

Residents gather to support race equality

Greg Phillips

gphillips@dothaneagle.com

OZARK — Residents of different races gathered at First United Methodist Church in Ozark Monday night to discuss the advances and continuing challenges of race relations.

The Friends of Ozark presented the event, titled, "The Birmingham Pledge and Race Equality: A Dedication Service," in honor of the Birmingham Pledge, a statement composed by Birmingham attorney Jim Rotch in 1997 to create a commitment to ending racial prejudice.

The first sentence of the pledge reads, "I believe that every person has worth as an individual," and for those in attendance, it struck a chord.

"I think it's a great opportunity for people of different races to come together and reaffirm a pledge of working together and make sure that in everyday life, we're not looking at prejudice, we're not looking at color, we're looking at people," said Dale County District Attorney Kirk Adams. "We're all God's people, and that's what it's all about."

Brenda Harper, who attended the event with a group of friends, said the pledge should become a standard in the Ozark community like it is in Birmingham.

"I feel it's a great experience, and it should be strengthening to the ideals and values of the people in this community," Harper said. "I'm a positive person, and I feel very positive about them rallying around it."

Some aren't sure the community will get behind the pledge, but most believe it should.

"If not, they need to," said Frederick Gissendanner, a member of the Friends of Ozark. "I think this is right on time. It's a great idea to get together and let each other

The pledge

- I believe that every person has worth as an individual.
- I believe that every person is entitled to dignity and respect, regardless of race or color.
- I believe that every thought and every act of racial prejudice is harmful; if it is my thought or act, then it is harmful to me as well as to others.
- Therefore, from this day forward I will strive daily to eliminate racial prejudice from my thoughts and actions.
- I will discourage racial prejudice by others at every opportunity.
- I will treat all people with dignity and respect; and I will strive daily to honor this pledge, knowing that the world will be a better place because of my effort.

know where we stand today and let them know we're all on one accord."

Adams said the pledge makes a great start for the community to come together and begin to bridge racial gaps.

"We don't need to be a divided community, by race or whatever. We need to be one group of citizens trying to make Ozark better, trying to make our county better and trying to make Alabama better," Adams said.

One of the speakers at Monday's event, retired U.S. Army Major General Lou Hennies, summarized the challenges facing residents as they move forward.

"While much has been done by so many, much more remains to rid racism from our country, because it all starts in the heart," Hennies said. "You can't legislate the heart."