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Promise Keepers make history with reconciliation rally in D.C.

By Mark Wingfield and Greg Warner

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In the largest religious gathering in American history, an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Christian men gathered on the national mall Oct. 4 to confess sins of impurity, ungodliness, family neglect, racism and sectarian strife.

Men from across the nation and representing every Christian denomination imaginable crowded onto the mall to participate in the "Stand in the Gap" assembly, sponsored by Promise Keepers, a national evangelical men's movement.

A sea of men that spread 300 yards wide filled the mile-long lawn from the U.S. Capitol to the Washington Monument. Loudspeakers and huge video screens were set up in 12 locations on the mall. The event also was telecast live on the C-SPAN cable network.

Neither Promise Keepers officials nor the U.S. National Park Service attempted to estimate the size of the crowd, due mainly to controversies over estimates of other events held on the mall in the past. Professional estimates placed the crowd at anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million.

Two things local observers agreed on were that the "Stand in the Gap" rally ranks as one of the two or three largest events of any kind ever held on the mall and that participants outnumbered the huge turnout for the 1995 Million Man March.

Promise Keepers officials repeatedly emphasized that size is not what matters in this movement.

"A lot of folks are saying our success is based on numbers. Our success is not based on numbers," Pete Richardson, Promise Keepers vice president for programming, said in a news conference the day before the rally. "If one man changes his life ... that is success."

Indeed there was evidence many men were deeply moved by the event. They fell to their knees in prayer, often laying their faces on the ground weeping or embracing each other as they confessed sins and prayed for each other. Event organizers say such emotional displays, which were frequent and welcomed by the participants, are too rare among men and are a strength of the Promise Keepers movement.

Because of its size and scope, the Promise Keepers' first national meeting already is eliciting comparisons to the two national revival movements that swept parts of the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. Plans

announced at the end of the Washington meeting are intended to ensure the Promise Keepers movement continues to spread -- both into local communities and across the globe.

Calling men to become more responsible in their families, churches and communities was a recurring theme of the six-hour event, billed as a "sacred assembly of men."

The program was structured around three areas: A call for men to commit their lives to Jesus Christ as Savior, a call for men to respond to God by becoming more actively involved in their homes and churches, and a call for men to extend the hope of Christ to others.

The bulk of the program focused on the need for men to repent and become spiritually responsible. Speakers focused on three areas of spiritual failure:

- Forsaking God by disregarding the Bible, failing in prayer and falling into sexual sins.
- Evading spiritual leadership by abusing and abandoning their families.
- Fostering disunity in the body of Christ through racism and denominational pride.

After brief messages on each of the three topics, a time for confession of sins followed, then a joint declaration of the men's desire to serve God and their families more faithfully.

Those declarations were combined into a single statement, dubbed the "D.C. Covenant," that participants recited aloud together at the end of the day.

Music by a worship team, as well as contemporary Christian singers Ray Boltz and Steve Green, punctuated the assembly, with hundreds of thousands of men standing and waving their hands or clapping, sometimes jumping and dancing with joy.

Framed by the U.S. Capitol on one side and the Washington Monument on the other, the rally created a powerful visual image of religion in the public square. Yet patriotism was not the appeal. Instead the men were led by songwriter Boltz to sing in one voice: "I pledge allegiance to the Lamb, with all my heart, with all I am." Tears filled many eyes as virtually everyone on the mall stood and sang the contemporary song with the gusto of an old-fashioned revival hymn.

Though surrounded by all of Washington's trappings of power, the rally contained virtually none of the political overtones critics feared would emerge. Dozens of politicians hovered around the platform all day, but none was asked to address the crowd. In fact, the rally was delayed a year to avoid association with the 1996 presidential election.

"We have not come to demonstrate our power to influence men," declared Promise Keepers' President Randy Phillips in the rally's opening minutes. "We have come to demonstrate our spiritual poverty, so that Almighty God might influence us."

Although Promise Keepers acknowledges an affinity with the Religious Right, none of the day's 40 speakers invoked political activism or reform as the road to revival. Instead organizers pleaded for Christian special-interest groups to put aside their agendas for a day and to seek God. Only a smattering of activists remained around the fringes of the crowd distributing their leaflets.

Responding to the movement's critics -- who say Promise Keepers teaches a narrow religious dogma, seeks political power and promotes male domination -- Phillips declared: "We are not here to impose our religious values on others. And it is not politics we are concerned with but biblical conviction. We are here not to exalt our gender as males. We have come to exalt the man Jesus Christ, who is the Savior, who is the Lord, who is God."

Not everyone was willing to accept those disclaimers, including pockets of feminists who protested around the mall and engaged Promise Keepers in sometimes lively debate.

"We don't mind men keeping promises, but I really believe they're being hypocritical," Connie Hannah of Norfolk, Va., told the Washington Post. "They have a long-term agenda that is being bankrolled by the Religious Right."

"My objection to Promise Keepers is that they say it is the men who must lead in the household," added Wendy Weinholt of Scottsbluff, Neb., a member of the National Organization of Women. "They don't talk about equality. They talk about submission."

But the men who gathered on the mall seemed little interested in debates about gender roles. Instead repentance and reconciliation were the order of the day.

A poignant moment came when John Dawson, an Anglo who directs urban ministries for Youth With a Mission, from the platform begged the forgiveness of God and men of other races for the racist attitudes of white males.

"Anglo people, we are an arrogant people. Lord have mercy on us because we have brought so much pain in this land," he said. "We have been a greedy people. Because of a love of money, we have broken treaties, hundreds of treaties with Native Americans. We have abused power. I ask my friends, my brothers, for your forgiveness for our pride and our greed, and for our arrogance, for our injustice and our abuse of power. Please forgive us."

As Dawson knelt on the platform in prayer, he was embraced by John Perkins, an African-American author from Mississippi and descendent of slaves, who said, "John, I accept your repentance now and I come to confess my own sin of reaction."

The pair was then joined by an African-American, an Hispanic, a Native American, an Asian, a Messianic Jew and a hearing-impaired man, who each offered a prayer of forgiveness and repentance.

"We are not exempt as men of color from repentance," noted African-American pastor A. R. Bernard. He called on African-American men to confess their hatred of Anglos and their use of past oppression as an excuse for their own inaction.

Tom Claus, a Native American from Arizona, joined the moment by saying, "Please, oh Lord, give our Native American Christians hearts that are filled with forgiveness."

Marty Waldman, a Messianic Jew from Dallas and the son of Holocaust survivors, tearfully recalled the silence of the Christian church during Hitler's reign of terror in Nazi Germany. Then he thanked God for the spirit of racial reconciliation he senses emerging through Promise Keepers.

Then all huddled to link hands and pray as a symbol of Christian unity.

Racial reconciliation has evolved into a prominent theme of the Promise Keepers movement in recent years, and intentional efforts have been made to include a racially diverse group in leadership positions.

Before the Washington rally's focus turned to race, however, it highlighted the other well-known theme of Promise Keepers' stadium rallies that have been held across the United States since 1990. That is the appeal for men to put concern for their families above their own self-interests and become more active in the lives of their wives and children.

But group officials steadfastly avoided assertions that men should dominate their wives. Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney explained in a news conference immediately before the rally that a Promise Keeper is "encouraged to love his wife, enjoy her, celebrate her."

"Promise Keepers do not believe it's an unequal yoke. It's an equal yoke," he said.

That message was carried throughout the "Stand in the Gap" rally by platform speakers.

Tony Evans, a Dallas pastor, admonished the men to "repent of not treating our wives as equals ... of abuse and neglect."

"When you come home, you come home to your second job," he said, "not to read the newspaper but to help your family."

He continued: "Fight for your families. Many of you have given up too quickly. What you would never allow your home football team to do ... many of us have done. What do you mean you can't stay married and you have been married 10 years? You have not been married long enough. It takes a lifetime."

Bruce Fong, a seminary professor from Oregon, urged: "When it comes to marriage and family ... no more abuse and no more abandonment. The Bible is very clear for us as husbands. A husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. It's very simple, very clear. Battery is not included."

Baptists encouraged by talk of renewal, reconciliation

By Greg Warner

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Two years ago Mike Mitchell of Camden, S.C., and his friend David Hamilton of Memphis, Tenn., made a "covenant" they would attend the Promise Keepers' national rally in Washington together.

"I knew that it would be a history-making event," Hamilton said, "and I wanted to be part of history -- but also part of revival."

The prospect that Promise Keepers could be the start of a nationwide revival has kept Mitchell, a Southern Baptist pastor, involved in the six-year-old movement. "For years I prayed ... for revival in this country, and my heart got cold. I wanted God to renew my heart for that today, and he did," said Mitchell of Gateway Community Church in Camden.

"Revival has to take place with men, because they are the spiritual leaders," added Hamilton, a layman in Bellevue Baptist Church in the Memphis suburb of Cordova.

The men were likewise inspired by the rally's call for reconciliation across racial and denominational lines.

"Racial issues are very strong where I am in South Carolina," said John Caruso, minister of families and evangelism at First Baptist Church in Dillon, S.C. "We do everything together [with African-Americans] but we don't worship together."

There is "a great need" for racial reconciliation, Hamilton said. The sight of African-American, Anglo, Hispanic, Asian, Native American and Jewish Christians linking hands on the Promise Keepers' stage in a prayer of confession "was a beautiful thing," he said.

When the men who packed the Washington mall Oct. 4 formed prayer circles to repent of their own sins of sectarianism and denominational pride, Hamilton said he overheard some of his Baptist brethren -- who make up a third to half of Promise Keepers nationwide -- leading the chorus of confession.

"We're probably one of the worst about saying 'We're right and they're wrong,'" he admitted. "That spoke to me."

For Greg Strawn, a former Methodist who is now a member of Bellevue Baptist, the call for denominational reconciliation was a welcome word. "That gave me hope."

Strawn said he and his father, who is still a Methodist, have yet to resolve their denominational differences. "It's just something that's not talked about. I'm hoping this can make a difference. We have to go pray more about that."

Likewise for Bruce Spring, a Pentecostal from Columbia, S.C., the most urgent need of the day was for reconciliation within his family.

"Being a good father..." he began, then broke into tears before he could finish the thought. His drive for financial success, he said, has cost him the closeness he once felt with his wife and children. "I never thought it would happen to us because we were close to the Lord. First I got away, then [the children] did."

"There is a lot of need for reconciliation in my life," he said with a resolute nod.

Promise Keepers: By the numbers

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The "Stand in the Gap" rally at the Washington mall was the largest religious gathering in American history and one of the largest U.S. gatherings of any kind.

Here's a summary of the rally by the numbers:

-- How many? Professional estimates ranged from 480,000 to 1 million. The Million Man March in 1995 drew 400,000 to 800,000. Two earlier meetings claim a million or more -- the 1965 inauguration of Lyndon Johnson (1.2 million) and the 1976 U.S. bicentennial (1 million) -- but experts consider those estimates inflated. About 300 protesters -- mostly feminists -- attended. Two out of three Promise Keepers at the Washington rally had attended one or more of the group's stadium events over the last six years, which have attracted a cumulative 2.6 million men.

-- How did they get here? Six men walked -- beginning in early August -- from Los Angeles. A group from Florida rode bikes. By mid-morning, 725 charter buses had arrived at only two subway stations. Other men drove cars or flew commercial flights. National and Dulles International airports, two of three area airports, received 34 charter flights, including 23 planes from Arlington, Texas, alone. One small chartered plane crashed near Baltimore, injuring six Promise Keepers.

-- Who are they? The average Promise Keeper is a middle-aged, middle-income, married (88 percent), white (80 percent) male, according to a Washington Post poll. He is likely a Republican (46 percent) and considers himself conservative (61 percent), but he prefers that Promise Keepers not play a political role.

-- What did it cost? The Washington rally cost almost \$10 million. Admission was free, but organizers expect to recoup most of the expense through an offering that was taken at the close of the event. Promise Keepers estimates its 1997 net revenue at \$70 million.

-- Why did they come? A third (32 percent) came primarily to confess their sins to God and a fourth (25 percent) came to show unity with other Christian men, according to a Washington Post poll. Others came to make a change in their lives (14 percent), support their family (10 percent) or show support for Promise Keepers' values (9 percent).

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-- By Greg Warner

What's the future for Promise Keepers? First local, then global, McCartney says

By Mark Wingfield

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- With the "Stand in the Gap" Washington rally behind them, Promise Keepers' organizers say the movement over the next two years will focus on strengthening local churches.

That will lead to statewide rallies on the steps of every state in the year 2000. Then the movement will "go global," Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney said.

"On Jan. 1, 2000, in every state we are asking pastors and men to gather on the state Capitol steps and take roll call," he explained in a news conference before the "Stand in the Gap" assembly. He also repeated this appeal at the conclusion of the rally on the national mall Oct. 4.

Churches will be asked to account for three achievements, he said:

-- That they have a "vibrant men's ministry."

-- That they are engaged in "vital prayer."

-- That they are working toward "intentional racial reconciliation."

Between now and that date, Promise Keepers will hold about 37 regional rallies each year, with one major change: There will be no admission fee. In the past, participants in Promise Keepers stadium rallies have paid up to \$60 apiece in admission fees. The Oct. 4 "Stand in the Gap" assembly in Washington was Promise Keepers' first free event.

McCartney did not say how Promise Keepers will pay for the no-fee rallies, but he did indicate at least one motivation for the change. "We want you to bring the lost with you," he said.

Promise Keepers also will hold a series of conferences for pastors in early 1998 to help pastors catch the group's vision. Pastors conferences are scheduled for Philadelphia, Denver, Portland, San Diego, Nashville, Charlotte, Dallas, St. Petersburg and Indianapolis.

McCartney admonished the laymen attending the "Stand in the Gap" assembly to return home and submit to the authority of their pastors.

"Our clergy are called to lead us spiritually," he said. "We must let them lead."

"We want you to go back to your church and give away your time, your treasures and your talents. ... You can't sit on those gifts. You've got to give them away."

He also admonished pastors to be receptive this new influx of male volunteers. "Is your church ready for these men to give away their gifts?" he asked.

McCartney called on Christian pastors in every community to meet together once a week to share their burdens for men's ministry and encourage each other. "We need you preaching and teaching and modeling racial reconciliation and denominational reconciliation," he said.

One of the unique features of the Promise Keepers movement is its ecumenical stance, a position not traditionally associated with conservative Protestantism.

"We have so much in common as men of God, but we have not stood together," McCartney explained in the news conference. "The reason we have seen a downward spiral in morality is because we have not stood together."

Popular Christian author Max Lucado also sounded this theme during the "Stand in the Gap" assembly. He and other speakers called on Christian men to repent of the "sin" of sectarianism.

To illustrate the results of denominational disunity, he asked every man present to shout the name of his church. The result was a muddled roar that was unintelligible. Then he asked everyone to "shout the name of your Savior, Jesus Christ." The name of Jesus could be heard clearly all over the mall.

"The watching world has never seen us cooperate," Lucado explained. But such cooperation is God's desire, he said, pointing to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that his followers "may be one ... so the world will believe you sent me."

"We have boasted about the name of our church rather than the name of our Savior," he said.

"Jesus accepts all who come to the cross," he declared. "Have you rejected anyone who's come to the cross? Have you said, 'I'm the screen door and to get to Jesus you have to go through me?'"

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