

Ted Haggard's November Surprise

by Bill Berkowitz

The double life of one of Bush's key links to the conservative Christian evangelical right About a week before Karl Rove and Team Bush received its November Surprise, Pastor Ted Haggard got one of his own. As voters in Colorado were preparing to vote on ballot initiatives banning gay marriage, Mike Jones, a former gay escort, came forward and claimed that he had a three-year sexual relationship with Haggard, the founder and senior leader of the 14,000 member Colorado Springs, Colorado-based New Life Church, the state's largest megachurch. Haggard also served as president of the National Association of Evangelicals, whose 30 million members come from more than 45,000 churches across the United States. Over the past few years, Haggard has been a regular advisor to the Bush Administration. After initially denying all of Jones' charges, Haggard, himself married with five children, resigned his post at the NAE and voluntarily took an administrative leave of absence from his church. He was later dismissed by the church's independent overseer board. By Sunday morning, a letter composed by Haggard admitting his involvement with Jones was read to New Life Church parishioners. In the letter, Haggard apologized for his transgressions and asked for forgiveness. "The fact is I am guilty of sexual immorality. And I take responsibility for the entire problem. I am a deceiver and a liar. There's a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I have been warring against it for all of my adult life," he said. Although Haggard refused to be specific about which of Jones' accusations were true, he pointed out that "the accusations made against me are not all true but enough of them are that I was appropriately removed from my church leadership position." Jones came forward after realizing that the person he was involved with was Haggard. In a radio interview, Jones said that "After sitting back and contemplating this issue, the biggest reason (for exposing it) is being a gay man all my life, I have experience with my friends, some great sadness of people that were in a relationship through the years" and were not able to enjoy the same rights and privileges as a married man and woman. "I felt it was my responsibility to my fellow brothers and sisters that I had to take a stand and I cannot sit back anymore and hear (what) to me is an anti-gay message," he said. According to the political blog Colorado Confidential, Haggard's New Life Church contributed 12,000 dollars to the campaign for Amendment 43, the anti-same-sex marriage measure that would amend the state's constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman. "It has been a very bad year for conservative evangelicals," Barry Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, told me in a pre-election telephone interview. "Their leader in congress, Tom DeLay, had to slink away in disgrace; several of the 'family values' contingent in the House [of Representatives] appeared to have covered up the Mark Foley [sex] scandal; David Kuo's book revealed that some in Karl Rove's office regard them as 'nuts', and, now, Ted Haggard has been forced to leave the stage." While backing federal and state measures to block gay marriages, Haggard did take a more tolerant stance on domestic partnerships. "If the state wants to provide people who are in a different type of relationship the same benefits as marriage, that's up to the community," Haggard said. "As a Christian, I would be hesitant to do anything that would deny people medical insurance or the ability to visit their partner in a hospital." "We believe within the church that sexuality should be only between a married man and a woman," Haggard said. "But there are many things that I teach in the church that I would never want integrated into civil law." Haggard was one of the rising stars in conservative evangelical Christian circles; the heir apparent to such leaders as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and James Dobson. In 2005, then NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw profiled Haggard in a series on mega-churches. The pastor was also listed by Time magazine as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in the United States last year. Well-connected to the Bush administration, Haggard often met with officials at the White House. In a Wall Street Journal story dated August 13, 2004, Haggard told reporter Elizabeth Bernstein that he participates in "a weekly conference call...that's led by Tim Goeglein, the White House's liaison to the conservative community, and includes prominent religious leaders. We have direct access," Haggard told Bernstein. "I can call [Mr. Goeglein]; he'll take my concern to the president and get back to me in 24 hours." "The weekly conference call with the White House" allows him to give the administration "the pulse of the evangelical world," Haggard said. In 2004, Haggard was heavily involved in "trying to boost evangelical voter participation," the Wall Street Journal reported. "On Sept. 19, he co-hosted a two-hour broadcast encouraging viewers to make it to the polls and to call their congressional representatives in support of the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would ban same-sex

marriages. The show was carried on three Christian television networks and as many as 1,500 Christian radio stations. "Meanwhile, Haggard makes no secret of his support of President Bush. Of the three framed pictures hanging outside his office, two are of himself and the president. Oddly enough, the other picture is of himself and the beleaguered Mel Gibson, who pre-screened his movie "The Passion of Christ" at a conference organized by Haggard." "It's ... worth remembering," the Carpetbagger Report pointed out Thursday afternoon, "that in a broad movement, Haggard was occasionally a voice of reason. Over the summer, for example, when there was a growing debate about the American use of torture on suspected terrorists, Haggard stepped up to sign a joint statement that said torture 'violates the basic dignity of the human person' and 'contradicts our nation's most cherished values.' The statement added, 'Nothing less is at stake in the torture abuse crisis than the soul of our nation. What does it signify if torture is condemned in word but allowed in deed?' "Moreover, Haggard's National Association of Evangelicals was one of a handful of Christian groups to show some leadership in dealing with global warming, and pressured the Bush administration to change its position. "For that matter, when Pat Robertson called for Hugo Chavez's assassination, Haggard also told a reporter, 'Pat doesn't speak for evangelicals any more than Dr. Phil speaks for mental health professionals.'" Given Haggard's prominence and influence in the conservative evangelical and political communities, his alleged three-year gay relationship and use of the drug methamphetamine is of far greater import than the televangelist scandals of the 1980s involving the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart and PTL's Jim Bakker -- the former was caught engaging in meet-ups with prostitutes, while the latter was discovered dabbling in extramarital relationships and financial shenanigans. Whether the Haggard situation had a specific effect on Tuesday's election is still unclear. David Kuo, the former high-ranking official at the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, told Time magazine in a pre-election interview that he believed the scandal could reduce evangelical turnout. "I think the significance of the Haggard thing is this building case against evangelical involvement in politics," he said. "Christians are smart. They can see what influence politics is having." "Haggard was a guy who had the same rigid views on issues like gay marriage and abortion as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, but he was politically savvy enough to understand that conservative Christian evangelicals needed to focus on other issues like race and poverty," Lynn said. "I hope that in the future, evangelical Christians will spend more effort on their personal lives than on their political ambitions," he added. As for Haggard's future: On Tuesday, November 7, the Associated Press reported that Focus on the Family founder James Dobson had signed on to be one of the people overseeing counseling for Haggard. "The counseling process, called restoration, could take years," said H.B. London, vice president for Focus on the Family. Within hours, however, Dobson had second thoughts and withdrew from the process. He issued a statement saying that "after much prayer and discussion with friends and family" he decided to "reconsider" his involvement in the panel overseeing Ted's restoration. Emotionally and spiritually, I wanted to be of help, but the reality is I don't have the time to devote to such a critical responsibility.

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