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**LEADSTORIES**

Story last updated at 10:13 p.m. on Monday, July 23, 2001

Molestation charges leveled against pastor

By Lee Shearer

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BISHOP -- A wounded Oconee County church is trying to pick up the pieces this week after the shattering news that its pastor had been jailed on felony child molestation charges.

Larry Michael Holmes, 53, who was minister of the Bishop Baptist Church until he abruptly resigned two weeks ago, remained in the Oconee County jail without bail on Monday, charged with child molestation and one count of aggravated child molestation.

Holmes' lawyer filed a motion for a bond hearing on Monday, but Western Circuit Superior Court Judge Lawton Stephens has not yet scheduled a hearing.

Holmes is charged with molesting a teen-age girl in a series of incidents that began about 18 months ago, when the girl was 14 years old.

Holmes, 53, of 1021 Elder Ridge Drive, Bishop, was arrested by the Oconee County Sheriff's Department on Wednesday, a day after the Oconee County Department of Family and Children Services notified the department and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation of the allegations.

DFCS investigators learned of the possible molestations after the young woman confided in a friend, and the friend told adults what the girl had told her, said Oconee County Sheriff Scott Berry.

More charges could follow after further investigation, Berry said. The alleged incidents did not take place in the church, Berry said.

Holmes had been highly regarded by the members of Bishop Baptist Church. He had been pastor of the church, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, for about five years.

His sudden resignation and arrest left the congregation in a state of shock, members said.

"He had led the church so strongly. It has just been devastating," said one member, Jean Holcomb.

"He had done a real good job," said church deacon Dean Johnson.

"People have taken it really bad. They are very upset, just having a hard time accepting it. I am sure we will be hurt by it," said Gene Dellinger, chairman of the church's board of deacons.

The church has about 250 members, about half of them active, and the church "grew a lot" under Holmes' pastorship, Dellinger said. Church members recently began a construction project to add new Sunday school rooms and offices to the church on Old Bishop Road.

"We're trying to put this behind us and go forward and seek the Lord," Johnson said.

For the past two Sundays, the church has had guest speakers from the Appalachee Baptist Association, a group of area Baptist churches, but the congregation will soon choose an interim pastor and form a committee to look for a new permanent pastor, Dellinger said.

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