

Gingrich woos skeptical evangelical voters

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WASHINGTON (RNS) As evangelicals and other social conservatives gather here this weekend (June 3-4) to take the measure of a number of Republican presidential candidates, Newt Gingrich will be conspicuously absent.

Gingrich's campaign cited scheduling conflicts in not speaking to Ralph Reed's Faith & Freedom Coalition, but his absence will nonetheless prompt questions about his ability to woo politically minded religious voters, and leave some voters' concerns unanswered.

To be sure, the former House speaker has made the rounds in trying to line up early support, especially in Iowa, where religious conservatives are a major force in the state's first-in-the-nation presidential caucuses.

He's paid a courtesy call to San Antonio megachurch pastor John Hagee and also stopped by the late Jerry Falwell's Liberty University and a gathering of Hispanic evangelicals, always trying to reaffirm his commitment to God and country.

Even so, some political observers expect his marital past -- three marriages, two divorces and an admitted affair with the woman who became his current wife -- to be too much for some conservative voters.

"There are some who will look over that because Newt is a political genius," said Tamara Scott, the Iowa director of Concerned Women for America.

"There are others who have concerns that this man couldn't keep his marriage together and how can you run the White House and the country if

you can't keep your own home in order? I've heard all of it."

But Gingrich, who has talked openly about his past failings, has a compelling narrative for religiously minded voters who appreciate a good conversion story.

"People are not, by and large, going to be sidetracked by somebody's past behavior," said Steve Scheffler, president of the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition. "We're all sinners and people make mistakes."

Indeed, Iowa pastor Jeff Mullen, who has hosted Gingrich at his church in Waukee, cited ancient Israel's King David, who was a murderer and an adulterer and yet is described in the Bible as a "man after God's own heart."

"I personally don't think (Gingrich) needs to ask my forgiveness for anything," Mullen said.

Gingrich's nascent campaign is already off to a rocky start. After savaging the House GOP plan to overhaul Medicare, and racking up a bill at Tiffany & Co. of up to \$500,000, Gingrich's "Positive Intensity Score" now trails all other GOP candidates, according to Gallup's most recent analysis.

His political baggage isn't new: a March poll by the Pew Research Center found Gingrich was the first choice of 11 percent of white evangelicals, lower than Sarah Palin and Mitt Romney and significantly lower than Mike Huckabee, who has since withdrawn from the race.

As he attempts to both launch and repair his bid for the White House, Gingrich has held get-to-know-you meetings with evangelical activists. California pastor Jim Garlow, who became chairman of Gingrich's "Renewing American Leadership" nonprofit, left his session with a better impression.

"I found him to be very transparent," said Garlow, pastor of Skyline Wesleyan Church in La Mesa, Calif., of his discussion of Gingrich's "moral and marital failures" in a private meeting. "There was no defensiveness at all."

But some evangelical leaders say Gingrich still has work to do.

"Men are much more willing to cut him some slack than women are," said Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land, who said he's asked hundreds of Southern Baptists what they think of Gingrich and his past. "I find that women don't trust him and it doesn't help that he's married to the `other woman.'"

Gingrich, who was a Southern Baptist until he joined the Roman Catholic Church in 2009, is married to his third wife, Callista, a lifelong Catholic who sings in the choir at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

Land, for one, thinks Gingrich needs to give an honest address about his past failings, similar to John F. Kennedy's Houston speech about his Catholic beliefs, or Mitt Romney's 2007 defense of his Mormonism.

"Don't try to explain it," Land said he's advised Gingrich, who he said would think about it. "Just confess it and ask for forgiveness."

Reed, who will host this weekend's Washington gathering as he attempts to revive his old Christian Coalition kingmaker role, predicted evangelicals will consider Gingrich as long as he speaks about his past mistakes and his current faith in God.

"I think there's a misconception that evangelicals engage in identity voting," Reed said, citing as evidence divorced Ronald Reagan's win over evangelical Jimmy Carter.

Gingrich spokesman Rick Tyler said the candidate has not shied away from the topic, discussing it "courageously and honestly" whenever asked.

In a March interview on Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, Gingrich spoke frankly about his marital past.

"I was doing things that were wrong and yet I was doing them. I found that I felt compelled to seek God's forgiveness. ... I do believe in a forgiving God."

During the 2008 campaign season, he confessed on James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" program that he was having an affair while calling for President's Bill Clinton's impeachment in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal.

Even so, Tyler acknowledged that some evangelicals may not be able to consider Gingrich.

"Newt has made peace with God over his failings and people can determine for themselves if it's a disqualifier or not," Tyler said.

"The people that I'm talking to are more concerned about finding someone who could beat Obama because he is so antithetical to their values, as opposed to picking someone who is perfect."