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Falwell expressed peace about dying

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LYNCHBURG--Spiritually, the Rev. Jerry Falwell seemed prepared for his passing.

A little more than two weeks ago, the founder of the Moral Majority preached of man being indestructible until he has finished God's work, then told churchgoers he was at peace with death.

On the day before he died, Falwell called his son and asked him to take a drive up the mountain that overlooks Liberty University, where he posed for pictures near a new, massive "LU" logo with students from the school he built.

"He said he was feeling better than he'd felt in awhile," Jerry Falwell Jr. said. "He'd been feeling kind of tired in the past two weeks."

On Tuesday morning, the 73-year-old Falwell was discovered without a pulse in his office at Liberty and pronounced dead at a hospital about an hour later. Dr. Carl Moore, Falwell's physician, said he had a heart condition and presumably died of a heart rhythm abnormality. His funeral was set for Tuesday.

The big, blue-eyed preacher with a booming voice used the power of television to found the Moral Majority and turn the Christian right into a mighty force in American politics.

The rise of Christian conservatism made Falwell perhaps the most recognizable figure on the evangelical right.

Over the years, Falwell waged a landmark libel case against Hustler magazine founder Larry Flynt over a raunchy parody ad, and created a furor in 1999 when one of his publications suggested that the purse-carrying "Teletubbies" character Tinky Winky was gay.

Driven into politics by the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that established the right to an abortion, Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979. He credited the conservative lobbying group with getting millions of like-minded people to vote, and one of its greatest triumphs came when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980.

"I shudder to think where the country would be right now if the religious right had not evolved," he said when he stepped down as Moral Majority president in 1987.

Falwell was both a businessman and a preacher, roles that each of his sons embody. He had made careful preparations for a transition of his leadership to Jerry Jr., vice chancellor of Liberty University, and Jonathan, executive pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church.

But neither is involved in politics, an area where Falwell's influence had declined in recent years. He was quietly led in and out of the Republican Party's 2004 national convention. Just four years earlier, he was invited to pray from the rostrum.

The fundamentalist preacher also is remembered for being divisive.

Matt Foreman, executive director of National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, extended condolences to those close to Falwell, but added: "Unfortunately, we will always remember him as a founder and leader of America's anti-gay industry, someone who exacerbated the nation's appalling response to the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic"