

Southern Baptist Pastors Continue To Embrace Charismatic Renewal

Ron Phillips says his Fresh Oil ministerial fellowship is growing as the movement gains reluctant acceptance

Southern Baptist affiliates of a charismatic network of churches known as Fresh Oil represent just 1 percent of the denomination's 43,000 congregations. But Fresh Oil's leader says there is a grudging acceptance developing within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

Ron Phillips acknowledges that many Baptists frown on spiritual gifts, and some state conventions remain hostile to charismatics. However, because the denomination supports local church autonomy, many think if a congregation supports mission work that it should be left alone, he explained.

Regardless of where fellow Baptists stand, Fresh Oil members are no longer concerned with debating the issue. "In Tennessee there is openness and acceptance, not disagreement," said Phillips, pastor of Central Baptist Church in suburban Chattanooga, Tenn. "But we're past rubbing each other's wounds. We're moving on to missions."

Now five years old, the network has cooperated with both the SBC and independent agencies to help build five churches overseas. Attendees at March's annual conference donated \$30,000 to overseas missions.

With his services aired weekly on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Phillips' outspoken nature rankles cessationists

within the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Yet they can't get upset with his church's annual gifts of nearly \$200,000 to regional and national SBC causes.

Central Baptist supports the convention because it agrees with its evangelistic spirit. And despite disapproval of charismatic gifts by the convention's domestic mission agency, the scene is different overseas.

"At least half the international mission force operates in the power of the Spirit," Phillips said. "They can't work without it. I've been on the field and seen evidence of it."

Some of the 450 Baptist pastors (an overwhelming majority of the group's 500 affiliated ministers) who identify with Fresh Oil report mixed reactions to their stance.

Dwain Miller of Second Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark., said no state or regional official has ever complained about his emphasis on the fullness of the Spirit. Nor is his embrace of the movement as controversial as it was five years ago.

"I preach in a lot of fundamental churches, and we agree to disagree," Miller said. "Fresh Oil is a fellowship of hungry and thirsty people who are tired of the same old thing."

The annual conference gives laypersons a chance to see what a church looks like where the glory of God is present, he added.

At this year's meeting, a member of his church—who previously had a vision of God's glory flowing into Second Baptist—interceded for Miller. In addition to having a similar

vision, he sensed that April 27 represented a key turning point.

The evening of April 27, a traditional Sunday evening service ran for three hours as numerous people confessed and repented of wrongdoing, the pastor said.

"It's an old-fashioned spiritual awakening and revival," said Miller, who has seen record numbers accept Christ this year. "I see God pouring out His glory."

Two other SBC pastors who departed for nondenominational churches say they now feel much freer to move in the Spirit. Dwain Kitchens' views on the Holy Spirit changed after his son's radical conversion in Teen Challenge. The following year the pastor encountered the Spirit at a Jim Cymbala conference in Tampa.

Although only a small contingent at his church in Florida resisted his openness to spiritual gifts, last year Kitchens moved to Cathedral in the Pines in Beaumont, Texas.

"I was 46 and wanted to go out and flap my wings a little bit," the pastor said. "I knew that would cause trouble. Most guys my age and younger would say the gifts are valid, but they aren't embracing it. I knew some pastors who were, but they were certainly in the minority."

An Alabama pastor who left the SBC in 1999 sees many Baptists driving up to an hour to attend his charismatic church, which draws more than 1,100 worshipers a week. Eddie Lawrence of Faith Tabernacle in Florence, Ala., thinks they are drawn by God's presence.

“What I see happening is spearheaded by worship,” Lawrence said. “This seems to be what God is using to bring breakthrough. As people experience the Spirit of God and feel the Father’s presence, there’s nothing that can replace that.”

Regardless of opposition within the SBC, John Kilpatrick senses a mighty move of the Spirit in Fresh Oil. The pastor of Brownsville Assembly of God, home of the world-renowned Pensacola Revival, Kilpatrick was one of several charismatic speakers at the March meetings.

When he spoke, many people hit the floor, crying and asking God for forgiveness. Kilpatrick said whenever he talks about God’s presence, the Holy Spirit invariably comes.

“I don’t know enough about the background of Southern Baptists to gauge the hunger,” Kilpatrick said. “I only know when I was there, it felt a lot like Brownsville.”

Ken Walker