

# Jimmy Swaggart's Ministry: 'Just a country boy at heart'

He couldn't have possibly known it in 1958, but Jimmy Swaggart made the right choice. Today, some 19 years later, the statistics of his globe-spanning ministry loudly proclaim that decision. There is no question today he is one of America's best known preachers.

He has been called "the most powerful radio preacher in the world." With a daily radio program, "The Camp Meeting Hour," currently being aired on 550 stations in the United States and Canada and 25 stations abroad, there is ample evidence for that claim. Altogether the 15-minute program is broadcast over 15,000 times a month.

His weekly television program is viewed on 200 stations in the U.S., Canada, the Philippines and the Bahamas. His 30 record albums have sold in excess of five million copies making him the best-selling gospel artist in record history. Each year, he travels more than 100,000 miles conducting large-scale evangelistic crusades in practically every metropolitan city in America.

The hub of the Jimmy Swaggart Evangelistic Association, a tax-exempt church organization under a seven-member board of directors, is a complex of one-story, white-columned office buildings on Goya Street in Louisiana's sprawling capital city of Baton Rouge. The buildings have been expanded in the last six years to the size of two football fields.

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One hundred persons work in the building complex where a daily devotion begins sharply at 11:15 a.m. Outside Swaggart's own

office, the kind accruing to a typical corporate executive, young women and a forest of desks receive the donations and mail requests for the Swaggart records and tapes. An average day brings about 5,000 pieces of mail.

A select few of the women correspond with hundreds of people who write seeking counsel from Jimmy Swaggart. "I'm still convinced," he says, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer for every single problem in the world. The teachings of the Bible have not been adhered to in most churches and people are hungry for the Gospel."

In a taping room sits what Swaggart describes as the largest Telex duplication system in the world, capable of reproducing 51 cassettes in four minutes from his master tape. A series of printing presses in the next room turn out 1 million pieces of Gospel literature a month.

"The post office tells us we send out more mail each day than anyone in the state including the state capitol and Exxon," he says.

Swaggart Broadcasting Inc. is also headquartered in the complex along with radio station WLUX, Baton Rouge's all-gospel radio station. Swaggart acquired it in 1973 after lengthy litigation. The station's previous owners had lost their license to operate and Swaggart stepped in, offering to pay off \$80,000 in debts. The Federal Communications Commission at first agreed and Swaggart took over. But perturbed FCC officials reversed their opinion and decided to rid Baton Rouge of the station. The U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington finally granted Swaggart the license.

"After we saw the impact of WLUX, we felt it would be advantageous to the work of the Lord to have more outlets for the Gospel," he says about the subsequent purchase of stations in Bowling Green, Ohio; Pensacola, Florida; Dallas, and Oklahoma City. The latter two stations are 24-hour FM's. His

goal is to own 14 stations, the maximum allowed by the FCC, "if the Lord would enable us to do so."

Across the street from the main complex is the ministry's television duplication center. Four machines costing \$90,000 each duplicate the batch of master tapes Swaggart periodically cuts in Nashville in the same studios where the syndicated show Hee Haw is produced. The 30-minute television programs include plenty of Jimmy Swaggart's distinctive Gospel songs and a brief sermon. He uses no script with the program, but simply "depends upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit to help us."

Comparisons are almost inevitable and Jimmy Swaggart agrees his organization is set up "very, very similar to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association." The two evangelists have never met but "we know of each other."

Born March 15, 1935, in Ferriday, Louisiana, Jimmy Swaggart was "filled with the Spirit and called to preach at the age of eight." He began playing the piano about the same time. His parents were pastoring an Assemblies of God church in Wisner, north of Ferriday, when at the age of 17 he met and married an attractive brunette, Frances Anderson.

Two years later, he became a father. He also found himself working as a swamper on a drag line and preaching weekend street services, a popular evangelistic tool of the mid-1950's.

The likelihood of any success for him in the Gospel ministry was highly doubtful. A high school dropout, he had no formal ministerial training. Local Assemblies of God preachers were anti-Swaggart because of his rhythmic piano playing and singing, similar in style to his cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis.

But the work on the drag line became Swaggart's Bible school. He learned by continually reading the Bible and other religious books, and by preaching to the stumps. He also had

the mountain-moving prayer support of his mother and grandmother, two persons whose Christian experience was rooted in a miracle-working God. Together with the constant encouragement of his wife, Swaggart began that tiring journey as a traveling evangelist.

For some five to six years after he rejected the recording contract with Sun Records in 1958, he preached in small Assemblies of God churches throughout the Southeast.

“Regardless of the hardships,” he says, remembering those days staying in church basements, pastors’ homes and small hotels, “we always obeyed God.”

During the early 1960’s, he began recording gospel albums. The records—filled with the Swaggart “toe-tapping, hand-clapping” piano playing and singing—were an immediate favorite with churchgoers (although some pastors found the music too lively). In the beginning, Swaggart sold the records from the trunk of his car.

Swaggart music, combined with the excellent results from his revival meetings, drew larger crowds to his services. That produced invitations to bigger churches. By 1968, he was already preaching some of the longest and largest revivals in the Assemblies of God. On average, his meetings were lasting six to eight weeks.

“Churches were being revolutionized,” he recalls.

“Then the Lord began dealing with me about going on radio,” he says, “though I didn’t want to. I was deeply troubled by a few supposedly Pentecostal radio evangelists who specialized in selling ‘miracle’ billfolders, prayer cloths and anointing oil. I detested such trickery and refused to be identified

with such an element.

"He finally convinced me I needed to be on the radio to show the world every Pentecostal wasn't a fake," Swaggart says.

On January 1, 1969, he went on the air in Atlanta, Houston and St. Paul with "The Camp Meeting Hour." The program's response was so pitiful that after six months Swaggart actually wrote letters of cancellation. No sooner had he written the letters, however, than a deluge of 900 letters and \$3,000 in donations arrived at his doorsteps to keep the program going.

"Everything seemed to explode after that," he says. "The crowds became so large in the churches that we had to move into large auditoriums. We had to put up the office buildings in the early 1970's, and then the television program came along in 1973."

Because of the exhausting three-day weekend crusades which take him a minimum of 10,000 miles a month, Swaggart had to purchase a DC-3. Because of a stepped-up crusade schedule (about 35 a year), he's in the market for a jet-prop. His only child, Donnie, 22, handles the crusades, sometimes planned two years in advance.

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Along with the notoriety came a flood of contributions now amounting to \$600,000 to \$700,000 a month. "When that happened," he recalls, "the Lord asked me, 'Can I trust you with this much money?' I couldn't understand millions of dollars coming into my hands. I promised Him, I wouldn't touch the money.

"Frances and I could have been millionaires many times over," he says. "But we have no stocks, no bonds, no investments. Everything, even all of the record money, goes directly into the ministry."

At 41, Jimmy Swaggart is a personable, articulate man with a sturdy build, smooth brown hair and immense energy. In many ways, he's just a country boy at heart. But that, too, is part of his public attraction.

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In spite of all the trappings of a world-wide ministry, Jimmy Swaggart's greatest joy is still "the saving of a lost soul." He believes the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not up on a pedestal, "It's down where people live.

"When you found the Lord in the Bible, you very seldom found Him in a synagogue unless he was throwing out tables," he says. "You found Him by the sea or on the road. You found Him in peoples' houses, in the marketplace or healing the sick."

That's where Jesus was in his day... and that's where His disciple, Jimmy Swaggart, follows today—on radio, television, records and crusades.

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*Author and preacher Robert Paul Lamb, a native of Macon, Georgia, has been writing since age 15. He authored several books, most notably with Christian personalities Jim Bakker of the PTL Club and Jimmy Swaggart.*