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Pastors urged to recruit 400,000 voters

Reformation Ohio's religious-voter drive is power to contend with, its founder says

By Joe Hallett
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Inspired by fiery speeches from televangelist Rod Parsley and former U.S. Sen. Zell Miller of Georgia, hundreds of evangelical pastors vowed yesterday to sign up new voters in their churches for next year's elections.

Meeting for the fourth time in a year under the banner of Reformation Ohio, a four-year initiative to infuse state politics with conservative values and morality, 1,320 pastors were handed thousands of mail-in petitions to distribute to their congregations urging U.S. senators to quickly confirm John Roberts to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Parsley, founder and president of the Center for Moral Clarity, hailed the large gathering of pastors at his southeastern Franklin County church complex as evidence of momentum from the successful 2004 general-election campaign to constitutionally ban same-sex marriage in Ohio.

"If they thought they saw something in 2004, wait until they see 2006," Parsley said, referring to skeptics of the religious-voter movement. "They thought we would go away. I'm here to tell you, we're

here to stay."

The effort headed by Parsley, pastor of the World Harvest Church, has similar objectives as the Ohio Restoration Project's Patriot Pastors movement founded by the Rev. Russell Johnson, pastor of the Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster.

Together, Reformation Ohio and the Ohio Restoration Project are aiming to register 400,000 new voters supportive of an agenda that includes national bans on abortions, same-sex marriages, human cloning and stem-cell research using embryos, and that would limit pornography and sexually oriented businesses.

The groups also want to overturn a provision in the U.S. tax code that prohibits nonprofit churches from endorsing candidates.

"The church in America is under oppression," Parsley said. The nation, he said, was founded on biblical principles, adding: "Our founders never intended a secular state."

Joe Conn, spokesman for the Americans United for Separation of Church and State, in Washington, said it appeared Parsley was "trying to blur the line" of what is permissible for churches in order to retain their IRS tax exemptions.

"If there is any hint that the churches are doing political advocacy on behalf of candidates, the IRS will step in," Conn said. "It's a dangerous game for these pastors to play because the IRS is very strict when it comes to



Former U.S. Sen. Zell Miller, who joined Rod Parsley at yesterday's gathering, spoke out against "liberal activist judges."

partisan politics."

Although Parsley and Johnson have been careful not to endorse Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell's Republican candidacy for governor, Blackwell has become a regular at their events and often is asked to speak.

"I think it's pretty clear in this case that Rev. Parsley is supporting Ken Blackwell for governor," Conn said.

Yesterday, Blackwell was endorsed by Miller, the conservative Democrat and former governor of Georgia who delivered a prime-time speech at the Republican National Convention last summer in New York City.

"You are the kind of leader this state — any state — needs," Miller said to Blackwell, who was seated in a front-row pew.

Later, Blackwell said endorsements in the last week by Miller and two Republican governors, Mark Sanford, of South Carolina, and Rick Perry, of Texas, were more than symbolic gestures in his race for the gubernatorial nomination against state Auditor Betty D. Montgomery and Attorney General Jim Petro.

"These are conservatives who not only view me as a longtime

friend and ally, but they view me as the only genuine conservative in this race on both sides of the aisle," Blackwell said.

In his speech, Miller railed against "liberal activist judges" who he said have encouraged the debasing of society by sanctioning violence, immoral sexual behavior and vulgarity under the banner of free speech.

"Free speech is not free at all — it's costing this country," Miller said, contending that too many Americans have "turned a collective deaf ear and blind eye to the trash that pervades our culture. . . . For too long, way too long, the Supreme Court has been handing down decisions that men and women of faith cannot accept."

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