News

The Rev. Billy Graham, famed preacher who was best known for his televised evangelism broadcasts, died Feb. 21 at his home in North Carolina at age 99. He is pictured in a 1990 photo in Berlin. (CNS/Juergen Schwarz, Reuters)

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Billy Graham, a religious phenomenon who became a household name and preached to multitudes of people across the globe, died Feb. 21 after more than a half-century of ministry. He was 99.

He died shortly before 8 a.m., a spokesman for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association told Religion News Service.

Known as "America's preacher," William Franklin Graham Jr. was responsible for spreading evangelism worldwide, converting millions in person and via broadcasts and encouraging them to nurture their Christian lives in local congregations. Beyond his influence on the grass-roots level, he was counselor to 11 presidents and participated in the inaugural activities of seven dating back to Dwight Eisenhower.

Although Graham said he wasn't publicly political, those who studied him have said he was a powerful, behind-the-scenes player in national affairs. He also took on the visible role of a national pastoral leader at times when the country was shaken by domestic and international terrorism, first after the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 and later after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

Over his many years of ministry, Graham preached to an estimated 84 million people at his crusades around the world. When non-crusade events are included, that figure grows to 110 million, and nearly doubles to 215 million including live

audiences reached via satellite.

Graham, touted as one of the world's most famous religious leaders, often tried to turn attention away from himself. He said whenever he was asked to name the finest Christian he ever met, his response was always, "my wife, Ruth," who died on June 14, 2007. At her funeral, he said he looked forward to joining his wife of more than 63 years in heaven.

And when the Billy Graham Library opened in Charlotte, N.C., shortly before his wife's death, he said, the building should be a tribute to God and not to him.

"This building behind me is just a building," he said at the library dedication. "It's an instrument; it's a tool for the gospel. The primary thing is the gospel of Christ."

Graham's influence was far-reaching, from fellow evangelists who adopted and adapted some of the strategies and processes used at his crusades, to average Christians who read Christianity Today, a premier evangelical publication he founded in 1956.

"He would have to be viewed as by far the most important, single religious figure of the 20th century here in America," said Randall Balmer, chairman of the religion department at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., and an expert on Graham and evangelicalism.

"Billy Graham's career spanned more than half a century. Just in terms of longevity alone, he was enormously influential."

In recent years, the once-robust Graham saw his health slowly decline in much the same way that age took its toll on his friend Pope John Paul II. He has been treated for hydrocephalus, a buildup of fluid in the brain that causes symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease, and has suffered from illnesses and accidents that delayed his crusade plans. In 2004, crusades in Kansas City, Mo., and Pasadena, Calif., had to be temporarily postponed while he recovered from a fractured pelvis.

In 2005, after preaching his last New York crusade, Graham cited his health when he declined an invitation to lead a crusade in London. In July 2006, when he spoke at the Baltimore festival of his son, Franklin Graham, the elder Graham declared that appearance could be "the last time I'll have an opportunity to preach the gospel to an audience like this."

By the time he died, Billy Graham had preached at 417 crusades.

His son, evangelist Franklin Graham, 65, was named in 1995 as the eventual successor to his father's ministry, and is now president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

As the elder Graham's health declined, he rarely ventured far from his home in the North Carolina mountains. But on special occasions, the elderly evangelist appeared in public, such as at a prayer service to mark the beginning of President George W. Bush's second term in 2005.

In April 2005, both Grahams hosted the dedication ceremony for the new headquarters of the association in Charlotte, N.C., after it moved from its decades-long location in Minneapolis.

One of his most prominent recent appearances outside his mission efforts was at the Washington National Cathedral three days after the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

"Yes, our nation has been attacked, our buildings destroyed, lives lost, but now we have a choice whether to implode and disintegrate emotionally and spiritually as a people and a nation or whether we choose to become stronger through all of this struggle to rebuild on a solid foundation," he preached.

"That foundation is our trust in God."

In a 2012 prayer letter released by his ministry, Graham said his "heart aches for America." He decried abortion and "a lack of shame over sin" and tied the nation's ills to its need for the gospel.

"Our society strives to avoid any possibility of offending anyone -- except God," he wrote.

Also in that year, Graham took a more prominent role in partisan politics, after years of public avoidance. He was featured in an ad supporting a North Carolina referendum that would ban gay marriage. His ministry also announced a "vote biblical values" campaign that opposed abortion and supported traditional marriage. Some observers speculated that Franklin Graham played a key role in his father's political participation.

In 2000, two of Graham's children, Franklin and Anne Graham Lotz, who both have evangelistic ministries of their own, appeared on CNN's "Larry King Live" to talk about their father's legacy.

Following a busy life that often kept her father on the road, "We'll know exactly where he is," Lotz told King. "For the first time in my life, I'll be able to say where my daddy is for sure. He'll be in heaven with Jesus."

Graham's long, widely publicized career, his squeaky-clean image and his steadfast faith — his message in the 1950s was the same five decades later — succeeded in shaping the public image of Graham as one of the good guys.

Later in his life, the evangelist's reputation was slightly tarnished by reports of a 1972 recorded conversation with President Nixon in which he said Jews had a "stranglehold" on the American media. The evangelist issued two written apologies, voicing "deep regrets" and saying, "My remarks did not reflect my love for the Jewish people."

Graham was a Southern Baptist who never pushed his particular denomination on the millions of people he reached in more than 185 countries. Although criticized by some for his willingness to accept Catholics, liberal Protestants and other religions, it was precisely that openness that observers say was the key to his enduring success.

When he held a crusade, thousands often wanted to turn themselves over to Christ. Rather than sign these believers up to form his own church or denomination, Graham always referred them to local congregations. In fact, he wouldn't hold a crusade without first gaining permission from local church leaders.

"Our credo has been over the years that we want to make disciples, not just decisions," said Art Bailey, crusade director for Graham's 2005 New York crusade. "That's been a hallmark of what Mr. Graham has done over the years."

Graham began as a tent-revival preacher in the late 1940s and evolved into a prominent ecumenist who since 1955 ranked among Gallup's "10 Most Admired Men" more than 50 times — more than any other person.

Why he received so much media attention when hundreds of other religious leaders toiled quietly offstage became a mystifying question throughout his career. In a June 2005 interview with CNN's King, the evangelist said that's a question he hopes to

ask in eternity: "I'll ask the Lord the first thing when I get to heaven — why me?"

His evangelistic career was propelled in part by publisher William Randolph Hearst, who in 1949 told his editors to "Puff Graham," after witnessing a Graham revival. In those early days, the evangelist's fiery, stiletto speaking manner earned him the label of "God's Machine Gun."

Graham's preaching style later mellowed as he grew more confident and his popularity mushroomed. But he never lost the quiet sincerity that even his critics acknowledged upon meeting him or hearing him preach.

The evangelist's timing, his longevity, his talent, his soothing voice, his aggressive use of media to promote his unwavering biblical message all contributed to his phenomenal success. His reputation also profited handsomely by the fact that he and his Billy Graham Evangelistic Association were never tarnished by major scandal.

In an interview with Religion News Service in December 1994, Graham explained his enduring popularity this way:

"Very few people have gone for as long as I have. I don't know any other evangelists who have preached to the audience that we have over a period of more than 50 years. Secondly, I've had a lot of exposure in the press ... over a period of time from the television and radio."

Graham's reach was staggering. A 2005 Gallup Poll showed that 16 percent of Americans had heard Graham in person, along with 52 percent who had heard him on the radio and 85 percent who had seen him on television.

The evangelist's strong call for improved race relations endeared him to many, but also caused friction with others. Known for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa and racism in America, Graham prohibited segregated seating at his crusades starting in the mid-1950s.

Graham's rise to prominence was meteoric.

He was born to Presbyterian parents on a small dairy farm in Charlotte, N.C., and known as Billy Frank. His religious reawakening occurred at 16 when, in 1934, traveling evangelist Mordecai Ham set up a tent in Charlotte.

"I simply felt at peace," he wrote in his 1997 autobiography, "Just As I Am," of the experience in which he checked "Recommitment" on the card he was given to fill out. "Quiet, not delirious. Happy and peaceful."

After a brief enrollment at then-Bob Jones College in Cleveland, Tenn., he pursued further studies at then-Florida Bible Institute near Tampa, Fla. Graham was ordained a Southern Baptist minister in 1939 in Florida. Ten years later, at age 30, the evangelist and Wheaton College graduate was preaching to thousands at his Los Angeles Crusade -- the crusade that first brought him national attention and inspired Hearst.

Television was just emerging. In some ways, television and Billy Graham grew up together. He was good on radio, but better on television. It was his early, forceful use of media and technology that many say catapulted him permanently into the spotlight.

In 1957, with television in its infancy, he held his first televised crusade and it proved to be a turning point in the Graham ministry. After the first broadcast from New York, Graham received 25,000 supportive letters. Within three months, 1.5 million letters, including donations, were sent to his organization. By the end of the crusade, 30,000 people promised, in Graham's words, to "accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior."

"Nobody has been more gifted at the use of TV," said the Rev. Billy A. Melvin, a former executive director of the National Association of Evangelicals in a 1995 interview. "It would appear in retrospect that God raised Billy Graham up in a time when there would be a communication explosion and when the gospel could be preached around the world by means of TV."

Graham's largest revival meeting occurred in March 1995 with his "Global Mission," a technological marvel where 30 satellites broadcast taped messages from Graham in 116 languages to 185 countries at a cost of $25 million.

When Graham died, more than 3 million people had come forward to commit or recommit to Christ at a Graham crusade, according to his association. Graham biographer William Martin made several attempts over the years to determine how many converts at Graham crusades kept the faith but he said it is "a long-standing never-resolved question."

His "My Answer" syndicated newspaper column, begun in 1952, had been published for more than five decades.

The evangelist's unblemished image — which he saw as paramount to his success — was also the result of business decisions he made more than 50 years ago, when he chose to stick with preaching and leave fundraising to others.

Using North Carolina as his base, he let a board of directors in Minneapolis run the fledgling Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Graham founded the association in 1950 after a Portland, Ore., crusade produced $25,000 in donations in a single day, earmarked for Graham's first network radio show — the weekly "Hour of Decision," which has continued online decades later.

In 1977, The Charlotte Observer reported that Graham's ministry had a $22.9 million secret fund it didn't want to reveal, fearing the public would think it too rich. After that, Graham opened his books for financial scrutiny and publicly thanked the newspaper.

To avoid any appearance of moral impropriety, Graham and his male colleagues agreed in 1948 never to be alone with women other than their wives.

At times the media have been more foe than friend to the Graham image.

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"Over the years I've gotten used to being persecuted by the media," Graham told a gathering on the eve of the National Prayer Breakfast in 1995.

Graham did his part to enhance his public image when he frequently placed himself among the famous in press interviews. He told of playing golf with Eisenhower, visiting Reagan after Christmas. Graham often spoke of his friendship with religious leaders such as the late Pope John Paul II and the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and political leaders such as former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Graham acknowledged being bothered "a little bit" by those who called him a name-dropper.

"That's not true," he told RNS. "Because I've lived to be my age and met so many interesting people around the world, that just becomes second nature."

The author of more than 30 books, including many best-sellers, Graham was honored numerous times during the last five decades, garnering the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion in 1982 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 1996.

His successor, Franklin Graham, was known as a bit of a rebel in his younger years. Ordained in a nondenominational church, Franklin Graham serves as president of Samaritan's Purse, an international Christian relief agency that is based in Boone, N.C., as well as the leader of his father's association.

In the elder Graham's later years, his son supported him physically — at his elbow and ready to take his place at the podium when he addressed thousands — and administratively.

"He really doesn't worry about things and he's happy for me to look into 'em and deal with them and he's happy for me to lose sleep for a while," Franklin Graham told RNS in 2002.

Graham is survived by his three daughters, Virginia "Gigi" Graham Foreman, Anne Graham Lotz, and Ruth Graham, and two sons, Franklin and Nelson, plus 19 grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren.