

Current Leader of 50-Year-Old Ministry Speaks: 'We Hope to Spark a Revival'

Recently, World Challenge celebrated 50 years of ministry. As president of the ministry my father started, I reflect on the start of World Challenge, how we have expanded our outreach and how we are aiming to do even more in the future.

To understand World Challenge and where we are headed, you have to go back to the beginning. My father, David Wilkerson, grew up in a Christian home with a long legacy of Christian preachers. Not surprisingly, God also called my father, David, to be an evangelist at a young age.

When he was just 26 years old, he started pastoring a small Pentecostal church in rural Pennsylvania. One night, during an evening prayer time, he was continuously drawn to an article in Life magazine about seven gang members in New York City who brutally attacked and killed a 15-year-old polio victim, Michael Farmer. They stabbed him in the back seven times and beat him with garrison belts, leaving him for dead. While most people would read this story and respond with horror and disgust, my father felt compassion and pity for the young gang members.

On the evening of February 28, 1958—while their highly publicized murder trial was underway in a New York City courthouse—my dad made the eight-hour drive from his quiet mountain home to downtown Manhattan with the goal of speaking to the accused gang members about God's love and their salvation. At the end of the proceedings, he rushed to the front of the courtroom and pleaded with the judge for a minute to meet with the teenagers.

News media caught this seemingly silly act on camera and my

dad was almost arrested and ordered never to return to the courtroom. But God had a plan. His courthouse behavior surprisingly opened the door for him to speak with the teens who now saw him as a “criminal” too. And, before long, he was reaching out to gang members and drug addicts on the street, sharing the message of Jesus.

A few years later the drug epidemic hit New York City and heroin use caused gangs to slowly dissipate. My dad, believing his call was not only towards gang members but instead to culture’s biggest crisis, launched Teen Challenge, a ministry for drug addicts. Then, during the Jesus Movement in the 70s, he began preaching to hippies and flower children in California. His efforts to share the Gospel with gang members, drug addicts and hippies eventually lead to the launch of a ministry that encompassed all of this work and thus World Challenge was born.

When World Challenge began, our family moved from New York City to Texas. We went from city living to a sprawling 300-acre farm. I got a job working on a ranch but later joined World Challenge as a part-time custodian. After paying my dues, I eventually moved up to work in the warehouse, sorting and shipping my father’s books.

At this point in time, my dad had become fairly well-known in Christian circles from his book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, about his work with gang members in New York City. And, he was regularly preaching to tens of thousands of young adults—sharing the message of Jesus. He saw a lot of young adults—homeless and hooked on drugs—come to faith in Jesus.

Many years later I traveled with my father through Europe doing pastor conferences. In almost every city we visited a denominational leader would come up to him and say something like, “I heard you preach in ’74 and was hooked on drugs and your message helped me turn my life around. I went to Bible

school and am now here overseeing several hundred churches in Europe.” It was incredible to see the profound impact his simple obedience to Christ had on so many people.

Later I helped my father plant Times Square Church in New York City. While my father never asked for money—he trusted the Lord to provide for the ministry needs—people started giving. And, out of those funds, we started our international mission work at World Challenge, caring for those in need around the world. With the belief that God’s power can overcome any obstacle, we started feeding programs and opened orphanages around the world.

For the last 50 years, the ministry has had dualistic purposes: 1.) To share the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and 2.) To do the work of Jesus—care for the poor and those in need. Basically, to love others like Jesus did. Today, our efforts continue with a newfound passion for reaching the next generation with the Gospel, a fresh vision for international missions and a heart for revival within the American church.

According to Pew Research Center in 2019, “The decline of Christianity in the U.S. continues at a rapid pace. In telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade.”

As we look forward to the future of our ministry, we at World Challenge hope to spark a revival in the American church through our messages, podcasts and preaching series. We want people to be built up in their faith and to feel a renewed fire to do what God has called them to do. We continue to hold conferences and virtual events in 72 nations, encouraging pastors to stay strong and faithful in their commitment to sharing the Gospel. And, we hope our messages will encourage believers to not let culture squeeze them into its mold. We

believe that when the church is what God intended it to be, it has the power to speak to culture in a way that causes change.

Internationally, World Challenge has been shifting its focus from meeting immediate needs to establishing long-term poverty solutions in communities around the world. Instead of only providing feeding programs and launching orphanages, we are now helping to solve problems of food scarcity through programs that teach about gardening, farming and micro business. Now we are training communities in bringing new children into their family through adoption. Our focus on teaching skills has allowed communities to support one another and ultimately thrive. We are building faith so that communities can solve problems and, out of that work, increase their faith.

Today 83 percent of church youth don't have a Christian worldview. That means that today's youth are primarily finding answers to life's questions outside of the church. The Wilkerson ministry continues through the generations with my son, Evan Wilkerson joining World Challenge with our efforts in reaching a younger generation with the message of Jesus.

He currently leads youth outreach through the apologetics ministry of World Challenge, offering answers to tough questions and objections to faith in Jesus. His messages address questions like: What is worldview? Is it normal to have doubts? Was Jesus a real person and how can we be sure? Over the next ten years, we plan to expand our efforts to provide sound biblical teaching to life's tough questions for the next generation.

As we reflect on the past and look forward to the future, we remember that World Challenge was birthed a time when so many people were lost and desperate for Jesus Christ. And today, not much has changed. Our world is in need of Jesus more than ever before. We pray that the Lord will use World Challenge to transform lives and bring glory to God for all generations.

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Gary Wilkerson is the president of World Challenge, a global ministry that aims to transform lives through the message and mission of Jesus Christ. He travels nationally and internationally to speak at conferences and establish long-term poverty solution programs among the poorest of the poor. His daily devotional and weekly podcast provide encouragement to Christians and tackles culturally relevant issues of faith. Wilkerson is also the founding pastor of The Springs Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., which he launched in 2009.

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