

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Billy Graham's Life: An interfaith perspective



**Douglas Kindschi**  
Director, Kaufman  
Interfaith Institute

The death of Billy Graham has taken me back to the 1950s when as a teenager I first heard him preach in Minneapolis. My father was a minister and church administrator whose travels took him around the country. One summer I went with him to New York City, where we attended the famous 1957 Madison Square Garden Crusade. Graham's early fiery preaching in this packed New York arena made quite an impression on me. My father ended his active career as the director of planned giving for the Graham organization, and I had further opportunities to attend Graham events and learn more of the details of his ministry.

Much has been written these past days about the impact of Graham, and there is not much I can add other than my own observations from an interfaith perspective. My upbringing was very much in the same community as Graham's, generally described as fundamentalist.

He graduated from Wheaton College, and I graduated from Houghton College in New York State, a very similar religiously conservative school. Dancing was clearly forbidden and even attending movies was frowned upon. Women were not permitted to wear sleeveless blouses, and contact between the sexes was carefully regulated through curfews and the watchful eye of the dean of women in the lounges of the women's dorms.

Following graduation, my world theologically was greatly expanded by attending the University of Chicago, and politically enlightened by attending talks by Martin Luther King and getting involved in south

Chicago politics. Meanwhile, the southern preacher, Billy Graham, already had refused to segregate his revival meetings in the South and was opening ecumenical doors by working closely with Catholics as he brought his crusades to cities all over America.

## DEFYING BOUNDARIES

William Martin is professor emeritus at Rice University and author of what is considered the definitive biography of Graham, "A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story." He writes: "As early as 1953, Graham told a Chattanooga, Tennessee, crusade that he would not accept the usual practice of segregated seating and personally removed the ropes marking the section for blacks. He declared in a newspaper column that the Bible did not teach racial superiority. He privately urged segregationist Southern governors to 'consider the racial problem from a spiritual point of view.'"

While Graham was never out in front of the segregation struggle, he was clearly supportive and in communication with King, inviting him to pray at his Madison Square Garden Crusade. Graham said that racism was "a heart problem" that could be solved by converting people to Christianity, clearly ignoring the longstanding racism of many Christians.

When his 1957 New York City campaign was announced, more than 1,500 churches were sponsors. Fundamentalists were incensed that liberal Protestants and Catholics would be involved. Recall that this was at a time when in a few years the Catholic faith of presidential candidate John F. Kennedy was feared by many conservative Christians.

Richard John Neuhaus, prominent Christian cleric and author, wrote about the special friendship between Graham and Pope

John Paul II. He recounts an extraordinary personal meeting the two of them had in 1989. Graham reported: "There was a pause in the conversation; suddenly the pope's arm shot out and he grabbed the lapels of my coat, he pulled me forward within inches of his own face. He fixed his eyes on me and said, 'Listen Graham, we are brothers.'" Graham's comments about John Paul II, Mother Teresa and the Catholic Church led many evangelicals to judge him as having gone overboard or even heretical.

## BUILT RELATIONSHIP WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY

Graham also had a warm relationship with the Jewish community and developed a special friendship with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, who was the director of the Synagogue Council of America. Graham was recognized for his key role in developing interfaith relations and in 1977 received the American Jewish Committee's first inter-religious award. Tanenbaum gave him credit for much of the progress in Protestant-Jewish relations over the past quarter century.

David Neff, former editor of Christianity Today and co-convenor of an ongoing national Jewish-evangelical dialogue, writes that Graham had distanced himself from attempts to target Jews and explained his strategy of not trying to recruit people from their religious communities. Graham said, "Anyone who makes a decision at our meetings is seen later and referred to a local clergyman, Protestant, Catholic or Jewish."

When the Nixon tapes revealed some anti-Semitic statements that Graham had made but did not recall, he apologized immediately. Neff continues, "Tanenbaum's widow defended his character in The New York Times, and the Anti-Defama-

tion League's ever-vigilant Abraham Foxman accepted the apology on the behalf of all Jews. The controversy blew over quickly, but it left an indelible asterisk on Graham's legacy."

Graham's efforts expanded as he conducted major campaigns in England, Africa, Russia and Asia. He preached in 185 countries but refused to preach in South Africa because of its apartheid policies. When in Asia, he was asked by reporters whether the Hindus and Buddhists would be in heaven. His response was that God had called him to preach, but he was not called to judge. Those were God's decisions.

As he was ending his active ministry, Graham was interviewed in 2006 for a cover story in Newsweek magazine. Asked whether he believes heaven will be closed to good Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or secular people, Graham said: "Those are decisions only the Lord will make. It would be foolish for me to speculate on who will be there and who won't. ... I don't want to speculate about all that. I believe the love of God is absolute. He said he gave his son for the whole world, and I think he loves everybody regardless of what label they have."

As Graham's ministry expanded and his insights matured, his faith deepened and affirmed the essential value of love and respect for all. His humility enabled him to recognize and admit his mistakes, but also led him to withdraw from judging others. He experienced and sought to live out the deep love that he recognized as the essence of God.

He was deep in his faith but open to all persons created in God's image. It is an example for each of us.

*interfaith@gvsu.edu*