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75-63

Inner-City Church Finds Its Way Back into Own Community

By Walker Knight

DECATUR, Ga. (BP)--Oakhurst Baptist Church marched back into the life of its community on the stepping stones of ministries.

For more than 60 years the church had staked out as its "community," a southeast corner of Decatur, Ga.

Most of the area was in Decatur, an old Southern city of 20,000 now engulfed by expanding metropolitan Atlanta.

The Oakhurst congregation had met with more than the usual success.

Sunday School peaked at 750.

Buildings sprawled over more than seven acres worth \$750,000, and plans for the new sanctuary were prominently displayed.

In the early 1960s a social change hit the community with hammer-like blows.

As the affluent bought larger homes in the distant suburbs, renters moved in.

Builders erected garden apartments, and larger houses were split into apartments. Residents were highly mobile and the density of population increased.

The ages of the residents moved both up and down.

The older residents were staying and the newer families, many of them black, had more and younger children than those who were leaving.

The church took a comprehensive survey of the community in the early 1960s. They discovered many changes and realized less than 25 per cent of the membership lived near the buildings.

From the study came recommendations for extensive community ministries designed to put the church back in touch with the residents' needs.

The neighborhood became the focus for new ministries.

Young people led the way with a weekly skating party.

They raised more than \$500 to buy the skates and taught community youth to skate on the church's parking lot.

Organizations of the church followed the youths' lead.

The Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) sponsored a free time for mothers and later a mothers Bible study and club.

The church library created a mobile unit and took books to be checked out at every gathering.

A seminar on growing old led to the start of XYZ club; "Extra Years of Zest."

Pastor John Nichol, who came to the Oakhurst pastorate in the late 1960s, preached on Christians assuming their servant role to the world and led the congregation to see the gospel demanded all persons be included.

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As the congregation came back in touch with the community, blacks began to attend Sunday School and church services. This precipitated one of many crises through which the congregation moved, intact but not unscarred.

When others saw the congregation was serious about staying in the community, they helped the church add a community minister to the staff.

The first was William Jackson, an appointee of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

He was later succeeded by John Cross, a black minister best known for his pastorate of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four children were killed by a racist's bomb.

Community ministries intensified under Jackson to include day camp, tutoring classes, clubs, well baby and sick baby clinics, and the sponsorship of recreational activities.

As news spread of the Oakhurst congregation's success, others sought advice and guidance from Jackson.

One area of affluent whites was especially troubled with vandalism. When summer activities were planned for the youth, the difficulty stopped.

Out of such contacts came the Decatur Cooperative Ministries (DCM), formed by 11 churches of various denominations, for which Jackson became executive director.

Cross has found that many of the early needs and ministries are now met by others.

The community has strong units of a boys' club and girls' club.

The church participates with the Dekalb Council on the Aged in providing daily meals for nutritional purposes for those over 60.

Cross has grouped other ministries for the aged around the nutritional meal, such as counseling and continuing a club for older members.

Oakhurst members spawned another larger ministry for the metropolitan Atlanta area as George Sheridan asked others to join him in a restaurant, art gallery, gift and book shop ministry patterned after Potters House, a coffee house sponsored by Church of the Savior, Washington, D.C.

Common Cup, as the project is known, involves Christians from more than 20 churches who provide a ministry for business and young career persons.

Common Cup is entirely separated from Oakhurst, but at one time more than 25 per cent of its volunteers came from the congregation.

Now, Cross said, the church's missions committee is projecting the creation of a housing task force, and wants to start a day care facility for the aged.

Other plans call for a credit union, a political action group, more after-school tutoring, and the strengthening of all of the present ministries.

The congregation's struggle, Nichol said, turned to that of a clear identity as the people of God and to an understanding of what is basic to congregational life.

"The church is mission," Nichol said. "Bible study, worship, and preparation for mission are priorities in the life of our church only to the degree that they call us to, equip us for, and eventually involve us in mission."

Nichol articulated yet another important shift that was taking place in the church's leadership.

"Where once I had been the authoritarian minister...I became the leader with questions instead of answers, and some of the natives who yearned for the comforting note of authority felt restless and complained about leaders who did not lead."

"But something happened," he added.

The intensive social changes in the community changed the congregation, most dramatically in the loss of membership and finances.

With continued financial losses, the church went through some \$22,000 in reserves and faced the necessity of reducing the staff. Three of the ministers agreed to move to a bi-vocational ministry.

Cross was retained fulltime. And major committees were strengthened to function in the areas of worship, missions, education, and receiving and caring.

Important changes resulted in, first, a program of delayed membership to insure that new members clearly understood what the congregation was, was doing, and would expect from them.

Second, the congregation explored the creation of a church covenant spoke to the rejection of any status, wealth, race, age, sex, education or other distinctions. The church had meanwhile accepted blacks and women as ministers and deacons. Oakhurst's education director, Hazel Grady, was ordained to the ministry and three women serve as deacons.

Third, covenant groups were created for the purpose of sharing and exploring what it means to live under the covenant.

The journey of the "exodus congregation," as Nichol once described it, continues to be one of exploration to discover what it means to be God's people at this time in Oakhurst.

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April 22, 1975

**Baptist Mission Work Growing
 In Mid-America and Caribbean**

RICHMOND (BP)--"Planning to Grow," the theme for Southern Baptist mission work in Middle America and the Caribbean since 1973, is paying off, not only in existing work but in the opening of five new fields to Southern Baptist missionaries, according to a report here.

"The past 12 months represent the greatest period of expansion known in Middle America and the Caribbean since Central America and the Caribbean were entered by Southern Baptists," said Charles W. Bryan, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's secretary for Middle America and the Caribbean.

In his report to the board during their April meeting in Columbia, S. C., Bryan told of the addition of St. Lucia, Grenada, Panama, Dominica and El Salvador, the vote to enter Nicaragua and St. Vincent as soon as missionary personnel are available, and a request for missionaries from the Baptist Convention of Haiti. (Baptist work in Panama was previously under the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.)

To take advantage of these expanding opportunities, 27 missionaries have been assigned to the five new countries in the Middle America and Caribbean area. This number includes new appointees and missionaries transferred from other countries.

There are now 259 missionaries under appointment in Middle America and the Caribbean.

Organized into 16 missions (organizations of Southern Baptist missionaries), they serve in 21 countries, including eight Spanish-language, one French-language, one Dutch-language and 11 English-language countries.

Plans for growth have included updating missionary skills through workshops for improving communication and interpersonal relations.

Led by missionaries Mr. and Mrs. Howard L. Stevens, the workshops included helping missionaries to recognize basic personality traits, to communicate with family, fellow missionaries and nationals, and to increase knowledge of how and why people act and react in certain ways.

A second part of the plan for growth includes new projections for field orientation.

"In Middle America and the Caribbean, with limited resources, we are providing in-service training for (new) missionaries and we are designing a plan for field orientation to give week-by-week guidance to the missionary family for a period of four months," Bryan said.

Bryan also reported "many spiritual victories" in Honduras resulting from relief and reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Fifi.

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**High Court Asked to
 Abolish Death Penalty**

**Baptist Press
 4/22/75**

By Stan Hastey

WASHINGTON (BP)--The Supreme Court of the United States heard oral arguments here in a case which could result in the abolition of the death penalty.

The nine justices are being asked by Jesse Thurman Fowler, a convicted murderer from North Carolina, to declare that the death penalty constitutes a "cruel and unusual punishment" in violation of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution.

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At the same time, Robert H. Bork, the solicitor general of the United States, pled with the high court to avoid reaching such a sweeping decision in the case of the 26-year-old Fowler.

Fowler was convicted of the 1973 slaying of John Griffin, an acquaintance with whom Fowler had argued and fought earlier the day of the killing. The argument began over a dice game where the participants were drinking heavily.

Before bringing his case to the U. S. Supreme Court, Fowler's conviction of first degree murder was upheld by the North Carolina Supreme Court.

The nation's highest tribunal is considering for the first time the argument that the death penalty itself violates the constitutional rights of the condemned.

In 1972, the court handed down a decision declaring that the death penalty as it was then being administered in many states was unconstitutional. But it stopped short of outlawing execution as such.

Fowler's attorney, Stanford University law professor Anthony G. Amsterdam, argued that the one question before the court is whether the death sentence constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

He further stated that the "arbitrary selectivity" employed by prosecutors and juries in North Carolina in imposing the death penalty is essentially similar to what the high court struck down in its 1972 decision.

Fowler is black, as are most of the more than 200 individuals now under the death sentence.

He also said that the death penalty is "now inconsistent with developing standards of decency."

On the other side, North Carolina's deputy attorney general, Jean A. Benoy, defended North Carolina's use of the death penalty.

His state, Benoy said, "takes no back seat to any state or nation on this earth in civilized standards . . . we sentence all equally."

Fowler's attorney had maintained that the state is "vague," "subjective," and "judgmental" in the way it distinguishes on an individual basis the difference between capital and non-capital crimes.

Bork, who was given 15 minutes to present the view of the federal government, argued that the high court should not strike down capital punishment across the board.

He stated that the fact that 31 states have reimposed the death penalty since the court's 1972 ruling makes it clear that the "legislative will" is for retention of execution. Bork also noted that such a sweeping action by the court would do away with the death penalty provision in a 1974 federal law against air piracy and hijacking.

The dramatic hearing took place in a crowded chamber while long lines of people waited outside, hoping to witness for a few moments a historic moment in American jurisprudence.

Associate Justice William O. Douglas, who was recently rehospitalized for complications arising from a stroke suffered three and one-half months ago, was assisted into the court room in his chair, and left immediately after the Fowler arguments were heard.

A decision in the case is expected by the end of the high court's current term sometime in June.

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