

Faith and Family Are Chosen Track for 'Chosen Women'

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PASADENA, CALIF.

It looked like a typical Rose Bowl crowd: thousands of revved-up fans, listening and watching intently. But this crowd of 20,000-plus was made up of evangelical Christian women gathered to praise God, not the gridiron. No men invited.

This mega-meeting of female faithful — the latest phase in the burgeoning evangelical Christian movement — congregated recently to sing, pray, and rejoice. Called the "Chosen Women," members of the group build their lives around a Bible-inspired family structure, with women as helpmeets to husbands, family, and church leaders. Their commitment is all-encompassing, much like the all-male Promise Keepers, which launched single-sex rallies in 1990 (see related story, right).

But there's a key difference. Unlike the men, evangelical women increasingly have to balance a conservative message with such feminist values as independence and female leadership that have woven themselves through much of modern culture.

For Susan Kimes, the huge assembly was a tool to promote unity in an era that challenges conservative Christian faith. "The devil is getting more powerful. The faithful must be stronger to fight back."

Mrs. Kimes says she founded the group two years ago in response to a vision from God. It is geared toward a single event. "Unless the Lord says so, we won't do another," she says.

Chosen Women does not follow the Promise Keeper model of signing a seven-point pledge, but rally speaker Bunny Wilson echoes an equally traditional credo.

"Women need to be focused on the family and complement, not compete, with men," says the author of such books as "Liberation Through Submission," adding that women need to focus on their special attributes of sensitivity and intuition to help build the family, rather than usurp what she views as a man's leadership role.

She does not support women's political activism to fight sexism, although she encourages activities in line with church teachings, such as anti-abortion rallies. "Right now, the world needs the qualities of mothering and compassion women can offer more than it needs increased competition with men," she says.

Chosen Women is not alone in promoting this stance through large rallies. A half-dozen other women's groups have sprung up in response to the Promise Keepers,

with names such as Heritage Keepers in Wichita, Kan., Suitable Helpers of Wheat Ridge, Colo., and Promise Reapers in Houston. Most have regular meetings, drawing crowds of a few thousand.

But in many ways, they are following a well-established tradition. "Women's groups are not new in the evangelical churches," says Margaret Bendroth, director of the Women and 20th Century Protestantism project at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass. "The churches have always relied on them to hold the community together. It was always more difficult to get the men to participate in church life."

She says this fact helps explain some of the tolerance evangelical women have for unequal roles. "Historically, women have felt one way to keep men in the church was to accord them a special, inviolate role."

Ms. Bendroth says what's new are the scale and historical context. In the 19th century, women could excel in the church without violating cultural standards for women's behavior. But, she explains, the leadership was limited to "women's arenas, such as temperance and family issues."

By contrast, she says, modern culture is steeped in feminist principles. Most evangelical women see feminism as too anti-male or pro-choice on abortion. But, says Bendroth, separating themselves from its underlying values is harder. "There is a deep ambivalence in evangelical culture about modern society, and powerful women in the movement reflect this tension."

Many speakers acknowledged their own struggle to balance modern with traditional values. Jill Briscoe, a prominent evangelical figure and speaker at the conference, says worrying about sexism is a luxury. "I consider the women's issues secondary to the larger issues of Christian creed," she explains. "As long as we can agree on the fundamentals like salvation, heaven, hell, Jesus Christ, then where women fit in the church hierarchy will have to wait."

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DRIVING FORCE:
Susan Kimes says she organized the 'Chosen Women' rally as the result of a vision from God. She says the rally was designed to promote unity in a time of challenge to conservative Christian faith.



JOINING HANDS: While the call to support but not compete with men was well received, a number of women at the rally acknowledged their struggle to balance a traditional message with modern values of female independence and leadership.