

# Georgia's Oakhurst Baptist Expands Ministerial Diversity

By Jack Smith

On July 18, 1999, Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, voted to call the Rev. Christopher T. Copeland to be its Associate Pastor. Chris is a wonderful human being, equipped for ministry, and full of passion and excitement for the challenging job that lies ahead. Being Associate Pastor to the Oakhurst congregation is not so much like being a shepherd to a flock of sheep as it is dealing with a herd of independent-minded goats. His administrative skills, I am certain, will be called on greatly for goat herding.

I just want to share with you my excitement. I have served since March of 1998 on a search committee to find an Associate Pastor for Oakhurst - a church that continues to be bold in "listening to the Spirit." As our former pastor, Mel Williams, once said of the Oakhurst congregation, "They want to be church more than any people I have ever known."

Serving on the search committee was hard. We had many wonderfully qualified and gifted people who applied for the position. The committee knew that our job was to discern who among the candidates would be the "best fit" to lead us in the areas of Christian education, mission activities (within our walls, within our neighborhood and beyond), and ministries to our children and youth.

Our church covenant, which hangs in the sanctuary for all to see, embraces diversity. It says, "...we reject any status in this fellowship in terms of church office, possessions, education, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability, or other distinctions." The search committee struggled. We wanted the leadership of our church to represent the diversity articulated by our beloved covenant. How could any one person be all that our covenant named?

Chris, as it turns out, is one of our own. He was, however, not the only one from among us who applied for the position. This made

the task of the search committee all the more difficult.

In May of 1997 Oakhurst ordained Chris to the gospel ministry. Now we are calling on him to use his many gifts to assume a leadership position within the congregation that ordained him.

And what of diversity? Are we yet another one of the many churches in Christendom - Baptist and otherwise - who can see no others called by God to be ministers, except that they be white and male? Not so. Oakhurst is likely to be ousted from the Georgia Baptist Convention (Southern Baptist) for its diversity - welcoming and affirming of gays and lesbians as a part of the life of our congregation. To be true to our covenant we are inclusive of people of all sexual orientations. In a recent letter to

the Georgia Baptist Convention we boldly proclaimed, "Oakhurst Baptist Church is a welcoming and affirming place in which lesbian and gay Christians are embraced as full members of our congregation. Indeed, the ministry that lesbian and gay Christians offer so joyfully to our church is a blessing and a crucial part of the life of this congregation."

Chris Copeland, whom we ordained to the ministry and now have voted on as the nominee recommended by the search committee to be our Associate Pastor, is one of our church's most outstanding Christians, and he is gay.

Chris, along with our wonderful senior pastor of a decade, Lanny Peters, and the others of the Oakhurst staff will make an excellent ministry team to lead our church into the future. As our covenant proclaims, "We are together only to be the church of God in Christ. We are not here by chance, but God through grace is making of us a fellowship to embody and express the Spirit of Christ". Thanks be to God ▼

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## Georgia Southern Baptists Vote to Expel Oakhurst Baptist Church

By Gayle White

The executive committee of the Georgia [Southern] Baptist Convention voted Tuesday to remove Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur from convention roles because of the church's acceptance of homosexuals. The recommendation will go before the full state convention in Macon in November.

"This is not the kind of decision we make without a broken heart," said the Rev. Gerald Harris, president of the state convention. "Some Georgia Baptists may disagree with this motion. Some Georgia Baptists may say 'good riddance.' For me, it's like sending a child away from home."

The action is the first since the 1998 Georgia Baptist Convention voted specifically to exclude any church that

"knowingly takes, or has taken, any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior." A committee is also looking into Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta.

At Tuesday's executive committee meeting, the Rev. Robert White, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Convention, read a statement from Oakhurst that acknowledged that the church's "struggle with questions of who is to be included at the Lord's table has been an essential part of our history for many years."

In its 86-year-history, Oakhurst helped to resettle Cuban refugees, accepted African-American members, ordained women, took in homeless men and drug addicts, and finally welcomed gay and lesbian members, according to the statement.