

Rev. John Mendez: Controversial, Maligned, Misunderstood

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"The Thinker" sits atop the bookshelf.

It is a hazy Thursday morning in July, and the stout and burly pastor, wearing a black shirt and pants with pens protruding from his front pocket, walks into the church following "We Are the World."

Upon entering his office, Mendez learns that an old college friend trying to recover from drug and alcohol abuse is facing financial difficulties. Mendez calls the man — once a college administrator at Shaw University in Raleigh — and assures him that he will loan him some money.

That's one side of Mendez — the side that is seldom shown to the public. What most of Winston-Salem and the Triad chooses to see, however, is an agitator, a burly, bespectacled, black man who shouts racism at every turn.

"He goes for the headlines," said William Hairston of Kernersville. Hairston recently wrote a letter to the *Chronicle* chastising the minister's attention-grabbing tactics.

"He only speaks out when there's a controversy. If he is concerned with black life, why doesn't he speak out on black-on-black crime," said Hairston, who is black. "If a white does something against a black, he's right on top of it."

Mendez' supporters, however, see a determined soldier who refuses to back down from the front lines in his fight for justice. Many African Americans believe that Mendez is unfairly criticized and mistakenly perceived as an instigator.

"I have a very high opinion of him as a person, a minister and a leader in the community," said Dr. Raymond Oliver, a longtime dentist in East Winston. "He is very much concerned about the poor and disadvantaged."

"Leaders that try to lead are the most misunderstood people in the

world," said Ben Ruffin, the first black vice president of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. and a member of Mendez's congregation. "John is misunderstood often."

Under Constant Attack

Although he is pastor of one of the fastest growing churches in the city with a highly distinguished congregation of black professionals, Mendez is under constant attack for his outspokenness. He is alternately revered as an intellectual genius by some and labeled a street preacher with cult followers by others.

Last summer, he helped found Citizens United for Justice, an organization that has black and white members and was borne out of the controversial and horrific deaths of two black residents that heightened racial tensions in the city.

"When we first started meeting a year ago," said Mendez, the media "referred to us as 'black activists.' That was a way of inflaming white folks' emotions to try to turn the community against us, when, in fact, we were a mixed group. But the whole idea was to portray us as radicals, which I make no excuse for being radical because I am."

"I've been radical all my life, but so was George Washington, Patrick Henry and all those folks," he said. "It is the radicals that introduce something new all the time or else we would be stuck with a bunch of boring conservatives who wouldn't want to change anything."

Ran With Streets Gangs

Mendez was born in New York City to a Puerto Rican father who worked at a paper factory and a black housemaid mother. His early years included living in the same house with two brothers — one younger and one older — two aunts and a great-aunt he says played a central role in his life.

He grew up in the ghettos of Harlem and the South Bronx where drugs and gangs were prevalent. Although he stayed away from drugs, Mendez and his younger brother did become gang members.

"Our joining the gangs," he said, "was really a survival kind of thing because we had to fight to survive."

Saved By the Church

Mendez learned community activism at an early age — his mother was very active in the community. He put his activism to use early, becoming a member of the NAACP in second grade. And in subsequent grade-school years, he had run-ins with teachers after feeling that they treated him differently than they did white students.

Shortly thereafter, he became more rebellious, aggressively acting out his emotions. It was the church that prevented him from total spiritual deterioration. He became close with the pastor of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Harlem but continued his gang activities while grappling with the influence the church had on him.

Fred Shuttlesworth, a preacher and civil-rights leader who began a protest movement in Birmingham, Ala., before the Montgomery bus boycotts, inspired Mendez to preach. Mendez decided to quit the gangs and answer his call to preach.

A "Late Bloomer"

Promoting himself from the street corner to the church, Mendez began his religious training as a teacher in his Sunday school class at Olivet church at 13. By 17 or 18, Mendez had traveled to Europe to speak at the Baptist World Alliance convention in Berne, Switzerland.

He also developed an appreciation for the arts.

"I wanted to be a concert artist," he said. Paul Robeson, a

famous Shakespearean actor and social activist, he said, was a role model.

Mendez, who calls himself a "late bloomer," attended college without ever graduating from high school. He enrolled at Shaw University in 1969, where he continued his activism with a young man named Benjamin Chavis. One of the organization's primary concerns was to protest a movement to integrate historically black college and universities.

"We marched 7,000 black students down the streets of Raleigh, demanding that they keep the schools black. That issue did not come up until 20 years later," said Mendez, referring to the recent proposals to increase white enrollment at predominately black schools.

A Committed Person

Cleon Thompson, president of Winston-State University, attended Shaw when Mendez was the student body president.

"He was a very active and knowledgeable student," Thompson said. "He is obviously a person truly committed to equal opportunity and justice."

After graduating from Shaw, Mendez continued his studies at Morehouse College in the school's interdenominational theological center. He later received a master's degree in divinity from the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1991, Mendez became the youngest person — 41 — to address a graduating class at Shaw and to be given an honorary degree. He is currently a part-time instructor in Shaw's School of Religion.

As far as the progress of blacks from the sixties to today, Mendez is less than optimistic. Although blacks have made some strides in civil rights, he said, the promise of justice and equality is far from being

fulfilled.

"We've got a conservative Supreme Court that's constantly eroding civil rights and human rights with professional 'Uncle Tom' Clarence Thomas, who has done more to hurt us than help us," he said. "I think we've lost a lot of ground pathologically and philosophically."

He said the black community needs more strong leaders.

"I'm a leader both by default and maybe by circumstance and on purpose," he said. "And what I mean by that is that because I pastor a church in the city, that automatically makes you a leader. I believe, as a minister that you cannot be a leader and pastor folk and not be

concerned about them politically, economically, socially and culturally."

Fighting Worldwide

Mendez has traveled to Europe, Africa and Asia to spread the word of God and to fight for justice. In November he will be in Russia for a convention. He is currently working with an organization called Pastors for Peace that is trying to persuade the U.S. government to discontinue its embargo against Cuba.

"If we can build relationships with North Korea, with Vietnam and China, then there is no reason why we ought to continue to abuse and intimidate and harass this little tiny

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The Rev. John Mendez and his family.

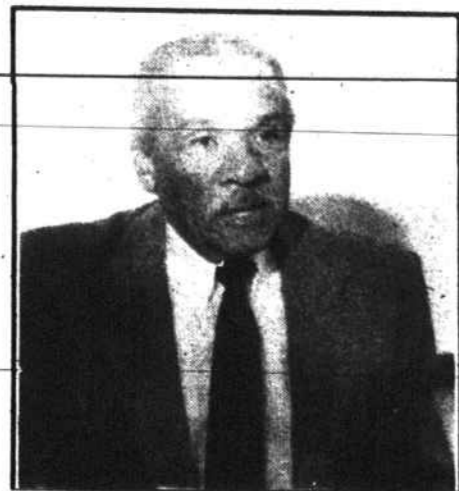
How Some People Feel About the Rev. John Mendez

"I have a very high opinion of him as a person, a minister and a leader in the community. I feel very strongly that John Mendez loves black people. He is very much concerned about the poor and disadvantaged."



Raymond Oliver, dentist

"He's very dedicated and focused on what he thinks the city of Winston-Salem needs. He causes people to think what changes are needed in the community."



C.P. Booker, retired insurance executive

"John Mendez is one of those guys that was born to lead. He has a deep commitment to making things right. He comes out with it; he can't hold it back. Leaders that try to lead are the most misunderstood people in the world. John is misunderstood often."



Ben Ruffin, VP, R.J. Reynolds

"I like him. I don't always agree with him. I approve of his position that he takes a role to point out what needs to be corrected. He comes across as being a little lopsided at times. He can be candid to the point of pain. Sometimes I would like him to forcefully commend people who are trying, but it may not be his fault. He is perceived as someone who only criticizes."



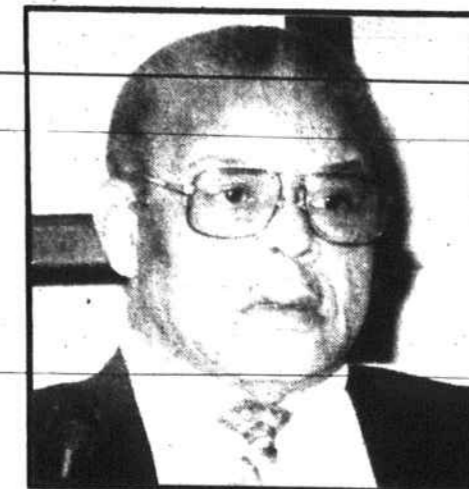
Nancy Wooten, board of education

Martha Wood, mayor of Winston-Salem



"He certainly is dedicated to important issues in the community. It's like he said, 'anytime you try to make progress, it takes a struggle.' Progress is growth."

Warren Oldham, state representative



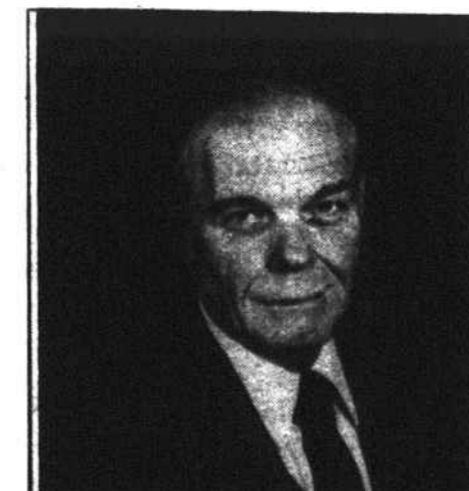
"I think he performs a valuable service to the community. Through his efforts, he has made people more aware of problems and seeks solutions. He serves as an inspiration for African-American youths who want to make a contribution. Because he steps forward and addresses issues that are controversial, he often bears the brunt of criticism."

Cleon Thompson, WSSU chancellor



"I met John as a student at Shaw University back in the sixties when he was the student body president. He was a very active and knowledgeable student. Today he continues his work in support of the down-trodden and disenfranchised. He is obviously a person truly committed to equal opportunity and justice."

Wayne Willard, Forsyth County commissioner



"He is a very dedicated person in his chosen calling. He is very intelligent and has considerable drive. He is involved in his projects one hundred percent."