

Tyson, Vernon: Miss Amy's Witness^[1]

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The Rev. Vernon Tyson: Miss Amy's Witness

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#)"^[2], *News and Observer*. Published 7/12/1998. Copyrighted.
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In 1963, when the Rev. Vernon Tyson was pastor of Jonesboro Methodist Church in Sanford, he invited Dr. Samuel Proctor to preach for what was called Race Relations Sunday. Proctor, an African-American and one of the leading theologians in the United States until his death in 1997, was then president of [North Carolina A&T](#)^[3] in Greensboro. When Tyson invited him to Sanford, Proctor laughed and said, "Yes, and we'll be run out of town together."

In the 1950s and '60s, hundreds of white congregations in the South dismissed their ministers for such gestures of support for racial equality. Nevertheless, Proctor agreed to come. The invitation to Proctor sparked a controversy within Tyson's church, including a protest meeting, calls for his dismissal, death threats and self-doubts in the minister's own mind. "I thought they were going to kill him," his wife, Martha, told me.

At his home in the Hayes-Barton neighborhood of Raleigh, Tyson, a warm man renowned as a gifted preacher and caring pastor, recalled the turning point in his church's struggle over whether to support Proctor's visit. The controversy had grown to the point that he called an emergency meeting of his administrative board the night before Proctor's arrival. Just as the meeting was about to dissolve in an uproar, a quiet, dignified older woman rose to speak.



Vernon Tyson. Photo by Chris Seward, 1998. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

In Vernon Tyson's words:

"Amy Womble was a 60-year-old who walked with a limp. She was a first-grade teacher, and she had taught all these people. She was honored. Nobody knew how she felt about social matters. And she says: "I've been sitting here just sort of
"Now, I don't know the man who is coming very much. I know he's president of A&T. But I know our pastor and he's not going to tear. And I don't suppose Dr. Proctor's going to tear. If there's any tearing done, we're going to do the tearing. It
She went on: "I've been reading about a case up near Chapel Hill, where a teenage boy went around a curve too fast and was killed in a car crash. He was down there by the side of the road and they were just waiting for the ambulance to co
"They had a big dinner up there for this airman in this community in Orange County, celebrating his saving that boy's life. What I haven't told you was that the boy who was saved was a white boy and the airman was a black man." She said, "I
I tell you, I have never heard the voice of the Lord with such thunder, such love, such wisdom. When I got home, Martha said, "Grayson Bryan was here and he was crying." So I went down to Grayson's house. He was a bachelor, came out c
The next day, on Sunday morning, the street out there was bumper to bumper traffic to see this man. We were singing Fosdick's hymn - "God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power, give us wisdom, give us courage for the f
Well, I lost a member who had never been in the church since I had been there. He was a farmer. If I showed up after he sold tobacco, he'd give me a check for \$200. I went every fall to pick up his check. That was what was expected. He me
My lay leader, a wholesale grocer, came into my study during this Proctor controversy. He was crying. I said, "What's wrong, Carl?" He said, "I went to see one of my merchants, and he said, 'Carl, you go up there to that church, don't you?' "
"Preacher," Carl said, "I've heard all my life about witnessing, but until this morning I didn't know a thing about it."

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#)"^[4] project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#)^[5] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

Tyson, Timothy B. 2004. *Blood done sign my name: a true story*. New York: Crown Publishers.

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