

Healing Evangelist Oral Roberts Dies at Age 91

Normal

0

✖ Oral Roberts, the legendary evangelist who rose from humble beginnings to become one of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century, died Tuesday in Newport Beach, Calif., due to complications from pneumonia. He was 91.

The evangelist and founder of Oral Roberts University (ORU) died just days after he had been hospitalized near his California home because of a fall. His son, Richard, and daughter, Roberta, were by his side at the time of his death.

A memorial service is to be held Monday at 2 p.m. at ORU's Mabee Center in Tulsa, Okla.

"The Oral Roberts University family was deeply saddened to hear about the passing of our dear chancellor, Oral Roberts," said Mark Rutland, president of ORU. "Chancellor Roberts was one of the brilliant spiritual lights of the 20th century and a giant of the Christian faith. At the core of his legacy is a great university that bears his name. Like millions worldwide, I am mourning his passing and am grateful for his visionary life and contributions."

Born Jan. 24, 1918, north of Ada, Oklahoma, Roberts survived a raging flu epidemic that wiped out more Americans than World War I. Before his life ended, he had written more than 120 books, pioneered American television evangelism, bolstered belief in divine healing and founded his trademark university.

"He's one of the most significant figures in American religious history," said Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan.

"I think he planted the seeds publicly of what became the charismatic renewal after 1960 because the American public first saw Pentecostalism in their living rooms through his televised tent crusades."

Jack Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, said of Roberts: "If God had not, in His sovereign will, raised up the ministry of Oral Roberts, the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred. Oral shook the landscape with the inescapable reality and practicality of Jesus' whole ministry. His teaching and concepts were foundational to the renewal that swept through the whole church. He taught concepts that spread throughout the world and simplified and focused a spiritual lifestyle that is embraced by huge sectors of today's church."

This man who eventually preached to millions-and laid hands on 1.5 million sick people-faced many physical challenges. He almost died from tuberculosis at age 17, but he told audiences later that he was healed in July 1935 during a tent revival.

En route to the meeting, he said he heard God say: "Son, I am going to heal you, and you are to take My healing power to your generation. You are to build Me a university and build it on My authority and the Holy Spirit."

In 1965 ORU opened its doors to its first 303 students. Small wonder that Roberts wrote in his 1995 autobiography, *Expect A Miracle*, "Some believe in miracles; some don't. Take miracles out of Oral Roberts' life and I'd be dead."

The son of a poor farmer who also picked cotton while preaching in Pentecostal Holiness churches, Roberts credited his parents with instilling faith in him at a young age.

He married his wife, Evelyn, and set out to lead his first revival at 23. After pastoring four churches he moved to Tulsa and started the evangelistic ministry that later bore his name.

Roberts' fortunes would change in the 1950s after he seized on radio and TV's potential to spread the healing message. By 1955 his program was on 800 radio stations and 200 TV outlets. Within two more years, 1,000 letters a day flooded his ministry.

While Roberts would be known as a healing evangelist throughout his career, it was the university he founded that brought lasting recognition. Although he stepped down as president in 1993, he remained chancellor and a lifetime trustee.

Through the years, the student body grew to 10 times its original size while the number of undergraduate majors expanded from 24 to 63. By the spring of 2008, ORU's rolls included 37,000 alumni.

Among notable alums are Clifton Taulbert (1971), entrepreneur and author who had one book nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and another made into a movie; Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann (1986-law); and Jim Stovall (1981), who co-founded a TV network for the visually impaired after losing his sight at age 29.

Former student and longtime professor Ralph Fagin, who assumed the interim presidency after Richard Roberts stepped down in November of 2007, fondly recalls the sign Oral Roberts kept on his desk: "Make no small plans here."

Not all of Roberts' initiatives succeeded. The highly touted medical school and City of Faith lasted only a decade. A graduate nursing program is gone, along with the dental school and law school.

However, Fagin thinks despite its closing in 1989, the medical school achieved a long-lasting impact. Many doctors now recognize the value of combining prayer with conventional treatment, something ORU's medical school tried to demonstrate.

“He was thinking so far ahead,” Fagin said. “I think about his launching out in terms of TV ministry, but also the City of Faith and merging of prayer and medicine. All of these things were so ahead of his time.”

Evangelist Benny Hinn calls Roberts a spiritual father whom he loved and respected, stretching back to his teens, when he decided to follow Christ. They eventually became neighbors in California, where Roberts lived out his final years.

“I have seen how his heart yearned for people of all ages and backgrounds to know Jesus Christ personally and how to enjoy the abundant life that is available to allÂ believers,” Hinn said. “What a legacy he leaves. Only heaven will reveal how many lives have been revolutionized through his seed-faith teaching.”Â Â Â Â

Bible teacher Marilyn Hickey became aware of Roberts in the early 1950s when her mother was healed at one of his tent meetings in Denver. Though still skeptical after her mother was again healed, this time of a breast tumor while watching Roberts’ TV program, Hickey was filled with the Spirit three years later and helped host a return visit to the city.

“We became partners [of] his ministry, and I began to see healings and miracles in my ministry,” she said. “I said to the Lord, ‘I know You called me to be a teacher of the Word; what is happening here?’ He said, ‘Psalms 133 says the anointing on the head comes on the body. You are a partner to Oral Roberts’ ministry; he has a healing and miracle ministry, so that anointing comes on you.’”

Roberts lost his wife in 2005 after 66 years of marriage. He called Evelyn Roberts the most popular and respected person at ORU, saying when it was time for God to hand out rewards, hers would exceed his.

Richard Roberts, who served as a past president of ORU, described his father as “the greatest man of God I have ever

known” and “a modern-day apostle of the healing ministry.”

Oral Roberts is survived by a daughter and son-in-law, Roberta and Ronald Potts; son Richard and daughter-in-law Lindsay; 12 grandchildren and several great-grandchildren.