

Hobby Lobby family plans to give away free campus

March 3, 2012

NORTHFIELD, Mass. (RNS) —Jerry Pattengale's cell phone won't stop ringing as he leads four college administrators around a majestic campus built in 1879 by legendary evangelist D.L. Moody.

Calls and visitors are pouring in for one reason: The billionaire Oklahoma family that owns the 217-acre site and its 43 buildings aims to give it away to a Christian institution. Free. No charge. Just take it.

Jerry Pattengale, who was hired by the Green family of Oklahoma to help find a new owner of a college campus in Northfield, Mass., points out the stone chapel that once was deemed unsafe but has been repaired. (RNS PHOTO/G. Jeffrey MacDonald)

"That was a national organization in Colorado that just called," said Pattengale, a college administrator who's been hired to help find a new owner for the property. "They want to come and see."

The extraordinary offer went out to 15 hand-picked institutions in January after plans fell apart to locate a new C.S. Lewis College on the site that once housed the Northfield campus of Northfield Mount Hermon School. Moody founded a predecessor school, the Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies, here in 1879.

Now the Green family, owners of the [Hobby Lobby](#) craft store chain, is soliciting new proposals. The winner will need to demonstrate both an

orthodox Christian vision and the financial wherewithal to pull it off.

Whoever gets the property will inherit a gem with hilltop views stretching to New Hampshire and Vermont. Since buying the campus in 2009 for \$100,000, the Greens have poured \$5 million into improvements. Visitors now stroll along new sidewalks, smell fresh paint in the 2,400-seat auditorium where Moody preached and marvel at seamlessly rebuilt buttressing for a formerly condemned stone chapel.

For the Greens, giant gifts to promote Christian education and the Bible are a stock in trade. The family saved Oral Roberts University with a \$70 million donation; gave a campus in Haverhill, Mass., to Zion Bible College; and built a 1 million-square-foot complex for Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va. They're currently planning a Bible museum to house their private collection of biblical antiquities, which ranks among the world's largest.

Although none of the Greens have been to college, Pattengale said, they're committed to strengthening Christian higher education. The so-called "Moody campus" here gives them an asset for doing so in a region famous for academic institutions and secular liberalism.



Dave Powell, D.L. Moody's great-grandson, visits his great-grandfather's grave in Northfield, Mass., as Christian institutions submit proposals for the former Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies that Moody founded in 1879. (RNS PHOTO/G. Jeffrey MacDonald)

"While the Northeast has become very secular, we feel like it needs to reconsider the roots that this country was founded upon and that D.L. Moody taught," Hobby Lobby President Steve Green said. "If there can be a light in that area that this campus can play a part in, we would love to see that happen."

Interest has been keen. But giving away a historic, picturesque campus is turning out to be a challenge.

So far, only the Redlands, Calif.-based C.S. Lewis Foundation has offered to take the entire property. The group still is raising funds with hopes of launching a "great books" college on the site, where students would focus on classic literature and arts. But organizers missed their Dec. 31 fundraising target by more than \$3 million, thus triggering the new search.

"Everything is in place except money," said Stan Mattson, [C.S. Lewis Foundation](#) founder and president. The curriculum is ready for would-be C.S. Lewis College students, but one year's operating costs for the campus—estimated at \$1.5 million—would virtually deplete its resources.

Colleges have expressed interest in owning select portions of the campus, but not the whole thing. So, the Greens are considering a scenario of co-ownership among various institutions with one serving as the anchor, like a department store in a mall.

Liberty University is a leading contender, since it has a 40-year track record, has 80,000 students—including online enrollments—and, unlike many universities, "moves at lightning speed," Pattengale said. Liberty likely would offer short-term and weeklong intensive courses in Northfield for its thousands of online graduate students who live and work in the Northeast, according to Liberty Provost Ronald Godwin.

But even deep-pocketed Liberty doesn't want exclusive ownership of the campus.

Northfield Mount Hermon broadly interpreted Moody's legacy by focusing on education, not evangelism. Some want elements of that ethos to continue. Dave Powell, D.L. Moody's great-grandson, said he hopes a Christian institution will take ownership and carry on such traditions as honoring the dignity of manual labor by having everyone do physical chores.

"I hope they sustain the Christian foundation here but are broad enough to understand that it's not the only religion in the world," Powell said. "I would hope we certainly would invite Muslims, Jews and everybody else (to speak on campus) because how else are we going to survive in the world?"

The Greens will consider a first round of proposals at their monthly family meeting March 7. After that, they might open the process beyond the handpicked candidates, although that could mean weighing hundreds of proposals, Pattengale said.

"We could hold it indefinitely if we wanted to, but our goal is to get it operating," Green said. "The sooner the better, if we could find the right fit."