

Truett Cathy tosses cows, mesmerizes North Georgia UMs

By Alice M. Smith
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ATHENS -- Chick-fil-A king Truett Cathy took the North Georgia Annual Conference by storm, striding to the front of the stage and tossing out small plush cows, the company's signature trademark. Others moved among the audience, passing out coupons for free Chick-fil-A sandwiches. One of the best-known Christian laymen who lives out his faith in both the business and personal arenas, Cathy joked with the delegates, "If you can't be Baptist, I guess the next best choice is Methodist." A member of Jonesboro First Baptist, he has taught a Sunday school class for 13-year-old boys for 45 years.

"I've found God can use each and every one of us, and it doesn't have to be perfect. We just have to make ourselves useful," he said. After greeting the full conference, he was the guest speaker at the laity luncheon, where each table setting was adorned with — what else? — a small plush cow. "We're all excited about the cows," he said, whose "eat mor chikin" slogan may not be good English but certainly has caught the fancy of consumers.

A strong family man, Cathy was accompanied by his son Dan and grandsons Ross and Andrew, all of whom flew to Athens on a private plane. Now 82, Cathy learned at a young age a strong work ethic and the importance of always doing his best. A product of the Great Depression, his family was poor, and he assisted his mother in running a boarding house by "shelling peas, shucking corn, washing dishes and going shopping." He was also involved in other money-raising endeavors, such as selling soft drinks and magazines to the neighbors and operating a paper route.

From those early days he learned "the harder you work, the more successful and satisfied you will be." Following a stint in the Army, he and his brother Ben, who was later killed in a tragic airplane crash, opened the Dwarf Grill restaurant in Hapeville in 1946. When a second Dwarf restaurant burned, Cathy spent some of his freed-up time inventing the Chick-fil-A sandwich. Today there are more than 1,000 Chick-fil-A restaurants with more than \$1 billion in sales annually.

Perhaps the most high-profile testimony to Cathy's Christian commitment is refusing to operate on Sunday, a policy he has followed since opening the first restaurant. He is also the creator of the WinShape Centre Foundation, which operates 14 foster homes, sponsors a summer camp and has provided college scholarships for more than 16,500 students. Many of these scholarship recipients have attended Berry College, which shares a special relationship with Cathy. When

the ever-spiraling Chick-fil-A hit a snag in the early 1980s and experienced its first decline in sales, Cathy and the executive committee closeted themselves away in a retreat setting to discuss the situation. Instead of looking at new marketing techniques, the group asked themselves such basic question as why are we in business, what do we expect to accomplish?

Out of that retreat grew Chick-fil-A's corporate purpose: "To glorify God by being faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A." The following year sales were up again.

Cathy is not content just to establish charitable programs but is personally involved in them, especially with the children in the foster homes. He visits them, takes them on outings, and is actively involved in helping them to overcome their family circumstances and become productive, ethical citizens. He is profoundly grateful for the success he has enjoyed but gives God the glory. "God has used me in mighty ways," he said, "and given me resources to benefit myself and other people. Scripture tells us," he said, we are created in the image, in the likeness of our creator. That puts an awesome responsibility on each one of us to be at our best, at all times, regardless of the circumstances.

"The one question for you as well as myself is, 'Why not?'"