

A Legacy of Faith

Written by Ken Walker

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Roberts heard a voice: “Son, I am going to heal you, and you will take My power to your generation.”

Claudius Roberts dedicated her son, Oral, to God before his birth in rural Oklahoma early last century. While pregnant, she went to pray for a neighbor’s child who was stricken with pneumonia. Battling a fierce thunderstorm as she crossed a field and crawled through barbed wire, she told God if He would heal her neighbor’s son, she would give Him her soon-to-be-born child.

When Granville Oral Roberts was born to her on January 24, 1918, he survived a raging flu epidemic that killed more people than World War I. Later, as a teenager with a severe stuttering problem, he almost died of a respiratory illness.

His mother prophesied God would release his tongue and that he would speak to multitudes. Then, in July 1935, after suffering with tuberculosis for 163 days, he was healed of both the TB and the stuttering through the ministry of an unknown evangelist, George W. Moncey.

En route to the meeting, Roberts heard a voice that he believed was God’s say: “Son, I am going to heal you, and you are to take My healing power to your generation. You are to build Me a university and build it on My authority and the Holy Spirit.”

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Roberts would go on to preach to millions and lay hands on 1.5 million people for healing. Before his life ended on December 15, at age 91, he had written more than 120 books, pioneered television evangelism, spread the doctrine of biblical prosperity and founded the university that bears his name. Christian historians have placed him alongside Billy Graham, William Seymour, Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II as a spiritual giant of the 20th century.

“He’s one of the most significant figures in American religious history,” says Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan. “I think he planted the seeds publicly of what became the charismatic renewal after 1960, because the American public first saw Pentecostalism in their living rooms through his televised tent crusades.”

Roberts’ testimony of miracles became the basis of his upbeat theology. He wrote in his 1995 autobiography, *Expect a Miracle*: “Some believe in miracles; some don’t. Take miracles out of Oral Roberts’ life and I’d be dead.”

His father, Ellis, was a poor farmer who also picked cotton while preaching in Pentecostal Holiness churches. Roberts credited his parents with instilling faith in him. Hearing their early-morning prayers convinced him that he could be so close to Jesus that he could talk to Him.

Strong faith was necessary after Roberts set out to lead his first revival at age 23 with his wife, Evelyn. Lodging in the home of a church member, he shivered nightly for three weeks as subfreezing winds howled through the plank walls.

Over the next six years he bounced between evangelizing and pastoring, settling on evangelism after a startling experience in Toccoa, Georgia. A deacon at his church was injured when a car motor fell on his foot. When Roberts prayed for him, the pain vanished and the man’s crushed toes returned to normal.

Roberts would pastor one last time—at a church in Oklahoma where he experienced miracles of provision that laid the groundwork for his teachings on prosperity. Forced to live with another family, he donated his \$55 weekly salary as “seed” money for a parsonage. Early the next day, a farmer gave him \$400. Soon after, a Buick dealer gave him a new car.

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A year later, Roberts moved to Tulsa and started the evangelistic ministry that later bore his name. Wherever he went across the world, he was confident that when he felt God's power come on his right hand, people would be healed.

The early years were not easy. He often hauled his family's furniture on the roof of his car during their frequent moves. While he was on a preaching tour in Virginia in the 1940s, he sometimes took odd jobs, such as painting houses or hanging wallpaper, to make \$5 a day.

"That's how he kept body and soul together," Synan says.

But Roberts' fortunes would change in the 1950s after he seized on the potential of radio and television for spreading his healing message. By 1955 his program was on 800 radio stations and 200 TV outlets. Within two more years 1,000 letters a day flooded his ministry. Two years after that he moved his ministry into a seven-story building in downtown Tulsa after outgrowing two previous spaces.

Roberts' heyday was in the 1960s and 1970s after he pioneered the concept of a multimedia ministry. The circulation of his monthly magazine, *Abundant Life*, reached as high as 1 million. His monthly spiritual column appeared in 674 newspapers. For almost 30 years his Sunday morning TV program was the No. 1 syndicated religious program in the country—reaching 64 million viewers at its peak.

Though Roberts would be known as a healing evangelist throughout his career, his lasting recognition came because of the university he founded in Tulsa in 1965 (with just 303 students). When he stepped down as president of Oral Roberts University (ORU) in 1993, Roberts remained as its chancellor and a lifetime trustee.

Over the years, the student body grew exponentially while the number of undergraduate majors expanded from 24 to 63. By the spring of 2008, ORU's rolls included 37,000 alumni and approximately 23,000 graduates.

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Each of those students passed through the entrance of the school where its most famous landmark now stands—a 60-foot bronze sculpture of praying hands. It symbolizes Roberts' belief in the power of audacious faith.

Former student and longtime professor Ralph Fagin, who assumed the interim presidency after Richard Roberts resigned in November 2007, fondly recalls the statement of faith on the sign the first president kept on his desk: "Make no small plans here."

"*The Living Bible* says, 'The godly grow trees that bear life-giving fruit,'" Fagin says. "Oral grew lots of trees. His vision, his message—he would plant them in your soul. His vision is still alive in every student.

One of the school's less-publicized aspects is its ethnic diversity. Because Roberts was one-eighth Cherokee he was committed to crossing racial boundaries long before it was popular. Though he drew considerable heat for allowing interracial crowds to mingle freely at his meetings in the 1950s, he never backed down.

The fruit of that decision is reflected today in ORU's enrollment, which in the spring of 2008 included 18.2 percent African-American students and an equivalent number of Indian, Asian, Hispanic or other backgrounds.

In 2002 the university won the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities' Racial Harmony Award for building relationships and serving students of color and other minority groups.

Tulsa pastor Billy Joe Daugherty, who died a few weeks before Roberts, served as acting president of ORU before Fagin and pastored 17,000-member Victory Christian Church across the street from the ORU campus. He told *Charisma* before his death that many people overlook the significance of the school's birth during the turbulent 1960s. It was an era of upheaval that Daugherty ranked second only to the Civil War.

"In the middle of this, God raised up His standard," Daugherty said. "Instead of just going into the sunset, Oral developed something. Thousands of young pastors got the same vision to

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raise up a standard and hear God's voice.

"Now ORU's not limited to one tent—it's in the arts, education, ministry, government, medicine, everywhere you look. I go to Washington, D.C., and all over there are ORU graduates. We go around the world and they're in leadership, making an impact."

Not all of Roberts' faith goals for the school were achieved. His highly touted medical school and City of Faith lasted only a decade. A graduate nursing program is gone, as well as dental and law schools.

However, Fagin thinks that despite its closing in 1989, the medical school achieved a long-lasting impact. Many doctors today recognize the value of combining prayer with conventional treatment, an approach to medicine that was practiced at the ORU medical school.

"He was thinking so far ahead," Fagin says. "I think about his launching out in terms of TV ministry, but also the City of Faith and merging of prayer and medicine. All these things were ahead of his time."

Roberts was certainly not perfect, and he admitted that his ego drove him. "To be strong, to be a leader, to obey God with all of your ... ability, you need a considerable ego," he wrote in his autobiography. That ego could have been part of the reason he made two unusual public statements that landed him in hot water in his later years.

In 1977 the evangelist told his supporters that a 900-foot-tall Jesus had commanded him to build his City of Faith complex in Tulsa. Then in 1987 he announced that God would kill him if he did not raise \$8 million for his medical school.

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That embarrassing incident, which occurred at about the same time as Jim Bakker's and Jimmy Swaggart's sex scandals, tarnished the reputation of American evangelists. Some TV stations refused to run his appeal; others accused Roberts of "emotional blackmail"; others feared he was hinting at a planned suicide. In the end, despite the bad publicity, Roberts raised \$9.1 million with the unusual appeal.

Roberts also dealt with lots of personal pain, starting with the death of an older sister at 19. An airplane crash claimed the life of his daughter, Rebecca Nash, while his oldest son, Ronnie, committed suicide after a long battle with drug addiction.

There was also the death of his wife, Evelyn, in 2005 after their 66 years of marriage. He called her the most popular and respected person at ORU, saying when it was time for God to hand out rewards, hers would exceed his.

The most public disaster, though, involved ORU years after Roberts retired to California. After a lawsuit was filed against the school that included allegations of financial mismanagement, son Richard stepped down as president of the university in November 2007.

The next spring, the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association moved its operations off campus after Christian philanthropist Mart Green offered the debt-ridden school a \$70 million endowment. The gift hinged on whether the school would remake itself with a new board and president.

Respected Christian educator Mark Rutland stepped in to fill Richard Roberts' shoes as president, and the donation from Green is now being used to refurbish buildings and re-establish ORU's credibility. Many people believe the school's best days are ahead. One of them is Rutland.

"ORU continues to be the pre-eminent charismatic university in the United States," he says.

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“The emphasis is not just on evangelicalism in a broad sense, though it is that—and evangelicals attend. It’s a university that embraces and celebrates and lives in the Holy Spirit, present tense, in and among us in the operation of the gifts, and in responding to God’s direction in the world.”

Most observers *Charisma* interviewed say the 2007 setback will be a blip on the big screen of Roberts’ legacy.

“I think it was devastating to [Oral] when Richard was forced to leave the presidency,” Synan says. “But the fact that he was able to weather that storm and come out with the university intact is a great testimony.” Oral Roberts’ resilience sustained him through tragedies that would have destroyed lesser people, Synan adds.

Daugherty told *Charisma* that he was so captivated by ORU that he gave up a full athletic scholarship to transfer to the school his sophomore year. He said he would never forget how much the school’s founder taught him.

“Oral Roberts inspired us to believe that God is a good God,” the late pastor said. “That was probably the greatest revelation, that God wanted good things for us. He inspired us to believe that we could do whatever God put in our heart.”

There are some leaders who believe ORU was a distraction from Roberts’ evangelistic calling. Pentecostal historian Bill Menzies never considered the university a crowning achievement, instead terming it a “major blunder” because of the time and energy that fundraising required.

When Roberts got involved in starting a seminary and other expensive programs, the work mushroomed beyond his control, according to Menzies.

“Those sapped his energy and strength,” Menzies says. “I remember hearing him speak at a meeting in Korea some years ago, and he was just overloaded. He had to raise so many thousands of dollars a day to keep that empire afloat. I think he regretted some of the things he got into that weren’t sustainable.”

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Yet after you study a list of ORU alumni—a list that includes a renowned cardiologist, a congresswoman and thousands of pastors and leaders of ministries—it seems unfair to call ORU a mistake.

ORU is perhaps the most tangible legacy Oral Roberts leaves behind—built through simple faith by a simple man from Oklahoma who dared to believe that God still does miracles.

Ken Walker, a writer based in Huntington, West Virginia, wrote *Charisma's* cover story on Richard Roberts and Oral Roberts University that was published in March 1996.

ONLINE TRIBUTE

To view film clips and photos from the life of Oral Roberts, or to read comments written by those who ministered with him, go to oralroberts.charismamag.com.

A Journey of Faith

The life of Oral Roberts

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1981 - City of Faith opens

1947 - Launches healing ministry

1965 - ORU opens in Tulsa

2005 - Evelyn Roberts dies

1993 - Richard Roberts named ORU president

1918 - Born in poverty in Pontotoc County, Okla.

1955 - Begins weekly TV program

1989 - City of Faith closes

2007-2008 - ORU gets \$70 million gift, new leader

2009 - Oral dies in Palm Springs, Calif.

Tributes to an American Legend

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Evangelist **Billy Graham** appeared at ORU in 1967 to dedicate the school when it opened. Now 91, Graham talked with Oral Roberts three weeks before his death. "I was privileged to talk to Oral over the telephone. During the short conversation, he said to me that he was near the end of his life's journey. I look forward to the day that I will see Oral and Evelyn Roberts again in heaven—our eternal home. Oral Roberts was a man of God and a great friend in ministry. I loved him as a brother."

Bishop T.D. Jakes, pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, described Roberts as a forerunner in Christian ministry. "Through his vision and commitment to Christian education, his legacy will continue in the hearts and minds of young believers. His tents no longer flap in the wind; today they are pulled up by the stakes leaving only the echo of his distinct voice reverberating in the hearts of all those who admired him."

Charismatic healing evangelist **Frances Hunter** said before she died in 2009 that she was inspired to pray for the sick because of Oral Roberts. Just months before her death, she told *Charisma* : "Oral Roberts was one of the forerunners in bringing healing back to the world. Kathryn Kuhlman was another. But Oral brought people back to the reality that Jesus Christ still heals today."

Evangelist **Benny Hinn** calls Roberts a spiritual father. The two became neighbors in California, where Roberts lived out his final years. "Only heaven will reveal how many hearts he has pointed toward heaven, how many homes have been revolutionized through his seed-faith teaching, and how many ears have heard his faith-filled phrase, 'Expect a miracle!' God has used him to open doors that were once considered closed to the miracle-working power of the gospel, and wherever I travel, I have been ever thankful for the trail he blazed."

Bible teacher **Marilyn Hickey** became aware of Roberts in the early 1950s when her mother was healed at one of his tent meetings in Denver. Though still skeptical when her mother was healed again—this time while watching Roberts' TV program—Hickey was filled with the Holy Spirit three years later and helped host a return visit to the city. "We became partners of his ministry, and I began to see miracles in my ministry. I said to the Lord, 'I know You called me to be a teacher of the Word; what is happening here?' He said: 'You are a partner to Oral Roberts' ministry; he has a healing and miracle ministry, so that anointing comes on you.'"

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International evangelist **T.L. Osborn** says observing Roberts instilled in him hope for his future in ministry when he became discouraged after ministering in India. Osborn realized he too could be used by God when he heard radio-evangelism pioneer Thomas Wyatt praising Roberts after meeting him in Oklahoma. "That helped fire our furnace, to get ready to go to Jamaica," says Osborn, who was then living in Portland, Oregon. "In 13 weeks there were 125 deaf mutes healed, and it was wonderful."

Trinity Broadcasting Network founder **Paul Crouch Sr.** met Roberts in 1959 while working as a news reporter at an NBC affiliate in Rapid City, South Dakota. Roberts was there to hold an annual crusade for the Sioux tribe. Their live interview took up the entire program, for which the owner chewed out Crouch the next day. But Crouch says it was worth it: "We talked about the things of God, and Dr. Roberts ministered to the people right there on the local news." The evangelist helped the Crouches through difficult times, including Jan Crouch's bout with colon cancer in 2003. Crouch described Roberts as "a preacher, prophet, educator and visionary whose life and example taught us much about faith."

Missions leader **David Shibley**, founder of Global Advance, believes Oral Roberts was a towering figure in the 20th century. "In a few years we will begin to understand just how much we owe Oral Roberts. I am convinced that his fiercely focused faith, in the university's darkest hours, simply would not permit Oral Roberts University to die. Like the patriarchs of antiquity, he shaped history by his faith and his clear vision of an all-sufficient, conquering Christ."

ORU's Hall of Fame

Oral Roberts University grads include these notables.

- Clifton Taulbert (1971), an author whose 1989 book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and released as a movie in 1996
- Michele Bachmann (1986), U.S. Representative from Minnesota
- Jim Stovall (1981), founder of the Narrative Television Network for the visually impaired.

He started it after losing his sight at age 29.

- David Barton (1976), historian, activist and founder of the pro-American organization WallBuilders

- Tom Newman (1980), founder of Impact Productions, which produces up to half a dozen faith-based Hollywood movies a year

- Dr. Jacqueline Fisher (1981), a Georgia cardiologist who has received the American Heart Association's Physician of the Year award

- Keith Wheeler (1988), an evangelist who has carried a 12-foot wooden cross in 165

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