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Here's A Preacher Who Can't Find Time To Retire

By DORIS CANNON
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"I think it's about time for me to retire," said A.M. Wiggins as the January wind shook trees and lunged at wet topsoil in the field behind his house on RFD Clayton.

The problem is, nobody will allow him to quit work.

When he mentions retirement to the people who employ him, they reply, "No, we're aiming to hold you here till you die."

Mr. Wiggins, who was 93 years old on Christmas Day, has been a preacher for 75 years. And he's still pastor of New Hope Baptist Church at Spring Hope, where he was been in the pulpit for 45 years, and at Rocky Point Baptist Church a few miles from Spring Hope, where he has been pastor for 15 years.

Twice a month, he makes an 80-mile round trip to preach in those churches.

Last year, Mr. Wiggins was honored by his alma mater, Shaw University, as the oldest active minister in North Carolina, "as far as they could tell."

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The youngest of 12 children, Mr. Wiggins was born in 1893 at Nashville, where his father worked in a sawmill and also share-cropped for a living.

Mr. Wiggins joined the church in his early teens, and a few years later began to wrestle with a feeling that the Lord wanted him to do something that he was not doing at the time. "I prayed about it for three or four months," he said, "and suddenly it came to me: 'The Lord wants you to preach.'"

It was a glorious yet bothersome revelation.

"I was poor," said Mr. Wiggins. "I was uneducated. I had no relatives in the ministry, and I was afraid to stand before people. But that compelling conviction continued, and I prayed for the Lord to take away my fear and let me feel free and bold to do what He wanted me to do."

Today, Mr. Wiggins's voice is deep, rich, and captivating. Its authority rode above the angry gusts and the rumbling of the heating system in his house. It was a sound that could grip a congregation and cause time to stand still.

He began preaching when he was 18 years old, but he didn't want to be a minister with a fifth-grade education. So at age 21, he entered Alban Academy, a high school in Franklinton, for three months of study. After that, he studied for five months at Henderson Normal Institute and then returned home to preach and work as a farmer.

Later, he encounter Dr. A.B. Vinson, "a Shaw University man," who told him a minister should go to a religious school. So he studied at Shaw for three years, focusing on religion, Bible intpretation, theology, logic, geography, and math.

Rising costs forced him to leave Shaw, but he later completed his education at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he was a night student.

But the North was not for him, unless it preceded "Carolina." He said, "I wanted to come back to North Carolina and marry a North Carolina girl."

His wife, the former Fannie



A.M. Wiggins, who was 93 years old on Christmas Day, has been a preacher for 75 years. And he's still going strong. (Herald photo by Doris Cannon.)

Pulley of Nash County, died in 1981 at age 77.

"She was a faithful wife and one who sympathized with my work," Mr. Wiggins said. "But she was not strong and went to the doctor off and on as long as she lived."

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Mr. Wiggins's work was not only as a preacher, but as a farmer who earned most of his living from the soil. For 16 years, poor farm yields and his wife's illness kept him "broke and with my nose to the grindstone." But then he began to clear a little profit each year.

"My boss told me, 'If I was in your shoes, I'd put a little money in the bank. It'll draw a little interest.'"

He followed that advice, and within eight years he had saved \$2,200, enough to put into purchase of a 24-acre Nash County farm costing \$4,000. He borrowed the balance from the bank.

"I worked hard that year and made enough to pay off the debt," he said. "Then I bought some stock and painted the old barns."

After five years, and with the improvements he had made to the property, he sold the farm for \$8,500 and put that money into a 90-acre farm costing \$15,000 on RFD Clayton.

He farmed and preached and took care of his ailing spouse and sent his son and daughter to college.

Daughter Evelyn Mitchell, who resides near her father, has had a 27-year career as an elementary school teacher in Four Oaks and Clayton. Son Garland F. Wiggins is a full-time minister who is also in the real-estate business in Peekskill, N.Y.

There are four grandchildren.

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Mr. Wiggins said he has no idea

how many people he has led to conversion during his ministry. He estimates he has baptized at least 1,000 people, usually in a creek.

Some of the churches he has served now have baptismal pools inside, but Mr. Wiggins said outdoor baptisms are the best. "They're lovely," he said. "Can you imagine John the Baptist being baptised in an indoor pool?"

He recalled that, in addition to the beauty of the occasion, there was a bit of fear accompanying baptism for some converts. "Some would begin to tremble and resent it," he said. And he laughed, "I'd just tell them to be quiet—and all at once just baptize them."

Mr. Wiggins said he needs to retire because his eyesight is failing. His grandchildren now have to drive him to his churches and back.

But he is so familiar with the Bible that he doesn't have to actually read a text. He said, "Last Sunday, I spoke from Proverbs: 'Trust in the Lord with all thy heart and lean not on thy own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy path.'"

His subject was "Turn It Over to the Lord."

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The wind wailed at the corners of the house and warned of a cold night ahead, but Mr. Wiggins commented that it wouldn't be cold at all, "only down to about 30."

He said he could not think of any way he could have improved his life if he had had a chance. "I started out poor, with nothing," he said. "I took advantage of the best ideas and opportunities I could. I wanted an education, and went to school. I wanted a wife, and married a fine girl. I wanted a family, and had a fine son and daughter. I wanted to preach, and have done that for 75 years. I have succeeded in all those things," he said.

At the back door, the wind played in his gray hair and lashed at the lapels of his dark blue suit. "I really feel that I've about finished my ministry," he said. "I think it's about time for me to retire."

In the west, black clouds hovered near the horizon, but they only aided the sun in creating a spectacular golden scene at the close of day.

Pastor Has 31-Year Record Of Service To Church Here



THE FIRST NEW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH

Spindale Sun
Spring Hope Enterprise
Spruce Pine: Tri-County News
St. Paul's Review
Sylva Herald
Tabor City Tribune
Taylorsville Times
Trenton: Jones Journal
Troy: Montgomery Herald
Valdese News
Wadesboro: Anson Record
Wadesboro: Messenger &
Intelligencer

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The First New Hope Baptist Church, one of the oldest churches in Spring Hope, was organized between 1870 and 1880 by the late Rev. Henry Mitchell.

Rev. Ned Rice is believed to have been the first pastor to serve the infant church. One of its first deacons was Madison Yeargan.

The Yeargan family became the prominent church family in the First New Hope Baptist Church. George Spivey married into this family, which helped him to become an outstanding deacon, who worked with Deacons Jim Mitchell, Jack Coppedge, Milton West Pope, Thomas Gay, Mark Mitchell and George Battle.

The following pastors have served the church since the early days: Revs. Ed Taylor, Dossie Battle, Evadis Mirriat, Fred Boddie, George Todd, A. A. Heartly, and Rev. A. M. Wiggins, present pastor.

Rev. Wiggins has served the church ably for the past 31 years.

The present deacon board is composed of Jesse Lee Lucas, senior deacon, J. P. Mack, Lawrence Hawkins and Frederick L. Wilkins.

Mrs. Olar Cameron Battle is Mother of the Church.

Since the founding of the church many repairs and renovations have been made in the following areas: purchase of pulpit furniture, installation of baptistry, installation of rest rooms, expansion of the church sanctuary, walk ways, church grounds beautification project, step railings and column planters, and new carpet.

Also new furniture of a modern design has been recently installed in the pastor's study.

It is believed that the church's rapid progress and growth is due primarily to the fine Christian leadership that has been evidenced through its former pastors, and its members are indebted most of all to its present pastor, Rev. Wiggins.

Rev. Wiggins has seemingly dedicated his whole life to the steady progress of the First New Hope Baptist Church as well as to its membership. He no longer resides in Spring Hope, but makes his home in Clayton. However, he and his wife, Mrs. Fannie Wiggins, are both natives of Spring Hope. The couple have two children, who were both born in Spring Hope. They are Mrs. Evelyn W. Mitchell of Clayton and Rev. Garland Wiggins of New York.

This dedicated Christian man stands ready on call for

funerals, weddings and special events, and is in Spring Hope each first and third Sunday for Pastoral Day.

Each year the members of the First New Hope Baptist Church observe and celebrate many festivities.

Probably the three most outstanding events are the annual Christmas Pageant, which is produced and directed by the youngsters of the church; the annual Fellowship Dinner held in December, which coincides with Rev. Wiggins' birthday and is open to the general public; and the annual Founders Day observance, which is held each first Sunday in June.

On June 3, 1973 the church will observe its eighth consecutive year commemorating its founders. They are: Mrs. Studie Wood Dickens, Mrs. Beatrice Dunn Richardson, Mrs. Betty Clark Hayes, George Battle, Mark Mitchell, Jarvis Stokes, George Spivey and Jim Mitchell.