

United church reborn - New pastor ushers in a season of hope for once-divided group



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Members of White Rock Community Church recognized two resurrections Sunday. One was the traditional Easter celebration to commemorate the rising of Jesus Christ.

The second: the rebirth of their own once-divided church.

About a year ago, the church's former pastor, the Rev. James Simmons, reluctantly resigned after members cast doubts about his highly publicized story of amnesia.

On Sunday, the White Rock congregation spent Easter listening to their new leader's first sermon.

The Rev. James P. Walker, 50, officially became pastor of the predominantly gay and lesbian church Friday and took the pulpit on Sunday.

"My essential task and primary task as your pastor here is to point you to Jesus," Dr. Walker said.

Along with his commitment to serve the members' spiritual needs, Dr. Walker said he would be a leader in helping the church to grow, become better organized and increase its presence in the community.

Dressed in a gray business suit, he moved across the pulpit with ease and appeared comfortable in his new role as pastor of the 300-member church.

Before his sermon on Sunday, Dr. Walker said that from the first time he visited the church, it felt like the place for him.

"When I visited in January, I sat in the back of the congregation with my partner, and we just wept because this felt so much like home to us," Dr. Walker said.

"I've been waiting for God to show me where he wanted me to serve. It's been a long process, but throughout that process I've gotten affirmations from God ... in terms of this being a good match."

Church members said they believe Dr. Walker is the person to move them forward. "We are so excited," said Kelly Drake, a deacon-elect at White Rock. "I think he's a dynamic teacher, and I think he has the ability to reach out to all different types of folks. He comes from a church that is very affirming."

According to the church's Web site, Dr. Walker had been a pastor at two Pennsylvania Baptist churches from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. In 1995, he divulged his homosexuality to his former wife of 25 years, and in 1996 he became self-employed in the residential renovation business.

He also joined the Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga. He did not operate in a ministerial capacity there, but he did once serve a three-year term as a deacon.

The Rev. Lanny Peters, Oakhurst's pastor, who first mentioned the White Rock vacancy to Dr. Walker, said that he had been a solid member of the Georgia church.

"Jim is a man of deep integrity," said Mr. Peters, who added that his church has several openly gay and lesbian members but does not "characterize" itself as such.

"He's very personable, he's very intelligent, and he's very compassionate. I feel like it will be a good fit."

That wasn't always the case with the church's former pastor.

Mr. Simmons came to White Rock in December 2000, but after preaching his trial sermon there, a member recognized him as Wesley Barrett "Barre" Cox, who had disappeared without a trace from Abilene in 1984.

At the time, Mr. Simmons said that he had no memory of his life - which included a wife and daughter - before his recollection of being found beaten and nearly comatose inside a car trunk near Memphis, Tenn., in 1984.

Memphis police and hospital officials have said they have no record of any cases fitting Mr. Simmons' account.

His amnesia story, though, caused division, bitterness and unwelcome media attention at White Rock, on Garland Road near Buckner Boulevard.

Mr. Simmons, 51, resigned in February 2001 even after he gained a vote of confidence from a majority of church members. The pastor, however, had said he would stay only if two-thirds of the congregation wanted him.

Three months after that vote, he became pastor of the Faith Community Church of Dallas, a predominantly gay and lesbian church in Garland. The church was founded by some of Mr. Simmons' former White Rock supporters.

Mr. Simmons now says he's still under the care of a neuropsychologist and can now recall "bits and pieces" of

his former life. He said that he bears no ill will toward White Rock Community Church and wants to reach out to Dr. Walker and his former congregation.

"We're making an arrangement of flowers to send to him to extend the right hand of fellowship and welcome him here," Mr. Simmons said last week.

"I plan to ask him out to lunch and see if we can build a relationship. Anything we can do to support White Rock, we want to do."

Dr. Walker is appreciative of Mr. Simmons' support, but he made it clear that his focus would be on White Rock and its future.

"I'm going to be cordial and open to ministering to everybody," Dr. Walker said. "If Reverend Simmons calls me, I'll have a nice conversation with him. But this church has hurt enough, and they don't want to live in the past. They want to move forward."

Roy Cooper, the minister of music and an ordained minister at White Rock, said that after the turmoil of the past, he and the rest of the congregation are expecting great things from their new leader.

"I think it's going to put an exciting explosion in our future," Mr. Cooper said. "Our church is hungry, our church is ready."

"We're ready to assume the place where God wants us to be, and we think Dr. Walker is the right person to lead us there."

Staff writer Linda Jones contributed to this report.

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Caption:

PHOTO(S): (1. CHERYL DIAZ MEYER/Staff Photographer) The Rev. James P. Walker (left) and his partner, Russell Sriver, admire the choir before services at **White Rock Community Church**, which has been without a permanent pastor for a year. 2. James Simmons