IN EXILE:
Liberian brings lesson home to Christians

The Rev. Emile Sam-Peal stared across black and white faces in Wait Chapel, seeing the past and the future rolled together. He is in exile from his native Liberia, taking shelter in America from eight years of civil war that have produced hardship and horror beyond the conception of most Americans. But as he began to preach last Sunday, it became evident that we're in our own kind of exile.

At 37, Sam-Peal is the executive director of the Liberian Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention. Since the war drove him and his family from Liberia, he has been studying toward a master's degree in divinity at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond.

At Wait Chapel on the campus of Wake Forest University, Sam-Peal talked to a joint worship service of Wake Forest Baptist Church and First Baptist Church of East Winston.

The white congregation and the black one have been holding occasional joint services for several years in an attempt to bridge racial barriers. Sam-Peal, a native of a West African country settled in part by refugee slaves from America and now torn by civil war, talked to blacks and whites still trying to heal the lingering wounds of slavery and their own civil war.

Christianity is the language of hope for exiles. Blacks recognized this almost from their first forced arrivals in a young and brutal America, finding solace in the religion as they endured bondage far from their own homeland and families.

Christianity seems to work best in times of exile and hardship. The trick is to make it work in times of complacency like our own. Until we Southerners can come together as one people, we will always be in our own spiritual exile.

Such efforts as the joint worship of Wake Forest Baptist and First Baptist are strong first steps, but more such action is needed. It takes outsiders like Sam-Peal to let us know that.

"You can sing God's song, even in your own strange land," he said.