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Christian right returns to grassroots to reverse political fortunes

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BRANDON, Fla. — Headed into the 2008 election season, Christian conservatives are weary. Their movement has lost iconic leaders and the Republican presidential field is uninspiring. But they may have found hope in a trailer on the campus of Bell Shoals Baptist Church.

There, in Annex Room No. 3, Ruth Klingman nods as a leader in Florida's pro-family movement describes how gay marriage would open the door to other "aberrant forms of marriage." He holds up a printout of "polygamy pot lucks" as evidence.

Yes, Klingman says afterward, she will do her part to pass a constitutional amendment cementing marriage as a union between one man and one woman in this presidential swing state.

The first Family Impact Summit had minted a new activist — tangible results from three days of talks and workshops meant to replenish the roots of the Christian right.

"I just feel the opposition is growing so strong, I need to grow stronger," said Klingman, 34, who drove two hours from the one-stoplight town of Hawthorne to join activists in this Tampa suburb.

Organized by a scarcely known Tampa-area Christian group and ending Saturday, the summit sounded a back-to-basics theme: that evangelicals are called to be active citizens to combat threats from the left; that the work must involve not just national advocacy groups but local people and pastors; and the fight requires patience and persistence.

That last sentiment is a reminder of the challenges facing the Christian right.

Activists lost key allies in Congress when the Democrats retook Congress in 2006, movement pioneers Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy died this year, and there's apathy over the current crop of GOP presidential candidates.

Even this weekend's summit had its disappointments. Organizers had hoped up to 350 people would attend, laying the groundwork for a new Florida activist network.

But only 104, nearly all from Florida, had registered by Friday. A workshop on the basics of grass roots activism drew a handful of people — and one was a spy, an activist for Americans United for Separation of Church and State researching the opposition.

"There will be peaks and valleys, but I don't know if people understand the depth and breadth of our movement," said Gary Cass, former executive director at Kennedy's Center for Reclaiming America for Christ, which closed after the South Florida preacher fell ill.

"While we lament the loss of our leaders, their ideas that have been sewn into the larger church culture are just now starting to germinate and take root."

In a sign of just how much Christian activists want new blood, the summit drew some of the movement's heavyweights, including former GOP presidential candidate Gary Bauer, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council.

However, the organizing group was a Tampa-area shoestring operation: the Community Issues Council,

previously known for fighting a local bikini bar. The group's sole full-time employee is former state Christian Coalition operative Terry Kemple.

Such national-local partnerships are the way to go right now, Kemple said: "It means more troops on the ground and more feet on the streets.

"The old saying is all politics is local. It gets people involved."

The power of state-level organization was seen in 2004, when 11 states passed amendments prohibiting gay marriage and were credited with driving up GOP turnout.

The next marriage battleground is likely here in Florida. In the workshop that won Klingman over, John Stemberger of the Florida Family Policy Council described the particulars: volunteers have collected 597,702 verified signatures toward the 611,009 needed to get an anti-gay marriage amendment on the fall 2008 ballot.

Mark Rozell, a professor of public policy at George Mason University, said state and local groups tend to stick close to social issues that please religious conservatives. Many in the movement wrote off the national Christian Coalition as just another mainstream GOP group vying for power after it got involved in foreign policy and tax cuts, he said.

"Even if these local groups merely exist for one election cycle and go out of existence, they can still have a real impact turning people out to vote," Rozell said.

Beyond gay marriage, abortion remains the cornerstone issue for conservative Christians, the one that got evangelicals involved in contemporary politics in the first place, said Land, of the Southern Baptist Convention. The GOP needs to take that into account when picking its presidential hopeful, he warned.

"If the Republicans are foolish enough to pick a pro-choice candidate, they've given the Democratic Party a license to go hunting for evangelical votes," Land said.

There is only one GOP hopeful who fits that description: front-runner Rudy Giuliani.

A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey this month showed white evangelical Protestants are the only major group that considers social issues like abortion and gay marriage very important to '08 presidential decision-making. But even among that voting bloc, social issues trailed the Iraq war, the economy and other domestic issues.

Religious conservatives also are watching whether a second-tier GOP candidate can break through, said Tom Minnery, a vice president of Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family. But Minnery already is highlighting other races for the control of Congress and several state legislatures.

"Those down-ballot races will be significant, and I hope that will make people excited," he said.

In Tampa, most panels stuck to hot-button themes aimed at getting Florida conservatives involved in politics: The Homosexual Agenda. Life Issues. Redeeming the Culture Through the Legal System. The Church and Voter Registration. Several speakers highlighted threats from militant Islam, an increased emphasis in the movement.

If many of those topics seem familiar or tired to people outside the movement, their power to move people should not be underestimated, said John Green, a senior fellow with the Pew Forum. The audience might just be activists-in-training in Florida this weekend, but it could be much larger in November 2008.

"Since the origins of the movement in 70s, obituaries have been written several times — and they've always turned out to be wrong," Green said. "This is very long-lived movement, in part because it has this capacity to renew itself at the state and local level."

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