

Promise Keepers called a danger to U.S. society

Gays, atheists, feminists and others gather to voice myriad concerns about the Christian men's group.

St. Petersburg Times, October 9, 1999

By Waveney Ann Moore

ST. PETERSBURG -- Several days before thousands of Promise Keepers began their fellowship at Tropicana Field, an informal coalition of gays, humanists, atheists, feminists and others gathered to share their concerns about the Christian men's group.

The organization is a danger to American society, a panel of speakers said Monday during a forum at the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus.

Specifically, they asserted, Promise Keepers has a far-right political agenda, is a threat to the constitutional guarantees that separate church and state, aims to reverse gains made by women and abrogates the rights of gays and lesbians.

Supporters of the men-only Christian group, some of whom had traveled from Tampa, were not given a chance to respond to the charges. Sidney M. Goetz, the evening's moderator, stands by his decision.

"I made a judgment," said Goetz, president of the Tampa Bay Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"Frankly, I thought it might get out of hand. The meeting was fraught with that type of potential."

But Promise Keeper Robert Sutton said he only wanted an opportunity to give a different view.

"If I had a chance . . . I would have just shared the seven promises of Promise Keepers," said Sutton, a teacher at Booker T. Washington Middle School in Tampa.

The discussion Monday night, which was billed an educational forum, was presented by A Florida Coalition for Equality. There was a reason for scheduling the event several days before an estimated 30,000 Promise Keepers were due to meet in St. Petersburg, Goetz said.

"We, the coalition, hope to awaken the public to the perils of a theocratic, anti-democratic movement, which seeks to pit men against women," Goetz said.

"The idea was to educate whoever came to the objectives and the goals of the Promise Keepers' leadership. . . . When you look at a mass movement like this, you must look to the leadership, the founders and the financial backers. What are their objectives? If you look at (Bill) McCartney, the leader and founder, he backed anti-gay legislation in Colorado."

The evening's speakers pursued a similar theme.

Nigel Watson, vice president of the Pinellas County chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, told the audience of about 80, which included Promise Keepers critics from as far away as Pasco County and Sarasota, that the men's group is driven by "fear, naked stomach-churning fear" of change. "The followers of Promise Keepers appear to crave nothing more sinister than validation," said Watson, who described himself as a pagan.

"Their leaders, on the other hand, have a purely sinister agenda," he said. "We need to keep an eye on McCartney."

Toni Van Pelt, state president of the National Organization for Women, was emotional.

"The most frightening aspect of the Promise Keepers is the fact that you are excluding women and that you are asking women to be subservient to men," she said, speaking directly to several Promise Keepers supporters seated in the back of the room.

Atheist Ed Golly agreed with her. The group wants to take the nation "back to the Dark Ages," he said.

"Religion never has been nor ever will be the vehicle for making a better society," Golly, president of the Atheists of Florida, said a few days later.

"There was a time when religion dominated all of Western Europe, and rightly so we called it the Dark Ages. They're using religion to steer us back into that direction."

The Rev. Charles Throckmorton, co-chairman of Equality Florida, an organization for gay and lesbian rights, chose a prop -- a large rainbow-colored umbrella -- to make his point.

"Friends," he said, "I am here to put forth a different view of the world" than Promise Keepers.

Families, said the ordained unity minister, can consist of two men or two women. And regardless of sexuality, all people "are perfect expressions of God," he added.

Stephen Boyd, a professor of religion at Wake Forest University and president of the American Men's Studies Association, said he can understand why Promise Keepers causes so much apprehension among certain groups. Sexism and homophobia are destructive and it is impossible to take a neutral position on either one, he said.

"I think the fear is that there is a truck headed for folks, whether it is a sexist truck or a homophobic truck," Boyd said.

"The question that many religious people and other people ask of any movement (is), are you in the truck or are you trying to stop the truck?" Early on, he said, Promise Keepers gave the impression that the movement was squarely aiming at destroying women's rights.

"That has changed a bit," Boyd said. "In respect to gay and lesbian people, I am not aware of any attempt to back off the rhetoric that condemns gay or lesbian people and that's cause for alarm for folks who believe that homophobia is very destructive."

During Monday's forum, the Denver-based Promise Keepers also was criticized for being a white man's movement. Its talk of racial reconciliation is without substance, Goetz said.

Boyd agrees.

"There is no reconciliation without justice, and having better relationships between individual white men and African-American men and other men of color is a good thing, but it doesn't mean that equality between the races will take place until the structural injustices are addressed -- for example, the criminal justice system and its profiling of oftentimes young black males for arrest and traffic stops," said Boyd, who is white.

"Those kinds of structural issues are what keep the divide between white Americans and black Americans almost unbridgeable. I haven't heard Promise Keepers talk about that."

A Baptist, Boyd also addressed what Monday night's speakers referred to as "the hidden political agenda" of Promise Keepers.

Early financial support from political conservatives James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and televangelist [Pat Robertson](#) led to that conclusion, he said.

But Steve Chavis, Promise Keepers' national spokesman and director of public affairs, said such backing was simply evidence of cooperation among groups that share "an agenda of faith and evangelism."

"I would really like to see some evidence of political involvement," he said of his group.

"We have never advocated a candidate or any legislation. We don't share our mailing lists with anyone. The fact is, the men who attend Promise Keepers conferences span the political spectrum. . . . Our stand on the abortion issue might sound political to some, but our interest in unplanned pregnancies is that there are men involved and it appears, based on what we've read, that women choose abortions more often when men are not responsible or available. So for Promise Keepers, abortion is a question of sexual purity and family responsibility."

Chavis also defended the organization's attitude toward women. They are not excluded from its gatherings, he said.

"Women are not invited, but they are certainly open to come. Women are able to register and come in if they want," Chavis said. "But our message is targeted at men. We are called to speak to men."

Sheryl Young, whose husband is a Promise Keeper, said the movement is far from sexist.

"When Promise Keepers says for men to take back leadership in their homes, it means stop deserting their families, stop skipping out on child support, take an active role in raising the children," said Young, a member of Concerned Women for America, an organization whose goal is to preserve traditional family values.

"The women that I know that have Promise Keeper husbands, the marriages are more of a partnership than before. None of them have been made to quit their jobs. I am allowed to go out by myself. Nobody is being whipped into submission or strapped to the kitchen sink."

Chavis also spoke about the evangelical group's efforts at racial reconciliation. Its staff is 35 percent non-white, he said.

"Few organizations are maintaining front-burner status on the race question," he said. "We are practicing what is very difficult even for corporate America. Reconciliation is beyond integration and beyond legislation."

He also explained the group's stand on homosexuality. "There's a biblical design for sexuality that's in the context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage," Chavis said. "Other expressions of sexuality are outside of God's design. That would include homosexuality, the use of pornography, premarital sex and extramarital sex."

Founded in 1990 by McCartney, then head football coach for the University of Colorado, Promise Keepers describes its mission as one that encourages men to live godly lives. Its first stadium gathering was held in July 1991 at the University of Colorado basketball arena. Since then, more than 3.5-million men have attended the group's conferences.

The non-profit organization ran into financial trouble in 1998, when it decided to stop charging admission to its conferences. Supporters raised money to keep it afloat.

Today, said Chavis, "We are well. There is plenty to do and it seems as though we are the ones to do it."

Sutton, who arrived at Monday night's meeting with an armload of Promise Keepers books, agrees.

"It's been a tremendous spiritual help for me."

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