

The Plains Post 3

Plains, Georgia

Spring 2023

*Good
& faithful
servant*



Maranatha Baptist Church
Jimmy Carter's current church

Good & faithful servant

THE OFFICIAL website of the City of Plains lists eight churches for fewer than 600 people. Three of them are Baptist. In the 10 miles of Highway 280 that run through the forest and farmland separating Plains from Americus, there are four more churches, two of them Baptist.

Five commercial radio stations broadcast from Sumter County, one owned by a local Baptist church, a second owned by the broadcast division of the American Family Association, whose vision is “to be a leading organization in biblical worldview training for cultural transformation,” and a third is a self-described “Christian-based radio station.”

If you visit among Jimmy Carter’s homeboys, yet don’t pick up on the pervasive religiosity of the local culture, you have visited the aquarium and missed the fish.

Every serious presidential candidate since Carter has talked religion, nearly always Christianity. But in 1976, Carter so inundated journalists with his constant Jesus talk that his own campaign manager, Hamilton Jordan, called it Carter’s “[weirdo factor](#).” Yet while it was from the evangelical milieu of the white South, Carter was not the practicing the same kind of Christianity as most white people there.

Carter recoiled from Plains Baptist Church’s rejection of a group of prospective black members just before election day. After four years in Washington, he came home to join Maranatha Baptist Church, which was formed during his presidency by breakaway members from Plains Baptist (see the next story in this newsletter). He disassociated himself in 2000 from the Southern Baptist Convention, formed in 1845 as an advocate for slavery, because it also refused to open church leadership roles to women. The SBC has since renounced its positions on slavery, racial segregation and white supremacy.

“When you look at anyone who says they’re religious — they believe in Jesus of Nazareth — I accept what they declare,” said the [Rev. William Howard](#), a black Baptist but not an SBC member, and a Carter contemporary growing up in Sumter County. “But then I watch their walk and see if the walk negates. And in the case of Jimmy Carter, we saw a man in his maturity who appeared to walk according to the teachings of Jesus, in this complex, capitalist, postmodern society, where there are many contradictions.”

Carter formed a relationship with Clarence Jordan (pronounced JUR-dan), Hamilton’s second cousin, a Southern Baptist preacher. In 1942, Jordan created a small, experimental Christian farm community five miles from Plains called Koinonia, which in Greek refers to sharing or community. Koinonia members committed themselves to pacifism, human equality and common ownership of possessions.

Of all the great men he had met, Carter told a 2012 symposium, [he ranked Jordan with Nelson Mandela](#). According to [Koinonia’s website](#), Jordan was excommunicated in 1950 from Rehoboth Baptist Church

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Plains Baptist Church
Jimmy Carter's former church

Good & faithful servant

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for his beliefs. In 1956, the Sumter County health department banned Koinonia's integrated summer camp. Also that year, local businesses launched a decade-long boycott of the farm's produce because Jordan sponsored two black students for admission to the University of Georgia system. A year later, Koinonia's produce stand and a local business that disregarded the boycott were bombed. The Ku Klux Klan held a rally and threatened violence, and a county grand jury began an investigation of the farm. Koinonia claims that in 1960, the children of one of its member families became the first white kids refused admission to a U.S. public school when they were blocked from attending Americus High.

Even today, Koinonia Farms does not fit comfortably in Sumter County or the United States any more than Carter did or does, although you can visit, spend the night and share a meal. Or you can stay for a month or three and help with the farm work in exchange for room and board.

"There's just nothing in our — I'm just going to say American — culture that supports what we're doing," Bren Dubay, the current director of Koinonia, told me on Zoom. "You know, they love it that we're nice people. 'Isn't that sweet?' But are you there because you couldn't make it in the real world?"

Few people are aware of Koinonia Farms, which today has eight members plus seven full-time staff and volunteers. But much of the world is familiar with a project begun by one of its now-deceased members. In the 1960s, Millard Fuller developed a financial model for building new homes based on no-interest loans to cover materials with volunteer labor and sweat equity from the homebuyer that became a Koinonia project.

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The year Carter was elected president, Koinonia Partnership Housing was spun off into a separate nonprofit, Habitat for Humanity International, based in Atlanta. Four years after returning to Plains, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter helped build Habitat houses in Americus. That was the start of their practice of spending one week each year working on a Habitat project somewhere in the world. Carter said seeing a public figure volunteering would inspire others.

"Wherever he would go in the world, that would raise up new volunteer leaders and board members and donors," [Habitat CEO Jason Reckford said in a March interview with a South Dakota TV station.](#) "So directly the Carter projects every year have helped over 4,000 people purchase homes, but indirectly it's led to millions of people having new or improved housing."

William Howard knew Fuller well. Howard attended black schools while Carter served on the county school board and was elected the youngest-ever president of the National Council of Churches a year

after Carter moved into the White House. He tried to persuade Fuller that Americas' housing stock in the '60s was as bad as that in West Africa, where Fuller wanted to focus his program.

But Howard had never met Carter.

And Howard was apparently unknown to Carter until he was invited — along with a delegation of two other U.S. clergymen and the Catholic archbishop of Algiers — by the Revolutionary Council of Iran to visit 50 American hostages being held in the U.S. embassy in Tehran at Christmas 1979. After that event, Howard was invited to the White House and Camp David several times.

"What I remember is going there and immediately feeling the President had some sense of familiarity with me that he didn't share with the other church leaders," Howard said in our Zoom conversation.

“ ... I mean, a president teaching Sunday School ...

"As you know, these people do the seating," Howard said. "I was placed next to the president. And I will say that — having spent a large number of years in the Northeast and understanding a bit about New York and Washington — there were times when I felt the President ... was not a part of the ruling establishment of the country. And in some ways, he struggled by bringing himself to the office without a full grasp of the weight of this establishment dimension."

I've seen reports that Carter privately chafed at the widely held assessment that his post-presidential life eclipsed his accomplishments in Washington. Howard didn't find that popular opinion unusual or necessarily uncomplimentary.

Post-presidency — which for Carter has been a 43-year run — "you have to figure out something that you want to do to give your life meaning," Howard said. "What did Jimmy Carter do? He decided to help build homes for the poor. He decided to help observe elections, to have free and fair elections in places where this was not always guaranteed. I think the Carter Center (in Atlanta) — I attended a couple of meetings there around some pretty heavy issues — and it was, in my view, a service-oriented enterprise. You know, it wasn't a library, it was a service-oriented enterprise. So, these are the kinds of things that — I mean, a president teaching Sunday School ..."



Rev. Lowery "Buck" Kinney
Pastor, Plains Baptist Church

Churches and race

Speaking with the Rev. Buck Kinney on the front pew of Plains Baptist Church — the church Jimmy Carter famously left in 1981 after four black applicants were denied membership — he was frank about “that stigma” on the church he has pastored for the last seven years.

“That always gives us pause,” he said when I asked the question. “I say ‘us’ because I represent the whole congregation. It gives us pause when anyone wants to talk to us.”

There is no bar to black membership today, he said, and the church has had black visitors and speakers, though none has joined. Black and white Christians have differing worship styles that make them uncomfortable with each other, he said. But Kinney sits on the [board with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter](#) of the Boys & Girls Club that I wrote about in the first newsletter of this series.

“Certainly there are things that President Carter and I don't agree about,” he said. “I mean, we have differences of opinion, you know, biblical theology in some areas. Maybe in a lot of areas. But I respect him greatly, and what he's done and what he's done for this community.”

Kinney is conflicted about Christians' ability to erase America's racial divide even as he grapples with the obvious question of why a local culture, thoroughly marinated in Christianity, was instrumental in its creation.

In a [video discussion](#) for a Lutheran seminary in Pennsylvania, Rev. Howard asks the question that occurs to both religious and non-religious people: “Why is it that faith — and I mean a faith where the person surrenders to the power of God — has yet to help us embrace one another?”

“Peace happens when people, human beings, who are separated from God by sin, are restored to him,” Kinney said. “... Apart from being restored to him, I'm not able to love you ... and so there can't be peace between people.”

Doesn't this theological interpretation give Christians a way to avoid working with people to bridge differences that otherwise reasonable adults can resolve?

“If we're not walking in good works and ministering to people, yeah, we're not doing our job,” he said. “And yes, the church has absolutely used personal religion as a crutch, to not be too concerned. ... I don't think the church's lack of involvement has been because of, you know, misplaced theology. I think it's just been just general selfishness.”

“ I have to do those (changes) at the right time, at the right pace

Is there a willingness to overcome that selfishness?

“I came to this church after someone had been here for 38 years, and so everything in this church essentially was running the same way it was in 1977,” Kinney said. “But there's a lot of things that need to be done differently if we're going to reach the community around us in the world, and we're going to thrive. ... But I have to do those at the right time, at the right pace, right? Because slow changes last and fast changes don't. They cause chaos.”

Howard's view of reconciliation works in reverse. “Everybody is talking about when the Lord returns, we will be opening the doors of the jail, when the Lord returns will be feeding the hungry, when the Lord returns, people of different hues and cultural backgrounds will find fellowship with one another. ... The Lord can't come because you're not inviting him. In other words, when you build justice, and live as neighbors, the Lord will be welcomed. That would be the year of his return.”

Kinney and Howard agree on more than you might imagine. They are both Baptists in the larger sense of the term. They trace humanity's problems to “brokenness” — what Kinney also describes above as “separated” — with/from God. And as pastors, both are acutely familiar with the insecurities of pulpit leadership.

“If I get up and preach a sermon about the transformation of society (at a black church), people stand up and applaud,” [Howard said in the previous YouTube video](#). “But if my white colleague in Summit (New Jersey) preaches a sermon to his predominantly white congregations in that way, he might get fired.”

Who did I interview?

REV. DR. MOSES WILLIAM HOWARD JR., grew up in Americus and is now retired and living in New Jersey, having preached his final sermon as pastor of Bethany Baptist Church at its Watch Night Service



William Howard

in 2015. Watch Night is also New Year's Eve, and commemorates black slaves awaiting midnight on December 31, 1862, when the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring slaves in the Confederate States free, took effect. In addition to being a pastor, his career spanned work in academia, international diplomacy and state and United Nations appointments. While working for voting rights growing up, he remembers a particular disappointment. "You had (black) churches that would allow you to have a mass meeting in the church, but the pastor would never be there. But then you had more churches, including my own church (Mount

Olive Baptist), who wouldn't let the movement come near the place. ... Why is it that Mount Olive won't allow a mass meeting in our church? One of our leading deacons stood up and said, 'We support what these people are doing. But the New York Life Insurance Company will cancel our fire insurance if we allow the meeting.' Now, here I am a young man in Georgia thinking New York was the promised land. And he told me that the insurance company in New York would cancel our insurance."

BREN DUBAY is the director of Koinonia Farm, a religious community founded by a Baptist preacher. But growing up in her small town in Texas, in some ways religiously similar to Georgia, she had no religious upbringing. She was curious about religion, though, and attended some services, usually Protestant Christian. "I was usually taken by a neighbor, I guess, wanting to save my soul. ... I was taken to, you know, a lot of revivals, so a lot of hellfire and brimstone. ... Ultimately, I had a religious experience. In the Catholic Church, I discovered my Irish roots and returned home to Catholicism. But now I've ended up at a community founded by a Baptist that is very ecumenical." In addition to her work at Koinonia, she is a writer who blogs, writes, acts in and produces plays, and works as a script doctor. Her website is <https://brendubay.com/>.



Bren Dubay

THE REV. DR. LOWERY BRANTLEY "BUCK" KINNEY was born in Albany, Georgia, about 30 miles / 50 kilometers from Plains and raised in Leesburg. He graduated from Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus with a biology degree and worked for TCI Powder Coatings in Americus as head of research and development. "I surrendered to this call to the ministry when I was about 36," he said. "Most of my whole life up until I was about 27 years old, I despised the church with a passion." But he had a good experience on occasional visits to a church in Americus, discovering that he missed the members when he wasn't there, and decided to give it another try. "And so God really started working on me." He has been at Plains Baptist Church for the past seven years.



Main Street
Plains, Georgia

Notes on photos

MARANATHA BAPTIST CHURCH — There will be a funeral service here among the pecan trees for Jimmy Carter, who joined this church after his presidency. It may be the first time the sanctuary has been full since 2020, when he stopped teaching the Sunday School classes that had visitors from around the world lining up at 4 a.m. in the parking lot. Attendance has fallen from the hundreds to less than a hundred. Maranatha's [homepage](#) still carries a notice across the top that "Until further notice, President Carter will NOT be teaching Sunday School," and its [Frequently Asked Questions page](#) still has detailed instructions for people wanting to see him there. But, on the day Carter's body returns, "they (meaning the federal government) will take over the town and I'll have to ride to my own church in a bus from the visitor center outside town," Plains Mayor Boze Godwin told me. "I could see more from my porch on Church Street." The larger question, of course, is similar to the one that faces the town and region. When Carter is buried and the crowds dwindle, what survives? I had hoped to speak with the Rev. Tony Lowden, the church's most recent pastor who left in 2021, for this project but he describes himself as a very busy man and we could not cross paths on my visit or in Zoom requests after I returned home. As a black man who grew up in Philadelphia, played college football at the University of Southern California and was invited to be Maranatha's first black pastor by Carter himself, I thought his perspectives would be valuable.

PLAINS BAPTIST CHURCH and REV. LOWERY "BUCK" HENRY — Carter's original church stands across North Bond Street from the Plains High School building, which is now a museum and headquarters for the Jimmy Carter National Historical Park. Henry lives with his family in a house next door. The stained-glass windows behind him are the same windows you see in the exterior shot of the church. He was the first person to respond to my interview requests in Plains, and we did a follow-up interview about a week later. Its website is [here](#). The building was erected in 1906, but the original congregation was organized as Lebanon Baptist in 1848. Lebanon, in this case, is one of the three settlements that were merged into the current town of Plains. It was located very near Carter's boyhood farm in Archery and is still the site of a major cemetery. According to Georgia's [Historic Rural Churches website](#), Lebanon Baptist held monthly services for whites and slaves until 1870 when "... our colored brethren and sisters requested letters of dismissal." Lebanon Baptist became Plains Baptist in 1909.

MAIN STREET — There are a few more businesses scattered around town, but when it comes to Plains' central business district, this is it. The flags aren't out because it's a special occasion; they're out because everybody who lives there has a neighbor who once was President.

HEADQUARTERS FLAG — It stands outside the National Park Service headquarters at the former Plains High School. It was the first picture I shot after arriving in Plains and the closing photo of this newsletter series.



Headquarters flag

Formerly Plains High School
Jimmy Carter National Historical Park