

Heart Attack Kills Christian Television Pioneer Carlos Ortiz in Texas

He brought Spanish-language broadcasts to millions

The man who broke much of the ground in Christian cable television and created one of the world's largest Spanish-language broadcasting networks has died at 56. Carlos Ortiz Sr., founder and president of La Familia Television Network and pastor of Faith That Pleases God Church in Harlingen, Texas, died after suffering a heart attack on Aug. 5.

Paul Crouch, Rodney Howard-Browne, Dodie Osteen, Rod Parsley and other charismatic leaders sent their condolences, lauding the former gang member who became a televangelist. Ortiz was the first televangelist to break through Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licensing barriers to obtain large numbers of low-power educational TV stations. His model was copied by Pat Robertson at the Christian Broadcasting Network and by Crouch at Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Born in Puerto Rico, Ortiz moved to New York as a child and accepted Christ at an Assemblies of God Church in Kingsport, Tenn. He later moved to Texas' Rio Grande Valley with his wife, Aracelis, to begin an evangelistic ministry.

Instead of purchasing airtime or a standard commercial station, as other preachers had, Ortiz envisioned a more affordable option—noncommercial, educational cable outlets. A few ministries had flirted with this possibility, but none had been successful.

He discovered that the FCC would classify Bible teaching as education because the Bible is considered a classic book. With this approach, he was able to launch his first Bible teaching TV venture in 1978 on a low-power cable station in the Rio Grande Valley, and quickly expanded with shows in Puerto Rico and Mexico.

By 1981, Ortiz had applied for 6,000 permits for low-powered stations across the nation. The FCC had never seen anything like it. In addition to Bible teaching, his cable stations included telecasts on nonreligious subjects such as GED studies, health and finances. Ortiz did not win all the permits he sought, but other broadcasters such as Robertson and Crouch followed his lead.

“Everyone in the industry said this could not be done,” said his son, Clark Ortiz, 34. “But today this is the way the gospel is being preached. He was a pioneer in cable broadcasting.”

Ortiz Sr. taught the Bible in English and Spanish, and watched his outreach expand to 29 stations in the United States, from Worcester, Mass., to San Antonio. Overseas, he broadcast throughout Latin America and in 140 nations. In recent months he spanned the entire world via satellite transmissions. La Familia, now carried on Sky Angel channel 9720, features Ortiz’s teaching, a women’s talk show, a Royal Ranger’s program, concerts and youth broadcasts, all in Spanish.

A week before he died, Ortiz told his son that he had completed his goal and was “ready to go home,” Clark Ortiz said.

Approximately 1,000 families attend services in English and Spanish at Ortiz's church in Harlingen. The interdenominational congregation is Pentecostal in doctrine, but Ortiz was often invited to speak in non-charismatic and Roman Catholic churches.

"One of the things my husband always emphasized was that we are here to encourage people and to teach them about the Lord Jesus, no matter what denomination they are," said Aracelis Ortiz, who at 59 has become the church's senior pastor.

—Steve Lawson