

## **God Is A Gardener, And He Wants To Help You Grow, Ruth Graham Tells Paducah Conference Attendees**

Mother's Day weekend proved to be an opportune time to "Get Growing" with Ruth Graham & Friends in Paducah, KY.

Springtime seems to bring out the gardener in all of us, Ruth Graham & Friends included. Noting that the Bible brims with gardening terms, Ruth Graham noted that "God is a gardener. And He wants us to get growing!"

Following the lead of the "Master Gardener," Ruth urged people to view the tools delivered through her conference's workshops as the implements for tending to the spiritual, emotional and psychological aspects of personal growth – their own and that of others that they care about -- through Christ.

"Our goal is to be more like Jesus," said Ruth in her opening remarks for the Paducah "Get Growing" conference, held May 9-10 at the Heartland Worship Center in Paducah.

"We are here to reflect the character of Christ, to show you (the audience) how to take everything we've learned through our experience and share it with the lost and hurting," said Ruth.

Certainly there was no lack of people seeking helpful information on the various topics covered by the RGF workshops. Every workshop leader reported strong interest from attendees, both during the workshops and afterward in the many personalized, one-on-one meetings that take place after a workshop is concluded.

### **'They Were There To Serve The People'**

These one-on-one meetings, which are a hallmark of the RGF conferences, are where the speakers and their listeners have a chance to meet and discuss in-depth specific issues that are on the minds of the individual attendees. People at the Paducah conference were avid in seeking out the speakers for individual advice and ministry throughout the conference, and as always, the speakers themselves bent over backwards to make themselves available for these private consultations.

"To tell you the truth, that is what I noticed," said Cathy Travis, a member of the host organizing committee in Paducah. "You saw them – the speakers – not sitting around but actively involved and talking with people one-on-one all during the conference. That to me is the biggest asset of the Ruth Graham conference – the

speakers are there not to be served, but to serve the people in attendance. It made this conference truly unique.”

### **Speakers Connect On A Personal Level With Attendees.**

“If you’ve always wanted to talk about it and have been afraid to in church, here’s your chance.”

That’s how Tal Prince, who led the workshop on “The Pornography Plague,” described the way he approached his topic. Although referring specifically to the highly emotionally charged issues of pornography and sexual addiction that he deals with, Tal’s comment was a good way to sum up the approach of all the different speakers – and indeed, that of the entire conference itself.

“Most people either struggle with life-controlling issues, or know someone who is,” said Aleta Nichols, who spoke on Life Controlling Behaviors – Addictions at the conference. “What we say to them is, ‘You don’t have to stay stuck with those issues, as if they are some terrible plague that you have to live with forever.’”

### **Good To Grow In The Face Of Adversity.**

It’s a message that people in Paducah responded to with a passion. For example, one attendee, Joyce (it’s our policy to use first names only when referring to conference attendees, as a means of honoring the RGF confidentiality pledge), said, “I’ve been married three times and I wondered why I couldn’t make it work either (she heard Ruth talk about her own marriages that ended in divorce). I learned from this conference how to have a marriage, and I learned that I have to wait on God to make it work.”

“This conference will make a big difference to me,” said Rhonda, another conference attendee. In particular, she said she benefited from attending Ray Giunta’s workshop on “Handling Your Emotions Before They Handle You.” “It helped me to understand why God gave us emotions,” she said.

The conference was full of blessings for Ann, another attendee, who said, “Ruth’s talk on forgiveness was very good, because I have a lot of issues of forgiveness with my ex-husband.”

She also reported receiving much good information from Aleta’s workshop about drugs and addictions that she plans to use “to help her daughter head things off at the pass.” Finally, she said that “the real benefit is that I am the only Christian at work, and one of the girls there has a domestic abuse problem” that she hopes to help her with using information garnered from Jacquie Skog’s workshop, “Peace and Safety in Your

Heart & Home – Domestic Abuse.”

### **Ruth Graham Welcomed New ‘Friend’ Cheryl Torain To The Fold.**

Friday nights are always informal affairs on stage, and Paducah was no different. Ruth called all of the speakers up to the stage for a comfy fireside-like sit-down chat so that the crowd could get to know them – and their workshop topics – a little better.

Aleta Nichols, for example, allowed that she is an avid quilter – and that she had missed not coming to the big quilting show held recently in Paducah (as the home of the National Quilting Center, Paducah is a quilter’s mecca). She also noted that her workshops deal with drug abuse issues, and that she was there “to explain to you how people get out of this and how God can help you get out.”

Linda Mintle, introduced herself as “the thighs woman,” referencing her workshop title, “Making Peace with your Thighs.”

Making her first appearance as a Ruth Graham speaker was Cheryl Torain, whose workshop topic – “Unequally Yoked” – introduced a new and vital thread into the ever-changing fabric of the conferences. Noting that she had been married for 32 years to a man not of faith, she said, “When you love Jesus and the person you live with doesn’t, you’re going to have issues. “

Also speaking at the conference were Kim Ketola (“Life Redeemed: Healing & Hope After Abortion”, and Don Miles, “Understanding Depression.”

Welcoming the conference to Paducah were Cathy Travis, Sarah Housman (chair of the organizing committee) and Nathan Joyce, pastor of the Heartland Worship Center.

### **Something To Be Learned In Every Workshop. No Labels Attached.**

As always, Ruth encouraged people to follow their instincts and attend those workshops that most appealed to them.

“We all have issues,” said Ruth. “Choose your workshops based on what you’re interested in. And remember, we’re not going to label you as having ‘that problem’ just because of the kind of workshops you attend.

“For example, I might not have a problem with abuse,” she said, “but my grandson may be bullied in school -- I want to learn what the symptoms are. I can do that at this conference.”

It’s fair to say that attending a Ruth Graham & Friends conference is not all fun and games. The issues discussed are very serious, after all, and the overall purpose of the conference is not just to instruct and inform, but to also motivate people to take

positive steps in addressing these issues effectively in their own lives – and in the lives of people they know and care about. That said, there's always room for some inspirational “play time,” as when Nashville's Jason Catron takes to the stage to lead the crowd through a selection of his praiseful songs from his two outstanding CDs. Or when gifted, Chicago-based pianist Huntley Brown storms the stage with his passionate piano magic (including a very powerful rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in Paducah).

There are always other light-hearted moments as well, as when Ruth introduces the speakers on Friday night – she always manages to ask them a question or two that puts them personally on the spot, sometimes with hilarious consequences.

### **Plenty Of Roses, But No Rose Gardens Promised.**

But the overall tenor of these conferences is one of tending to the serious business at hand, and that was certainly the case in Paducah, where many of the people in attendance stayed not only for the final plenary session of the day late into Saturday afternoon. It turned out they were there not just to listen to what Ray Giunta had to say in his closing plenary session on the Stems of Adversity.

Although Ray's talk was certainly powerful enough – especially when he noted that adversity itself is a gift from God, intended to help us better develop our Godly character, and thus nothing to be shunned nor to feel ashamed over. Nor were they there just to receive one of the many red roses that Ray handed out to the crowd – although they were certainly much-sought-after by many members of the audience.

No, it turned out that many of the people in attendance to the very end on Saturday were also there to pray over what they had learned that day. The Paducah altar call, coming at the very end of the conference, was nothing short of spectacular, with well over half the people in attendance leaving their seats to surge forward toward the sanctuary stage for a prayerful moment. The sheer number of people called to the altar took everyone on the organizing committee by surprise, to say the least.

“I thought we had more people than we needed to help with the altar call, but there were still people waiting for help,” said Cathy Travis. “To me, it just said to me that all these people flooding to the altar just showed that they were ministered to throughout the whole weekend.”

Those are the kinds of comments that bring tears to the eyes of Ruth Graham, who said, “I feel that the need for this conference is so great and the message is so important. We really feel like we are here to come alongside the church, to equip the

church and the lay leaders and the individual congregation members to deal with these issues – because the pastors can't do it all.

“We are here to help the church be the church,” she added.

**‘Tremendous Christian Benefit’**

“There is a tremendous benefit to this for any Christian,” said Michael, a resident of Bartlett, TN. “It's hands-on advice on how to be a disciple.”

He was surprised there weren't more men in attendance. “A lot of the workshops, such as those dealing with depression, divorce, pornography, are very relevant to men,” he said. “And the workshop on controlling your emotions – that would be of real benefit to many men. It could help some men not divorce or keep them out of jail for hitting women,” he said.

With comments like those, it's clear that the Ruth Graham & Friends ministry is on the right path.

“I had a deep sense that Jesus was there in Paducah, very strongly touching people,” said Ruth.

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