

D. James Kennedy, elder statesman of Religious Right, dead at 76

By Robert Marus

Published September 5, 2007

Presbyterian minister D. James Kennedy died Sept. 5, little more than a week after he retired from the pulpit that helped him launch both evangelistic and political ministries.

Kennedy, who was 76, had served for nearly half a century as pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. But he was also one of the pioneers of television ministry, a seminary founder and the head of an activist empire devoted to what he believed was the restoration of the United States as a "Christian nation."

According to Coral Ridge Ministries, the umbrella group for his ministry efforts, the death was the result of complications from a heart attack he suffered late last year. He had stepped down from his day-to-day role as head of the church and ministry while undergoing rehabilitation, but worshippers at the church learned Aug. 26 that he would be unable to return to his duties.

Kennedy's death comes just months after that of his better-known contemporary, Jerry Falwell, and at a time when some commentators have also pronounced the demise of the Religious Right movement they helped birth.

Nonetheless, his supporters praised Kennedy's understated leadership in a movement where fierier orators often overshadowed the erudite and highly educated Presbyterian.

"He 'walked the walk' and 'practiced what he preached,'" his daughter, Jennifer Kennedy Cassidy, said in a statement posted Sept. 5 on Coral Ridge Ministries' website. "His work for Christ is lasting -- it will go on and on and make a difference for eternity."

Kennedy, who was born in Georgia but raised in Chicago, became a Christian in his early 20s. He entered Columbia Theological Seminary, now a Presbyterian Church USA school, and went to pastor Coral Ridge, then a tiny mission church, in 1959. The congregation later joined the conservative Presbyterian Church in America, formed mainly by Southerners who broke with the mainstream Presbyterian denomination over the ordination of women and other issues.

After training the church's members in effective means of personal evangelism, the church began to grow explosively. His method, called "Evangelism Explosion," became popular in the Southern Baptist Convention and across evangelicalism. By the 1970s, Kennedy had written several books and built a congregation thousands strong. He began television broadcasts of his sermons from Coral Ridge, which built a massive facility with a 30-story-tall steeple and one of the nation's largest pipe organs.

Kennedy's work soon moved from evangelizing individuals to evangelizing the culture for what he considered Christian values on policy issues. He served on the initial board of Falwell's Moral Majority, which aimed to mobilize conservative evangelical voters who had previously shunned politics. He later founded the Center for Reclaiming America, which brought Christian activists to Fort Lauderdale for training on effective issue advocacy.

Kennedy's political efforts earned him strong praise from supporters and strong denunciations from his opponents. "Dr. Kennedy's strong stand on social and moral issues, including the issue of homosexuality, elevated and compelled public debate," said Alan Chambers, president of

Exodus International, in a statement. Chambers' group is devoted to helping gays and lesbians "change" their sexual orientation. "[Kennedy] loved Exodus, and his dedication to biblical truth has helped to spread the message of hope and change around the world."

But the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force said Kennedy's advocacy for groups like Exodus hurt, rather than helped, sexual minorities.

"Through his advocacy of ex-gay ministries, Kennedy called for the 'transformation' of [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] Americans while ignoring scientific truths about the lack of efficacy and gross mental, physical and spiritual harm caused by so-called 'conversion therapy' programs," said Jason Cianciotto, a senior fellow for the organization's policy institute, in a press release. "He used his media empire of television and radio programs to spread lies and misinformation to support his opposition to marriage equality, hate crimes legislation and employment nondiscrimination legislation."

Kennedy also advocated staunchly in opposition to abortion rights and in favor of government endorsements of Christianity. He was a strong supporter of former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who lost his job after defying a court order to remove [a] monument to the Ten Commandments from the rotunda of the [Alabama Supreme] court's building. In 2001, a crew from Coral Ridge filmed the clandestine installation of the two-ton granite monolith -- inscribed with the Protestant King James translation of the biblical commandments -- although Moore's fellow justices were not even aware it was being placed in the building.

Coral Ridge Ministries later raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay for Moore's legal defense, but he lost all of his appeals and was removed from office in 2003. At the time, Kennedy characterized the rogue judge as a legal martyr.

"Moore is being punished for upholding the rule of law, for following the will of the voters, for faithfully upholding his oath of office, and for refusing to bow to tyranny," he said. "For too long, too many elected officials have bowed in submission to lawless federal-court edicts that set aside life and liberty. They have stood by as, case by case, God and biblical morality have been removed from public life. At some point, the representatives of the people must defend the rule of law and oppose tyranny."

His views on such issues made him a frequent enemy of those who support strong church-state separation, such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Barry Lynn, the group's director, called Kennedy a "key architect" of the Religious Right who "played a huge role in building the religious conservative movement" even though Falwell and Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson are better known.

"His many books were quite important, because they offered the theological underpinnings for the Religious Right's political stances," Lynn said in an e-mail interview.

"Rev. Kennedy often drew a good bit of fire from critics of the Religious Right, because they would accuse him of having theocratic ideas because he had a more sophisticated set of theories and ideas about why conservative Christians should be involved in politics," said John Green, an expert on conservative evangelicals at Washington's non-partisan Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

But Green said he didn't think Kennedy was a true theocrat -- someone who believes religious tenets should govern civil society -- even though he sometimes left himself open to the charge.

"I would say, though, that he often talked in the kinds of terms that led his critics to label him that way," he said. Green also noted that Kennedy sometimes associated with true theocrats, such as Rousas Rushdoony of the Christian Reconstructionism movement. The movement advocates Christians taking "dominion" over government and seeks to reinstate Old Testament law, including capital punishment for crimes such as adultery and homosexuality.

Kennedy's passing and that of Falwell mark a changing of the guard among politically oriented evangelicals, Green said. A new generation of evangelical leaders have, while continuing to

express opposition to abortion and homosexuality, also expressed a desire to broaden the movement's agenda to encompass fighting global poverty and protecting the environment.

That doesn't mark an ideological difference so much as a natural historical progression, he said, because of the fact that people like Kennedy got conservative evangelicals to engage in political activism. "There's also a little bit of a different style -- [Kennedy and Falwell] were hard-edged, they were confrontational in their politics. They didn't compromise," Green said.

"Part of that is, I think, the difference in time," he continued. "When the Rev. Kennedy came into politics, there weren't very many people to compromise with, because conservative Christians weren't involved in politics."

Besides his daughter, Kennedy is survived by his wife, Anne, of 51 years.