

Goal is a new 'Great Awakening' for the nation

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN
The New York Times

For 40 days last year, Linda Creager prepared dinner and sat down with her two sons at the table, but ate nothing. Instead she fasted, swallowing nothing but liquids. Creager said she was not on a diet, but on a religious mission, to find guidance from God.

"After four or five days, I didn't even want food," said Creager, a church outreach worker in Birmingham, Ala.

Thousands of evangelical Christians, hoping that the nation is on the threshold of a huge spiritual revival, have quietly begun to prepare by fasting and praying, on their own and in large groups.

NOW PROMINENT evangelicals, led by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ and Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network, are calling for 2 million Christians to join in a national 40-day fast beginning March 1 and ending April 9 — roughly coinciding with Lent, the period of penance preceding Easter.

Many fasters will sustain themselves with fruit and vegetable juices. Some will drink only Slim Fast. Others will go on modified fasts by denying themselves a favorite food. What is important to them, they say, is that while they carry on their work and family routines, they will also be deep in prayer and Bible study.

"Fasting and prayer is the atomic bomb, or the hydrogen bomb, of all the Christian disciplines," Bright said in a recent interview. "Prayer has great power, but fasting with prayer has infinitely more power."

Biblical accounts, he said, show that God responds to the faithful who fast because it demonstrates repentance, humility and contrition.

Fasting has never been widespread among Protestant denominations. Roman Catholics and many Orthodox Christians fast before Christmas and Easter, Muslims during Ramadan, Jews on Yom Kippur and American Indians before rites of passage and to cleanse their bodies of toxins.

THE ADOPTION of fasting by evangelicals coincides with their growing hope for a great spiritual revival, a fervor that scholars say is fueled in part by the coming end of Christianity's second millennium, but even more by what evangelicals see as a dismal moral climate.

Evangelicals, Robertson said, are discovering that fasting "is a way of coming before God and saying we really mean business, we're not just playing this time."

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"awaken" to Christ.

There have been two major periods of revival in America that historians call "Great Awakenings." The first swept the colonies from Boston to Philadelphia from 1730 to 1760. The second arose in the early 1800s among students at Yale College and at a huge camp meeting in Kentucky and quickly spread throughout the Midwest. Though the nation has had subsequent eras of renewed religious interest, evangelicals long for a new "Great Awakening."

Some evangelical leaders talk of the United States as "Sodom and Gomorrah." As evidence, they cite statistics on the high rates of abortions, teen-age pregnancy, divorce, crime, suicide, drug addiction, alcoholism and prostitution, even though some social indicators, especially crime rates, are improving. In addition, the evangelicals say, the current White House scandal has intensified their sense that sin reigns.

DESPERATE TIMES require drastic measures, evangelical leaders say, so they are promoting fasting and prayer just as the early American evangelist Jonathan Edwards organized fasting days in the colonies and Europe from his pulpit in Northampton, Mass., in the first Great Awakening.

"As a nation, we are faced with the gravest crisis in our more than 200-year history, because we have rejected God and His commandments," Bright warned last year as he and Mission America, an interdenominational group, announced their fourth annual Fasting and Prayer meeting.

"Judgment has already begun with rapid social disintegration during the last three decades, but far worse awaits us," he warned. "Unless we believers truly repent, further judgment and ultimate destruction loom drastically ahead."

Last November, 800 church leaders from more than 60 denominations gathered in Dallas for last year's meeting of collective fasting, preaching and prayer. Their sessions were broadcast by satellite to about 2,200 churches, living rooms and campuses and were heard on more than 110 Christian radio stations.

In Springdale, Ark., the Rev. Ronnie Floyd, senior pastor of First Baptist Church, reinforced his belief in the power of fasting three years ago after a 40-day fast during which he drank cantaloupe, watermelon and carrot juice. He has since led his church of 10,000 members in extended fasts, written a book on fasting and, in a speech before the Southern Baptist Convention in 1996, persuaded its churches to call a one-day fast.

"These are desperate spiritual moments in the life of our nation," Floyd said in a recent interview, so the faithful must set an example by

repenting and "humbling ourselves before God." And the most dramatic sign of repentance, he said, is to go without food: "We deny the most natural thing that our body desires, which is food, in order to persuade God to do something supernatural in our lives."

While evangelical leaders like Floyd see signs of darkness, they also see hints that revival is coming. In interviews, the signs they mention include the spectacle of more than a half-million men kneeling in prayer on the National Mall in Washington last October in the demonstration of faith organized by the evangelical

men's group Promise Keepers; the enduring revival meetings that have drawn more than 2 million people to churches in Pensacola, Fla., and Toronto; and increasing cooperation among Christians across denominational and racial lines.

The sense that both destruction and deliverance are just around the corner is not as paradoxical as it might seem, said Joel Carpenter, provost of Calvin College and the author of "Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism."

"People can say it's the very worst of times and that will give them hope, because that's when God be-

gins to act," Carpenter said. "It's almost an ideological judo. You can turn the most adverse of situations into the beginning of the way out."

IN THE LAST few years, thousands of people have taken up fasting. Some fast on their own, some with their congregations. A Denver church began the year with a month-long graduated fast in which, by the fourth week, the congregation was drinking only water.

A youth group at a church in Harrisburg, Pa., fasts a day or two a week as a way to grapple with personal problems. The Promise Keepers movement encourages fasting.

Bright said that the inspiration to call for 2 million people to fast came to him as a message from the Lord after he had fasted for three weeks in 1994. He says he rose from his knees after prayer, woke his wife, Vonette, and shared the divine revelation he had heard: "America and much of the world will, before the end of the year 2000, experience a great spiritual awakening."

In 1996 Bright received the \$1 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, given annually to prominent religious figures by the investor Sir John M. Templeton.

Bright is using that prize to pro-

mote fasting and prayer. He says this nation is "following the ways of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome," adding, "God was offended, and these nations were destroyed."

And yet, some evangelical leaders are uneasy about Bright's campaign to promote fasting, because the Bible says that people who fast should not talk about it publicly.

For this reason, many observers of the Promise Keepers' rally in Washington last year were unaware that thousands of the participants and many of the group's leaders speaking from the podium had ended 40-day fasts that morning.

Evangelical Christians turn to fasting in hope of vast revival