

Bringing Christianity Back to the Public Square

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North Carolina Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson has a message for the state's evangelical pastors: Run for office.

Robinson has repeated his message at least eight times over the past few months at church luncheons across North Carolina hosted by the American Renewal Project, a group dedicated to mobilizing evangelical pastors to run for school boards, city councils, county commissions, the state legislature and beyond.

The project, which has hosted similar events in Iowa, Missouri, South Carolina and Texas, takes the now decades-long effort to get evangelicals engaged in electoral politics one step further. It seeks to bring pastors into elected office.

Robinson, a 54-year-old Republican and a first-time officeholder himself, said the nation needs pastors willing to fight a spiritual war in the halls of power.

"Step up," he thundered to some 200 pastors and their wives munching on boxed lunches of Chick-fil-A chicken sandwiches in Winston-Salem last month. "Join the fight. Don't join the fight under man's power. Join the fight under God's power. Bring the principles of God, not the principles of politics. Bring his words with you."

If Jerry Falwell Sr. founded the Moral Majority to get evangelicals to lobby Congress on issues of morality, and if the Christian Coalition mobilized Christians to cast ballots, then the American Renewal Project wants pastors to run as candidates on the Republican Party ticket up and down the ballot.

Now in its 17th year, the project reorganized two years ago to focus on regional pastor luncheons in a handful of states. This year, eight of its 19 luncheons were held in North Carolina, drawing more than 1,500 pastors and their wives. The events were free, and no offerings were taken.

In addition to the lieutenant governor, each luncheon featured North Carolina Republican Party Chairman Michael Whatley, who promised the pastors that if they run, the party will provide them the logistical support they need.

"You're really good at public speaking," Whatley told the pastors at each meeting. "You're great herding cats. God knows, you can raise money. You're perfect."

Driving the project is the Christian nationalist notion that America has strayed from its origins and needs to be restored to its Christian foundations.

"America was founded on the Judeo-Christian heritage and established a biblically based culture," said David Lane, a Dallas, Texas, political operative who founded American Renewal Project. "We no longer have that. Secularism was officially crowned in the mid-20th century."

Lane said evangelical donors have given him nearly \$50 million since 2005 to support his project and convince pastors to take up the cause.

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