

Billy Graham to Host What May Be His Last Mass Evangelism Crusade

Organizers say the upcoming event in New York may mark the start of a new era in evangelism

Organizers of what may be Billy Graham's final crusade believe the June 23-26 event carries prophetic significance and could mark the beginning of a new era in evangelism.

"The crusade symbolizes the end of one evangelistic period and the beginning of a new period," said A.R. Bernard, chairman of the Greater New York Billy Graham Crusade executive committee and senior pastor of Christian Cultural Center (CCC) in Brooklyn. "We saw a greater significance than just a crusade. It's the passing of the anointing to a new generation of leaders."

He said this will begin to jell when Graham addresses key ministry leaders and pastors from around the world in a special service during the crusade. The result could launch a new global wave of evangelism, organizers say.

In addition to other evangelical denominations, the executive committee has a heavy concentration of Pentecostals, including Carlton Brown of Bethel Gospel Assembly in Harlem; Joseph Mattera of Resurrection Church in Brooklyn; and several Assemblies of God (AG) pastors.

"Pentecostal churches are having a tremendous impact on New York City," Mattera said.

The AG in New York is gearing up to train volunteers, said Mark T. Gregori, pastor of Crossway Christian Center in the Bronx and AG presbyter for the Bronx and Manhattan counties.

The 2005 event signals Graham's fourth crusade in New York. His most recent crusade, in 1991, attracted 250,000 people. Crusade director Art Bailey said the schedule is still evolving. Madison Square Garden in midtown Manhattan will be the main site, but he is trying to line up outdoor venues such as Central Park.

Bailey, a veteran of 34 crusades, leads a full-time staff of 25, evenly divided between members of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association team and local hires. Their plates are full, running 43 church-involvement seminars, 34 outreach seminars and 17 leaders meetings.

The crusade is recruiting 15,000 to 25,000 volunteers, including personal workers and counselors, ushers and a 5,000-voice choir. Discipleship responsibility will be passed on to participating churches. The Youth Outreach Committee, co-chaired by Jeremy Del Rio, pastor of Abounding Grace Ministries, and Dimas Salaberrios of Youth for Christ, is mobilizing teenagers and 20-somethings to invite friends to the special crusade service aimed at young people. The committee also proposes prayer walks around the city and "random acts of kindness."

"We recognize that evangelism doesn't stop with the proclamation of the gospel," Del Rio said. "It's as much about the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself." Other special outreaches are aimed at the arts; police, fire and rescue personnel; and the business community.

Bailey paints the crusade as a walk of faith. Plans were delayed when Graham broke his hip in January 2004, and some still question whether the 86-year-old will be healthy enough to make it. "It is by faith that it happens," Bailey said. "God will deliver us and give us victory. Like David, I'm standing in the stream picking up stones."

He said thousands of e-mails offering prayers for Graham's health and the crusade have flooded his computer. "The crusade site is the most prayed for spot in the world," Bailey said.

The crusade has corralled an unusual mix of denominations. "Billy brings them to the cross," Bailey said. "There is always more to agree on than separates us."

The Council of Churches of the City of New York (CCCNy), representing 29 denominations and church agencies, endorses the crusade. Council members include diverse theological persuasions such as Baptist, Reformed, Episcopal, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Moravian, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, and Russian, Greek and Armenian Orthodox churches.

"Our board of directors took a special vote to endorse the Billy Graham crusade," said John Hiemstra, CCCNY executive director. "We have some people who are very excited about the crusade. We applaud the commitment to Jesus Christ."

Bailey anticipates the crusade could thrust world evangelism into the spotlight for the future. "Not necessarily for Billy Graham, but for the body of Christ," he said. "It could be the spark that ignites something bigger."

The crusade will be a milestone in Graham's illustrious career as the world's most famous evangelist. But the question remains. Will this be his final bow on the evangelistic circuit? "We've been doing the last crusade for 10 years," Bailey said. "God will make that call."

Peter K. Johnson .in New York City