

Campus founded by Moody is being given away—to the right buyer

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

Jerry Pattengale's cell phone won't stop ringing as he leads a secretive group of college administrators on a tour of a majestic Massachusetts 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.

"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 handpicked 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 preceding school, the Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies, in 1879.

The current owners, the Green family, of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, are soliciting new proposals. The winner will need to demonstrate both an orthodox Christian vision and the financial wherewithal to establish an institution on the campus.

Whoever gets the property will inherit a choice site 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, Massachusetts, to Zion Bible College; and built a 1 million-square-foot complex for Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

They're currently planning a Bible museum to house their private collection of biblical antiquities, which ranks among the world's largest.

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

"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," said Hobby Lobby president Steve Green. "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, and not just from organizations requesting anonymity. Delegations from Liberty University, Azusa Pacific University and Indiana Wesleyan University were on site within days of being invited. (Indiana Wesleyan, where Pattengale is assistant provost, opted to pass on the opportunity.)

Giving away a historic, picturesque campus is turning out to be a challenge, however. So far, only the Redlands, California-based C. S. Lewis Foundation has offered to take the entire property. The group is still 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 December 31 fund-raising target by more than \$3 million, thus triggering the new search.

"Everything is in place except money," said C. S. Lewis Foundation founder and president Stan Mattson. 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 the foundation's resources.

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

Liberty 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 would likely 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. "Liberty is a large school, but we still couldn't see how we'd utilize that whole property," said Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. "We suggested that maybe several schools could work together to jointly use the property for different programs. . . . We put together a proposal along those lines."

Negotiating a cultural fit for the local community could pose challenges as well. When Pattengale recently met with 15 community leaders at a local inn, he asked if the campus had ever hosted a contemporary Christian music event, such as an Amy Grant concert.

"We had Peter, Paul and Mary play once," answered Ted Thornton, the chairman of the history department at Northfield Mount Hermon, which

continues to operate on a separate nearby campus in Mount Hermon, Massachusetts.

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?"

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Greens were scheduled to consider a first round of proposals at their monthly family meeting on March 7. After that, they might open the process beyond the handpicked candidates, although that could mean weighing hundreds of proposals, Pattengale said. He reminded local leaders that it's the Greens' property to "do what they want with it."

Said

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