

Marriage ministry: 'Restoration Project' targets ministers

by [Ryan Valentine](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

"This I know," the politician-*cum*-evangelist insisted, "he who counts every hair on our heads and every drop in the oceans . . . this all-knowing, all-powerful Creator loves us so much that there is not a matter so trivial or so small that we can't surrender it to him and say, 'Father, your will be done!'"

"I certainly know this to be the heartfelt prayer of a governor," added Texas governor Rick Perry. He was speaking to hundreds of pastors last fall at a "Pastors' Policy Briefing," the inaugural event of the Texas Restoration Project.

The Restoration Projects—with groups in Texas, California, Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania—represent a new model for mixing faith and politics. They differ significantly from the first wave of conservative Christian political organizations such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Many conservative pastors agreed with the politics of those groups, and some permitted the distribution of slanted voters' guides in their churches. Yet most of the political work was done not from the pulpit, but by grassroots supporters. In effect, those early groups were limited by a longstanding reluctance among evangelical pastors to tie their spiritual calling too closely to politics. That model is fast becoming a relic. New groups like the Restoration Projects are focused on activating conservative evangelical pastors as political campaign operatives.

In 2004 the Ohio Restoration Project asked hundreds of conservative pastors to conduct voter registration drives within their churches and encourage congregants to go to the polls to support an amendment to the state constitution banning same-sex marriage. Restoration Project organizers knew that most of these church members would also cast ballots for President George W. Bush. Organizers of the Ohio group were publicly gleeful at their perceived success.

"It's time for the church to get a spinal column," pastor Russell Johnson of the Ohio Restoration Project said to one congregation. Johnson said he wanted to push the

“seculars and jihadists . . . into the dustbin of history.”

The Ohio group’s efforts have inspired conservative pastors in other states. Ohio Restoration Project leaders have made numerous appearances at pastors’ policy briefings in Texas and Florida. Ohio pastor Rod Parsley calls efforts to mobilize Christian conservative voters a “revolutionary movement” and criticizes pastors who “avoid confrontation by dwelling in the devil’s demilitarized zone inside their church walls.”

This networking between state groups hints at another key shift. The high level of political sophistication employed by the various Restoration Projects, including the funding for their work, is without precedent when it comes to organizing people of faith for electoral purposes. For the Texas group, money apparently has been no object: there were six pastors’ policy briefings in 2005, including overnight stays at the posh Austin Hilton at no charge for hundreds of pastors. Texas Restoration Project leaders have repeatedly refused to say who is footing the bill.

The briefings feature boisterous preachers, choir members and politicians and combine the trappings of religious revivals with partisan campaign rallies. They include emotional appeals to support traditional values and oppose perceived threats to those values. Last year, leaders encouraged pastors to register 300,000 new Texas voters during planned statewide “Citizen Sunday” events at their churches. The ostensible goal was to register churchgoers and get them to the polls to support a state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. (Voters overwhelmingly approved the amendment.) But there were other clear beneficiaries of this effort, most obviously Governor Perry.

The conservative Republican incumbent, who could face as many as four challengers on a fractured November general election ballot, spoke at each of the Texas pastors’ briefings in 2005. Members of his staff and other Republican operatives joined him, all singing the governor’s praises. In addition, the vast mailing list compiled through these briefings has apparently been shared with the governor’s campaign office. The campaign mailed holiday cards to briefing attendees shortly before Christmas.

Aides to Perry deny that his campaign is tied to the Texas Restoration Project or its leaders. But those aides have acknowledged that passing the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage was key to the governor’s reelection efforts.

Although Restoration Project leaders claim that they will not endorse a candidate, Perry has been the sole gubernatorial candidate to speak at the Texas briefings. Similarly, Kenneth Blackwell, Ohio's Republican secretary of state and a gubernatorial candidate, has been a familiar face at his state's Restoration Project events.

The Texas Faith Network and other religious-liberty groups worry that the Restoration Project is encouraging pastors to cross the line that properly separates preaching from politicking. Last fall the Texas Faith Network's parent organization, the Texas Freedom Network, asked authorities to investigate whether the Restoration Project is abiding by the state's election laws. A pastors group in Ohio has asked the Internal Revenue Service to consider whether two churches associated with the Ohio Restoration Project have improperly coordinated with Blackwell's campaign.

Rulings on these complaints are pending. Ultimately the only real check on politicking in churches may well be the men and women who stand in the pulpits.