

Black pastor coalition protests gay marriage

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ARLINGTON, Texas — Black pastors representing thousands of congregants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area are calling for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages.

The pastors, who formed the Not On My Watch Coalition six weeks ago, kicked off efforts Saturday with a rally at Arlington City Hall that

drew 1,000 supporters. The group included representatives from Promise Keepers, an international men's ministry.

As gay and lesbian couples celebrate in Massachusetts, the first state to make same-sex marriages legal, the coalition denounces parallels drawn between the gay rights movement and the civil rights movement.

Members say legalizing same-sex marriages will have irreparable repercussions on the country.

"We've taken the blow of cohabitation. We've taken the blow of divorce. We've taken the blow of absentee fathers," said the Rev. Bryan Carter, pastor of Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Dallas. "Homosexual marriage could be the knockout

blow."

The group asked attendees to sign a petition asking lawmakers for a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman.

"The church cannot allow the gay rights movement to hitch itself to the civil rights movement," said the Rev. William Dwight McKissic,

one of the coalition's founders. "It is insulting, offensive and racist. It is to compare my skin with their sin."

Randall Ellis, executive director of the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas, based in Austin, said Saturday that his organization was unaware of the rally but is familiar with such groups. "They're rallying to con-

strict rights and weave discrimination into the very fabric of our Constitution," he told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram for its Sunday editions. "And really that's all they can do, is hold rallies like that. Fair-minded and open-minded people have a hard time disagreeing with what gays and lesbians are after: fairness and equality under the law."

Rural churches struggle to maintain their congregations with sanctuaries in disrepair

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SPRING MILLS, Pa. — The stained glass windows are being removed from the old First Pentecostal Church, now falling apart in this central Pennsylvania village.

Less than a mile away, a "For Sale" sign sits outside the century-old St. Mark's Lutheran Church. Just down the highway, two reunited congregations credit their newfound growth to a new building.

Across the country, rural churches are struggling to maintain their congregations and their way of life while facing a daunting reality—it's hard to get new members in old churches.

"Part of the problem with rural churches is that old buildings don't appeal to young couples," said Robert Seater, pastor for New Horizon United Church of Christ in Wisconsin, recently created from three congregations in rural Sheboygan and Washington counties. New Horizon hopes to build a new church and sell the three older buildings.

"They're living in homes that are \$150,000, \$300,000 homes, and they don't want a building that just has a bare basement for their kids' Sunday school," Seater said. "If the church is going to meet the needs of the 21st century, we're going to have to do something with these buildings."

Garth Brown, the council president for New Hope Lutheran Church in Spring Mills, said the same situation existed here.

New Hope was founded in 2001 when the congregations from St. Mark's and Holy Cross Lutheran Church merged. Both churches had aging congregations and saw little room for growth.

"The one building had some parking, but there was no fellowship hall, no Sunday school area, nothing. The St. Mark's building, there was a fellowship hall in the kitchen, but there was no parking," Brown said. "We worked with the synod and the national church, and the things that young families were looking for we could not offer from the old buildings."

All the while, just outside of Spring Mills stood a stark reminder of what could happen if the churches couldn't save themselves.

Originally founded as a Lutheran church more than 100 years ago, the building that housed First Pentecostal hasn't hosted regular services in some 15 years. Cracks streak the red brick walls, the white wooden bell tower is succumbing to rot and vines are overtaking the building.

Because of a deed restriction, when services were no longer held in the building, ownership reverted to 56-year-old Delbert Decker, who had gone to Sunday School there as a child.

"I had a contractor look at it. He said to try to restore it and fix the roof, it would cost \$350,000," said Decker, who is allowing a salvage company to remove anything valuable, such as the stained glass, from the building before tearing it down.

"There's no place for people

to park here, and the building doesn't even have plumbing—no bathrooms, nothing," Decker said. "It's a shame, but there is something you can get out of it."

Rural churches aren't alone. Last year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named urban worship centers as among the nation's most endangered historic sites.

But experts say rural churches face particular challenges in trying to maintain both their congregations and their buildings.

As the population becomes increasingly urban and suburban, there are fewer people in rural areas to attend those churches. In 2001, the National Trust reported that 20 percent of prairie churches in North Dakota sat vacant.

Churchgoers increasingly are looking for more than just a pew and a sermon. Flavil Yeakley, professor director of the Harding Center for Church Growth Studies at Harding University in Searcy, Ark., said churchgoers are seeking out bigger churches that have day care and other services available all week.

"In the last two decades, at least, we've seen more of a migration from small churches to larger ones," Yeakley said. "The big churches can offer programs that the small churches can't."

As people become accustomed to commuting longer distances for work, school and entertainment, they're more willing to commute for church, said David Roozen, director of the Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research in Hartford, Conn. "The vast majority of congregations are commuter congregations these days," Roozen said. "That shouldn't be a surprise — not many of us live where we work these days, ... but probably finding a style of worship and education and mission program that fit the person are more important than the church being close or local."

There are fewer options for an old, rural church building once a congregation has left.

"In urban areas, if one church gives up, often there's another church ready to take over," said Robert Jaeger, co-director of Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based organization dedicated to preserving religious properties. "But that's not the case in rural areas, where there's a much thinner population density."

The differences can be seen

even in the mostly rural Centre County. Just 10 miles from Spring Mills lies the borough of Bellefonte, where one former church was turned into office space for a financial services company and another now houses the local school district offices.

With just 6,400 residents, Bellefonte is a far cry from urban. But it has three times the population of Spring Mills and Gregg Township, where First Pentecostal sat vacant for more than a decade, and where Brown said other congregations showed little interest in his two buildings. Holy Cross was sold to a neighbor who planned to preserve the building, but not to use it for services. St. Mark's is still for sale.

"If you have some kind of population, and you have a structurally sound building, you have a good chance of finding a use for the building," Roozen said. "But in a rural area, you won't always have that."

But not everybody is ready to give up on old churches. Shannon Jung, professor of rural ministry and director of the Center for Land and Theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, said even in rural areas a growing number of church buildings are finding second lives — a wedding chapel in Elizabeth, Ill., a tuxedo shop in Asbury, Iowa, and dozens of antique malls around the country.

And groups like Jaeger's are working with congregations to help them find ways to stay in their old buildings. Jung said some of the more active rural churches already are remaking themselves to provide the services new members want.

"I see lots of churches that are recreating themselves to address this new situation, and I see a lot of very exciting rural churches that are maintaining the building, or modifying the building for new uses, adding day-care centers or elder care centers — the services that larger churches offer," Jung said.

Brown said he still felt some sentimental attachment to the Holy Cross building, which his ancestors helped to found in the 1770s. And he hopes St. Mark's attracts a good buyer.

But after six months in his new church, along Route 45, the region's main traffic corridor, Brown says he'll never go back. New Hope has a children's choir — something neither of the old churches could support — and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts

troops. Attendance is up more than a third, fueled largely by young families, a demographic that was sorely lacking in the old buildings.

"I have some sentimental feelings, but I often think our forefathers were the kind of people who came and built a church because the community needed it," Brown said.

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Most of you in my family have been left alone. Most of you that I deal with on a daily basis have been left alone. You are religious, but you are not in Christ. Some of you are gospel hardened. The truth rolls off like water on a duck's back. You have no more interest in knowing Christ than a baldheaded cow out there in the pasture. You are determined to have your way, not knowing that your way means hell. I take no pleasure in seeing you go to hell.

Every sinner out of Christ is running from God. I, too, was running from God when I was on that religious profession. But thank God He did not leave me there, if He had I'd be in hell today. Sometime back I was talking to a small group and made this statement; "when I was born I should have been cast into the hottest place in hell." A young man spoke up quickly and emphatically; "But Mr. Little, you didn't know God back then!!!" I replied; "it makes no difference, I still should have been cast into the hottest place in hell."

Did you know that you were conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity (Ps. 51:5)? When you were in your mother's womb you had in you a heart of hatred for God (Rom. 1:30, 8:7). Did you ever see and know that by nature you hate God? And the only thing God has to do for you to go to hell is just leave you alone. If you have never seen that then you are not saved!!

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