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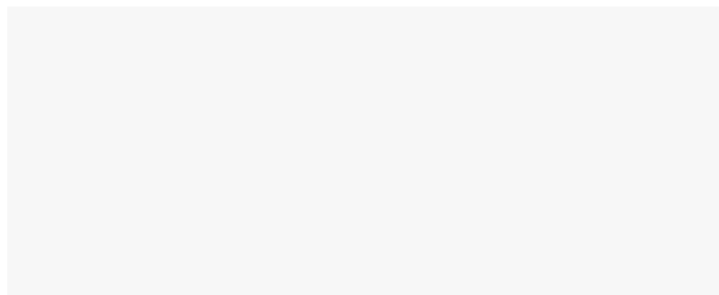
AN INSTANCE OF WOLVES IN SHEPHERDS' CLOTHING?

By **Gustav Niebuhr**
February 3, 1993

DECATUR, GA. -- For years, Chapel Hill Harvester Church billed itself as a place of "refuge and reconciliation," a spiritual oasis for the walking wounded in the transient suburbs east of Atlanta.

On billboards and in TV commercials, the independent, charismatic church reached out to troubled teenagers, divorced adults, addicts and alcoholics, among others. In an area churning with white flight, it preached a soothing message of racial harmony, offering common ground for blacks and whites to share worship.

Services rocked with vibrant music and vivid dramas; pastors proclaimed "words of knowledge" they said they got straight from God. Membership exploded. The church won plaudits from politicians and police. In 1982, the founder and senior pastor, the Rev. Earl Paulk Jr., took the title "bishop." And in 1991, for social work with local poor, the church was named one of President George Bush's "points of light."



But these days, Chapel Hill -- which recently moved into a new, 7,000-seat sanctuary on its 100-acre campus and rechristened itself the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit -- is itself deeply troubled. Paulk and three other pastors, his younger brother Donald and two nephews, have been accused of sexual misconduct by former members -- who, in making those claims, have squarely punched one of the hot-test buttons in American religion today.

Concern over clergy sexual misconduct -- driven by accusations and lawsuits by aggrieved parishioners nationwide -- rages like prairie fire in many religious circles. Last year, one denomination, the Christian

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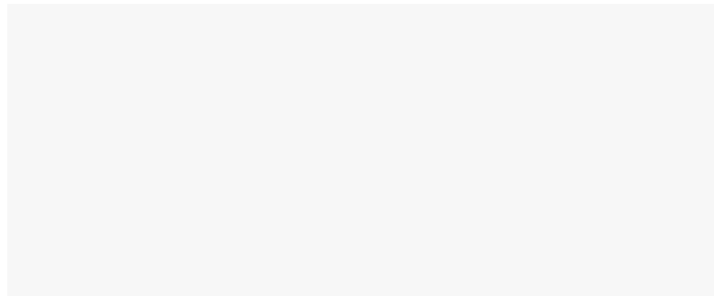
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many religious leaders last year, the denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, officially declared it a "sin" and instructed local congregations to draw up procedures to deal with it. Another, the Church of the Brethren, adopted a code of ethics with penalties for errant clergy that range from probation to outright defrocking.

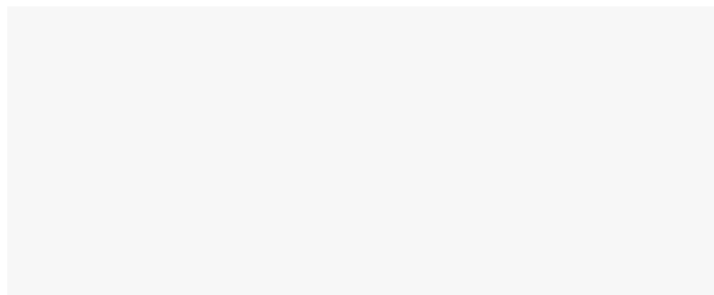
Thanks to the uproar at Chapel Hill, the issue has also begun to stir secular authorities in Georgia. State Rep. Gail M. Buckner, an Atlanta area Democrat, said she wants to introduce a bill into the Georgia legislature mandating prison terms for clergy sex abusers, similar to one enacted last year criminalizing sexual abuse of patients by psychotherapists. Because of constitutional guarantees of church-state separation, "it is a very difficult piece of legislation to accomplish," Buckner said, but added, "I haven't given up."



The negative publicity has taken a toll on the church.

Since last year, thousands of members have quit, and weekly donations are down to about \$70,000 from around \$170,000, forcing the church to discuss a new payment schedule with bondholders of its approximately \$20 million debt, said O. Jackson Cook, Chapel Hill's attorney. In November, sensing a conspiracy, the church filed a \$24 million lawsuit against seven former members, alleging they were trying to wreck Chapel Hill economically.





Although the suit was withdrawn last December, Cook said "there was a group of people who were actively soliciting members not to participate and not to contribute." Based on his interviews with other church members, he said, he identified as "a ringleader" Paulk's former spokeswoman and the ghostwriter of his autobiography, Tricia Weeks.



Until she quit Chapel Hill in 1991, Weeks was one of the church's most visible staffers. Now, she is Paulk's most persistent critic, accusing the tall, silver-haired cleric of using a warped theology to push her into an adulterous relationship of more than two years.

"He continually said the Kingdom of God is built on trust," and that

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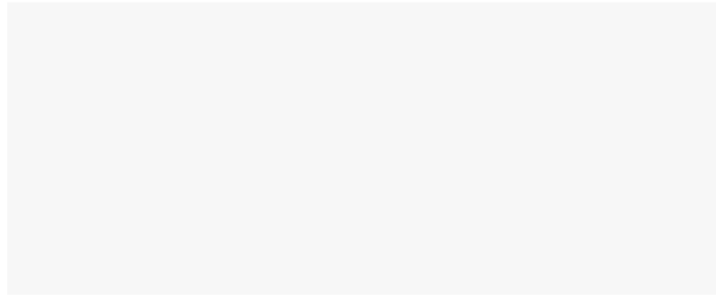
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certain "special relationships" outside marriage were "honorable to God," said Weeks, who, like Paulk, is married. "It left me feeling I was not trusting God or spiritually immature," she said, if she did not agree to an affair.

"It was the closest thing to mind control you have ever seen," said Weeks, who teaches English in a local high school.

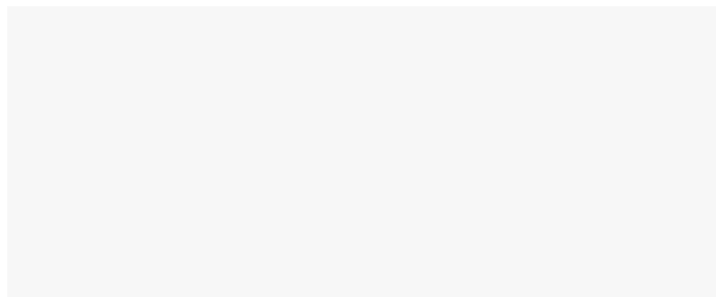
"We categorically deny that," said Cook, who has advised church officials not to comment on the allegations. "I think Tricia Weeks is living in a fantasy world and her idea of a relationship with Earl Paulk is a delusion. She may believe it, but it is absolutely not true."



Shortly after Chapel Hill filed its lawsuit, naming Weeks among the defendants, she called a news conference. Three other women joined her - two saying they previously had been coerced into sexual activity (that stopped short of intercourse) with the Rev. Duane Swilley, a Chapel Hill pastor and a nephew of Paulk's, the third saying she had been involved with another Paulk nephew, the Rev. Alan Mushegon, pastor of a separate, independent congregation across town. WITH ANOTHER PAULK NEPHEW, THE REV. ALAN MUSHEGON, PASTOR OF A SEPARATE, INDEPENDENT CONGREGATION ACROSS TOWN.

Cook discounted the claims against Swilley, who he said has completed a church-run counseling program for ministers who have experienced problems.

"There were some allegations of touching," Cook said. "My God, it's charismatic religion -- people touch each other in church all the time." Mushegon is represented by Cook's partner, Ernest D. Brookins, who was not available for comment; however, Cook called the allegations against Mushegon "totally discredited."

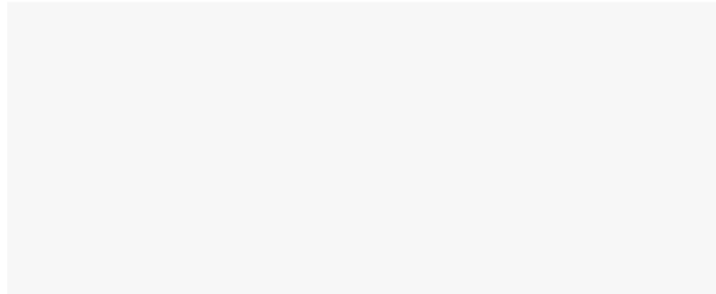


(In a separate, earlier news conference, another church member said she had an affair with the Rev. Donald Paulk. The church does not dispute this, saying through Cook that Donald Paulk has been relieved of all but administrative duties and that the church has reached "an accommodation" with the woman.)

accommodation" with the woman.)

In the meantime, the church has been hit with other charges, leveled by former members who accuse Paulk of acting as an ecclesiastical dictator who threatened hellfire against those who did not give heavily to the collection plates.

Thumbing through a copy of a book called "Toxic Faith," the Rev. Barry Smith, who resigned from Chapel Hill last year, accuses the church of being so authoritarian that questions about finances were placed off limits by Paulk. "He taught us that when God speaks, there is no questioning," said Smith, 31.



Johnny Enlow, 33, a former deacon, said that during the building of the cathedral, the pastor demanded his flock "double-tithe" -- contribute 20 percent of their income -- or risk damnation.

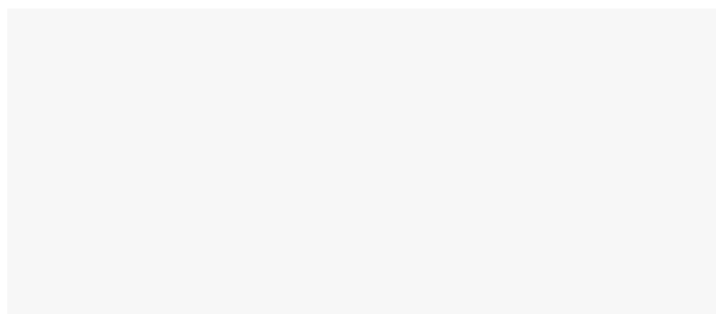
"It got to the place where people felt they were outside the will of God if they didn't double-tithe," Enlow said. "It was a threat to contribute 20 percent of their income -- or risk damnation."

"It got to the place where people felt they were outside the will of God if they didn't double-tithe," Enlow said. In 1991, his last full year there, he gave \$15,000. "That was over one-third of my total income," he said. "And I wasn't even close to being a top giver."

Judy Hough Finan, 27, one of the two women who said she had sexual involvement with Swilley, said Paulk's frequent preaching on the need for members to obey church authority made a powerful impression on her mind. "I really thought those people knew everything. They would never tell a lie," she said. "If my feelings and their feelings didn't match, they were right." She added ruefully: "I've been duped -- big time."

But in meetings with staff still at Chapel Hill, Cook said he found no evidence to support any of these charges.

"The place appears to me to be run very democratically," he said. "At no point in private conversations with these people {at the church} did I find a discordant note, not even the slightest evidence of anything other than a great love of the church and respect for Earl Paulk."



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