

How T.L. Osborn Dared to Touch the World

Editor's Note: *This article originally appeared in the January 2007 issue of Charisma. We decided to republish it in honor of T.L. Osborn, who passed away on Thursday at the age of 89.*

In an age dominated by mass media, lightning-quick computer technology and society's unquenchable need for information, it's unfathomable that hundreds of thousands of people could gather in a single location without attracting international attention.

But that's exactly what has happened for 53 years when evangelist T.L. Osborn and his wife, Daisy, who died in 1995, held open-field crusades in developing countries, drawing an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 people to each event. All told, millions of lives have been directly changed by Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Osborn International in the last 58 years.

Besides preaching at the crusades, Osborn prays for the masses—without laying hands on anyone—and subsequently sees countless miracles take place. Some of the more astounding occurrences have included the instantaneous healing of leprosy, blindness and crippled legs, and deliverance from demon possession. On more than one occasion, the Osborns witnessed uneven limbs growing out to the proper length.

Osborn is also one of the first charismatic ministers to distribute bulk amounts of translated evangelical literature. The most common practice has been to give a set of six Osborn-penned books to all crusade attendees who will accept the gift. As many as 70,000 copies of each title have been printed per outreach event, and one instance required an astonishing 56 tons to be shipped.

Osborn and his family have conducted their ministry with no

fanfare, no attempt to conform to the personality-driven culture of the American church, and little regard for their own personal safety or comfort.

“That’s where we’ve chosen to seed our lives and I’m happy about it,” Osborn says during a rare interview granted to Charisma. “I live happy. I live happy to go again, help them again.

“Travel is awful, but when I think it’s awful, I think of Paul. Paul did it. Paul rode on a donkey or on a camel or on a boat, and he didn’t gripe. I won’t gripe. I just keep going.”

How It All Began

Randomly ask 100 native Oklahomans where the town of Skedee is, and at least 99 of them say they never heard of the place. In fact, it’s conceivable that only the 100 or so people who live there and a few census takers actually know that the small landmass in Pawnee County exists.

But in 1923, this nondescript farming community produced a child who would quite literally change the world. Tommy Lee Osborn was the seventh and youngest son in a family of 13 kids. Ironically, his father was also a seventh son.

“That’s supposed to mean something,” he jokes.

Turns out, it did mean something.

Osborn’s father was a nonpracticing traditional Baptist, but T.L. attended a Pentecostal church, where he played piano and accordion. A neighboring evangelist heard him play and asked if he would join him in his national travels. At that time, Osborn’s brothers all had left home and he was the only son still there to help his 60-year-old father on the potato farm.

Osborn admits that he was reluctant, even a little scared, to ask his father for permission to leave Skedee and hit the road. That fateful day while sorting potatoes in the cellar,

he was greatly surprised when his father said yes.

About two years into his travels, Osborn found himself at a revival in California. By the time the event ended, he knew he wouldn't be going back to the farm. He had caught a glimpse of the evangelist's daughter, and it was love at first sight.

A year later, in 1942, the teenagers were married—T.L. was 18 and Daisy 17. Not long after, they took on the pastorate in Portland, Oregon, for the Pentecostal Church of God of America. But after hearing a female missionary from India speak at their church, they immediately felt a tug toward international outreach.

The pull was so strong that the Osborns devised a five-year plan to evangelize India. Their church organization helped them raise the sponsorship money to go, but just 10 months in, they ran into an unexpected wall.

"We couldn't convince the Hindus and the Muslims about Jesus, about the Bible," Osborn says. "But they were very kind to us and the Indians love to talk about religion."

T.L. and Daisy were unfamiliar with the competing philosophies and had no convincing arguments that could sway the people. In fact, on many occasions those they attempted to evangelize tried to convert the Osborns to their faiths. This apparent failure left the couple "brokenhearted and ashamed" on their return to the United States.

"I said, 'I've got to go back to where people believe in the Bible,'" Osborn recalls telling himself. "'You can't do anything with people who don't believe in the Bible.' I didn't know that [the Bible] could be proven because I didn't know about miracles."

Eight Hours With the King

Not long after coming home, the Osborns became aware of the miracle-working evangelists ministering in the U.S. at the

time. Although Aimee Semple McPherson had passed away in 1944, her reputation greatly influenced their desire to see miracles in their own services.

“That was the big thing that happened to us in India,” Osborn says. “We realized that without the miraculous, we couldn’t prove what we believed. I hadn’t thought of that before India. So we were going to find somebody that performed miracles.”

The search started in 1947 with Smith Wigglesworth, but as they planned to go to one of his meetings, the legendary preacher died. Later that year, they attempted to meet with Charles Price, but before they had a chance to attend a tent revival, he also passed away.

The distraught couple then learned that Price’s post had been handed to Hattie Hammond, known at the time as the greatest female preacher in the Assemblies of God. She was also known for the remarkable miracles that took place in her meetings. It was the Osborns’ meeting with Hammond that marked a significant turning point in their ministry.

Hammond encouraged them to look at their trip to India not as a failure but as their first glimpse into the massive harvest of souls that God had called them to reach. She also left T.L. with this curious admonition: “If you ever see Jesus, you’ll never be the same.”

It didn’t take long for him to understand what her words meant.

“The next morning at 6 o’clock, Jesus Christ walked in our room,” Osborn vividly remembers. “I saw Him like I see you. He didn’t walk on the floor. He walked on the air. I’ll never forget it.

“And I laid there. It was like I was dead. I couldn’t move a finger or a toe. I finally laid on my face on the floor until 2 o’clock in the afternoon. It changed my life. I was totally,

totally bathed in a new life. That's the best way to describe it."

For Osborn, it was his first of four distinct revelations of Christ. The second came when he encountered the ministry of Gordon Lindsay, a Kentucky native who founded Christ for the Nations.

"I was dumbfounded when I saw him preach in a simple way, and when he made an invitation to accept Christ, lots of people came," Osborn says. "Then, when he prayed for the sick, they were instantly healed.

"It shocked me. It profoundly affected me, and it seemed to me like a thousand voices swirled over my head saying: 'You can do that. That's what Jesus did. That's the way Peter did it. That's the way Paul did it. That proves the Bible is true today. You can do that.'"

Osborn's third revelation came after he followed what he believed to be a divinely inspired unction to read the Gospels as if he had never read them before. Both he and Daisy poured through the Scriptures and began to see Jesus in His Word.

"This is the pledge we made," Osborn says. "Whatever Jesus said He would do, we would expect Him to do it. Whatever He told us to do, we would do it."

After making this commitment, the Osborns decided to host a healing service. They put ads in the paper and promoted the event on radio broadcasts.

That night the church in Portland was packed. Many were saved, and people began lining up to receive healing.

"It worked," Osborn says. "We prayed for them and they were healed, and I had the fourth vision. I discovered Jesus in me. When that happened, Daisy and I said: 'Now we can go back to India. Now we can convince them.'"

But this time, they couldn't get funding from the church organization. They had to mortgage their car, sell some furniture and go only as far as their money would take them. The first stop was Jamaica, where in 13 weeks they saw 135 deaf-mutes healed, 90 blind people receive their sight and hundreds of crippled people walk away on their own two legs.

From Jamaica, they traveled to South America and then to Java and Japan. Ultimately, they landed back in India. Since those days, Osborn or others in his family have traveled to more than 90 countries.

Sowing Good Seed

When Daisy passed away in 1995, it seemed fitting to engrave this defining phrase on her tombstone: "The seed is the Word of God. The field is the world."

That's because sowing the Word has been foundational in the Osborns' ministry—both orally and through evangelical literature. Sam Osborn, T.L.'s nephew and the ministry's international general manager, helps oversee many of the programs that facilitate translation, printing and distribution of the Osborns' books.

"The printed word is very important to [T.L.]," he says. "You can tickle people's ears with the spoken word for a little while, but it doesn't have the staying power it does when it goes through the eye gate as well. To preach and deliver the Word and then leave books for them to study has made a lasting impact."

Ask someone at Osborn International what that impact looks like in raw numbers, and even an educated guess will be hard to come by. What they can tell you is that T.L., Daisy and their daughter, LaDonna, have collectively had their books translated into more languages than most evangelical organizations have.

"The real engine that generates our will to go—[my will] at my

age to keep going—is our faith in the seed of the Word of God,” T.L. says. “That sounds so ho-hum in America, but that is the touchstone of everything about a successful gospel ministry. ... And that’s the reason for the books.”

LaDonna Osborn, vice president and CEO of her father’s ministry, says that one of the unseen results of the sowing is the way it influences indigenous missionaries and preachers. She once traveled to the remote region of India known as Mizoram, where the preacher who extended the invitation got his start in the ministry after reading T.L.’s testimony 40 years before.

People in Russia, Poland and other eastern European countries sometimes show the Osborns handwritten copies of their books that they use to minister to the lost. T.L. has never directly mentored other would-be world evangelists.

Yet throughout his years in ministerial service countless pastors, teachers, missionaries and even major world evangelists have been birthed from his far-reaching influence—men such as David Yonggi Cho, Reinhard Bonnke, R.W. Schambach and Sunday Adelaja.

“These are like the grandchildren [of his ministry],” LaDonna says.

The Final Frontier

When T.L. was born in 1923, commercial radio was in its fledgling stages, full-scale network television broadcasting in the U.S. was still 23 years off in the future, and the personal computer was more than 50 years away from mass production.

Though widely available today, these modes of communication have seldom been used in the Osborns’ ministry. Daisy briefly hosted a radio program, and the couple once published a magazine that has long since been replaced by a newsletter used to communicate with financial partners. T.L. makes token

television appearances but has never produced his own program.

The Internet, on the other hand, is one technological advance the Osborns have fully embraced. Supporters can keep track of the ministry at , where they can also download a series of e-books. This has given the ministry access into countries such as China.

Osborn remains hopeful that he will one day be able to take advantage of opportunities to minister in these difficult places.

"I would like to go to the Muslim countries," he says. "I would like to go to Arabia and talk to the governments. And this is what I would like to say to them: 'Gentlemen, can you explain to me why you believe so much in Jesus?'"

"And they would say, 'No, we don't.' And I would say: 'You do and I'll prove it. You know if you would give us freedom to preach Jesus you would have no Muslims left. You believe Jesus is greater than Muhammad.

'You use your laws, your parliament, your guns and your tanks to keep Jesus out. Is He that great?' I'd like to go to China and say the same thing."

At 83 years old, Osborn laughs at the idea of retirement. He admits that his body will eventually keep him from traveling extensively, but at that point he plans to tackle a significant writing project. Osborn has already compiled a thick stack of notes based on what he deems are the most important elements of a successful ministry.

Like the rest of his life's work, the time-tested concepts he writes about may not be embraced by the American church. Osborn has never felt fully comfortable sharing his message in his own homeland due to a disconnect between modernized, Western culture and developing Third World nations.

He can only pray that his fellow citizens will—in some shape or form—follow the example he has inconspicuously set for nearly six decades.

“I want American Christians to share what they have with other people and with the world,” he says, “because the world is really poor, really hurting, really neglected, really in trouble—and we have the answer.”

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