



A worship style described by the pastor as "blended contemporary" marks services at St. Philip African Methodist Episcopal Church.

JEAN SHERRIN / Staff

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Churches that excel

FOURTEEN METRO CONGREGATIONS, CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT, ARE RATED AS AMONG THE NATION'S BEST

By Gayle White
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On a first visit, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Alpharetta can seem a bit overwhelming.

About 5,000 families are registered members of the parish, representing 10,000 to 15,000 individuals. Each Sunday, priests conduct seven or more worship services, many standing room only in a sanctuary that seats 750.

But the church has found a way for people to feel at home among the masses at the Masses. The parish sponsors 46 "small faith communities" involving about 700 of its most active members.

When Don and Kathy Hoffman moved to metro Atlanta from Ohio 11 years ago, they immediately signed up to participate. "They've become family," said Kathy Hoffman of her group of about a dozen people.

The network of small faith communities at St. Thomas Aquinas helps make it one of the country's best Catholic parishes, according to a recent study by Paul Wilkes, a writer and adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

With funding from the Lilly Endowment, Wilkes assembled a team of researchers to identify 300 Protestant churches and 300 Catholic parishes that are among the nation's top congregations. The results are being published this year in two volumes, "Excellent Protestant Congregations" (Westminster John Knox Press, \$18.95) and "Excellent Catholic Parishes" (Paulist Press, \$22.95). In metro Atlanta, they include two Catholic parishes and a dozen other churches, ranging in membership from fewer than 250 to more than 20,000.

Wilkes said he was inspired to conduct the study after giving a series of talks at the Church of the Presentation, a Catholic parish in Upper Saddle River, N.J.



Maureen Welch (hands clasped) attends Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas.

KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

"I just had the time of my life," he said. "I'd never seen a church like this. I'd never seen so many people having so much fun worshipping and helping people. I

got back to my home parish and immediately went into depression, it was so lifeless."

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INSIDE: Metro churches rated as 'excellent' in nationwide study. B5

Churches: Seen as 'beacons of hope'

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Wilkes, aware that there have been "1 gazillion books" about excellence in corporations, figured some of the same approaches could be applied to churches. Find some that are working and expose others to what they're doing right.

The task was daunting. There were 19,584 Catholic parishes in the United States as of 1999 and, Wilkes estimates, 100,000 to 200,000 other churches. How to choose?

"You can't send out a survey and say, 'Are you an excellent church?'" said Wilkes. So he assembled "a stable of experts in pastoral institutes, congregational studies, people who have written books about church excellence, denominational officials and diocesan reporters," and asked them for "the cream of the cream."

Wilkes wanted congregations that had a strong impact on the lives of their members and on the communities where they were located, "local churches that were beacons of hope and guidance," and, most of all, "congregations with soul."

After compiling a list, Wilkes and his fellow researchers visited a variety of the churches, attempting to assemble a list that was nationally, geographically and ethnically diverse.

The books are not about theory, trends or statistics, Wilkes says. They are meant to be "survival guides" for pastors and for church leaders, offering ideas that can be replicated. For people looking for a church to join, Wilkes says he hopes the books will serve as sort of "Michelin guides."

The strengths of the different congregations Wilkes mentions in his book run the gamut from worship to community involvement.

At St. Philip African Methodist Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Wilkes and his co-workers found a congregation with a child development center, a prison ministry, a credit union, several choirs and a dance troupe.

When the Rev. George Moore became pastor of the church 30 years ago, it was a congregation of about 200 members located in Reynoldstown. Today it is an 8,000-member church with an impressive new sanctuary at the corner of Memorial Drive and Candler Road.

"We are a loving and caring congregation," said Moore, who describes the church's worship style as "blended contemporary."

Deatur's Oakhurst Baptist won praise for its Sunday school, mission groups and substance abuse recovery programs.



JEAN SHIFFIN/Staff
The Rev. Lanny Peters and Brenda Wallace, assistant minister, sing at Oakhurst Baptist.

Oakhurst's pastor, the Rev. Lanny Peters, found some irony in his church's selection by Wilkes & Co. as an excellent church. The Southern Baptist congregation is embroiled in a dispute within the Atlanta Baptist Association over its willingness to ordain sexually

active homosexuals as deacons and ministers. Its openness to gays and lesbians is just a continuation of the spirit that has defined the church since civil rights days, when some of its members were unwilling to follow white flight to the suburbs, Peters says.

"Many Baptist churches were standing in the way of the civil rights movement, and Oakhurst embraced it at great cost," said Peters. "The church lost two-thirds of its members over that issue, and it changed the identity of the church. As a result, I think, the congregation has really been willing to look at the Bible and talk with each other about any issue that comes along."

At St. Thomas Aquinas, in addition to the small groups, Wilkes cited the parish's outreach to Hispanic immigrants and its religious education program, with an emphasis on adults, as contributors to its effectiveness.

The list made the church's senior pastor, the Rev. Albert Jowdy, very happy.

"Those are areas of our parish life we have consciously worked on," he said. For the most part, the factors cited in Wilkes' study were responses to needs Jowdy, his predecessors and lay leaders saw in the community.

The small groups came about because of a consistent influx of new people into the 29-year-old parish.

"The growth has happened so quickly here a lot of us still think of St. Thomas Aquinas as a little country parish," said Jowdy, who came to the church in 1988 and was named senior pastor in 1991. "We were looking for a strategy to keep some sense of intimacy in the midst of all that growth."

The Hispanic ministry, which represents about one-fourth of Aquinas' parishioners, resulted from a strong push by a lay leader who "kiddapped" Jowdy, as he describes it, show him the number of Latino immigrants living in the Alpharetta area.

Church leaders "literally went knocking on doors" to invite people to worship, with services held first in nearby neighborhoods and later at the church. The ministry has grown from 10 or 15 families to more than 1,000 people at a weekly Sunday afternoon Mass conducted in Spanish. "It's like 'Field of Dreams,'" said Jowdy. "If you build it, they will come."

The same could be said of the adult Sunday school program. Several years ago the parish decided to make adult faith formation a priority. Now it has a "cradle-to-grave" system of religious education that produces strong lay leadership, Jowdy said.

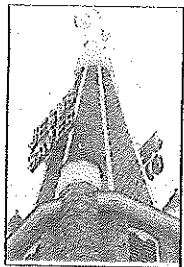
"It's a constant challenge to change the mind-set that many of us have that faith is something you learn once and have forever, he said. "Faith is a living relationship with God that, like all relationships, has to be nurtured."

Asked whether, after all his research, Wilkes has been able to make his own parish St. Mary's in Wilmington, more dynamic and welcoming, he answers with a word. "No."

But, he says, he will stay. "The culture in my parish is not conducive to change," he said. "But this is my family. This is my home. Whatever I can do to be of service to my parish, I will do it."

Wilkes said he makes no claims to have found the 600 absolutely best churches in America. He hopes, however, that his book will spark discussion about the nation's churches.

He said he has faith that with God's help they can become more appealing.



Big Bethel AME Church

In Atlanta area, these 14 churches make national list

After a two-year study funded by the Lilly Endowment, Paul Wilkes of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington identified these metro Atlanta churches as "excellent."

Excellent Catholic parishes

Cathedral of Christ the King
2699 Peachtree Road N.E.

- **Membership:** 4,950 families
- **Senior pastor:** Monsignor Thomas Kenny
- **Comments:** Ministries to the homebound and hospitalized; well-attended women's Bible study; 10 choirs.
- **Web page:** ctk.home.mindspring.com
- **Phone:** 404-233-2145

St. Thomas Aquinas
535 Rucker Road, Alpharetta

- **Membership:** 5,000 families
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Albert Jowdy
- **Comments:** Small faith communities; religious education with emphasis on adult formation; Life Teen; outreach to recent Hispanic immigrants.
- **Web page:** www.sta.org
- **Phone:** 770-475-4501

Excellent Protestant congregations

Ben Hill United Methodist Church
2099 Fairburn Road

- **Membership:** 9,678
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. McCallister Hollins
- **Comments:** Large African-American congregation has a strong music focus with nine choirs; men's outreach; extensive youth programs; three Sunday worship services and youth church; full-time preschool program; church takes a holistic approach to ministry.
- **Web page:** www.benhill-umc.com
- **Phone:** 404-344-0618

Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church
220 Auburn Ave. N.E.

- **Membership:** 1,100 families
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. James Davis
- **Comments:** Numerous outreach programs include Homeless Intervention and Prevention Project and counseling for at-risk children; Andrew ministry teaches sharing one's faith with-

out fear; children's ministry; active singles ministry; dance ministry.

- **Web page:** www.bigbethelame.org
- **Phone:** 404-659-0248

Central Presbyterian Church
201 Washington St. S.W.

- **Membership:** 814
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Ted Wardlaw
- **Comments:** Outreach ministries include work with homeless families; Central Neighbors program divides the congregation into small parishes to enhance pastoral care; choirs for all ages.
- **Web page:** www.centralpresbyterianatl.org
- **Phone:** 404-659-0274

New Birth Missionary Baptist Church
6400 Woodrow Road, Lithonia

- **Membership:** 22,000
- **Senior pastor:** Bishop Eddie Long
- **Comments:** African-American congregation provides substance-abuse ministry, GED classes, family life center, health services and outreach to shut-ins; choral, orchestral groups; youth ministry.
- **Web page:** www.newbirth.org
- **Phone:** 770-696-9600

Oakhurst Baptist Church
222 East Lake Drive, Decatur

- **Membership:** 450
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Lanny Peters
- **Comments:** Music and youth ministries; Sunday school for all ages; mission groups; drug and alcohol recovery program for homeless men; church has started many thriving ministries.
- **Web page:** www.oakhurstbaptist.org
- **Phone:** 404-378-3677

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church
118 Second Ave., Decatur

- **Membership:** 229
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Gibson (Nibs) Stroupe
- **Comments:** Multiracial congregation with ministry to gays and lesbians; community ministries include tutoring, senior services, youth arts academy and prison ministry; anti-racism and social justice ministries have received national attention.
- **Web page:** In production
- **Phone:** 404-378-6284

Peachtree Presbyterian
3434 Roswell Road N.W.

- **Membership:** 9,386
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Victor Pentz

■ **Comments:** One of the largest Presbyterian churches in America; pastoral counseling center; midweek alternative worship service; large single and youth ministries; support, recovery groups.

- **Web page:** www.peachtreepres.org
- **Phone:** 404-842-5800

Ray of Hope Christian
2778 Snapfinger Road, Decatur

- **Membership:** 5,300
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Cynthia Hale
- **Comments:** Hosts Bible study and breakfast and provides transportation to Sunday services for homeless men; quarterly job fairs for youth and adults; emphasis on evangelism and the arts in worship; extensive youth programs.
- **Web page:** www.rayofhope.org
- **Phone:** 770-696-5100

St. Phillip African Methodist Episcopal
240 Candler Road S.E.

- **Membership:** 8,000
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. George Moore
- **Comments:** Inviting African-American congregation has several choirs; prison ministry; child development center; outreach to the homeless; dance ministry.
- **Web page:** www.saintphillip.org
- **Phone:** 404-371-0749

Trinity Presbyterian Church
3003 Howell Mill Road N.W.

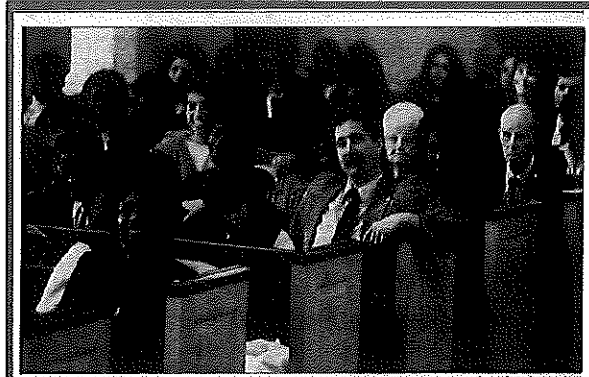
- **Membership:** 2,241
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Joanna Adams
- **Comments:** New music center brings multi-generational members together for arts festivals and concerts; many small groups, including groups for seniors, young adults and young families.
- **Web page:** www.trinityatlanta.org
- **Phone:** 404-237-6491

World Changers
2500 Burdett Road, College Park

- **Membership:** 20,000
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Creflo Dollar
- **Comments:** African-American congregation offers a variety of programs, including an athletic ministry, business network, marriage counseling, several choirs; outreach to nursing homes; performing arts ministry; extensive media services.
- **Web page:** www.worldchangers.org
- **Phone:** 770-907-9490

Young-Nak Presbyterian (Associate Reformed)

- 3100 Oakcliff Road, Doraville
- **Membership:** 295
- **Senior pastor:** The Rev. Hyon K. (Paul) Shin
- **Comments:** Has two Korean-language Sunday services, traditional and contemporary, as well as English-language worship. Has 6 a.m. prayer meetings Tuesday through Saturday and an all-night prayer meeting every Friday.
- **Web page:** Not available
- **Phone:** 770-936-2800



A racially diverse congregation gathers at 11 o'clock each Sunday morning, followed by a black flock at 12:30, at White Oak Hills Baptist.

One faith, two congregations

Both flocks sing praises of arrangement

By Donna Williams Lewis
PHOTO BY JIMMY DOWNS

At 11 a.m. on Sunday, at the White Oak Hills Baptist Church in modern DeKalb County, a mostly white congregation files into the sanctuary for a morning service while a black congregation enters a different door for the 12:30 service.

At noon, the mostly white congregation shares the sanctuary with the black members of the Christ Fellowship congregation for their 12:30 weekly service.

The partnership between a white congregation and a black congregation is unusual but not unique in metropolitan Atlanta. In fact, the United Baptist Church on Sweet Auburn Avenue recently hosted a similar partnership with a black congregation.

The problem at White Oak Hills is something different. Both congregations are serving a common purpose that is unprecedented in the area.

Recently, a White Oak Hills pastor was alerted by the reaction he got when he mentioned that his wife plays piano there. The response, he says, was "Oh, that's where they separate the blacks and the whites."

Members react with a mix of stunned good humor at the suggestion that segregation is what they had in mind with last year's decision to sponsor and host a separate black congregation within their facility.

"We don't separate anybody," said the Rev. Ron Hankie, pastor of White Oak Hills. "We're just those who wish to separate ourselves to do so."

Like many other churches that have seen their membership eroded by white flight, White Oak Hills faced tough choices: Just siting and hoping to survive, pushing up and moving again, or changing its worship style and offering other things to appeal to a variety of people.

The Rev. Hankie says his church has tried to attract blacks who are coming to the area, and most recently at the 175 to 200 people at White Oak Hills services every week.

But many of those are visitors. And the blacks who are members tend to be from Africa or the Caribbean — people whose church experience may be not so close to the Southern Baptist tradition that is that of black Baptist worship.

When visiting in the community, the Rev. Hankie says, "You find a lot of black professionals, well-educated people. They may have a liberating feeling in the driveway. But on Sundays, they want a... black worship experience."

So when White Oak Hills members heard that the Rev. Jerome Housesworth, a black minister from Chicago, wanted to start a church for blacks that would be affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, they offered him not only their sanctuary, but space.

The Christ Fellowship congregation hopes about 40 people to service each Sunday, most of whom live within five miles of the church and reflect the youthful faces of blacks moving to the area.

In its heyday, White Oak Hills established 22 years ago, had 1,000 members in a building at the intersection of Chandler Road and Memorial Drive, now the home of St. Philip AME Church. By the time it moved to Redan Road, White Oak Hills was down to about 200 members, although it still carries 4,000 people on its roll.

Moving again is "not an option," the Rev. Hankie said. "No, I don't believe in it. No, it's an economic disaster. No, it's not consistent with what we believe to be the mission of the church."

A number of other Atlanta churches have been able to successfully integrate by taking such steps as changing their worship style. At Decatur's Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, for example, people had traditional church composed of both races alternate performances, and the service includes an interfaith "prayer and sharing time."

But the Rev. Hankie says no such changes are on store for White Oak Hills. "We were in a unique situation of the current congregation, however, obviously, if they leave, we're not of business."

The two congregations say their beliefs are the same but concede that their worship styles and approaches to the community are different.

Christ Fellowship is making headway with worship in three black male members from church by the dozens. The church also is welcoming, the pastor said, to the new generation of blacks moving to Stone Mountain who want to make a con-



At the second service, Arja Chastain (left), Tim Walker and Coleman White follow along during the reading of Scripture.

tribution to a church, but we're looking for that progress and momentum by-oriented with a sense of purpose."

Roy Calhoun, a black Stone Mountain resident, said he joined Christ Fellowship because it met the criteria he had set for a church home: education, community outreach, and convenience and accessibility to his home for his family's sake. It is that help build neighborhood."

Meanwhile, Cheryl Corbett, a black woman from the Cobb County, has been visiting the majority-white church for about a year. She likes White Oak Hills because it is friendly to the "Episcopalian, Anglican church she attended on her home island, Barbados."

"I think that's a good sign and I'm open to white preachers anyway," Mr. Corbett said of the Rev. Hankie.

As for the future, both say Christ Fellowship giving and moving to a new location. Some see a church that the two churches might merge.

Gold Cyril Johnson, the black director of White Oak Hills, "I think we're on the brink of a very exciting opportunity to see an example of a traditional, multicultural congregation."



The Rev. Jerome Housesworth (right) started a new church for blacks. It's housed in the White Oak Hills Baptist Church, where the Rev. Ron Hankie is pastor.

St Philip AME

White Oak Hills Baptist

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