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April 10, 2013

“The Ties that Bind”: White Church Flight in Atlanta, 1955-1985

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## Abstract

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By Preston Carter Hogue

It has long been said that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week in the United States, a reference to racial segregation in churches. As residential neighborhoods in Atlanta transitioned from being predominately white to predominately black in the 1960s and 1970s, churches in those communities had the opportunity to embrace all of their neighbors and create inclusive, integrated congregations. White congregations in Atlanta responded to racial transition in their neighborhoods in many different ways. Some immediately left to preserve their white church communities, and some stayed in the changing community, committed to serving whoever lived in the area. Most congregations lingered in the transitioning neighborhoods as they disputed and discerned the proper response to the changes but eventually relocated or disbanded. All of them faced deep moral and spiritual struggles throughout the process. This thesis seeks to uncover and explore those struggles so that evangelical churches today can learn from a moment in history when Atlanta churches could have integrated and almost always failed at doing so.

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Preston Hogue  
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## Introduction

On May 11, 1966, Kirkwood Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, voted to sell its property and relocate. Over the previous few years, the neighborhood of Kirkwood had been undergoing a racial transition as African Americans moved into what had been an all-white area. Members of Kirkwood Baptist joined with other white churchgoers to prevent African Americans from purchasing homes in the working- and middle-class neighborhood. Despite the church members' pleas with the city and negotiations with real estate agents, many Kirkwood residents still sold their homes to African Americans. Kirkwood Baptist had lost 119 members in the seven months prior to May 1966. This spurred the call for a vote to relocate which carried with an overwhelming majority.<sup>1</sup>

At the conclusion of the meeting, the congregation sang "Blest Be the Tie that Binds," a late eighteenth century English hymn that was a favorite of Protestant congregations the world over.<sup>2</sup>

Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.<sup>3</sup>

The lyrics express the deep sense of belonging and companionship when gathered together in God's name. Like many congregations before them, the members of Kirkwood Baptist affirmed

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes of Kirkwood Baptist Church in conference, 11 May 1966, Kirkwood Baptist Church Papers, Georgia Baptist Church Records, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia (hereafter cited as Kirkwood Baptist Papers); Kruse, Kevin. *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 91-2.

<sup>2</sup> Terry, Lindsay, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds," *Today's Christian* 46, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 11, <http://web.archive.org/web/20090213115457/http://www.christianitytoday.com/tc/2008/002/12.11.html> (accessed 21 March 2013).

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Hymns: Official Hymnal of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1979), 306.



the strong binds within their fellowship, likening their closeness of community to that in heaven. They were parting with a church building and property that had been filled with shared experiences, the scenery of their collective memory—a property valued at close to one million dollars.<sup>4</sup> The hymn expressed their pain in leaving behind something so important to their lives but also their hope for their new congregation in a new neighborhood.

Looking back, however, there is a sad irony to the choice of hymn and to Kirkwood Baptist's decision to leave the neighborhood. Their fellowship exhibited a narrow understanding of community—namely, one that excluded African Americans. They honored their relocation with a hymn that celebrated the “perfect love and friendship” that will “reign through all eternity.”<sup>5</sup> Yet it is clear in retrospect that the tie that bound Kirkwood Baptists had less to do with Christian love than with white racial identity.

Also important to the church was the racial identity of the neighborhood where it was located. Churches like Kirkwood Baptist that were situated in residential neighborhoods generally ministered to the area surrounding them; indeed, the names of such churches came from their locations (e.g. Kirkwood Baptist Church was in the Kirkwood neighborhood). Rev. Clarence Drummond, a student at the Southern Theological Seminary in the 1970s who conducted an in-depth study of his church as he shepherded it through neighborhood racial transition and eventually completed a doctoral thesis with his findings, found that “every people-serving institution and establishment in a racially changed community” had to respond to the transition and that churches were “among the most conspicuously affected institutions” in neighborhood racial transition. Neighborhood churches were hit especially hard by the

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<sup>4</sup> Minutes, 1963, Atlanta Baptist Association, (privately printed, 1963, held at Georgia Baptist Convention Archives, Duluth, GA), 248.

<sup>5</sup> *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 1940*, (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1943), 495.

transitions.<sup>6</sup> Churches were caught between the reality of an eroding membership (and therefore financial resources) and an ideal of fraternal bonds described in “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.” Southern Christians had a long tradition of using the Bible to uphold segregation, but as the Supreme Court and Congress slowly dismantled the legal basis for Jim Crow, white southerners wrestled with discerning the proper response to race issues.<sup>7</sup>

The more general phenomenon of flight by white homeowners has been well documented. Kevin Kruse wrote extensively on the struggle of white Atlanta neighborhoods facing racial transition. His 2007 book, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, explains white segregationists as they struggled with the desegregation of Atlanta’s residential neighborhoods, public spaces, schools, and businesses. Kruse addressed religion only peripherally, discussing the role of private church schools that provided an alternative to desegregated public schools and mentioning churches as one institution among many affected during a neighborhood’s racial transition.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between white churches and white flight in Atlanta deserves greater investigation. Other historians have written specifically on the relationship between religious congregations and white flight, notably John McGreevy in his 1996 book *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*.<sup>9</sup> His work, however, focuses on northern Catholic churches, which operated in a very different setting from the southern, Protestant churches of Atlanta. Although northern cities were often equally segregated and experienced white flight in many similar ways to Atlanta, the southern city is unique in the

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<sup>6</sup> Drummond, Clarence, *Developing a Model of Church Ministry in a Racially Transitional Community*, Diss., The Southern Theological Seminary, 1974, 21, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, Paul, *Freedom’s Coming*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 43-4.

<sup>8</sup> Kruse, Kevin, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> McGreevy, John T., *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-century Urban North*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

discussion of religion and segregation. Atlanta whites responded not just to residential desegregation, but to the dismantling of Jim Crow legislation that had defined cross-racial social interaction for decades. The civil rights movement forced southern whites to face their discrimination and demanded that they change immediately. As a city known for its importance to the civil rights movement, we need to understand better how white Christians, particularly lay members, understood issues of race in Atlanta.

Samuel Hill's 1966 classic analysis of southern religious culture in *Southern Churches in Crisis* explains the pertinence of this differentiation.<sup>10</sup> He wrote about the distinctiveness of Southern Protestantism, especially the three dominant white denominations: Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Hill claimed that there was a collective (white) Southern Church because of the distinctive culture and the theological importance of evangelism shared across the southern branches of those denominations. *Parish Boundaries* may have discussed how churches reacted to white flight, but it did not address the particular importance of how white Protestant churches in the South responded to white flight. Some authors approached this topic by studying how denominations responded to race issues institutionally, including Mark Newman's *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*, Peter Murray's *Methodists and the Crucible of Race: 1930-1975*, and Joel Alvis's *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*.<sup>11</sup> These books, however, chronicled the development of denominational policies which often differed considerably from the practices of local churches. For example, Murray described the abolition of the Central Jurisdiction, which was an organizational district of the Methodist Episcopal Church that segregated African American

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<sup>10</sup> Hill, Samuel S. Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> Newman, Mark, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Murray, Peter C., *Methodists and the Crucible of Race: 1930-1975*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Alvis, Joel L., *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

churches from activities of other regional jurisdictions. Even as this decades-long process came to a close in the 1970s, white Methodist churches were still fleeing neighborhoods that experienced racial transition.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, it is necessary to study how individual congregations in Atlanta, not denominations as a whole, dealt with the immediate crisis of racial transition in the neighborhoods that they served.

While the experience of each church was unique in its particulars, it is possible to divide the various responses of white churches to neighborhood racial transition into three broad categories: churches that fled, churches that lingered, and churches that stayed. Chapter one describes churches that left almost immediately upon racial transition. In some cases, these churches were initially the main organizing institutions to prevent African Americans from moving into their communities. When these neighborhoods began transitioning despite the efforts of church leaders, the congregations decided to relocate to white neighborhoods, hoping to preserve the racial homogeneity of their churches and communities. Chapter two explores a more ambiguous category of churches that did not try to organize against racial transition. The vast majority of congregants from these churches fled with the rest of the neighborhood. After experiencing rapid declines in membership (and consequently in financial contributions), these churches lingered in their neighborhoods for several years as relics. This category of churches includes a wide range of reactions to racial transition and could also be thought of as “the churches that did not immediately flee.” Although some of them attempted to reach out to new black neighbors in the years following the initial membership decline, all eventually closed their doors. The third chapter examines churches that remained in the transitional communities and welcomed African Americans into their fellowships. Sometimes such churches, like the

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<sup>12</sup> Murray, 223, 229.

neighborhoods around them, fully transitioned from white to black, but at least one has maintained a multi-ethnic congregation to the present day.

The dilemma of racial transition met churches at different stages of development, hence the wide variety of responses. This is reflective of whites' response to desegregation as a whole. By and large, though, white Christians left the city of Atlanta when it was desegregated, moving to the suburbs where they could maintain white racial homogeneity in their churches, schools, other social spaces, and workplaces. The emphasis on evangelism within such churches, combined with the social expectation that they not interact with African Americans, caused white Atlanta churches to overlook an opportunity to integrate African Americans into their fellowships. Instead, most of them chose to relocate or disband, furthering an already stark divide between white and black evangelicals that has perpetuated racial inequality not just within the Church but in society. The individuals and congregations that fled Atlanta became complicit in such inequality.

Yet white Protestant church flight in Atlanta was not inevitable. One of the most important contributions of this study is to recover the stories of white southern Protestant ministers who felt the need to share Christ's redemptive message across racial divisions, especially given the opportunity in a racially changing neighborhood. When they encountered resistance or apathy from their congregations, determining the proper response to racial transition became a deep moral struggle for them. In almost every example, such ministers failed in their efforts, so historians have often overlooked their struggles. Understanding those struggles and the various responses of congregations to neighborhood racial transition can help white evangelicals today begin to dismantle the spatial divide between black and white churches that deepened during the 1960s and 70s.

## Chapter 1: Churches that Fled

In the 1950s in Atlanta's Kirkwood neighborhood, within a three block radius of the intersection of Boulevard Drive and Howard Street were six Protestant churches of different denominations. Once a year in April, the congregations of five of the churches—Kirkwood Presbyterian, St. Timothy Episcopal, Kirkwood Seventh Day Adventist, and Kirkwood Baptist—gathered at Kirkwood Baptist Church, the largest in the neighborhood. Each year a different pastor would preside over the service. In 1960 it was Louie Huckaby, the pastor of Kirkwood Methodist Church. The annual service usually featured a combined choir from all of the churches and special performances from other neighborhood groups such as the Masonic Male Chorus or the local high school choir.<sup>13</sup> This annual service was an expression of Kirkwood's community spirit, which centered on participation in church activities. A survey showed that nearly three-quarters of Kirkwood residents attended church in the area.<sup>14</sup> It made sense that the largest community event of every year should be a church service. To these neighbors, church activities and neighborhood activities were synonymous; the success and growth of one flowed from the other.

In addition to a neighborhood identity based on Protestant faith, Kirkwood residents shared a white racial identity. By the 1960s, however, Kirkwood's white homogeneity was under threat by African Americans. Not surprising, given their prominence in the neighborhood, the church leaders responded with haste to protect the homes of residents and their beloved neighborhood institutions—the churches of Kirkwood. The well-organized and forceful action

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<sup>13</sup> "Kirkwood Presbyterian Church History, 1957, 1958," Kirkwood Presbyterian Church History Collection. C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary (hereafter cited as Kirkwood Presbyterian History Collection).

<sup>14</sup> West Side Mutual Development Committee to residents of Kirkwood, 2 October 1957, Box 3, Atlanta Bureau of Planning, Keenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center (hereafter referred to as Planning Bureau Archives). The 1957 survey was sent to 135 Kirkwood residents and had 75 respondents.

taken by Kirkwood church leaders demonstrated the harmony of neighborhood, religion, and race in Kirkwood's identity. Ultimately, Kirkwood's church leaders could not hold off African Americans from moving into the neighborhood, so most of the churches moved out. The journeys of Kirkwood Baptist and Presbyterian Churches show how two white Protestant congregations rebuilt their congregations after their neighborhood was integrated.

*Residential Segregation and the Kirkwood Community Committee*

Atlanta has a long history of racial segregation in its neighborhoods. In 1913 the city of Atlanta passed ordinances that designated different districts to be white or black, but only four years later the United States Supreme Court struck down all such zoning laws. In truth, however, the ordinances merely codified a longstanding practice, one that remained in place well after the court's ruling. Atlanta city officials and other leaders had an unofficial understanding of which areas of town were to be inhabited by people of each race and ensured that it happened indirectly through other policies.<sup>15</sup> Buffer zones of industrial or commercial space separated residential areas for different races, and neighborhood parks and schools were segregated as a marker of which race lived in the area.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, these buffer zones became contested ground.<sup>16</sup> Starting in the late 1950s the city finally began to address the shortage of housing for African Americans. The black population had grown dramatically since the second World War, and about two-thirds of the existing housing stock for African Americans was sub-standard, with much of it being demolished for federally-funded urban renewal projects and new expressway

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 169.

construction. With increased income levels, black homebuyers were able to buy homes outside of the traditionally black neighborhoods. The city had developed as much vacant land as was available at the time, mostly concentrated on the west side, but with such high demand, they were forced to transition white neighborhoods to black ones.<sup>17</sup> These transitions continued in the city's tradition of informally establishing the race of a given neighborhood since it was still illegal to zone by race. Starting in 1947, the Atlanta Urban League, with the blessing of the Chamber of Commerce and the Metropolitan Planning Commission, created six expansion zones to grow existing black neighborhoods to meet the African American housing needs.<sup>18</sup>

Mayor William B. Hartsfield, a politician skilled at working across race lines, knew how explosive this situation was. During the quarter-century Hartsfield was in office he became dependent on black voters, a group he courted along with the city's white business elite, who cared little about African American progression as long as the city's reputation (and therefore its economy) continued to flourish. With the solid support of Atlanta's white business elite and the black community, what has been called the "moderate coalition," Hartsfield could bypass poor, white voters who were more likely to support segregation.<sup>19</sup>

In this political climate, Hartsfield created a biracial council of six knowledgeable and respected men (three black, three white) to negotiate the racial transition of residential neighborhoods. The neighborhoods named as transition zones were concentrated in the central western part of the city, so the council was called the Mayor's West Side Mutual Development

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<sup>17</sup> "The Story of Negro Housing in Atlanta," Citizens Advisory Committee on Urban Renewal, 20 January 1959, Papers of Atlanta Bureau of Planning, Keenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>18</sup> Bayor, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Kruse, 31.



Committee (WSMDC). Although the committee members at first met with cool handshakes, they developed a friendship that made their work easier, and they became skilled at their task.<sup>20</sup>

The WSMDC did not negotiate the transition of Kirkwood because it was not on the West Side, but their dealings were used as a model for how to go about the process in eastern Atlanta as well. Mayor Hartsfield encouraged one concerned white resident of the Moreland Heights neighborhood, directly to the west of Kirkwood, to look to the Metropolitan Planning Commission for guidance in how to set up “a joint panel” as had been done on the West Side.<sup>21</sup> Hartsfield’s administration repeated this course of action to organize racial transitions in neighborhoods across the city to solve its housing crisis. East Side residents responded by creating Eastern Atlanta, Inc. which sold stock to white residents in a cluster of East Side neighborhoods, including Kirkwood, to buy back homes from African Americans who had breached the race boundaries they had tried to establish. This was a common practice among ‘protective’ homeowners associations to counteract racial transition already under way. Eastern Atlanta had purchased seventeen properties by February 1961, usually renting them at a loss, with stock subscriptions covering most of the losses.<sup>22</sup>

When it was apparent that African Americans wanted to move into Kirkwood, the church leaders mobilized in a similar way. Twenty-three clergy and lay leaders from six Kirkwood churches met to agree on a plan of action on February 21, 1961. They resolved to create the Kirkwood Community Committee (originally called the Kirkwood Church Committee) to represent the Kirkwood churches to the Eastern Atlanta Civic Clubs if they so desired.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> T. M. Alexander, *Beyond the Timberline: The Trials and Triumphs of a Black Entrepreneur*, (Edgewood, MD: M.E. Duncan & Co., 1992), 164-169.

<sup>21</sup> William B. Hartsfield to Sara S. Livingston, August 13, 1956, Planning Bureau Archives. The Metropolitan Planning Commission was the city department responsible for overseeing the WSMDC.

<sup>22</sup> “Land Buying Urged to Stop Undesirables,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 February 1961.

<sup>23</sup> Kirkwood Community Committee meeting notes, 21 February 1961, Box 5, Planning Bureau Archives.

Changing the name from the Kirkwood *Church* Committee to the Kirkwood *Community*

Committee reflected their quick change in role. The community committee had no intention of taking a back seat to another organization as an advisory committee as they initially suggested.

When the civic clubs did not take action in the way that they hoped for, the community committee became the primary organizers in the struggle to “Keep Kirkwood White.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the community committee never had any members who were not church leaders, the organization took the initiative to represent the entire community. No group rivaled its tenacity in defending Kirkwood from African American home buyers.

Although more ambitious than the civic clubs, the community committee maintained partnerships with them and was “willing and anxious” to help Eastern Atlanta, Inc. “in the selling of stock subscriptions” to buy back houses from African Americans.<sup>25</sup> To encourage their neighbors to buy stock, the community committee leaders compared themselves to West End and Grove Park, other Atlanta neighborhoods that had (at the time) successfully re-established a racial boundary through the buy-back method.<sup>26</sup> It would have been easy to partner with Eastern Atlanta in such a campaign since many of the church leaders were also officers in the organization.<sup>27</sup>

Kirkwood Community Committee leaders also planned to partner with Alderman Robert E. Lee Field to pressure the Empire Real Estate Board, the black realists’ association in Atlanta, to stop the sale of homes to African Americans in Kirkwood.<sup>28</sup> Following the practice of their city leaders, they brainstormed ways to erect physical barriers to block African American

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<sup>24</sup> Draft letter from Kirkwood Community Committee, April 1961, Box 5, Planning Bureau Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkwood Community Committee meeting notes, 21 February 1961, Box 5, Planning Bureau Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Kirkwood Community Committee meeting notes, 10 March 1961, Box 5, Planning Bureau Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Kruse, 95, 91.

<sup>28</sup> A ‘realist’ was a black real-estate agent. The term ‘realtor’ was copyrighted by the National Association of Real Estate Brokers, which excluded blacks from membership. See Kruse, 63.

advancement east into Kirkwood. One idea was to have Alderman Field, who was also a director of Eastern Atlanta Inc., devise an urban renewal project to have several homes demolished along their proposed racial border and ensure that Empire understood their terms. They prepped Alderman Field with talking points for his meeting with Empire, recommending that he “Point out that the (conceded) Moreland [Heights] ‘transition area’ contains 7 churches, Whitefoord School, *and* over 600 houses.” They emphasized the damage done to congregations in their neighboring white community when so many religious properties were sold at the same time. They argued that the seven churches selling their property in Moreland Heights sometimes received less than half of the market value. They feared the same thing would happen in Kirkwood. Their focus on the “plight” of their neighboring churches reveals their primary concern: to keep their community institutions intact and preserve the identity of their neighborhood by preserving their churches.<sup>29</sup>

Their situation was indeed dire. Federal lending practices tied property value to (among other things) the race of the property owner. If African Americans moved into a neighborhood, the homes in the neighborhood immediately lost value. For a working- or even middle-class white neighborhood like Kirkwood, this policy ruined the lifetime investments of many families. Kevin Boyle describes the crisis of white homeowners in a Detroit neighborhood when an African American couple moved onto their block, signaling the downward spiral of their financial stability. As property values fell for homes they already struggled to pay for, lenders ceased refinancing. When loans were due, homeowners would try to sell their homes, which drove down prices further in price wars. If they sold their homes, it happened at drastically-reduced prices, and if they chose not to sell or could not sell, then they risked defaulting on their

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<sup>29</sup> “Land Buying Urged to Stop Undesirables,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 February 1961; “Notes for Aldermen for Meet with Empire,” 10 March 1961, Box 5, Planning Bureau Archives.

loans and losing their homes. It was not merely white homogeneity that white property owners feared losing but a lifetime of financial investment.<sup>30</sup> Consider, then, the threat of loss on an investment made in a church building. Many churches in Atlanta had property values upwards of one million dollars, paid for by faithful congregants contributing weekly tithes and additional offerings during building campaigns.<sup>31</sup> When African Americans moved into a neighborhood, the churches and community felt threatened not just by a racial ‘other,’ but by the massive financial losses looming in their future. As Boyle aptly observed, “It was a process shot through with irony, whites suddenly victimized by the very practices that were supposed to protect them from Negro invasion.”<sup>32</sup>

The Kirkwood Community Committee, mindful of the importance of community solidarity, partnered with other organizations and city representatives to avoid the damage neighborhood racial transition could incur. After all, it was their white neighbors who initiated racial transition by listing their homes with African American realtors. In April of 1961 they sent out a letter to Kirkwood and the surrounding area announcing their intentions to “Keep Kirkwood White,” offering several steps that neighbors could take to prevent African Americans from moving in. To establish themselves as upstanding citizens and leaders of the community, they first identified themselves as “members of the seven churches in the South Kirkwood area.” They hoped to maintain a race border at Woodbine Avenue through “[b]i-racial negotiations,” reassuring their neighbors that African Americans would abide by such a border. They suggested measures that individual homeowners could take to shore up the situation, including selling only to white home buyers, and participating in the efforts to buy back homes already sold to African

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<sup>30</sup> Boyle, Kevin, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 149-150.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes, 1963, Atlanta Baptist Association, (privately printed, 1963, held at Georgia Baptist Convention Archives, Duluth, GA), 248.

<sup>32</sup> Boyle, 147.

Americans. This letter established the community committee as the leader of the movement to protect Kirkwood and reassured the neighborhood that their trustworthy church leaders had taken charge of the situation to protect the individual and corporate investments they had made in Kirkwood.

Indeed, this rhetoric of protection was common among whites resisting African American neighbors. Nineteen sixty-one was a mayoral election year in Atlanta, and Lester Maddox, the infamous owner of the Pickrick restaurant, ran on a segregationist platform, smearing his opponent, incumbent Allen Ivan Jr., as willing to increase crime to integrate Atlanta.<sup>33</sup> Maddox ran quirky advertisements in Atlanta's major newspapers, the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal* that listed notices for menu items ("Roast Young Hen with Dressing, Giblet Gravy and Cranberry Sauce" for 55 cents) alongside appeals to uphold segregation at all costs and condemnations of liberal city officials he wanted out of office. His justification for segregation often revolved around the protection of communities and Atlantans' investments in them. One of his advertisements, printed the day before the election in September, included churches as one such investment:

YOU should elect a man who will work with you in planning housing for all our people and prevent, as much as possible, the present policy of ruining entire communities through integration. If you have lost your home, business, church or other investment because of this problem, you know what I mean. If you haven't been involved, can you afford a \$5,000, \$10,000, \$20,000 or greater loss to your investment?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lester Maddox, "Pickrick Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 September 1959.

<sup>34</sup> Lester Maddox, "A Message from Lester Maddox," *Atlanta Journal*, 12 September 1961.

His appeals to voters echo almost exactly the concerns of the Kirkwood Community Committee when they implored Empire Real Estate Board to help them protect the value of their churches' properties. This advertisement played on both the racist and economic fears of Atlantans in order to procure votes on the day before the election and provides a glimpse into the minds of segregationists. It also shows the connection between residential neighborhoods and local institutions, specifically churches. Maddox lists both homes and churches as investments that could be lost through integration.

The loss of a Protestant neighborhood church was a hard blow to a community. John McGreevy contrasted the effect of Protestant church flight with that of Catholic church flight in his book about northern cities and the impact of racial transition on Catholic churches. Just as in Kirkwood, church identity and neighborhood identity were intertwined in northern urban neighborhoods because of the parish system which assigned just one Catholic church to each neighborhood. The prevalence of Catholicism, especially in white immigrant neighborhoods, meant that the Catholic church was sometimes the only one in the neighborhood. But in

**PICKRICK SAYS**

more and more thousandaires are becoming multi - thousandaires with the money they save by enjoying wonderful food served at the Pickrick.



LESTER MADDOX

**ATLANTA TAXPAYERS**

are spending \$321,145.00 plus interest for three duplex quarters with 6 outside patios for bears at Grant Park, and swimming pools for sea lions. All walls in bear apartments will be covered with thin granite stone on inside and crab orchard stone outside. And if you can't afford tile for your bath, please don't be impatient because first you must provide tile walls for the sea lions' bath. If you have plumbing troubles at home, in the event of an emergency, you might temporarily use the 150,000-gallon tiled sea lion bath.

**THANKS**

for the many wonderful letters we received from readers all over Georgia. Please keep writing as it encourages us in our efforts. (By the way, the few mean letters we are accustomed to receiving have stopped. What happened? How about a good hot one from one of you integrationists.)

**SPECIAL TONIGHT**

**ORDER OF PICKRICK SKILLET-FRIED CHICKEN**

25<sup>c</sup>

Drumstick and thigh served right from a Pickrick skillet.

**QUESTION OF THE WEEK**

When the asphalt scraper (machine for removing old asphalt from Atlanta city streets) is loaned out and used on private property in Atlanta, how much is paid into the City Treasury for the use of this machine that cost the taxpayers thousands upon thousands of dollars? Will City Officials please answer this question?

**ANY DIFFERENCE?**

The Communist party of the United States outlines its platform for the U. S. under caption "New Horizons." A very similar platform, The National Democratic Platform, is captioned "New Frontiers" by the Democratic nominee for President. Is there a connection or is it that the Communists are directing the Democratic Platform?

**NOTHING BUT A FOOL**

would put political party loyalty ahead of God, Country, Family, Neighbor and self.

**IT IS RIDICULOUS**

for the Atlanta City Administration to bring charges of "Block Busting" against Real Estate Salesmen or others, when everybody knows that failure of Atlanta Public Officials to provide housing for our Atlanta Negro citizens who were forced from their homes because of Expressway construction and urban renewal is the real cause of "Block Busting" in Atlanta. Real estate salesmen and our Negro citizens must not be blamed for these mixed neighborhoods that are destroying white churches, homes, businesses and white communities. Thousands have been trapped and forced to sacrifice their homes and thousands more are trapped and unable to get anything for their homes. It is pitiful to see the conditions existing in some neighborhoods, and if you don't believe such conditions exist you have only to visit the Kirkwood-East Atlanta Communities.

**FAILURE OF CITY FATHERS**

to act is not only destroying white homes and entire white communities, causing people to lose their homes, who will never again be able to own another home, but is recreating slum areas faster than they are being removed from close-in downtown.

**SPEAKING OF SIT-INS**

Sit-downs, Kneel-ins, Wade-ins, etc., if somebody doesn't slow up there will probably be some throw-outs.

**OUR SUNDAY MENU**

ROAST YOUNG HEN, dressing, giblet gravy and cranberry sauce	55¢
PICKRICK MEAT LOAF	50¢
FRIED FILLET OF HADDOCK	50¢
ROAST ROUND OF BEEF	65¢
BARBECUED PORK in sauce	50¢
BRAISED SHORT RIBS OF BEEF	50¢
SKILLET FRIED CHICKEN	50¢ and 60¢
Choice of vegetables, fruit and vegetable salads at 10¢, 15¢, and 20¢ each.	

**PLUS**

Chicken Dumplings, Hot Biscuits, Chicken Gravy, Hot Rolls, Etc., so delicious you can't afford not to eat at The Pickrick

**FREE PARKING**

891 HEMPHILL AVE.



MEMBER OF LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

Figure 1. Lester Maddox regularly ran advertisements for his restaurant that included both menu items and political rants. This appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution* on August 27, 1960.

contrast to Catholic parishes, which have a perpetual physical presence in the neighborhood, Protestant churches can more easily leave, and as such they exacerbated white flight in racially transitioning neighborhoods. McGreevy claimed that the “mobility of the Protestant churches... accelerated neighborhood transition by pulling communicants away from particular areas.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, when Kirkwood began to transition, the white residents began to flee and take with them their institutions—the many churches within the three-block radius of Boulevard Drive at Howard Street. Even if some Kirkwood residents held out hopefully when African Americans began moving in, they surrendered their homes when they saw the churches leaving.<sup>36</sup>

Churches were not the only Kirkwood institutions to flee with racial transition. In January of 1965, Kirkwood Elementary School was desegregated because two nearby African American schools were severely overcrowded, practicing “double sessions,” or having half of the students attend classes in the morning and the other half of students attend classes in the afternoon. This was common practice among overcrowded African American schools in Atlanta.<sup>37</sup> When Kirkwood Elementary was integrated, the Atlanta Board of Education allowed white students to transfer to other schools. Over the weekend of January 23, 1965, all but seven of Kirkwood’s 470 white students and all eighteen of its white teachers transferred to different schools. Only the white principal and the seven white students remained when nearly 500 black students came to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 19, 20.

<sup>36</sup> John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-century Urban North*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21-22, 96, 101. McGreevy tends to honor the Catholic method of church organization as superior to the Protestant because the parishes maintained a Christian witness in the neighborhood no matter who lived there. Indeed, many churches experienced incredible success at converting African Americans to Catholicism and filled the pews of once-abandoned urban churches. In the 1940s and 1950s, roughly 12,000 African Americans in northern cities converted to Catholicism annually. But this was a hollow sense of continuity. Although the parish still existed with the same name, the congregations that participated in church activities were completely different. The building and perhaps the clergy were the only elements of the parish that remained. The rigidity of the Catholic parish system made the departure from a parish a clean break, leaving little room for further association with it. See McGreevy, 56, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Hornsby, Alton Jr., “Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973: From Segregation to Segregation,” *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 76., No. ¼ (Winter – Autumn, 1991), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717407> (accessed 15/10/2011), 32-33.

school on Monday, January 25.<sup>38</sup> This rapid withdrawal from what was supposed to become an integrated school is a reminder that white Kirkwood residents were not only concerned about their property values when they protected their neighborhood against African Americans; no property values were at stake in allowing black and white children to share classrooms. They may have coveted the depth of community at their neighborhood school, but when its white homogeneity was threatened, every family fended for themselves and sent their children to different schools.

#### *Kirkwood Churches on their Own*

In a similar fashion, the Kirkwood churches may have gathered once a year to celebrate their shared Christian faith in a worship service, but ultimately when Kirkwood saw its first African American neighbors, it was every church for itself. The cases of two churches in particular, Kirkwood Baptist Church and Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, regular participants in the annual Kirkwood Community Worship Service, shed light on the decision to flee a racially changing neighborhood.

Three small congregations in the area around Kirkwood combined in 1904 to form Kirkwood Baptist Church. Its first location was on the corner of Howard Street and Delano Drive. The first building was moved to that location on a mule-drawn cart from its previous location about a mile south. As the congregation continued to expand, they relocated once more in 1953 about six blocks away to what is now 2071 Hosea L. Williams Dr., this time constructing a new building at its final Kirkwood location.<sup>39</sup> Kirkwood Baptist was the largest church in

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<sup>38</sup> Hal Gulliver, "Only 7 White Pupils Still at Kirkwood," *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 January 1965.

<sup>39</sup> Freeman, Mary, *A Century for Christ 1873-1973: A Baptist Church History (Beech Springs, Kirkwood, Rainbow Park)* (privately printed, 1973; held at Jack Tarver Library, Mercy University), 4-8.



Kirkwood in the early 1960s with a membership of 2,785 and Sunday School enrollment of 1,769 in 1963.<sup>40</sup>

Before African Americans even began to move into the neighborhood, Kirkwood Baptist affirmed its commitment to remain an all-white church. In response to a string of “kneel-in” demonstrations at churches across the city, the congregation took a vote in August 1960 in which a majority of the church resolved to “request our Negro friends to attend services at their own churches.”<sup>41</sup> That summer, groups of black students attempted to attend services at several prominent white churches in Atlanta, most notably at First Baptist Church, Atlanta and Druid



Figure 2. The sanctuary of Kirkwood Baptist Church, built in 1953, is now owned by Israel Baptist Church. (photo by author)

Hills Baptist Church.<sup>42</sup> Kirkwood Baptist adopted its closed-door policy to establish the procedures for handling protesters attempting to integrate their worship services.

Voting to keep their “Negro friends” out of church services did not keep African Americans from moving into Kirkwood. The church historian later reflected on the “rapid change of

<sup>40</sup> Minutes, 1963, Atlanta Baptist Association, 248.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes of Kirkwood Baptist Church in conference, 14 August 1960, Papers of Kirkwood Baptist Church, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia (hereafter cited as Kirkwood Baptist Papers).

<sup>42</sup> “‘Kneel-In’ Extended: Negroes Turned Away at 4 of 10 Atlanta Churches,” *New York Times*, 15 August 1960, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/docview/15160182?accountid=10747> (accessed 25 March 2013).

the Kirkwood community. A few homes were sold to Blacks, panic swept the entire community and within a few months few of our members retained residence in Kirkwood.”<sup>43</sup> In the midst of panic, Kirkwood Baptist searched for ways to escape and preserve its racial homogeneity. Luckily for them, they already had somewhere to go. In 1964 they acquired five acres of property about seven miles southeast of Kirkwood in unincorporated DeKalb County, an area that had not yet seen racial transition. They initially intended to use the property as a mission to the growing south DeKalb community. But in May of 1966 the church voted to sell the church properties and promptly voted in the same meeting to “relocate our church on the Columbia Park Mission property.” The committee recommending the new site of the church took into consideration that the new location should be accessible to members in their new (non-Kirkwood) homes but still close enough to Kirkwood so that it was not entirely unfamiliar territory.<sup>44</sup>

In early 1967, eight months after the vote to relocate, they sold all of their property and buildings in Kirkwood, valued at \$947,000, for \$360,000 to the Atlanta Board of Education. They broke ground on a new building at the Columbia Park mission property on October 15, 1967, but until early 1969 they used the facilities of Columbia High School, Green Forest Baptist Church, and Columbia Drive Methodist Church to house their weekly activities. A 1973 history of the congregation recorded that although “many odds were against [them],” they overcame the “crisis” of relocation because of the members’ devotion to God. “The beautiful spirit of fellowship, love and loyalty so characteristic of Kirkwood Baptists, was never so severely tested, nor so firmly demonstrated, as during this transition period.” Clearly making a decision to leave for racial reasons, they remembered their exodus from Kirkwood in religious terms. Despite the

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<sup>43</sup> Minutes, 1963, Atlanta Baptist Association, 248; Freeman, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of Kirkwood Baptist Church in conference, 11 May 1966, Kirkwood Baptist Papers.

“handicaps,” they reported growth through the period, a “reward” for faithfulness to their calling to a new location.<sup>45</sup> In a new neighborhood, the church took on a new name, Rainbow Park Baptist Church, because of its proximity to Rainbow Drive.

Kirkwood Presbyterian Church faced a similar crisis. Founded in 1877, the church moved to its final 1963 Kirkwood location at 1895 Boulevard Drive in 1954. The church steadily grew through the 1950s and in 1954 they had only built a new educational building at their recently purchased Boulevard property. In 1959 they were considering plans to build a new sanctuary, expecting to have a long-term, permanent presence in Kirkwood. Yet when it became obvious that Kirkwood was not going to stay white, Kirkwood Presbyterian resolved “that it is no longer feasible for our congregation to maintain a Presbyterian witness in and through the facility at 1895 Boulevard Drive.” Like their Baptist neighbors, they explored options for how to continue their ministry elsewhere.<sup>46</sup>

Kirkwood Presbyterian devised a rather simple solution to their predicament, electing to merge with another nearby Presbyterian congregation. This option was especially attractive to Kirkwood Presbyterian because only a couple of decades earlier they had planted a Presbyterian church just three miles south from Kirkwood in unincorporated DeKalb County as Kirkwood Baptist had planned to do. Each Sunday after morning worship services at Kirkwood Presbyterian had concluded, members of the church hosted a Sunday School starting in the fall of 1942 for residents that lived in the vicinity of the intersection of Flat Shoals and Gresham Road. When it became clear that the new church needed a building of its own, Kirkwood Presbyterian members were instrumental in making it happen.

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<sup>45</sup> Freeman, 9.

<sup>46</sup> “History of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, 1954, 1963,” Kirkwood Presbyterian History Collection.

Annie Laurie Warren and her husband donated the land at 2394 Gresham Road and made significant financial contributions to the construction of a building modeled after a church that Warren went to in Scotland. Kirkwood Presbyterian elder John Tuggle “worked unceasingly until his death” to make sure the chapel reflected its model in Scotland. The new church was named Wee Kirk Presbyterian Church in honor of the Scottish church, “wee kirk” meaning “little church.” Construction for the new building started in the spring of 1944 and on May 16, 1947 the Presbytery of Atlanta officially recognized it as a separate church. Until that point, Wee Kirk’s members were counted on a separate list at the Kirkwood Church.<sup>47</sup>

Kirkwood Presbyterian had nursed Wee Kirk for five years before it was fully independent, so a decade and a half later when it wanted to escape Kirkwood’s racial transition, they turned to their sister church as a place of refuge. Wee Kirk had continued to grow since the 1940s, and on July 14, 1963 they broke ground for a new sanctuary. In the crowd gathered for the dedication service were many members of Kirkwood Presbyterian who joined not only to celebrate the progress of their church plant, but to begin a process of assimilation into the life of Wee Kirk. They continued to attend special programs there during the summer, and on August 25 they began to attend Sunday worship. After consultation between both congregations and the Atlanta Presbytery in a series of meetings in September, the two churches officially merged to form the Wee Kirk Covenant Presbyterian Church effective January 1, 1964.<sup>48</sup> On January 5 the new church held a service to honor the merger at Alexander Memorial Church in nearby Decatur, Georgia. This choice of location was significant: Kirkwood Presbyterian’s flight into unincorporated DeKalb County aligned them with a new city center, Decatur, rather than their

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<sup>47</sup> “History of the Wee Kirk Presbyterian Church,” Wee Kirk Presbyterian Church History Collection. C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary (hereafter cited as Wee Kirk Presbyterian History Collection).

<sup>48</sup> “History of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, 1963,” Kirkwood Presbyterian History Collection.

former association with the city of Atlanta, which was increasingly associated with African Americans.

Merging with Wee Kirk also allowed Kirkwood Presbyterian to flee the racially transitioning neighborhood of Kirkwood, yet still maintain continuity as a community. As a fairly recent church plant with personal connections to the membership and a financial stake in the church's growth, Wee Kirk was more than just a nearby church; it was an extension of Kirkwood Presbyterian. Additionally, Wee Kirk was not far from Kirkwood geographically. The churches served neighboring communities, so Kirkwood Presbyterian members that did not flee the Kirkwood neighborhood could still commute to church fairly easily, even if it was not just a few blocks away as it would have been in Kirkwood.

The Kirkwood Presbyterian congregation saw its exodus from Kirkwood as a religious journey just like Kirkwood Baptist. Acutely aware of their race-based departure, they described it in religious terms to justify it. Every year the church historian wrote a summary of the church's activities for the previous year. In 1963 she included this "Final Note from the Historian":

And so ends the history of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church – but not of the members, which is a part of the Church of Christ, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

So, we the former members of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, remember Christ's last words were, "GO, YE – PREACH THE GOSPEL". Moses command to the children of Israel was "GO FORWARD". Cecil Thompson in his address at the ground-breaking for Wee Kirk's new sanctuary said, "A church building is not a place to come to, but a place to GO FROM" with the gospel.

Therefore, let it be recorded that the former members of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, GO about the Father's business to work from other bases.

She quoted Matthew 16:18 to characterize their flight from Kirkwood as prevailing over "the gates of hell" that they encountered there and used rough quotes from Moses and Jesus that encourage movement forward to characterize their leaving as going. For Kirkwood Presbyterian

Church, maintaining racial homogeneity in their community was a religious task, and Wee Kirk was a convenient alternative “base” from which to reconstruct their congregation.<sup>49</sup>

### *New Identities*

The Kirkwood churches examined here may have retained a fractured collective identity, but the Kirkwood neighborhood as a whole, once bound tightly by shared space, common religious convictions, and white racial homogeneity was scattered to new neighborhoods far and near. As Lester Maddox so aptly communicated, white Kirkwood residents feared the violence and ruined investment that they thought African American homebuyers would bring, so in order to protect their whiteness they relied on their religious leaders to defend their neighborhood. Once their defenses ultimately failed, they turned again to church leaders to safely lead them elsewhere. Kirkwood Baptist and Presbyterian Churches gave their relocations religious meaning, intertwining once more religion with their new physical space at Columbia Park and Wee Kirk.

The churches never considered that they could be a white church ministering to a black community. Their tendency to abandon a black neighborhood is partly based in their theological understanding of their purpose as evangelical churches. Samuel Hill wrote that southern Protestant churches valued evangelism above all else.<sup>50</sup> If interaction with African Americans was prohibited by social custom, then southern evangelicals thought it appropriate only to evangelize whites. When there were no longer any whites in Kirkwood, the congregations found it illogical to continue a ministry there. Members of Oakland City United Methodist Church expressed a similar sentiment when their community transitioned from white to black. Their

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<sup>49</sup> “History of the Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, 1963,” Kirkwood Presbyterian History Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, 81.

membership had plummeted because of the “extensive cultural and racial changes” in the neighborhood—changes they found irreconcilable. They disbanded their church because they saw no further opportunity for ministry in the neighborhood.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the church in Oakland City, the Kirkwood churches had enough members left to relocate, which may have given them new mission fields, but ultimately their relocations proved to be futile in maintaining racial homogeneity. Both of the new areas in south DeKalb eventually experienced racial transition. As African Americans moved into the area around Rainbow Park Baptist Church, they were given a second opportunity and used it to respond differently, as chapter three will show.

By 1973, just ten years after Kirkwood Presbyterian Church fled the first time, Wee Kirk Covenant Presbyterian Church took its first steps toward relocation, including a split with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) after the Atlanta Presbytery recommended that Wee Kirk Covenant dissolve rather than flee another African American neighborhood. Most of the congregation agreed with the Presbytery and voted to close the church. A group of about 45 members did not appreciate the Presbytery interfering with its affairs.<sup>52</sup> Insulted at the suggestion, they resolved once again to journey out of “the wilderness into which it had been led by circumstances,” this time far enough away from Atlanta so as to avoid any more African Americans trying to buy homes nearby. This final movement took the former in-town Kirkwood residents and nearby Gresham residents to the suburbs, thirty minutes down I-20 to an otherwise undeveloped road outside of Lithonia, GA.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Resolution, Oakland City United Methodist Church, 1 July 1973, Oakland City United Methodist Church (Atlanta, Ga.), RG 021, Archives and Manuscripts Department, Pitts Theological Library, Emory University.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta, November 22, 1972 – December 10, 1974,” Presbytery of Atlanta. (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 129-32.

<sup>53</sup> “History of the Steering Committee and Beginning of Wee Kirk Continuing Presbyterian Church Wee Kirk,” Wee Kirk Presbyterian History Collection.

By the time the Kirkwood and Gresham residents finally achieved lasting racial homogeneity in the suburbs, their understanding of a valuable place to grow a community had transformed. The act of twice leaving African American neighborhoods only further solidified their resolve to maintain racial homogeneity, but in twice compromising the value of neighborhood identity, they began to value instead the convenience of suburban commuter culture. The days of an in-town neighborhood unified by religion, annually gathered at one of the seven churches found within the three-block radius in Kirkwood were long past, and congregants settled to commute to a church in the suburbs.



## Chapter Two: Churches that Lingered

Some churches in Kirkwood tried to prevent racial transition in their neighborhood, and when their efforts failed, they relocated. They fled alongside and partly in response to the departure of Kirkwood residents, many of them members of their congregations. Relocation as a pre-emptive measure helped to protect them from a dramatic decline in membership.

Other churches did not respond so expeditiously to neighborhood racial transition. Often the changes occurred so quickly that they could hardly assess what was happening before many of their members had already left the neighborhood. The churches that formed the Kirkwood Community Committee had the advantage of having witnessed the nearby Moreland Heights neighborhood face a similar situation, but others were not so fortunate.

In a way these churches fell victim to white flight, their rosters rapidly depleting as members moved away. No church members expected racial transition in their neighborhood, observed Clarence Drummond, and they certainly never encouraged it.<sup>54</sup> Many churches, such as Kirkwood Presbyterian, were planning a building campaign to further their ministry in their community when suddenly they found themselves putting their facilities on the market. The rapid pace of racial transition left many churches with little time or resources with which to respond, so they often responded by turning their attention inward rather than engage with their new neighbors. Unlike the Kirkwood churches that fled as soon they realized racial transition was inevitable, this second category of churches is characterized by lingering in the transitioning (or transitioned) neighborhood, sometimes for decades, but often for just a few months.

These congregations stand in contrast to the Kirkwood churches for other reasons as well. Some of the lingering churches merely buried their heads and tried to ignore the changes outside

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<sup>54</sup> Drummond, Clarence, *Developing a Model of Church Ministry in a Racially Transitional Community*, Diss., The Southern Theological Seminary, 1974, 58.

their walls. Others, however, considered different options in response to neighborhood racial transition, wrestling with what exactly they should do. Their varying responses suggest the profound moral and spiritual confusion that accompanied the rapid racial transition of Atlanta neighborhoods.

### *A Quarter-Century of Lingering*

A good example of a church that lingered was Capitol View Presbyterian, founded in 1917 in the south Atlanta neighborhood of Capitol View, named for its view of Georgia's state capitol building. The church had a membership of 366 in 1962. That year they launched a campaign to finance an educational building to accommodate their growth.<sup>55</sup> Within a decade, though, they began to lose members as African Americans began to move into the neighborhood and white residents moved out. In 1971 the church reorganized its Sunday School to reflect the decreased enrollment, and by 1973 they reported a "crisis of [a] financial nature."<sup>56</sup> At first, Capitol View made efforts to understand and include its new neighbors. A group from Capitol View attended the opening service of Westhills Presbyterian Church, a new African American church that filled a property left vacated by a relocating white church. Another group went to the Race Relations Convocation in 1973 (The records do not show who hosted the convocation, but it was likely a denominational event). Finally, they made efforts to invite "the community"—a term often used to refer to the African Americans in the neighborhood—to several church activities, including Vacation Bible School, which had the most success at including African

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<sup>55</sup> "Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1981," Capitol View Presbyterian Church History Collection, C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library. Columbia Theological Seminary. (hereafter referred to as Capitol View Presbyterian Records)

<sup>56</sup> "Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1971, 1973," Capitol View Presbyterian Records.

Americans.<sup>57</sup> But after the initial efforts, there is no indication that the church continued to reach out to African Americans or to learn about cross-racial ministry.



Figure 3. The facilities of what was Capitol View Presbyterian Church is now the home of Rice Memorial Presbyterian Church. (photo by author)

They began instead to focus their activities on the past. In September of 1975 they hosted an event intended for “reminiscing of earlier days.” The church historian prepared pictures from the church’s past and

they had various members share stories as they browsed the photographs. In 1985 the church dedicated one Sunday’s worship service to Flora Curtin who turned 100 years old. Notably, in a church with membership hovering around 100, there were approximately 200 guests at a reception for Curtin that day, evidence that the remaining church members kept in close contact with those that had moved away in the 1970s, even those that attended different churches.<sup>58</sup> Curtin’s birthday reception is not the only example of these continued social connections. The church historian often reported significant events in the lives of former members, writing that “[a]lthough not members, it is our custom to mention some events that are closely related to our members,” before reporting the deaths of two former members and three births to former members.<sup>59</sup> Curtin’s birthday

<sup>57</sup> “Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1971,” Capitol View Presbyterian Records.

<sup>58</sup> “Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1985,” Capitol View Presbyterian Records.

<sup>59</sup> “Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1982,” Capitol View Presbyterian Records.

celebration served as an informal homecoming, but in 1987, the year of the church's seventieth anniversary, the church hosted a homecoming celebration that lasted four days featuring former pastor Rev. C. Walker Sessions and about 175 guests.<sup>60</sup>

All the while, the community around Capital View continued to change. In the study of his church, Rev. Clarence Drummund admitted that it was easy for a church to strive only to preserve itself as an institution, but he challenged his congregants to make missions the church's identity.<sup>61</sup> Capital View had reached a point where its identity was in the past and its mission was to preserve the institution that it had once been. Until 1985 the church annually hosted two suppers, one to honor a specific mission project and the other for a reading of the church's history for that year. In 1985 and thereafter they combined the suppers. They did so as a matter of efficiency, but it was also telling of the church's priorities. The celebration of the church's activity in missions had to share time with an account of the church's activities for that year, including items such as Flora Curtin's birthday party or the deaths of former members. The purpose of the church became maintenance and reminiscence rather than outreach or other forms of ministry. Robert Wilson and James Davis conducted a study of over sixty churches in twenty-two cities and found a similar pattern. Having been a part of a church with such a rich history, it became increasingly difficult for members to accept that the church was in decline. They still thought of themselves as the great church that they once were.<sup>62</sup>

The Capitol View congregation continued to age, and in fact it served an almost entirely elderly population, having suspended children's activities in 1982. The church installed a lift to assist members in moving up stairs; the historian wrote that it prevented people from using the

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<sup>60</sup> "Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1987," Capitol View Presbyterian Records.

<sup>61</sup> Drummond, 46, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, Robert L. and James H. Davis, *The Church in the Racially Changing Community*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), 77.

stairs as an excuse to stay home from church. Eventually, though, even a lift could not keep such an aging congregation involved. More of them moved to assisted living facilities. In 1990 Virginia Curtin (daughter of Flora Curtin, whose 100<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated in 1985), the long-time president of the Women of the Church society and for many years the historian, passed away. One year later the records ceased to report on the church's activity. The church closed in 1995.<sup>63</sup>

### *The Precarious Position of Pastors*

Not every lingering church was as passive as Capitol View Presbyterian. Whereas the Kirkwood churches, under the leadership of their pastors, relocated to preserve their white identity, other congregations fought to preserve theirs without moving. Often the pastors of such churches came into conflict with the congregations, and unlike the Kirkwood pastors, pushed them to embrace a more progressive stance on race. Pastors who did so were in precarious situations, especially Southern Baptist ministers, who presided over churches that were independent and answered to no ecclesiastical authority. Church decisions were made by a simple majority, so if the pastor fell out of favor with his congregants, they could easily put him out of his job.<sup>64</sup> Even Methodist ministers, who had more security because they were appointed by bishops, could still face difficulty dealing openly and directly with a controversial issue such as race. Unlike the itinerant or activist minister who had the luxury of preaching a firestorm and leaving, the role of the resident pastor was to daily guide his church through a journey of

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<sup>63</sup> "Capitol View Presbyterian Church History, 1982, 1988, 1990," Capitol View Presbyterian Records; Minutes, 207<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1995), VI-3.

<sup>64</sup> Newman, Mark, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 41.

change.<sup>65</sup> Many liberal pastors had difficulty finding balance between their progressive convictions about how their church should respond to racial injustice and how to best care for their flock. Owen Cooper, a segregationist-turned-integrationist in Mississippi and a president of the Southern Baptist Convention, argued that many pastors deserved more credit than they were often given. Rather than openly and publicly decrying segregation, he argued, often it was more effective to “accept people where they are and bring them along.”<sup>66</sup>

Many liberal pastors did speak openly about their convictions, though, and it often led to clashes with their congregations. The *Atlanta Journal* published the “Ministers’ Manifesto” in 1957, a document signed by 80 white Atlanta ministers who broke the ranks and cautiously argued for equal rights for whites and blacks in the United States. Citing the Golden Rule, they called for law and order and preservation of the public school system, even if it meant desegregation. These pastors made clear, though, that they represented only themselves in their statements and not their churches.<sup>67</sup>

Some churches were uncomfortable with their outspoken pastors. This was the case with William Geren of Dogwood Hills Baptist Church in East Point, Georgia, a town that predates the metropolis Atlanta to its north that eventually subsumed it. Although the population of East Point in the 1950s and 60s was mostly working class whites, Dogwood Hills’ membership of 1,202 in 1969 was mostly middle- to upper-class whites, many of whom worked as pilots or in other

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<sup>65</sup> Oates, Wayne Edward, *Pastoral Counseling in Social Problems: Extremism, Race, Sex, Divorce*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 66-67.

<sup>66</sup> Newman, 45. The term “liberal” as used in this context is meant to denote a progressive stance on racial issues, i.e. integrationist. Also see Hadden, Jeffrey K, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 103ff.

<sup>67</sup> “Ministers’ Manifesto: 80 Pastors sign Manifesto on Racial Beliefs,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3 November 1957.

airlines jobs, since the airport is so close to East Point.<sup>68</sup> In 1954 Geren had been an associate pastor at West End Baptist Church for several years when he planted Dogwood Hills with Rev. Norman Shands, the lead pastor at West End. Shands, one of the few Baptists to sign the Ministers' Manifesto, also took a stand against segregation in West End Baptist.<sup>69</sup>

Geren initially chose to work under Shands because, as Geren's wife later commented, his "education was so liberal he didn't fit in every Baptist group."<sup>70</sup> Geren earned a Th.M. from the Southern Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. An outspoken advocate of integration, he was the president of the Christian Council of Metro Atlanta, later known as the Ecumenical Council. In 1968 the Council sponsored a passion play called "Behold the Man" with an interracial cast, including a black man playing the role of Jesus. The church historian noted that, "as a rule, the members of the Dogwood Hills Church are appreciative of his role in the city," which was "keenly felt through the metropolitan area." The church members not only admired their pastor's work, but engaged in it themselves under his leadership. They established a "Missions Committee," responsible in part for the ambiguous "Negro work" as well as traditional charity functions such as sponsoring new churches and visiting jails. In addition to paternalistic charity, church members were involved in more egalitarian measures, such as helping the mayor of East Point establish a bi-racial council in their area.<sup>71</sup>

Geren's and the church's racially progressive activity was unacceptable to some Dogwood Hills members. In 1969 a group within the church submitted to the deacons a list of grievances in how the church operated, mostly directed toward the pastor and his staff. The

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<sup>68</sup> Jernigan, Scarlet Faith, *A Study of Six Atlanta-Area Baptist Churches and Their Response to Changes in the Racial Status Quo*, MA Thesis, Texas Christian University, unpublished, 131; Peggy Geren, interview by author, Atlanta, GA, 23 February 2013.

<sup>69</sup> Jernigan, 16; For more on Shands, see Shands, Bob, *In my Father's House: Lessons Learned in the Home of a Civil Rights Pioneer*, (Olathe, Kansas: Bushel Basket Publishing, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Geren, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Jernigan, 135, 131-2.

group complained about petty issues such as “staff employees not answering [the] phone [and] bickering about duties,” but they also described a “lack of leadership, particularly in church administration” as well as suggesting that there was too much staff in general. They also criticized the “pastor’s outside activities” as a distraction from his duties at church. Finally, the group complained about what the deacons labeled as “racism” in their response to the complaints: more specifically that the leadership had “too liberal views on race.”<sup>72</sup> The deacons defended the pastor against the dissenting group, affirming his outside activities and his right to invite a black speaker to the church if he saw fit. They also reminded the church of its decision to have an open door policy for African Americans, a policy that aggravated many of the dissenters. To appease the dissenting faction, though, they created a committee to investigate the accusations that the staff was inefficient, oversized, or unmotivated. Rev. Geren warned that the church should focus more on evangelism and building up the Sunday School ministry than worry



Figure 4. Former Dogwood Hills Baptist Church facilities in East Point, Georgia. Word of Faith Love Center now owns the property. (photo by author)

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<sup>72</sup> Minutes of Dogwood Hills Baptist Church deacons, 30 April 1969, Dogwood Hills Baptist Church Papers, Georgia Baptist Church Records, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia (hereafter cited as Minutes, deacons, Dogwood Hills Baptist).



about the work load of the secretaries and janitors, but he was willing to work with the committee to assuage the discontent within his church, encouraging a staff review committee to look into the complaints put forth by the group.<sup>73</sup>

The situation worsened, however, in July 1969, when an unknown group sent a copy of the Black Manifesto to the home of every member of the church.<sup>74</sup> The April 1969 document, written by James Forman and promoted by the Black Economic Development Council, demanded at first \$500 million and then \$3 billion in reparations from white churches for participation in black oppression.<sup>75</sup> Most whites rebuffed this demand with disdain for the growing Black Power movement. Organizers of the mysterious mail-out hoped to stir discontent with the pastor's progressive racial stance. The church distanced itself from the mailing and resolved that a return address should thenceforth always be used on church mail-outs to verify their authenticity.<sup>76</sup>

As if this were not enough, the agitators also harassed Bill Geren in more personal ways. They would write on church blackboards "Dr. Geren is a nigger lover," leave garbage in his driveway, and call his house at all hours of the night, knowing that he would always answer in case there had been an emergency with a church member. They even interrupted his oldest daughter's wedding in 1969 by reporting that there was a bomb in the church during the ceremony. The pre-nuptial music was drowned out by sirens and emergency responders.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the discord in his church and the personal attacks he endured, Bill Geren continued to take progressive racial stands. When Andrew Young, then executive director of the

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<sup>73</sup> Minutes of Dogwood Hills Baptist Church, 6 August 1969, Dogwood Hills Baptist Church Papers, Georgia Baptist Church Records, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia (hereafter cited as Minutes, Dogwood Hills Baptist); Geren, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Jernigan, 136

<sup>75</sup> Newman, 188.

<sup>76</sup> Minutes, Dogwood Hills Baptist, 16 July 1969.

<sup>77</sup> Geren, interview.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a family friend of the Gerens, ran for United States Congress in 1970, Geren hosted the candidate at his home, inviting the children from the church to come meet him. The group of about 40 kids asked Young questions about what he would do as a congressman and he shared stories from working with Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>78</sup> The Dogwood Hills deacons discussed Geren's actions, agreeing that many members were dissatisfied with his open support for the civil rights activist running for office.<sup>79</sup> One woman in the church even wrote to the local paper about the event.<sup>80</sup> For many, this was the tipping point. Some members called for Geren's resignation. The deacons again stood by their pastor, instructing dissenters to consult scripture about conflict resolution, and met with them to hear their complaints. Although some of the dissenters seemed willing to work toward reconciliation, "[m]ost seem to have no willingness to be reconciled to the Pastor under any condition."<sup>81</sup>

Geren himself addressed some of the dissenters' concerns at a Wednesday night church meeting, again emphasizing that evangelism and the Sunday School ministry were suffering because of the discord within the church and the energy needed to address it. Urging his church to reconsider use of the term "liberal," he instead used the term "open" to describe their church: open to "conservative expressions and trends coming out of our past," youth participation in leadership, scholarship, and "change, knowing that God's truth is marching on." He further expressed that he was not primarily concerned for himself but for "the Church, for its soundness, for its integrity, its welfare, and its spiritual prosperity." Finally, he issued another challenge to move their focus back onto "others who need the gospel" rather than continue to be consumed by

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Jernigan, 139.

<sup>80</sup> Geren, interview.

<sup>81</sup> "Deacons' Report to Church Concerning Resolution Passed in December," 20 January 1971, Dogwood Hills Baptist Church Records.

internal issues.<sup>82</sup> In August of 1970, the church put to a vote whether or not Geren should be asked to leave. Twenty-six percent voted in the affirmative. Although the vote failed, Rev. Geren knew that 154 of his church members wished he was not there.<sup>83</sup>

Throughout this period of conflict, race issues had remained abstract for members of Dogwood Hills Baptist. Geren was the only one challenging them to face their attitudes toward race. That began to change in 1972, however, when African Americans started moving into East Point in sizable numbers, especially around the church itself. No longer was race avoidable or abstract. African Americans were moving in near to the church, and Geren addressed the matter explicitly at a deacons meeting. He “asked that all examine our feelings and pray for divine guidance that we might be better prepared to meet the challenges of the coming times.”<sup>84</sup> That instance was one of the last times Geren taught about race. By month’s end, he and the rest of the church staff had resigned. The first resignation came from the ministers of music and education on the day he cautioned the deacons.<sup>85</sup> Less than two weeks later Bill Geren resigned, as well as the secretary and youth minister.<sup>86</sup> Finally the dissatisfied faction of Dogwood Hills members had their way.

The resignation of the staff team was sudden. There was little explanation in their resignation letters and it seems from Geren’s words to the deacons about the neighborhood transition that they would be facing the upcoming challenges together. Geren had stayed at Dogwoods Hills for seventeen years, long after it became uncomfortable for him to do so, especially given the many opportunities he had to move to larger, more prestigious churches. He stayed because he felt obligated to help lead the church out of the debt he led them into while

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<sup>82</sup> Geren, William, 20 January 1971, Dogwood Hills Baptist Church Records.

<sup>83</sup> Jernigan, 143.

<sup>84</sup> Minutes, 5 April 1972, Dogwood Hills deacons.

<sup>85</sup> Duward and Ellie Whelchel to Dogwood Hills Baptist, 5 April 1972, Papers of Dogwood Hills Baptist.

<sup>86</sup> Jernigan 145.

they constructed facilities. For many years, he also had hope that he could change their views on race. But after so much time, he lost hope. Knowing that a quarter of his congregation had rejected him, and with less supportive laymen rotating onto the deacon board, he could no longer envision a successful effort to include African Americans in the life of the church. Once again, the church had to focus its energies inward to replace an entire staff team.<sup>87</sup>

Dogwood Hills replaced Rev. Geren with Dr. J. Estill Jones, a more conservative minister who received his Th.M. and Th.D from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Rev. Jones and Elmo Harrell, the new Chairman of the Deacon Board, who had opposed Geren in previous years, were not so conservative as to reverse previous decisions to allow African Americans to attend and join Dogwood Hills. Harrell instructed the church to reach out to their new neighbors, and in 1975 the deacons re-affirmed the church's open door policy.<sup>88</sup> Bill Geren may have had a tough last few years in East Point, but his time was not without impact. He serves as an example of a southern minister that did not get credit for influencing a congregation to be more open to cross-racial ministry. Despite finding him to be too progressive on race issues, Dogwood Hills still welcomed their black neighbors to join their church after Rev. Geren was gone, something that may not have happened had it not been for him.

An open-door policy was not enough on its own to attract African Americans to Dogwood Hills. Church membership continued to decline as more African Americans moved to East Point. In 1991 Dogwood Hills sold its property to the African American Word of Faith Family Worship Cathedral. Although they sold the property, Dogwood Hills continued to meet

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<sup>87</sup> Geren, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Jernigan, 146-7, 150.

there, renting the chapel for its own services while the new owners of the church used the main worship hall. This relationship continued until 1994 when Dogwood Hills dissolved.<sup>89</sup>

In slowly rejecting and steadfastly demoralizing their leader, Dogwood Hills refused to accept a truly progressive approach to race issues. When they were given the opportunity to integrate their church, they did not have the tools or the readiness to do so. They may have had an open door policy, but integration required more than just a policy. Instead, they became what Wilson and Davis, in their study of churches in transitional communities, call a white “fortress church,” which exists in a black neighborhood with little effort to include African Americans in their ministry.<sup>90</sup> Even after they could no longer support their own property, they shared their fortress with African Americans but still did not attempt in a meaningful way to integrate their church. In the end, after lingering for a couple of decades, the ministry collapsed because they did not have the necessary leadership to guide them into a more integrated church life.

Another Baptist church faced a similar situation. Capitol Avenue Baptist Church served a white working class neighborhood in the area southeast of what is now the intersection of I-20 and I-75/85. The church’s primary ministry was an extensive weekday program in the neighborhood that in 1961 reached 361 people. The program was funded in part by a large, influential Baptist church in Atlanta, Second-Ponce De Leon, and by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. With a slowly dwindling white community, this program helped the church remain relevant in its neighborhood.<sup>91</sup>

Capitol Avenue stood apart from other white evangelical churches in this way. Rather than embrace a narrow mission of evangelism, they also sought social justice through their

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson and Davis, 68ff.

<sup>91</sup> “Resolution,” 23 April 1961, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church Papers, Georgia Baptist Church Records, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia.

weekday program, providing services and assistance to the poor in the area. Because of the primacy of evangelism among white evangelical churches, most de-emphasized issues of social justice. The solution to social ills was the conversion of individuals. White southern evangelicals joined in movements against gambling, illicit sex, and alcohol abuse, which they saw as sins plaguing society, but even those movements attacked “personal and interpersonal, not social” vices.<sup>92</sup> They found no value in fighting problems like poverty, discrimination, or inequality in economic or educational opportunity. This led to a belief in what has been called the “miracle motif,” that if everyone were Christian, then there would be no social problems. The solution to social problems, then, was conversion.<sup>93</sup>

While Capitol Avenue was theologically progressive because of its weekday programs, it still did not allow African Americans to benefit from them. In August 1960 they first voted to bar African Americans, resolving that if any tried to attend a service, they be told that “this church is not integrated and there are sufficient Negro churches in the community where they could worship.”<sup>94</sup> This was a common reason that white churches gave to justify closing their doors to black attendees. Whites figured that black churchgoers had their own ways of worshipping that would not align with how they carried out their services. They assumed that African Americans would not want to come to their church, and since the feeling was mutual for many churches, they codified it with a closed-door policy.<sup>95</sup> As more African Americans moved into the

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<sup>92</sup> Hill, Samuel S. Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited*, n.p.: University of Alabama Press, 1999, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/ehost/detail?sid=8b023074-aaaf-4f03-85f8-7ae7d6593eb0%40sessionmgr111&vid=1&hid=125&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=nlebk&AN=35154> (accessed March 24, 2013), xxxiv.

<sup>93</sup> Stark, Rodney, Bruce D. Foster, Charles Y. Glock, and Harold E. Quinley, *Wayward Shepherds: Prejudice and the Protestant Clergy*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 102-3; Woodbridge, John D., Mark A. Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Gospel in America: Themes in the Story of America's Evangelicals*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 246-7.

<sup>94</sup> “Resolution,” October 1968, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson and Davis, 54-5.

neighborhood, their policy became more important for maintaining the racial homogeneity they desired.

Preventing African Americans from attending worship, however, did not keep them out of the neighborhood. In 1962, so many African Americans had moved into the area that the Atlanta School Board decided to vote to change the racial designation of two local schools from white to black. Atlanta's public schools were not desegregated until the next year, so all schools were designated for white or black students.<sup>96</sup> Considering a race change for the Capitol Avenue schools was not uncommon. The School Board changed the designation of twenty-seven schools from white to black between 1961 and 1971—about one third of all schools that started with a white designation in that decade.<sup>97</sup> In 1962 the neighborhood's schools had under-enrolled white populations and nearby black schools were grossly overpopulated. A matter of practicality for the school board became a dire situation for the whites in the neighborhood and their white church.

In a plea to the School Board to keep James L. Key Elementary School and Hoke Smith High School white, Capitol Avenue listed six churches that “have all abandoned the community and relocated in new and more promising areas,” and boasted that their church had remained “to serve the white citizenry of the community.” They warned that “abandoning” the schools would “sound the death knell of the remaining White populations living on Capitol Avenue.”<sup>98</sup> They were not wrong in their dramatic language. As soon as the superintendent announced that the school board was considering changing Key's designation, seventeen homeowners in nearby

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<sup>96</sup> Hornsby, Alton Jr., “Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973: From Segregation to Segregation,” *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 76., No. ¼ (Winter – Autumn, 1991), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717407> (accessed 15/10/2011), 21.

<sup>97</sup> Kruse, 166.

<sup>98</sup> “Resolution Adopted by Capitol Avenue Baptist Church,” 25 April 1962, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

Grant Park, still a thriving white neighborhood, put their homes on the market. When the school board voted to change the racial designation of Key Elementary to black, there was a mob ready to attack them as they left the building. After waiting for thirty minutes, the police eventually managed to escort the board members safely out of the building.<sup>99</sup> After the ‘loss’ of Key, Capitol Avenue was one of the last remaining white institutions in the neighborhood.

On July 14, 1963, a group of African Americans tested Capitol Avenue’s closed door policy. They wanted to attend a service, but after a brief discussion with the ushers, they left “without making a scene,” only one of them actually making it into the sanctuary. In response, the church re-affirmed its policy and provided greater detail as to how to handle black visitors. They cautioned those who would approach African Americans because of “the increasing militancy of our Negro population in their attempt to infiltrate or integrate institutions of all kinds, and particularly churches.” They also ambiguously included that if their procedures proved to be inadequate that they would “reconsider the matter,” leaving the door cracked to the possibility of a change in policy.<sup>100</sup> They may have anticipated more visits in the future, especially considering that the immediate surroundings of the church had finally begun to transition. Although African Americans lived in most of the general area around the church, the immediate vicinity of the church had remained white. But in 1963 African Americans lived right down the street from the church and new apartment buildings intended for black tenants were being constructed nearby as well.<sup>101</sup>

Even in the midst of a nearly all-black neighborhood, the church upheld its closed door policy, still maintaining the weekday program as its main ministry but barring blacks from

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<sup>99</sup> Kruse, 166-7.

<sup>100</sup> “Resolution,” October 1968, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>101</sup> Jernigan, 33.



benefitting from it. The pastor and his wife, Fred and Louise Propst, became increasingly wary of the closed door policy. Both had extensive experience working with African Americans before they were called to Capital Avenue in 1958, teaching Sunday School for a black women's group, working with homeless black populations in Atlanta, preaching at black churches, and assisting in black Bible schools.<sup>102</sup> For this reason Mrs. Propst served as the Director of Community Missions, managing the extensive weekday program.<sup>103</sup> Whites still commuted to the church to receive assistance from the program, but it did not serve as many people as it once had. The slowing use by whites of the weekday program gave the Propsts extra time which they used to coordinate with black National Baptist churches in the area to establish similar weekday programs to provide assistance to African Americans living in the neighborhood. They did this of their own volition, though, and not with the resources of the Capitol Avenue weekday program. The Propsts' hope was to be able to fully love their neighbors by welcoming African Americans into their own well-resourced weekday program as well as church services. So on August 6, 1967 Rev. Propst delivered a challenge in his Sunday sermon that the congregation admit people of all races to services at the church. On August 16 he told the deacons that if the closed door policy was not rescinded then he and his wife would resign their positions at the church. The Propsts wrote a five-page letter stating their reasons for such an ultimatum, including a Biblical defense of integration, and an account of their own cross-racial experiences at Capitol Avenue and throughout their lives. The letter was distributed to the church in anticipation of the vote on October 8, 1967.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "Resolution," October 1968, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>103</sup> Minutes, 22 October 1958, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>104</sup> "Resolution," October 1968, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

The vote to rescind the closed-door policy failed, thirty-four to seventy-one.<sup>105</sup> Fred Propst submitted his letter of resignation a few days later.<sup>106</sup> He, his wife, and twenty-eight others transferred their membership to neighboring Grant Park Baptist Church. With the Propsts' resignation, the church lost more than just its two staff members. Before his last month as pastor was complete, the deacon board recommended that the church end its weekday program and notified Second-Ponce De Leon Baptist Church that it no longer needed its funding support.<sup>107</sup> The last ministry the church had in operation no longer had its foundational director, so there was no way to continue the programs. Fred Propst probably saw that his church had little future holding out as a white fortress in a black neighborhood. If neither services nor the weekday program allowed blacks, and whites were unwilling to commute back to Capitol Avenue for anything other than the weekday program, then the church had no future.

In December 1967, Capitol Avenue leaders distributed a survey to gauge the congregation's thoughts about the church's future. The first question asked "Do you think it wise, and believe it possible, for Capitol Avenue to continue as a church?" If the answer to that question was "yes," it questioned if the respondent would support the church, try to build its membership, and drive to different parts of the city to pick up and drop off members that had moved away. Finally, it gave an option to suggest closing the church immediately. They devoted one Sunday morning to discussing the results of the survey, which apparently suggested that the church stay open.<sup>108</sup>

Having survived until September 29, 1969, they again considered their closed-door policy through a congregational vote in a last ditch effort to save the church. This time, forty-

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<sup>105</sup> Jernigan, 36.

<sup>106</sup> "Fred Propst to the Deacons of Capitol Avenue Baptist Church," Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes, 29 October 1967, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>108</sup> Minutes, 20 December 1967, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

seven voted to rescind the policy and eight to uphold it.<sup>109</sup> Yet even with their doors officially opened, they did not make much of an effort to invite newcomers. In September they merged their membership with Capitol View Baptist Church, a nearby church in a neighborhood that would soon face its own crisis.<sup>110</sup> Before permanently disbanding their fellowship, Capitol Avenue hosted a homecoming service on November 23, 1969, a celebration of all that the church had accomplished since it was founded in 1900.<sup>111</sup>

The Propsts' vision for what Capitol Avenue could have been was stymied by the congregation's staunch adherence to social and cultural norms. In their letter urging the congregation to rescind the closed door policy, they wrote that they had prayed and waited for signs that the church might warm to the idea of integration and inclusivity.<sup>112</sup> Fred Propst allowed his church to linger in the neighborhood, patiently acquiescing to their racial limits on the weekday program, in hopes that over time and with increased exposure to African Americans they would come to share in the vision he and his wife had for the church and the neighborhood. He ministered from the precarious position of a liberal white minister, giving his congregation time before leading them to a crossroads. It was because of his desire to bring change that the congregation lingered so long in Southeast Atlanta.

### *Denominations Get Involved*

Not every pastor encouraged his congregation to integrate or embrace a transitioning community. Instead, denominational bodies overseeing congregations sometimes intervened in the affairs of churches in racially changing communities. Gordon Street Presbyterian Church

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<sup>109</sup> Minutes, 9 March 1969, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>110</sup> Minutes, 29 September 1969, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>111</sup> "Mrs. R. L. Stocks to Friends of Capitol Avenue Baptist Church," 4 November 1969, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church; Jernigan, 24.

<sup>112</sup> "Resolution," October 1968, Capitol Avenue Baptist Church.

faced one such intervention. The pastor of Gordon Street, Rev. Joseph L. Griggs, first mentioned that the “Racial Issue bears heavy upon our hearts and minds” in his 1957 comments in the church’s annual history, but they were more reflective of the national dialogue about race than the local conditions affecting Gordon Street.<sup>113</sup> Two years later the church showed growth, so whatever weighed on Griggs’ heart had no effect on the church yet.<sup>114</sup>

It was not until 1965 that Griggs explicitly mentioned that the community was changing. The church was providing “a spiritual ministry in a ‘Graying Area,’” a term he used to describe racial transition. Even at that point, his words were not fearful either of what effect the change could have on the church or of how the church members would respond. A couple of years in a ‘graying area’ took its toll on the optimistic pastor, and by 1967 he reported both excitement and concern. The excitement came as the church paid off the debt on its facilities, a milestone fifteen years in the making. They celebrated with a burn the mortgage ceremony, inviting former pastor



Figure 5. Gordon Street Presbyterian Church was located at 1450 Gordon Street, now called Ralph David Abernathy Street, after the civil rights leader. (photo by author)

Thomas M. Johnston to speak. But as the church celebrated its past in 1967, it also cautiously planned for the future. They were well aware of the white flight eroding their membership, and they organized a “special study Committee, that the Church serving the people so

<sup>113</sup> “1957 Gordon Street Presbyterian Church History,” Gordon Street Presbyterian Church History Collection, C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary (hereafter cited as Gordon Street Church History).

<sup>114</sup> “1959 Gordon Street Presbyterian Church History,” Gordon Street Church History.

faithfully in the past may, continue such a service for years to come.”<sup>115</sup>

Although the findings of the committee were not reported, the Presbytery of Atlanta, the governing body that oversaw Presbyterian churches in the metropolitan Atlanta area, passed a resolution granting them the required permission to relocate in the summer of 1971. Yet permission to relocate came with several stipulations. After the sale of their church property the congregation had to give half of the profit to the Presbytery to help fund “existing Presbyterian works in the Southwest section of Atlanta seeking to minister to persons in transitional or predominantly black areas.” Gordon Street, too, had to continue working in the Southwest area, partnering with another Presbyterian church to do so. Finally, the Presbytery gave Gordon Street a ten-acre site on Old National Highway for their “new pioneer work.”<sup>116</sup>

The church’s last Sunday at Gordon Street was January 2, 1972, after which they started meeting at Cascade Road Presbyterian Church, the church that they were to partner with in their new endeavor. The Cascade Road building housed the activities of the two separate churches until they moved into their new facilities on Old National Highway on November 5, 1972. Joseph Griggs pastored both churches through the transition period and became the pastor of the combined church, known as Bethany Presbyterian Church. They chose the name because “Bethany was the place Jesus loved and He often went there. We wanted our new church to be a place Jesus loves.”<sup>117</sup> With a new name, new location, new facility, and a new sense of purpose, the combined Gordon Street-Cascade Road Church started afresh under a consistent pastor that guided them through the relocation. Like many of the churches examined in this study, the church found “many evidences of the leading of the Holy Spirit as we have worked and

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<sup>115</sup> “1967 Gordon Street Presbyterian Church History,” Gordon Street Church History.

<sup>116</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1971 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1971)*, (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 62-3, 69-70.

<sup>117</sup> “1972 Gordon Street Presbyterian Church History,” Gordon Street Church History.

planned.”<sup>118</sup> The churches often used religious language to give them confidence that their decision to flee from a racially transitioning neighborhood was in God’s plan for them.

They may have fled black newcomers, but the Gordon Street congregation did not relocate out of fear. They were much more open to their black neighbors than Capitol Avenue Baptist or the dissenting faction at Dogwood Hills Baptist. A document reported that the few black visitors that “attended spasmodically...were heartily welcomed” at Gordon Street Presbyterian.<sup>119</sup> But by 1972 when that document was written, most of the fearful Gordon Street whites had already fled for the suburbs, leaving a core of congregants that truly welcomed African Americans. The church’s relocation was less an act of fear than a controlled move on the part of the Presbytery of Atlanta. The Presbytery was intentional about its ministry, and it wanted to retain as many members of Gordon Street and Cascade Road as possible. By providing the land for a new church, the Presbytery helped to target where they would be ministering. The move appeased the churches, but they relocated to an area in East Point that later transitioned, so they would still need to learn to embrace their black neighbors. In addition, the Presbytery did not neglect the site of flight, requiring the Gordon Street church to give half of its earnings from the sale of its property back to the Presbytery to be invested in ministry to the community they left. The Presbytery was not simply concerned with maintaining its white churches but also sought to develop new churches in recently transitioned neighborhoods.

In fact, following the Gordon Street merger/relocation, the Presbytery re-asserted its recent policy decisions about how to best manage situations where churches were in transitional neighborhoods. The five-page document began by summarizing the Presbytery’s past resolutions and policies made by the Church Extension Committee, the body responsible for overseeing new

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

and changing ministries in the Presbytery. In 1963 the Presbytery encouraged churches to minister to the area within two miles of their main facilities, upholding the tradition of neighborhood or community churches. With that policy in mind, in 1968 the Presbytery expressed “its conviction that its witness to and ministry in the communities of our Presbytery will be seriously damaged by the flight of our Churches from racially transitioning communities.” By that time the Presbytery had overseen the relocation of several churches including Kirkwood Presbyterian. The Presbytery defined its role as the local authority over churches with the power to establish and disestablish churches and to bind a pastor and congregation together in ministry. It was responsible for planning and coordinating ministry at the metropolitan level and admonished “[c]omplete preoccupation” with merely church-level ministry. The Presbytery worked to ensure that Presbyterians maintained a larger vision of ministry to the entire city and not just individual neighborhoods or churches.<sup>120</sup>

With its stated fear that flight from racially transitioning communities would damage their ministry to Atlanta, the Presbytery established ten principles for how to approach the problems faced by churches such as Gordon Street and Kirkwood. The first principle re-affirmed the policy of a church’s responsibility to “its total immediate community.” If the future of the church was uncertain because that community was in flux, the Presbytery recommended first that they revise their ministry, make changes in “traditional patterns of worship and activities...and programs.” They encouraged Presbyterian churches in the same neighborhood to share facilities, staff, and programs to strengthen their witness to the community and endorsed merging churches if it was more efficient. They also offered limited sources of funding as the churches redefined their ministry, but cautioned that churches with a plan and vision for the changes would be more

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<sup>120</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1971 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1971)*, (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 63-7.

likely to receive financial support. Finally, as a last resort, the church would be granted permission to relocate or dissolve if efforts to continue ministry in the community failed.<sup>121</sup>

These principles guided the Presbytery as it sought to maintain ministries throughout the city, especially in neighborhoods that white congregations wanted to abandon. Although the Presbytery did not have the strict parish system of the Catholic Church, in which a church is bound to a specified geography, it upheld similar principles of perpetuating some form of ministry in all neighborhoods in which they had established ministries, despite racial transition. Because of this policy, Gordon Street may have relocated, but the Presbytery ensured that the area was not abandoned. Pastors like Rev. Griggs were then allowed to move with their congregations, providing stability for an unstable congregation, while the Presbytery funded new operations among the African Americans that the white church left behind.

Some denominational bodies forced their churches to linger for less principled reasons. One Methodist church had to fulfill obligations to the denomination before it would be allowed to close its doors. Audubon Forest United Methodist Church was founded in 1949. In its early years in the post-war period, the church grew rapidly, a new church in a fairly new neighborhood in southwest Atlanta, outside the city limits. But as the surrounding neighborhood began to transition in the 1970s, the church went into decline.<sup>122</sup> They were aware of the transition and its effects on their congregation, and in 1977 they passed a resolution explaining that “[t]he situation surrounding the Church has caused the departure of three-fourths of the membership of

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Audubon Forest United Methodist Church records, “Historical Note,” Pitts Theology Library Archives and Manuscripts Department, Emory University, <http://www.pitts.emory.edu/Archives/text/rg018.html> (accessed 21 November 2011).



Audubon Forest United Methodist Church.”<sup>123</sup> The resolution also noted that “much of our members live in twenty-one towns and villages away from the Church and return over long distances out of loyalty.”<sup>124</sup> Even though many members of the church had moved away, they returned each week to continue participating in church activities. Audubon Forest was on its way to becoming a white fortress church. A church of its size could feasibly maintain a minimum of services and programs, but as Wilson and Davis found, a commuting congregation was limited in how much weekly activity they could carry out.<sup>125</sup> They knew that their situation was unsustainable, though, as their resolution indicated.

A declining membership meant a decline in giving, so when Audubon Forest resolved to sell their church, they hoped that the property would be “sold at a fair market value” and ninety percent of the revenue given “for the benefit of the retired ministers of the Conference” and the remaining ten percent to two other charities. The North Georgia Conference of the Methodist Church was at that time raising money for a retired ministers’ pension fund, and Audubon Forest hoped that the profits from the sale of their property would cover their obligations to the fund. Rev. Dumas B. Shelnett, District Superintendant of the Atlanta-Emory District, inquired about the church’s wishes for the property with the Webb, Young, Daniel, and Murphy Law Offices. After reviewing both Georgia state court rulings and United Methodist Church policies, Paul Webb, Jr. found that the only action the church could take was “to convey the property to the Annual Conference Board of Trustees” (a denominational body) and that the Board of Trustees could deal with it how it pleased, but that it should take into consideration the wishes of the local

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<sup>123</sup> *Quarterly Conference Records*; 1968-1981, “Resolution,” Audubon Forest Audubon Forest United Methodist Church (Atlanta, Ga.), RG 018, Archives and Manuscripts Department, Pitts Theological Library, Emory University. (hereafter cited as “Audubon Forest UMC records”)

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Wilson and Davis, 74.

church.<sup>126</sup> Unlike Presbyterian or Baptist churches, Methodist churches often did not own their church facilities. Instead, the conference, a body of local churches administered by a bishop, owned the property, so when the church decided to close its doors, the property returned to the North Georgia Conference.

Audubon Forest, then, started a campaign to meet the required contribution to the pension fund, even though they relinquished their property to the Board of Trustees in 1977. After they had fulfilled their obligations to the conference pension fund, the church closed on June 13, 1982.<sup>127</sup> Bishop Joel McDavid wrote the church on June 3, 1982 to console them in the “necessity of closing” the church. He also thanked them for their service in the church and notified them that the future of the property, which was not to be put toward the pension fund, but would “be used for the housing of another United Methodist Church.”<sup>128</sup> The North Georgia Conference, like the Atlanta Presbytery, was intentional about maintaining a witness in each neighborhood, but they were less concerned that the white churches be involved in it. The bishop expressed contentment and understanding in his letter to Audubon Forest rather than admonition or instruction. It was easier for Methodists to manage racial transition, though, because Methodism has across history had the largest black population of any majority-white denomination in the United States.<sup>129</sup> When Audubon Forest moved out, a thriving black Methodist congregation from the area was ready to move into their church facilities. The church

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<sup>126</sup> *Quarterly Conference Records; 1968-1981*, Correspondence, Paul Webb, Jr. to Rev. Shelnut, Audubon Forest UMC records.

<sup>127</sup> *Quarterly Conference Records; 1968-1981*, 1, Audubon Forest UMC records.

<sup>128</sup> Joel D. McDavid to The Members of Audubon Forest United Methodist Church, 3 June 1982, Audubon Forest UMC records.

<sup>129</sup> Murry, Peter C., *Methodists and the Crucible of Race: 1930-1975* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 3, 9.

at Benjamin E Mays Drive was reopened on June 27, 1982, just two weeks after the white congregation vacated it, to be the new home of Hoosier Memorial United Methodist Church.<sup>130</sup>

The Bishop's office forced Audubon Forest to linger in the black community it wanted to escape for several years to fulfill its fundraising requirements. Less a strategic act on the part of the denominational office, Audubon Forest had to hold off dissolution for technical reasons. It is an example again of how unique the situation of each lingering church was. Audubon Forest was merely waiting for clearance to dissolve, but others, like Capitol View Presbyterian, held on to the church as long as they could. In other cases pastors and denominational bodies alike tried to teach congregations to embrace not only new racial ideologies but their new neighbors as well, a



Figure 6. Formerly Audubon Forest United Methodist Church, this building is now used by Hoosier Memorial United Methodist Church. (photo by author)

difficult undertaking in most white churches in Atlanta. Wilson and Davis concluded, “The congregation which ignores its community cannot survive over a long term.”<sup>131</sup> Even the churches studied here that tried to reach out to African Americans did not survive in the transitioned neighborhoods. Truly inclusive and integrated churches took intention, patience, and time, and even then it oftentimes failed. The following chapter examines churches that successfully remained in transitioning neighborhoods.

<sup>130</sup> *Quarterly Conference Records; 1968-1981*, Audubon Forest UMC records, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Wilson and Davis, 82-3.

### Chapter Three: Churches that Stayed

When Kirkwood Baptist Church voted to sell their property in 1966 and move into a newly constructed building on Columbia Drive in south DeKalb County they also took a new name, Rainbow Park Baptist Church, for nearby Rainbow Drive.<sup>132</sup> Church members soon discovered, however, that the same forces that transformed Kirkwood were also affecting south DeKalb. The area was increasingly populated by African Americans, many of them middle class or wealthy, moving out of the city.<sup>133</sup> Unlike Wee Kirk Presbyterian Church, which had absorbed Kirkwood Presbyterian Church, Rainbow Park Baptist chose not to relocate a second time. They, like a handful of other Atlanta churches, instead chose to stay in a transitional community, committing to minister there, no matter who their neighbors were. These churches lost many members to white flight, but those that remained fought for racial inclusion under the direction of progressive pastors or denominational leaders. This chapter explores the travails and triumphs of such churches.

#### *From Integration to Re-Segregation*

As Rainbow Park started afresh in a new location, it turned a new page in its racial policies. While still in Kirkwood, many members of the church had mobilized to protect the neighborhood from African Americans moving in. But at their new location, under the leadership of the pastor that led them out of Kirkwood, Rev. William Bryant, they adopted a resolution “that all people without regard to race, creed, color or national origin be welcomed by our

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<sup>132</sup> Freeman, Mary, *A Century for Christ 1873-1973: A Baptist Church History (Beech Springs, Kirkwood, Rainbow Park)* (privately printed, 1973; held at Jack Tarver Library, Mercy University), 9.

<sup>133</sup> Kruse, Kevin, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 244.

church.”<sup>134</sup> As part of their centennial celebration in 1973, Bryant wrote that the church finally lived up to the sign that hung outside their church: “A Friendly Welcome to ALL.” The resolution was necessary, he said, “if we are to please God.”<sup>135</sup>

Though it is not entirely clear, it would seem that Rainbow Park’s new policy came as a reaction to public criticism of the church from the pastor of another nearby Baptist church. John Nichol of Oakhurst Baptist Church wrote a letter to the editor of the *Christian Index*, the Georgia Baptist Convention’s weekly newspaper, criticizing the church’s reaction to neighborhood racial transition. The *Index* had praised the church for paying off the mortgage on its building before relocating even though it knew that soon it would move. It spoke in glowing terms of the church’s move, praising Rainbow Park as “a church of integrity, faith, courage, vision.”<sup>136</sup>

Nichol challenged the *Index*’s use of the word “integrity,” a value he often invoked in his church as they faced neighborhood racial transition in Oakhurst. Nichol and his congregation had resolved to stay in Oakhurst regardless of the changes taking place in the neighborhood. In his letter he contrasted Kirkwood’s “responsibility to meet its financial obligations” with its “integrity in mission.” The church had compromised its integrity by moving out of the neighborhood, as he saw it. He also called into question the financial integrity of a church that would sell a property valued at one million dollars for only \$360,000.<sup>137</sup>

As notable as Rainbow Park’s new policy was, it would take more than an open door policy to successfully integrate the church. Even a church open to all people needed a leader to push them to be more inclusive.<sup>138</sup> In 1974, Rainbow Park chose a new pastor, Dr. Eugene Tyre,

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<sup>134</sup> Freeman, 9.

<sup>135</sup> Mary Freeman, *The Second Century: A History of Rainbow Park Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia, 1973-1983* (privately printed, 1983; held at Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University), 63, 70.

<sup>136</sup> Walker L. Knight, *Struggle for integrity*, (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1969), 76-7.

<sup>137</sup> John Nichol, letter to the editor, *Christian Index*, 15 June 1967.

<sup>138</sup> Wilson and Davis, 87.

who was excited to fulfill such a role. Tyre quickly realized “that my initial challenge was to prepare the church for ministry in a racially and economically changing community.” He met with groups and leaders within the church and in the community, including the County Commissioner, to understand the neighborhood.<sup>139</sup> Tyre also began to take measures to prepare the congregation for the challenges they would soon face as African Americans continued to buy homes closer to the church. He hosted discussion groups to build consensus on the church’s identity as “people of God on mission to its neighborhood and to the world,” deepening their understanding of what it meant to have a mission in the neighborhood. To change attitudes toward race, he taught from the Bible, brought in “people of other races for a time of dialogue,” and invited people of color to lead worship and participate in other church programs. In addition, he mentored deacons and other leaders in the church to change their views on race, hoping that they would help to do the same with others.<sup>140</sup>

In 1977, after about three years of work, Dr. Tyre had the church reaffirm their 1972 open door policy, formally adding “that it is the policy and intention of this church to reach persons and minister in the name of Jesus Christ throughout the church community.” The revised resolution carried with only four dissenting votes out of 196.<sup>141</sup> Even with a landslide vote, some members still chose to move away rather than face true integration of the church, but a committed core remained and began an “aggressive ministry of outreach” in south DeKalb County. “The preparation and prayer that took place during the pretransitional period,” Dr. Tyre later wrote, “enabled the church to move into the transitional period determined to be the people of God on mission to South DeKalb.” They launched ministries for apartment dwellers who lived

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<sup>139</sup> Freeman, *The Second Century*, 9.

<sup>140</sup> Freeman, *The Second Century*, 9; Jernigan, 76.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

close to the church and for children in the neighborhood, started a benevolence ministry that included a clothing bank, and began a ministry for the mentally handicapped that received state and national attention.

In the midst of all this, African Americans began to join the church. The first black family joined soon after the 1977 vote to reaffirm the open door policy. To accommodate its growth, Rainbow Park launched a building campaign in 1979 to enlarge their fellowship hall and office area and add two classrooms to their facilities. The Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention considered the church “a model for ministry,” and pastors from across the country visited Rainbow Park to observe and learn from what they had accomplished.<sup>142</sup>

Despite this success, white members of Rainbow Park slowly continued to move away as African Americans moved to south DeKalb. Mary Freeman, author of a church history, wrote that at one point “a person could almost walk across the community on for sale signs.”<sup>143</sup> A core group remained for many years, but eventually lay leaders like Bob Spooner moved away because, as he put it, “all the whites were moving out.”<sup>144</sup> Wilson and Davis found that “[e]very inclusive neighborhood church” in their study of churches in racially transitional areas was “a congregation in transition. None of them were recruiting white members to replace those who die[d] or move[d] away.”<sup>145</sup> This was the case at Rainbow Park Baptist as well.

Rainbow Park Baptist was among a group of churches that attempted to integrate but because of broader changes in the neighborhood ended up resegregated. Their efforts to include African Americans in church life were so successful that as the community experienced a nearly complete transition from white to black, the church did too. In this way it was truly a

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<sup>142</sup> Freeman, *The Second Century*, 10-12.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>144</sup> Jernigan 80.

<sup>145</sup> Wilson and Davis, 103.

neighborhood church, and the white members who moved away did not end up commuting back to Columbia Drive when they chose to leave the community.

### *Forced Integration*

West End Presbyterian Church experienced a similar trend, but not as willingly as Rainbow Park did. In 1957 West End Presbyterian relocated to accommodate the needs of their church. Many of their members had left because of the limited facilities, and they feared more would leave if they did not increase the capacity of their buildings. The immediate area around the church was becoming a business district as well, so there was a demand for the property.<sup>146</sup> They considered three options: remodel the existing buildings, dissolve the church, or relocate. They put each option to a vote and decided that relocation was the best option, moving to an area southwest of Atlanta, outside the city limits, and continued to grow.<sup>147</sup>

West End Presbyterian Church, like many other white Atlanta churches, was not particularly racially progressive for the era, but it had made pledges to support denominational efforts for ministry among African Americans. The Presbyterian Church, United States (informally known as the Southern Presbyterian Church) instituted the Committee on Negro Work to expand their efforts to grow the Presbyterian presence in African American communities in the South. It began as a means to train black seminarians but expanded to include projects such as loans and grants for new church facilities, establishing new churches, and recruitment of potential ministers to the denomination's black seminary.<sup>148</sup> In 1953 West End

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<sup>146</sup> Jeanne C. Atkins, "West End Presbyterian Church History," 1 November 1987, Southwest Presbyterian Church Records, C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary (hereafter referred to as Southwest Presbyterian Records).

<sup>147</sup> Session Minutes, 1 July 1956, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

<sup>148</sup> Alvis, Joel L., *Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 19-20.



Presbyterian made a pledge of \$1,000 to what was called “Negro Work,” as sign of good faith to the denomination.<sup>149</sup> They pledged those funds to causes that were anonymous and long-distance. They might not ever meet the churches or individuals that the money supported.

When West End Presbyterian began to transition from white to black in the following decades and was given the opportunity to do “Negro Work” in their own neighborhood, they took a different path. African Americans first moved into the neighborhood in 1965, the same year it reached peak membership with 376 members. The pastor understood that the new neighbors would eventually require action of some kind, so he sent a letter to the members with options for how to handle the situation. They formed a committee to determine the proper response. It voted seven to four to stay at the same location and only solicit whites to join the church. Even though blacks continued to move into the neighborhood, West End Presbyterian continued to ignore them and neglect any mission work directed at them. Many white members even moved away. The church was not unanimous in the decision to ignore their African American neighbors, though. The pastor worked with those willing to stay to try to overturn the decision, but he could not rally enough support to have the church minister to African Americans. Abandoning the cause, he answered a call to another church.<sup>150</sup>

In November 1967, two years after their initial decision to ignore their black neighbors, the Atlanta Presbytery sent a letter to the session, the governing body in a Presbyterian church, “with reference to evangelistic efforts in the negro neighborhoods.” The content of the letter is not disclosed in the records, but it is clear that the session did not want to address it. An elder, a member of the session, made a motion that “the matter . . . be tabled indefinitely.”<sup>151</sup> The motion

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<sup>149</sup> Session Minutes, 9 April 1953, Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

<sup>150</sup> “A Case Study: West End Presbyterian Church,” n.d. Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

<sup>151</sup> Session Minutes, 5 November 1967, Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

carried. This small gesture typified the relationship between the church and the Presbytery in the coming months as they fought over the proper response to racial transition in the West End. The Presbytery did not abandon the issue, though. When they sent a similar letter three months later, the session called a meeting for the next week to have the time necessary to discuss the situation. The Presbytery was forcing them to face the issue.<sup>152</sup>

West End Presbyterian devised a few options for how to respond, much like they did in 1957 when they needed larger facilities. They proposed four potential courses of action: dissolving the church; taking no action for another five years when they projected funds would dry up; hire an African American associate pastor to minister in the community around the church; or “relocate in an area that it would continue to minister to its present members and seek new white members in an area South of Campbellton Road.” They were fully aware that staying in West End would mean ministering to African Americans, and they knew that continuing a ministry to whites would mean relocation. They voted to relocate the church and at their next meeting finalized a committee to move forward with that process.<sup>153</sup>

One step towards relocation was receiving approval of their decision from the Atlanta Presbytery, a local denominational body made up of pastors and elders from various churches that oversaw the activity of the churches in that region. In mid-March the Presbytery found out that both the session and the congregation of West End Presbyterian had voted to relocate.<sup>154</sup> At its meeting the next month, the Presbytery stated its “conviction that its witness to and ministry in the communities of our Presbytery will be seriously damaged by the flight of our churches from racially transitioning communities.” It resolved that West End Presbyterian should stay at

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<sup>152</sup> Session Minutes, 7 January 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

<sup>153</sup> Session Minutes, 4 and 11 February, 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

<sup>154</sup> “A Case Study: West End Presbyterian Church,” n.d. Southwest Presbyterian Church Records.

its current location and maintain a ministry there. Understanding the difficult situation of the church, the Presbytery appointed a commission to guide them through the changes that would be necessary to stay in West End.<sup>155</sup> These decisions were among the first of their kind at the Presbytery. It had not yet fully established its policy on churches in transitional communities as discussed in chapter two; in many ways the case of West End Presbyterian was an experiment.

To assess the situation in southwest Atlanta, the Presbytery's advisory commission met with the sessions of West End Presbyterian and other Presbyterian churches in the area eight times and recommended such options as working with other area churches and requesting financial support from the Presbytery to be able to stay at its present location as the Presbytery had mandated. The session of West End Presbyterian rejected the commission and its recommendations, insisting that it wanted to relocate.<sup>156</sup> In the session meetings, they discussed "the injustice that the Commission and Atlanta Presbytery had inflicted" on them through its "arbitrary" decision to force them to stay. They blamed the Presbytery for the families they had lost to other denominations.<sup>157</sup> They were so incensed that they would rather have disbanded their fellowship than stay in the present location. The session invited Presbytery officials to their September meeting to discuss the necessary procedures for dissolving the church. The representatives of the Presbytery explained that the church needed permission to dissolve just as it did to relocate, and suggested that the request might not be granted. They recommended that the Presbytery establish an Administrative Commission to make the decision to dissolve or

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<sup>155</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1968 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1968)* (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 70-72.

<sup>156</sup> Session Minutes, 16 June 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

<sup>157</sup> Session Minutes, 21 July 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

sustain the church. The session accepted that recommendation, hoping it would end their struggle by closing their doors.<sup>158</sup>

At its fall meeting, the Presbytery again expressed a “deep sense of concern and responsibility in connection with the problems of changing communities in its midst.” As recommended, it established an Administrative Commission, “clothed with the powers of the Presbytery, including and limited to the power to declare all church offices vacated, the power to administer the church in lieu of a Session, and the power to dissolve the said church.” The Commission had direct oversight of the church’s leadership and worked with them to make any decisions, including dissolution. Because of their refusal to honor the Presbytery’s requests, the church was forced to comply through the special Commission.<sup>159</sup>

At the first session meeting with representatives of the Administrative Commission, the representatives reminded the session that it was the desire of the Presbytery that the church remain in southwest Atlanta. Removing relocation and dissolution from the table, they suggested a “multiple ministry” with a bi-racial pastor team to evangelize both white and black neighbors. They also looked into formalizing financial assistance from the Presbytery to sustain the church. The session had no option but to comply.<sup>160</sup> The next month the leaders of the church sent a letter to the membership inviting them to a meeting that replaced normal Sunday morning services. They planned to share the direction of the church for the next few years so that members could decide if they wanted to commit to it. They planned to consider both the “present

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<sup>158</sup> Session Minutes, 17 September 1958, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

<sup>159</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1968 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1968)* (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 107-109.

<sup>160</sup> Session Minutes, 24 October 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

congregation” and the community.<sup>161</sup> The church leadership had accepted the new direction given them by the Presbytery, but they did not enthusiastically lead their fellow members into it.

When the church adopted its new direction, African Americans visited regularly, but they did not at first become members. Several families were interested in joining, but they were waiting until there was a black minister on what was supposed to be a bi-racial pastor team. The Administrative Commission was responsible for finding pastors to lead the church. They hired a white evangelist, Rev. David Stover, in September 1969 and an African American seminarian, Elias Hardge, in March of 1970. Hardge worked part-time at the church as he finished his studies at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. His addition to the staff signaled a dramatic change in the church. Many white members left when he came, but the black visitors felt secure enough to join. New African Americans continued to replace the whites that had fled. Although it was a bitter transition for many of the white members, the new congregation that was forming abounded with hope for the future.<sup>162</sup>

The abrupt transition in pastoral leadership took a toll on the lay leadership. By May 1970, all but one of the elders had resigned. The Administrative Commission “voted to assume original jurisdiction on July 1, 1970 and administer the church in lieu of a session.” They quickly began the process of electing and training six new elders, and, a year later, they constituted a new session. With a new pastor team and a new session, the Administrative Commission requested on September 28, 1971, that it be dismissed immediately.<sup>163</sup> The pastor team did not stay bi-racial for very long, though. Within a year after the Administrative Commission was dissolved, Rev.

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<sup>161</sup> John Abbott, Taylor Franks, and James M. Cook to Each Member and Family, 6 November 1968, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

<sup>162</sup> “A Case Study: West End Presbyterian Church,” n.d. Southwest Presbyterian Church Records; *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1971 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1971)* (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 77-8.

<sup>163</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta (Stated Winter Meeting, 1971 – Stated Fall Meeting, 1971)* (privately printed, held at John C. Bulow Campbell Library), 77-8.

Stover accepted a call to a white church in Decatur. The church had become predominantly African American, and the church leaders felt that black leadership “was essential to the continued effective ministry” of the church.<sup>164</sup>

West End Presbyterian Church, like Rainbow Park Baptist Church, attempted to foster an integrated ministry committed to the neighborhood that was transitioning around them. Unlike Rainbow Park, though, West End Presbyterian was forced to engage in bi-racial ministry by the Presbytery of Atlanta. Even though the church eventually became predominately black, the Presbytery achieved its goal of maintaining a ministry in the neighborhood. Likewise, the congregation of Rainbow Park Baptist Church may not look like it did when Rev. Tyre committed to ministering to south DeKalb, but the church still has a commitment to the area. In these cases racial transition occurred not just in the neighborhoods but in the church institutions of the neighborhoods.

### *Too Little too Late*

Not every church that attempted to establish a bi-racial ministry survived the transition. Ben Hill Presbyterian Church, located in southwest Atlanta just outside I-285, Atlanta’s loop interstate, faced racial transition in its community in the early 1970s. At the end of 1973 the church historian noted that they had had “a very ‘mixed up’ year.” With so many members moving away “at a very fast pace” they asked themselves “shall we carry on with the faithful few left, or close the church?” The Women of the Church recorded that many of their members, even

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<sup>164</sup> Jeanne C. Atkins, “West End Presbyterian Church History,” 1 November 1987, Southwest Presbyterian Records.

officers, had moved away. Earlier in the year the church had decided to stay open one more year “as a missionary project,” not hopeful that they could grow.<sup>165</sup>

The members that remained opened the doors to African Americans, and many visited worship services. They also hosted a youth club which was well attended by black children. In addition, they leased their educational building (put to little use otherwise) to the Fulton County Board of Education to instruct one hundred children with disabilities, many of them black. They considered this a gift to the African American community. Even with all of these efforts, they expressed frustration at the end of the year that “the black community has not responded to our open door and come in to worship with us.” They even enlisted the help of a black seminarian at Columbia Theological Seminary to help make visitations but to little avail. Only one black couple joined the church that year, and they celebrated when they could “report the first black baby born into a White church.”<sup>166</sup> Ben Hill was excited about their new ministry in the neighborhood, aware of their history as a white church but ready to change it.

Surviving longer than the one-year trial period established in 1973, the Presbytery of Atlanta agreed to support them financially as they continued to reach out to the community. At the end of 1974 they boasted four additional black members after they “put out the ‘Welcome Mat’ for people in the new Community.” In May the pastor resigned, and they took the opportunity to hire a black pastor “with more hope to get the black community interested and involved.” Rev. Cleopatrik Lacey was a recent graduate of Interdenominational Seminary. In November 1974 Lacey sent a letter to the homes of members introducing himself and declaring “Ben Hill Presbyterian needs you!” He invited them to recommit to the church and reminded

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<sup>165</sup> Ben Hill Presbyterian Church History 1973, Ben Hill Presbyterian Church History Collection, C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary. (hereafter referred to as “Ben Hill Church History Collection”)

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

congregants of the many programs offered.<sup>167</sup> Even with his fresh leadership, the congregation questioned at the end of 1974 how much longer the church would stay open as members continued to move away with very few joining.<sup>168</sup> That year 112 removed their membership, leaving just 118 members.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, the church closed halfway through the next year.<sup>170</sup>

Like Rainbow Park Baptist and West End Presbyterian, Ben Hill Presbyterian Church attempted to include its black neighbors. Compared to the other churches, it was quick to make changes in its programs and leadership in order to make African Americans feel welcome. Yet Ben Hill failed to keep its doors open for blacks or whites. Although many factors could have contributed to this, its struggle mostly derived from the small size of its congregation. Whereas Rainbow Park Baptist started with over 1,000 members, Ben Hill's membership had stayed around 300 since the mid-1960s, before the neighborhood began to face racial transition.<sup>171</sup> Large numbers of white members left both churches, leaving only a remnant to minister to the communities, but because Ben Hill was smaller to begin with, it took less time for the flight to take a debilitating toll on the church's ability to function. Although only around 30 members left in 1973, the church historian wrote dramatically about the losses in the church. Numerically they did not lose many people, but as a small institution, it was a hard blow. While Ben Hill started down a path to integration (or perhaps re-segregation), it did not have a large enough stock of willing members to carry out its desire to include African Americans.

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<sup>167</sup> "Cleopatrack Lacey to Member," November 15, 1974, Records of Ben Hill Presbyterian Church. C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary. (hereafter cited as Ben Hill Church History Collection)

<sup>168</sup> Ben Hill Presbyterian Church History 1974, Ben Hill Church History Collection.

<sup>169</sup> *Minutes of the One-Hundred-Fifteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, (privately printed, held at John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary), Appendix 90.

<sup>170</sup> *Minutes of the Presbytery of Atlanta 1975, 1976*, (privately printed, held at John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary), 91-2.

<sup>171</sup> *Minutes of the One-Hundred-Sixth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, (privately printed, held at John Bulow Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary) Appendix 30.



These three churches—Rainbow Park, West End, and Ben Hill—all exhibited a commitment to evangelism. In other churches, that commitment was superseded by the social and cultural standards that prevented whites from interacting with African Americans. Their commitment to evangelism (or at least to church growth) overcame such racial barriers and welcomed new black neighbors into the life of the church. Despite initial signs of successfully integrated ministry, though, the economic and social pressures prevailed, and whites moved out of the neighborhoods and the churches as they became more heavily populated with African Americans. In one last church, those forces did not overcome its purpose and mission.

#### *Maintaining Integrity*

Immediately east of Kirkwood, across the Atlanta city limits and Fulton County line is the neighborhood of Oakhurst in DeKalb County and the city of Decatur. Oakhurst and Kirkwood are adjacent to one another and share many similarities. The architecture of the homes and the physical landscape are nearly identical. African Americans also moved into both neighborhoods in the 1960s, and the churches serving each neighborhood had to respond to the transition. Most of the churches in Kirkwood fled with the white residents. Something different happened in Oakhurst. It not only stayed in the neighborhood after racial transition but retained white members to continue a multi-racial ministry.

### *Building an Institution*

Oakhurst Baptist was organized in 1913 and after several years meeting in tents established a permanent building on East Lake Drive.<sup>172</sup> Like most of the churches in this study, it grew in the post-war period and in 1951 the church purchased an eight-acre property a couple of blocks away on College Avenue.<sup>173</sup> The ever-expanding Sunday School quickly filled the mansion on that property, as well as other nearby homes in the neighborhood, leaving only one fourth of the Sunday School classes meeting in the main building on East Lake Avenue.<sup>174</sup>

In 1955 they formed a building committee to begin planning for construction on the new property. Congregational giving had increased by fifty percent in recent years and the church was ready to upgrade. The first three structures, including a 21,000 square foot activities building with a fellowship hall, a three-story youth building with classrooms, and an outdoor pavilion, were dedicated on September 20, 1959. The dedication services acted as a cap to a “Sunday School Enlargement Week” to increase participation in the church’s programming. They constructed the buildings, not just in reaction to a need, but also to foster more growth. The campus, however, was not yet complete. Budget constraints forced them to build in phases, and the goal was to complete the colonial-style sanctuary with a seating capacity of 1,500 by August 1963 and a chapel by 1970.<sup>175</sup> Until then, most Oakhurst Baptist members were content to use both buildings every Sunday, which involved “crossing the parking lot, the alley, and Third Avenue.” Only senior citizens continued to meet in the old building.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> “Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, GA: Dedication Day,” Oakhurst Baptist Church Papers, Oakhurst Baptist Church Library, Decatur, GA. (hereafter cited as Oakhurst Baptist Papers)

<sup>173</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Conference, 24 November 1951, Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

<sup>174</sup> Wright, Alverta Sedgwick, *Not Here by Chance: The Story of Oakhurst Baptist Church Decatur, Georgia 1913-1988*, (Decatur: Oakhurst Baptist Church, 1988), 173.

<sup>175</sup> “Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, GA: Dedication Day,” Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

<sup>176</sup> Wright, 185-6.

The buildings were not the church's only focus in the early 1960s. An article in the *Christian Index* drew its attention to the need to house, feed, and provide work for Cuban refugee families who were "flooding Miami" at the time. On April 25, 1962, the church began a long ministry to Cubans and other Hispanics by voting to host a refugee family and to form a committee to coordinate those and future efforts.<sup>177</sup> In addition to resettling refugees in Atlanta, they sent resources to refugees in Miami. As the ministry grew, they started a Spanish-language Sunday School class that in 1963 had twenty-two members.<sup>178</sup> The new Hispanic members of their church were integrated into its leadership: the first of many Hispanic deacons was elected in August 1963.<sup>179</sup> This was an early demonstration of Oakhurst's desire to partnership in ministry rather than merely provide paternalistic charity to minorities.

Much of the expansion of the ministry to Hispanics came out of Oakhurst Baptist's participation in the Southern Baptist Convention's Church Development program which encouraged churches to expand their ministries and programs in the neighborhood. In response to the initiative, they devoted three Wednesday night meetings to assessing their programs in "buzz groups" and developing reports that included "a resource guest" with suggestions for improvement from each group.<sup>180</sup> The church submitted to the Southern Baptist Convention an album detailing their development plans, including the ministry to refugees, expansion of their music program, youth programs, and their aggressive building campaign. For their efforts the church received the National Church Development Award, and Pastor Thomas "Brother Ted" Dougherty was featured on the cover of *Home Mission*, a magazine published by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dougherty had been the pastor since 1954,

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<sup>177</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 25 April 1962, Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

<sup>178</sup> Mike Wright, "Oakhurst Baptists Earn High Award," *The Atlanta Journal*, 24 August 1963.

<sup>179</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 25 August 1963, Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

<sup>180</sup> "Oakhurst Wins in Development," *Christian Index*, 22 August 1963.

leading the church out of debt from the College Avenue property and into the building campaign of the late 1950s.<sup>181</sup>

In the mid-1960s the neighborhood began to show the first signs of change. In the early 1960s, Kirkwood, immediately west of Oakhurst, had nearly completed the transition from white to black. Although Oakhurst did not yet have many African American residents, the neighborhood's overall socio-economic conditions had declined, partly due to Decatur city planning. For example, forty-four acres of "sub-standard homes" were demolished and replaced with 600 units of low-rent houses nearby. With lower income neighbors—still almost all white—crime increased, and the area eventually developed the highest crime rates in DeKalb County.<sup>182</sup> In 1965 the chairman of the missions committee at Oakhurst Baptist urged the church to be proactive in addressing the changes in the neighborhood, suggesting that they hire an outsider to conduct a study of the area and propose recommendations for how the church could meet its needs.

Later that year the missions committee presented the findings of the seven-page report, which evaluated church growth since 1955, the programs it offered, the demographic information for the surrounding area, and growth trends in Decatur, including the housing stock around Oakhurst. It highlighted that the area was increasingly "blighted" and listed the first cause as "Negro invasion." Other reasons were deteriorating infrastructure, lax code enforcement, and crime. The report noted two nearby African American communities, one "well-established" and unlikely to expand; the other, probably referring to Kirkwood, had seen "a more recent movement of Negroes into the area... [that] reaches within two blocks of the Oakhurst Church."

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<sup>181</sup> Wright, 173, 177.

<sup>182</sup> "Report of the Missions Committee on Church Community Survey," 28 July 1965, Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

Although African Americans had moved very close to Oakhurst, the report projected that they would likely stay inside the city of Atlanta and not cross into Oakhurst in Decatur and DeKalb County. Nonetheless, the report recommended forming a “joint committee” to maintain a healthy relationship with nearby African Americans.<sup>183</sup>

The report included two pages of recommendations, mostly for how to expand programs and ministries, such as weekday programs for children and babies, a mothers’ club, fathers’ club, counseling services for youth and families, additional recreational programs for children, and a children’s summer camp. The first recommendation, listed in the report in two places, was programming for senior citizens. To oversee the new weekday programs, which would all fall under the missions committee, the report suggested hiring a new staff member. Finally, the report indicated that the church should complete its building plans as soon as possible, even if it meant selling the old building on East Lake Drive to pay off debt and fund the new sanctuary.<sup>184</sup>

Indeed, the church was two years behind its goal to dedicate the new sanctuary in 1963. The expectation shared among members that “if you have the space the people will come” was unfulfilled as membership numbers continued to drop from their 1963 peak of 1,552. By 1965, membership was 1,347.<sup>185</sup> In the face of change and decline, Rev. Dougherty, the pastor for almost eleven years, resigned to answer a call from a church in Columbia, South Carolina.<sup>186</sup> With a lingering debt from the new buildings and an ambition for new programs to serve its changing community, Oakhurst Baptist had to find a pastor to lead them into the next era of its history.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Wright, 185; Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 16 October 1963 and 30 August 1965, Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

<sup>186</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 4 July 1964. Oakhurst Baptist Papers.

*A New Direction*

For the next sixteen months the Oakhurst Baptist pulpit committee considered over 100 candidates and travelled long distances to hear ministers preach, sometimes over 700 miles. Many of the ministers they met were hesitant to enter into such an uncertain time in the church's history.<sup>187</sup> In late 1966, they came across Canadian-born John Nichol, a pastor in Flint, Michigan, who was preaching at a conference in north Georgia. The pulpit committee admired his conception of the church's relationship to the community, and he was impressed by Oakhurst's steps to engage with a changing community.<sup>188</sup>

Oakhurst had not let their search for a pastor distract them from a desire to serve the lower-income neighbors moving into Oakhurst. In the months after Rev. Dougherty left, they launched several new programs. Most ambitious were the youth of the church who, in 1965 shifted the focus of their annual Christmas party for inner-city children to the "needy children" in Oakhurst. Instead of singling out poorer children in the neighborhood, they invited the entire elementary school of 300 children to the party at the church just a few blocks away. On the day of the event, they marched all of the children whose parents allowed them down the street where dinner and entertainment awaited them.<sup>189</sup> In keeping with their annual tradition, they also raised over \$400 to buy gifts for the children. Rather than giving away something small to each child, they thought it better to buy seventy-two pairs of skates that the children could check out at weekly skating days hosted at the church. The skate days became a regular Saturday occurrence, and children lined up each week to enjoy the skates, refreshments, and music offered by the

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<sup>187</sup> Wright, 127.

<sup>188</sup> Knight, 53.

<sup>189</sup> Knight, 58-60.

church.<sup>190</sup> Six black children were enrolled at Oakhurst Elementary School, and therefore, invited to the Christmas party, so it was the church's first integrated event.<sup>191</sup>

Also launched in 1965 and 1966 was a library ministry, a Mothers' Club, tutoring two afternoons a week, a clothing room, a pantry, and expansion of the Spanish ministry to include preaching.<sup>192</sup> Also in 1966 Oakhurst Baptist began consulting with First Baptist Church Decatur, the Atlanta Baptist Association, and the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to launch a weekday program as suggested by the community assessment. The initial talks in October 1966 established that the Home Mission Board would financially sponsor a couple to coordinate weekday ministries to families in the Oakhurst school area, and Oakhurst Baptist would provide housing and office space for the couple. It was several months before this vision became a reality, but it was Oakhurst Baptist that brought the coalition together to bring a weekday program to Decatur.<sup>193</sup>

The Oakhurst Baptist congregation had already engaged with the changing community well before John Nichol became pastor. Nichol recognized that Oakhurst was not a typical Southern Baptist church when he arrived. He was surprised when each week there were at least 150 people at Wednesday night prayer meetings (which typically had low attendance) where they regularly remembered people in need. Without his encouragement, the Oakhurst congregation embraced both evangelism and social justice. Nichol later remarked that he could not have successfully led the church without the undying support of a core group, which included many who worked at the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, based in

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<sup>190</sup> "Skating is Missions," *Home Missions*, April 1967, 25-6.

<sup>191</sup> Knight, 59.

<sup>192</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 11 October 1966, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>193</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 12 October 1966, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

Atlanta, as well as several progressive ministers who were “shot down along the way.”<sup>194</sup> Jeffrey Hadden did a study of ministers during the civil rights movement and wrote that clergy like the ones in the Oakhurst congregation were often most active in social causes because they were not bound to a parish that might limit their action. Because they did not answer to a congregation, they could speak and act more freely on issues of race and justice.<sup>195</sup>

Notable among those who worked at the Home Mission Board and attended Oakhurst was Walker Knight, long-time editor of *Home Mission*.<sup>196</sup> Early on, he used his editorial presence to convey messages of racial reconciliation and social justice to the readership of hundreds of thousands of Southern Baptists.<sup>197</sup> Knight also encouraged his church to embrace the needs of his community. He proposed many actions that guided the church to become more inclusive, including supporting Cuban refugees, the study of the neighborhood, and he was even instrumental in bringing John Nichol to Oakhurst. With the leadership of Knight and others, Nichol was well supported in his endeavors to challenge Oakhurst in new ways.

The lay leadership and their new minister shared a vision for what the church could do for the community, but the Oakhurst congregation needed Nichol to push it to embrace the *whole* community, including not just poor whites, but African Americans that moved into Oakhurst in greater numbers. Unlike other ministers in this study, his goal was not integration per se but simply that his congregation “be the church,” a phrase he often used in his teaching, one that

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<sup>194</sup> John Nichol, interview by Wayne Grinstead, Decatur, GA, 24 August 2012, Oakhurst Baptist Church archives, Decatur, GA.

<sup>195</sup> Hadden, Jeffrey K., *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 207.

<sup>196</sup> Mike Wright, “Oakhurst Baptists Earn High Award,” *The Atlanta Journal*, 24 August 1963; *Home Missions*, April 1962.

<sup>197</sup> Newman, Mark, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 141; “Walker Knight Takes Home Missions Post,” Baptist Press, 10 June 1959, <http://media.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/1302,10-Jun-1959.pdf> (accessed 26 March 2013).



meant welcoming everyone to their fellowship, including African Americans.<sup>198</sup> A few months into his time at Oakhurst, he challenged the congregation to stay in the city and face “a world where injustice, indifference, immorality, poverty and depersonalization are harsh realities.” He taught that only in the city could the gospel be embodied, because people’s needs are so great there. He praised the urban Christian, who “cares more than his counterpart in the suburbs.”<sup>199</sup> This was a stinging assessment in a church where members were regularly choosing suburban life over life in the city.

Not everyone in Oakhurst Baptist was keen on Nichol’s message. After his letter to the *Christian Index* about Kirkwood Baptist’s relocation, a reporter from the *Atlanta Constitution* called to write a profile on Nichol’s church. It described the Oakhurst congregation and its commitment to the neighborhood, despite the changes taking place there. The church was bound to change, Nichol commented, even if African Americans did not move into Oakhurst, because of the class differences between old and new neighbors. It was Oakhurst’s responsibility to be a church, not a country club, he said. “Transition in the church will come naturally,” according to Nichol, if the members of Oakhurst maintained “integrity” in their witness. Nichol never stated directly that he intended to integrate the church, but the reporter heard that implication in his comments and ran the article with the provocative title, “Oakhurst Baptists Plan to Integrate.”<sup>200</sup> The congregation did not respond well when they saw such a plan in the newspaper without approving it themselves. Many feared that African Americans would flock to services or that whites would leave en masse. Others thought Nichol was simply trying to get publicity. At a Wednesday night service the day the article was published, Nichol explained how the reporter

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<sup>198</sup> Diane Stepp, “Oakhurst Baptists Plan to Integrate,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 July 1967.

<sup>199</sup> Knight, 54.

<sup>200</sup> Diane Stepp, “Oakhurst Baptists Plan to Integrate,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 July 1967.

had drawn inferences from his remarks, and some respected church members defended him, smoothing over some of the tension. Walker Knight wrote in *Struggle for Integrity*, his book about Oakhurst Baptist, that the article exposed how Oakhurst congregants truly felt about the changes in the community and in their church. For that reason, Knight argued, it was helpful despite the controversy.<sup>201</sup>

An important event for Oakhurst came in 1967, when the church council, made up of church staff, committee chairs, and lead deacons, decided to invite African American children to vacation Bible school. Nichol simply informed the deacons, the decision-making body in the church, without a question or a vote.<sup>202</sup> It was bold of him to hand down a decision on such a key issue in a Baptist church where democracy rules and the pastor ultimately answers to the deacon board and the congregation. In a sermon delivered at the Christian Life Conference in Chicago in 1969 he shared with other church leaders his disdain for “viewing the local church as a democracy in which the will of the congregation is equated with the will of God, rather than a theocracy living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” He said he refused to let his church “vote or bring any recommendation...which would imply that our obedience to Christ was a debatable option.”<sup>203</sup> Accordingly, Oakhurst Baptist never voted on the issue of integration or established a policy of how to react to African American visitors.

Anti-institutionalism was another main tenet of John Nichol’s philosophy of church growth. In the same Christian Life Conference sermon he claimed that his “greatest accomplishment at Oakhurst would be regarded by many of my colleagues as a mark of

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<sup>201</sup> Knight, 81-3.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>203</sup> John Nichol, “A Local Church’s Struggle for Integrity,” (sermon, Christian Life Conference, Chicago, IL, March 31, 1969).

failure.”<sup>204</sup> The Oakhurst congregation voted to put the College Avenue education buildings on the market in August 1968.<sup>205</sup> He saw this decision as an indication of the church’s greater commitment to people than buildings. As more members moved away, they had less use for the buildings and fewer resources to maintain them.

In April 1969 Southern Bell Telephone Company signed a ten-year lease with the option to buy the property after the first, fifth, and tenth years.<sup>206</sup> In the *Oakhurst Messenger*, the church’s weekly newsletter, Nichol explained that the agreement would pay for the mortgage on the property and allow the church to renovate its East Lake Drive facilities if Southern Bell decided to buy the property. He made it clear that “[o]ur decision, then, in no sense reflects an intention to leave the community, but rather a determination to stay with it.”<sup>207</sup> Nichol’s understanding of a successful church stood in contrast to that of his predecessor, Ted Dougherty, whose focus on church development, including institutionalized programs and the expansion to the College Avenue property, brought the church national attention. Walker Knight, having adopted Nichol’s anti-institutional philosophy, described Oakhurst Baptist under Dougherty: “The important things had become the organizations, the methods, the buildings, and the huge debt. New members were needed for the contribution they could make to the institution...”<sup>208</sup> In focusing the church back on the people of the neighborhood, Nichol changed the tone at Oakhurst Baptist in an important way.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 21 August 1968, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>206</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 10 April 1969, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>207</sup> John Nichol, Pastor’s Pen, *Oakhurst Messenger*, 17 April 1969, (privately printed, held at Oakhurst Baptist Church Library, Decatur, GA).

<sup>208</sup> Knight, 20.



Figure 7. Walker Knight (left) and Bill Jackson (right) consult with John Nichol (center) in his office at Oakhurst Baptist Church. (photo courtesy of Lynn Farmer, Oakhurst Baptist Church historian)

Under Nichol's leadership, the weekday program continued to expand and change. About a year after he came to Oakhurst, the church hired Bill Jackson as the community minister to administer the weekday programs, enlist lay people to participate in them, train staff and other leaders for ministry, and lead the Decatur-area churches involved in the cooperative initiative to expand weekday programs for the area. Regional, state, and national Baptist organizations took an interest in the work in Oakhurst: Jackson held an appointment as a missionary under the

Home Mission Board and was also supported by the Georgia Baptist Convention and Atlanta Baptist Association.<sup>209</sup> A few months after they hired Jackson, Oakhurst Baptist also called Durward V. Cason to be associate pastor to develop a ministry for senior citizens and assist with the weekday program.<sup>210</sup> With additional staff, the church increased the programs it offered, including a preschool program on Wednesdays to correspond with the Mothers' club, a "study hall" for neighborhood children organized by the youth, a one-on-one tutoring program for students, cub scouts, and a twice-monthly well-baby clinic, a partnership with the DeKalb

<sup>209</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 15 November 1967, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>210</sup> "Decatur Church Working on Inclusive Ministry," *Christian Index*, 1 February 1968.

County Health Department that provided free examinations and injections by a doctor and nurses for neighborhood infants.<sup>211</sup>

As Oakhurst Baptist continued to minister to the community, some neighbors began to visit church services. By early 1968, about fifty African Americans attended Sunday school, but had not yet joined, although about thirty Cubans had “converted” through the Hispanic ministry by that point.<sup>212</sup> No African Americans officially joined Oakhurst Baptist until February 1969 when Jack Clark, a chaplain for the state mental health institution, and his family presented themselves to the church for membership.<sup>213</sup> Although they were accepted into the fellowship, it was not without controversy. After joining, they soon received an anonymous letter saying they had caused “unrest” in the church, asking “wouldn’t you be happier with your own race if you could know the general feeling of the entire membership?” The letter implied that most white members preferred that they not join. The Clarks struggled with the decision, too. They visited worship services, Sunday School, church activities, and had conferences with the pastor before concluding that they “sensed the earnestness of the church’s struggle to project an honest witness of the gospel in the community” which made them comfortable joining.<sup>214</sup>

In June 1971 Oakhurst added its first black staff member, John Cross, who, when the church put it to a vote, was unanimously called to be the new associate pastor.<sup>215</sup> Bill Jackson had resigned as community minister in December 1969 to become the Coordinator for the Decatur Cooperative Ministry, the newest and strongest iteration of the work Oakhurst Baptist

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<sup>211</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 31 August 1968, Oakhurst Baptist Records; *Oakhurst Messenger*, 28 March 1968.

<sup>212</sup> “Decatur Church Working on Inclusive Ministry,” *Christian Index*, 1 February 1968.

<sup>213</sup> Wright, 232.

<sup>214</sup> Knight, 107, 105.

<sup>215</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 21 June 1971, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

had initiated in Decatur several years earlier.<sup>216</sup> Jackson remained active in the church as a lay member, though, chairing the missions committee in 1971. The weekday programs continued to change under Cross, who created an after school program, community dialogue group focused on political involvement, and a literacy program.<sup>217</sup>

Indeed, the weekday program continued to expand each year as Oakhurst Baptist learned more about its community's needs. Its conviction to stay in a changing neighborhood led it to be progressive in other areas of church life as well. In 1971 Oakhurst established a special committee on ordination, and the next year presented a recommendation to the congregation that "the church offer ordination to any ministerial staff member at his or her request in recognition of his or her function as a professional minister in the midst of our ministering community."<sup>218</sup> Including the phrase "or her" was radical in a Southern Baptist church. Southern Baptists still do not ordain women, and today Oakhurst Baptist is associated with the American Baptists U.S.A. instead of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>219</sup>

Oakhurst Baptist Church was unique in its embrace of its community. It sacrificed reputation as a leading church in 'development' for an unpopular journey of reconciliation. As an institution it suffered losses in members—those that could not stand to integrate—and finances. In 1973 it faced a financial crisis that prompted the church staff to offer their resignations so that the church could sustain a ministry in the neighborhood. They averted the crisis, keeping the staff, but their embrace of the community forced them to make difficult decisions.<sup>220</sup> They were willing to make the financial sacrifice to maintain their integrity as a church, just as John Nichol

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<sup>216</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 3 December 1969, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>217</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference, 13 October 1971, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>218</sup> Minutes of Oakhurst Baptist Church in conference 11 October 1972, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

<sup>219</sup> Oakhurst Baptist Church, "Affiliations," Oakhurst Baptist Church, <http://www.oakhurstbaptist.org/who-we-are/affiliations> (Accessed 2 March 2013).

<sup>220</sup> "Report...from Special Personnel Committee," 26 September 1973, Oakhurst Baptist Records.

so often taught. Indeed, like Rainbow Park Baptist and West End Presbyterian, many white members moved away rather than be a part of the new ministry. But some Oakhurst members moved back to the neighborhood, sacrificing their own financial investments in real estate to participate in the ministry of the church. Oakhurst Baptist is still located at 222 East Lake Drive. Ironically enough, the neighborhood is once again experiencing transition. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* featured Oakhurst in a 2004 article, saying that “[p]roperty values are rising, and builders are putting up new homes on in-fill lots.”<sup>221</sup> This ‘church that stayed’ and its members still living in Oakhurst have been rewarded by the ebb and flow of the real estate market, but more importantly, they have earned a reputation of maintaining integrity.

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<sup>221</sup> “Oakhurst,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 20 June 2004.

### **Conclusion: A Theological Hindrance to Social Change**

In his 1966 book *Southern Churches in Crisis*, Samuel Hill wrote about the changes in society and culture that southern churches faced. Among them was urbanization, which brought people of different races, backgrounds, and cultures into a shared space. As Jim Crow was slowly dismantled in Atlanta and blacks had more resources to purchase homes outside of historically black districts, whites were forced to interact with African Americans in new ways. Hill saw these circumstances as an opportunity for the church “to come forward as healer and spokesman in the service of modulating explosive problems into constructive energies,” but he expected that “it is ill equipped for this role, because of its history and reigning values.”<sup>222</sup> In addition to a wide acceptance of racial segregation, they emphasized evangelism and the miracle motif instead of social justice.<sup>223</sup> Hill knew that the 1960s presented the southern churches with the opportunity to embrace African Americans and fight for social change in new ways, but he was not hopeful that it would.<sup>224</sup>

His suspicions were well founded, as this study of Atlanta churches has shown. Although Oakhurst Baptist Church remained in a black neighborhood and practiced integration and social justice, it was exceptional. The reasoning, process, and intention may have varied greatly across congregations, but the vast majority of white urban churches in Atlanta chose to relocate or close in reaction to neighborhood racial transition. As the white population in the city dwindled, Atlanta’s suburbs grew dramatically and were almost entirely white until recent decades.<sup>225</sup> Whites living in the Atlanta suburbs, especially in the counties north of Atlanta, built a new

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<sup>222</sup> Hill, Samuel S. Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 176, 5.

<sup>223</sup> Stark, Rodney, Bruce D. Foster, Charles Y. Glock, and Harold E. Quinley, *Wayward Shepherds: Prejudice and the Protestant Clergy*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 102-3; Woodbridge, John D., Mark A. Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Gospel in America: Themes in the Story of America’s Evangelicals*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 246-7.

<sup>224</sup> Hill (1966), 81, 107, 82, 182.

<sup>225</sup> Kruse, 243-4.



world separate from the city, including new places of worship. Like most every other institution in the suburbs, these new churches were almost entirely racially homogenous, as the whites fleeing the city had desired.

In the commuting suburban culture, churchgoers had many options. Congregations were no longer defined by parish boundaries or neighborhood identity as in the 1950s and 60s. Churchgoers became consumers and churches competitors in a market.<sup>226</sup> This was especially true in the suburbs, where some of the most successful and powerful Christians lived. Few such Christians would choose to attend a church that would challenge them to forgo their social or economic power.<sup>227</sup> Similar to churches in the 1960s and 70s, these congregations composed of individualistic evangelicals could easily stifle a progressive pastor. Charles B. Thomas, who conducted a study of pastors facing racial controversies, wrote that congregations “expect the minister to do nothing (such as taking a prophetic stand) which would interfere with the harmony and growth of the membership.”<sup>228</sup> In addition, laymen or clergy that desired to challenge the status quo were “ghettoized” because they were unwelcome in most white evangelical churches.<sup>229</sup> Therefore, change was unlikely in white suburban churches as theological and racial homogeneity converged.

This further segregation between white and black churches perpetuates and even deepens inequalities between whites and blacks in the United States. It is important first to understand that nearly all inequality among groups in American society is tied to race, including income difference, education, residential location, occupation, and incarceration rates. For this reason,

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<sup>226</sup> Goen, C. C., *Broken Churches, Broken Nations: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 46.

<sup>227</sup> Emerson, 164.

<sup>228</sup> Thomas, Charles B. Jr., “Clergy in Racial Controversy: A Replication of the Campbell and Pettigrew Study,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 4 (June 1985): 379-390, 382.

<sup>229</sup> Emerson 166.

racial segregation is inherently unequal, so when churches are racially homogeneous, it undercuts efforts to fight against systems that perpetuate racial inequality.<sup>230</sup>

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith have written extensively on how segregated churches are complicit in deepening inequality. First, they found that the more religious churchgoers are, the more likely they are to have close friends within their denominations. This limits opportunities for cross-racial friendships since denominations are largely segregated.<sup>231</sup> Second is a phenomenon called “ethical paradox of group loyalty,” in which people are more loyal to their own group than to others outside the group. This loyalty becomes an “ethical paradox” because it creates an aversion to outsiders. So while a group of Christians may be comprised of kind, caring, and generous individuals, because they form a group, they can be unkind, apathetic, and self-serving as a collective interacting with outsiders. When a group is also racially homogeneous, their group loyalty becomes a racialized ethical paradox.<sup>232</sup>

Furthermore, Emerson and Smith conducted studies that showed that white conservative evangelicals perpetuate racialized systems more than other whites and other white Christians. Many whites understand racism to be the result of personal attitudes that produce discrimination between individuals. They fail to see how racialized systems still perpetuate inequality even in the absence of prejudiced intentions on the part of individuals. Conservative whites, then, understand the solution to ending racism as ignoring the existence of race altogether.<sup>233</sup> According to their logic, if all humans are created equally and given equal opportunities, then the factors that cause unequal outcomes are “individual, relational, historical, or governmental

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<sup>230</sup> Emerson, 155-6.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>232</sup> Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158.

<sup>233</sup> Wellman, David T., *Portraits of White Racism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 20-3.

deficiency.” If race plays no part in disparity, then the responsibility of social ills falls to individuals, and in the case of racial disparity, black individuals.<sup>234</sup>

Indeed, this worldview aligns with the miracle motif. Perhaps because of their theological beliefs, white conservative Protestants are more likely to understand inequality to be rooted in individuals’ decisions than are other whites and less likely to see racial inequality in structural terms than other whites. In addition, they found that “conservative religion intensifies the different values and experiences of each racial group,” because black conservative Protestants are “less individualistic and more structural in their explanations of racial inequality” than other blacks.<sup>235</sup> Not only do conservative white evangelicals blame individual African Americans for the disparity they face, but they are most unlike black conservative evangelicals in their understanding of economic and social disparities.

Ultimately, the ways conservative white evangelicals propose to end racism and the social ills tied to race fall short. The miracle motif, upon which most conservative white evangelicals base their approach to social justice, allows Christians to avoid working with social reformers. If evangelism is the sole appropriate response to injustice, then there is no need to address social issues, and far fewer resources are devoted to them. The miracle motif also overlooks the fact that new converts do not automatically become mature Christians. Lee Nash, historian and religious scholar, wrote that new converts were “left cooing in the lap of a church so obsessed with its evangelistic function that Christian growth is pursued and defined in terms of preparation for evangelistic witness,” and often neglects social concern. They are not taught to

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<sup>234</sup> Emerson, 105.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 105, 96-7.

have social awareness needed to address issues society faces.<sup>236</sup> Finally, the miracle motif “mistakenly presumes that multilevel problems can be solved by unilevel solutions.” In short, relying on individual conversions to change society is an approach that is both inadequate to address social problems and misunderstands them, therefore perpetuating inequality.<sup>237</sup>

According to a telephone survey, very strong evangelicals believed the most important way to address racism was to get to know people of another race. Sociologists Jackman and Crane have found that although this practice may improve whites’ “social dispositions toward blacks,” it is largely ineffective at even changing whites’ beliefs about African Americans, let alone systems that oppress them. Prejudice is not derived from personal animosity, but from “an implicit sense of group position,” so even if one belonging to a dominant group has a positive affect toward one in a subordinate group, they will still defend their privileges against the subordinate group.<sup>238</sup>

John Perkins, a ground-breaking Christian advocate and practitioner of social justice and racial reconciliation, encourages whites pursuing reconciliation to move into urban spaces to fully understand the challenges faced there. Most conservative white evangelicals find this suggestion unthinkable. Emerson and Smith record the responses of an interviewee pursuing interpersonal racial reconciliation, a white suburbanite Christian. When asked about Perkins’ teaching, she said “I am just crusty enough to say that Perkins’s idea, it’s going to affect real estate value. So you’ve got to be willing to pay financially for it as well.” The ideal, to her, was nice to consider, but true reconciliation was too costly financially. Her sentiments are shared among most white suburbanite evangelicals. The innately human aversion to discomfort has

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<sup>236</sup> Nash, Lee, “Evangelism and Social Concern,” In *The Cross and the Flag*, edited by Robert G. Clouse, Robert D. Linder, and Richard V. Pierard, 133-55, (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1972), 134, 136.

<sup>237</sup> Emerson, 131.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 130.

caused them to pursue justice and reconciliation by simply asking for forgiveness and seeking new converts, two approaches inadequate to bring lasting change.<sup>239</sup>

It was an aversion to discomfort that caused the exodus of white, evangelical churches out of Atlanta's racially transitioning neighborhoods in the 1960s and 70s. It has long been said that the most segregated hour in America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, but this hour in American history gave white Christians an opportunity to integrate their churches while, for a brief moment, their neighborhoods were integrated. The widespread decision of white Christians to leave the city only deepened the divide between blacks and whites by adding one more layer of separation, spatial distance, between them. Suburbanites now possess what Kruse calls "collective amnesia about the nation's troubling history of residential apartheid, school segregation, and economic discrimination" that was exacerbated by the rise of the suburbs. Even though some churches, like West End Presbyterian Church and Rainbow Park Baptist Church, attempted to remain in racially transitioning communities, both the social and economic pressures on whites to abandon those churches meant that they too transitioned with the community. They were unwilling to make financial sacrifices to pursue justice.

Oakhurst Baptist Church chose to make those sacrifices, and they became a host of integrated ministry and social justice. Many churches in Atlanta were given that opportunity, and despite the efforts of progressive ministers and denominational bodies, most churches chose the comfort of the white suburbs and a theology that allowed them to relish in the benefits of being white. Their decisions make it even more difficult for white evangelicals today to work against the powers of injustice because they are only further removed by time and space from African Americans and the social problems that many poor black urban communities face. White

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 130.

suburbanite evangelicals can learn from both the prophetic voices and the segregationist decisions of white church leaders of the past to finally live into the hymn of Kirkwood Baptist Church, “Blest be the Tie that Binds,” embracing each other not just on a basis of white racial identity but in the “Christian love” that the song celebrates.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> *The Book of Hymns: Official Hymnal of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1979), 306.

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