End times for the Christian Coalition?

by Bill_Berkowitz

Debt, lawsuits, president-elect's resignation threaten Pat Robertson's former juggernaut

On September 19, 2005, Jason Christy, the head of Christy Media and the publisher and editor-in-chief of The Church Report, a national news and business journal for pastors and Christian leaders, was named executive director of the Christian Coalition by the organization's president, Roberta Combs. "I am honored and humbled to be chosen by the Christian Coalition's Board of Directors for this key position," Christy said. "It is crucial at this time in our nation for people of faith to engage the culture, and to realize that at the grassroots level they can make a difference."

Jason Christy, head of Christy Media and publisher and editor-in-chief of The Church Report Within a month, Christy changed his mind, deciding not to take the position. According to Word News, Christy intimated that it would be difficult to work with the Christian Coalition and continue running his various businesses.

Less than a year later, the Coalition's board voted to name Joel Hunter -- the senior pastor of the nondenominational Longwood, Florida-based Northland Church, also known as Northland A Church Distributed, and a founder of the Christian Citizen, and the Alliance for the Distributed Church -- president of the organization.

In late November, however, Hunter stepped down as president-elect (he was to have assumed office on January 1), saying that he had wanted the organization to focus on issues other than abortion and same-sex marriage -- such as poverty and environmental protection -- but Coalition leaders did not. "I think the board just got scared," said Hunter, the author of "Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won't Fly With Most Conservative Christians."

The withdrawal of the media-savvy Christy and the forward-looking Hunter -- albeit for different reasons -- is indicative of a once mighty organization going south. However, like Spain 's Fascist dictator, Generalisimo Francisco Franco, who was kept alive so that his death would coincide with the anniversary of the death of another well-known fascist leader 39 years earlier, the Christian Coalition's demise is taking a dreadfully long time to play itself out. While Reports of Franco's death made it into the popular culture -- It became a recurring item during the satiric Weekend Update segment on the then-new "Saturday Night Live" program -- the death of the Christian Coalition probably won't get the same comedic treatment.

It should be noted that in its day, the Christian Coalition became the heir and-then-some to the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition (CC) set the gold standard for Christian conservative grassroots organizing efforts, fundraising ability and lobbying efforts well into the 1990s.

At its peak, one of the organization's claims to fame was its highly partisan Voter Guides. In 2000, it distributed over 70 million voter guides in churches all across America, including over 5 million in Spanish (approximately 2 million of which were distributed in Florida alone). In the 2004 election cycle, the group claimed that it distributed around 30 million voter guides, but this time in targeted states and congressional districts, choosing instead to focus its efforts on areas that were more politically competitive.

"The once-mighty Christian Coalition founded 17 years ago by the Rev. Pat Robertson as the political fundraising and lobbying engine of the Christian right, is more than $2 million in debt, beset by creditors' lawsuits and struggling to hold on to some of its state chapters," according to the Washington Post. "In March, one of its most effective chapters, the Christian Coalition of Iowa, cut ties with the national organization and reincorporated itself as the Iowa Christian Alliance, saying it "found it impossible to continue to carry a name that in any way associated us with this national organization." Stephen L. Scheffler, president of the Iowa affiliate since 2000, said that "The credibility is just not there like it once was. The budget has shrunk from $26 million to $1 million. There's a trail of debt. . . . We believe, our board believes, any Christian organization has an obligation to pay its debts in a timely fashion."

In reality, the organization hasn't been the same since Ralph Reed, the organization's baby-faced point man who garnered serious face time on television pushing the organization's agenda, and Robertson, the founder and chief operating officer left the Coalition. "After the founders left, the Christian Coalition never fully recovered," James L. Guth, an expert on politics and religion at Furman University in South Carolina, told the Washington Post's Alan Cooperman and Thomas B. Edsall in April of this year. "The dependence on Robertson and Reed was really disastrous."

Reed resigned as the CC's executive director in 1997, leaving to head up his own political consulting firm (Century Strategies), become head of Georgia's Republican Party, and to set the stage for launching his own political career. Earlier this year, unable to slide out from under reports of his close connection to GOP uber-lobbyist, the now-imprisoned Jack Abramoff, Reed was defeated in his bid to become the GOP's candidate for lieutenant governor. Robertson left in 2001 after a CNN interview in which he defended China's one-child policy, a position that horrified fellow Christian conservatives. Robertson's China comment, according to the Washington Post, "was among the most damaging in a series of remarks that have hurt Robertson's standing among evangelical Christians -- and may have hurt the Christian Coalition as well."

"The Christian Coalition was already on life support. Robertson's remarks probably mean its demise," said former Christian Coalition lobbyist Marshall Wittmann, who before he was recently hired to be the communications director and spokesman for Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT), was a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute, a think tank affiliated with the Democratic Leadership Council.

Roberta Combs, who coordinated Robertson's South Carolina campaign during his run to head the GOP presidential ticket in 1988, replaced him as head of the Christian Coalition five years ago. Claiming that the organization was in horrendous financial straits, Coombs cleaned house and made enemies. "I had to let a lot of staff go, and they all got upset with me because they were close to Ralph [Reed]. Of course they said bad things about me. But we got a lot of that [debt] paid down over time," Combs told the Washington Post.

While she may have succeeded in cleaning house and making enemies, one thing she didn't do was straighten out the organization's financials, according to the Washington Post: "IRS records show that the Christian Coalition's red ink has remounted. Its debts exceeded its assets by $983,000 in 2001, $1.3 million in 2002, $2 million in 2003 and $2.28 million at the end of 2004, the most recent year for which it has filed a nonprofit tax return.

"Lawsuits for unpaid bills have multiplied. The Christian Coalition's longtime law firm -- Huff, Poole & Mahoney PC of Virginia Beach -- says it is owed $69,729. Global Direct, a fundraising firm in Oklahoma, is suing for $87,000 in expenses. Reese & Sons Inc., a moving company in District Heights, is trying to recover $1,890 for packing up furniture when the Christian Coalition closed its Washington office in 2002."

The resignation of Joel Hunter precludes any chance that the Christian Coalition might emerge as a new and forward-looking organization. "My position is, unless we are caring as much for the vulnerable outside the womb as inside the womb, we're not carrying out the full message of Jesus," Hunter said in a late-November telephone interview with the Washington Post. "They [Christian Coalition leaders] began to think this might threaten their base or evaporate some of their support, and they said they just couldn't go there." Although concerned about the organization's precarious financials, his resignation did not stem from that factor: "I got a look at who they owed money to. It's sobering. But with the right leadership and the capability of rebuilding a grass-roots organization, it's not insurmountable. My church budget is $15 million a year. . . . It's not too intimidating for me to think I could have raised that kind of money."

According to the newspaper, Roberta Combs, chairman of the coalition's four-member board, "said that Hunter "is still a good friend" but that they agreed during a Nov. 21 conference call that "it would be best for everyone" if he did not become president." Combs pointed out that the organization has "been wanting to broaden our agenda for some time. But there's a way to do that. We wanted to survey our supporters first and make sure they're on board on new issues. Joel saw it differently -- he just wanted to go out and do it."

Interestingly enough, when Time magazine ran a cover story earlier this year headlined "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America," not one Christian Coalition spokesperson was amongst them. With Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Tony Perkins' Family Research Council, and the Southern Baptist Convention having eclipsed the Coalition in lobbying effectiveness since even before Pat Robertson's leaving the organization, Hunter's ideas represented an opportunity for a new beginning.

With Hunter's resignation, it appears that Christian Coalition leaders have soundly rejected changing the way it has been doing business. The organization's long slide from its glory days to relative obscurity will no doubt continue.

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