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Church secretary says interracial marriage got her fired

Kay Campbell Religion News Service | Dec. 16, 2011

FAYETTEVILLE, Tenn. -- A white church secretary is suing her former employer, saying she was fired for marrying a black man.

Debra Dodd, the former secretary at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, Tenn., and the Rev. Tim Smith, pastor of the church, agree on one thing: Most of the members of that congregation are great people.

But from there, their stories diverge.

Dodd has filed a lawsuit for back wages and $500,000 in punitive damages against the church after she was fired for what she says is racial discrimination.

Dodd said the all-white church first embraced her during her two years as secretary -- and then suddenly shunned and subsequently fired her May 26 after they learned she had married a black man in April.

Smith said Dodd's marriage is unrelated to her firing, but also said his lawyer has directed him not to discuss particulars.

"In this congregation, I work with some of the most loving people in the city," Smith said. "I can't comment on the lawsuit, but there is more to this story."

Dodd said the church initially "treated me like family," but that changed after three church leaders saw Dodd and her then-fiancé, Michael Hampton, eating together at a Fayetteville restaurant.

"Then suddenly it went downhill. All of the sudden my clothes were not appropriate, I was not doing my job right. People stopped looking at me. They would turn their faces away from me. When my husband and a friend of his visited one week when I sang, there were comments about the 'colored boys in the back.'"

Kay Campbell writes for The Huntsville Times in Huntsville, Ala.

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