple was coming. I said, "If you have a problem with that, let's make a change right now because when they come, they will be accepted just like everybody else." And everyone said, "That's okay, no problem." So they came out. They came to Sunday school. They mixed right in with the rest of us. 'Course on our weekday program, we got a program of twos, threes, and fours. We don't have any fives now because they're all going to a public school. But we have several of the blacks that, you know, are members.

But um, I say that we have two worship services on Sunday. One is at 8:30, and another one at 10:40. And I go to the second one, so I don't know everybody that comes to the early service. I know most of the people because I see them at other settings of other organizations. Um, I don't know, I wouldn't say that there is not anybody in that youth group that comes, but I have not seen them in the early morning services. But they're there on Wednesday nights. And that group is growing. It has grown more this year than any other group in the church. And during the prayer meeting hour, they go off and do their own thing. You see they don't stay there with the whole rest of the congregation. 'Course, they're in there for the summer time when everybody's walking around, talking and such, and we've seen no negative reaction. Not openly. 'Course, people don't talk to me about those things. They know where I stand on it. But uh, it really seems to be going well.

Dana: I know that we all went to Vineville on Sunday, and I noticed that you have a nice sized choir. Have y'all ever had African Americans join something like that or become something on staff or anything like that?

Mrs. Williamson: I can't remember anyone in choir. I really don't. We don't really have anybody on staff other than our custodian. Our hostess is a young black lady. We had a white lady that was our hostess for thirty-five years, and she started this young girl working with her, and she retired last year. And so the young girl is church hostess. She's head of the whole thing. She's...to me she's one of the most important people on staff. She deals with everybody and everything and has just the sweetest personality. There are two men that work with her. One's black and one's white, and they just sing her praises all the time. She's easy to work with, you know. But, when a decision is made, you do it. She can be firm when she needs to be. It's a good working situation with Amber, as far as her managerial staff, with the secretaries. They're all white.

Everyone: All right, Mrs. Williamson. Thank you so much.