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Disowning Conservative Politics, Evangelical Pastor Rattles Flock

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

Correction Appended

MAPLEWOOD, Minn. — Like most pastors who lead thriving evangelical megachurches, the Rev. Gregory A. Boyd was asked frequently to give his blessing — and the church’s — to conservative political candidates and causes.

The requests came from church members and visitors alike: Would he please announce a rally against gay marriage during services? Would he introduce a politician from the pulpit? Could members set up a table in the lobby promoting their anti-[abortion](#) work? Would the church distribute “voters’ guides” that all but endorsed Republican candidates? And with the country at war, please couldn’t the church hang an American flag in the sanctuary?

After refusing each time, Mr. Boyd finally became fed up, he said. Before the last presidential election, he preached six sermons called “The Cross and the Sword” in which he said the church should steer clear of politics, give up moralizing on sexual issues, stop claiming the United States as a “Christian nation” and stop glorifying American military campaigns.

“When the church wins the culture wars, it inevitably loses,” Mr. Boyd preached. “When it conquers the world, it becomes the world. When you put your trust in the sword, you lose the cross.”

Mr. Boyd says he is no liberal. He is opposed to abortion and thinks homosexuality is not God’s ideal. The response from his congregation at Woodland Hills Church here in suburban St. Paul — packed mostly with politically and theologically conservative, middle-class evangelicals — was passionate. Some members walked out of a sermon and never returned. By the time the dust had settled, Woodland Hills, which Mr. Boyd founded in 1992, had lost about 1,000 of its 5,000 members.

But there were also congregants who thanked Mr. Boyd, telling him they were moved to tears to hear him voice concerns they had been too afraid to share.

“Most of my friends are believers,” said Shannon Staiger, a psychotherapist and church member, “and they think if you’re a believer, you’ll vote for Bush. And it’s scary to go against that.”

Sermons like Mr. Boyd’s are hardly typical in today’s evangelical churches. But the upheaval at Woodland Hills is an example of the internal debates now going on in some evangelical colleges, magazines and churches. A common concern is that the Christian message is being compromised by the tendency to tie evangelical Christianity to the [Republican Party](#) and American nationalism, especially through the war in Iraq.

At least six books on this theme have been published recently, some by Christian publishing houses. Randall Balmer, a religion professor at [Barnard College](#) and an evangelical, has written “Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America — an Evangelical’s Lament.”

And Mr. Boyd has a new book out, “The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church,” which is based on his sermons.

“There is a lot of discontent brewing,” said Brian D. McLaren, the founding pastor at Cedar Ridge Community Church in Gaithersburg, Md., and a leader in the evangelical movement known as the “emerging church,” which is at the forefront of challenging the more politicized evangelical establishment.

“More and more people are saying this has gone too far — the dominance of the evangelical identity by the religious right,” Mr. McLaren said. “You cannot say the word ‘Jesus’ in 2006 without having an awful lot of baggage going along with it. You can’t say the word ‘Christian,’ and you certainly can’t say the word ‘evangelical’ without it now raising connotations and a certain cringe factor in people.

“Because people think, ‘Oh no, what is going to come next is homosexual bashing, or pro-war rhetoric, or complaining about ‘activist judges.’ ”

Mr. Boyd said he had cleared his sermons with the church’s board, but his words left some in his congregation stunned. Some said that he was disrespecting President Bush and the military, that he was soft on abortion or telling them not to vote.

“When we joined years ago, Greg was a conservative speaker,” said William Berggren, a lawyer who joined the church with his wife six years ago. “But we totally disagreed with him on this. You can’t be a Christian and ignore actions that you feel are wrong. A case in point is the abortion issue. If the church were awake when abortion was passed in the 70’s, it wouldn’t have happened. But the church was asleep.”

Mr. Boyd, 49, who preaches in blue jeans and rumpled plaid shirts, leads a church that occupies a squat block-long building that was once a home improvement chain store.

The church grew from 40 members in 12 years, based in no small part on Mr. Boyd’s draw as an electrifying preacher who stuck closely to Scripture. He has degrees from Yale Divinity School and [Princeton Theological Seminary](#), and he taught theology at Bethel University in St. Paul, where he created a controversy a few years ago by questioning whether God fully knew the future. Some pastors in his own denomination, the Baptist General Conference, mounted an effort to evict Mr. Boyd from the denomination and his teaching post, but he won that battle.

He is known among evangelicals for a bestselling book, “Letters From a Skeptic,” based on correspondence with his father, a leftist union organizer and a lifelong agnostic — an exchange that eventually persuaded his father to embrace Christianity.

Mr. Boyd said he never intended his sermons to be taken as merely a critique of the Republican Party or the religious right. He refuses to share his party affiliation, or whether he has one, for that reason. He said there were Christians on both the left and the right who had turned politics and patriotism into “idolatry.”

He said he first became alarmed while visiting another megachurch’s worship service on a Fourth of July

years ago. The service finished with the chorus singing “God Bless America” and a video of fighter jets flying over a hill silhouetted with crosses.

“I thought to myself, ‘What just happened? Fighter jets mixed up with the cross?’” he said in an interview.

Patriotic displays are still a mainstay in some evangelical churches. Across town from Mr. Boyd’s church, the sanctuary of North Heights Lutheran Church was draped in bunting on the Sunday before the Fourth of July this year for a “freedom celebration.” Military veterans and flag twirlers paraded into the sanctuary, an enormous American flag rose slowly behind the stage, and a Marine major who had served in Afghanistan preached that the military was spending “your hard-earned money” on good causes.

In his six sermons, Mr. Boyd laid out a broad argument that the role of Christians was not to seek “power over” others — by controlling governments, passing legislation or fighting wars. Christians should instead seek to have “power under” others — “winning people’s hearts” by sacrificing for those in need, as Jesus did, Mr. Boyd said.

“America wasn’t founded as a theocracy,” he said. “America was founded by people trying to escape theocracies. Never in history have we had a Christian theocracy where it wasn’t bloody and barbaric. That’s why our Constitution wisely put in a separation of church and state.

“I am sorry to tell you,” he continued, “that America is not the light of the world and the hope of the world. The light of the world and the hope of the world is Jesus Christ.”

Mr. Boyd lambasted the “hypocrisy and pettiness” of Christians who focus on “sexual issues” like homosexuality, abortion or [Janet Jackson](#)’s breast-revealing performance at the Super Bowl halftime show. He said Christians these days were constantly outraged about sex and perceived violations of their rights to display their faith in public.

“Those are the two buttons to push if you want to get Christians to act,” he said. “And those are the two buttons Jesus never pushed.”

Some Woodland Hills members said they applauded the sermons because they had resolved their conflicted feelings. David Churchill, a truck driver for U.P.S. and a Teamster for 26 years, said he had been “raised in a religious-right home” but was torn between the Republican expectations of faith and family and the Democratic expectations of his union.

When Mr. Boyd preached his sermons, “it was liberating to me,” Mr. Churchill said.

Mr. Boyd gave his sermons while his church was in the midst of a \$7 million fund-raising campaign. But only \$4 million came in, and 7 of the more than 50 staff members were laid off, he said.

Mary Van Sickle, the family pastor at Woodland Hills, said she lost 20 volunteers who had been the backbone of the church’s Sunday school.

“They said, ‘You’re not doing what the church is supposed to be doing, which is supporting the Republican way,’” she said. “It was some of my best volunteers.”

The Rev. Paul Eddy, a theology professor at Bethel University and the teaching pastor at Woodland Hills, said: “Greg is an anomaly in the megachurch world. He didn’t give a whit about church leadership, never read a book about church growth. His biggest fear is that people will think that all church is is a weekend carnival, with people liking the worship, the music, his speaking, and that’s it.”

In the end, those who left tended to be white, middle-class suburbanites, church staff members said. In their place, the church has added more members who live in the surrounding community — African-Americans, Hispanics and Hmong immigrants from Laos.

This suits Mr. Boyd. His vision for his church is an ethnically and economically diverse congregation that exemplifies Jesus’ teachings by its members’ actions. He, his wife and three other families from the church moved from the suburbs three years ago to a predominantly black neighborhood in St. Paul.

Mr. Boyd now says of the upheaval: “I don’t regret any aspect of it at all. It was a defining moment for us. We let go of something we were never called to be. We just didn’t know the price we were going to pay for doing it.”

His congregation of about 4,000 is still digesting his message. Mr. Boyd arranged a forum on a recent Wednesday night to allow members to sound off on his new book. The reception was warm, but many of the 56 questions submitted in writing were pointed: Isn’t abortion an evil that Christians should prevent? Are you saying Christians should not join the military? How can Christians possibly have “power under” [Osama bin Laden](#)? Didn’t the church play an enormously positive role in the civil rights movement?

One woman asked: “So why NOT us? If we contain the wisdom and grace and love and creativity of Jesus, why shouldn’t we be the ones involved in politics and setting laws?”

Mr. Boyd responded: “I don’t think there’s a particular angle we have on society that others lack. All good, decent people want good and order and justice. Just don’t slap the label ‘Christian’ on it.”

Correction: Aug. 2, 2006

A front-page article on Monday about the Rev. Gregory A. Boyd, a Minnesota pastor who has preached against church involvement in politics, included an outdated reference to the school where he taught and where the Rev. Paul Eddy, a theology professor who called Mr. Boyd “an anomaly in the megachurch world” teaches. It is Bethel University, not Bethel College. (The name was changed in 2004.)

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