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Movement in the Pews Tries to Jolt Ohio

By James Dao
The New York Times

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The Ohio secretary of state, J. Kenneth Blackwell, has the support of the state's conservative church leaders.
(Photo: Greg Sailor / The New York Times)

Columbus, Ohio - Christian conservative leaders from scores of Ohio's fastest growing churches are mounting a campaign to win control of local government posts and Republican organizations, starting with the 2006 governor's race.

In a manifesto that is being circulated among church leaders and on the Internet, the group, which is called the Ohio Restoration Project, is planning to mobilize 2,000 evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic leaders in a network of so-called Patriot Pastors to register half a million new voters, enlist activists, train candidates and endorse conservative causes in the next year.

The initial goal is to elect Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, a conservative Republican, governor in 2006. The group hopes to build grass-roots organizations in Ohio's 88 counties and take control of local Republican organizations.

"The establishment of the Ohio Republican Party is out of touch with its base," said Russell Johnson, the pastor of the Fairfield Christian Church and the principal organizer of the project. "It acts as if it lives in Boston, Mass."

Pastor Johnson's challenge to the party establishment could have far-reaching consequences in a state dominated by Republican elected officials but still considered a bellwether in presidential politics. Conservatives in other swing states are watching closely.

"In Ohio, the church is awakening to its historic role as the moral voice in the community," said Colin A. Hanna, president of Let Freedom Ring, a conservative group based in Pennsylvania that trains ministers in political activism. "Ohio is in the vanguard of that nationally. I very much want Pennsylvania to be with them."

The church leaders say they will try to harness the energy of religious conservatives who were vital not only to Mr. Bush's narrow victory in Ohio but also to passage of an amendment to the state constitution banning same-sex marriage. The amendment, known as Issue 1, was credited with drawing large numbers of rural and suburban conservatives to the polls and increasing Mr. Bush's support among urban blacks.

"We're calling people to act, not just wring their hands in the pews," said Rod Parsley, senior

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pastor of the World Harvest Church outside Columbus, who is considered a rising star in the religious broadcasting world and will be an inspirational speaker for the project. "We got people motivated last year, and then the election was over. We don't want folks to think our work is over."

Republican officials are watching warily. The chairman of the state party, Robert T. Bennett, warned that the decade-long dominance of his party could be jeopardized if it was pushed too far to the right. "This is a party of a big tent," Mr. Bennett said. "The far right cannot elect somebody by itself, any more than somebody from the far left can."

The conservatives point to the governor's race as an example of what they consider wrong with the state Republican Party. Of the three Republican candidates, only Mr. Blackwell has the solid support of religious conservatives. Jim Petro, the attorney general, opposed the same-sex marriage amendment on the grounds that it would invite litigation against companies that provided domestic partner benefits. Betty D. Montgomery, the state auditor, has supported some abortion rights.

Gov. Bob Taft, who cannot run for re-election because of term limits, allowed a sales tax increase to close a budget shortfall and opposed the marriage amendment.

"We're very confused that you have a Republican Party platform, and yet people running for higher office pay no attention to it," said Phil Burress, the leader of the Issue 1 campaign, who is also helping organize the Restoration Project. "Why don't they just become Democrats?" he asked.

[On March 22, Mr. Petro announced that his running mate for lieutenant governor would be Phil Heimlich, a conservative from Cincinnati, and Ms. Montgomery has asked for a meeting with Pastor Johnson. Conservatives said that was evidence that the candidates recognized the churches' power.]

"They understand what happens when 100,000 people committed to our views are on the same page," Pastor Johnson said. "In their little political gatherings and cocktail meetings at the country club, they can't build that kind of loyalty. They can't spend millions to buy what our people will give for free."

In a three-way primary, many Republican leaders say, Mr. Blackwell has a solid chance of winning because conservatives represent much of the party's base. But moderates worry that he could alienate independent voters and lose the general election. Some are discussing enlisting the White House to prod Mr. Blackwell to quit the race.

In a recent meeting of leaders from some of the state's largest churches, many of them in booming Republican suburbs, the Restoration Project issued a blueprint calling for Patriot Pastors to register 500,000 new voters by the May 2006 primary, then inform and energize them with voter guides, rallies and so-called e-prayer networks on the Internet. The group hopes to raise \$1 million and is considering creating a political action committee to provide direct donations to candidates.

The project, which describes itself as nonpartisan and nonprofit, will not endorse candidates. But Mr. Blackwell will be invited to speak to pastoral meetings and to a statewide Ohio for Jesus rally next spring, along with other prominent Christian conservatives like the Rev. Franklin Graham, Dr. James Dobson and Charles Colson, the plan says.

Democrats say they are buoyed by the insurgency of Mr. Blackwell. "He's formidable in many ways, but he's the candidate we'd most like to run against," said Greg Haas, a strategist for Michael Coleman, the mayor of Columbus, who is seen as a favorite for the Democratic nomination.

In an interview, Mr. Blackwell, who is black, said that Ohio had shifted to the right and that he now represented mainstream voters. He also predicted that he would draw black religious conservatives into the Republican Party, breaking the Democrats' hold on urban precincts.

"I think what's happening is we're seeing a struggle for the heart and soul of the Republican

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Party," he said. "And that's healthy."

Experts said that religious conservatives could bring energy to campaigns, but that they had mixed results trying to win control of local political organizations.

"For short periods of time, they often had successes," said John C. Green, a professor of political science at the University of Akron. "But it was very difficult to sustain."

Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the Restoration Project might have greater impact because it was more homegrown and had ties to a wider array of denominations than previous groups like the Moral Majority.

"This represents a new wave in organizing on the part of conservative evangelicals," Mr. Lynn said. "From my standpoint, as someone who doesn't agree with their conclusions, this is a more dangerous model."

Pastor Johnson says the project can sustain political energy. Among conservative leaders, his church, which draws 2,500 regular Sunday worshipers in a heavily Republican suburb of Columbus, is considered a model for activism. In the last five years, a half dozen of its congregants have been elected to local offices, including a judge, several Lancaster city councilmen and the Fairfield County sheriff, Dave Phalen.

Mr. Phalen said he was encouraged by church members to run for office in 2000, when the incumbent was under investigation for corruption.

Sheriff Phalen's official letterhead now reads, "With God, all things are possible."

"These people turn out to vote," he said of Christian conservatives. "They give money and will become active. And there will always be issues to keep people mobilized."


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