

## **Giving Voice To The Hurting In Nashville**

Fall is a festive season in Nashville, or so it seemed on the early October weekend when First Baptist Nashville hosted the Ruth Graham & Friends Get Growing conference. More than 25,000 out-of-town visitors were expected for the weekend, which included a major bluegrass music festival, a large Walk for Breast Cancer, and a humongous college football clash between Vanderbilt University and Auburn University (Vanderbilt eked out a 14-13 upset, much to Nashvilleans' delight). As fired up as people were for all of these different events, it's safe to say that Ruth Graham & Friends were most successful in firing up people's hunger for divine truth.

More than 400 people attended the conference, held at First Baptist Nashville. As usual, there was plenty to learn. Topics covered ranged from abuse and addiction to pornography, abortion, divorce and loneliness, body image, anger, depression and the challenges of being unequally yoked.

### **Saying What Needs To Be Said In The Church**

"These are exactly the things we should be talking about in the church," said Steve Siler, founder of the Nashville-based Music for the Soul ministry. "As far as I know," he added, "this is the only conference dealing with the hurts that are un-dealt with by the church. This conference gives voice to the hurting – and the hurting people in our society are at epidemic levels. The church needs to engage people in the issues covered by this conference – the church needs to be pertinent, or we will lose the church."

Steve, incidentally, was talking not just about others' topics but also his own. He made his own statement with his Music for the Soul exhibit in the designated display area in the church. Featuring a variety of musically based materials for helping people deal with significant life issues – his latest DVD, *Somebody's Daughter – A Journey To Freedom From Pornography* is an example – the exhibit seemed to draw quite a bit of interest from conference guests. It was the first time that Music for the Soul appeared at a Get Growing conference, and it heralded the start of an ongoing connection between RGF and Music for the Soul.

## **‘A God Of Fresh Starts’**

The Nashville setting also marked the first time that Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee, founder and director of the Living Free Ministries, addressed a Ruth Graham & Friends conference audience.

Dr. Lee, speaking at the concluding plenary session on Saturday afternoon, spoke on “Lessons Learned.” He referenced the Biblical analogy of gardening and agriculture, saying that it is important for people to be vigilant in weeding out destructive tendencies that crop up in life. To not do so is to fall victim to negligence, which allows weeds to come in and destroy people’s ability to bear fruit.

“We need to maintain a hunger for God,” he said. Churches, he said, must be the hospital for people’s souls, not the museum. (Tex Reardon, Ruth Graham & Friends Executive Director, adds that churches need to be battleships, not cruise ships.)

One of the greatest lessons of all is that the gospel of resurrection is something we can live by and die by, he said. “Like they say in Scripture, life is like a vapor, and that is why we must pray every day.”

God is also a God of fresh starts, he said, which is why people must never give up hope. “We must keep our focus on Jesus. He is the answer,” he said.

Nashville saw a renewed focus on making the speaker seminars more open for discussion with participants. That emphasis paid off, according to Dr. Linda Mintle, who commented that “These were the most responsive groups to date.”

Don Miles noted the critical importance of engaging depressed people at the conferences – and having the means to steer them toward ongoing help. “People with depression are very inclined to crawl back in the hole,” he said.

## **Workshops Encourage People To Speak Up, Ask Questions**

There was also a noticeable increase in male participation at the conference, and in particular at some of the seminars that traditionally attract a mostly female audience. Both Jacquie Skog, with her domestic abuse workshop, and Kim Ketola, with her post-abortion workshop, reported seeing more than the usual number of male participants.

Cheryl Torain reported ministering to a woman at one of her workshops who had suffered a terrible depression after her husband of 40 years had denied the validity of the resurrection just before he died.

“We’ve really started to see more people opening up and coming forward with questions that relate to their immediate need for help and understanding about these issues we address,” said Ruth Graham. “That was certainly the case in Nashville, and I think it’s

because we have adjusted our workshops along the way this year to make them more participatory with the audience. It makes all the difference in the world when someone from the audience feels safe enough to ask a question that is directly relevant to their own situation – it means that they do feel safe enough to break out of their silence and isolation and ask for help.”

There’s no question that the speakers are reaching people in a personal way. As Wendy, a Nashville participant, said, “Tal Prince’s workshop – there is an education there. He just blew me away. One of the things I heard is that the church is not addressing the real issues in our lives. I heard words today that I never heard in church before. They are convicting.”

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