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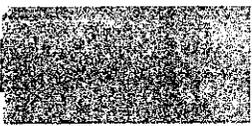
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## 'Patriot pastors' recruited Churchgoers will be urged to vote

By Howard Wilkinson  
Enquirer staff writer

**KINGS MILLS** - The luncheon Thursday at the Kings Island Conference Center could easily have been mistaken for a political party affair, with politicians, speaking over the clank of forks and knives, exhorting the guests to go out and register new voters and make sure they get to the polls.

But the hundreds of people dining at the ballroom tables Thursday were not ward-heelers and precinct captains.

They were, for the most part, men and women of the clergy - evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists and a smattering of Catholic clerics and laymen.

They were being recruited for the Ohio Restoration Project, the brainchild of the Rev. Russell Johnson, pastor of a 2,500-member evangelical church in the southeastern Ohio town of Lancaster. He wants to build a force of Christian conservatives - the "values voters" who oppose abortion, want to protect traditional marriage and oppose higher taxes - to dominate Ohio politics, starting with the 2006 gubernatorial election.

And he plans to do it by recruiting an army of more than 2,000 pastors - "patriot pastors," as he calls them - to do the grassroots work.

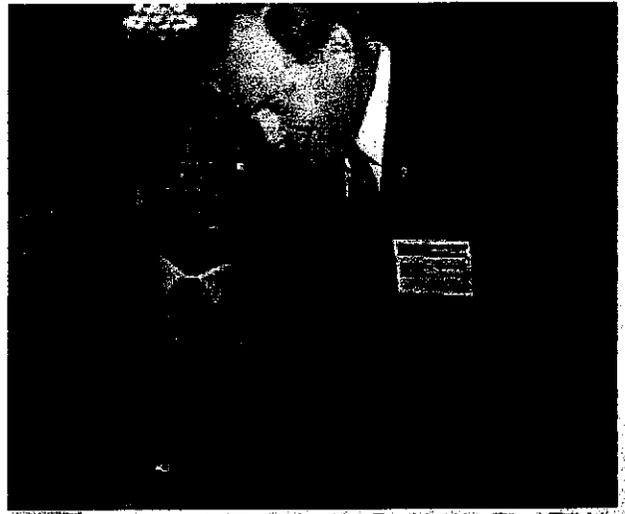


Photo for The Enquirer by Tony Tribble  
Ken Blackwell (seated), a GOP candidate for Ohio governor, talks with the Rev. Russell Johnson at Thursday's luncheon.

### OHIO RESTORATION PROJECT

Created by the Rev. Russell Johnson, senior pastor of the 2,500-member Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster, Ohio.

Aims to recruit more than 2,000 pastors - evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists and Catholic clergy - to become "patriot pastors," with the job of registering 300 new Ohio voters for the 2006 elections.

Agenda: opposition to abortion, protection of marriage, school choice, tax reform, tort reform.

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"Our nation was founded on godly principles," Johnson told the crowd of about 500 at the southwestern Ohio kick-off. "The warfare in our culture has been over the future of America's spiritual health. We must not sit on the sidelines. We must act."

But the group's social conservative agenda and its vow to take over Ohio politics has some Republicans concerned that the movement could drive the party so far to the right that it would scare off middle-of-the-road Ohio voters. Others are concerned that Christian churches all over the state are turning into political organizations.

As a non-profit organization, the Ohio Restoration Project can't endorse candidates, but it was clear at Thursday's luncheon that, for many of the group's faithful, the favorite among the three Republican candidates for governor is Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, who was given a long standing ovation after his speech.

Clutching a microphone in one hand and a Bible in the other, Blackwell quoted Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. as he urged Christian conservatives to get involved in the political process.

"We cannot sit back and let the public square be stripped naked of faith, religion and God," Blackwell said. "The true warrior in this cultural battle must be willing to serve."

The possibility of hundreds of thousands of new Christian conservative voters in next May's GOP primary for governor has some Republicans concerned, particularly those who support the two other announced candidates, Attorney General Jim Petro and State Auditor Betty Montgomery.

"My question is if they are really committed to spreading the word of God or the word of Ken," said Republican political strategist Mark Weaver, who is working for the Montgomery campaign.

Johnson insisted Thursday that his organization is not committed to any one candidate or political party.

"God was pro-life before there was a Republican or Democratic party; God has been pro-marriage since Adam and Eve," Johnson said, as supporters filed into the room Thursday. "This is about empowering people, motivating them to go out and work for the things they believe in."

### Would Jesus join?

More than 300 of the luncheon attendees Thursday were southwestern Ohio pastors. By the time the two-hour lunch had finished, many had filled out cards left on their seats that volunteered them to become one of Johnson's "patriot pastors."

By this time next year, Johnson's organization hopes to have more than 2,000 "patriot pastors" throughout Ohio - pastors who will have promised to fulfill a very specific mission that combines the spiritual with the political.

"Patriot pastors" will be asked to register at least 300 new voters, recruit at least 200 volunteers for community service projects, and contribute 100 names to an e-mail list of "intercessors" who can be counted on to pray for Ohio and the nation.

"Pray, serve, engage," said Johnson. "All three important. It's not just politics."

But to U.S. Rep. Ted Strickland, D-Lisbon, an ordained United Methodist minister, the message of

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Johnson and the "patriot pastors" is far too political.

"I have no problem with anybody going out encouraging people to vote," said Strickland, who is also a candidate for Ohio governor. "What troubles me about this movement is how overtly political it is."

"I can't imagine Jesus engaged in this kind of activity because it is so polarizing, so divisive," Strickland said. "In my reading of the Gospels, Jesus didn't say anything about stem cell research, but he said a lot about poverty and hunger, about clothing the poor and visiting the prisoners. He talked about redemption."

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