

Sex Scandal Cuts Into Church of Television Minister With PM-Cathedral-Sex-Box

CINDY ROBERTS January 9, 1993



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ATLANTA (AP) — A sex scandal that has grown to include four ministers from one family has halved membership and donations at a church that was one of President Bush's "1,000 Points of Light."

The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, an independent charismatic congregation led by Bishop Earl Paulk in suburban DeKalb County, had grown to be one of the largest in the Atlanta area.

It boasts a multiracial ministry of social services, a 7,700-seat neo-Gothic cathedral and a television ministry that takes its message to most states, much of Central America and South Africa. At its peak, it claimed 12,000 members, 24 pastors and \$1 million annual contributions.

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Because of its community ministries, Bush designated the church one of his "Points of Light."

Then the allegations began.

Paulk's former biographer, Tricia Weeks, alleges he had a two-year extramarital affair with her ending in September 1988. Paulk has denied it.

Two former church employees say they had affairs with the Rev. Don Paulk, the bishop's brother and church co-founder. Don Paulk, whose wife is the church's music director, admitted to one of the affairs in May and stepped down from the pulpit for three weeks.

Two former church members say they were involved with the Rev. Duane Swilley, the Paulks' married nephew. Swilley was disciplined early last year after admitting he fondled a woman several years ago when he headed the church's youth program.

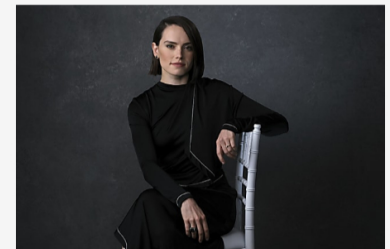
And a member of a sister church in nearby Cobb County says she was seduced by her pastor, the Rev. Alan Mushegan, another Paulk nephew.

The women charge that the ministers pressed them into having sex, saying they would be serving God. They are lobbying for a state law that would make it a felony, punishable by one to three years in prison, for clergy to have sex with members of their congregations.

Don Paulk and Swilley have declined to discuss the latest allegations, which surfaced in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in December. The bishop has said they are part of a conspiracy to destroy the ministry he has spent 30 years building. Mushegan did not return telephone messages for comment.

At last Sunday's sermon, the bishop called 1992 "the most valuable" time

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of his life because God was testing him.

"In the midst of the battle, learn how to rejoice," he exhorted the congregation.

The church has dropped a \$24 million libel lawsuit filed against seven former church members, including two of the women who made the sex complaints.

The lawsuit, which said the defendants had cost the church half its members and about \$90,000 a week in offerings by circulating rumors, was dismissed at the church's request in December after a judge imposed a gag order and ordered negotiations.

The Rev. Kirby Clements, an associate pastor, said the lawsuit was to head off potential litigation. John Shaw Jr., an attorney for three of the defendants, said they plan no legal action against the church.

By soliciting tithes of at least 10 percent of its members' income, the church has been able to build a Bible college, a school and a \$12 million sanctuary the size of a fortress.

But those expansions have left it with \$20 million of debt. Making payment on that debt is a "significant challenge," Clements said.

The church has had to cut its staff from 200 to 50 and reduce its monthly budget in half to \$80,000, he said. Worse, it has cut out local television, one of its main methods of attracting new members.

But he said the church will overcome.

"The church is surviving and it will continue on. I have to believe once things are settled, there will be people who will return."

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