Baptist church efforts bridge racial divisions across denominations

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue

Pastors Frederick Haynes and George Mason both lead Baptist churches in Dallas, but they did not meet until the not-guilty verdict in the death of Florida teen Trayvon Martin brought them together in 2013.

Now the two men—one the leader of a predominantly black megachurch, the other of a mostly white congregation—have signed a "covenant of action" spearheaded by former president Jimmy Carter.

Carter, now 91, has long been known for building bridges between divided parties. His work to bring Baptists of different races together on a national level is morphing into grassroots attempts to address community needs.

About a dozen partnerships have been created by groups of Baptists from Alabama to Oklahoma—renovating campgrounds, mentoring youth, packing boxes at a food bank. The former president and a younger cohort of leaders are hoping the movement will grow to 100 by 2018.

"What we are trying to do now with the New Baptist Covenant is to pair up African-American-dominated churches and white churches in the same community—or sometimes on the same street almost—to work together on projects that are good for the low-income people in that neighborhood," Carter said.

Haynes and Mason are partnering on reducing payday loan businesses in Dallas. Recently, staffers of Haynes's mostly black church, which once had some 20 payday loan businesses within a five-mile radius, trained members of Mason's historically white church on ways to block such business. And now they are spending time together studying the Bible and sharing a meal while learning about privilege.

"There were some who received more food than others and some received nothing, and I think that was an eye-opening piece for many who were there," said Haynes, who said the work of the two churches has moved beyond "feel-good" experiences. "What makes this effort different is that we are refusing to settle for a kumbaya moment."

Carter, who is scheduled to keynote a training session for the New Baptist Covenant in Atlanta in mid-September, said he was moved originally to bring black and white Baptists together because they once met together in the Triennial Convention in the 1800s, before the Southern Baptist Convention broke off in a dispute over slaveholding missionaries.

His efforts for greater Baptist and interracial cooperation come, he says, after the country may have prematurely thought racial reconciliation had been achieved with the civil rights movement victories of the 1960s.

"That was a sigh of relief too early," he said. "We rested on our laurels and now we've found out in the last year or two, very vividly with the police attacks on innocent black young people, that we still have a long way to go in this country."

Hannah McMahan, executive director of New Baptist Covenant, works in an office the movement leases from the Progressive National Baptist Convention at its Washington headquarters. She'll be traveling to annual meetings of some Baptist groups this summer to encourage expanded involvement.

About half a dozen predominantly black PNBC congregations have committed to covenants of action. A PNBC state convention in Georgia and its counterpart in the mostly white Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are working together to repair an interfaith campground for joint youth retreats. And Oklahoma members of both of those national groups have joined with the Oklahoma Indian American Baptist Association to provide tablet computers to elementary schools.

James C. Perkins, PNBC president, said he will be encouraging greater participation of his churches with New Baptist Covenant to achieve more social justice progress and foster improved racial understanding.

"The more we come together to get to know one another," he said, "the easier it becomes to talk about these touchy, volatile issues that impact the quality of life, not just in our congregations but across the nation." —Religion News Service

This article was edited on June 20, 2016.