

Ecumenical service to celebrate UGA desegregation

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A series of events marking the 50th anniversary of the University of Georgia's desegregation will begin this Sunday, appropriately, off the campus, where the struggle for desegregation actually began.

A 4 p.m. ecumenical service at Athens First United Methodist Church, 327 N. Lumpkin St., will bring together faith leaders of different races as well as denominations.

"The desegregation of the University of Georgia impacted the community as well as the university, and this is a way for us to acknowledge that," said the Rev. Glenn Doak of Athens First Presbyterian Church, one of the planners of the event.

"When Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes (UGA's first two black students) arrived at the university in January 1961, they didn't just arrive to the university; they arrived to the community," said Cheryl Dozier, UGA's associate provost for institutional diversity.

On-campus events get under way at 6 p.m. Sunday, with a reception honoring UGA's first black students and their families. More events will follow through the month and into February on campus and around Athens.

The Rev. Michael Gerald chaired the committee of faith leaders organizing Sunday's ecumenical service and hopes the service not only will mark a celebration of history, but will help launch a new era of cooperation across racial and denominational lines.

"We thank God for helping us to grow and evolve, and will try to take some steps forward for the good of all people," said Gerald, senior pastor of Hill Chapel Baptist Church.

"We all think it's important to celebrate and commemorate the faith community that contributed to desegregating the University of Georgia," said the Rev. Edward Bolen, pastor of Milledge Avenue Baptist Church.

Like Gerald, Bolen looked to the future, however.

"I think there are plenty more barriers for us to overcome," Bolen said.

The theme for the service comes from the biblical book of Amos: "But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."

In a spirit of celebration, the service will be more colorful than most. Ministers of area churches will process into the sanctuary in their own church's vestments.

The service is not only important in the community's history, but long overdue, said keynote speaker the Rev. James Kendrick.

"Maybe we should have been doing this all along in the faith community, not to try to relive the past, but to look on to the future and bring the community together," said Kendrick, pastor of East Friendship Baptist Church.

"We have not gotten beyond race in class in America. We have just not gotten beyond that," said Kendrick, who was in Athens in 1961 and vividly remembers the struggle to desegregate the university. "This is a day that should not have to be," Kendrick said. "But it is significant that we realize that we're celebrating this day because it recognizes a landmark - that one day this is where we are, and now this is where we are. There was a time when all the taxpayers could not go to the University of Georgia, though we paid our taxes."

For more events, visit www.desegregation.uga.edu.

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