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Shaping politics from the pulpits

By Susan Page, USA TODAY

CANTON, Ohio — Pastor Russell Johnson paces across the broad stage as he decries the "secular jihadists" who have "hijacked" America, accuses the public schools of neglecting to teach that Hitler was "an avid evolutionist" and links abortion to children who murder their parents.



Russell Johnson leads the Ohio Restoration Project, a network of nearly 1,000 "Patriot Pastors" from conservative churches across the state.

Kiichiro Sato, AP

"It's time for the church to get a spinal column" and push the "seculars and the jihadists ... into the dust bin of history," the guest preacher tells a congregation that fills the sanctuary at First Christian Church of Canton.

That is his mission. Johnson leads the Ohio Restoration Project, an emergent network of nearly 1,000 "Patriot Pastors" from conservative churches across the state. Each has pledged to register 300 "values voters," adding hundreds of thousands of like-minded citizens to the electorate who "would be salt and light for America."

And, perhaps, help elect a fellow Christian conservative, Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, as governor next year. That has alarmed some establishment Republicans who back rival contenders and warn that an assertive Christian right campaign could repel moderate voters the party needs.

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Evangelical Christian leaders nationwide have been emboldened happens by their role in re-electing President Bush and galvanized by their success in campaigning for constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage, passed in 18 states so far.

Now some are organizing to build on last year's successes. They want to solidify their role in setting the political agenda and electing sympathetic public officials.

The Ohio effort isn't unique. Johnson's project — which he says has signed up more than 900 pastors in Ohio during its first 10 weeks in operation — has helped spawn the Texas Restoration Project in Bush's home state. The fledgling Pennsylvania Pastors' Network has signed up 81 conservative clergy so far. Similar efforts are beginning to percolate elsewhere.

"It's maturing as a movement within the evangelical Christian community," says Colin Hanna of Let Freedom Ring, a Pennsylvania-based group that teaches pastors how to be involved in politics.

John Green, a political scientist at the University of Akron, calls the networks a new chapter in an effort to organize conservative clergy that began with the Moral Majority a quarter-century ago, then faltered.

"This generation of evangelical pastors is much more open to this type of activity," says Green, who studies Ohio politics and religious conservatives. "There isn't the kind of hostility to involvement in public affairs you would have found among evangelicals 25 years ago."

Interviews with a dozen worshipers after the service here find only enthusiasm for Johnson's message. No one raises concerns that the church is moving into terrain where it doesn't belong. "There's a plumb line that our nation needs to stand for," with Christian principles guiding public policy, says Vicki Cantrell, 50, a homemaker. Her words echo Johnson's sermon.

Her husband, Jim, 52, a chemical engineer, applauds the church's efforts to "get Christians reconnected to the political process" by registering and educating voters. "They've been absent a lot in the past," he says.

Republican vs. Republican?

What's ahead could be a struggle for the soul of the GOP.

HOW THEY VOTED IN OHIO

Survey of 2,020 voters as they left polling places in Ohio on Election Day.

	Bush	Kerry
By religion		
Catholic	55%	45%
Protestant	56%	44%
Other	26%	72%
None	29%	69%
By church attendance		
More than once a week	69%	31%
Once a week	64%	36%
Few times a month	50%	50%
Few times a year	40%	60%

Conservative Christians have become the most reliable bloc of voters in the Republican coalition, the sort of grass-roots army that organized labor once provided for Democrats. Many have become active in politics because they feel battered by a Hollywood culture that offends their values. They decry federal and state court decisions that have recognized abortion rights, opened the door to same-sex marriage and barred organized prayer from public schools.

"We as Christians need to take a stand as to what our beliefs are," Linda Stoffer, 50, a bank loan officer, says after the service in Canton. Her top concerns are gay marriage and abortion. "And life issues,"

Never	35%	63%
By candidate quality that mattered most		
Care about people like me	32%	68%
Has strong religious faith	95%	5%
Honest and trustworthy	74%	26%
Strong leader	87%	13%
Intelligent	7%	93%
Will bring about needed change	6%	93%
Clear stands on issues	79%	20%

Margin of sampling error: +/- 3 percentage points

Source: Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International

adds her husband, Dave, 54, who works in a cabinet shop. "Like, what was her name? Terri Schiavo."

"We sit back and let it happen," Jean Wuske, 77, says. "We need to be more vocal — let God back into places he should be, like in the schools."

In 2004, the Bush campaign targeted evangelicals for support, even collecting church directories to identify sympathetic prospects. In Ohio, strong turnout by conservatives who supported the president on social issues was critical in overcoming opposition among voters more worried about the economy and the Iraq war. Bush won the state by just 118,601 votes of more than 5.6 million

cast.

In Ohio, 25% of the electorate described themselves as white evangelical or born-again Christians, according to surveys of voters as they left polling places; they supported Bush over Democrat John Kerry by 3-to-1. In that group, those who said they attended church at least once a week made up 9% of the electorate and supported Bush over Kerry by a crushing 97%-3%.

"The president wouldn't have carried Ohio if the issue (to ban same-sex marriage) hadn't been on the ballot driving out the base," says Blackwell, 57, who as secretary of State oversaw voting operations. He says Christian conservatives are "not going to evaporate, they're not going to retreat, and they will be a real and influential and sustainable force."

But the unyielding focus by many conservative Christian activists on such issues as abortion and gay marriage worries Republican loyalists who have other priorities. Economic conservatives want to lower taxes, for instance; small-government conservatives want to limit the intrusion of government on daily life. For many voters, jobs and education are top concerns.

"This is a 50-50 state," almost evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, state Auditor Betty Montgomery says. She and Ohio Attorney General Jim Petro are the other Republicans now in the gubernatorial race. "We are a crossroads state and very diverse. We've never really elected anyone too far to the right or too far to the left, too liberal or too conservative, and that could make it difficult for Ken to win in the fall."

Montgomery and Petro are proven vote-getters and known statewide; each received more votes than Blackwell in their respective contests in 2002. But Blackwell can claim a base among Christian conservatives — he's featured in "Ohio for Jesus" radio spots and regularly speaks from pulpits across the state — while the other two divide the party's more moderate ranks.

Some establishment Republicans want either Petro or Montgomery to drop out and allow a one-on-one contest against Blackwell. (Both insist they're in the race for good.)

Neil Clark, a former chief operating officer for the Ohio Senate Republican Caucus and one of the best-connected lobbyists in Columbus, the state capital, says he and other moderate Republicans are worried about the state "going back to the Stone Ages of Salem."

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Moderates may fight back

They are ready to fight back, he says. "That could be in recruiting another candidate, or it could be in saying we're not going to support a candidate that doesn't have interests other than the three fundamental interests of the church — abortion, gay marriage and gambling," he says. "There's a lot of other things that make a state go."

Johnson, pastor of the 2,500-member Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster, scoffs at the suggestion that evangelical leaders are the ones out of touch with the state's voters. Republican Gov. Bob Taft and Sens. George Voinovich and Mike DeWine last year opposed Issue 1, the constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, saying it was poorly drafted and overly broad. Pushed by Christian conservatives, it was passed by 62% of the electorate.

"I don't think some of our people in the Republican hierarchy are learning how much more conservative Ohio is than they thought," Johnson says. The political successes scored already should have been "a wake-up call" for them, he says.

The Ohio Restoration Project — enlisting mostly evangelical pastors but also some Methodists and Catholics — is well on its way to meeting its goal of signing up 1,000 pastors by the end of the year, he says. By Election Day 2006, the goal is 2,000.

Johnson brooks no doubts about the merit of his cause or the certainty of its success. At 49, he has an open face, a slight Kentucky twang and a missionary's zeal — a legacy, perhaps, from his grandfather, J. Russell Morse, a renowned missionary who served for decades in China and Burma.

State Republican Chairman Bob Bennett, who is neutral in the primary, predicts "a very tough year" for whoever wins the gubernatorial nomination. Investigations into financial improprieties have engulfed the Taft administration and touched other officeholders.

He says the odds are against Republicans uniting behind any one candidate — and against having a primary that doesn't leave scars. "They'll be out to kill each other," he predicts, "and they'll have \$10 to \$15 million each to do it with."

'I'm a Christ-o-crat'

Tax-exempt churches and organizations can't endorse candidates or be formally tied to a political party. Johnson notes that the Ohio Restoration Project aims to do more than register voters. Each pastor who joins also promises to sign up 100 "Intercessors" to join an e-mail prayer chain and 200 "Minutemen Volunteers" to work in community projects.

"I like to say I'm not a Republican or a Democrat, I'm a Christ-o-crat," declares Pastor Rod Parsley, a supporter of the Ohio Restoration Project and head of a similar venture called Ohio Reformation. His ministry, housed on a sprawling complex in Canal Winchester, includes the 12,000-member World Harvest Church and the non-profit Center for Moral Clarity.

Still, Parsley's book, *Silent No More*, features a laudatory blurb by Blackwell. (The book should "make values voters a force that politicians can no longer ignore," he says.) The tax-exempt organizations can register voters and advocate positions on issues. And the voters recruited by conservative churches are likely to support Republicans by overwhelming margins.

They also are likely to be attracted to Blackwell's message of staunch opposition to abortion and support of gun-owners' rights. While Blackwell says his "right-of-center coalition" also includes fiscal conservatives, his candidacy has become something of a

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crusade for social conservatives nationwide.

Paul Weyrich, a leader of modern conservatism, has paid tribute to Blackwell in commentaries for the Washington-based Free Congress Foundation. Blackwell "believes God wanted him as secretary of State during 2004" because as such he was responsible for voting operations in a critical state during a critical election, Weyrich wrote. He added: "It is difficult to disagree with that proposition."

Johnson sees Blackwell as destined for higher things — even transforming American politics by drawing black voters, now the Democrats' most loyal supporters, to the GOP. If elected, Blackwell would be just the second African-American elected governor in the USA, and the first African-American Republican. Supporters suggest that would make him a natural to be the vice-presidential nominee on the GOP ticket one day.

A primary test

First, though, there is next year's gubernatorial primary — no sure thing, and a test for the emerging network of Christian conservatives.

Petro, 56, has raised the most money and gotten the most endorsements from state legislators. His hometown of Cleveland gives him a stronghold in a Democratic part of the state. Sitting in an office suite lined with portraits of his predecessors, he says he has a "record of accomplishment" in state office that Blackwell can't match.

But Petro's positions on social issues have caused controversy. After being endorsed in 1998 by the National Abortion Rights Action League, he announced two years later that after reflection he had decided to oppose abortion except in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother. While he opposes same-sex marriage, he also opposed the constitutional ban last year because he said as written it could have unintended consequences, including undercutting laws on domestic violence.

Montgomery, 57, has been the state's top vote-getter in the past two elections; she was the first woman elected auditor in Ohio and, before that, attorney general. She backed the gay-marriage ban but is anathema to many conservative Christian leaders because she generally supports abortion rights.

The focus on that issue to the exclusion of all others exasperates her. "If you get somebody who is with you 100% of the time and can't win an election, isn't it better to have somebody who is with you 80% of the time and can win?" she asks, sitting in a conference room at her campaign headquarters. Boxes of campaign literature are stacked along the walls. She says she was raised "not to wear your religion on your sleeve."

Still, the rising power of conservative Christians is suggested even in her bid. At campaign events, she passes out lapel pins that advertise her role in winning a lawsuit for the state against the ACLU to preserve the state motto. The motto encircles the red-white-and-blue pin that has her name stamped on the back. "With God," it says, "All Things Are Possible."

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