

Martin Luther Stirewalt Jr.

HILLSBOROUGH—“I think the Lord was in there pushing me on. With that kind of support behind me, I didn’t have much choice but to keep going.”

With that quote, Martin Luther Stirewalt Jr. summed up the progressive steps he undertook in 1954 to help lead Lutheran churches in North Carolina and Lenoir-Rhyne College (now University) into a new era of race relations.

That was no easy task because taking on issues of race—inside or outside the church—is generally a slippery slope. Stirewalt also quickly learned that a lot of church and educational leaders in this state were pushing back on him as the Lord was pushing him forward. To his credit, Stirewalt followed the Lord’s advice rather than his detractors.

The result, after much anguish, hurt feeling, soul-searching, prayer and postponement was that the Lutheran synod and the college slowly began to open their minds and doors to racial minorities

“I did what I did because it was the right thing to do,” Stirewalt said in retirement in a small cottage in which he until recently lived in an isolated Quaker village outside Hillsborough, not far from Chapel Hill. After the death of his wife Frances, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, Stirewalt left his cozy home for an assisted living facility in Hillsborough. He was physically frail but mentally alert in the early spring of 2010, awaiting his 97th birthday in June when he granted his final interview for this story.

Death came just two months shy of that birthday. Stirewalt died peacefully surrounded by close family on March 24, 2010.

Stirewalt made it clear near the end of his life that he had no regrets and never once considered any kind of retreat from his work on the race relations committee. The action of and reaction to the Synod’s role in promotion of improved race relations in churches and Lenoir-Rhyne is one of the more interesting as well as controversial steps taken in the area of human relations within the church body in the last half century.

Stirewalt was thrown into the center of the swirl of conflicting views on race when he was asked to lead a committee charged with recommending how the church could and should move forward in ways to conform with Biblical teachings that all people are equal in Christ Jesus.

Stirewalt, a 96-year-old native of Hickory and the son of a Lutheran minister whose family has had close ties with Lutheranism for generations (not limited to, but including affection for the name of Martin Luther, the father of Lutheranism). He was a professor of history and Biblical studies for multiple decades at Lenoir-Rhyne and other educational institutions. In that capacity he was asked by Synod President F. L. Conrad to chair a new committee on race relations. He willingly accepted that assignment, perhaps wondering but certainly not knowing that the result would forever be part of his remaining life and legacy.

It was in 1952 that Synod President Conrad, who served in that capacity from 1949 until 1963, took what could be considered a bold, yet belated, step for what was at the time the United Evangelical Lutheran body in North Carolina. There had been attempts and progress made in the area of racial improvement in the state, but until that time virtually all efforts had been by the Missouri Synod or American Synod leaders.

“President Conrad was the first (official) proponent of enhancing civil rights by the United Evangelical group,” Stirewalt explained. A year after Conrad first broached the subject that the church ought to step up because scriptures called for such moves, Stirewalt, then a professor at Lenoir-Rhyne, was chosen in 1953 to lead a 10-member committee with the charge to come up with a set of recommendations in time for the 1954 Synod convention.

All members of the committee, of course, were white and nine of the 10 were men. Inez Seagle, a faculty colleague of Stirewalt’s, was the only female member, but she proved to be as vocal and important one. Seagle walked in lockstep with Stirewalt as they pushed onward in an effort to advance racial harmony within the church and college. Some committee members were more timid on the topic and one member failed to show up for any meetings.

Stirewalt discovered in short order that the committee’s task would be arduous, and not just among church members either. His colleagues on the Lenoir-Rhyne faculty were sharply divided and were not reluctant to make their feelings known. There were no African-American students enrolled at Lenoir-Rhyne at the time. Stirewalt recalls it was another half dozen years before the racial barriers were removed on the campus, and even then it was a slow process.

Prior to the formation of the Stirewalt committee, except for what little the Missouri Synod and American Synod had achieved in race relations in North Carolina, black Lutherans had been pretty much left to flounder on their own across the state. At that time, for almost a century and a half, the Lutheran hierarchy had seldom debated and never reached any kind of consensus on how to treat minority race members. A small group of black Lutheran pastors formed their own Alpha Synod in 1889, but they received little or no outside support in their struggles for survival as an organization.

That is what President Conrad sought to change and asked Stirewalt to accomplish. Conrad said at the time he had biblical teaching as his reason, but he also had another force pushing the cause. Conrad’s son, David, was in Alabama at the time and was prompting his father to act on behalf of the church organization and also to help integrate the student body at Lenoir-Rhyne. “His son was pushing him and recommending students for enrollment at the college,” Stirewalt said.

Regardless of his own private reasons, President Conrad made public his position that it was time for the North Carolina (United Lutheran) Synod to take responsibility for the ministry of all people, including African-Americans, in the state. His official recommendation was that the Synod extend its reach to include “the Negro people within the territory of the Synod”. The Synod convention adopted his recommendation and authorized him to name the committee to propose actions to be voted upon at the 1954 Synod convention.

The Stirewalt committee of 10, with only nine participating, held five meetings in the following 12 months and formulated its list of recommendations. Most committee members were active in debating their recommendations, but Stirewalt and Seagle were the two most outspoken.

Stirewalt’s committee agreed on a specific set of actions that generally included more openness for racial minorities within Lutheran churches, but the group’s most explosive proposal was aimed at Lenoir-Rhyne. Among the specific recommendations for

the college was one that proposed opening the campus classrooms to American-American students.

To say that was controversial would be a major understatement. College trustees rebelled, somewhat quietly but forcefully. They privately demanded that the committee report be rescinded, arguing that to admit black students, or even to allow the report to be made public, would be the ruination of campus fund raising, among other things. Agitated trustees argued a familiar refrain for those times: that the college community was just not ready for such actions.

Stirewalt said word of the committee's proposals was leaked to trustees before they were ready or before he had a chance to explain the committee's reasoning. But the damage had been done. College trustees, then and now, carry a lot of clout.

President Conrad heard the call of college trustees and, for whatever reason, sided with the objectors. Stirewalt was asked to either withdraw or water down the recommendations. Reluctantly, the committee drafted a new and weaker version of its work. The revised committee report was presented to the Synod convention on May 5, 1954, two weeks before the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its historic Brown vs. Broad school integration ruling.

Among the comments in the final report was this statement: "Anyone who confesses Christ as Lord may be placed in only one category before God, that of 'child of God and joint heir to Christ' Any exclusion of a child of God from the Communion of Saints, any manifestation or instrument thereof, on such grounds as social status, economic resources or race, is contrary to God's will and revealed love." Other recommendations included a "grass roots" effort in each congregation on Christian education in race relations and for financial assistance be given to black candidates for the ministry.

"I think this is the place where the dear Lord took over," Stirewalt said of the visceral opposition to the original committee report. "Once we got rolling, there was no stopping it. We issued what we felt was a strong statement, and one that was needed. I think we did what was the right thing and I think we helped move (race relations) along. From what I see, we have made a lot of progress and are moving along pretty well. But it will be some time before we have fully integrated our churches."

Stirewalt readily concedes he was not pleased that his committee had to rework its original list of recommendations, but he did as he was asked by President Conrad. The committee deleted the hot button recommendation for integration of classes at the college.

"It did not make me happy that we had to tone down the original report," he said. "What we ended up with was strong, but not as strong. Once we issued our recommendations, we just wanted them to sink in. The college trustees who read the original report said if that (the recommendation on accepting blacks) got out it would ruin the economy, meaning fund raising. I was not really surprised at so much opposition and expected some of it. President Conrad didn't give us any specific instructions on what to recommend. We did what we felt was the right thing based on New Testament scriptures. And I think our work helped speed up some things."

Stirewalt left Lenoir-Rhyne and the state not long after his committee work was done. Was his unease with the committee opposition cause his departure? "Well, that was only part of my reason for leaving," he explained. "My work at Lenoir-Rhyne was done

by that time.” Stirewalt moved in 1959 to Hamma School of Theology located on campus at Wittenberg in Ohio where he taught before returning to his native North Carolina, serving for a time as interim pastor for a small predominately black congregation in Greensboro before retiring to the peace of his small Quaker community.

Stirewalt maintains an affinity for Lenoir-Rhyne and its core mission and has kept up with campus progress, including racial integration. “I visited the campus in the early 1960s and walked into the library and saw a black student working at the desk,” he said in expressing a tone of pleasure as well as a touch of surprise. “What I have seen and what little I see (in terms of racial advances), I feel pretty good about it in general,” he said. “But I feel like it will still be some time before races are really integrated in the church.”

When and if that does happen, Stirewalt can feel comfortable with the knowledge that he helped that to happen.

Stirewalt was born in June 1913. He followed his minister father as a scholar at both colleges and theological centers of learning in the two Carolinas. He was married to the former Frances Miller for 69 years before her death in 2007. She was the daughter of the Rev. L. D. Miller who once served as pastor of historic St. John’s Lutheran Church in Cabarrus County, one of the first two Lutheran churches established in North Carolina in 1745. Stirewalt liked to tell how and his future wife spent many of their evenings dating in the graveyard at St. John’s because he had no money to go anywhere else.

Stirewalt and his wife had one son, now deceased, and one daughter, Anna Carolyn Gilbo of Hillsborough, three grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.