

COLUMBUS

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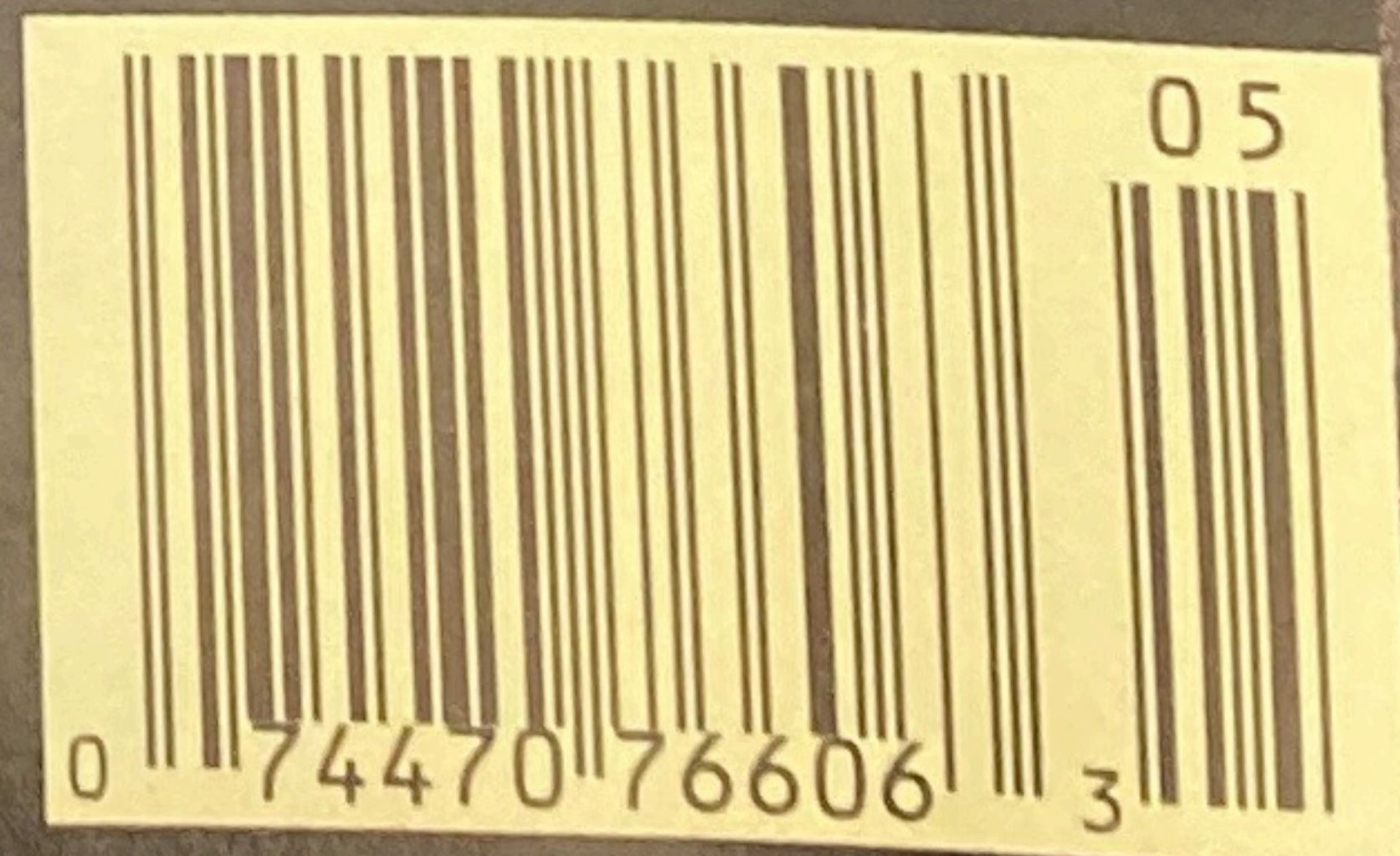
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Two great new
restaurants

Rod
Parsley:
Hellfire
and healing
with a cast
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Columbus's
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preacher



AN EMPIRE OF SOULS

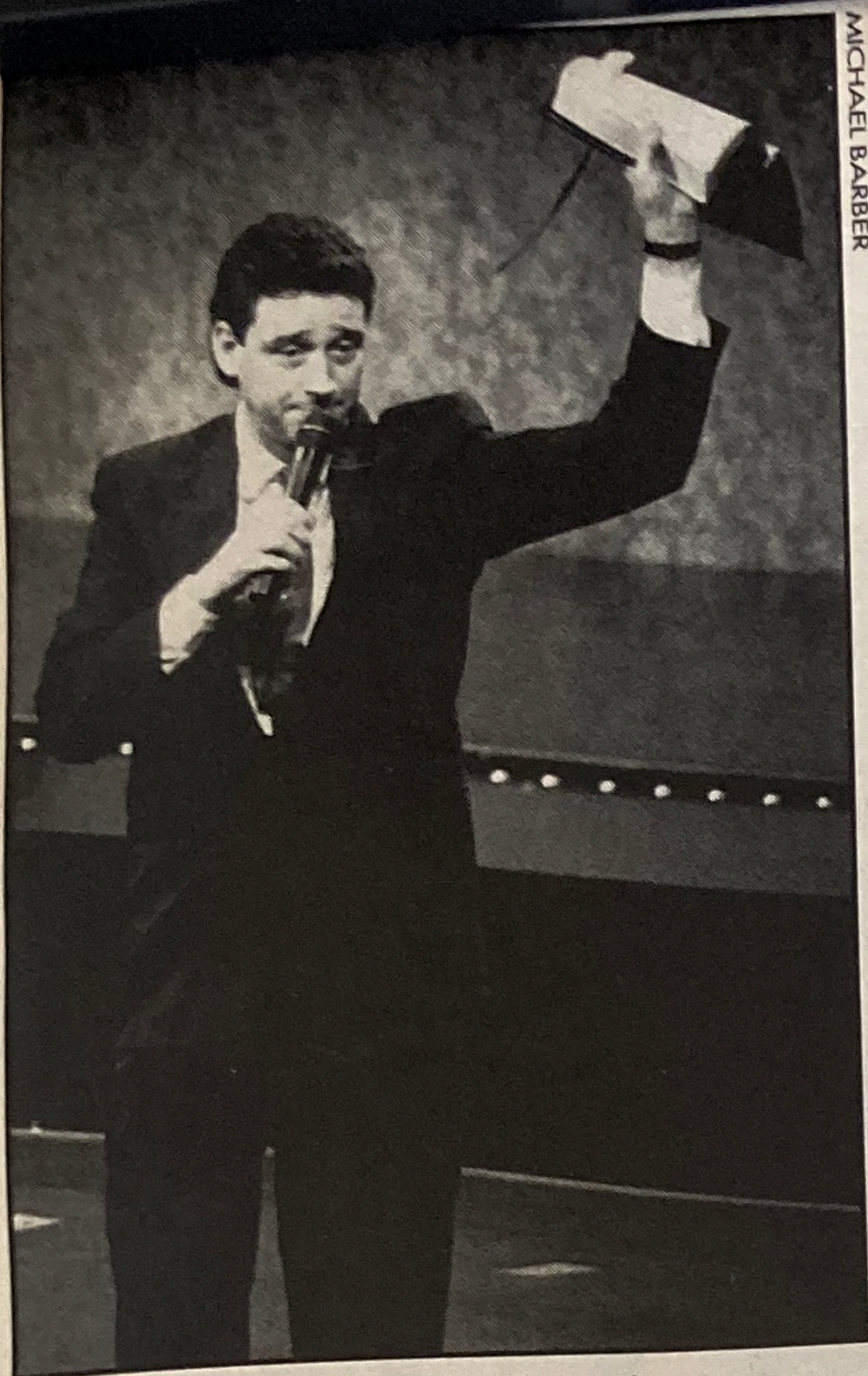
Rod Parsley draws thousands to his World Harvest Church in southeast Columbus and reaches thousands more on 600 TV stations. Saving souls and fighting Satan requires money, he tells his flock.

By Jim Bebbington

In 1975, the seniors at Pickerington High School each composed one brief line to be printed beneath their photos in the yearbook. Most paid homage to their friends, favorite beers or cars, but one made a prediction: "Be patient, God isn't finished with me yet."

Whether God had a hand in what that high school senior has accomplished since is open to debate, but Pastor Rodney Lee Parsley definitely was not finished. With a gift for gab and fervid beliefs—and, he feels, ample help from the Almighty—Parsley has built from scratch the World Harvest Church in southeast Columbus, which already has broad local impact and is reaching for more.

Parsley regularly comes close to filling 5,200 pew seats at World Harvest's weekly services. The church's daily television program, "Breakthrough," is beamed to stations covering a third of the country, showcasing outtakes from Parsley's sermons, music, a prayer telephone line and pleas for funds. Church members visit prisons, donate and distribute food, picket weekly outside adult bookstores in an antipornography crusade



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Rod Parsley, during a 1989 service.

and currently are supporting a Congressional letter-writing campaign in favor of the military's ban on homosexuals.

World Harvest also helps many congregants find peace.

"I don't come here for the pastor. I come here because God is here," says a woman in her early 40s. She has driven from northern Ohio to attend weekly services ever since feeling spiritually healed one night while watching "Breakthrough."

"I was going to hell, and now I am going to heaven," she says.

But there is trouble in Parsley's paradise. A church employee and Parsley relative is suing over what she claims were repeated incidents of sexual harassment by Parsley's father. She says she sued rather than complain to church officials because they punish boat-rockers. The Parsleys deny the claims of harassment. And the apparent financial success of the church, Parsley has acknowledged, has brought cries from members for a better accounting of how donations are spent, something Parsley adamantly refuses to provide.

The voice

Besides whatever guiding vision he provides for the church, Parsley, who refused to be interviewed for this article, brings to World Harvest its most important physical asset. He is an awesome pulpit pounder, jamming 90-minute sermons with energy, humor, shouting, pleading, anecdotes and Bible readings.

Handsome and charismatic, with neatly coifed dark brown hair and dressed usually in a double-breasted suit, white shirt, tie and suspenders, Parsley roams through the crowd during sermons with a wireless microphone. He constantly ham-

mers home that humans are warring against Satan, and every second counts. God's reign on earth is coming soon, he tells his flock, and those people who have not entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ will be tossed into the "smoky-black pit of hell." Parsley says in nearly every sermon, soon after shouting about the wages of sin, "I'd rather be too hard now than have you stand in the Judgment with your blood dripping through my hands and you point your finger at me and say, 'You never told me.'"

He will do nearly anything to get his message across. During a sermon one Sunday evening, he lay face down on his carpeted stage to show his congregants the proper way to worship God. "You are Lord," he shouted again and again into the microphone. Rising, he said, "Preachers ask me all the time, 'How did you build a church? How did you do it?' I just showed you. I've eaten more carpet dust than a Eureka sweeper."

The church services Parsley has developed are World Harvest's backbone and what sets it apart. Jumping, clapping, singing, dancing, loud music, faith healing and tongue-talking are pretty standard fare in many Pentecostal churches, but Sundays at World Harvest are nearly extravaganzas.

One typical 10 am service finds a crowd of about 4,000 mingling in Sunday best while a maroon curtain shrouds the stage. With a blare of instruments over a gigantic amplification system, the curtain rises and the crowd leaps to its feet, clapping and singing as a 12-piece band and 66-member choir stomp off on the first of a string of raucous gospel tunes. Clint Brown, the church's music director and the author of most of the songs, sings lead, with lyrics flashing across two 15-foot television screens flanking the stage. Two mounted television cameras and one hand-held unit film throughout, with live footage sometimes being shown on the screens.

After 40 minutes of songs praising God, with no one yet sitting, Parsley ambles up the five steps to the carpeted stage, tosses his Bible onto his clear plastic pulpit placed dead center, and begins singing along. Parsley has said his services are guided by the Holy Spirit, which tells him what the church should do that day. The choir and band are prepared to play for the whole two hours, if necessary. Some days Parsley goes straight into sermons.

This day is one for faith healing. It is a core belief of church members that God will heal physical and spiritual ailments of those who have faith enough to ask for help. Parsley, in laying hands on them, is merely the conduit.

Almost immediately, an assistant hands Parsley two cards containing hastily scribbled pleas for healing.

"They are coming forward already," Parsley says.

Parsley reads some of the requests—

one woman wants help as she and her husband try to conceive a child—and asks for the writers to approach the stage. None do at first. He asks a choir member to come down and mentions that she has requested prayers for her grandmother. Placing his hands on her forehead, Parsley shouts, and the woman drops to the stage. Someone with a blanket rushes forward and covers her, and Parsley moves on. Still no one comes forward for healing. The band continues to play.

Parsley reads aloud a card from a woman worried she may have breast cancer. "I want every woman with trouble in their breasts to come forward," he says.

A stampede begins. About 200 women come from every corner of the church to crowd the floor in front of the stage. Parsley moves through them, speaking with

"Handsome and charismatic, with neatly coifed dark brown hair and dressed usually in a double-breasted suit, white shirt, tie and suspenders, Parsley roams through the crowd during sermons with a wireless microphone."

some, touching their foreheads in passing. Some women fall to the ground, others simply step back after his touch. Occasionally he focuses all his attention on one petitioner, squaring himself before her, saying a few words in her ear and tensing his own body before bringing his open palm sharply down on her forehead.

The response by the women with breast ailments opens the floodgates, and the stage front soon is packed with people. Others rush onto the stage and lie face down on the floor, in the manner Parsley says is best for worshipping God. Parsley walks among them, touching each in turn. After one or two especially energetic episodes, Parsley leaps around stage as if the healing power passing through him has left a residual energy that has to be set free. His elbows and knees jerk every which way, and churchgoers cheer.

Near the end of an hour of healing, hundreds of healing cards are spread over a table to the side of the stage, and the band plays loudly as Parsley places his hands on each card. Swept up in emotion, with the music swelling, Parsley climbs onto the table to reach more cards. He is blocked from view by the standing crowd,

but the TV monitors show him crawling across the table.

When it is all over, and people resume their seats, Parsley gives a 15-minute sermon, then asks for the white plastic collection buckets to be passed. Afterward, as some people put on their overcoats, Parsley asks everyone to sit for a moment.

"It's not even 12 o'clock yet, and we've had more church today than some places will have in the next six months," he says. He makes a 20-minute plea for additional money to fund "Breakthrough," and shows the congregants the pamphlets, folders and pins they will receive if they donate.

"I don't mind taking time for this. The Methodists aren't even out yet, and they didn't see anyone saved."

Family feud

Parsley preaches a strict lesson, making no compromises with sin, and there are hints that his desire for rigid conformity extends beyond the pulpit to the point of creating an atmosphere of intimidation. No critics of Parsley, including other ministers and members of the Columbus evangelical Christian community, would agree to be interviewed for this article, with one longtime evangelical Christian saying he feared retribution from the church. And the former World Harvest employee who has gone to court with sexual harassment charges says she felt that to complain would have been to invite the wrath of church leaders.

World Harvest is practically a family business. Parsley is president, and his mother, Ellen, is secretary of World Harvest Church Inc. His father, James, has worked in several capacities with the church since the 1970s, mainly overseeing construction. In the lower ranks are

assorted in-laws, nieces and nephews of the Parsleys, with everyone helping each other out of difficulties and spending time together off work.

That family unity ruptured in September when Parsley's aunt, Naomil Endicott, filed suit in Franklin County Municipal Court claiming James Parsley, her brother-in-law, had sexually harassed her while she worked at the church. Endicott has been with World Harvest Church from the beginning. Her brother, Ed Endicott, co-founded in 1977 the Sunrise Chapel with Rod and James Parsley, and Ms. Endicott says she began attending services regularly in 1979.

In a deposition she gave in September, she told how the Parsleys helped her out many times over the years, including pooling money to help pay her rent and bills when she had to be hospitalized during the mid 1980s. They spent holidays together, and when she needed a job in 1984, she found one at the church. She left in 1986, and when she was out of work again in 1989, the church hired her to design audio tape covers, moving her to the purchasing department in 1991.

She says her world began crumbling in late 1990 when James Parsley began asking her questions she found deeply offensive. She recounted them in her deposition: "Did I get any over the weekend?" "Did I give any over the weekend?" and "Was I going to let him rub that fuzzy today?" She says he grabbed her crotch and breasts several times, made a lewd gesture to her during a Wednesday night religious service and made more obscene comments, including one during a family Thanksgiving dinner at Rod Parsley's home.

Endicott says she always told the elder Parsley to stop, but balked at complaining to her sister, Ellen, or anyone else in authority at the church, because she felt they

would not support her. "I never stopped hoping that he would stop. I loved working there," she said during her deposition. She added later, "I was trying to convey that nothing would have been done to change Mr. Parsley. They would have fired me."

Endicott said her health deteriorated and she had an emotional breakdown at a friend's home, forcing her to quit the church in February, 1992. She said she did not leave her apartment for the next three weeks, sobbing uncontrollably and losing 20 pounds. Since filing the suit, Endicott says she has been shunned by nearly the whole family, and she no longer attends services.

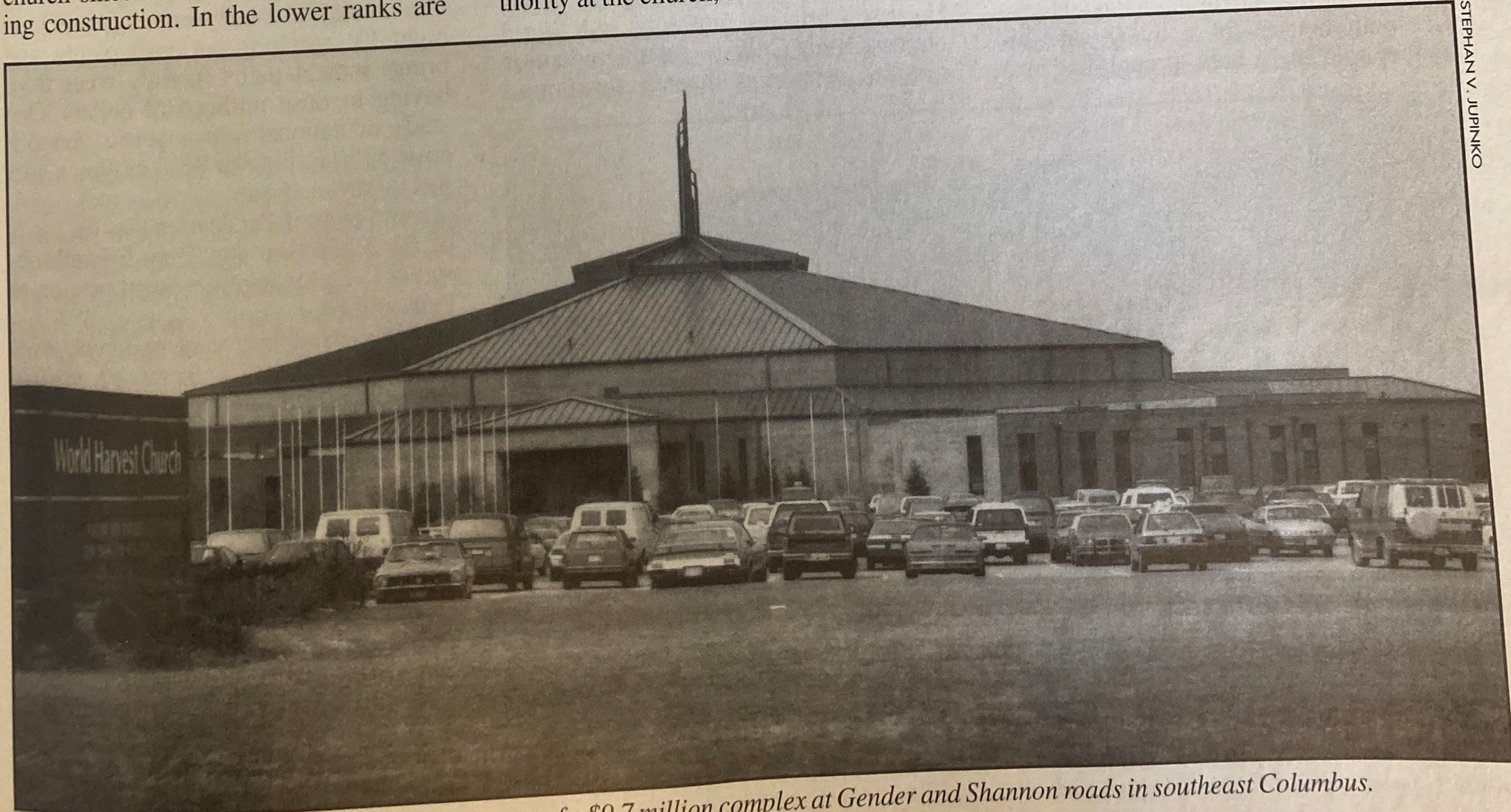
"All of this has had a devastating impact on her," says one of her attorneys, Donald Hallows. "She has been ostracized—by nothing she did—from the single most important facet in her life."

She has sued both Rod and James Parsley and the World Harvest Church, asking for compensatory and punitive damages which her attorneys have not specified yet but which could top \$1 million. To back up her accusations, Endicott claims to have secretly taped James Parsley twice saying sexual comments to her.

Through court documents, the Parsleys have denied all wrongdoing. Calling her "a disgruntled family member," their attorneys, Hamilton, Kramer, Myers & Cheek, have written, "Evidence will show [Endicott and James Parsley] had a close relationship characterized by genuine affection for each other."

"This is yet another means in a pattern of manipulation by Ms. Endicott to obtain monies from the family and the church as she has in the past," they wrote in a press release.

Michael Johrendt, another attorney for Endicott, says Rod Parsley and the church



STEPHAN V. JUPINKO

Sunday morning at the World Harvest Church, part of a \$9.7 million complex at Gender and Shannon roads in southeast Columbus.

are included in the suit because, while Endicott never notified him of her complaints, he should have exerted better control over his employees. "Instead of paying attention to the business, he was out in new directions," says Johrendt. The suit is scheduled for trial in the fall.

Endicott's suit is one of two facing Parsley and his father. In a civil suit filed in Fairfield County Common Pleas Court, a former church member named Lewis Bungard claims that in September, 1991, Rod Parsley choked him and James Parsley punched him in a dispute over some painting work Bungard had done at the Parsleys' homes. (Criminal assault charges were dropped against Rod Parsley, and his father pleaded no contest to an assault charge, was found guilty of disorderly conduct and fined \$100 plus court costs.) Bungard also charges that a \$7,000 donation he made to the church to build a home for unwed mothers and a senior care center was used "for the enrichment of Rodney Parsley, his parents and others so as to achieve an opulent lifestyle for themselves."

From the pulpit in February, Rod Parsley mentioned his legal trouble. "All you people who want to sue us so we have to give you a great big pile of money: I couldn't get to it anymore than you can get to it," he said.

From his back yard to the big time

In suing World Harvest Church, people sue something Parsley has spent his entire adult life building. Born in eastern Kentucky, Parsley moved with his family to Central Ohio during his childhood. His father built houses for a living, and his mother sold real estate through her own

company, L-Par Realtors. He played forward for the Pickerington High School basketball team before graduating in 1975.

Two years later, along with his father and his uncle, the Rev. Ed Endicott, he incorporated the Sunrise Chapel, listing his parents' home on Diley Road in Canal Winchester as its address. He told a reporter for a 1989 article in the Suburban News Publications that he first preached to about 17 people in his back yard. Parsley dropped out of the Circleville Bible College in 1979, and around that time changed the name of the church to the Word of Life, moving it into buildings off Wright Road in Fairfield County.

They soon took to the airwaves, Parsley said, taping a 30-minute show of "Breakthrough" in 1981 at a Newark television studio. The church grew quickly, and locals still recall ungodly traffic snarls clogging the area's narrow country roads after some Sunday-night services.

In the late 1980s, Parsley broke ground on the church's current home, and today the \$9.7 million complex dominates the farm fields around Gender and Shannon roads in the southeast corner of Columbus. "I think we're here to stay," Parsley said in 1989. "This is our Jerusalem."

During services today the parking lot is filled with cars bearing license plates from across Ohio, as well as Michigan, Indiana, West Virginia, Tennessee, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

As the names have changed and the facilities have grown, so has the mission of the church. Last August, church officials amended their incorporation papers, listing the church's purpose in 28 separate articles sprinkled with biblical citations. The church's projected activities include ordaining ministers, sending out missionaries, owning television and radio stations, broadcasting, operating the World Harvest Christian Academy and World Harvest Bible College, running adoption services, providing homes for unwed

mothers and the elderly, establishing a retreat for other ministers and providing housing for staff.

Any question as to who is in charge of all these enterprises is answered very clearly. "In the event of a conflict of opinion between the Board of Trustees and any auxiliary organization, the Pastor shall have the power to overrule and take precedence over any such organization," the papers state.

TV, money and the press

While Parsley's services, showcasing energetic and loud praising of God, have helped bring many people to World Harvest, the branch of the church that has potential for greatest impact, and for the greatest trouble, can be seen at 9 am on Channel 28—"Breakthrough," with your host, Pastor Rod Parsley."

Televangelism has been around as long as television, and hundreds of local and national preachers sail the airwaves every day to an estimated regular viewership of 13.3 million. Despite sensational scandals in recent years toppling the pulpits of such luminaries as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert, scholarly observers of televangelism find most religious broadcasters are honest people doing work with integrity.

Parsley has big plans for "Breakthrough."

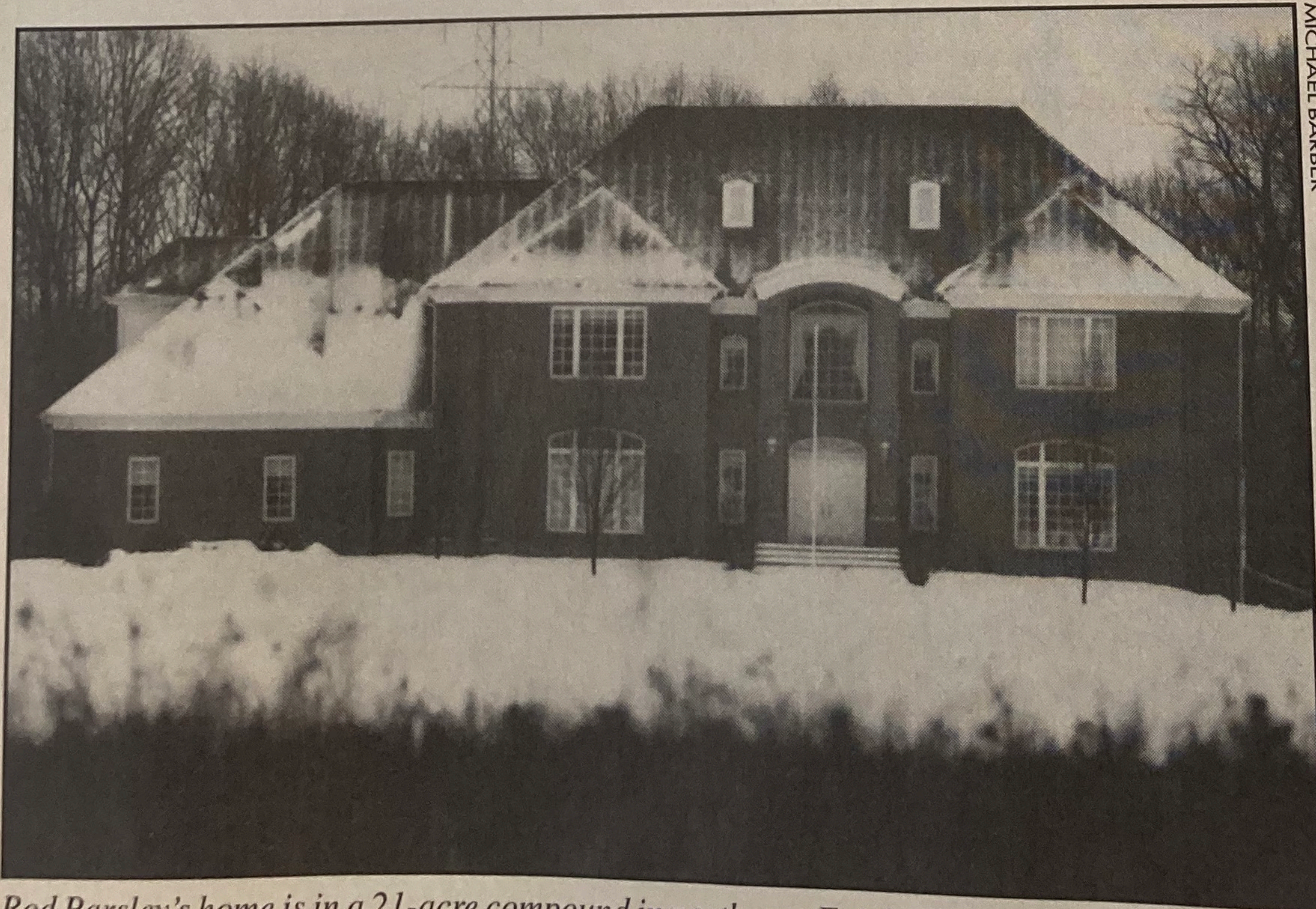
"It's one thing to be on Christian television, but then we're just talking to ourselves," he says. "We have to get on secular TV."

And since televangelists have to pay to air their programs, such as the 30-minute infomercials on early-morning and late-night TV, reaching out costs plenty, and brings with it many worldly woes from having to raise millions of dollars. One study of national televangelism found it costs \$150 million to \$200 million a year just to stay on the air.

And even if Parsley reaches the ranks of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, observers of televangelism warn new problems will arise.

"Television ministers and rock stars have in common a vulnerability created by being thrust into fame and fortune with little training for handling either," writes Joe E. Barnhart in the book *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*.

But Parsley is determined, and during a sermon Feb. 7, he divulged some figures about his TV ministry in hopes of generating greater giving. He said the church spends \$10,000 each day airing "Breakthrough" on 600 stations. Study guides mailed to regular contributors cost \$20,000 each month to mail out, Parsley said, and the telephone prayer line receives 5,000 calls a day, costing the church 72 cents per call. He did not say whether costs for the



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Rod Parsley's home is in a 21-acre compound in northwest Fairfield County that includes his parents' house. According to county records, Parsley's home is worth \$857,090.

prayer line or mailings were included in the daily "Breakthrough" cost, but from his figures, World Harvest spends at least \$3.65 million to \$5.2 million a year on "Breakthrough." The donations the church receives in return must at least cover those costs, Parsley said, and "Breakthrough" has been pulled from a Philadelphia station where donations from that area were not paying the cost of local air time of \$6,000 an hour.

Such information is otherwise hard to come by from the World Harvest Church, which does not make financial statements available. Its policy stands in contrast to that of the members of the Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability, a watchdog group that accredits churches, broadcasters and charities. World Harvest is not an ECFA member, and groups that are, such as the Billy Graham Ministries, must submit an audited financial statement to anyone who requests one.

Money flows into Parsley's World Harvest Church in many ways. Collection

"I don't care whether the world likes it or not. I am serving a God that said He will supply all my needs. . . ."
Parsley wrote in his book *God's Answer to Insufficient Funds*. 'Everybody believed in prosperity until the secular press got upset about it.' "

buckets are passed during each service, with envelopes available so people can earmark funds to feed the hungry or for general church needs. Audio tapes of Parsley's sermons are available for \$6 almost immediately after conclusion of services. And the church bookstore does brisk business selling the seven books Parsley has written in the last two years, as well as 27 video and audio tapes produced in-house and a roomful of other religious books and tapes.

On "Breakthrough," fund-raising has mimicked that done by other television preachers. Recently, Parsley has taken a few minutes each show to hawk a 12-videotape set of church services for a "love offering" of \$125, and each show also has a promotional segment about "Breakthrough Partners," who were asked to send in \$15 each month but now are asked to send in any amount they feel is appropriate.

On Feb. 14, Parsley preached for 90 minutes on money, telling his congregants that tithing, or donating 10 percent of their incomes to the church, was a strict rule set out by God in the Bible. He said God told church leaders how to use the money, and that they did not need to account for it to the public.

"People say, 'I want a financial report.' You couldn't read it," Parsley said. "I'll tell you when I'll give you a full financial statement—when every member of this church brings in a full financial statement of their finances to me."

Parsley is upfront with his congregation about the church's need for money. "I just love to talk about money," he told them. "I just love to talk about your money. Let me be very clear—I want your money. I deserve it. This church deserves it."

Parsley says God wants people to be wealthy in this world, but the first step is for them to tithe. Then believers have but to ask God for a blessing, and the wealth of sinners will be the first money to come their way.

"I don't care whether the world likes it or not. I am serving a God that said He will supply all my needs. . . ." Parsley wrote in his book *God's Answer to Insufficient Funds*. "Everybody believed in prosperity until the secular press got upset about it."

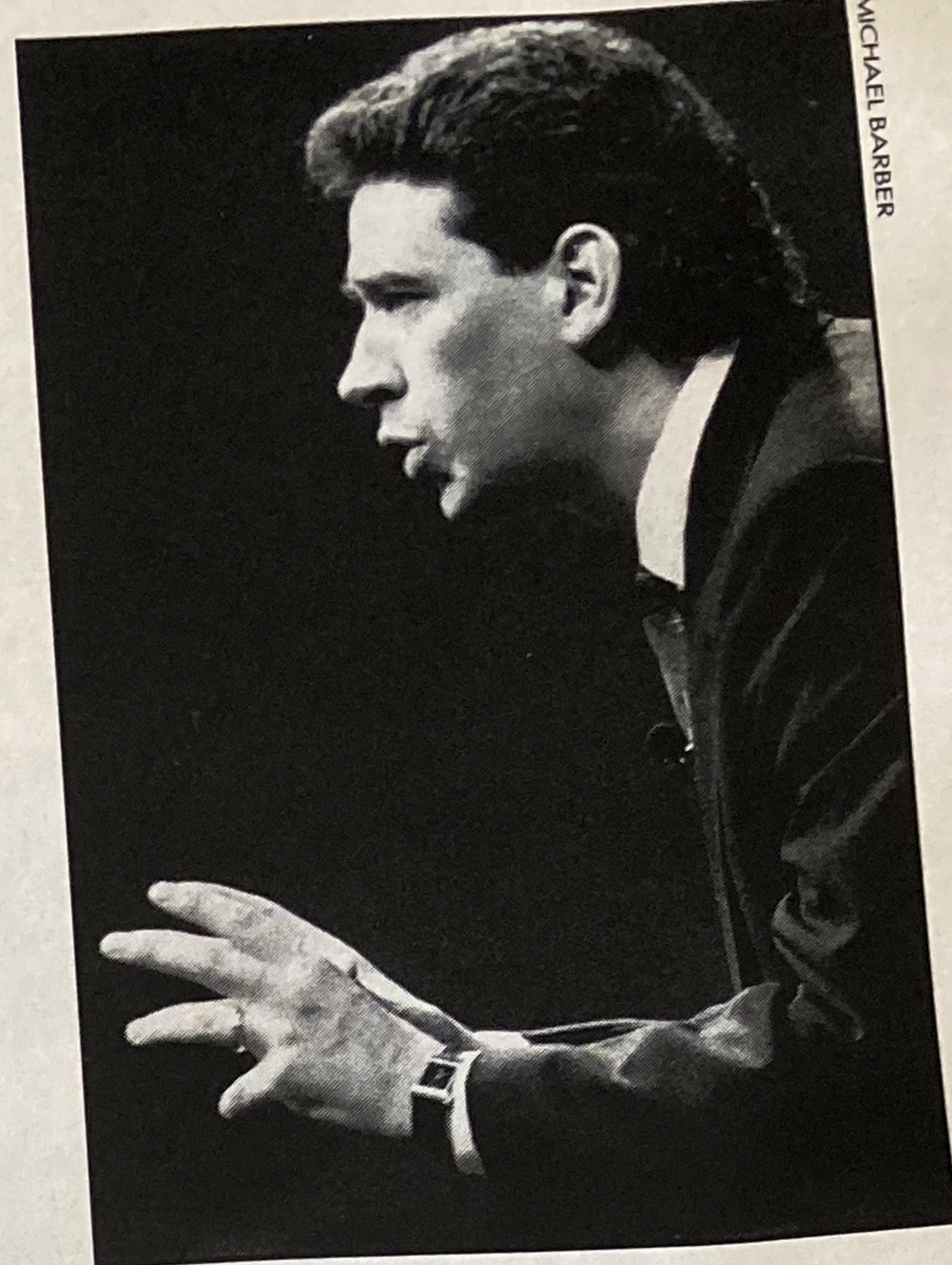
It is a preaching that Parsley practices in his own life. "I don't want to look like I'm living out of a food pantry," Parsley wrote in the same book. "I don't want to look like I'm getting my clothes from the missionary barrel. I've had enough of that. You can keep it if you want to. I'll endure the persecution that comes with the blessing. That's a choice I've made—a hard choice, but I've made it."

Parsley, his wife, Joni, and their two young children live in a five-bedroom house they have built next to his parents' house on a 21-acre compound in northwest Fairfield County. The compound has an electronic gate at the road to discourage uninvited visitors, and stables and a corral have been built in one corner. Rod Parsley's home is worth \$857,090, say records at the Fairfield County recorder's office. His parents' home, also new, is valued at \$831,480. Each was built with a \$200,000 mortgage taken out in 1990, records say. The elder Parsleys' previous home, on one acre off Diley Road, is valued at \$94,750, and county records show the World Harvest Church bought it in January, 1992, for \$149,000.

Parsley also owns a \$500,000 jet, a seven-passenger Hawker Siddeley 125.

In his Feb. 14 sermon, Parsley said that the truth about worldly wealth has been tarnished by the popular press, who have misled people about other TV preachers.

"They've lied about preachers like a bunch of pack dogs," he said. "You think they've told the truth about all the preachers, and you lose faith in them because of what some lying, stinking, on-their-way-



Parsley, in 1989.

to-hell press told you," he shouted. "Shame on you for believing the lying media."

Parsley's anger has led him to stop talking to the press. The church's administrator, Dean Radtke, wrote in a letter responding to an interview request that Parsley currently refuses all media interviews.

"We have had many requests from all forms of news media—magazines, newspapers, television human interest shows etc., and we have declined participation with all of them at this time," Radtke wrote. "Unfortunately the interviews do not result in accurate reporting or in showcasing the tremendous ministry work accomplished in the lives of people as the requests are initially postured. Rather, the reporting attempts to make an unfavorable association with situations encountered in a few other ministries."

"In one instance where factual material was made available," Radtke wrote, "that material was presented to the public in three different accountings by three different media sources, all of which were inaccurate."

Still, as an ambitious young man, Parsley can expect more, not less, media attention the more successful his ministry becomes. Whether it's good or bad will depend largely on him. With millions of dollars at stake, and the examples of such preachers-gone-bad as Swaggert, Bakker and Leroy Jenkins, Columbus's newest television Bible-thumper may want to keep page markers at *Proverbs*, 28:20: "He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent," and *Matthew*, 19:24: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." ■

Jim Bebbington is a free-lance writer in Columbus.