

At small Georgia church, ex-president still a draw: Maranatha Baptist

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With its aging storefronts and small train depot, its graceful pecan trees and clipped fields of peanuts, cotton and hay, peace still seems possible in the tiny town of Plains, Georgia.

And nowhere is that peace protected more fiercely than at Maranatha Baptist Church, where former President Jimmy Carter teaches adult Sunday school class two or three Sundays every month.

Jan Williams, who taught Amy Carter when she was in fourth grade, is the head peacekeeper at the simple country church set in a grove of pecan trees. At 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning, Williams— known universally as “Miss Jan”—steps out of the church’s front doors and encounters a line of visitors.

“Are you a member of the Secret Service?” a woman in the line asked, noting the men wearing earpieces who stepped out behind her. “No, I’m Jan Williams. I’m in charge,” Williams said. “They say I’m too dangerous to carry a loaded gun.”

Even though Carter left office 30 years ago, security remains tight at the church, which is open to anyone who wants to come to Sunday school. But first they have to get past Miss Jan and the Secret Service.

A civilian Marine and a bomb-sniffing dog check each vehicle. Secret Service agents comb the church, sometimes checking each hymnal in the pews. Everyone who comes in, including regular members and Williams herself, is stopped as pockets and purses are checked with a metal-detecting wand.

Williams was one of the Maranatha members to realize early on that if they were going to continue to enjoy Carter’s Bible-based teaching, and also keep their church open to visitors, the church would have to have some rules.

“It was a circus,” Williams said. “People were standing up to take pictures. They were talking. It was not worship; it was entertainment. We had members going home because there was not room to sit.”

That’s when Williams took charge. “My church maybe will have the one-time witness to someone who has never had the opportunity to hear the gospel,” Williams said. “For many, it is the first time they have ever been to church or to a Christian service.”

The line moves inside, guided by other members, including Williams’s husband, George, who hands out bulletins. Six visitors are seated on each row in the center section of pews; portions of the side pews are reserved for members.

Williams describes for visitors how Carter will ask where they were from, and she orchestrates as people call out places from around the world: China, Korea, Denmark, Brazil, and every state, it seems, from Alabama to Wyoming.

She walks visitors through the process of staying after church to get a picture with the Carters. “Whatever you do, do not attempt to shake his hand unless he extends his first,” Williams said. “People, he’s 85 years old. How do you think germs are passed?”

Williams closes her briefing with prayer for the guests, those in the military, and she thanks God “for the man who comes to give a lesson to us today.”

Carter, who entered quietly during her prayer, is suddenly standing by the podium at one side, checking his microphone. He asks, already knowing the answer, “Do we have any visitors?” Carter braces as cameras are raised in what Miss Jan had said would be the only photo opportunity in the church.

As the cameras are put away and the Sunday school quarterlies opened, Carter becomes much more comfortable. And he should be: he’s been teaching regularly since he was 18. The text was from the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector, as his disciple.

“Jesus taught that what is most important is the love—of whom? Of people who are not lovely. Of people who didn’t love him back, necessarily,” Carter says.

“Jesus picked out the scum of the earth as an example of a person who had the proper relationship with God. He came to show that all people are equal in the eyes

of God.”

Carter pauses and looks at the crowd.

“I think that’s a very disturbing lesson. If you’re a Republican, it’s hard to believe that a Democrat is equal,” he says in the only political reference he made. “And I know from experience that if you’re a Democrat. . . .”

The chuckles from the congregation complete his sentence.

Carter teaches for about 50 minutes before the organist begins a prelude of lively hymns. “You will sit down and be quiet,” Miss Jan warns, and then she moves to the piano for the opening hymns. Carter takes a seat in a side pew with Rosalynn. A Secret Service agent stands quietly at the end of their pew.

Miss Jan and other members know their church functions as a tourist attraction for some guests. “People sometimes come looking for one thing—to see a former president and first lady in person—but when they leave, they leave with so much more,” Williams said. *-Kay Campbell, Religion News Service*