

T.D. Jakes' MegaFest Event Draws 100,000

Bishop T.D. Jakes' giant conference in Atlanta drew 100,000 faithful-and a handful of protesters

More than 100,000 people from the U.S. and abroad converged on Atlanta to attend the second annual MegaFest event in early August.

Bishop T.D. Jakes, pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas and creator of the huge four-day gathering, fused his popular Woman Thou Art Loosed and Manpower conferences with Mega Youth Experience and MegaKidz to offer a smorgasbord of preaching, teaching and entertainment.

Participation this year was shy of the 140,000 who attended in 2004, but Jakes said meeting attendees' needs was the event's priority. "We quantify success in how we provide them with services, and the tools to help families leave MegaFest stronger than when they arrived," he said.

His strategy seemed to work. With general sessions and workshops held in the Georgia Dome, Georgia World Congress Center, Philips Arena and International Plaza, conference-goers scurried from one venue to the next to participate in festivities geared toward faith and family.

"My faith isn't what I believe God for," preacher Juanita Bynum told thousands of people who attended her Morning Glory session. "It's who I believe God is."

The list of speakers read like a who's who of famous

preachers, musicians and authors. Festivities included a family expo, an Xtreme Sports event hosted by actor Stephen Baldwin, a parade, a fashion show, puppetry and much more.

But not everyone agreed with Mega-Fest's blending of sacred with secular. One protester, Orlando Bethel of Loxley, Ala., held a sign outside an arena and distributed literature condemning MegaFest. Bethel, 38, said he believes it is wrong for Jakes to put on such a big show for Christians while ignoring the unchurched.

"How can we market to as many people as possible without standing on godly principles," Bethel said, just as a police officer arrived.

Bethel was particularly upset that well-known mainstream singers and speakers participated in MegaFest. Last year, R&B singer Patti LaBelle and neo-soul artist India Arie were among the performers. This year financial guru Suze Orman; comedian Steve Harvey; Rich Dad, Poor Dad author Robert Kiyosaki; and Gladys Knight topped the list of participants.

"Gladys Knight is not saved," Bethel told Charisma. "The Word of God says don't be unequally yoked!"

Knight, who is a Mormon, sang her popular 1970s hit "Midnight Train to Georgia" during MegaFest's Women of Purpose Concert. Billed as a tribute to Coretta Scott King, the event also featured gospel artists Martha Munizzi, Vickie Winans and the Clark Sisters, along with R&B artists Stephanie Mills and Chaka Khan—who is now a Christian.

Concertgoers arrived at the arena early and waited in line for

hours to get inside. They responded to Knight's performance with rousing applause, shouts and cheers.

MegaFest manager Derrick Williams defended Jakes' decision to feature Knight's performance, saying that she was not there to promote her Mormonism. "The purpose of the Woman of Purpose concert was to honor Coretta Scott King," Williams said. "Gladys Knight and the others were there for that reason. We wouldn't put [Knight] on the platform to preach."

Although some believers question the need to include secular entertainers in religious events, big-name sponsors are taking note of the growing Christian market. Noticeable at MegaFest were well-known corporations such as the Coca-Cola Company, Bank of America and American Airlines.

Valerie G. Lowe in Atlanta