

Chosen: Gatherings fill Valley the next month

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when they arrived, soon after the program started, they were a cohesive body.

They clapped and sang upbeat, contemporary Christian songs. They shared laughs as their emcee teasingly poked fun at the foibles women have in common. They became reflective and some shed tears when speakers challenged them to put aside worldly lives and live holy lives dedicated to God.

"It's what I had hoped for," said Beth Hullender of Fresno, who attends Biola Congregational Church west of the city. "The speaker's messages were so diverse but all wonderful. I felt like they were all talking to me.

"Something like this recharges the batteries of Christians."

Indeed, said Chosen Women executive director Susan Kimes, "It's powerful when you see this many people come together for the same purpose as you."

Chosen Women, a division of Women of Honor, a Southern California-based nonprofit, non-denominational organization, is just one of a growing number of Christian ministries sponsoring mass stadium or arena rallies.

The Christian message to dedicate oneself to follow Jesus is reverberating throughout the Valley and California this year:

■ Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, will be the featured speaker Friday through Sunday at Festival '97 in Visalia, which is expected to draw 45,000 people.

■ Promise Keepers, a national Christian organization dedicated to uniting men to become godly influences in their world, will have a conference at Bulldog Stadium in Fresno on June 27-28. About 50,000 men are expected. Last month, Promise Keepers had a rally at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Twenty other such regional conventions are planned throughout the country in 1997.

■ Joyful Journey, a large-scale convocation for women that will focus on the joy of the Christian

lifestyle and relationships between women will be held in Sacramento in June and in Anaheim in September.

Why so many large-scale Christian rallies?

"It's a movement of God," Kimes said. "The Lord is doing things in a large way to get our attention."

The success of the 7-year-old Promise Keepers organization has validated for many the potential for other mass events. Promise Keepers was founded in 1990. Last year, about 1.2 million men attended regional "PK" conventions.

Although Chosen Women is not affiliated with Promise Keepers, many people called it as "the women's Promise Keepers." And the women welcomed the opportunity to gather.

Judy Dodd, who organized a group of 20 women from Clovis Hills church to attend Chosen Women, said the PK similarity was a strong motivation to attend.

"I had seen that Promise Keepers was so positive for my husband and sons and the men from church," she said.

Among the many Christian-themed T-shirts worn by women at the Rose Bowl last weekend were ones with a heart in the middle and the words, "I Love My Promise Keeper."

Marda Magdaleno, who attends St. Luke's Methodist Church in Fresno, said her husband's PK experience last year was a reason she attended Chosen Women.

"Promise Keepers is how to be a better husband and this is telling me how to be a better wife," she said. "That's the bottom line. We want to be better husband and wife and parents."

Chosen Women founder Kimes said she has had a "heart and a passion for women" for many years and felt led by God to spearhead a revival for them.

"I've done a lot of biblical counseling [with women] and heard the problems of how women need the Lord," Kimes said.



Shirley Armbruster — The Fresno Bee

Valley flavor. Fresno's Beth Hullender, left, joins hands with other participants at the Chosen Women's revival Saturday. "It's what I had hoped for," Hullender said, who attends Biola Congregational Church.

"I think we have been so confused and lost. There is pain, grieving. I just think we've been looking for answers.

"What is the answer? Jesus Christ is the answer."

Kimes also said an all-woman emphasis is appropriate for some gatherings.

"I think we can be ourselves" at a women's function, she said. "Our reactions are different when we're with people of the opposite sex."

Melina Rakis of Clovis said being with so many like-minded women was a real boost for her.

"Just to be surrounded with this many Christian women is wonderful," said Rakis, who attends Clovis Hills Community Church.

Cindy Moreland, who attends Northwest Church in Fresno, said the all-female aspect of the conference allows women to learn more about themselves and to be themselves.

Also, she said, seeing the "gentle strength" of speakers such as Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of Billy Graham, was a reminder that the image of the domineering, career-oriented woman is not the only kind of strength that women can have.

Helen McCullough, founder of I'm A Woman Ministry in Sacramento, said she doesn't think there can be too many mass events for Christians, especially women.

"I believe there's a spiritual trumpet call for women for this time in history," McCullough said. "We really believe God is calling the Christian woman forth at this time in history."

McCullough was observing the logistics of the Chosen Women conference in anticipation of staging a women's rally Oct. 24-25 in Sacramento.

The theme is "For Such a Time as This," which refers to a Jewish queen, Esther, whose courageous action saved her people.

"Esther saved a whole nation by her willingness to risk her life," McCullough said. "We think that today with the Christian woman — by her involvement, worship of God, gifts and talents — God will literally use her to rescue our nation."

Racial reconciliation was addressed at the Chosen Women rally, and McCullough it will be a major issue at the Sacramento conference because the church should be taking a strong role in bringing down racial barriers.

Unlike Promise Keepers, which stages conventions throughout the United States each year, Kimes said Chosen Women was developed as a one-time event, but she is not ruling out the possibility of future meetings if she feels that is where God leads her.

When the issue of future events was raised by one speaker during the weekend, the participants told Kimes through their clapping and cheers that they wanted to do this again.

Kimes said she was surprised by the turnout and the response. "I'm just a little person. This is just an amazing thing to me that I would be used this way, she said.

"You know it's a work of God."