OFF THE TRAIL

# Huckabee Steps Back Into the Pulpit at Evangelical Church in N.H.

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Monday, January 7, 2008; Page A07

WINDHAM, N.H., Jan. 6 -- A pastor from Texas was scheduled to deliver the sermon Sunday at a church here called the Crossing.

But instead this small evangelical congregation heard from a different special guest: Baptist minister and 2008 presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who delivered a sermon of more than 20 minutes on how to be part of "God's Army" in the middle school cafeteria where the congregation meets.

"When we become believers, it's as if we have signed up to be part of God's Army, to be soldiers for Christ," Huckabee told the enthusiastic audience.

Days after winning the Iowa Republican caucus, where Christian conservatives powered him to victory, Huckabee now finds himself in a state without an extensive religious base. While more than 60 percent of GOP voters were estimated to be evangelicals in the Iowa caucuses, they accounted for only about one in five New Hampshire Republican voters in 2000, the last time the state held a competitive Republican primary.

Huckabee's campaign did not allow cameras into the church, and the candidate did not make an appeal for votes as part of his sermon. But a church official invited members to attend an event a mile away, where Huckabee held a rally with actor Chuck Norris and where free clam chowder was served.

Huckabee mixed homespun jokes into his sermon and added a more religious tone than in his political speeches, not just quoting from the Bible but citing specific verses and talking about the serious side of faith.

"When you give yourself to Christ, some relationships have to go," he said. "It's no longer your life; you've signed it over."

Likening service to God to service in the military, Huckabee said "there is suffering in the conditioning for battle" and "you obey the orders."

In his campaign stops in New Hampshire, Huckabee has generally focused on appealing to nonreligious voters, playing the bass guitar and emphasizing his support of small government, local control of schools and gun rights, popular causes among Granite State Republicans. Norris, who has endorsed him, has been at his side at nearly every event.

His campaign has not run an ad dubbing him a "Christian leader" that was popular in Iowa.

The former Arkansas governor said he was comfortable at the Crossing because it is similar to the Church at Rock Creek in Little Rock, which he attends regularly. The former head of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention prefers "contemporary" services, an aide said, and often attends services that are not explicitly Baptist.

At the Crossing, like at Huckabee's Arkansas church, a band with guitar players leads the singing, and the words of the songs appeared on a projector rather than in hymnals. In contrast, however, this relatively new congregation does not own a building -- there is a large sanctuary at his Arkansas church -- so more than 200 people sat in folding chairs in the large cafeteria, with the lunch tables used during the school week stacked against the wall.

Huckabee, sitting beside his wife, Janet, in the front row, seemed to know most of the songs without reading the words and praised the guitar player as being better than he is. And he said he enjoyed the upbeat service, which included tambourine and drums and children running under flags that were waved during the songs.

"If we know the Lord, there ought to be joy," Huckabee said.