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national news

Communion

Promise Keepers offers hand of 'reconciliation' to people of color, can teach progressives about the merits of bonding

by Bob Roehr

Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly for Men" is the theme of a Promise Keepers' gathering in the nation's capital in October.

The men-only organization of the Christian right wing has filled football stadiums across the nation with evangelical fervor since its founding six years ago. Its explosive growth now supports an \$87 million annual budget—more than the budgets of all the national gay and lesbian organizations combined.

Promise Keepers cofounder Bill McCartney, meanwhile, actively promoted Colorado's anti-gay rights law, Amendment 2, which was approved by voters in 1992 but later declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

During the Amendment 2 campaign, McCartney—the extremely popular head coach of the University of Colorado football team—held a press conference where he declared homosexuality an "abomination of Almighty God."

The Promise Keepers' Oct. 4 rally is being heavily promoted by Pat Robertson on his television program, *The 700 Club*.

Not surprisingly, critics are making their voices heard. The National Organization for Women strongly opposes the Promise Keepers, dubbing the group "a new form of male supremacy."

(One of the "Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper" calls upon men to "take back" from their wives the leadership role in their families.)

Patricia Ireland, NOW's president, says, "The Promise Keepers is just the latest vehicle to promote the religious extremist agenda."

Mandy Carter is a longtime political organizer in the sexual minority and African American communities.

She says she is particularly concerned that the principal organizations of the Christian political right wing have launched a major effort to bring people of color into their fold under the phrase "racial reconciliation."

She quotes David Love, writing in *Emerge* magazine: "As a concept, reconciliation is quite different from equality or justice. If two individuals reconcile, that doesn't mean that they must both get what they want. A slave and a slave master may reconcile, but that will not fundamentally alter their relationship. The Christian right does not seek racial justice in the United States. Throughout history it has stood in the way of freedom for all Americans."

Carter adds, "There ain't nothing new about hearing folks from the black church pulpit speaking of hell and damnation for being gay—we've heard it for years."

What is new, she says, are attempts by the "white right" to build coalitions with conservative African American churches.

"People of color have got to stand up and say, not in my church, not in my community. We have got to stand up and say this is not acceptable," says Carter, adding that she is "astonished by the wait-and-see attitude of mainstream religions" toward the Promise Keepers.

Hans Johnson has followed the right wing for groups such as People for the American Way.

He warns there is a danger in neglecting the genuine need the Promise Keepers seem to fulfill for many men.

Part of that need, he says, is "bonding between men and giving them a sense of meaning," particularly in a world where the meanings of work, family and community are in flux.

Johnson also says it's important to distinguish between the group's leadership, which may in fact have hidden agendas, and the rank-and-file.

"By recognizing that, you begin to see a potential wedge and a weakening of the Promise Keepers as a political movement," he says, adding that leadership has had success by masking politics, but "when the political agendas of the leaders becomes clear, when they become less artful in their masking of it, it will cut into the numbers of men coming" and bring increased criticism from others.

The Rev. Dan Aldridge is an African American senior minister of All Souls Church (Unitarian) in Washington, D.C.

He says the progressive movement could learn something from the Promise Keepers.

"Frankly what I don't see enough of, in any quarter, is progressive forces projecting an alternative vision for their community. What type of society do we want to live in?" he asks. "One of the problems with reacting is that you get caught up in their energy and they begin to set your frame of reference. You no longer have a program."

Aldridge says the men he has talked with who have attended Promise Keepers' rallies come with some of the "same spirit as a football rally."

He says, "To them this is fun, and something we don't pay much attention to—gender camaraderie—a feel-goodness about being with other men."

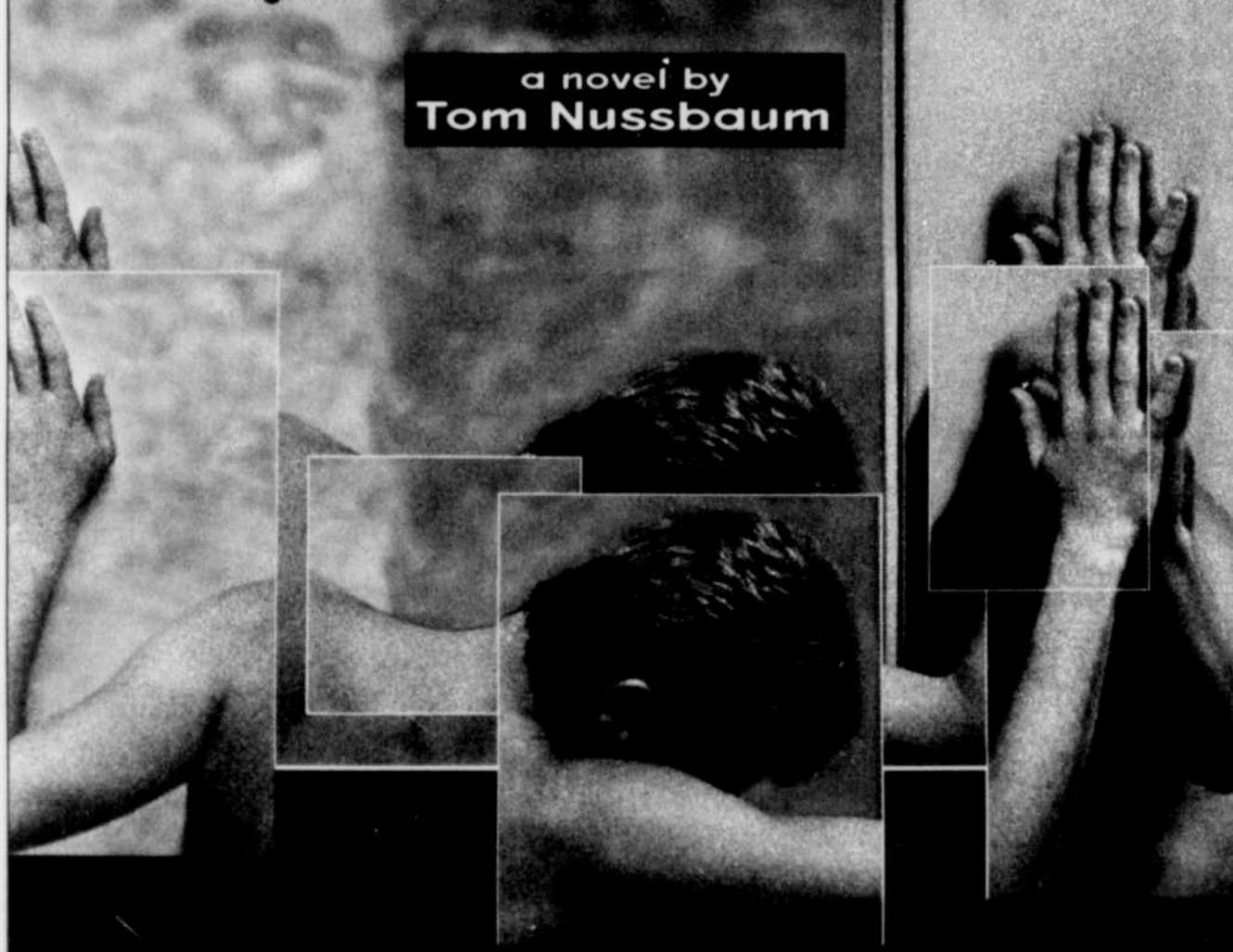
Aldridge also criticizes the progressive movement for "not having a lot of fun" and challenges its adherents to work that element into their movement's vision.

"There is something to be said about coming together to share the joy of each other's company," he says.

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