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Christian Broadcasters Voice Their Vision: They Find More Americans Are Receptive to Their Goals

CECILE S. HOLMES, Houston Chronicle Religion Editor Staff

INDIANAPOLIS - Meeting in the nation's heartland this week, Christian broadcasters articulated their vision for a moral America committed to strong families, civic responsibility and high personal ethics. In a change from previous years, they are finding their desires shared by a larger percentage of Americans.

The occasion was the 53rd annual gathering of the National Religious Broadcasters, a predominantly Protestant, evangelical trade association. In the 1980s, its meetings launched the controversial alliance of conservative Christian TV ministries and the Republican Party. Forged in a decade dominated by Ronald Reagan, that alliance faltered under George Bush. Then sex and financial scandals toppled several top TV preachers and undermined the broadcasters' credibility.

The broadcasters have regrouped, emerging as a group of 830 organizations emphasizing ethical business and good fellowship. Their pro-family values and conservative politics haven't changed.

But more of the nation is listening.

In effect, this has led to a less political annual meeting and diffused political clout. "Maybe what we're seeing today is the result of their prior influence," communications scholar Stephen Winzenburg said in a telephone interview. "We have numerous Republican candidates pushing family values. Maybe that's the result of years and years of the NRB pushing family values." Winzenburg, head of the department of humanities at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, has studied religious broadcasters for more than a decade. He sees them playing a minimal role in 1996 elections.

"The fact that they're no longer the only ones out there proclaiming moral values means a loss of power," Winzenburg said. "Compare this election to 1988, when Pat Robertson was running. He really represented the values of the NRB. There are probably eight candidates out there representing their values this year."

In power bases where Christian broadcasters once were ridiculed, their sensibilities now are being considered. From Congress to Hollywood, conservative concerns ranging from the state of public education to violence in film and television are taken more seriously.

Their concerns extend to the fast-growing life on-line. An Internet resource group introduced at the conference plans to offer a World Wide Web community committed to Judeo-Christian values.

In domestic policy, the broadcasters' most influential voices are calling for a return to the principles of religious liberty, godly education, political fairness and personal freedom they believe make America great. They want a say in public policy, a judicial system as intent on justice as on political correctness, a fair shot at evangelism on the airwaves and a family-centered culture based in biblical values.

Former Vice President Dan Quayle summarized their feelings in a speech Tuesday. "Despite our vast material wealth, something seems to be missing when you look at our culture," he said. "Thirty years of social engineering have only led to social breakdown and a bankrupt federal treasury."

Prominent social conservative Gary L. Bauer of the Washington-based Family Research Council elaborates in a new book, *Our Hopes, Our Dreams: A Vision for America* (Focus on the Family Publishing, \$4): "I want a country where children come first again and where virtue is honored; a place where values matter and the American dream is still real," Bauer writes.

Such ideas are striking a responsive chord.

A USA Today poll last week showed 73 percent of those surveyed agreed on the importance of "family values." Such values include strengthening the family and encouraging young people to abstain from sex until marriage. This week, vocal conservative Pat Buchanan, a GOP presidential contender, won in Louisiana caucuses to select many of the state's delegates to the Republican National Convention. Last month, President Clinton talked about values in his State of the Union address.

"We are living at a moment of profound spiritual awakening," Jewish conservative film critic Michael Medved told the broadcasters. Powerful forces influencing Jews and Christians "penetrate even to Hollywood itself," said Medved, author of *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War Against Traditional Values* (Zondervan, \$20). He noted that religious values and family themes are re-emerging in the secular mainstream film industry. As an example, he cited Mr. Holland's Opus as a film filled with "gratuitous goodness."

The broadcasters, a \$1.5 billion-a-year industry, are building interfaith alliances with Jews and Catholics and strengthening their ties with conservative minorities. Rep. J.C. Watts, a black Republican from Oklahoma, spoke at a breakfast meeting. "From Genesis to Revelation, God gives us social and economic policy," Watts said. "But the problem is we refuse to adhere to it."

Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of Chicago has attended the broadcasters' convention since the 1980s, strengthening its ties with his organization, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Eckstein sees a chain reaction in which the GOP listened to conservative Christians, then the Democrats listened as the general public began to worry about values and morality.

"This convention is providing kind of that cultural seedbed for getting information out," Eckstein said.

Christian activists who came to Indianapolis despite the snow and sub-freezing temperatures hail from a savvy evangelical mainstream marshalling publishing and broadcast technology to their causes.

They have taken their battles beyond the ballot box. They sponsor national political groups like Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and Washington-based organizations such as Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America. They share a broad-based mission almost incomprehensible to the irreligious. They want to evangelize the world for Jesus. They want to live in a less politically polarized world. They want to leave their children a safer society. To do that, they'll build radio transmitters, develop computer software, make movies, protest at abortion clinics, run for school boards, start Christian music video networks, hold mass political rallies, adjudicate religious liberty cases, home-school their children and launch new services on the Internet.

Politically experienced evangelicals are the muscle behind CyberDirect, the Internet resource group. With plans to offer local access in 300 cities, the company was founded by Tommi Thornbury, who now lives in Laguna Niguel, Calif. For 10 years she operated a political fund-raising company in Washington with clients including televangelist Robertson. "The Internet is going to eclipse even TV in becoming the most effective and efficient media weapon," Thornbury said. "Imagine a big-spending liberal ideologue running for office. How do we combat that? If the Internet is used, it levels the playing field. The little guy with the right ideals can get his message out for almost nothing."

Locally, all this activity translates into a built-in network for building a values consensus and reaching out across denominational lines.

Jim Glogowski, general manager of KTEK-AM in Houston, went to the broadcasters' meeting to learn, seeking to better serve his clients. He says Christian radio's first mandate is to preach the gospel, but notes that more Christians are becoming involved. "I see that in Houston. "We just encourage the listeners to pray for political leaders, period," he said. That's the bottom-line, and that's very biblical."