

## *The Three Miracles of Smithfield*

Written by Gary Waller, GAB Participant, 2012

What in the world?" I looked over at Beth and she looked at me. We were both wondering what we might be getting into.

What caught our attention was a sign just outside the city limits of Smithfield, NC, a town of about 12,000 souls in eastern NC, about 35 miles SE of Raleigh. The sign was of average size for a roadside billboard, i.e. about the size of a small house, or so it seemed to us that Sunday morning in July of 1969. What caught our attention was the message that could not be missed or misinterpreted. Portrayed in bigger than life detail was a Confederate soldier on a white horse, with a drawn sword waving above his head, and in equally large print the following words: "The Ku Klux Klan Welcomes You to Smithfield."

I had only recently completed some graduate study at Duke University and was seeking a part-time, short-term ministry opportunity close to Durham for a few months while Beth completed her graduate degree at the same institution. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Smithfield had heard of my availability and wanted to interview me for an Associate Pastor position. The congregation of about 350 members did not really need another ordained staff person, but the pastor had recently been diagnosed with rapidly growing lung cancer and was losing ground daily to the deadly disease. His son drove him to Durham to meet with me. The interview went well. The congregation officially extended the call and I looked forward to beginning my ministry there in July with pastor Joe Lansinger. However, as providence would have it, he and I would never work a single day together. His condition worsened dramatically and a telephone call in the early hours of September 7 informed me of his passing during that night. The congregation rescinded my call as Associate Pastor and called me to be the Pastor shortly thereafter. I was about to experience the most intense six years of my life.

"Don't worry", Bill Kimball, one of the Elders of the church said, trying his best to allay my concerns about the sign. "The Klan is pretty active here, but most of us don't pay any attention to it. One of the Klan families owns that property where the sign is. Not much any of us can do about it. Don't let it get you down."

News travels fast in a small town. It wasn't long before I got a call from the head of the Klan. "Preacher", he said, "I want to welcome you officially to Smithfield. I got along fine with the previous pastor and hope to get along fine with you." I told him that I was offended by his sign and that I would do everything I could to see that sign removed by the time my ministry ended there.

Like I said, news travels fast in a small town. Although nothing was said in the next several months, I knew that what I had done had not set well with a segment of the congregation that supported the Klan and what it stood for.

My ministry in Smithfield crossed cultural, racial and economic lines. A Ministers' Association was formed by many of the pastors in the area in order to discuss the various issues of concern in our communities with surprising results. An interracial committee was formed to establish one of the first Contact Teleministry programs in North Carolina. This interracial ministry consisted of 24/7 telephone counseling ministry handled by volunteers trained to be first responders to citizens needing someone to talk to and/or referrals to agencies that could provide professional counseling. It also was a way of modeling moderation and progress in race relations.

This committee was also responsible for creating a monthly seminar series held in the Johnston County Public Library. This series was open to the public and dealt with such topics as were deemed helpful to the community and supportive to peace and understanding in a troubling and difficult time in the community's history.

Things were changing in Smithfield. Several years before my arrival, a number of non-smokestack industries began to locate there, bringing with them executives and administrators and employees from other parts of the country. These new arrivals did more than bring in new residents to the area; they brought in different values, different views, and different perspectives that began to have an impact on the community. The biggest change they brought was a spirit of acceptance of the changes that were sweeping our culture in those years, a change in the level of tolerance and open-mindedness.

I received telephone calls from the Klan from time to time reminding me of their presence. I also suspected there were several families in the congregation that were sympathizers to the Klan and were probably attempting to undermine my ministry there.

Before I left Smithfield three things happened to make me feel that whatever I had experienced of a negative nature was well worth the time spent in that place. Number One occurred when I received a call from the Klan main man to come down to the site of the sign outside town. I went, not knowing what to expect. What I found truly astounded me. The sign that greeted everyone coming into Smithfield was coming down and for some reason the main man wanted me to see it.

Number Two occurred after the worship service on the last Sunday before leaving Smithfield. There was a large congregation for that service and after greeting and saying goodbye to everyone; I realized that someone was lingering behind me, waiting until everyone else had left. I turned to see that it was a man whose family had not been very supportive of my ministry those six years. Before I could speak he hugged me, crying, and said, "I love you, Preacher!" and walked quickly away. I was stunned and I wondered what the Lord had done in that man's heart to enable him to humble himself that way.

And finally, Number Three and most importantly -the birth of Susan and John. These three events were the Three Miracles of Smithfield.