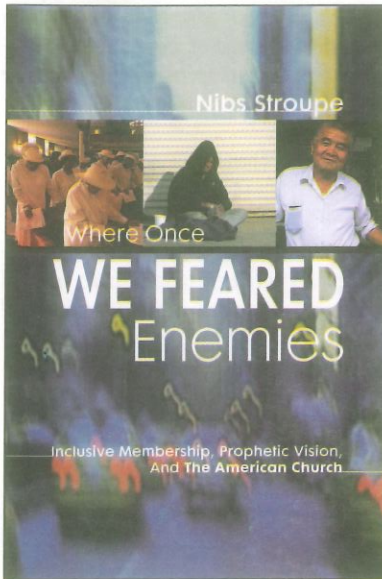


Embracing
Diversity

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Where Once We Feared Enemies *Inclusive Membership, Prophetic Vision, And The American Church*

by

Nibs Stroupe

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Whether we are conscious of it or not, we fear difference. That often unwarranted fear leads

us to create enemies in our hearts and minds — and fear was no stranger to Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, as confessed by Pastor Nibs Stroupe: *“We have listened to one another’s stories here, and we have discovered that the people we feared, those monsters we thought would destroy us — because of different skin colors, different genders, different sexual orientations, different economic categories — they are really our sisters and brothers, the folks for whom our hearts long.”*

In the 1960s the Oakhurst congregation was 900 members strong, but by the time Nibs Stroupe arrived in 1983, “white flight” had left less than 100 on the church’s dwindling membership rolls. Since then, Oakhurst has undergone an extraordinary transformation, re-inventing itself as a growing community that welcomes everyone. The congregation has attracted national attention for its radically inclusive and egalitarian diversity, which extends beyond racial integration to class, gender, sexual orientation, and theological perspective. How have people from such dissimilar backgrounds come together to create a harmonious and thriving whole? In what biblical vision is it rooted and shaped? By what theological resources is it fed and sustained? The heart of the answer to these questions lies in the exceptional sermons of Nibs Stroupe.

Growing out of the experience of a multi-cultural congregation in which diversity is both valued and feared, these messages offer an uncompromising prophetic vision of the American church’s identity and mission. Stroupe firmly grounds a liberal social viewpoint within the biblical and theological traditions of the church, and he calls us to hear God’s claim on us in our place and in our time. Underlying his powerful sermons is the fundamental conviction that the barriers which separate us from our neighbors have been brought down in Jesus Christ.

Where Once We Feared Enemies will be an indispensable addition to any pastor's library. It is also inspiring and enlightening reading for anyone interested in the future of the American church, as well as its role in the continuing stories of race relations, civil rights, and peace and justice issues.

These sermons are not your typical "social action" homilies. Rather Nibs Stroupe cuts to the quick of the biblical message of Jesus as it impacts the minds and hearts of thinking people of every race, class, and political stripe. This is theologically rich fare that will satisfy and energize Christians and non-Christians alike. These are the kind of no-nonsense sermons that have made Oakhurst one of the most faithful and consistent witnesses to the love and justice-making of the gospel that I have seen in more than half a century of ministry.

Gayraud S. Wilmore

Emeritus Professor of African-American Church History
Interdenominational Theological Center

Here are powerful, persuasive, disturbing, and inspiring sermons that leap from the printed page. This is preaching that loves the biblical text, wrestles with it, delves into it, and moves effortlessly between the text and context. Evangelism and social justice walk hand in hand — characters from scripture like Samuel, Thomas, and Mary Magdalene rub shoulders with Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., and others less well known.

Brian Wren

Conant Professor of Worship
Columbia Theological Seminary

Stroupe models a rigorous biblical theology with a rigorous social analysis in his preaching.... His preaching has a pastoral sensitivity and sensibility often missing from some of the prominent social justice preaching of the 1960s.

Charles R. Foster

Professor of Religion and Education
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

About The Author

Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe and his wife, Caroline Leach, have been the pastors of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, since 1983. They are the co-authors of *O Lord, Hold Our Hands*, a book detailing Oakhurst's unique multi-cultural ministry. Stroupe is also the author of *While We Run This Race*, which won the 1996 Gustavus Myers Award for outstanding book on human rights. Stories on Stroupe and his Oakhurst ministry have been featured in numerous media outlets, including *Time*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *NBC Nightly News*, CNN, and National Public Radio, and in several books.

***Where Once We Feared Enemies* and other fine
CSS titles are available at your local Christian
bookstore, or order direct from CSS Publishing Co.**

**Toll-Free: (800) 537-1030 Fax: (419) 228-9184
E-mail: orders@csspub.com Website: www.csspub.com**

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Stroupe, Gibson - Pastor

Leach, Caroline - Associate Pastor

Andrews, Elizabeth - Clerk of Session

Jiles, Patrice - Youth Minister

Balance, Charles - Treasurer

Buss, Nancy - Chancel Choir Director

Price, Joann - Gospel Choir

Teaver, Tommy - Organist

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GIBSON (NIBS) STROUPE
Pastor

CAROLINE LEACH
Associate Pastor

March 25, 2005

Dear Friends:

I am grateful to announce that a book of my sermons has just been published by CSS Publishing Company. They were edited by Chris Boesel, a former Oakhurst member who now teaches religion at Drew. The book is entitled "Where We Once Feared Enemies," and I have enclosed a flyer on it. We will be having a book-signing at Oakhurst after worship on Sunday, April 10, and we'd be glad to see you there. I'd be happy also to do a book signing with your group or church also. I'd also appreciate your sharing news of the book with your community and circles of friends. Thank you for your ministry, and thank you for your support in this. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Peace,



Nibs Stroupe



1/6/93 THE PEOPLE'S BUSINESS

Decatur Posse taught drama at sanctuary

By Joseph Arrington II
STAFF WRITER

"How much wood, can a woodchuck chuck," one student began to say before being interrupted.

"Wood! Wood! With a 'd.' Chuck with a 'k,' a 'k,'" said an excited Harry Bryce, of the Harry Bryce African-American Dance Theatre. "Now start again."

Four hours each weekday for six weeks, 17 students are learning theatre arts on the second floor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church at the corner of Second Avenue and East Lake Drive in Decatur. Huddled around a table, with two fans attempting to cool the classroom, they sat attentively, listening to instructions.

They call themselves the Decatur Arts Posse.

"Decatur Posse is really a spin-off from the name of a theatrical group formed two summers ago that called themselves the DeKalb Arts Posse," said Mr.

Bryce, the posse artistic director. "It also gives them a sense of belonging."

The performing arts camp receives aid from The Atlanta Project, through the Decatur Cluster and the Soapstone Center for the Arts. The Rev. Caroline Leech of Oxford Presbyterian applied for a grant from The Atlanta Project for this summer's program.

The last week of the session, the Decatur Arts Posse will showcase what they have learned to several audiences, possibly totaling 2,000 people.

Various DeKalb County summer camps will visit the church sanctuary for the week of performances. For those unable to travel to the church, the Posse will take the show to them.

"I love acting," said Kerri Bacchus, 13, of Decatur. "I came to become a better actress."

"In school we really don't have a chance to do these types of things," said Nicole Gatlin, 14, of Decatur. "They teach us things



JOEY IVANSCO / Staff

Rashawn Mitchell (front center) rehearses with Decatur Arts Posse teenagers at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church. The group plans a performance dealing with problems of youths.

other kids don't have an opportunity to do."

This group does more than learn to articulate and project words. They have a chance to tackle social issues, perfect writing skills and write original poems, plays and raps about issues from peer pressure to abortion.

"They help show what I can really do," said Jason Andrews, 14, of Lithonia. "It helps keep me off the streets, too."

"It makes me feel important,

learning to write poems," said Harold Jordan, 13, of Decatur. "I can now write good poems in school, ones that can go up on the wall."

Writing and talking about such things help these teenagers realize the dimension of some of these issues, said Mr. Bryce. The program attempts to expose the teenagers to more than the ordinary, to touch different artistic disciplines and establish a sense of challenging one's self, he said.

Fall fest touts Oakhurst's 70th

By Donna Williams Lewis
Staff writer

A church described as having one of metro Atlanta's "few truly biracial" congregations marks its 70th anniversary this weekend.

The celebration for south Decatur's Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, 118 Second Ave. at East Lake Drive, begins at noon Saturday with the third annual Fall Festival.

Founded in a tent at its Decatur location on Sept. 25, 1921, Oakhurst's membership is about half black and half white and includes Hispanics and Koreans, among others.

"I think for the church, this is just a way to celebrate that they survived," said the Rev. Caroline Leach, who co-pastors Oakhurst with her husband, Nibs Stroupe.

"In the movement of the '60s, many churches either closed or opted to move," she said, "and I think this is a real affirmation of

a church that could have chosen to do all of these things, but didn't, and suffered a lot, but held its own.

"I think a lot of people still think of [Oakhurst] as a family church. It is," the Rev. Leach said. "It's just that the family has changed. Instead of a single kind of family where everybody looks alike, it's a family with a lot of different faces and economic levels. We have people who can't read and people who have Ph.Ds. We have people from all over the world."

Robert P. Reno, executive director of the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta Inc. and a member of Oakhurst, said he sought out the church for its diversity. He praised it for becoming "truly biracial in terms of leadership, fellowship and community."

"The church, in addition to worshipping together, socializes together, attends each other's

weddings and funerals and visits in each other's homes," Mr. Reno said.

Said the Rev. Leach, "It's really difficult to think about joining a biracial church. People on both sides think they're giving up something. But we tell people you're gaining more than you're giving up."

The church also is recognized for its extensive community service. It houses an adult education program, Boys Club and Girls Club programs, the Trinity Head Start program for 80 children and an infant-toddler center. The child-care center primarily serves "high-risk" children and is seeking funding.

The church helped initiate the South Decatur Coalition Against Drugs and the day-care center at Decatur High School. It also works with the Oakhurst community improvement project and has a busy street ministry advocating for families in the



Special

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, marking its 70th year, is celebrating its diverse congregation and dedication to community service. Above, members take part in a Christmas pageant.

community, visiting jails and helping youths find jobs.

On Saturday, the free Fall Festival includes health screenings; musical performances featuring country, gospel, rhythm and blues, music of the '60s, and classical tunes; and children's activities including face-painting by a clown, stories and recreation activities conducted by the Decatur Recreation Department.

Food and craft items will be on sale. A Vespers Service of Remembering with several former pastors begins at 7 p.m. in the church sanctuary. The celebration continues Sunday, with an 11 a.m. worship service followed by a bring-your-own picnic dinner on the church grounds.

For more information on the church's celebration, call 378-6284.

Thriving On Challenge

Oakhurst Presbyterian Celebrates 70th Anniversary

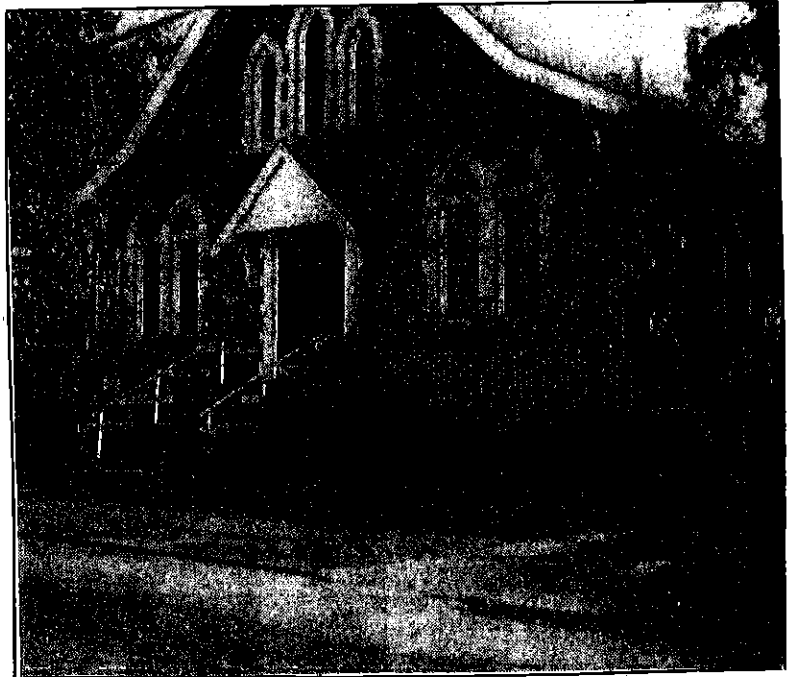
Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, 118 Second Ave., Decatur, will celebrate the 70th anniversary of its founding with a weekend of events, Sept. 28-29.

The celebration will begin on Saturday with the third annual Oakhurst Neighborhood Festival from noon to 3 p.m. on the church grounds. This popular festival includes music of all types, artwork from community schools, crafts, food, games, health services, and other events.

A Vespers Service of Remembering with several former pastors will begin in the sanctuary at 7 p.m. with dessert to follow. The celebration continues on Sunday morning with worship at 11 a.m. followed by a picnic dinner.

Founded in a tent at its Decatur location on Sept. 25, 1921, Oakhurst currently has 130 members. Distinctively bi-racial with black and white members, Oakhurst also includes Hispanic, Korean and Native Americans in its worshipping community. The Reverends Caroline Leach and Nibs Stroupe, one of the first clergy couples to minister in the Presbyterian Church, have pastored at Oakhurst since 1983.

The Rev. Lawrence Bottoms, first black minister of the former PCUS, or "southern" Presbyterian church, is Pastor Emeritus of the congregation. The Rev. James An-



Oakhurst has remained in the location chosen in 1921, serving a unique ministry.

draws, Stated Clerk of CEO, of the Presbyterian Church (USA) also calls Oakhurst his church home. Numerous other church and community leaders from Decatur and DeKalb worship at Oakhurst. The congregation also has a long history of supporting community ministries such as Trinity Head Start, Girls and Boys Clubs, an adult education program, a family support center, an infant-toddler cen-

ter, and advocacy for families at risk.

Faced with the social and economic pressures of changing neighborhoods in the 1960s, Oakhurst Presbyterian Church not only survived the transition but went to thrive in the reconciliation of black and white, rich and poor, young and old.

The church is in Decatur at the corner of East Lake Drive and Second Avenue, the site chosen in 1921. Members invite the public to join in this "70th anniversary celebration of God's faithfulness and community commitment." Phone the church at 378-6284 for more information.

Oakhurst not only survived but went on to thrive in the reconciliation of black and white, rich and poor, young and old.

■ RELIGION

The Gospel of Diversity

Oakhurst Presbyterian is that rarest of institutions: half black, half white and entirely harmonious

By CHRISTOPHER JOHN FARLEY



AT THE OAKHURST PRESBYTERIAN Church, there's a black Jesus in front, a white Jesus in back and folks of both colors in between. The black Jesus depicted on a stained-glass window in front used to be white, but the pastor of Oakhurst, the Rev. Gibson Stroupe, and his wife Caroline Leach tinted the once pink portrait brown. Both Leach and Stroupe are white, and she admits "we did get some flak" for the racial alteration. There were those

who thought Oakhurst was caving in to the dogmatizers of diversity, the whistle blowers of melanin management. Some chose to leave the church and the neighborhood, looking for greener pastures and whiter places in which to live and worship. And then there were those that came, saw and stayed. In a perfect world, religion should be color-blind. Oakhurst isn't in that perfect world. It's in Decatur, Georgia.

Oakhurst, which has a congregation that is roughly half black and half white, is what diversity is all about: people of different races coming together not in the mournful, candle-bearing aftermath of some urban riot or the artificially arranged precursor to some political photo op, but because they *want* to be together. Things in America tend toward being all one thing or all the other. Schools, parties, circles of friends, television sitcoms are often mostly or entirely white or mostly or entirely black. It's especially rare to see a church that is racially mixed with such equanimity. The neighborhood where Oakhurst is located used to be all white, but once a few black families moved in, most of the whites moved out. Oakhurst's congregation was 900 members strong in the 1960s, but after the white flight of the '70s, membership dwindled to only 80 by 1983.

That's when Stroupe took over the church. He was 36 years old then, a youthful, activist minister who had campaigned hard for prison reform in Norfolk, Virginia, and elsewhere. But the decrepit physical state of the 62-year-old church and the demoralized yet intransigent spiritual condition of some of the Oakhurst congregation

initially startled and depressed him. "The white people who stayed at the church wanted things done their way," Stroupe recalls. "And the blacks weren't talking, but it was clear they wanted some changes." What intrigued Stroupe, and made him stay on, was that the congregation was an unusual ethnic mix of white holdovers and black newcomers. Oakhurst's most difficult problem, he decided, could become its greatest strength.

Stroupe began to make changes. He added something to the worship service that he calls "a sharing of concerns and

choir. No one in it knows how to read music, but they learn songs "by ear" and sing them from the heart. And, by most accounts, the music is heavenly.

The changes are working. The congregation has grown and now boasts almost 200 members, many from other neighborhoods. Betsy Cameron and her husband Mark Gray, both in their 30s, heard about Oakhurst while they were teaching English in Malawi in southeast Africa. "To [white] people who have stepped outside their own culture, you feel uncomfortable going to a white church," says Gray. "This is the only church we have attended since we came back in 1993. We feel at home here." Inez Fleming, 46, a family counselor, made a promise to attend the church of her new husband several years ago. She has since been divorced from her mate, but not from Oakhurst, where she has become an outspoken church stalwart. "I had a lot of problems accepting a white person as my spiritual leader," says Fleming. "But Stroupe



ALL TOGETHER NOW: Pastor Stroupe, front, with members of his flock after Sunday services at Oakhurst; upper left, the tinted Jesus in the window above the church's altar

joys" where congregation members stand up and tell anecdotes from their lives. "It's a way to get some of the spontaneity of the black church into our service," he says. "It's also a way for people to see that our lives are more alike than we think." At Palm Sunday service, a black woman got up to say she believes in miracles because the last of several boys in her family was graduating from college, despite the fact that so many young black men are on drugs, in jail or dead. Stroupe also changed Oakhurst's music, switching from stiffer Presbyterian hymns to songs from the black gospel tradition. At first the choir director resisted, purposefully playing off tune during gospel hymns. Now the church has its own mostly black gospel

[whom she calls Nibs] has really been a driving force in my life."

The mayor of Decatur attends Oakhurst, as do some affluent white gays who have settled in the area. "When you come here, you are going to shake the hand of somebody you don't know and would not normally meet," says Stroupe. "We are proclaiming a different reality." This month, Stroupe is releasing a new book on ethnicity in America titled *While We Run This Race: Countering the Power of Racism*. But the real lesson of Oakhurst isn't on a page, it's in the spirit of the gospel music swelling out of the church every Sunday at 11 a.m. Anyone who wants to learn this tune is going to have to do it by ear.

—Reported by
Sylvester Monroe/Decatur

Oakhurst Ladies Create Quilt For Grady

The ladies of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur have been working for months to create a loving birthday gift for Grady Memorial Hospital. A handmade quilt depicts highlights of the 100-year history of the hospital and communicates messages from thankful citizens. The quilt was presented last Friday and will be displayed in the new wing of the hospital. At left: Ceree Bowden works on a square that proclaims: "Nurses, you're 'heary' special." Below: Quilters, left to right from bottom left: Mary Husband, Ruth Darby, Ceree Bowden, Denise Sharif, Hattie Neal, Jannie Byrdsong, Mire Miller, Josephine Reed and Florine Scandrett.

Jim Cook Jr./Staff

6/92





Staff photo by Donna Williams

GOOD SIGN: Oakhurst Presbyterian Church Pastor Gibson 'Nibs' Stroupe, right, and co-author Elder Inez Fleming sign their book 'While We Run This Race: Countering the Power of Racism' at Final Touch in Decatur for Mimi Walker and Bob Leslie.

Decatur pastor practices what he preaches: New book confronts racism in America

By Marnie Dwiglins
Neighbor Staff Writer

In keeping with DeKalb's multi-cultural community, a pastor in Decatur has written a new chapter for his church with a book expected to draw audiences of all nationalities.

The Rev. Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe has been pastor at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church for 12 years. The church has undergone a significant change from its all-white congregation with 800 members in the early 1960s, to its diverse 180-member group from eight different countries.

Members from the United States, Canada, Panama, China, Nigeria, Mexico, South Africa, Jamaica, and Trinidad make up the half-black, half-white congregation.

Stroupe said his more informal congregation worships differently from traditional, all-white churches by encouraging members to get up and walk across the sanctuary, during Sunday worship services, to shake hands with a stranger.

The church's two choirs represent the diverse group of members joining together. The Chancel

Choir, which sings more traditional hymns, and the Sanctuary Mass Choir, which sings gospel music, both represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

"At first, we had a hard time bringing different cultures together because we all had our own problems," he said. "It can't always be easy, but there is a strong commitment from the congregation to make it work."

Stroupe's book, "While We Run This Race: Countering the Power of Racism," which he cowrote with Inez Fleming, focuses on the continued power of racism and why it is still so powerful in the United States. He said the book is about why Americans can't overcome racism.

"I hope my book will help people deal with racism and come to terms with it," he said. "I also hope people will see each other for humans rather than as different colors."

Oakhurst Presbyterian is active in the community with programs including a new family support center, an infant-toddler center, adult education programs, a clothes closet, and several other youth programs throughout metro Atlanta.

Pastor offers account of a church coming to grips with racism

By David Joyner
STAFF WRITER

Sitting in wooden pews between two stained-glass images of Jesus — one black and one white — members of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur may naturally harbor unusual ideas about race.

And Nibs Stroupe, pastor of the church that has an equal number of black and white members, is no different.

"While We Run This Race," published this year by Orbis Books, is Stroupe's account of how his church is coming to grips with racism and of how society, despite the treacherous struggle of the civil rights movement, remains divided.

The appearance of harmony, Stroupe wrote, is a false one. Race still motivates society — black and white.

"We must begin with a review of our own lives, not to feel guilt or anger, but to be realistic about encountering the power of racism," he wrote. "It is only through a realistic encounter with the roots of racism that the seeds of hope can be born."

White people, Stroupe said, are responsible for the lousy state of race relations in America. They must come out of denial, he wrote, and recognize that darker people are "human beings, just like



WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff

The Rev. Nibs Stroupe is the

author of "While We Run This Race" and pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur. "It is only through a realistic encounter with the roots of racism that the seeds of hope can be born," he wrote.

white, are uncomfortable with its assertive stance.

Released in the middle of April, a spokesman for the publisher said, the book sold 1,800 copies by the end of May.

It was the support of Oakhurst members, Stroupe said, that gave him the courage to write.

Inez Fleming, a black member, said Stroupe is more than her pastor. He is a friend. Fleming helped to chronicle the Oakhurst community, Stroupe said, and contributed a chapter detailing her personal experience entitled "Been in the Storm So Long."

Not everyone will agree with the book, Fleming acknowledges. But talking about race and racism is important.

Fleming, who describes herself as an activist, said she agrees for the most part with Stroupe's beliefs.

"There's a healing process," she said.

"While We Run This Race" is available for \$12.95 at Oxford Books, Cokesbury Bookstore, Chapter 11 Bookstores, Final Touch Bookstore and the Presbyterian Bookstore in the Presbyterian offices on Tully Road. It's also available at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur.

achieved during post-Reconstruction, he said, suffered a similar fate as the advancements made during the 1960's.

Stroupe, who is white, said his book gets mixed reviews among the Oakhurst congregation. Some people, black and

us." The impetus for the book came during a sabbatical several years ago, Stroupe said, while he was reading about Ida Wells, a leader of the 1890s anti-lynching movement. Civil rights for blacks

Oakhurst Presbyterian's diversity demonstrates a church can challenge prejudice, not reinforce it

By John Blake
STAFF WRITER

At Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, the walls are tumbling down. Stop by any Sunday afternoon at the Decatur church, and one will see black and white members singing hymns together. Straight, gay and lesbian worshipers sharing the Lord's supper. Sharply dressed professionals sitting in the same pews as those dressed in shorts and tennis shoes.

There's even a black Jesus and a white Jesus at Oakhurst. A stained-glass portrait of a white Jesus, and a similar portrait of a black Jesus rest in the church's sanctuary.

Eleven o'clock Sunday morning may remain America's most segregated hour, but Oakhurst's diversity demonstrates that a church can challenge prejudice, not simply reinforce it every Sunday morning.

Charles R. Foster, an Emory University professor who performed a national study of cultural diversity in churches, said only "isolated" examples of multicultural churches like Oakhurst exist in the country.

"It is one of the most unusual congregations that I've ever encountered in the country," Foster said.

But most Oakhurst members do not brandish buzzwords like "diversity" or "inclusiveness" to describe their church. They talk about walls.

"For He is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing walls of hostility," an Oakhurst speaker declared one recent Sunday morning. The scripture, from Ephesians, has been adopted as Oakhurst's motto.

Yet, Oakhurst's walls need constant fortification, its members said. The church has an incendiary mix. It includes a white pastor who once opposed the civil rights movement and a black elder who once opposed worshiping with whites. The church is roughly half black, half white. Some members still struggle with the church's recent decision to accept gay and lesbian worshipers.

Twelve years ago, when Nibson Stroupe and his wife, Caroline, also a minister, first arrived, the 74-year-old church was on the verge of closing.

Oakhurst had become a victim of white flight. When whites began to move out of Decatur, Oakhurst's membership plummeted. It went from a peak membership of 900 members in 1960 to just 80 in 1982.

"This place was a fortress, literally and

spiritually," Stroupe said. "The white folks, who were here, wanted to stay, but they didn't want to change. The black folks who were here lived in the neighborhood. They said they were not going to let white folks run them off."

Inez Fleming, a black elder of Oakhurst, joined Oakhurst three years after Stroupe arrived. A blunt-spoken woman who grew up under segregation's thumb in Alabama, she preferred to worship only with blacks. She only joined Oakhurst because her husband attended. Fleming was not too impressed with the handful of white Oakhurst members who stayed.

"I thought white folks were there out of guilt," she said.

A power struggle ensued at Oakhurst after Stroupe arrived. The battles ensued over everything from what type of hymns to sing, to including more minorities in the church's leadership.

What happened at Oakhurst usually occurs in most multiracial churches, Foster said. The church's dominant culture does not want to give up its traditions of worshiping.

"What usually happens in an all-white church, is, if they reach that threshold, then you have a new exodus of whites, and the blacks take over," Foster said.

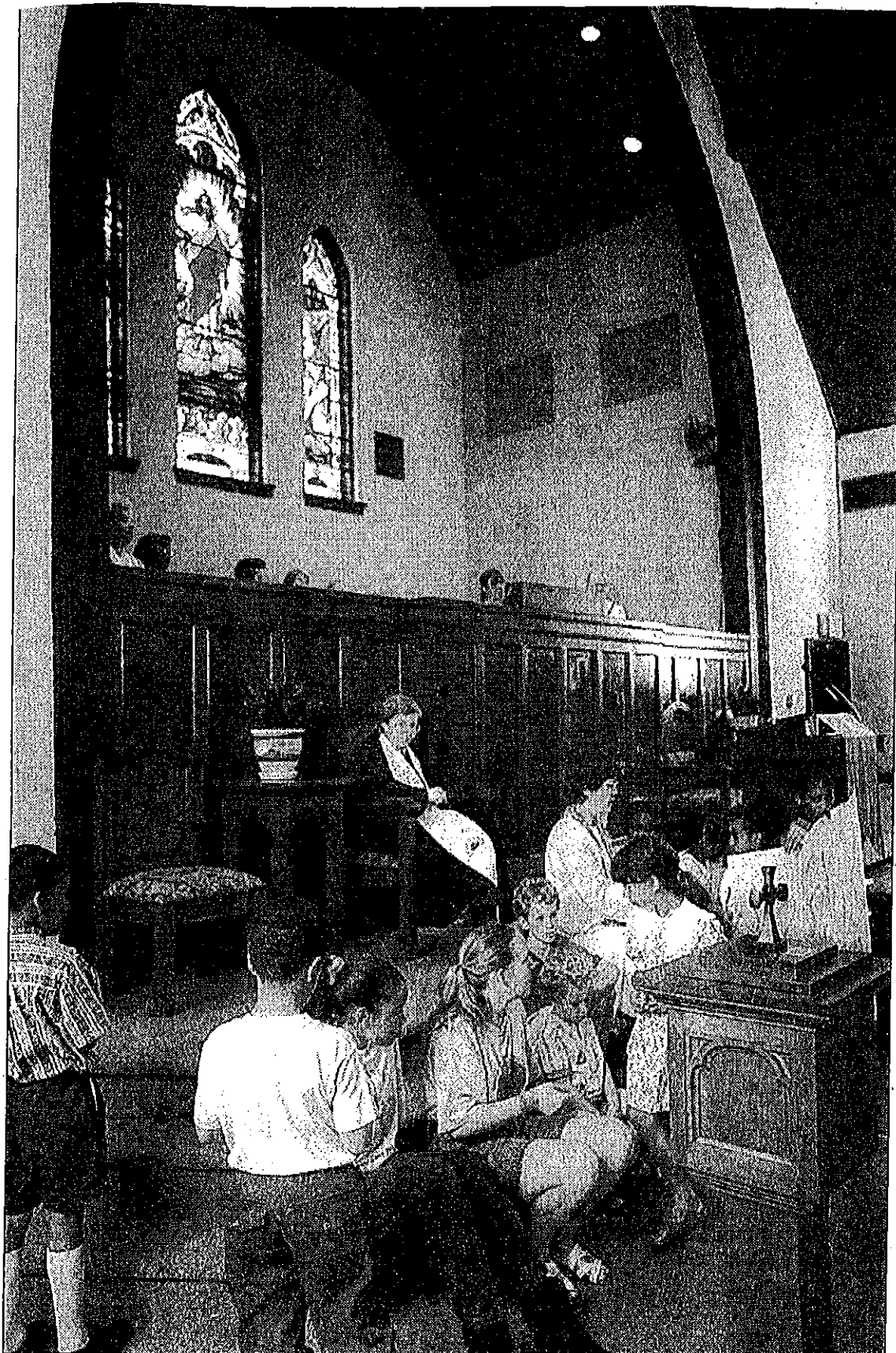
Stroupe, and his wife, Caroline, an ordained minister, took another approach. "You have to change your mind from 'it's a problem' to 'it's a possibility,'" Caroline said.

Stroupe informed the white members that Oakhurst was going to become a multicultural church. Some of them informed him they were leaving. The church plowed ahead with its new mission.

On the advice of black members, Stroupe began to include African-American hymns in the worship alongside the more sedate Presbyterian hymns. The church added a gospel choir. Then it added another element from the African-American tradition, public testimony, a time during each Sunday service when members stand and share their personal joys and concerns. Black leaders were placed in the pulpit.

Women were placed in leadership positions, Caroline said. "We offered leadership opportunities, up-front, clear and visible," she said. "No hidden stuff. No kitchen stuff. No mother stuff."

Constant dialogue among church members helped ease the transition. Oakhurst holds regular forums where members discuss everything from racism in the justice system to the Christian response to homosexuality.



Photos by DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff

Children gather near the pulpit in Oakhurst Presbyterian Church on a recent Sunday. Oakhurst pastor Nibs Stroupe (left) and his wife, Caroline, look on.

Oakhurst pastor ponders racism

By DOLLY PURVIS
Lifestyle Editor

"We struggle because we're not used to being together," said Stroupe. "We (Oakhurst Presbyterian) have been going out into the wilderness and looking for hidden paths."

Racism continues to manifest itself in America, even after the Civil Rights movement, because, Stroupe asserts "white folks won't acknowledge how powerful it (racism) is our lives, and some black people accept the definitions of racism and themselves."

The way to overcome racism, Stroupe posits, is for "whites to take responsibility for racism."

Stroupe, who is better known as "Nibs," will join three other Decatur writers, Pearl McHaney (*A Writer's Eye*, a collection of Eudora Welty's reviews), Charles McNair (*Land O'Goshen*), and Kent Leslie (*Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege*), at a book signing next Thursday night at Final Touch Gallery and Books.

The signing will begin at 5 p.m.

The Rev. Gibson Stroupe's sermon on Sunday at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur was about "God's pursuing Love."

That pursuing love, according to Stroupe, Oakhurst's pastor, is simple: "I belong to God, and God has claimed me."

What puzzles Stroupe, however, is that people don't practice that principle in their every day lives and in interpersonal relationships. He wonders, more specifically, how racism can survive in a culture permeated with the Gospel.

During a sabbatical three years ago, Stroupe began taking a close look at what he calls, "the continuing power of racism." Those thoughts eventually became a book, *While We Run This Race: Countering the Power of Racism*.

Stroupe wrote the book with Oakhurst elder Inez Fleming.

With a congregation of more than 800 members in the 1960s, Oakhurst Presbyterian's membership had dwindled to fewer than 85 members by the time Stroupe arrived in the early 1980s. Oakhurst had fallen prey to "white flight" from the area during the 1970s.

Now, Oakhurst claims nearly 200 members, who live in a unique church community where, according to Stroupe, "men and women, blacks and whites, gays and lesbians can come here and hear the good news."

The "good news," according to Stroupe, is "hearing that our importance is defined by what God says."

Oakhurst continues to struggle with its multi-faceted identity, Stroupe said. It struggles, he added, not because of what is known about interpersonal relations but because of what is not known.

Oakhurst pastor, elder are honored for book

Nibs Stroupe, pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, and Inez Fleming, an elder at the church, recently won the Outstanding Book Award from The Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights in North America for "While We Run This Race."

"While We Run This Race" is about the causes of racism and ways to overcome racism. It was published by

Orbis Books in 1995.

The Gustavus Myers Center offers annual awards for the best scholarship on intolerance. Founded in 1984, its sponsoring organizations include B'nai B'rith, Fellowship of Reconciliation, NAACP, National Conference of Christians and Jews, National Interreligious Commission on Civil Rights, NOW, and the National Urban League.

1/2/97 NewsEVA

A Tale of Two Journeys

The powerful witness of a racially mixed church makes Oakhurst one of the most unusual congregations in the country

By Nancy Anne Dawe



Photos by Nancy Anne Dawe

Nothing prepares a visitor for the moving experience that is Oakhurst Presbyterian Church's Sunday morning service. Not the unpretentious building, often in need of paint and repair; not its modest, residential Decatur, Georgia, neighborhood four miles from downtown Atlanta; not its always-tight budget; not the size of its 175-member congregation. But somehow you emerge from the multicultural service lifted up and energized.

Two stained-glass portraits of Jesus hang in Oakhurst's sanctuary: a black Jesus above the choir loft at the front and a white Jesus overlooking balcony pews at the back—both with outstretched welcoming arms. Between them sits a congregation that is roughly half white and half black and its pastors, Gibson Stroupe and his wife, Caroline Leach, associate pastor.

"Oakhurst has one of the most unusual congregations in the country," says Charles R. Foster, a professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. Foster undertook a national study of cultural diversity in churches and will highlight Oakhurst in his forthcoming book, *We Are the Church: Cultural Diversity and Congregational Life*.

The nearly 40 multicultural churches Foster identified across the United States, mostly urban and all radically different, fall into four categories. One is comprised of many Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches where culture is not as important as liturgy or doctrine for self-identity. Then there are transitional churches whose congregations are changing: becoming black, if they were white; becoming Hispanic, if they were black; former Japanese congregations now Korean. Third are the melting-pot churches that assimilate all their parishioners into a dominant culture.

And then there are churches like Oakhurst

Confronting the Power of Racism

Gibson Stroupe tells how Oakhurst challenged the destructive powers of American racism in his book *While We Run This Race: Confronting the Power of Racism in a Southern Church*,* written in part by his friend and a black elder at Oakhurst, Inez Fleming.

He relates that Oakhurst set its agenda on diversity, and always returned to three important points. First, "God's definition of us is primary . . . the Good News is this: We are given life by God; we are given meaning by God; we belong to God." Second, "Diversity is a gift God has created, and God intends for us to build community on that diverse foundation." Third, "Race has continuing power . . . it is only

in naming it that there can be healing."

"To seek to implement these steps," Stroupe writes, "meant significant shifts for both white and black people. For white folks it meant acknowledging how much we had invested in the system of race. . . . We had to begin to hear that darker folk might be able to help us. . . . For black folk, acknowledging these steps meant a tremendous leap of faith." They had to ask, "Can we be ourselves?"

*Orbis Books, 1995



Inez Fleming, who grew up under segregation's thumb in Alabama, says at Oakhurst, assisted by Nibs Stroupe, she is learning to overcome her distrust of white people

"that embrace all humanity," says Foster. "They are dynamic communities of faith, with long-term pastors who have a real sense of vision. What makes Oakhurst unusual is that a congregation of its size is embracing so much diversity—race, culture, sexual orientation, and class (both economic and educational)."

Oakhurst's story is a tale of two journeys. One is that of a 74-year-old church in a formerly all-white neighborhood, which had a peak membership of 900 in 1962. A victim of white flight, its membership plummeted to just 80 in 1982 as neighborhood

demographics changed and blacks joined the church.

The other journey is that of Gibson ("Nibs") Stroupe, who in 1983, at age 36, came to Oakhurst's pulpit. At the time, he says, "it was a fortress, literally and spiritually. When I first saw the church, every door in the building was locked. And nobody was communicating—the white folks wanted to stay, but not change; the black folks lived in the neighborhood and said they weren't going to let white folks run them off."

In his younger years Nibs Stroupe could not have been a more unlikely future candidate to address Oakhurst's problems. Reared in Helena, Arkansas, by his hardworking mother (his father had abandoned the family before Stroupe was a year old), he was nurtured by members of Helena's First Presbyterian Church. But those were the days of the civil rights movement, and Stroupe absorbed the era's racism. "Everything was defined by whether you were black or white," he says.

Stroupe remembers calling civil rights activists "communists" and "outside agitators," and he was tempted at one point to join the trek of some teenage boys to Ole Miss in 1962 to protest James Meredith's entry into that university. But people and events would point Stroupe toward a different path.

One of those who influenced Stroupe was his high school English teacher, a Jewish woman "who challenged all of us in our all-white segregated school to see life differently from what we'd been told it was by really good people—our parents and others we trusted. She had us read *Cry the Beloved Country*, a story of South Africa, in which I saw black people as human beings. It was stunning!"

Another transforming event that undercut Stroupe's racism was hearing Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in August 1963. "What I saw on television," he says, "was the American Dream, and hundreds of thousands of people—black and white—supporting it."

Stroupe's insights were further deepened as he watched John F. Kennedy's funeral on television



along with the black woman who did the Stroupe family's ironing. "Big Martha cried," he recalls, "and I got my first glimmer of her hopes and dreams as a human being. I began to see other black people as human beings."

While at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, Stroupe turned his insights into deeds; he became an activist in civil rights and political movements on campus and in the city. One particular summer would change his life forever. In 1966 he worked with a church program for 150 black children in New York's tough, inner-city Bedford-Stuyvesant housing project. "All my white Southern perceptions were called into question," he says, "because all the supervisors were black and very competent."

Stroupe attended Vanderbilt Divinity School on a full scholarship, co-founded Nashville's Opportunity House, a halfway house for men released from prison, and in 1975 graduated first

in his class from Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, where he met his wife, Caroline.

For five years Nibs Stroupe and Caroline Leach co-pastored a church in a low-income Norfolk, Virginia, housing project. Stroupe later worked with Death Row prisoners and advocated for prison reform in the state legislature while working for the Southern Prison Ministry in Nashville, Tennessee, his last stop before his call to Oakhurst.

What Stroupe found at Oakhurst at first depressed him, but in time he saw that Oakhurst's unusual ethnic mix, rather than being its most difficult problem, could become its greatest strength.

When Stroupe arrived, "the church was really almost dead," says longtime black member Christine Callier. "There were no children, no Sunday school. We were very discouraged because we realized we couldn't grow without strong leadership and energy.

"Nibs' and Caroline's children (David and

The Oakhurst congregation gathered outside the church

.....



Above: The ritual of friendship; right, an outreach display at the 70th anniversary picnic

Early arrivals on Sunday morning

What makes Oakhurst unusual is that a congregation of its size is embracing so much diversity

Susan, now 16 and 13), were quite young then, and they were able to bring in couples with young children from Columbia Seminary. They also brought in neighborhood children, and that brought adults, so membership started growing.”

“They had an ability to reach out to all people,” comments Azzie Preston, a member since 1972, “and it’s made our church great.” Another member, Decatur’s mayor, Elizabeth Wilson, says, “Nibs brought openness and acceptance of people where they are.” And dead honesty: “We had never heard a white preacher speak frankly about racism before,” says Ethel Steverson, a member of the church’s search committee.

These and other black members advised Stroupe to include African-American hymns in the service along with the more traditional ones. Also from the African-American tradition came a gospel choir (supplementing the regular choir) and a period for public testimony, during which members stand and share their deepest concerns and joys. Among them has been Mayor Wilson, who underwent breast cancer surgery three years ago and found “great support within the church.”

And then there was the black Jesus. “Now that was a big thing!” says Ethel Steverson about the church’s decision to change the original white figure. Stroupe says, “Both black and white members said they needed the sanctuary art to reflect more who we are. It is the single most powerful evangelistic tool we have.”

There were other changes: Black leaders in the pulpit, women in leadership positions, the walls of the church filled with felt banners whose figures are half white, half black. The transition was eased by constant dialogue between members, and regular forums dealing with all sorts of social issues.

“We had found our focus,” says Mary Reimer, a member since 1946. She feels “a deep commitment to the church,” along with her husband, who has been a member all his life.

Matching the inner changes has been an outward reach to the racially mixed south Decatur neighborhood. The church has been instrumental in developing many programs, including Head Start, Boys and Girls Clubs, the South Decatur

What’s It Like Being Black?

It’s pride, trauma, unity . . .

BY JULIAN SHIPP

“**W**hat is this strange thing called pigmentation?” an acquaintance of mine once asked me. I had never considered that question before, but the sincerity in his voice and the strained expression on his face as he held his ebony hand to the light burned inside my

brain. It’s a question I still find myself struggling with, reinforced by February being Black History Month.

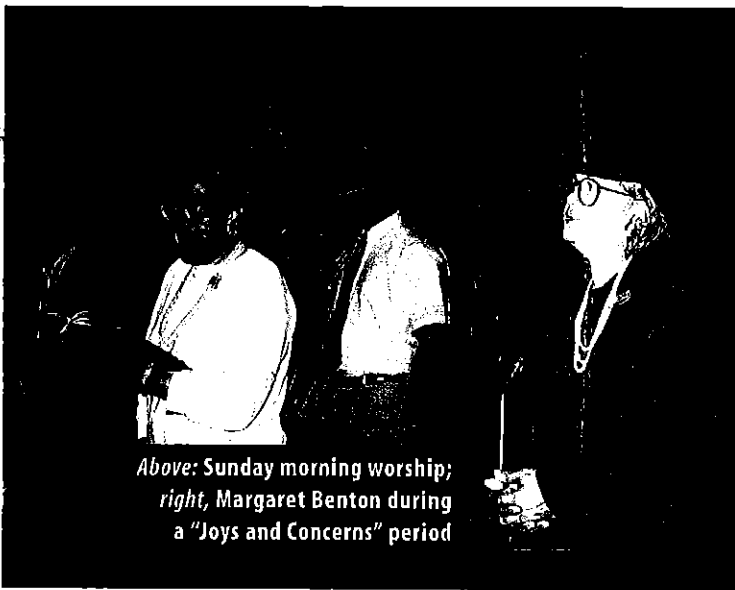
What’s it like, being black? It is at once a blessing and a curse. A marvelous opportunity. An overwhelming responsibility. A genuine privilege. A lifetime stigma.

It’s being able to summon the way you felt after you stomached your first derogatory racial remark. For me, that was in the first grade after being called “nigger” on the playground by a white boy named Billy.

To me there was no rhyme, reason, logic or motive behind why Billy called me that. But his remark remains with me to this day. Every black person I have ever met when asked can recall a similar incident, regardless of how old or young they were at the

time. It’s a permanent trauma.

What’s it like, being black? It’s growing up calling your next door neighbors “Auntie” and “Uncle” even if they weren’t blood relatives. It’s embracing the marvelous notion that all people of color are your brothers and sisters in the big scheme of things. During the 1970s we called ourselves “bloods.” Riding in the front seat of my dad’s car, I could evoke a greeting from every black person I saw in my neighborhood by simply sticking my fist in the air out the window. It



Above: Sunday morning worship; right, Margaret Benton during a "Joys and Concerns" period



Nibs Stroupe and Caroline Leach
.....

Community Development Program, and adult education programs that teach reading skills and prepare people to take the G.E.D. exam. More recently a "Homework Team" has been added to tutor mostly black neighborhood kids.

"Nibs and Caroline are fantastic people who tackle difficult things and live the gospel," Christine Callier says. "They represent what Jesus would want them to represent."

Oakhurst, which once nearly shut its doors, has come alive—its congregation is expanding, its professional and lay leadership are strong, its worship is vibrant. And the word has spread. Oakhurst was featured in *Time* magazine and in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* last year. A number of visitors have come to the church, and 25 new members have joined.

Nibs Stroupe, Caroline Leach and Inez Fleming; who collaborated with Stroupe in writing *While We Run This Race* (see box, page 22), are filling many requests for workshops on racism—not only around Atlanta, in churches both black and white, but in New Orleans and Nashville, in Florida, at the National Council of Churches, and elsewhere.

There is a connectedness at Oakhurst that is missing in much of American life, a culture in which "we're defined by our income, educational level, gender, looks or whatever," says Stroupe. "But the gospel emphasizes that we're defined by God and God's grace, and that God is already working in our lives. With that definition, we can risk getting to know folks because it won't threaten our definition of ourselves." □

Nancy Anne Dawe, an Atlanta-based writer and photojournalist whose photos frequently appear in Presbyterians Today, is a member of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, Ga., and the author of I Lift Up My Eyes to the Hills, Stories of Faith and Joy from Appalachia.

was my first, heady taste of unity.

What's it like, being black? It's the hunger of knowledge my grandmother instilled in me. I remember being the first student in my first-grade class who could read without using his finger to follow the words. It's the pride that beamed in my grandfather's eye when my brother graduated from college. It's having people who love and care about you. It's the priceless asset of your family.

What's it like being black? It's being looked at as evil while riding

in my brother's 450 SL Mercedes Benz hardtop convertible. If I'm dressed up or it's Sunday and I'm on my way to church, then everything's good. If he lets me take the car to, say, the car wash on a Saturday morning and I'm chillin' in a pair of jeans and a hooded sweat shirt or a running suit, then I'm the dopeman and under the close scrutiny of every law enforcement official in sight. It's the epitome of hypocrisy.

What's it like being black? It's enduring fire-and-brimstone

sermons from a minister on an equally hellacious Sunday afternoon. It's the frenzy the latest jam sends you in when it thunders over the stereo. It's the tears you shed when you see crack babies on the news. It's the instinctive stimulation your soul feels without warning.

What's it like being black? It's having knowledge of self and pride in the contributions and sacrifices of your ancestors. It's also having the wisdom to realize you've never truly "made it" in spite of education,

wealth or socio-economic status.

As for the "strange thing" my friend called pigmentation, Webster's dictionary defines it as "coloration in plants or animals due to the presence of pigment in the tissues." Funny—the only thing I find strange about pigmentation is its uncanny ability to make human beings feel indifference, even hatred, toward one another.

Julian Shipp is a reporter for the Presbyterian News Service in Louisville, Ky.

Decatur-DeKalb
News/Sun
2/16/89

Oakhurst To Focus On Black Family

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church will host a forum entitled "Been In the Storm So Long: The Gifts of Black Families" on Sunday, Feb. 26, at 4 p.m.

A distinguished panel will discuss questions of special interest to all concerned with families and will answer questions from the audience. Dr. Rita Dixon, staffer for Racial and Ethnic Concerns, will represent the Presbyterian Church USA denomination. Dr. Bennie Goodwin, a professor at TTC, comes as a director of Christian education.

Other panelists include Elizabeth Wilson, Decatur commissioner and director of the Oakhurst Community Health Center; Dr. Donald Hanchett, an internist in private practice; and the Rev. Fred Taylor, from the Southern Christian Leadership Council.

The panel will focus on gifts that enabled black families to survive in a hostile environment in the past and on some of the dangers faced by families now.

The public is invited to attend. For more information, telephone Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, 378-6284.

file: art/artists
DeKall news/Jan

7/19/89



'Many Streams, One River'

Robert Morris, a local artist who also works as a counselor with young adults, and Dr. Wanda White, coordinator of secondary mathematics for Fulton County Schools, who is chairperson of the Oakhurst Presbyterian Fair, plan weekend activities.

Art Exhibit, Fair Slated At Oakhurst

"Many Streams, One River" is the theme for the first annual Oakhurst Presbyterian Fair, an event for the entire community on Saturday, July 22, noon til 3 p.m., 118 Second Ave. at East Lake Drive.

The fair will feature an art exhibit of the works of ten artists, including local as well as nationally known talent. Photography, stained glass, and paintings will be among the media displayed free to the public to celebrate the diverse gifts and talents of this multi-racial church and community.

There will be performances of singing groups, entertainment by mimes and clowns, games, demonstrations of basket weaving and story-telling, as well as items to buy and sell such as baked goods, craft items, fresh garden produce, canned goods.

In a Health Insights booth, free testing for blood pressure and glaucoma will be available.

Anyone wishing to sell homemade items at the fair should call the church, 378-6284. All are welcome to share talent in this way.

Fall fest touts Oakhurst's 70th

By Donna Williams Lewis
Staff writer

A church described as having one of metro Atlanta's "few truly biracial" congregations marks its 70th anniversary this weekend.

The celebration for south Decatur's Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, 118 Second Ave. at East Lake Drive, begins at noon Saturday with the third annual Fall Festival.

Founded in a tent at its Decatur location on Sept. 25, 1921, Oakhurst's membership is about half black and half white and includes Hispanics and Koreans, among others.

"I think for the church, this is just a way to celebrate that they survived," said the Rev. Caroline Leach, who co-pastors Oakhurst with her husband, Nibs Stroupe.

"In the movement of the '60s, many churches either closed or opted to move," she said, "and I think this is a real affirmation of

a church that could have chosen to do all of these things, but didn't, and suffered a lot, but held its own.

"I think a lot of people still think of [Oakhurst] as a family church. It is," the Rev. Leach said. "It's just that the family has changed. Instead of a single kind of family where everybody looks alike, it's a family with a lot of different faces and economic levels. We have people who can't read and people who have Ph.Ds. We have people from all over the world."

Robert P. Reno, executive director of the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta Inc. and a member of Oakhurst, said he sought out the church for its diversity. He praised it for becoming "truly biracial in terms of leadership, fellowship and community.

"The church, in addition to worshipping together, socializes together, attends each other's

weddings and funerals and visits in each other's homes," Mr. Reno said.

Said the Rev. Leach, "It's really difficult to think about joining a biracial church. People on both sides think they're giving up something. But we tell people you're gaining more than you're giving up."

The church also is recognized for its extensive community service. It houses an adult education program, Boys Club and Girls Club programs, the Trinity Head Start program for 80 children and an infant-toddler center. The child-care center primarily serves "high-risk" children and is seeking funding.

The church helped initiate the South Decatur Coalition Against Drugs and the day-care center at Decatur High School. It also works with the Oakhurst community improvement project and has a busy street ministry advocating for families in the



Special

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, marking its 70th year, is celebrating its diverse congregation and dedication to community service. Above, members take part in a Christmas pageant.

community, visiting jails and helping youths find jobs.

On Saturday, the free Fall Festival includes health screenings; musical performances featuring country, gospel, rhythm and blues, music of the '60s, and classical tunes; and children's activities including face-painting by a clown, stories and recreation activities conducted by the Decatur Recreation Department.

Food and craft items will be

on sale.

A Vespers Service of Remembering with several former pastors begins at 7 p.m. in the church sanctuary.

The celebration continues Sunday, with an 11 a.m. worship service followed by a bring-your-own picnic dinner on the church grounds.

For more information on the church's celebration, call 378-6284.

WLS/c 2/17/99

B&W

DIVINE DIVERSITY

At Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, the congregation is an almost equal mix of blacks and whites. An inspiring emphasis is placed on worship with a liberal helping of tolerance.

By Holly Crenshaw
STAFF WRITER

When the congregation of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church files in for Sunday morning service, it gazes up toward a depiction of a dark-skinned Jesus in the stained-glass window at the front of the sanctuary, while a light-skinned version looms in the back.

Tapestries with images of both white and black angels line the walls, while the pastor delivers a sermon that couldn't be more plain-spoken in its call for racial and cultural diversity.

Welcome to an anomaly. Scattered through the pews of this Decatur church is a rare sight for many congregations: an almost racially balanced membership — 54 percent black and 45 percent white, with one Hispanic and one Native American.

There are Ph.D.'s sitting next to those who are struggling to learn to read, retired couples alongside lesbians and gay men, welfare recipients sharing pews with upper-income professionals.

Oakhurst's mission statement makes it clear this is no casual circumstance. Describing itself as "a community of diversites," the 160-member church goes out of its way to reach beyond the borders of its predominantly black East Lake neighborhood to draw members from as far away as Dallas, Ga.

"We haven't been able to attract that many members from this neighborhood because — for a long time — this was seen as a white church," said the Rev. Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe, who took over the congregation in 1983.

Founded in 1921, Oakhurst had become a bustling white church by the early 60s, when it boasted 900 members and con-



Photos by WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff
Reaching the young: The Rev. Gibson Stroupe talks to children at his church. The church's membership is unique in that it is almost evenly along racial lines — 54 percent black and 45 percent white.

structed a large education wing next to its sanctuary. But as more blacks moved into the Oakhurst and East Lake neighborhoods, white members fled so that from 1970 to the early '90s the church's membership had dwindled to 80.

"We had high hopes, but it was discouraging those first few years," recalls Stroupe, whose wife, Caroline Leach, serves as associate pastor.

Instead of having "a white church that black people came

to," Stroupe and his wife worked to make changes from the inside out.

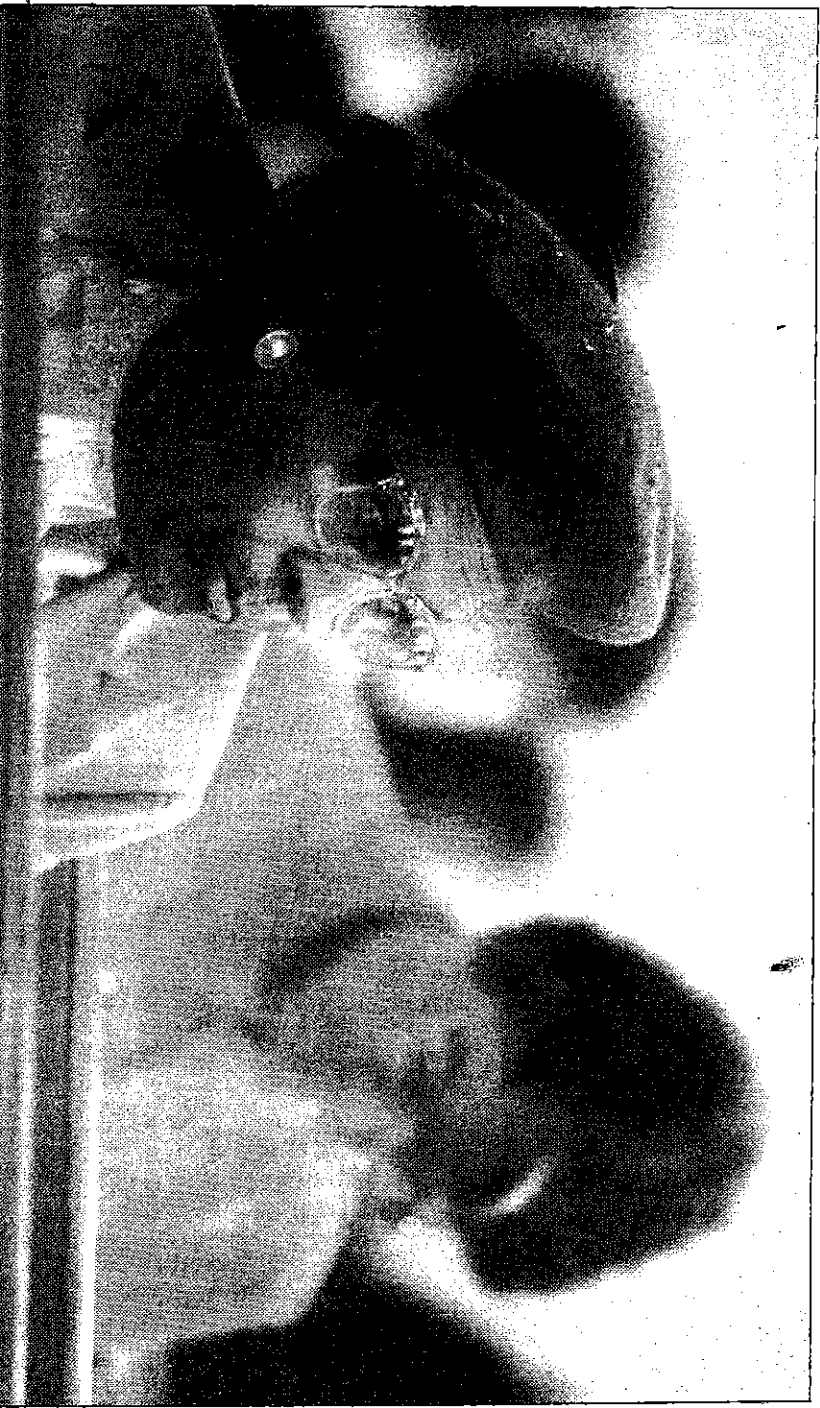
"We began to shift the worship service so the music reflected more of who we are, to include music from African-American and other traditions," he said. "We made certain that the black leaders who were here knew that we wanted them to take leadership and that we were not here to

Please see **CHURCH, 15** ▶

What do you think?

Why are most churches racially segregated? Should blacks and whites make more of an effort to worship together? How can this be achieved?

- **WRITE:**
WORSHIP
DeKalb Extra
315 W. Ponce de Leon Ave.
Decatur, Ga. 30030
- **FAX YOUR LETTERS:**
370-7293
- **PHONE YOUR LETTERS:**
222-1928



WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff
Devoted congregation: Lois Jefferson listens to services one Sunday morning. Tapestries with images of both white and black angels line the church's walls.

Church: Mixed congregation works

► Continued from J1

continue what they had experienced in the past.

"And we opened up the building to community ministry."

Oakhurst's education building now houses a wide-range of community outreach programs from literacy action to arts and crafts groups that make the church a hub of weekday activity.

Its open-door policy has become its strongest drawing card. "I think people are looking for a diverse congregation where they can affirm who they are," Stroupe said.

"We look at diversity as a gift and an opportunity rather than a problem, and I think there are a lot of people out there who are looking for this kind of experience."

William A. Adams, executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, confirmed that Oakhurst's racially diverse congregation is an uncommon one. "There are not many churches that have the balance that Oakhurst has," he said, "and I think that's true throughout the country."

Adams estimated that 10 percent of Presbyterian churches in the greater metro area can claim about a 10 percent degree of integration. "I think the reality is that there are basically black churches and white churches — with some sprinkling of integration," Adams said. "And then there are exceptions like Oakhurst."

Nate Mosby, a former DeKalb County commissioner, became Oakhurst's first black member when he joined in 1970. "We went through a period where we were teetering on the brink of just going away," Mosby recalled. "But even at that point, we insisted we were going to be an integrated church. We were not going to acquiesce to the powers-that-be who



WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff
United flock: Rev. Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe leads the congregation at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church.

wanted us to be something other than what we wanted to be."

After spotting an ad in a local gay and lesbian newspaper, Virginia-Highland resident Kathy Mathes visited Oakhurst and decided to join several years ago.

"I had a problem with the conventional church that acts like there's only one kind of person out there — with one skin color, one view of the world, one sexual orientation," she said. "To me, that's not what a church should be."

Retired postal supervisor Charlie Callier, who attends with his wife Catherine, said he started visiting

Oakhurst in 1983, when the new husband-and-wife ministry team had just arrived. "I was very impressed with the friendliness and genuineness I saw in the co-ministers," he said.

Mary Reimer, who joined the still all-white Oakhurst in 1953, said she's continued to drive past a Presbyterian church that's closer to her Avondale Estates neighborhood and commute to Oakhurst because of its particular brand of fellowship.

"I've made friendships that I never would have made," she said, "if it weren't for the fact that I was determined to stay here in this church."

WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff

WALTER STRICKLIN / Staff

Neighbors help Oakhurst elderly pay rising taxes

By KAREN HILL
khill@ajc.com

9/12/01
AJC

Several members of a small church in Decatur are donating their federal tax refund checks to help elderly neighbors pay city taxes.

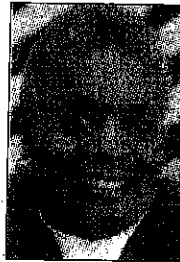
About 20 people have donated money, with at least two married couples donating their entire \$600 refunds, said the church's pastors, the Revs. Caroline Leach and Nibs Stroupe.

Oakhurst is a majority African-American, southwest Decatur

neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Its residents, many of whom are elderly widows, are being squeezed by rising property taxes that come with living in a newly fashionable area.

Many suddenly have found the homes they bought for less than \$20,000 in the 1960s and 1970s now worth \$200,000 and more.

But many older residents say they don't want to sell their houses, at any profit. Some don't want to leave nearby doctors, churches and stores. Others wonder where they could go. To others, Oakhurst is simply home.



Former Decatur Mayor **Elizabeth Wilson** had a yard sale this spring that raised \$2,500 to help with tax bills for some neighbors.

"It's rewarding to know that there are really people out there who want to do this to help," said Elizabeth Wilson, an Oakhurst Presbyterian church elder, former Decatur mayor and

Oakhurst resident who is leading a group of friends in raising money to help neighbors pay city taxes.

Wilson and her friends hosted a yard sale this spring that raised \$2,500 to pay taxes. The five neediest Oakhurst residents who applied to the group for grants received the money, in the form of monthly tax payments ranging from \$300 to \$600, paid to City Hall.

As word of the yard sale spread, young adults in the multiethnic

► Please see **CHURCH, E5**

Box 18 Oakhurst Pres.

Oakhurst elderly get help paying taxes

► **CHURCH**, from E1

church decided they could help, too, Leach said. Their tax-refund plan got the endorsement of the church session, or people elected to lead the congregation.

It didn't surprise Leach that help for the oldest adults would come from the youngest adults.

"They are really committed, very service-minded," Leach said of the younger members.

In fact, church members of all ages made donations last year to pay the taxes of some of the oldest church members, Leach said. This year, they're just expanding the pool to include non-church members and bumping up the totals with the tax refunds.

Wilson said some of Oakhurst's oldest residents are beginning to help, too. So many called her to say they had items to donate for the next yard sale that organizers decided to hold the next one this fall, rather than next spring as originally planned.

"Almost every one of the ladies we've helped has said

"Almost every one of the ladies we've helped has said they're ready to help others."

ELIZABETH WILSON
Elder / Oakhurst
Presbyterian Church

they're ready to help others, that they'll donate stuff," Wilson said.

Leach said it was important that Oakhurst keep its seniors, many of whom moved to Oakhurst from neighborhoods that were demolished for the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, or from public housing developments in downtown Decatur.

"They anchored this neighborhood when the white folks left," she said of the white flight that rolled Decatur in the 1960s. "They were the PTA, they beautified this neighborhood, they were the Neighborhood Watch when things were not the way they should have been with the city."

Oakhurst Presbyterian Pastor and Associate Pastor Co-author Book Church, known for its diversity, inspires recorded account of multi-racial worship

Continued from FRONT PAGE

Stroupe. "It was a stabilizing force in the 60s and 70s. It's tougher now but we're still trying to do that. We've been afraid of it changing, but it hasn't changed as much as we thought."

Leach was the 21st woman ordained in the old Southern Presbyterian Church, which was one of the two major branches that split before the civil war. The branches united to form Presbyterian Church, USA in 1983. Leach said she views the book as a work geared toward people who are interested in unified worship that extends beyond racial lines.

"We get a lot of calls and visitors from around the world because people have heard of Oakhurst Presbyterian," she said. "This book was kind of our gift back to people who want to be part of the multiracial world that we live in. This was really a combination of 30 years worth of work and a way to write it down to have something to work off of. Now when people ask, 'how do you do it, we tell them to read the book.'"

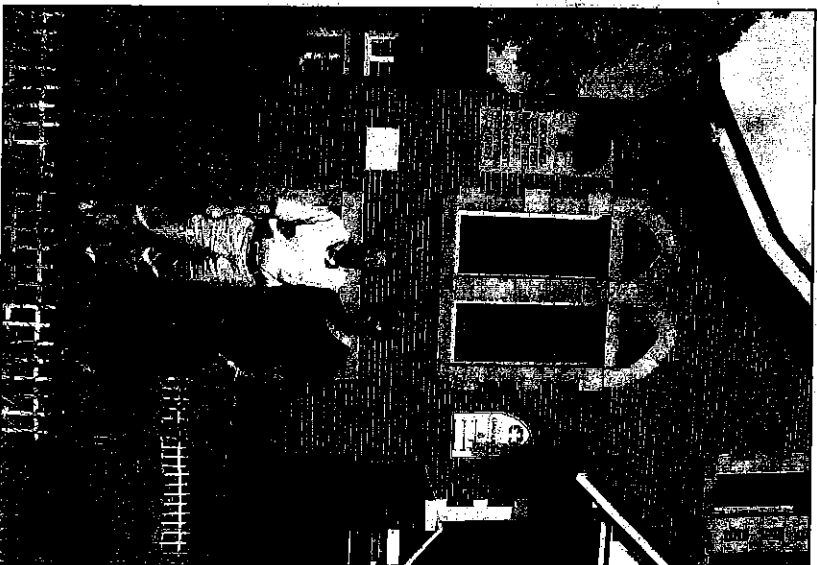
The church currently boasts 280 members, and Stroupe said one of the ways the church keeps up its membership is by discussing - not hiding from - issues that sometimes produce heated conversation.

"We talk about struggles a lot and keep everything on the table rather than talking in code words," he said. "The best thing for us is that most people who stay have an extraordinary experience. They find that the categories of the world don't define them. Also, we draw from the metro-wide area, which helps."

Learning from others' experiences is important in the church, according to Stroupe. "Everybody that comes here has to be re-educated and help re-educate us," he said. "Blacks and whites don't have much experience being brothers and sisters."

The church has always been active in the local community, Stroupe said.

"We do a lot with senior citizens in the community and we've been really involved in trying to get tax relief for seniors," Stroupe said. "We started Oakhurst Neighborhood Association, the Samuel L. Jones Boys and Girls Club, and were instrumental in saving the Scottish Rite center from developers. We also helped found the South Decatur Community Development Center, which is comparable to the downtown development authority and is a nonprofit that seeks to develop the community in good ways. We're also involved in affordable housing."



▲ Pastor Stroupe and Associate Pastor Leach began working on their book in 2001.

Decatur resident Jami Moss has attended Oakhurst Presbyterian since 2000. She said she's felt at home in the church since she first walked in the door.

"I got there and I just immediately felt in love with it," she said. "I stay because it's the only place in Atlanta where you can talk about racial issues and

Oakhurst Presbyterian Pastor and Associate Pastor Co-author Book Church, known for its diversity, inspires recorded account of multi-racial worship

by Victoria R. Sharp / 63

Community Review
Oakhurst Presbyterian Church Pastor Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe and his wife, Associate Pastor Caroline Leach, were called upon by their denomination to write a book about their church's uniquely diverse congregation. The pair, both of whom graduated from Decatur's Columbia Theological Seminary, began work in 2001 on *O Lord, Hold Our Hands: How a Church*



▲ Stroupe ▲ Leach

Thrives in a Multicultural World, which was published this year by Westminster John Knox Press. According to Stroupe, the book serves as both a how-to manual for other churches seeking diverse con-

gregations as well as an examination of what ministry means.

"We value the fact that we're all created as children of God," Stroupe said. "People that come here and stay here get to practice being a human being in a place that's rare in American society. The most important issue addressed in the book is race, and how difficult it is for white people to deal with race. That's why we have so many segregated churches in the United States.

We've been gifted (at Oakhurst Presbyterian) that people have stayed together long enough to get to know each other as people, not black or white or gay or straight."

Stroupe, who has been the pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian for 20 years, said the church's diverse ministry dates back 30 years.

"The church has been involved in the neighborhood ever since its beginning," said

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