

# Billy Graham Crusade Marked by Historic Show of Unity in San Diego

**Graham's previous visit to the city 27 years ago was nearly derailed due to racial and denominational divisions**

In a dramatic contrast to Billy Graham's last visit to the area, the evangelist's recent Mission San Diego crusade saw record-breaking attendance at its children's and youth outreaches, as well as 16,000 decisions for Christ over four days.

Local pastors say the success of the crusade—which brought 270,000 people through Qualcomm Stadium May 8-11—reflected the unprecedented cooperation of 650 area churches representing 66 denominations. Local ministers invited Graham in late 2002, but because of the 84-year-old's failing health, they did not have the usual two years to plan.

"We had only four months from start to finish to unite the churches for the mission," said pastor Jim Garlow of Skyline Church, a charismatic congregation in San Diego. "I asked the pastors to lay down their egos and their logos at the foot of the cross and lift up only the name of Jesus, and that is what they did."

Racial and denominational division all but derailed Graham's previous outreach 27 years ago, said Bishop George McKinney of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ, who was in charge of organizing the 1976 meeting. Participation was low, and several local churches boycotted the event.

"It's pretty common knowledge that during the civil-rights movement the white evangelical church did not sense the pain and the cries and that longing for justice," McKinney told The Southern California Christian Times. The Anglo community felt "we should be content with the status quo."

Rick Marshall, director of North American ministries for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), said the show of unity in San Diego this year was historic. "In the 23 years I have been with Billy Graham, I have never seen so many churches draw together on such short notice anywhere in the world," he said. "It is historic, and it wasn't us laying the groundwork. It was God."

More than 20,000 volunteers served as counselors and distributed 60,000 backpacks filled with food and other basic supplies to homeless teens. The BGEA also gave 10,000 military families \$20 gift certificates to Wal-Mart, as many of the troops sent to the Middle East were deployed from San Diego.

Organizers said the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, coupled with a shooting at a San Diego County high school and the abduction and murder of Danielle van Dam in February 2002 contributed to the cooperation at this year's event.

"Desperation, trouble and adversity bring people together, and differences don't seem that important anymore," Marshall told Charisma. "The tragic events in San Diego over the last three years have created a sense of humility and pulling together."

Former San Diego Chargers kicker Rolf Benirschke, who was the mission chair, agreed that the community needed to be comforted. "Billy Graham's visit to San Diego is a gift from

God because the community needs healing,” he said. “This mission is not a Christian party, but a desire of the Christian community for San Diegans to know the hope and future one can have through a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

McKinney, one of this year’s organizers, said the attention given to the diverse communities in San Diego and bordering Mexico also contributed to the its success. The services, at which Graham issued his classic call for salvation, were translated into 16 languages, including Spanish, Korean and Japanese. And in what local pastors said was a rare show of cooperation, churches in Tijuana, Mexico, united with San Diego congregations in planning the event.

“Though times appear to be frightening, these are the best days in the history of the world because there has never been such a spiritual hunger as there is now,” said Fermin Garcia, pastor of Unidad Cristiana church in Tijuana.

At a press conference before the event, Graham asked local leaders not to look to Mission San Diego but through it for the broader things God is doing.

“The mission wasn’t about all of the different churches getting together,” Garlow told Charisma. “It was about the church, the one body of Christ in San Diego sharing the hope of Jesus Christ.”

**Daniel E. Kennedy in San Diego**