

## **DeKalb blaze stokes outrage, frustration- Pine Lake Baptist Church fire Religious leaders denounce wave of 'hate and ignorance'**

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As federal and local authorities investigated a suspicious fire that destroyed the children's activity center at a **Pine Lake** church early Monday, a group of metro Atlanta church leaders called for stronger efforts to prevent future fires. The cause of the blaze at **Pine Lake** Baptist Church was not determined Monday. No one was injured in the early morning fire that gutted a 48-year-old building that housed the church's youth department. An accelerant-detecting dog did not indicate that a chemical was used to start or spread the fire, said Robert J. Johnson, chief inspector for the DeKalb County Fire Department. Members of the predominantly white church in the 4800 block of Rockbridge Road say they do not believe the fire was racially motivated or connected to recent torchings of black churches in southeastern states. "I don't believe this would be connected to those fires," said interim pastor Randy Mullins, who said about 30 of the **Pine Lake** church's 1,000 members are black.

Ira B. Melton, 77, who oversaw construction of the building that burned and is the only surviving charter petitioner, was the first parishioner to learn of the fire. The gray slate shingle building had been the original sanctuary when the church was organized in 1948. Melton's father, Ira H. Melton, drew up plans for it in one night. Within a month, the small congregation held its first service. "This is bad for me," Ira B. Melton said. "That was my church for many years. But we'll rebuild it. That's where all the children have their activities."

Church leaders representing a wide range of metro Atlanta churches joined Monday to denounce the recent church burnings. Representatives of Jewish, Muslim and Korean groups and several white churches expressed disgust with the recent church fires. "We recognize that here in the city of Atlanta - the birthplace of the civil rights movement and a mecca for many religious institutions and organizations - that we have been conspicuously silent," said the Rev. Gerald Durley, pastor of Providence Missionary Baptist Church and president of Concerned Black Clergy. "We are gravely concerned, disturbed, frustrated and deeply angered by the burning of black churches throughout the South. We felt it was time . . . for the religious leadership to express our collective outrage at the emerging epidemic of hate and ignorance."

Krysten Murdock, 9, an active member of the **Pine Lake** Baptist children's ministry, heard about the fire from her older sister. "We played games there and had counsel time," said Krysten. "The church is friendly, and the people care about you." Her mother, Mirta Murdock, had faith that the fire would not slow the growth of the children's ministry. "Out of the ashes," she said, "something beautiful will come from this."

Map and chart: Church fires in Georgia Since 1990, there have been 37 church fires in Georgia, not necessarily all of them arson. Here's the breakdown over the past six years, including the fire Monday at **Pine Lake** Baptist Church: 1990 - 7 fires 1991 - 8 fires 1992 - 2 fires 1993 - 3 fires 1994 - 8 fires 1995 - 5 fires 1996 - 4 fires Map shows location of **Pine Lake** Baptist Church fire and surrounding streets; inlaid map shows location in relation to metro Atlanta Reference note: The map was slightly changed for the final Journal Edition with the addition of Poplar Road. Color photo: Fire department investigators probe the cause of an early morning blaze Monday that gutted the children's activity center at the **Pine Lake** Baptist Church on Rockbridge Road in DeKalb County. / LAURA NOEL / Special Color photo: Children's minister Tony Lawson (left) and church member Hope Harris console each other. / CURTIS COMPTON / Staff