



Religion

Church rebuilding faith after pastor's disgrace

04/20/2002

By RACHEL MUSGROVE / The Denton Record-Chronicle

ARGYLE -- Pastors leave legacies that don't usually include words such as hurt and betrayal.

But so it has been for Oak Hills Community Evangelical Free Church for the last nine months since its pastor, Jon Warnshuis, was accused of molesting children.

Since then, church members have taken turns in the pulpit, too hurt and mistrustful to accept a substitute pastor while cautiously looking for a permanent leader.

"We kind of looked at the situation and said, 'Our pastor betrayed us. If we're going to be a church, then we're going to have to be a church by ourselves,'" said church member Joe Goetz, chairman of the search committee. "So we started ministering to each other."

After a careful search, the members this week voted 29-1 to hire Arlington resident Mark Piland to lead the church.

"We've got a new preacher, and we're walking on air," Mr. Goetz said.

Mr. Piland, an associate pastor at Park Springs Bible Church in Arlington, said he is pleased and excited to take the job.

"I spent about a week to 10 days meeting with people [at the church] prior to the vote and felt like they had gotten to know me, and my wife as well," said Mr. Piland. "I felt very comfortable with the people. The people at Oak Hills are very kind and warm, and we felt very accepted there."

The search was not easy. Of the 25 qualified applicants, about a third withdrew after learning the church's history, Mr. Goetz said. Many felt they didn't have the experience to deal with the church's problems, he said, but Mr. Piland accepted the challenge.

"It was my wife that said it best: It wasn't the people that are at the church now that committed this crime; instead they are the victims," Mr. Piland said. "They have accepted us to a great degree, and we are very pleased with that. But I feel like I need to continue to model my pastoral behavior to build their trust and confidence."

Out of limbo

The selection of Mr. Piland ended a period of limbo for the small congregation. Church leaders decided to have guest speakers rather than hire a temporary minister; Mr. Warnshuis began as an interim pastor at the church. They didn't want to bond with a pastor who was going to leave in the end.

"It was like getting out of a bad marriage. We didn't want to jump into another bad one," said Kim Eagleton, a member of the church who also served on the search committee.

Several churches, including one in Corsicana, stepped forward to help. But the members decided to take control.

Matt Meister, youth minister since December 2000, helped the church's young people deal with the situation.

"The students have grown a lot," he said, "not only out of the reality of the harm and sin of the world, but also out of their compassion for the people of the world. It's been an accelerated growth process that forced them to mature and see life differently."

When the first young man came forward to a youth pastor with allegations against Mr. Warnshuis, church elders had two choices: Fire the man quietly and move on or turn him in and weather the storm. The board made a quick, conscious decision: Call the police.

Mr. Warnshuis was arrested Aug. 18 and was indicted in November in connection with the molestation of three boys. Police said evidence collected at his home led to allegations that he had sexually abused at least five boys in Argyle, Grapevine and Laredo.

A month later he was sentenced to 40 years in prison under an agreement in which he pleaded guilty to aggravated sexual assault of a child and two second-degree felonies.

The church members' choice to alert authorities damaged then ultimately strengthened the church, members said.

"Our church kind of felt isolated when this whole thing broke," Mr. Goetz said. "We recognized immediately that we were going to be the ones on the news and in the newspaper. We knew that we were going to be 'that church' in the community and that parents were going to yank their kids from our program. But we also recognized that we had to do the right thing."

Many students were taken out of the church's programs after the revelation. Some members feared the church might not make it at all.

"I had come from a church [before joining Oak Hills] that had just kind of died and I was one of the last guys there," Mr. Goetz said. "That's one of the most depressing things I've been through -- to see a church turn out the lights and go."

"I felt for a year before he [Mr. Warnshuis] was arrested that this church was on its way. But I

Search



Subscribe

felt somewhat more encouraged after he was arrested – within a month our core membership had crystalized."

Not an option

Mr. Goetz admitted that the quick-fix thing to do would have been to attend another church. But that was not an option for him, or for other longtime members.

"Twenty years from now this will be a memory and looking back, how could I leave a church like that?" he said. "I wanted to stick by my church, and I think that's why many people stayed. You just don't desert your Christian friends when they're getting their teeth kicked in."

But renewal, restoration and rebirth slowly followed.

"In a lot of ways, we're through the process of grief and we're learning to live again," Mr. Meister said. "I would be naive to say that the grief is gone in nine months, but you have to learn live in the grief, if that makes sense."

The church and community will continue to feel the aftershocks of Mr. Warnshuis' betrayal for years, members say. Finding a new leader is only one step in the process of recovery, they say. The lessons learned may not have been worth the pain, but the members of Oak Hills Evangelical Free Church have learned nonetheless.

"We are no longer a trusting, Pollyanna crowd," Mr. Goetz said.

But confidence and hope has restored the church, and, they predict, will sustain them.

"In Romans 5, Chapter 5 it says: 'And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us,' " Mr. Meister said. "In a way, this has given us a new, restored confidence in God – that even though this happened, he still loves us and is still working through us."

 [Printer Version](#)  [Email to a Friend](#)  [Discuss in Forums](#)

©2002 Belo Interactive
Dallas Web Sites: WFAA.com | TXCN.com | Guidelive.com | Community
This site is best viewed with Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher.