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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: This story updates and replaces one sent Aug. 30. It includes comments from Atlanta Baptist Association's director of missions and a new lead.

Atlanta association threatens ouster of gay-friendly church

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The executive committee of Atlanta Baptist Association has asked Oakhurst Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., to reverse its welcoming-and-affirming stance toward gays or leave the association.

Oakhurst is one of two churches in the association to survive earlier ouster votes for including known homosexuals in all areas of church life.

The other church, Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta, voted May 20 to withdraw from the association after deacons met with an associational leader, said Pastor Tim Shirley.

Meeting Aug. 26, the executive committee voted 44-20 to ask Oakhurst to comply with the association's bylaws or withdraw voluntarily. That includes a recently added bylaw banning churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior." If the church doesn't leave the association by Oct. 31, according to the resolution, it will be dismissed.

Joel Harrison, director of missions, said the executive committee, which acts on behalf of the association between meetings, has the authority to dismiss the church without bringing it up to the whole association.

The executive committee defeated a motion by Robert Walker, pastor of Peachtree Baptist Church, to postpone the action.

Harrison said the committee extended the Oct. 31 deadline out of respect for the congregation's democratic governance and the fact that its pastor is on a sabbatical until Sept. 18. It is intended to "allow them time to prayerfully consider their decision," he said.

A staff member at Oakhurst said the church desired to remain a part of the association but hasn't yet met to consider a response to the most recent vote.

"We were saddened by the decision and hoped we would be able to work together," said Melanie Vaughan-West, interim minister at the church.

Vaughan-West said it would now be up to the congregation to decide how to respond.

The executive committee cited an example from the book of Acts where a strong disagreement arose between Paul and Barnabas, prompting the two missionaries to separate.

Following that model, Harrison said, the committee felt it would be better for Oakhurst and the association "to go our separate ways" for the sake of ministry and missions.

The executive committee vote reverses decisions at two associational meetings earlier this year. In January, the association voted 253-164 in favor of a membership-committee recommendation to keep the two

churches in membership. The action said the association did not "support or condone homosexual activity," but respected the autonomy of the local church.

In March the association approved a new bylaw against full inclusion of gays, but a subsequent vote to expel the two churches didn't receive a required two-thirds vote.

At that meeting, however, the association's membership team was assigned to determine how to deal with churches that are not compliant with the bylaws.

Harrison said he met with representatives of both Oakhurst and Virginia-Highlands at the request of association leaders.

He said he didn't ask the churches to leave but informed them they were out of compliance with bylaws and their membership could be challenged at any time. He also described the association's finances, which have suffered since the votes sustaining the two churches.

Harrison said income from the association's churches is down \$140,000 this year. In other action at the Aug. 27 meeting, the executive committee voted to reduce the association's budget to \$583,000.

Shirley said at one time, his church might have considered leaving quietly but others in the association urged them to stay and fight. Those dynamics changed, however, with intense pressure over the issue.

After the January vote, the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board and Georgia Baptist Convention both announced plans to defund the Atlanta Association for its refusal to expel the gay-friendly churches.

Fifteen churches formed an alternative Atlanta-area Baptist association in protest of the vote sustaining the churches.

Another 27 churches were said to be waiting on the sidelines to see how the association dealt with the bylaw issue before deciding whether to defect as well.

With the prospect of losing additional churches and financial support, Shirley said even some of the association's more progressive leaders appeared to be losing their resolve. "It's easy to take a stand on Day One," he said. "How easy is it to take a stand on Day 100?"

Harrison said he doesn't know if NAMB and the GBC will reverse pending decisions to defund missionaries in Atlanta Baptist Association at the end of this year. "We did not pass this by them ahead of time, because this is an associational issue," he said. Harrison said it wasn't discussed at the executive committee meeting.

Both Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland admit gays and lesbians as members and include them in church leadership. That is contrary to stated positions of both the Georgia Baptist and Southern Baptist conventions that view homosexuality as sinful.

Georgia Baptists voted to revoke the two churches' membership status in 1999. Both churches previously left the SBC, which in 1992 changed its constitution to exclude churches that sanction homosexuality. The congregations are affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.