

He's Still on a Crusade

Evangelist Benny Hinn still has his share of critics, but he's as determined as ever to take his message where the gospel has never been preached.

PLUS: Amy Grant, Mom and Pop Winans

The year 2000 is only seconds old, and Benny Hinn is on stage at the Long Beach Convention Center in Southern California. The crowd of some 10,000 people has sung hymns and partaken of holy communion from tiny containers. Hinn walks to the platform's center and welcomes the 21st century by making numerous declarations about the future.

"A peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians will be signed before the end of the year," Hinn announces, "and it will usher in a new era of openness to Christianity in the Middle East." The crowd roars with approval. Then Hinn predicts that a group of Israeli rabbis will see a vision of Jesus so magnificent that they will preach the gospel in their synagogues—triggering harsh laws restricting proselytism in the Jewish state.

"Within two years there will be a new pope," Hinn declares. He then describes the new pontiff as an Italian who wears glasses and has long hair. "And within two years," he adds, "a young Egyptian male converted from Islam will preach the gospel so well that hundreds of thousands of Muslims will accept Christ."

The crowd cheers again when Hinn predicts that the evangelistic breakthroughs made by this unknown Egyptian

preacher will be reported in Charisma.

Like Hinn's prophecies, his

ministry has grown much bolder since he first appeared on the cover of Charisma in 1979. At that time he was a relatively unknown evangelist based at Calvary Assembly of God in the Orlando, Florida, suburb of Winter Park. He answered the call to worldwide evangelism in 1990 and gained a national platform as he filled huge venues with audiences hungry for a touch from God.

Today his ministry is one of the nation's largest. His visibility on television and his frequent appearances on Larry King Live have endeared him to his supporters while making him the butt of jokes among skeptics.

His This Is Your Day TV show airs on more than 90 stations in 190 countries. His offices in Southern California, Dallas, England and Australia receive several thousand calls each day and between 20,000 and 30,000 pieces of mail each week. With some 250 employees and yearly revenues of between \$60 million and \$70 million, Benny Hinn Ministries held 41 domestic crusades, partners conferences and international crusades in 1999 alone.

This year, Miracle Crusade events in the Philippines and Kenya attracted four crowds estimated at more than 1 million people each. Some worshipers sat in trees and strained to hear the message through speakers connected by thousands of feet of wire. Scores of empty wheelchairs lined the stages. In Kenya alone, some 250,000 walked or ran down the aisles to publicly profess faith in Christ.

A Most Unlikely Preacher

Hinn was born in 1952 in Israel's port city of Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv. As a boy, he played on docks located at the spot where Jonah boarded the ship for Tarshish. His mother was Armenian and his father's family migrated from Greece to what was then Jordan by way of Egypt. His family spoke Arabic and attended a Greek Orthodox Church when he was a youth, but he attended a Catholic school and became an altar boy.

At age 14 he helped his father dig a ditch for refuge during the 1967 Six Day War. Months later the family moved to a Toronto suburb where Hinn got his first job selling ice cream from a kiosk owned by a Christian. As a long-haired high school senior, he attended a charismatic service in Toronto. There, in an Anglican church, he asked Jesus to be Lord of his life.

His family thought his born

-again experience bordered on blasphemy. Though he had stuttered horribly since his youth, he wanted to preach. At 22 he stood behind his first pulpit in a tiny Assemblies of God church in nearby Oshawa, Ontario.

He claims that his stuttering stopped the second he started to preach that day. When his family later heard him speak without stammering, they marveled at the change and later accepted Christ. The first time he publicly prayed for people's healing, the Holy Spirit brought them to the floor. Within two years, crowds numbering 1,000 or more came to hear and be healed.

In 1979, Hinn moved his ministry to central Florida and married Suzanne Harthern, whose father, Roy Harthern, was pastoring Calvary Assembly. Five years later Hinn opened the 2,300-seat Orlando Christian Center, which grew to 8,000 members in its heyday.

In 1990, he said God directed him to start healing crusades, something he says he felt unworthy to even pray for at first. Later, convinced of the call, he bought a daily half-hour time slot on credit from the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

His TV show became international. Hinn's crusades soon filled stadiums in the Philippines, Argentina, South Africa and Colombia,. In the last few years, international crowds have grown to a half million at most services.

Today, he uses up to 900 churches, 10,000 ushers and choirs of up to 5,000 to hold a single meeting. A newspaper in Kenya reported one single crowd at 1.2 million. Ministry officials believe this year his crusades will lead more than 1 million souls to Jesus.

Each crusade typically includes three services: a Thursday night, Friday morning teaching and Friday night. From 2 p.m. on Thursdays until the end of the Friday night service, he secludes himself to rest and pray.

"Virtually nobody talks to him," says Neil Eskelin, Hinn's writing

consultant for 15 years. "Everybody in his organization knows to not even make a phone call to him. That's when he [is] spending time with the Lord."

Suzanne and daughters Jessica, 18; Natasha, 16; Eleasha, 8; and son, Joshua, 9, sometimes travel with him, and Hinn calls them via cell phone from across the globe. Pastor Mike Thomforde, his missions director, travels with Hinn on a leased jet. He estimates that Hinn is on the road an average of 20 days each month, returning to his secluded home in Newport Beach, California, about two weekends a month.

“He thrives on it,” Thomforde says of Hinn’s travel. “The more he has to do, the more he seems to like it.”

In 1998 Hinn opened his New World Media Center television studio in Orange County, California, and announced that the ministry’s office was moving to Dallas. Still in temporary offices in Dallas, the ministry will break ground this fall for the International Partner Headquarters.

Phase two, planned for a date yet unannounced, will include the World Healing Center. Built with old-world stone architecture, it will include a cathedral, gardens, streams, fountains and statues of famous healing evangelists. Among those images will be one of Kathryn Kuhlman, whose noted healing services Hinn attended as a youth.

The ministry is increasing its efforts to aid the world’s orphans by buying two large houses in Manila and caring for abandoned children. Hinn already has established orphanages in Mexico and plans to visit Haiti, Romania and Cambodia to aid needy children.

A Target for Criticism

Despite his ministry's success, Hinn's visibility and his flamboyant style have made him an easy target for those who don't like TV preachers or who don't care for his charismatic views. For years Hank Hanegraaff of the California-based Christian Research Institute has blasted Hinn for his stage antics, unusual prophecies or his theological misstatements.

Although CNN's Larry King seems to favor Hinn, others in the media have written less than flattering articles about his penchant for jewelry and expensive clothes. The Orlando Sentinel conducted a probe on Hinn's ministry after an employee died of a drug overdose two years ago, and today the ministry is dogged by rumors that a major TV network is preparing to air an exposé of the ministry.

Yet many ministry leaders defend him, including Oral Roberts, E.V. Hill, Tommy Barnett and even Jerry Falwell. All of these men turned out to honor Hinn during his ministry's recent 25th anniversary celebration in Anaheim, California. Master of ceremonies Jack Hayford said it is not Hinn's "charisma" that caused a visitation of the glory of God upon him.

"I believe it is the character behind the charisma that occasions God's free flow of grace to this man," Hayford told the audience. "And I want to honor that."

But Hinn doesn't seem to pay attention to those who praise him or criticize him. As his ministry continues to expand, he seems determined to focus more of his efforts on taking the gospel to his Middle Eastern homeland.

In 1997, he met privately with Jordan's late King Hussein and preached in Amman's Palace of Culture—where he gave the altar

call in his native Arabic. His TV program is airing in that region on TBN's new "Hot Bird" satellite. Though it is not likely to be formally announced, Hinn's event director, John Wilson, said the ministry plans an October crusade in Dubai, capital of the United Arab Emirates.

Hinn's ethnic background has opened unusual doors for him in places where Christians are normally not welcome. King Hussein's son, King Abudullah, sent Hinn a plaque and a letter for his anniversary service that read in part: "You have brought faith, love and peace to the hearts and minds of so many around the world. You have also helped focus the attention of Christians around the world on Jordan, the land of [Christ's] baptism."

Hinn expects major breakthroughs in world evangelism in the coming years. "We are closing this chapter and are now on to something fresh and powerful," Hinn told the audience at his anniversary celebration. "Not only do we believe we're about to see Him perform what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what we've only dreamed about. He is about to perform the incredible, the impossible, the unbelievable, the unthinkable."

Ed Donnally contributes frequently to Charisma from his home in Los Angeles.