

Stadium revival: Promise Keepers try to regain the offensive

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Celebrating the 10th anniversary of "Stand in the Gap," evangelicals hope to bring 250,000 men to Washington to re-ignite the Christian men's movement

Ten years ago this October, somewhere between 500,000 to one-million -- depending on who was doing the tallying -- Christian men gathered in Washington, D.C., to "Stand in the Gap." At the time, the Promise Keepers (PK), the chief organizer of the event, appeared on the verge of becoming a major force in conservative politics. Within a few years, however, money dried up, media interest peaked and peeled off, and leadership squabbles ensued. The bubble burst. Despite scaling down their activities and continuing to function, the organization pretty much dropped off the radar screens of the traditional media.

With its 10th anniversary only a few months away, get ready for a SITG sequel!

Although, according to several press reports, the Denver, Colorado-based Promise Keepers (website) is only one of some 75 or so groups involved in staging the October event, it is far and away the most storied.

Founded in 1990 by former University of Colorado head football coach, Bill McCartney, the organization captured the attention of the media through its high-profile stadium rallies that attracted tens of thousands of participants. Christian men, accompanied by their buddies and/or children, prayed, sang, and bought just about everything available from PK's commerce department from t-shirts and hats, to mugs and bumper stickers, to books and DVDs.

The success of Promise Keepers alarmed liberals and progressives: Women's groups and gay rights organizations staged mini-protest rallies of their own outside PK events at arenas and stadiums. During this period, Lee Cokorinos, as senior researcher at the Center for Democracy Studies of the Nation Institute, helped coordinate a national campaign -- centered on the organization -- which received a considerable amount of national attention. This led to the establishment of PKWatch, a research bulletin that, Cokorinos told Media Transparency in an email interview, "focused on the growth of PK, and served as a critical source of information for progressives fighting back against its agenda of putting women into submission."

These days "the conservative Christian men's movement is still out there, but is less visible because they are not holding massive stadium events as at the height of PK," Cokorinos pointed out. "It's much more regionally-focused as evidenced by its shift to arena events. It is also much more structured along denominational lines -- as different ministries have developed their own men's ministries, such as the Southern Baptist Convention's men's ministry."

Since the first "Stand in the Gap" in 1997, the organization has held more than 160 conferences. "PK is still a fairly large organization," Cokorinos added. "It had revenues of over \$25 million in 2005, the most recent 990 available, and they were still paying Bill McCartney \$100,000 a year that year despite the scandals of

yesteryear."

According to Cokorinos, a number of issues led to the organization's fall from the heights it had reached in 1997. "There was a fight-back by progressives, that especially engaged the feminist movement. Rarely has a conservative religious movement been as directly confronted ideologically as was PK. NOW and the Feminist Majority Foundation, backed by the solid research we did at the Center for Democracy Studies, took on PK and essentially devastated its cover story that they were merely compassionate men 'coming home' to be responsible."

One of the most powerful frames created by Promise Keepers leadership was that these Christian men were only interested in being good husbands and good fathers. For Cokorinos, when Promise Keepers used the phrase "coming home," its really meant "to put women in submission, and network with one another to make that happen."

There were also myriad "turf issues," says Cokorinos. "As I argued a decade ago, PK was a product of the right wing evangelical movement. They supported it, put it together, made it grow, staffed it (Focus on the Family's Dr. James Dobson lent it dozens of full time staffers), and backed it."

"There were always a lot of tensions, however, over whether PK was engaged in 'sheep stealing,' and whether their small groups were taking energy from the churches, especially from other denominations. When these forces pulled the plug, PK was cut down to size."

"A lot of the conservative evangelical leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention, ELCA, Assemblies of God and other denominations felt their memberships were being targeted. And PK always had a problem attracting Catholics. The Atlanta 1996 Pastors conference -- the largest gathering of pastors in history -- brought a lot of this tension to a head. Also, as the right wing mega-churches have grown stronger over the past decade, a lot of the men's ministry efforts have been brought in-house (for example, TD Jakes' Man Power)."

And the situation wasn't helped by what Cokorinos calls "the corruption issue," which particularly "revolved around McCartney's transgressions."

In those heady days of the early 1990s and right through the "Stand in the Gap" rally, the nation's traditional media seemed to develop a fairly non-critical view of the movement. While the notion of racial reconciliation that PK leaders espoused was emphasized, little attention was paid to the underlying aspects of racism itself. Racial reconciliation meant not so much support for racial equality as it meant opening the doors to African American pastors who supported PK's core beliefs and to Black men who accepted the organization's credo.

From the beginning, "the story line was superficial, 'men trying to get right with God' in football stadia," longtime right wing watcher and journalist Fred Clarkson told me in an email. "While there was some truth to that, and the events were remarkable spectacles, there was much else to the story that went uncovered."

"But it was the very shallowness of the coverage that ultimately led to the lack of follow-up. Once that story had been told, there wasn't much more to tell, largely because the media are afraid of most of the controversial aspects of religious movements and report on them poorly," Clarkson added.

"There are a few aspects of the PK phenomenon that the media largely missed," said Clarkson, author of "Eternal Hostility," one of the earliest books to document the rise of the new religious right. "One is that there is a long tradition of stadium revival meetings in the summer that are simply updates of the tent revivals of an earlier era. They continue to this day."

"Another aspect of the PK phenomenon, as demonstrated by their own data at the time was that they were not building very much on the people they already had; people who were frequenters of revivals or who were already evangelical Christians who came out of communities that were part of that tradition. Additionally, a large percentage of those who attended PK events, had attended previous events making them the PK equivalent of the Dead Heads. I think after a certain point, the novelty wore off for both participants and the media. There was less there than met the eye."

Lee Cokorinos, now the executive director of the Capacity Development Group, a consulting partnership that assists progressive nonprofits with strategic planning on diversity and gender equality issues, says that the PK media story is actually "very complex and [agrees that it] has never been fully told." The organization was "covered quite uncritically by the mainstream media (on the religion reporter beats, which are very uncritical) until NOW, the FMF and some progressive religious groups (Unitarians, United Methodists, progressive Baptists) began actively seeking out the press to set the record straight."

"The existence of two opposed sides both increased the coverage -- it jumped it to the news pages -- and made the coverage more edgy and interesting. However, the media lost interest when the stadium events stopped and the scandals multiplied. Ironically the more controversial PK became, the less the mainstream media was interested."

Fred Clarkson, co-founder of the blog TalkToAction, also pointed out that one of the tipping points "for the sharp decline of PK was the McCartney sex scandal. It came out during media interviews promoting a new book that he had once cheated on his wife; he proceeded to tell her about it, and then went off to do the Promise Keepers. She said she had been nearly suicidal. The scandal was not so much the confession of a long ago infidelity, but the way he had neglected his wife while PK was on the rise that demonstrated how McCartney talked the talk but couldn't walk the walk. And it was crystal clear in national TV interviews. 'Coach' McCartney, famous for encouraging men to be good husbands, was unable to be one himself, and

apparently did not even know it. I think that the episode made it clear to the media and to would-be Promise Keepers, that they had been had."

Ironically, says Clarkson, "PK served as a catalyst in both its success and decline --opening-up the market for other Christian men's ministries, and the institutionalization of PK principles of male 'headship' in the family, and in the church and in society. The Southern Baptist Convention, during the Paige Patterson era, passed resolutions endorsing the notion of wifely submission in marriage, and banning the ordination of female pastors."

Although Clarkson believes that "it's too early to tell if the October event will really have any juice -- I recall that then-president Bill Clinton endorsed the 1997 rally -- so if it gains even a little bit of traction major politicians from both parties will be seeking to have their names associated with it in some way." After all, Clarkson noted, "Faith is in fashion this political season."

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