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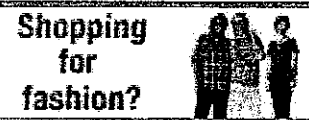
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Posted on Thu, Aug. 25, 2005

Group holds luncheon to engage troops

JOHN MCCARTHY
Associated Press

MASON, Ohio - Religious conservatives looking to build on the momentum from last November's passage of a gay-marriage ban and President Bush's key Ohio victory took the first step Thursday toward mobilizing forces statewide on issues such as abortion, education choice and taxes.

The meeting of the Ohio Restoration Project, a group of religious conservatives drawn from dozens of local organizations, attracted more than 500 people - 300 of them pastors - to talk about achieving clout on so-called values issues.

Religious conservatives have been gaining influence on elections nationwide. So far, 18 states have passed constitutional amendments outlawing same-sex marriage while just one state - Connecticut - enacted a law legalizing civil unions.

Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, a Republican running for governor next year, likened the meeting at the Kings Island Conference Center to a letter written in 1963 by a jailed Martin Luther King Jr.

"He said the church has to decide whether it's going to be a thermometer ... that takes the temperature of the culture or a thermostat that helps to shape the mores and the culture of society," Blackwell said before his speech. "He opted for being a thermostat. I think that's what this speaks to."

During his speech, with a 10-by-20 American flag as a backdrop, Blackwell stressed the need for religious people to be involved in politics.

"We cannot let the public square be stripped naked of religion," he said.

The project's chairman, pastor Russell Johnson of Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster, said Thursday's meeting was meant to move those attending to action.

"We want to see folks informed, equipped, mobilized," Johnson said before the meeting began. "We're over 900 pastors now and we want to pick up another 100 today."

Johnson said the goal of the group is not just to pray but also to serve. He said every time voters step up to the ballot, they should think about life, marriage and taxes.

The group came together after a successful campaign last year by religious and social conservatives to pass a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in Ohio.

Although it has nothing on the ballot for this year's election, it opposes three proposed constitutional amendments that would change Ohio election law. Johnson criticized the issue's backers as too liberal. He said liberals such as filmmaker Michael Moore and billionaire financier George Soros are behind the scenes of

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Reform Ohio Now, the group that collected signatures for the issues.

Reform Ohio Now spokesman Keary McCarthy said Moore and Soros have nothing to do with the campaign.

"Clearly they haven't read the amendments we're proposing because the amendments are inclusive to both political parties," McCarthy said.

The Ohio Restoration Project is supporting a constitutional limit on taxes and government spending slated for next year's ballot.

Another speaker, former U.S. Rep. Bob McEwen, implored the pastors to pray for people he believes lack a moral compass.

"This country, this nation needs you," McEwen said. "It will be preserved, not by politicians, but by prayerful patriot pastors."

The meeting was the first of six scheduled around the state during the next year to recruit people. The group wants to sign up 400,000 new voters before next year's elections. The next meeting is scheduled for Nov. 15 in Dayton.

The Rev. John Putka, a political science teacher at the University of Dayton who delivered the closing prayer, said later that the meetings will serve to keep the thousands of volunteers who worked for the gay-marriage ban engaged.

"People are mobilized by any issue that touches the fabric of people's lives," Putka said. "Every political issue is a moral issue."

Mark Brooks, senior pastor at A House of Prayer in Xenia, said the project's focus should not be on politics, but on "support for real needs for real people."

He said the ban in the U.S. tax code keeping nonprofit churches from endorsing candidates didn't bother him.

"For me to say I can't support a candidate from the pulpit doesn't mean I can't support a candidate in the parking lot," Brooks said.

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