



Florida Outpouring Revival Concerns Pentecostal Leaders

By **CARY McMULLEN** / Ledger religion editor

Posted Jun 22, 2008 at 1:51 AM

Updated Jun 22, 2008 at 8:45 AM

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Storms of another kind - doubts about claims of healings and criticism of his teachings and techniques - have not troubled Canadian evangelist Todd Bentley and the leaders of the Florida Outpouring revival, which continues on, now in its 82nd consecutive day. The revival seems set to meet in the tents at Sun 'n Fun for the indefinite future, even though some national and local Pentecostal leaders are wary of giving approval to it.

Bentley shrugged off the criticisms.

“We’re preaching and teaching the gospel and praying and healing the sick,” he said in an interview just before the recent service began. “Jesus said a tree is known by its fruit. What’s the fruit we’ve produced? Thousands are coming to praise God.”

The Pentecostal revival, which began April 2 at Ignited Church in Lakeland, draws an average of 30,000 or more people each week, according to its leaders, with about 50 percent of those from outside the state. In fact, it has become an international phenomenon, and almost a third of the crowds come from outside the United States, leaders estimate. At this particular evening service, flags from eight nations waved above the crowd, which numbered at least 4,000.

Bentley has been interviewed by MSNBC and Geraldo Rivera, and a “Nightline” segment is in the works. Several overseas news organizations have sent reporters to file stories about the revival and its flamboyant leader. Tattoos, lip studs Bentley, 32, runs Fresh Fire Ministries, an independent organization based in Abbotsford, British Columbia. He presents an unusual figure with his many tattoos and jeweled lip studs. A self-professed fan of professional wrestling, he is prone to giving gentle shoves or kicks and shouting “Bam!” as he touches people to “impart” the Holy Spirit to them. His antics have alarmed some, such as J. Lee Grady, editor of *Charisma*, a magazine for Pentecostals, who editorialized against those methods last week. But the crowds clearly love it.

The tents are hardly the steamy gathering place of 19th-century revivals. These are taut, erected on heavy aluminum beams over carpeted platforms, with huge vents blowing cool air inside and a high-tech sound and lighting system. By 7:45 p.m., the crowd is jumping up and down to deafening Christian rock music, singing, “We are the victorious generation.” Even after the music has died down, the crowd takes over, chanting, “Jesus! Jesus!”

Bob and Hilka Mounder traveled from Sheffield, England, last week to attend the revival. They have an affinity for Bentley, having met at a meeting he was conducting some years ago in England. They heard good and bad reports about the Florida Outpouring and decided to come see for themselves.

“Todd is rather special to us. We’ve really experienced God’s presence at his meetings,” Bob Mounder said. “I’m 20 years older, I know lots more about the Bible than he does, yet there’s something about him. He’s got something I haven’t got.”

The revival may have few precedents for its length coupled with the explosiveness of its popularity, which observers say has been fueled by the Internet, over which the services are streamed live twice a day (**see box**). But that has not stopped controversies about Bentley and the events transpiring on the stage of the revival, including the claim that because of prayers offered on their behalf, at least 25 people have been raised from the dead.

Faith healing has been a major focus of the revival. Each night, people with a wide range of serious medical conditions flock to the tents, with only a portion admitted on stage. Bentley says he has four assistants verifying whether people have been cured miraculously, and they are compiling a catalog.resurrection claims While faith healing is a part of the Pentecostal tradition, the claims of resurrections have raised eyebrows. No dead bodies have been brought into the revival. Rather, reports of the recent death of a loved one - in some cases located long distances away - are relayed to the stage by e-mail or cell phone, and Bentley has led prayers for the person to be revived.

“We do our best to find out the situation. In one case, a boy drowned in a pool. He had no pulse, wasn’t breathing and was clinically brain dead,” he said.

The revival has its share of critics. Bloggers such as Andrew Strom have said Bentley does not talk enough about Christ and focuses too much on the “spiritual gifts” of faith healing, prophecies and private supernatural encounters with angels or glimpses of heaven.

One local Pentecostal pastor who attended the revival said he came away “uncomfortable.”

“I saw a lot of passion from (Bentley), but there was too much hype. I just don’t feel I can endorse something that’s being exaggerated,” said Reggie Scarborough, pastor of Family Worship Center in Lakeland, a charismatic congregation that frequently practices faith healing. “We hear about the dead being raised, but we don’t know who they are or where they are.”

Last week, the Assemblies of God, the largest predominantly white Pentecostal fellowship in the country, claiming 2.8 million adherents, issued a statement about revivals that, while not targeting the Florida Outpouring specifically, seems to caution people about it.

For example, one guideline warns against Christians being “overly enamored with charismatic manifestations.” The statement goes on: “Miraculous manifestations are never the test of a true revival - fidelity to God’s Word is the test. Jesus Himself said there would be many who would do miracles in His name and even cast out demons, but He does not know them.”

Reached by phone from Springfield, Mo., the Rev. George Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, said the guidelines are intended to instruct church members about any revival but his office had received a number of queries about the Florida Outpouring. angel messages Wood, who said he had

watched YouTube video clips of the revival, said one concern related to a claim Bentley has made in the past about encounters with angels named Emma and Wind of Change, from whom he received messages.

“I’m concerned anytime someone reports to have special revelations from angels or a deceased person like the apostle Paul. That sort of information is not in the Bible,” he said. “We need to make sure there is adherence to Scripture in any spiritual movement.”

The Rev. Stephen Strader, pastor of Ignited Church, who invited Bentley to Lakeland, is a minister in the Assemblies of God, and his church is part of the Peninsular Florida District of the Assemblies. He said he agreed with Wood and the statement from the Assemblies headquarters.

“We have the exact same concerns. We watch over everything. Everything that happens on the platform is scriptural,” he said. Strader and Bentley say there has been very little talk about angels at the Florida Outpouring.

“Emma has never been part of this outpouring. It was an experience Todd had seven years ago, and it’s been totally blown out of proportion,” Strader said. “The nightly message has been totally 100 percent nothing but Jesus. People looking for a problem or a heresy, they’re going to find it.”

Bentley said he doesn’t understand the controversy.

“I’m not having weekly or daily experiences of angels. I believe they’re present at every service. I have felt them, but this revival hasn’t focused on angels at all,” he said.

Strader acknowledged there have been some missteps and that the leaders have made “a small amount of adjustments.” They no longer say people have been healed, only that people are “claiming to be healed,” he said. In one case, there was a hoax.

“Someone claimed to have a friend raised from the dead. We followed up, and it turned out he didn’t,” he said. “We’re correcting things like that.”

The superintendent of the Peninsular Florida District, the Rev. Terry Raburn, said district leaders have taken no official position on the Florida Outpouring, but Raburn sounded a cautionary note similar to Wood’s.

“In a spiritually charged atmosphere, there is the possibility of excesses - astral travel, out-of-body experiences, healings that can’t be verified,” he said. “Half the people calling our office want me to shut it down, which I would not be inclined to do even if I could. I have no authority over (Bentley). The other half feel I haven’t given it proper promotion and want to adopt it as an Assemblies of God project, which I can’t do,” Raburn said.

Raburn said his schedule has prevented him from attending the revival, but another prominent local Pentecostal leader said he is not sure he will attend. The Rev. Wayne Blackburn, an Assemblies of God district official and pastor of Victory Church in Lakeland, said he has concerns about the emotional level of the services, which often reach fever pitch.

“At these revivals, you’re going to have emotional manifestations that are just not scriptural,” he said.

Blackburn said there seems to be a difference between the Florida Outpouring and an extended revival at Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola in the mid-1990s.

“From what I understand, these services are different because at Brownsville, every night someone preached about the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s amazing that this one is called a healing revival. That’s the focus,” he said.

But Strader insisted that the revival has been genuine.

“What’s happening at the meetings is the manifested presence of God has come to Earth to reveal his glory and power, that’s all. People are saved, people are healed and Jesus is being glorified,” he said. “Even some of my so-called friends are questioning my integrity, but they never come to the services. It’s not fair just to watch it on TV.”

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