A TOWERING PRESENCE AND MAN of GOD

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF REVEREND ERNEST BUTLER

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DIRK SHADD**

THE PHONE RANG JUST AFTER 4 P.M.

The Reverend Ernest Butler, longtime pastor of Second Baptist Church in Bloomington, put down his paintbrush and picked up the receiver. Even though he was painting someone else's house — one of the many odd jobs he did to supplement his pastoral salary — Butler somehow knew the call was for him. It wasn't unusual, after all, for his secretary to call him on a job with news of someone who needed help or a situation that required "Rev's" immediate attention.

"A black boy, a former IU football player, has been shot and killed by the police," his secretary said, her voice quavering.

"You tell them I'll be there," Butler replied calmly. "Tell them I'll be there right away."

When he arrived at the Bloomington Police Department on that fateful day in 1983, Butler got law enforcement's side of the story. According to the police, former IU middle guard Denver Smith, 24, had been reported causing a disturbance on the street near his home at Henderson Court Apartments, where he lived with his wife, Cynequa, and newborn daughter, Ambrosia. According to witnesses, the shirtless and muscular 245-pound Smith was standing in the middle of the road on this hot September day, brandishing a tire iron, stopping traffic, and threatening to damage cars. When three policemen arrived on the scene, Smith reportedly punched one in the face and ripped his gun from its holster. Convinced Smith was about to shoot, another officer shot him twice in the back and, when the bullets seemed to have little effect, struck him hard on the back of the head with the butt of his gun. Still undaunted, Smith advanced, whereupon the third officer shot him in the chest, killing him.

At the station, Butler met his friend and political ally Mayor Tomilea "Tomi" Allison. Together, they went to pay their respects to Smith's suddenly widowed young wife. Although understandably inconsolable, Allison recalls, Smith's widow was at least comforted by Butler's presence and reassuring words. He told her to look after her little girl and that he would look after everything else.

"Ernie somehow made it OK," Allison says. "He had an innate understanding of the human thing to do, of how to reach out and touch people in their greatest time of need."

For Allison, Butler's role in the Denver Smith tragedy showcased what made him so effective. He was famously and unfailingly kind and available to those in need but also uncompromising and fearless when it came to saying and doing what he believed to be right. When Allison spoke at Second Baptist on Martin Luther King Jr. Day a few months after the Smith shooting and was heckled by agitators who had passed out flyers urging those at the church to protest the mayor's handling of the case by walking out, Butler kicked out the protesters and branded them "cowards" for not identifying themselves on the flyers.

Three decades later, the incident still resonates in the local African American community and beyond, where questions about the use of lethal force remain. Would a white man have been confronted in the same way? Was it possible that Smith, often characterized as a "gentle giant," was angling for a spot in the NFL and using steroids, the new body-mass builders, and exhibiting behavior later to be dubbed "steroid rage?" While highly critical of the outcome of the police action, Butler worked hard to defuse a potentially explosive situation.

During his 43 years as pastor of Second Baptist and as the most prominent leader of the local African American community, Butler's accomplishments changed the very nature of Bloomington.

He led the charge to desegregate the town's neighborhoods, broke down employment discrimination barriers, and helped clear the way for black teachers to teach in Bloomington schools. He was the driving force behind the creation of the Bloomington Human Rights Commission, was chairman of the Bloomington Public Housing Board, and served as a Bloomington Township trustee. He also marched with Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 (the infamous "Bloody Sunday" march), organized the local Martin Luther King Jr. Day

The Rev. Ernest Butler in his late-80s, pictured in the Second Baptist Church where he preached for 43 years.

Butler speaks to the congregation while the church choir watches in the background.

celebration, initiated a statewide MLK essay contest for middle and high school students, and ran a Baptist summer youth camp that for many years was one of only a handful of such camps for African American children in the United States.

Along the way, "Rev," as he was affectionately called by family and friends, received numerous awards and accolades, including a listing in *Who's Who in Black America*, an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and being named honorary mayor of Bloomington.

To those who came in contact with him, Butler was at once a towering figure and a down-to-earth man of God. But he was also, by all accounts, a complex person, full of contradictions. A true believer in the word of God who put the needs of others before his own, Butler was also famously egotistical, combative, rebellious, and inflexible. Although he excelled at breaking down barriers and bringing people together to fight for a common cause, he could not abide dissent. It was his way or no way at all. Even as he championed equality for all people, his attitude toward women remained hopelessly retrograde. (Once, talking to a reporter about his strategy for promoting one of his many initiatives, he offered this cliché: "There are three ways to get the word out — telegraph, telephone, and tell a woman.")

Most prominently, Butler was the undisputed leader of the mainstream civil rights movement in Bloomington and a major force in the city's political and civic evolution from his arrival in town in 1959 until his death in 2003. Yet despite his crucial place in Bloomington's history, Butler today is largely absent from the city's collective consciousness, the Rev. Ernest D. Butler Park on West 9th Street notwithstanding. Given his pivotal role in helping Bloomington become a more progressive, tolerant, and activist-oriented city, his life's accomplishments are worth knowing.

An early calling

Born in Connersville, Ind., in 1913, Ernest Butler exhibited the devout and rebellious sides of his personality early on. At age 8, upon emerging from the baptismal pool at the local Baptist church, little Ernie announced that he was going to be a preacher when he grew up. Making his name as an orator seemed unlikely, though, given a severe speech impediment that rendered his hurried sentences slurred and unintelligible to all except his parents. It was not until high school that Butler was forced to confront his speech problem and struggle to correct it. Showing up for football practice one day, he found a note from the coach taped to his locker: "You can have your uniform back when you learn how to talk." It was Butler's high school English teacher, Mary Reiman, intuiting that the speech-challenged boy actually had a lot to say, who vowed to teach him to speak properly.

Angry and humiliated by the coach's rebuke, Butler quit school and, without telling his parents, took a job stocking supermarket shelves. When his father, Daniel, learned of his son's truancy, he gave him two choices: be in school the next day or receive the whupping of his life. Butler chose the former, returned to school, and on his father's instruction, apologized to his teachers, and especially to Reiman. Undaunted, she stuck with Butler, working with him every day to improve his diction. Within a semester, he was on the school debate team.

After graduating in the early-1930s, Butler took a job as a chauffeur earning $8 a week, married a local girl, Mary Louise Jones, and started a family. Then, just as his life seemed to be taking off, it nearly ended. Laid low by an intestinal flu that had killed dozens of people in Connersville, Butler became bedridden, his recovery uncertain. "I fell asleep and, in a dream, saw a multitude of people crying for help, and I heard God say, 'Ernest, go preach,'" Butler recalled in a WTIU Public Television documentary about his life. "I woke up scared and said, 'Lord, just let me live, and I will preach your word.'"

Butler recovered and, with the aid of his employer, enrolled at Simmons College in Louisville, Ky., to study for the ministry. After earning a bachelor of theology degree in 1938, he was ordained at his home church in Connersville and began to preach. The former speech-challenged child and renegade student had begun his life's calling.

(above) Mary Louise Butler with children Grayce (left) and Albert outside their home in Connersville, Ind., circa mid-1940s. (below) The Rev. Butler in his early-30s with children (back row, l-r) William, Robert, Ernest Jr. (front row, l-r) Grayce, and Albert. *Courtesy photos*

Second Baptist Church at West 8th and North Rogers streets. Built in 1913, it was one of the first stone churches in Indiana constructed by African Americans.

Breaking barriers in Noblesville

By the early-1950s, Butler had moved his family to Noblesville, Ind., where he took a job as pastor of First Baptist Church. Although he was focused on building church membership and tending to his congregation, soon the need arose for Butler to take on the town's long-entrenched racial barriers when his oldest son, Ernest Jr., was not allowed to sit at the counter at Hutson's, a drugstore and ice cream parlor. When Butler confronted the owner and threatened a boycott, the store owner dismissed him, saying, "Boycott ain't gonna do you no good." To which Butler responded: "Watch me."

Two days later Hutson did indeed watch, bewildered, as a group of young people, led by Ernest Jr., walked past his store and crossed the street to another ice cream parlor where, a day earlier, the elder Butler had convinced the owner that allowing blacks to sit at the counter would pay off in business. Shaken and worried that he'd lose patronage to his more tolerant rival, Hutson reversed his policy and let it be known that everyone, regardless of skin color, was welcome at his store.

Butler quickly established himself as a civil rights leader in Noblesville, using Martin Luther King Jr.-inspired tactics to integrate not only ice cream parlors but also the public swimming pool. As his reputation grew, other Baptist churches began to take notice, including Second Baptist in Bloomington, which invited Butler to guest preach in 1956 and, duly impressed, offered him a job as pastor. The offer was flattering, but the fact that Bloomington was still segregated in many official and unofficial ways didn't sit well with the Butlers. For the time being, he told the leaders at Second Baptist, he was committed to growing what he'd started in Noblesville.

Butler comes to Bloomington

Bloomington, though, remained an enticing prospect, and in 1959, while once again guest speaking at Second Baptist, Butler made a bold declaration to the assembled worshippers. "You can stop looking for your next pastor," he said, "because I'm already here." After the service, church officials confronted Butler, demanding to know why he'd said what he said from the pulpit. "We're not even considering you for the job," Butler recalled them saying. "You turned us down once, so what makes you think we'd take you now?" To which Butler replied, smiling: "Because the Lord told me to tell you."

Within a month, Butler was offered the job and moved his family to Bloomington.

In the late-1950s, Bloomington was relatively progressive but not nearly the liberal, multicultural college town it's known as today. Although a decade earlier IU President Herman B Wells, with the aid of black IU football star George Taliaferro, had taken steps to integrate the campus and some restaurants and shops in town, Bloomington was still highly segregated. Negroes, as African Americans were then called, were unofficially kept out of many neighborhoods and barred from city-run public pools. Not a single black teacher worked in the local public school system, and the city's major corporate employers hired African Americans only for menial positions, never management. The eight Butler children (five boys and three girls), accustomed to the more integrated climate in Noblesville, thanks largely to Butler's efforts, were shocked to find themselves being refused service at drugstores, segregated at movie theaters, and generally made to feel like second-class citizens.

"The psychology of the black community at the time was such that it needed strong leadership and ministers who were looked up to by nearly all members of the community. By default Reverend Butler took on the role," says Gene DeVane, a longtime Bloomington resident and former Cook, Inc. executive.

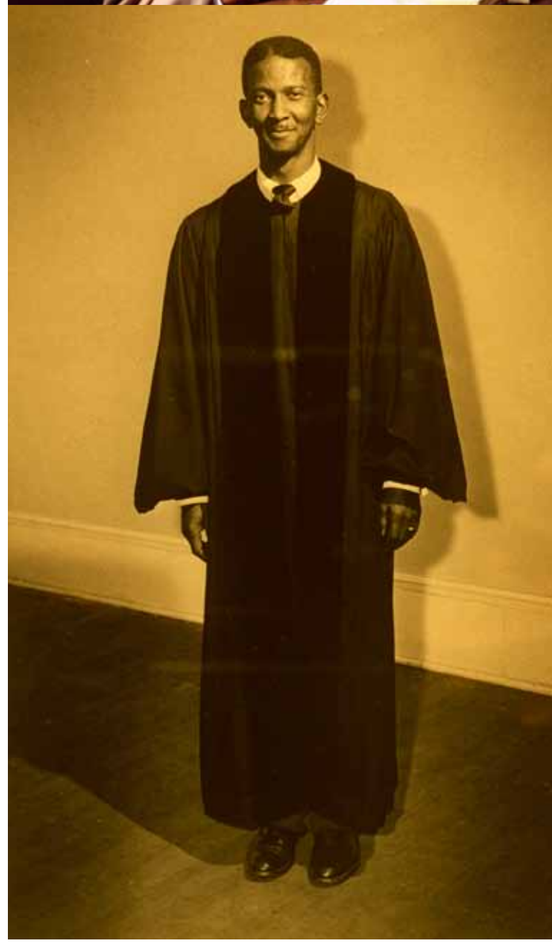
His wife, Gladys DeVane, a former Kelley School of Business professor and noted actress, speculates that Butler emerged as a prominent leader in part because he was in it for the long haul. "Baptist ministers tended to stay with their churches, so the community saw him as someone who was going to be around for a long time and someone they could trust."

The fight for fair housing

Butler wasted no time establishing himself as not only a dynamic preacher but also a skilled political player. He set his sights on rectifying a housing situation that relegated most African Americans to living in a de facto ghetto on the town's west side. "On the surface, blacks were supposed to have equal access to housing," Gladys DeVane recalls, "but when I came to Bloomington, we could not rent most of the houses we liked."

Forging alliances with several other Bloomington religious leaders, Butler used those and other connections to organize the Indiana Fair Housing Commission. With Butler at its head, the commission first picketed and then lobbied the state legislature, which led to the addition of a fair housing provision to Indiana civil rights law in 1965. It was a triumph, but Butler knew that changing the law was one thing, making it reality was another. Whatever the politicians in Indianapolis may have decided, many Bloomington landlords and real estate agents were not about to voluntarily change their ways. It was the job of Butler and the commission to persuade them.

Their plan was textbook for desegregating neighborhoods. A member of the Fair Housing Commission would call about a property and then a white family would go to take a look. A few days later the commission would send a black family that, more often than not, was told that the property had already been rented or sold. When yet another white person inquired about the property and found that it was, in fact, still available, Butler and other members of the commission would come calling, politely pointing out to the dumbstruck real estate agent that discrimination based on race was against both Indiana and federal law. Grudgingly, real estate



(top) The Rev. Butler gestures as he speaks.

(bottom) Butler wearing his ministerial robe as pastor of First Baptist Church in Noblesville, Ind., in the early-1950s. *Courtesy photo*

brokers and landlords caved to Butler's demands, and slowly but surely African Americans began moving into formerly restricted neighborhoods.

Gene Shipp, a now-retired Army careerist who served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, remembers, "When I first came to town in 1969, my son, who'd joined Second Baptist, told me to see Reverend Butler about finding a place to live. Rev took me around himself in his car to look at places, and I ended up becoming just the second black person to move into Park Ridge East. I think Rev took special pride in helping black folks find homes where they hadn't been allowed to live before." Shipp went on to serve as a deacon at Second Baptist for more than 20 years.

Breaking the color line at work

Butler also turned his sights on improving employment prospects for African Americans in Bloomington. Although the town's major corporate employers, including RCA, Westinghouse Electric Company, and General Electric, had black employees, they were limited to the factory floor and assembly line. Blacks who had been with a company for decades were likely to retire having never received a promotion or significant raise.

"The biggest thing about my father is that when confronted with a problem he would always begin with the most practical, logical, and peaceful plan of action," says Butler's daughter, Florence Newell. "And if that didn't work, he had a more aggressive plan B ready to go."

Butler began his initiative by appealing to the corporations' sense of fairness to persuade them to do the right thing. But although Butler's message was received cordially, nothing changed. So Butler switched to plan B, involving the federal government. Acting under the authority of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, three federal officials arrived in Bloomington to help Butler persuade the recalcitrant executives. As had local real estate agents and landlords, the corporate leaders succumbed and reluctantly agreed to hire qualified African Americans, if Butler could produce them. He did, and soon Bloomington's largest corporations began hiring at least a handful of black executives. While racial barriers in the workplace had hardly been toppled, Butler noted, they had at least been breached.

Blacks teaching whites

Arguably, Butler's greatest challenge lay in dislodging the racism deeply ingrained in Bloomington's public schools, none of which had ever hired a black teacher to instruct white students. When Butler went to the school corporation headquarters to get an application for his daughter Grayce, who had recently graduated from Ball State University with a teaching degree, he was told in no uncertain terms that, "We will never have Negroes in our school system as teachers."

"The hell you won't," Butler responded. When Grayce rebuffed her father's insistence that she become Bloomington's first black teacher, he set his sights on LaVerta Terry, then a graduate student in education at IU. At first Terry had no interest in being a civil rights pioneer. When, a decade earlier, she'd tried to apply for a teaching position in the Bloomington school system, she'd been told that the superintendent was fond of saying that before a black teacher stood in front of white kids in his schools, "they'd have to step over my dead body at the door."

Undeterred, Butler pushed and prodded, arguing that the times were changing but that things would never get better until brave souls like Terry were willing to take the first step. Like so many who came under Butler's influence and found themselves caught up in his passion for change, Terry finally agreed and in 1963 became the first African American to teach white students in Bloomington.

It was an important victory for Butler, Terry, and for the black community. But although Terry was a popular teacher, her incursion into the otherwise all-white teaching ranks of Bloomington schools was by no means easy. On the last day of her first year as a teacher, as her students waved goodbye and wished Terry a good summer, two students, a brother and sister whose father headed the local Ku Klux Klan chapter, "leaned out the bus window, waved to me, and said, 'Goodbye, Aunt Jemima,'" Terry recalled in the WTIU documentary about Butler's life.

The Klan

For the local Ku Klux Klan, Butler was a force like none they had encountered in Bloomington before. After Butler successfully stymied the Klan's attempt to stage a march in downtown Bloomington, the Klan intensified their attacks, egging Butler's car and slashing its tires, burning down the marquee outside Second Baptist, and terrifying the Butler family with a barrage of threatening calls.

"What got me is that they didn't care who answered the phone," Florence Newell says. "Even if it was one of us kids, they'd call Rev the n-word, say they knew where we lived, and make all kinds of violent threats. I'd hang up, shivering, and wonder, 'What are they going to do to us?'"

Rumor had it that the Klan had planned to assassinate Butler. Once, in the mid-1970s, attempting to exploit Butler's willingness to help anyone in need, the Klan allegedly tried to lure him to a trailer park on the premise that a poor family there needed him. Suspecting foul play, Butler's wife, Mary, convinced him not to go and instead to call the police. When officers arrived at the trailer park, they found a gunman lying in wait and arrested him. In the aftermath, the FBI counseled Butler to request police protection any time he traveled. For several months after the incident, Butler wore a bulletproof vest in public and carried a Smith & Wesson .32 caliber pistol.

"It was a frightening time," Newell recalls, "but my father, and especially my mother, made it seem OK. They always did their best to shield us from the worst of what was going on, even when things got bad."

Paying the price

According to his children, Butler was, by and large, an absentee father and husband. When he wasn't preaching or working on church business, he was busy with any number of odd jobs —painting houses, cleaning office buildings, stripping and applying wallpaper — to pay the bills. A typical weekday involved a few hours at the church in the morning

(opposite page) The Rev. Butler calls out to his congregation from the back of the sanctuary. (below) Butler tackled physically demanding jobs to help support his family. In this photo, he's sanding the floors in his daughter Grayce's Cincinnati home in 1994. "The floors stilll look great," says Grayce's son, Dirk.

followed by several hours of manual labor, then a quick stop at home for a bite of dinner before heading off again to a meeting of one of the many committees he chaired. What little time was left over often was given to total strangers — black and white — who called Butler at the church or at home looking for help of some kind. Once, on Thanksgiving, Butler gave away his family's turkey to an impoverished man who'd wandered into the church off the street.

It was Butler's wife, Mary, who kept the family intact. "Part of my mother's role was helping us kids understand that our father's work was important," Newell says. "So we learned to not be too upset if he didn't show up to Girl Scout events or basketball games, because we knew he was busy helping people."

(above) Mary Butler in 1967 with grandson Anthony Davis (the son of the Butlers' daughter, Mary Ann, who died in 2012). *Courtesy photo*

(opposite page) A proud moment in 1994, the Butlers with grandson Dirk Shadd, the son of their daughter Grayce Shadd. Dirk took most of the color photographs in this story as part of a student project while studying journalism at Ohio University.

For Butler's youngest child, Jim (who works as the director of video services for IU Athletics and is the only Butler child still in Bloomington), his mother was far more influential and present in his life than his father. "She molded me more than my dad ever did, 10 times over," he says. "She made sure that whatever we missed from dad not being around, she made up for. While he was out saving the world, mom was raising the kids."

When Butler was around his family, his old-fashioned, "father knows best" demeanor often rankled. He protested angrily when Mary dared to get her hair cut without his permission. Although Butler and his wife extolled education as the single most important factor in getting ahead in life, for Butler the sentiment did not extend to his three daughters, who, he believed, did not need to go to college. (They went anyway, as did all of the Butler children, most of whom earned master's or doctorate degrees.) Although he was at the forefront of the local civil rights struggle that sought equality for people of every race and creed, in private he was often dismissive of and angry toward anyone who disagreed with his ideas or methods.

Still, despite Butler's all-too-human flaws as a husband, father, and leader, his children remember him with great respect and devotion. "For all my father's contradictions, he really did believe in God," Jim says. "He may not have always carried himself the way God would have wanted him to, but he was truly devout, and his belief guided him to do many good works, most of which only he knew about."

Butler's legacy

At age 86, after playing tennis at West Ninth Street Park [renamed Rev. Ernest D. Butler Park in 2005], Butler suffered a heart attack and was rushed to Bloomington Hospital. According to the Rev. Anthony Gomez, associate minister at Second Baptist, entrepreneur/philanthropist Bill Cook paid for Butler's pacemaker. "First he had the Cadillac of pacemakers and when that wasn't giving him the flow of blood the way it was supposed to, Mr. Cook got him the Rolls-Royce of pacemakers, and that was put in him."

Butler never fully recovered although he continued to preach until his retirement in 2002.

As the years passed, Butler's persona and myth evolved from rebellious civil rights pioneer to elder statesman. He was seen by many (and probably saw himself) as a benign, godfather-like figure equally at home lobbying politicians or helping poor parishioners. It was well known that any initiative involving or seeking to impact Bloomington's African American community required Butler's stamp of approval. Although not everyone agreed with Butler's ideas or approach to civil rights activity, especially during the mid-to-late-1960s when more militant student activist groups derided him as being part of the status quo power structure, by the end of his career he was universally revered.

When Butler delivered his last sermon on Sunday, October 20, 2002, Second Baptist Church where he had preached for 43 years was packed beyond capacity. Friends, relatives, admirers, and fellow pastors came from all over the country. In poor health and confined to a wheelchair, he kept his remarks brief on doctor's orders. His sermon began, "God is, God was, God is, was, and God will always be."

The next day, journalist Michael Koryta, writing in *The Herald-Times*, reported, "Butler, 89, delivered a final message that brought tears, laughter, and shouts of support from the congregation … Early in his sermon, Butler was forced to pause for short coughing bouts and struggled to keep his throat clear. He had spent the previous Sunday in the hospital. As he reached the heart of his message, however, delivering the words with a poetic rhythm, his voice grew strong and powerful, physical ailments forgotten as he sought to reach his audience one last time."

Butler died six months later on April 5, 2003. Bloomingtonians of all colors, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status mourned his passing.

"If not for Rev, we may not be celebrating MLK Day or have African Americans working as executives in local companies," says Beverly Calender-Anderson, who got to know Butler during the 1990s and who today is director of the city's Safe and Civil City Program. "The importance of his legacy is that although now we see him as larger than life, in his time he was not a mythical figure. He was a man who had a purpose and great passion, and from him we can learn that everyone can make a difference and make Bloomington, and the world, a better place." ✲