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Rev. Jerry Falwell, leader of Moral Majority, dies at 73 **Conservative Christian is called unifier, divider**

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By Mark Feeney and Michael Kranish, Globe Staff

WASHINGTON -- The Rev. Jerry Falwell, a Baptist preacher whose founding of the Moral Majority helped spur a Christian conservative movement that is reverberating in the 2008 presidential campaign, died yesterday at his office at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

Rev. Falwell, 73, who had a history of heart problems, was found unconscious and pronounced dead after efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.

His political influence was recalled hours after his death among the Republican presidential candidates who gathered for a debate in South Carolina, where his political and religious views are deeply felt.

It was a sign of Rev. Falwell's clout that Senator John McCain -- the Arizona Republican who during his 2000 presidential campaign referred to Rev. Falwell as evil and intolerant -- appeared with the Christian leader last year at Liberty University. McCain's comment helped sink his 2000 campaign, and his appearance alongside Falwell last year signaled a revamping of campaign strategy to target Christian conservatives in his 2008 bid.

Yesterday, McCain called Rev. Falwell "a man of distinguished accomplishment who devoted his life to serving his faith and country."

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, meanwhile, has benefited from a statement Rev. Falwell made last year that said Romney's Mormon faith should "not be a factor" in whether to support his run for the White House. Romney hailed Rev. Falwell yesterday as a man who put his "faith into action."

While Rev. Falwell had not endorsed any candidate, his opposition to abortion rights was starkly at odds with the view of Rudolph Giuliani, the former New York City mayor who yesterday said in a carefully worded comment that Falwell was "a man who set a direction."

Rev. Falwell died yesterday shortly after having breakfast with one of his colleagues at the university.

"I had breakfast with Dr. Falwell this morning, and he seemed to be in good spirits," said Ron Godwin, the executive vice president at Liberty University. "He went to his office; I went to mine."

Rev. Falwell was remembered yesterday as both a unifier and a divider.

As the leader of Thomas Road Baptist Church, as a televangelist who headed the Old Time Gospel Hour, and as head of the Moral Majority, which he cofounded in 1979, Rev. Falwell united

Christian conservatives who were dismayed by what they viewed as a decline in American moral values.

At the same time, he divided Americans with his attacks on those supporting abortion rights and gay rights. He once called feminism "a satanic attack on the home." The Equal Rights Amendment, he said, struck "at the foundations of our social structure."

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Rev. Falwell said, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

He later apologized for his remarks.

John Green, a political science professor at the University of Akron and author of several books on religion and politics, said yesterday that Rev. Falwell was both "an important figure in the political mobilization" of Christian conservatives and "a symbol of how religion can be a divisive force in politics."

Within hours of Rev. Falwell's death, anti abortion activist Randall Terry praised the minister as creating the "modern Christian right as a political force."

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force said Falwell "demonized and vilified us for political gain and [was] someone who used religion to divide rather than unite our nation."

As a public figure, Rev. Falwell combined folksiness and brimstone. His broad face and smile gave him an emollient quality his rhetoric often lacked.

"I am not a Republican," he said in a 1980 speech, "I am not a Democrat! I am a noisy Baptist!"

Broadcasting amplified that noise. Some credit him with contributing to Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. Rev. Falwell was keenly aware of the power of the media and had given serious thought to journalism before deciding to become a minister.

"Journalism has been a part of my life throughout most of my ministry," he said in a biographical interview on his church's website, www.trbc.org, in Lynchburg, in central Virginia.

Within weeks of Thomas Road Baptist's opening in 1956, Rev. Falwell began radio broadcasts of church services. It took only six months before he started videotaping services for later broadcast on a local station.

Live broadcasts began in 1968. Since 1971 they have been syndicated as "The Old Time Gospel Hour" to hundreds of radio and television stations and have regularly drawn an audience of millions.

Rev. Falwell was not the first minister to use electronic media nor was he the first to combine religion and conservative politics. In both cases, though, he did so with great impact.

Emphasizing politics, Rev. Falwell carved out a place for himself among high-profile evangelists. Partisan and controversial in ways that the Rev. Billy Graham, for instance, was not, Rev. Falwell never endured the public airing of personal problems that plagued televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker .

When scandal engulfed Bakker's Praise the Lord ministry, in 1987, he asked Rev. Falwell to take charge of PTL. Rev. Falwell agreed, giving up control in 1988. Bakker and others later accused Rev. Falwell of deliberately leading PTL into bankruptcy, so as to remove a broadcast competitor.

Rev. Falwell was a favorite target of liberals. It was in direct response to the Moral Majority that in 1980, television producer Norman Lear formed the liberal organization People for the American Way.

Yet Rev. Falwell was not universally admired among fundamentalists or conservatives.

The fundamentalist minister Bob Jones Jr., who considered Rev. Falwell too polished and mainstream, once called him "the most dangerous man in America."

And when Rev. Falwell said "good Christians" should oppose Sandra Day O'Connor's nomination to the Supreme Court, Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, said, "I think every good Christian ought to kick Falwell's ass."

Rev. Falwell's influence has been measured by the growth of the church, which had a congregation of 35 when it began and numbers 24,000 today.

Liberty University, which Rev. Falwell founded as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971, has 21,500 students enrolled, the school's website said. Unlike many fundamentalist schools, it is fully accredited.

Rev. Falwell had said he hoped it would one day be for evangelicals what Brigham Young University is for Mormons or the University of Notre Dame for Catholics.

"My goal," he had said, "is to sit on the 50-yard line in South Bend when Liberty beats Notre Dame."

Jerry Falwell was born on Aug. 11, 1933, in Lynchburg. He credited his father, a prosperous businessman, Carey, for his entrepreneurial abilities, and his mother, Helen, for his faith. On Sunday mornings, she would turn on broadcasts of "The Old Fashioned Revival Hour," knowing that, as her son once put it, "We were too lazy to get out of bed and turn off the radio."

A gifted student, Rev. Falwell skipped second grade and was valedictorian of his high school class. He was also an editor of the school paper and captain of the football team. He was known as an inveterate prankster, and because of his frequent misconduct was not allowed to deliver his valedictory address.

During his sophomore year at Lynchburg College, young Falwell decided to go to an evening service at a local church. It was there, on Jan. 20, 1952, that he had his conversion experience and became born again in his faith.

At that service, he also met his future wife, Marcel Pate, the church pianist. She would later serve as pianist at Thomas Road Baptist.

Two months later, the young Falwell decided to become a minister. He transferred to Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Mo., and he earned his bachelor's degree there, in 1956. "I totally surrendered my life to God," he later wrote. "There was no emotion. . . . It all happened quietly, inside my heart."

In 1979, Falwell founded the Moral Majority, a political lobbying group that sought to further traditional religious values through support of conservative political candidates and the registration of millions of voters. Ceasing operation in 1989, it was succeeded in 1991 by the Liberty Alliance . Rev. Falwell served as head of both organizations.

But as scandal enveloped other televangelists, contributions to Liberty University declined in the 1990s, and the school went into debt. Bankruptcy was prevented after a number of businesses forgave debts to the school.

In addition to his wife, Rev. Falwell leaves three children, Jerry, the vice chancellor of Liberty University and Jonathan, executive pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church , both of Lynchburg, and Jeannie, a Richmond surgeon. The two sons are expected to take over leadership of Liberty University.