

Midland Conference “The Most Intense Ever” For Ruth Graham & Friends

People Hunger For Church-Based Help For Life-Controlling Issues



Ruth Graham addresses her audience at Midland conference.

When you're Ruth Graham & Friends, you go where you are called, to help the hurting wherever they are.

This past January, the call came from Crestview Baptist Church in Midland, TX.

For those not familiar with the area – Midland is just a little off the beaten path, located some 250 miles west of Dallas, out in what is known as the Permian Basin region – it is, unequivocally, oil country. Oil wells crop up everywhere – there was one pumping away patiently in a field just across the road from the church.

Inside the church, human energy also flowed abundantly during the Jan. 29-30 RGF Get Growing conference. For those two days, Crestview Baptist was the safest place in the area – maybe even the whole state of Texas – for people to look at ways to address those life-controlling issues in a positive, Biblically based and effective way. “That’s always our goal,” says Ruth Graham, “to make the church a safe place for people to get the help they need to understand these issues and, especially for those who struggle with such issues personally, to realize that there is hope for them.”



Ruth Graham conference was first major public event at new Crestview Baptist Church.

The conference drew close to 650 people, according to Sherry Thomas, one of the Crestview conference organizers. They came from throughout the area – about 60% were non-members of Crestview, she said – and they came prepared to drill into the issues under discussion: depression,

anger, abuse, divorce, pornography, body image, post-abortion syndrome, relationships.

“God does bring good out of terrible circumstances, even if you have to walk through fire to see it,” said Linda, a conference attendee. “This – the conference – is a safe place to come, and we need that.”

Grace was a pervasive (and persuasive) theme of the conference. “We are all sinners, saved by grace. He is there to give us grace,” Ruth Graham reminded her audience as she spoke about the need for forgiveness in her Saturday plenary address.

“You don’t have to live in shame,” Birmingham, AL-based Rev. Tal Prince told the audience for his workshop on the pornography epidemic. “All your sins were nailed to the Cross, before you were even born,” he said, while also noting that he himself had been buried in sin and shame because of his decades-long addiction to pornography and sex.



A common sight: attentive audience for conference speakers.

The pornography issue was a big one in the community, Byron Smith, pastor of community and mission ministries for Crestview Baptist, noted, and the fact that someone such as Prince was willing to come into the church and talk openly about the problem – and point to the solutions – would likely have great impact on individual lives, he said.



Pornography isn't just a problem in some communities, Prince noted – it's a pervasive issue in society, driven by Internet porn purveyors who have created a multi-billion dollar industry that affects everyone, including young children. "Porn," he said, "is the number four most searched word on the Internet – by children under eight years of age."

"I found Tal to be very inspiring," said Robert, the leader of a local youth ministry. "A lot of the information is very equipping for our ministry, especially for the children."

Hold The Abstract: Practical Help Is What's Needed

It was that sense that the information provided could be applied immediately, to issues that people struggle with every day, that really hit home with people in attendance.

"This was really intense. The most intense RGF conference I've been involved with," said Dr. Linda Mintle, who traveled from her home in Virginia to present three different workshops on Saturday, Jan. 30.

"People wanted practical information they could apply to their daily lives, they were hungry for it," she added.

This conference was exactly what we needed in the church, said Thomas. "We've laid the groundwork in a sense, by bringing in the Celebrate Recovery programs from Saddleback Church previously. Those helped people understand the issues, and now the Ruth Graham conference helps people focus in on the specific issues that they want to learn more about."

Coupling that and the Living Free programs makes Crestview a strong community resource for helping people with life-controlling issues, said Kathy Webster, a member of the conference organizing committee and of the Loving Free ministries.



Friday night prayer, Dr. John Gerlach, senior pastor, Crestview Baptist Church

Through Living Free, a curriculum program developed by Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee and the Living Free Ministries of Chattanooga, TN, people can participate in structured small Bible study courses that are focused on specific life-controlling issues. The Living Free component is a perfect “after-care” fit to RGF’s work of instilling hope and showing people new and proven ways to deal with those issues.

The Living Free programs fit well with another goal of the church – to help disciple younger people who don’t have any previous church background. In particular, the Living Free *Insight* group program will help in that respect, according to Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee, Living Free developer. “It’s a core program that can help everyone gain a deeper understanding of what true discipleship entails,” he said.



Friday night under the lights of Midland's Crestview Baptist Church.

“We have 12 people trained and ready to go with new Living Free programs in conjunction with the conference,” Webster said. “We are getting Living Free sign-ups at the conference, and we’re ready to start the new programs this coming week.”

About 15 people signed up right away for Living Free programs after the conference, said Thomas. The church also saw a “leap up in numbers for people volunteering to participate in the Loving Arms ministry,” she added.

“We’ve had quite a significant increase in our ministry due to the conference,” she said. “I’ve

been very pleased.

“We have been trying for years to lay the groundwork, and now all that work seems to be coming to fruition,” she said.

Rags Of Hope

“When Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future,” advised Chattanooga-based Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee as he spoke about the “Ministry of Rags.”

People are like rags, Dr. Lee explained – and that’s a good thing, because rags are reliable, they are dependable, they serve a useful purpose. Which is just what God expects from us, Dr. Lee continued, to be useful to Him. “Keep His commandments, that is the whole duty of man,” he said.

“Jesus does accept us just the way we are,” he added, thereby underlining a key point about the Ruth Graham conference.

“We want to meet people as they are,” Graham said about her conference.

That message of acceptance resonated with the attendees, as evidenced by the lively interaction between workshop leaders and their audiences. Every workshop leader reported meeting with people who came forward on their own to discuss their own struggles with them – and to ask for specific help both during the workshops and in the informal meeting time afterward. “I saw a higher level of trauma among people here than at any other conference,” said Atlanta-based Kim Ketola, who led workshops on the loss of a child and post-abortion syndrome.

Denver-based Dr. Don Miles, who speaks on the lethal dangers of depression, said people weren’t afraid to voice their concerns about depression – even thoughts of suicide – to him.

Aleta Nichols was exhausted after delivering her third workshop of the day. “The audience dynamics were different in every workshop, so I had to adjust my presentation differently for each one,” she said. “You could tell by the questions that they were all serious about getting answers today about addictions,” she added.

“There is a great need for this type of conference in Midland,” said Pastor Smith. “What we’re tapping into are such significant problems not just in the church but in the community at large.”



Dr. Jimmy Ray Lee.



Kim Ketola.



Linda Mintle makes a key point.

Mission Accomplished

Re-establishing the church as a major presence in the greater Midland/Odessa community is a priority, said Pastor Smith. Since opening the new church, Crestview has seen a surge in new members, he said, but still wanted to do more to show its relevance to the community. The RGF conference is a difference-maker in terms of raising the church’s community profile, he said.

“What’s exciting to me about this conference is that we’ve been able to connect with groups outside the church that we’d never heard from before,” he said. “We’re seeing new groups at the conference, and we are starting to build relationships with them.”

“Now we can say the church really means it, when we say we care about the community and helping people deal with these

issues,” said Thomas. “We have tried and tried to get the message out in so many ways, and now we’re seeing some of those walls between the church and the community come down.”

Sudden Impact: More Support For Loving Arms

Members of the Loving Arms ministry saw the conference as a wake-up call for the congregation to become more involved in ministering to the hurting. “We saw an immediate rise in the numbers for the existing ministry,” she said. “And we had about 15 more people sign up to be involved in Living Free right after the conference.”

“We’ve tried and tried to get the word out about the need for more ministerial help in so many other ways and just fallen flat. Now we’re seeing some of those walls come down from this conference,” said Thomas.

Word of the conference spread well beyond the bricks and mortar walls of the church as well, reaching into the greater community of the Midland/Odessa area. About 60 percent of the attendees were from outside the Crestview congregational family, Thomas said. “We had a really good presence from across the community, including other churches who were saying they need help too,” she said.

Kimberly Smith, the volunteer public relations coordinator for the conference, worked the phones hard to inform area social



Browsing the books display at Midland conference.

service agencies about the conference – and to persuade them to send people to it. She also enticed local news media, including the daily *Midland Reporter-Telegram* newspaper, to run news and promotional spots about the conference in advance.

“The exciting thing for me is, we’re able to connect with groups we hadn’t even heard of before due to the conference,” said Pastor Smith.



Huntley Brown performing at Crestview conference.

Crestview Reaches Out To Community With RGF Conference

The conference was the first major public event at Crestview since the church relocated into a sparkling new facility on the west side of Midland in the summer of 2009. That followed a stay of nearly 60 years in downtown Midland, where the church was founded.

“Before moving into our new church, we really didn’t have much presence in the community,” said Pastor Smith.

“We wanted to let the community know about our new church and let them know about the Loving Arms ministry within the church,” said Kathy Webster, a member of the conference organizing committee. Importantly, Loving Arms is there to help everyone, member of the church or not,

struggling with life-controlling issues. Loving Arms is also the sponsor of Crestview’s Living Free programs, which can also be accessed by people from the broader community.

Living Free is critical to the mission of the church ministry, said Thomas, who led the charge several years ago to initiate new programs to help recovering addicts. “We had prepared the ground with other programs, most notably the Celebrate Recovery program from Saddleback Church. But even with Celebrate Recovery, I felt there was something still missing – I just wasn’t sure what it was.”

Then she happened to read an article in the local newspaper about the Ruth Graham & Friends ministry, and there it was. What she and others in Loving Arms saw was that RGF offered practical, almost how-to information that people could use to understand and deal with specific life-controlling issues. Now came the hard part, she thought. Almost certainly, it would cost the church too much to bring Ruth Graham & Friends to Crestview. Still, it was worth a phone call, she



Jacquie Skog led workshop on domestic abuse.

decided. So she made that call and – surprise! – not only was there interest on RGF’s part in coming to Midland, but the cost was well within the church’s budget. In fact, RGF stipulated that the majority of its costs could be met through free-will, love offerings donated by the conference attendees.

“The conference was everything we hoped for – and more,” said Thomas.

“Wonderful, awesome,” said Susan, a conference attendee.

“I’ve been to a lot of conferences,” said Nancy Davis, who came down from St. Angelo, TX for the event. “This is the highest quality conference I’ve seen – the whole Ruth Graham & Friends team is so impressive, and this is such an encompassing effort.”



As the conference drew to a close, Graham took to the podium in the main sanctuary to ask those in attendance for a love offering for the ministry. “We need your support to keep doing what we are doing,” she said. “We are going to Albany, N.Y. next. If you have been blessed, we ask you to bless the people of Albany.”



Musical interlude with Crestview musicians.



Quiet moment in a safe place – the Ruth Graham conference.

Photos: Jim Whitmer, Jim Whitmer Photography.