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LET THE REFORMATION BEGIN'

# A call for converts, voters



TIM REVELL | DISPATCH

...couraged by the crowd, Jerrard Brown shares his enthusiasm before Reformation Ohio's rally. ...  
...stander's message was led by the Rev. Rod Borerley of World Harvest Church, which Brown attends.

# 45 Conservative religious group offers its message at rally, but some disagree with it

By Mark Niquette  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Using the Ohio Statehouse as a backdrop, a religious group launched a movement yesterday to convert thousands of Ohioans to Christianity and register them to vote.

Reformation Ohio, led by televangelist Rod Parsley, senior pastor of World Harvest Church in Columbus, held a multimedia kickoff rally with a boisterous crowd of more than 1,000.

The goals of the four-year effort: present the Gospel message to more than 1 million Ohioans with the hope of converting 100,000; host "compassion projects" to help the disadvantaged; and sign up 400,000 voters statewide.

"It's an ambitious agenda. It's a bold agenda. But it's an agenda demanded by our times and commanded by our God," Parsley boomed to the crowd as he stood at a podium behind the U.S., Ohio and Christian flags.

"Man your battle stations, ready your weapons, lock and load. Let the reformation begin," he said.

Parsley led the crowd, some of whom arrived on buses from his church, in three roaring chants each of "Let the reformation begin" and the state motto, "With God, all things are possible."

On the other side of the Statehouse an hour earlier, a small group of clergy and others gathered to denounce the initiative as an attempt to divide Ohio and to use religion "as a political weapon."

Critics said Parsley, founder of the Center for Moral Clarity, and his followers are intolerant — and that they seek to impose a moral and political agenda that includes opposition to abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage and pornography.

"The churches associated with Reformation Ohio have done some good things," said the Rev. Grayson Atha of King Avenue United Methodist Church. "But when their leaders and other religious leaders try to make us all in their image, they are seeking to take us down a path that is contrary to the very heart of our democracy."

Parsley had been meeting with pastors before yesterday's event and completed a related 11-city tour this year to promote his book *Silent No More*.

The initiative is similar to the "Patriot Pastors" movement founded by the Rev. Russell Johnson, pastor of Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster, which is intended to generate a greater role for persons of faith in next year's statewide elections.

At a news conference before the rally, Parsley said the initiatives are spiritual, not political.

"We would like nothing more than for Democrats and Republicans and independents alike to embrace the three goals of Reformation Ohio," Parsley said.

He noted that as nonprofit organizations, World Harvest Church and Reformation Ohio are prohibited from endorsing candidates or engag-

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ing in partisan political activity. Even so, Parsley has praised Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, a Republican candidate for governor next year. Blackwell sat with other dignitaries at yesterday's rally and addressed the crowd briefly. U.S. Rep. Ted Strickland, D-Lisbon and a Democratic candidate for governor, appeared with the clergy and others criticizing Reformation Ohio.

"As I look at the New Testament, I see no indication that Jesus Christ tried to use the instruments of governments to accomplish his kingdom on this Earth," said Strickland, an ordained Methodist minister.

"What concerns us today is that we believe religion is being used as a political weapon to accomplish narrow political

means and goals. And that is simply wrong, it is harmful and it is destructive."

The rally was a source of controversy for Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman, who also is seeking the Democratic nomination for governor next year.

Coleman's wife, Frankie, had agreed to appear at the rally and give a proclamation. But she pulled out, and the mayor issued a statement Thursday opposing the "divisive politics" of Reformation Ohio.

Greg Haas, Coleman's campaign manager, said Frankie Coleman and Dannette Palmore, Coleman's political consultant and a member of Parsley's World Harvest Church, initially thought the rally was to focus on good works such as hurricane-relief efforts.

But Haas said Coleman decided against any appearance or proclamation after learning that the event was to include prominent conservative Republicans.

U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas and U.S. Rep. Walter B. Jones of North Carolina. Parsley noted that Coleman has visited World Harvest Church and said the controversy was a situation in which "a good man got bad advice."

Shantee Tiller, 40, of Columbus, attended the rally and said criticism of Reformation Ohio is misguided. She said supporters strongly believe that they need to speak out and become more active in the face of a culture sliding into moral decline.

"If we sit back and watch and allow this country to go away from God, we're accountable for that," said Tiller, a World Harvest member.

Dan Stemen, executive director of Reformation Ohio, said the group has received a \$10 million pledge from the group Youth With a Mission and hopes to raise \$10 million more.

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A dance presentation by Remnant gathers a crowd at the Statehouse. The rally yesterday; a smaller group protested it for using religion as a