

### ***Ashes for Breakfast: The Autobiography of Rev. Thomas Holmes***

*Ashes for Breakfast* tells the tale of race relations and the changing atmosphere around Mercer's campus and Tattnall Square Baptist Church. It highlights the conflicts that emerged when individuals began to demolish the false façade around and within the church by trying to change for the better, into a more Christian way of life. Reverend Thomas Holmes, pastor of the church during a turbulent period, wrote the book to tell his story about the church's difficulties.

The church got its start in the year 1891 in the chapel of the university, ministering to the students, faculty, and the community. The university deeded the lot on the northeast corner of campus, and the church building was erected some years later. Tattnall Square Park gave the church its name, and the community around the park supplied its congregation along with students and faculty of Mercer. Tattnall Square was a paradox within a paradox. The original deed of the church stated that it was to be a "whites only" church, but the changing times conflicted with this. As society continued to change, the church fought harder to stay segregated. The surrounding community made staying segregated difficult with lower class individuals and Macon's Negro ghetto moving in. The church did like many churches in the South; it turned inward into itself and became a club of middle class whites. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, the church's policy became less appealing to the faculty and students of the university.

Missionaries that went to Africa to spread the gospel of Christ were supported by both the school and the church, but Tattnall did not seem to truly believe in what they were supporting. Though they had opened their doors to Chinese immigrants to rid themselves of some of the pressure that was being put upon them, they made certain no Negroes entered. When Mercer integrated the school in 1963 opening the doors for Sam Oni, a Ghanaian converted by missionaries from Mercer, the church refused him entrance. Though Oni was rejected by Tattnall, he was accepted into the congregation of Vineville Baptist Church. When Sam Oni's refusal from Tattnall officials became known, many Mercer students switched to Vineville, feeling that its ministry was more relevant to their needs. For the church to breathe new life and revive, it needed to acquaint itself with the new thoughts, new movements, and new methods of the twentieth century to update its ministry and satisfy the needs of the surrounding and Mercer's community.

Reverend Thomas Holmes, a member of Vineville Baptist and a part of Mercer's faculty, was called upon to be pastor of Tattnall Square after he preached in the pulpit as temporary pastor. While in his interim position at Tattnall Square Baptist Church, he challenged the congregation to rethink their role in the community and their relationship to the campus. After accepting the call to be pastor of Tattnall Square, Holmes wanted to bring the student body of Mercer back to

the church. He visualized a fellowship of concern for the changing community at their doorstep, with youth and maturity cooperating in a new outreach to people of all classes and races. To accomplish his goal of bringing in more students, Holmes wanted to employ someone who would serve the church as assistant to the pastor for youth and would work on campus as minister to students, advising the student religious organizations of all faiths. This position was filled by Reverend Douglas Johnson, at the time pastor of First Baptist Church of Shellman, Georgia. He was also a graduate of Mercer and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. They also hired Jack Jones, instructor of music at Mercer, to become part-time minister of music. Their hope was to make the religious life of the campus strongly church-centered.

The congregation of the Baptist church is a democracy, deciding the affairs of the church by majority vote, but this is not how it always worked at Tattnell Square Baptist Church. At Tattnell the minority, the deacons, ruled and made the decisions for the church. It had been this way for years, and the power structure felt pressured when Holmes started his progressive programs for the church, starting committees and realigning ministries. Holmes went through the two deacons who seemed to hold the most power, but he met opposition to many reforms. As the church continued to change, rumors started to swirl threatening the new comers of the church, the pastor, youth minister, and music minister. One rumor was that the pastor and Mercer were working together to claim the land from the church by trying to seat Negroes, which meant going against the original deed of the church, even though the deed was now irrelevant because Mercer was an integrated school. Another rumor involved the youth's resentment of the rules set by Rev. Johnson during a retreat where he taught on the "Christian View of Sex." The young people's disappointment led them to lie about being embarrassed with discussions about sex, which angered many of the parents. The real conflict did not truly start until three students agreed to teach a series of sermons from the Book of Acts, the subject of which touched upon the things happening at the time.

Mercer, meanwhile, continued on its progressive track. In cooperation with the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity, Mercer had an Upward Bound Project in 1966, which brought in a hundred high school juniors and seniors. The project was open to all, regardless of race, color, or national origin, so about half the enrollees were black. The project's director inquired about integrated churches. Doug Johnson asked Pastor Holmes about it, and the pastor left it in the hands of the special committee he had established for situations just like this because he had already stated his beliefs on the matter: that he would never turn away any person that wanted to attend the church based on color. During that summer, two black students were seated in the congregation of Tattnell Square. The service went on uneventfully, but after the service, Grace, the pastor's wife, greeted them and asked that they come again. People in the

congregation saw this and the opposition went from a smoldering fire to a blaze. After that encounter Reverend Holmes got phone calls about what happened. Some called with prayers and support, but others were accusing him of betraying the church and his calling as a minister. This incident led to meetings where the deacons of the church attacked Holmes, Johnson, and Jones suggesting that they resign and brought into play the rumors that had been going around the church. At these meetings, votes for the pastor's resignation and closure of the church to black members were put out on the table. Reverend Holmes refused to resign, and the other two ministers, Jones and Johnson, stayed by the pastor's side.

After the vote to close the doors of the church to black members passed, the decision became national news. The Mercer authorities were informed of the situation and let the black students on campus know that the doors of Tattnell Square were now closed. Individuals on campus were not happy about this and respectfully let their feelings be known. This was an embarrassing and frustrating time for the pastor and those around him. Reporters called requesting statements and letters were sent condemning the church for their decision. People that did not know the pastor accused him of being segregationist and leading his congregation to close its doors to Negroes. Pastor Holmes' Christian integrity was on the line, but he decided to stay at the church and deal with the controversy. In the beginning the pastor was against making statements to the press, but he eventually realized that the truth should be known about the storm that was ensuing inside the church. The deacons of the church called for a second vote to remove the three ministers from the church. The motion was lost again, but only by four votes. This was not to be the last vote. On September 25<sup>th</sup>, another vote was taken after the service and Holmes, Johnson, and Jones were voted out of the church. Unbeknown to the pastor, before the voting took place and while the service was going on Sam Oni tried to enter the church to talk with Pastor Holmes about the things that were occurring, but he was refused access. The things happening were stressful on the men, but they stayed faithful and put everything into God's hands.

The situation at Tattnell Square Baptist Church created a media frenzy. Reverend Holmes gave several interviews because he wanted to share his feelings that the house of God should be open to all that want to enter and worship. People called to give their support and a couple of individuals were very generous offering to help if the ministers were having financial problems. The media was also interested in Sam Oni, printing articles, such as "Student Ejected from Church" and "Banned Student Persists." The students of Mercer were not pleased with the fact that Sam Oni was kept from entering the church. They wanted to band with him when they realized that he was going to go back to the church, but Oni kept the students from organizing any demonstrations. Though no demonstrations were organized, some individuals did come up with other tactics to get their point across that they were not happy with Tattnell Square. There

was a bomb threat and a sign made that read: "Jesus loves the little children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." These verses were also written on chalkboards in the church's educational building. The general reaction of the student body was to avoid the church all together. The church was not ready for the reaction it received, and to build a defense against it, they said that the race issue was not the main issue, but they never stated what the real situation was supposed to be. The people that supported the ministers asked for their letters of membership transfer and they, including Holmes and his family, found a location where they assembled to give support to each other with song, prayer, and talk. Holmes went back to working at Mercer after his resignation. Rufus Harris, President of Mercer University, assigned Holmes to the Atlanta campus to direct the development of the Southern School of Pharmacy. While in Atlanta, he became a part of white and black ministers' conference.