

● "Seven Mothers." New Day Christian Church, Morganton, NC, 2015.

Seven Mothers

2015

From the New Day Christian Church script:

A little over 50 years ago, the colored elementary and junior high children of Morganton attended Mt. View and the high school students attended Olive Hill. For some children, that meant a 3-4 mile walk to and from school (Many families did not own cars back then.) Something did not sit well with a few mothers who knew things were not equal and they were determined to change the way things were done to give their children equal access to education under the law. They wanted better for their children, and that meant going against the status quo.

Don't be fooled. The fathers were in the fight as well, but they thought that the women would probably get more accomplished (and would seem less of a threat. They also thought there might be less chance of violence against the mothers.) So in the early 1960s, seven mothers, who called themselves the "West Concord mothers" got involved: Mrs. Laura Thomas, Mrs. Willette Chambers, Mrs. Mildred Largent, Mrs. Annie J. Hicks, Mrs. Ruth Forney, Mrs. Rose Johnson, and Mrs. Lucille Rutherford. These Seven Mothers got together and decided to petition the school board for transportation for the children on West Concord Street to and from Mtn. View.

Before the mothers went into action, they met in churches and basements to develop a strategy and get "prayed up" because they knew they were up against a formidable foe: segregation. They knew they needed to be covered in prayer to make such a bold move and to have the assurance and protection of God . . . These mothers knew families that had crosses burned in their yards and they knew they would be tested.

In 1961, when the time was right, the West Concord mothers asked the school board for that bus and the school board did not have the funds to provide a bus in the budget. (The mothers continued to press the school leaders for a solution, and eventually, a deal was worked out with the local bus company to offer a reduced rate for these students.)

With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregation of schools was banned and school systems that did not comply would lose Federal funding. At this point, Morganton City Schools began voluntary integration, which meant you could choose to attend the school in your neighborhood. The mothers knew that it

would be another battle to get their children to and from those neighborhood schools that had been only for white students. Being yelled at even before getting on school grounds, racial slurs and even being tripped going into the school is what they endured. They were ready, and they knew once they started they could not turn back. By this time, the mothers were very active in their local NAACP and churches, the launching pad of many protests and demonstrations.

Things moved on and tensions were high. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it legal but it still was not accepted by all. In 1965, Olive Hill would see its last students. The end of an era; the school where up until integration, every black person schooled in Burke County had graduated.

When schooltime rolled around in 1965, Carol Ervin Largent found herself in the gym at Hillcrest along with 10-12 other black children, new to this integrated school. These students spent the better part of the week in the gym with the books and materials from their former school, Mountain View. As Carol and the others played around in the gym and she wondered "Why are we in here and they are out there? All I want to do is go to school."

Integration was difficult on many levels, and no one was prepared—students, parents, teachers, or administrators. Over the next few years, there were protests, walk-outs, and sit-ins in Burke and all over the nation. The West Concord mothers could not have known what the next few years would bring, that they would be part of a national firestorm that would change the nation.

—Gary Harbison