

# Retreat Center Ministry Celebrates Half-Century of Holy Spirit Teaching

**Gospel Crusade and its Christian Retreat centers, founded by Gerald Derstine, have touched millions of lives worldwide**

When evangelist Gerald Derstine was traveling the United States preaching the gospel 50 years ago in tent revivals, he never dreamed that one day his ministry would have more than 1,000 affiliated churches in 40 countries worldwide.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary in April, Derstine's Gospel Crusade Inc. has embraced the growth, along with numerous changes, since it was founded by the former Mennonite pastor who experienced a supernatural revival in his church in 1953 that turned his life and ministry upside down.

In the half-century, Gospel Crusade has grown from a financial partnership between Derstine and Florida Mennonite Henry Brunk to a second-generation ministry—Derstine's son, Phil, is now president—that continues to witness the life-altering power of the Holy Spirit around the world today.

The ministry has spawned the internationally known Christian Retreat centers in Bradenton, Fla.; Ogema, Minn.; and upstate New York. The centers offer camp sessions to teach families, plant churches to support missions work worldwide, and aid church leaders through 10-week ordination sessions and weeklong training workshops.

"I felt a special drawing to teach across denominations about the Holy Spirit," Gerald Derstine told Charisma.

It wasn't always easy. In 1955, after witnessing supernatural events such as exuberance in the Spirit, being slain in the Spirit, speaking in tongues and other charismatic manifestations during a revival in his Strawberry Lake Mennonite Church in Ogema, Derstine was removed from the Mennonite church.

"They thought we'd gone crazy, or that it had to be a work of the devil," he said. "But there were too many confirmations that it was from God."

Derstine began to evangelize with passion the charismatic message and opened the doors of Strawberry Lake Christian Retreat 39 years ago. Christian Retreat Bradenton—Gospel Crusade's worldwide headquarters—followed in 1968, and the New York campus opened 12 years ago.

"When we opened here in Bradenton, we held sessions every week of the year, even Christmas week, for the next 18 years," Derstine said.

Today, the ministry has a local church, Christian Retreat Family Church pastored by Phil Derstine; a TV program named Reality TV; a series of "extreme" evangelistic ministries such as its racetrack ministry—with a car that races for Jesus; the 10-week Institute of Ministry; missions work around the world; and a mobile semitrailer ministry to truck drivers.

"In our ministry training school, we have trained more than 4,500 church leaders since 1975," Derstine said, "equipping them to go back to their churches and leave a definite impact on their denominations. Almost every denomination has accepted

a branch within their denomination now that includes the Holy Spirit and the Spirit-filled.”

The Derstines say they feel blessed that many nationally and internationally known ministers have been guest speakers or have gone through training at Christian Retreats. “Benny Hinn was ordained here at our place,” Gerald Derstine said.

This year the retreat center has hosted such guests as Los Angeles Dream Center pastor Matthew Barnett and evangelist Mike Murdock. A special 50th anniversary meeting will be held April 2-6, with guests including pastors Billy Joe and Sharon Daugherty of Victory Christian Center in Tulsa, Okla.; Vinson Synan, dean of the Regent University Divinity School; Bible teacher Marilyn Hickey; and Jim and Lori Bakker.

Today Gospel Crusade and the retreat centers are looking toward the future, discipling those who flock to them and teaching them to reach out to the world around them. “I think one thing that has characterized us is that we call ourselves interdenominational, not nondenominational,” Phil Derstine said.

“We love to see various denominations—including Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, every denomination—come to learn about the Holy Spirit.”

“We are evangelizing still, as we were from the very beginning,” Gerald Derstine added. “It’s been a great blessing.”

**Natalie Nichols Gillespie**