



'Klan with a tie?' Council's ideology steeped in Old South

By ALLEN G BREED
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Behind a wooden partition in a back room of the Lizard's Thicket restaurant, about 30 members of the Council of Conservative Citizens — many wearing Confederate battle flag pins and belt buckles — hovered over plates of fried catfish and chocolate cream pie as Dennis Wheeler laid out the struggle before them.

Wheeler, a freelance writer from Atlanta, opened last week's meeting with a reading from Revelation about the beast that "opened his mouth in blasphemies against God." Among those blasphemies, he told the group, is a "Yankee radicalism" known as equalitarianism.

"It is exactly this philosophy that our Confederate forefathers fought against in the War Between the States," said Wheeler, head of a council chapter in Georgia. "The current mark of the beast is the equalitarian religion which names as sins racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and homophobia, among others, rather than the Ten Commandments."

The only blacks within earshot were the waitresses and busboys working the tables on the other side of the partition.

Just what is the Council of Conservative Citizens? It was formed 13 years ago and it claims 15,000 members. Lately it's been in the news since Sen. Trent Lott and Rep. Bob Barr landed in hot water after it was revealed they had addressed the group.

Winston-Salem mayor Jack Cavanagh has also spoken at a CCC meeting.

But what else? Is it a reincarnation of the old White Citizens Councils, as some suggest? Is it a white supremacist group?

"We are not racists," insists South Carolina director Frances Bell, citing her American Indian background and noting the group has some Jewish members.

Is the council merely an organization so devoted to free speech and assembly that it refuses to silence racist or bigoted views?

The questions have sent Lott, R-Miss., and Barr, R-Ga., scurrying for cover. The chairman of the Republican National Committee has called on GOP members, including national committee member Buddy WITHERSPOON of Columbia, to quit the organization that calls itself the "active advocate for the no longer silent conservative majority."

Gordon-Baum, the St. Louis attorney who runs the group, says attacks on the council — especially by people like law professor Alan Dershowitz — are liberal diversions to take the heat off President Bill Clinton. "It all has to do with protecting Billy's butt," he said.

"Why are they so afraid of us?" Baum said in a telephone interview last week, noting that the council is best known for opposing affirmative action and quotas and defending the Confederate battle flag against those who would remove it from public display.

He answered his own question: "Because these are all politically incorrect (stances), and they would prefer that we would not have a voice. I mean, neither the Republicans nor the Democrats will touch these issues, and they're afraid of the people out here's growing discontent with the parties."

But to the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference along with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the group is "the Ku Klux Klan with a coat and tie."

"What they stand for sounds like just a recycled White Citizens Council," the Atlanta preacher said. "A cocklebur by any other name is just as thorny."

In fact, some of the group's original members came from the old Citizens Councils of America, a pro-segregation group formed as a response to the 1954 Supreme Court decision integrating public schools.

Baum was its Midwest field organizer and Robert "Tut" Patterson its founder. Patterson now writes a column for The Citizen Informer newsletter for Baum's group.

Mark Potok, a researcher for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., said the Council of Conservative Citizens is more dangerous than the KKK or neo-Nazis because it has been "successfully masquerading as a mainstream conservative organization."

"They're not going to produce a Timothy McVeigh; they are much more interested in genuine political power than in any kind of violence or terrorism," Potok said. "I mean, Timothy McVeigh can kill 168 people, but he is never going to be elected your senator or president or congressman. So, yeah, on a political level they're much more dangerous."

Indeed, the group claims as dues-paying members dozens of elected officials, from local school boards to state legislatures. It does not, however, claim ex-Klan leader and sometime GOP candidate David Duke, who caused Baum considerable discomfort in November by showing up at a national board meeting in Jackson, Miss.

The group's Web site welcomes visitors to "join the vast right-wing conspiracy!" — an ironic reference to Hillary Clinton's comment about who was behind the impeachment effort — and offers such publications as a pamphlet revealing "the ugly truth about Martin Luther King."

The South Carolina chapters have fought to keep the Confederate battle flag flying over the state capital and criticized The Citadel for not playing "Dixie" often enough during functions at the military college.

"Being pro-white is not equal to being anti-black," said Rebekah Sutherland, an executive committee member from Aiken who ran for state school superintendent last year. "It's OK to be white, isn't it? That's what this group is about. It's OK to be white." Don MacDermott, a Birmingham, Ala., city councilman and Council of Conservative Citizens member, campaigned with his chapter last year against a proposed 1-cent sales tax that he felt would go to fund "just a bunch of wish lists for some local bureaucrats." He said he wouldn't belong to the organization if he felt it was racist.

"The chapter I belong to is definitely not," he said. "They're just some well-grounded beliefs in conservative values. Most of the group I'm involved with were Ronald Reagan supporters in 1976."

A.J. Parker, a siding contractor who is director of the group's North Carolina chapter, doesn't like being condemned for the views of a few members.

"Why should I pay for deeds that took place 100 years ago, or even 50 years ago?" he said during a break from burning brush in

See Klan on A5

King's church makes historic move

Ebenzer to move to million dollar sanctuary in Sweet Auburn

By E.N. SMITH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — The pews are filled long before the start of the morning service, and despite a heavy rain, worshippers spill onto the sidewalk outside the historic church.

It's a typical Sunday morning at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached.

But the 76-year-old building is showing its age: the ceilings are cracked, the carpet is worn, the floors are creaky.

So next month, the congregation will pick up and move across the street — to a new \$8 million facility designed to accommodate twice as many worshippers.

"Some members are naturally nostalgic," said the Rev. Joseph Roberts Jr. "But now that we're getting ready to move, they see it is sensible. Others are very excited about the opportunity to expand."

The National Park Service — which already runs the visitors center at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in the neighborhood where King grew up, preached and is buried — will assume responsibility for the preservation of the historic church on March 7.

"There will be a lot of activities to keep the church alive," said Park Service superintendent Frank Catroppa. "We want the people who visit to experience something when they're in there."

The congregation's decision to



The Rev. Joseph Roberts Jr. poses in front of the new Horizon Sanctuary of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta last week as a crane raises a huge cross to the top of the church tower. The original historic church building, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached, will be called the Heritage Sanctuary.

move, he said, was a dream come true for the Park Service. Despite its modest brick facade, worn red carpeting and tattered hymn books, Ebenezer is revered.

"People all over the world want to see where Dr. King preached," said Park Service historian Dean Rowley.

Long before King introduced the world to his gospel of social and economic justice, his father and grandfather had been teaching the same message from Ebenezer's pulpit. It's also the place his mother, Alberta King, was gunned down while playing the organ in 1974.

The congregation's new church is

an architectural marvel paid for by individual donations.

"Not only is it beautiful, but is ethnically sensitive with no sense of being exclusivist," Roberts said. "We are still going to welcome people from all races and all nations."

The new building, which will feature eight towering stained-glass windows that depict the struggle for human rights, can accommodate both a 150-member choir and 1,600 in its oak pews — more than doubling the number currently able to attend Sunday services.

Howard King, who joined Ebenezer in 1966, said he and others in the congregation are excited about

the move and believe Martin Luther King Jr. would be pleased.

"Too many churches, I'm sad to say, are like Sunday morning social clubs," said King, who is not related to the civil rights leader. "Churches have all sorts of opportunities to affect change outside their walls, and they don't."

The first Sunday in March, Roberts plans to hold a 30-minute service in the current sanctuary immediately before the children in the congregation lead them over.

"The children — the children — shall lead us in," Roberts said from the pulpit, alluding to the words of Isaiah.

Blacks 'suplexed' by Minnesota governor

By BRANDT WILLIAMS
INSIGHT NEWS

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Black Minnesotans are already questioning the state's new governor, former wrestling champion Jesse "The Body" Ventura.

The Rev. Randolph Staten, speaking for the Coalition of Black Churches, expressed the organization's "disappointment, disgust, disagreement and outrage" that Ventura has yet to appoint any African Americans to his cabinet.

At a press conference held in the Capitol Rotunda, Rev. Staten responded to Ventura's stance that race doesn't matter when it comes to making cabinet appointments.

"His explanation that he doesn't see race — or even more ludicrous — race is irrelevant, is the same excuse that government, business and industry used 50 years ago to avoid an integrated workforce or to avoid hiring black people," Staten said.

Reading from a prepared statement, Staten said, "Mr. Ventura's appointments and established budgetary and legislative priorities, at a time when we have a billion dollar plus surplus and six billion dollar settlement from the tobacco industry, reveals that he does not appear to have the best interest of the African-American and other communities of color at heart."

John Wodele, director of communications for the governor, said he was "outraged at the suggestion that Governor Ventura is insensitive to the problems of the people in Minnesota, no matter what race or walk of life."

"If there wasn't one single woman in one of those 20 positions, wouldn't somebody say something," Staten asked. "Why are we the only ones saying

something? Everyone should take issue with this."

Before the press conference, Ventura was asked on Minnesota Public Radio's "Midmorning" program to respond to his critics. Ventura said the whole thing was "much ado about nothing." The governor restated his earlier statements about race and hiring.

"I'm colorblind," he said. "I take my colorblindness into

what I do."

Staten concluded his remarks with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"The problem of race is indeed America's greatest moral dilemma. Those who profess to be colorblind use their so-called loss of sight to perpetuate bigotry."

Tara Parrish of Insight News also contributed to this report.

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