

Stephen Strang's Tribute to Karl D. Strader: 1929-2020

Karl Strader, longtime pastor of Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida, was laid to rest Wednesday in Lakeland, where he had lived and ministered since 1966. He died peacefully March 30 surrounded by his family. He was 91. Due to COVID-19, a memorial service will be held later.

In my long journalism career, I've written many obituaries, but this is more than that. It's my tribute to a great leader and man of God who had an enormous impact on my life. A few hours after I learned he died, I recorded an emotional and very personal podcast about how he, as a Pentecostal, introduced our congregation to what the Holy Spirit was doing in mainline churches—what we now call the charismatic movement.

Raised a Methodist in the panhandle of Oklahoma, he attended Bob Jones University and received a master's degree. But a few years later, the university asked him to not tell people he attended there because he had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. As I say in my podcast, I heard him say that Bob Jones also asked Billy Graham to leave a few years earlier! I am familiar with that part of his life, as I co-authored his life story called *Mountain-Moving Motivation* in 1978. I also "self-published" it—the first book I ever published.

Pastor Strader was a man of great faith and great integrity. He never had moral shortcomings and he was respected around the world. He has touched many lives through the gospel and has left a beautiful legacy of soul-winning, discipleship and Scripture memorization. Many churches in the Lakeland and surrounding areas are filled with pastors and congregants who were once a part of his ministry.

I was 15 years old in 1966 when he became the pastor of First Assembly of God in Lakeland, Florida, where my family attended. He had a huge impact on me as a teenager. I grew up with his four children—Stephen, Daniel, Karla and Dawn. His late wife, Joyce, took a special interest in me as a teen and kept in touch with thoughtful notes over the years. She introduced me to her nephew, who became a mentor—Doug Wead, who served in the White House of George H.W. Bush and who has become a respected author and historian. His latest book, *Inside the Trump White House*, is the “authorized history” of the president’s first term. (Wead also gave me a lot of “behind the scenes” information on Washington politics for my most recent book, *God, Trump and the 2020 Election*.)

First Assembly was considered a successful church when Karl Strader became pastor, but it exploded under his leadership. This is partly because he welcomed charismatics, who often were asked to leave their churches after receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which not only changed their lives, but their theology. His was one of the first megachurches, and by the time I started *Charisma*, Karl Strader was considered a national leader. He was on the cover of *Charisma* twice, once in 1976 and a second time in 1985.

Within nine years of Strader pastoring First Assembly, the church built a 1,600-seat auditorium in 1975 next to the old church. A few years later they purchased a 488-acre parcel in North Lakeland owned by the Carpenter’s Union. The church sold off all but 125 acres and in 1985 built an octagon-shaped \$7.8 million sanctuary that seated 6,000 on the main level. It also had a balcony that was never finished, but if it had been, it would have been able to seat another 4,000. In 1985, it was considered the largest church building in America, according to our article in *Charisma*. They later built a \$50 million retirement community now called the Estates at Carpenters, which includes a nursing home, assisted living as well as independent living. The church remodeled the old Carpenter’s

Union nursing home into a school for 800 students. They also changed the name of the congregation to Carpenter's Home Church.

Yet as respected as he was, many considered Strader controversial. Other ministers seemed to feel threatened by his success. His relationship with his Assemblies of God denomination was often strained because some of the things he taught were more consistent with the charismatics than with traditional Pentecostalism, which in that era was rather legalistic in my opinion. One such teaching was about "deliverance." As *Charisma* reported in 1985, Strader navigated that controversy by changing terminology, such as by saying a Christian can be "oppressed," but not "possessed." It was interesting to reread that article 35 years later.

A quote from the 1985 article that editors pulled to run large-type summed up his ministry: "Although it sometimes has immersed him and his church in unwanted controversy, Karl Strader never has been afraid to step out in faith and befriend the unwanted, welcome the castout, dream the impossible or stand up for what is right. In the process, he's built an enormous church on the grounds of an old carpenters' home retirement center in a small city almost in the shadow of Walt Disney World."

Strader was, in my opinion, one of the great preachers of his generation, peppering his sermons with long Scripture passages he had memorized. He knew practically everyone in the Pentecostal/charismatic world and often invited some of his friends to preach at his huge church. This included high-profile preachers like Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart. In the late 1980s, all three were in the national news due to controversy or scandal. While Strader had utmost integrity, his church was hurt by the association. Then internal church disagreements flared into disunity and the church took "a vote of confidence" on Strader. While Strader won the vote, half the church left and formed Victory Assembly

of God, which is thriving today. (I had relatives who attended the church and were on both sides of that controversy.)

That began a decline in the church that was exacerbated when Strader's son Danny was caught up in some business dealings that exploded on the front page of the local newspaper. His business associates turned on him, and he went to prison in what I consider one of the worst miscarriages of justice I'd ever seen. (I've never reported this, but I personally petitioned then-Gov. Jeb Bush to pardon him, but to no avail.)

In 2007, the church building was sold to Without Walls Church in Tampa, pastored by Randy and Paula White. They planted a branch of their church that, while successful, couldn't sustain the huge facility. After sitting empty a few years and deteriorating, the huge sanctuary was demolished to make way for other development on the prime property.

"I hate to see the building torn down, but the building is not the church," Pastor Strader told Charisma in 2015 when the worship center was demolished. "The people are the church, and they are in about 12 different churches in Lakeland now. It's painful to see the building torn down, of course, but I'm not groveling on the ground because of it or putting ashes on my head. I just thank God for being involved in it for (nearly) 40 years."

Strader leaves behind a long list of accomplishments. The church pioneered a popular radio station WCIE (Where Christ Is Everything), which was later sold to Moody Radio, as well as the Joy FM and another station in Greenville, which are still playing contemporary Christian music and according to Stephen Strader are still very successful.

Evangel Christian School at one time had 800 students. Many churches in Lakeland, including Stephen Strader's Ignite Church, were founded by pastors who got their start at Carpenter's Home Church (CHC).

He served on many boards, such as Church Growth International, and was a regent at Oral Roberts University, which gave him an honorary degree. He was also one of the founding board members of International Charismatic Bible Ministries (on which I also served.)

In 2015, we invited his son Stephen to write in *Ministries Today* magazine (now called *Charisma Leader*) about the influence his dad had beyond the radio station or facilities he built. He commented on all the ministries that were launched at the church—the best known being Rodney Howard-Browne, whose extended meetings drew thousands to Lakeland and sparked revival in other places.

“CHC video productions had a large impact around the world,” Stephen Strader wrote. “Larnelle Harris did his first full video concert at CHC. Many artists followed that concept. This was long before video concerts were a frequent part of Christian television or product sales. The list of video products that came out of CHC is huge. Integrity Music did *Sing Out* with Ron Kenoly, and it went around the world. Thurlow Spurr did amazing productions with a 600-voice choir patriotic theme. Greg Buchanon, the world-class harpist; Dino Kartsonakis with his multiple grand pianos; Ballet Magnificat; and Brenda Dykgraaf, the famous aerobics exercise champion—the list keeps growing in my thoughts.”

He continued: “CHC productions produced the videos for Rodney Howard-Browne when he came in 1993 for the revival. Australia Hillsong Church was dramatically affected by the VHS video tapes we sent. Then Rodney went to Australia, and revival blanketed that country as well as New Zealand. The videos swept across Alaska, the Dakotas, and across the USA, and multiple evangelists were impacted, and the whole revival culture of the 1990s was birthed. Few know that Randy Clark from Toronto Blessing came to CHC for a week, days before he went to Toronto and started that revival that swept around the world.

"Few know that John Kilpatrick and his wife would get up at 5 a.m. on Sunday mornings to watch TBN services from CHC and cry out for revival in Brownsville. I'm told that the revival actually began when John's wife's prayer group got hit with the laughter, and then John got hit by the power in a restaurant, weeks before Steve Hill came to Brownsville. Few know that Joyce Meyer, Marilyn Hickey, Happy Hunters, Richard Roberts and Kenneth Hagin Sr. were all dramatically impacted by the revival with Rodney that flowed out of Lakeland's CHC.

"I'm not trying to 'toot my dad's horn,'" Stephen Strader wrote. "I'm just trying to help people understand what an impact CHC and my dad's ministry had on the body of Christ. Dad rarely gets any credit for any of this. And it wasn't just Dad; it was a large team of men and women he surrounded himself with who today are still making a large impact in their individual ministries or projects."

You can read Stephen Strader's entire article [here](#).

As I reflect on Karl Strader's influence on me, I realize that he is responsible (in a roundabout way) for *Charisma*. He was good friends with Roy Harthern, who pastored Calvary Assembly, which gave me credibility when I wanted to start *Charisma* at the church. Plus, when I was struggling spiritually in my late teens, I have no doubt that Strader's influence on me became part of the reason I'm serving the Lord today.

Karl Strader was preceded in death by his wife, Joyce. They were married for more than 60 years. He is survived by his children Stephen, Daniel, Karla and Dawn; 10 grandchildren; five great-grandchildren; and many nieces and nephews—whom he loved and prayed for regularly.

It was Pastor Strader's desire to help ministers in need, especially during this current crisis. A memorial fund has been set up for this purpose in his honor and memory. In lieu of flowers, please make a donation to the "Karl Strader

Memorial Fund.” Checks can be made payable to: Pen Florida District Council AG, PO Box 24687, Lakeland, FL 33802—or give online by clicking this link. Choose “Other” and type in “Karl Strader Memorial Fund.”