

Pensacola paper takes another look at religious revival

Financial problems are examined

By Julia Duin
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Until recently, the biggest booster of the large religious revival in Pensacola, Fla., seemed to be the local paper.

The 65,000-circulation Pensacola News Journal ran 44 mostly upbeat news stories about Brownsville Assembly of God's revival, including a lavish two-day series — complete with a 40-page ad supplement — on the revival's second anniversary in June.

Following the News Journal's lead, mainstream news organizations and television networks came from around the world, including CNN, "Fox News," "The Today Show," "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer," newspapers from England, Sweden, Denmark, Australia and Taiwan, and even Spin magazine.

They descended on the northwestern Florida town to see what has attracted 1.9 million visitors to what has been called America's largest revival in nearly a century.

Now the News Journal contends the much-ballyhooed revival is a fake.

In a five-day series, "Brownsville Revival: The Money and the Myths," that ran Nov. 16 to 20, the Gannett-owned daily devoted hundreds of column inches to detailing the ministry's finances and what it said was the falsification of important biographical data by key revival leaders. The stories were also posted on the paper's Web site: www.gulfcoastgateway.com.

On Nov. 22, the church posted a detailed rebuttal on its Web site — www.brownsville-revival.org — and ran three ads in the paper giving its side of the story, challenging

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major parts of the News Journal series.

The paper says it culled IRS records, interviewed police, social services and religious experts, and went through county and city documents to document its series. Key findings include:

- The Rev. Steve Hill, the revival leader, lied in his autobiography, "Stone Cold Heart," about being expelled from high school, about being a heroin addict, about hitchhiking around the country after high school, and about being arrested 13 times in the early 1970s. The newspaper said he admitted to fictionalizing other parts of the book for "impact."

- The staff at a San Nicholas, Argentina, orphanage that Mr. Hill specifically said the revival has supported with charitable donations told the paper they had not heard from Mr. Hill in 10 years. The newspaper said it also had problems tracking down where Mr. Hill's donations to other foreign missions and charities went.

- Revival leaders are amassing personal "fortunes," among them Brownsville Assembly of God pastor, the Rev. John Kilpatrick, whose new home near Seminole, Ala., has barbed wire, a security



Photo by Cathy Wood/Special to The Washington Times

The Rev. John Kilpatrick (center right) and the Rev. Steve Hill (center left) are featured in a recent expose.

guard, a metal gate and a 40-foot, \$310,000 bus used for road trips. The 5,557-square-foot home on the Styx River also has a two-story, 4,916-square-foot guest house and garage. The minister said in his building permit the house would cost \$343,860, but told the newspaper it cost \$270,000.

- Although the church brings in about \$12,500 per night from the revival, it has not given any of that money to the local community, leaving other churches to deal with the needs of the area's homeless and hungry.

- Church leaders make multiple claims of miraculous healings performed there, but the newspaper could not verify a single one.

In its rebuttal, the church chastised the paper for "misquotes, serious misrepresentation of facts, and misleading innuendoes" in the series, saying that Mr. Hill has never falsified stories about his past. The church said it had offered to fly News Journal reporters to Mr. Hill's mission projects anywhere in the world, but the newspaper declined the offer.

It also said that, out of a yearly budget of \$6.5 million, the church gave away \$1.1 million, or 18 percent, for outreach and mission work.

However, since the series ran, the church has changed its method of accepting offerings and yesterday Brownsville Assembly of God

leaders met in Pensacola with one of their chief critics, Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute, a California-based cult watchdog group.

The paper says its four-month investigation, conducted by four reporters working full-time on the project, has received "overwhelmingly positive" response from the community. That includes some 500 phone calls to the paper and hundreds of e-mails and letters to the editor, News Journal Executive Editor Teresa Wasson said.

The paper began investigating activities at Brownsville more closely after critics of the revival warned that the paper was not reporting the whole story, she said.

Asked why so many larger and better-funded media organizations did not pursue critical stories of the church, the editor suggested that national and international news organizations tended to treat the revival as a feature story — instead of hard news — and thus sent in reporters with no expertise in covering religious organizations to check out Brownsville Assembly of God.

"For 44 news stories, we didn't do much investigating, either," she said. "It takes a major reporting commitment to do what we did."