

PROSPERITY PREACHING: Church conference exalts money.

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Church conventions that hype prosperity gospel are the rave lately, and attendance has increased over the years. Kenneth and Gloria Copeland recently hosted the Southwest Believers' Convention this month in Ft. Worth, Texas.

It had an all-star line up of prosperity gospel preachers. Their message: If you have sufficient faith in God and the Bible and donate generously, God will multiply your offerings a hundredfold.

But not all of the attention was positive. Professor John Walton, who teaches Religion at University of California, Riverside, called the prosperity preachers "spiritual pickpockets," adding that "To dismiss and ignore the harsh realities of this economic crisis," he said, "is beyond irresponsible, to the point of reprehensible."

Even in an economic downturn, conferences like this draw a sizable audience. Many of the believers who attended the conference are weighed down by debt. Still preachers barely acknowledged the recession during the conference, though they did say it was no excuse to curtail giving.

"Fear will make you stingy," Copeland said in a written release.

Many in this flock do not trust banks, the news media or Washington, where the Senate Finance Committee is investigating whether the Copelands used donations to enrich themselves and abused their tax-exempt status. Televangelist Creflo Dollar who is based near Atlanta also is under investigation and was a speaker at the conference. Copeland, Dollar and other speakers took turns preaching for five days, 10 hours a day at the Ft. Worth Convention Center.

The crowd of more than 9,000 was multiracial, from 48 states and 27 countries. There was no fee to attend. There were bikers in leather vests, pastors, blue-collar workers, professionals and plenty of families with children. A large contingent came in wheelchairs, hoping for miraculous healings. The audience sat with Bibles open, flipping to passages cited by the preachers, taking notes on pads and laptop computers.

A call center at the ministry's 481-employee headquarters in Newark, Tex., takes in 60,000 prayer requests a month, a publicist said. The Copelands' broadcast reaches 134 countries, and the ministry's income is about \$100 million annually.

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