ORAL ROBERTS
1918-2009
LEGACY

TULSA WORLD
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dedicated to his life and career as an evangelist. View a complete archive of stories
written about Roberts, watch videos and slide shows and view an interactive timeline.
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Expect A Miracle
Oral Roberts lays hands on a man at a healing crusade. He once said he had laid hands on 1 million people over his years of ministry.

A LASTING INFLUENCE

BY BILL SHERMAN WORLD RELIGION WRITER

It is difficult to overstate Oral Roberts’ influence on 20th-century Christianity, church leaders say.

When Roberts pioneered his healing tent crusades as a young Pentecostal Holiness preacher in the 1940s, Pentecostalism was a small, poor, persecuted faith on the wrong side of the tracks.

When he died Tuesday, 640 million people embraced some form of his teaching that God is a good God who wants to bless people spiritually, physically and economically.

Worldwide, the Pentecostal/Charismatic family is second in size only to Catholicism and is the dominant form of Christianity in much of Africa, Asia and South America.

Among the many people involved in the worldwide explosion of Pentecostalism, Roberts is singled out as the most influential.

Often belittled in the press and taken for granted in his own hometown, Roberts was a hero to Third World Christians.

Visitors to churches in Africa who mention they are from Tulsa inevitably will be asked: “Oh, do you know Oral Roberts?”

“I don’t think there’s any question he and Billy Graham are the two towering figures from the 20th century,” the Rev. Jack Hayford told the Tulsa World on Thursday. Hayford recently completed a five-year term as president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

In his book, “The Charismatic Century,” he wrote that without the ministry of Oral Roberts, “the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred.”

Vinson Synan, a church historian, ranked Roberts with Graham and Pope John Paul II as the leading religious figures of the 20th century.

“I think he stands on that level,” said Synan, dean emeritus and professor of church history at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., and author of “The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001.”

“Billy Graham led the rebirth of evangelicalism, Oral led the growth of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement, and Pope John Paul II helped bring down communism.”

Synan was a high school student in 1949 when he met Roberts.

His father, J.A. Synan, was the presiding bishop of the Pentecostal Holiness Church and was Roberts’ spiritual overseer at that time.

“I want to see him at a tent crusade in Norfolk, Va. It was the biggest crowd I had ever seen. I got saved at that meeting,” Synan said his father told him after that meeting that Roberts was like a different man.

“He had stuttered so badly, he could hardly get a sentence out. But in the pulpit, he was a ball of fire — no stuttering at all,” Synan said.

Synan and Roberts changed the face of Pentecostalism, at that time an often ridiculed brand of Christianity that emphasized healing, miracles and speaking in tongues.

“His faith planted the seeds of the charismatic renewal.”

Through him, the movement spread worldwide, and now his teachings on healing and prosperity are spread all over the world, Synan said.

Among his disciples have been some of the top Christian leaders of the world, including Tulsa’s Kenneth E. Hagin, German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, Texas evangelist Kenneth Copeland and Korean pastor Togyu Cho, founder of the largest church in the world.

Synan said Roberts was the key to what is called the word of faith movement, a

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VINSON SYNAN

Church Historian
The whole idea that God is a good God can be traced back to Oral Roberts. So many Christians had the view that God is a good God. ‘I was aware of the deep respect and affection that he had for me and other African Americans.’

William George, pastor of Church on the Move, one of Tulsa’s largest churches, said Roberts introduced the concept of healing evangelism as a new paradigm, from huge tent meetings to television and foreign crusades.

‘I don’t tell you how many ministers I know who have had a similar experience connected to the Roberts ministry,’ he said. ‘He taught us to think big, to dare to dream. It had a huge impact on people like me.’

George said Roberts was the first one to do that. He was the pioneer,” he said.

So many Christians had the view that God wants to bless people spiritually, physically and financially and will do so in response to faith. "There are a lot of imitators, but he was the first one to do that," said Roberts "taught us to think big. He was the first one to do that.

Oral Roberts preaches to an audience of thousands at the Memorial Auditorium in 1978. / SHERRY BROWN/Tulsa World photo

Oral Roberts speaks during commencement services at Oral Roberts University in 1981. / SHERRY BROWN/Tulsa World photo

DEFINITIONS

Classical Pentecostalism

A Christian movement that came out of a 1906 revival at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, characterized by speaking in tongues, healing, miracles and other gifts of the Holy Spirit. Oral Roberts’ Pentecostal faith is evidenced by his ordination in a Church of God in Christ, which is America’s largest black denomination, and the Assemblies of God are part of that movement.

Charismatic Movement

A loose-knit movement closely related to the Pentecostalism that arose both in and out of the major denominations in the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by the gifts (charisms) of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, miracles and healing. Most of Tulsa’s large independent churches grew out of that movement, as all of them were influenced by the Oral Roberts ministry.

Speaking in tongues

Adherents say it is the practice of speaking or praying in an unknown language by the power of the Holy Spirit, a spiritual discipline that Oral Roberts has said was an important means of inspiration for him.

Oral Roberts speaks at the dedication of City of Faith Hospital in Tulsa in 1981. / SHERRY BROWN/Tulsa World photo

Oral is pictured with his wife, Evelyn, in 1976. They met in 1938 and were married for 64 years.

Tulsa World photo

FAITH:

FROM ORZ

Oral Roberts’ message was the same regardless of the setting. He taught the whole person, body, mind and spirit, that God is waiting to get you. Oral was the guy who really let us see we could have God’s best.”

The whole idea that God is a good God can be traced back to Oral Roberts. So many Christians had the view that God wants to bless people spiritually, physically and financially and will do so in response to faith. "There are a lot of imitators, but he was the first one to do that," said Roberts "taught us to think big. He was the first one to do that.

Oral Roberts was racially colorblind, a fact evident by the strong presence of ORU of people of every race around the world. Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake, head of the Church of God in Christ, the nation’s largest black denomination, said Roberts’ conviction about racial equality and the four involvement of all races in the life of the church characterized his entire life.

‘As an African-American leader, I was so honored to play significant leadership roles in various organizations which he headed, in the areas of the deep respect and affection that he had for me and other African Americans.’

‘His far-reaching, bold vision inspired me to think bigger than I’d ever thought before,’ he said.

‘We were all on fire. Blake pastors the 25,000-member West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, and he was on the board of International Charismatic Bible Ministries, a fellowship of charismatic leaders founded by Roberts.

“International evangelist T.L. Osborn, a lifelong friend of Roberts, said Roberts’ life has ‘imparted the world, reminding every man, woman and child that God is a good God.’

“His legacy of faith, carried on through the lives of thousands of Oral Roberts University graduates, will continue touching every person’s world until Jesus comes,” Osborn said.

WILLIE GEORGE

Pastor of Church on the Move, one of Tulsa’s largest church

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WILLIE GEORGE

Pastor of Church on the Move, one of Tulsa’s largest church

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Tulsa World
A $70 million donation helped ORU move away from a troubled past and years of spiraling debt.

In its 44-year history, Oral Roberts University has seen its share of controversy and financial crises, as well as international praise and tangible alumni support. From its beginning of 300 students in 1965 to its heyday of medical, dentistry and law schools on campus in the early 1980s, ORU, said the faculty and students were recognized institution.

But times change, and ORU is mired in scandal. Roberts churned financial trouble and legal fees plagued the university — now Regent University — in 2007.

“Now is the highest it has ever been. Financial trouble and legal fees plagued the university — now Regent University — in 2007.”

In September, Rutland announced that ORU had eliminated all of its long-term debt. Gillen said morale at the university is the highest it has ever been. “It’s one of the most remarkable things that I have ever seen,” said Douglas.

Rutland, who was recruited by Green and Oral Roberts himself, began to open the university to visitors and the Tulsa community, pledging to learn from — but not dwell on — ORU’s occasionally sordid past.

The current environment on campus is one of a new horizon and renewed optimism, Rutland said. “We have a great future ahead for ORU,” he said. “This is a brighter day than we have seen in at least 10 years.”

Rutland repeated a mantra of the last several months: “We’ve weathered the storm and we’re on clear sailing.”

"We’ve been through some tough times, but we’ve weathered the storm and we’re on clear sailing."

By SHANNON MUCHMORE

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**WORLD STAFF WRITER**

**ORAL ROBERTS 1918-2009**

"We’ve weathered the storm and we’re on clear sailing."
Tulsa radio icon John Erling interviewed Oral Roberts Aug. 11 at his Newport Beach, Calif., home, in what would be his last public interview. The more-than-hour wide-ranging interview covered everything from his grandfather coming west in a wagon train to his eagerness to get to heaven.

"His demeanor was very sweet and pleasant. His mind was very clear," Erling said. "I was impressed with his forthrightness. Erling did the interview as part of his "Voices of Oklahoma" oral history project, which will be officially launched early next year on the Web site "voicesofoklahoma.com." So far, the compilation includes the stories of 41 older Oklahomans. Here are edited excerpts of the Roberts interview:

On closing down the City of Faith

When I closed the City of Faith, the American Medical Association sent a man down to close it and to relocate the students. He said, "Dr. Roberts, I know this is a decision. You may not know it, but the medical world has known every step you've taken. We've followed you. We've loved you. We want you to know that you've not been a failure because we've affected the medical association forever. There was no talk about merging medicine and prayer until you came along. And you're right, Someday that'll be thee."

On his relationship with the President

President Kennedy reached out and shook my hand. He was the most generous man I've ever had in my life. I almost fell down. And he looked at me and said, "How about all those people you're praying for?" I prayed for him and asked him for me. I had a wonderful time with him.

Kennedy was determined that he had made the most of the gift that he had been given, and was determined that he would do. He had my senator from Oklahoma just pray over him, and I told him I wouldn't do it.

I came back three different times and said, "The President has it. He's the one you want." He turned me down. I found out what he wanted. He wanted it on TV and I wasn't. And he wanted to know how I'd put it. I told him I wasn't nervous when I started. (God) is a woman, 105 years old, and that I wasn't praying for anything. I was praying for one person. He thanked me.

On his son Richard stepping down

Richard had served his time. He is my legacy. We prayed, and we got over it. We prayed, and we got over it.

On his son Ronald

When President Kennedy reached out and offered me every dollar in my wallet, but he wasn't. He got ahold of some kind of drugs.

On his relationship with Billy Graham

I became a Christian at ORU, but he fell in love with my ministry. He gave me every dollar in my wallet. He took it and left.

On Barry and Rush Limbaugh

When Barry was determined that he had made the most of the gift that he had been given, and was determined that he would do. He had my senator from Oklahoma just pray over him, and I told him I wouldn't do it. I found out what he wanted. He wanted it on TV and I wasn't. And he wanted to know how I'd put it. I told him I wasn't nervous when I started. (God) is a woman, 105 years old, and that I wasn't praying for anything. I was praying for one person. He thanked me.

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September 1949: Completes single-story building on Boulder Avenue lot; later adds two stories.


Jan. 15, 1955: Returns to Tulsa after monthlong trip to Jordan, the Mideast and South Africa. Says 30,000 people converted in Johannesburg, South Africa.


<< February 1962: Trustees break ground for Oral Roberts University.

Sept. 7, 1965: ORU campus at 7777 S. Lewis Ave. opens with 303 students.

1967: Prayer Tower on campus completed.

April 2, 1967: Billy Graham speaks at ORU’s dedication; Roberts is named its president.

March 17, 1968: Switches affiliation from Pentecostal Holiness to Methodist.

Jan. 4, 1987: Says that if he doesn’t raise $8 million for a medical missionary program by the end of March, God will “call Oral Roberts home.”

March 22, 1987: Enters the Prayer Tower to begin a nine-day prayer vigil.

April 1, 1987: Richard Roberts says $8.7 million donated for the medical missionary program.

Jan. 27, 1993: Richard Roberts becomes ORU’s president, and Oral Roberts is named chancellor.

May 4, 2005: Evelyn Roberts dies.

Oct. 22, 2007: Returns to ORU to support Richard Roberts, who would resign as the university’s president a month later amid allegations of financial misconduct.

Dec. 12, 2009: Falls in his home, breaking his pelvis and neck.

Dec. 15, 2009: Dies at 1:40 p.m.