

The Graham succession: After Billy

by [Ken Garfield](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

The questions started coming as soon as Billy Graham left the spotlight following his last crusade in 2005 in New York. Can anyone take his place as a galvanizing figure in American Christianity? What is the future of his style of evangelism—and, more specifically, of the organization he founded, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association? All that son Franklin Graham knows about the future of the organization that he now runs is this: “If I’m around 20 years from now, I’ll be doing the same thing—telling people about Jesus Christ.”

The question is how many will be listening. Franklin Graham acknowledges that the Charlotte, North Carolina-based BGEA has lost 10 percent of its financial supporters to death each year for the past half-dozen years. The BGEA earlier this year laid off 55 employees—about 10 percent of its work force—to reduce the annual budget by about 15 percent to \$84 million. A ministry spokesperson said the BGEA has made “minor staff adjustments” over the years when various projects ended, but has never had layoffs of this nature in its 59 years. Some of the layoffs, Franklin Graham said, came in the ministry’s efforts to be “better stewards.” As an example, he said that the ministry will save \$1 million a year by outsourcing property management.

There’s more to the changes than outsourcing, though. The ministry’s Ken Barun told the *Charlotte Observer* that contributions have been “relatively flat” and that the association has seen lower returns on its endowment and less revenue from the sale of books and other products. According to the BGEA’s 2008 annual report—whose cover features billowy clouds and the words “Until He Returns”—contributions declined from \$73,199,347 in 2007 to \$62,428,546 in 2008.

Franklin Graham said the challenge for the BGEA is to rebuild its donor base. Rather than targeting the sons and daughters of past givers, who may not be as loyal to the cause as their parents were, the BGEA is trying to woo new supporters and raise money in different ways.

There’s more reliance, for example, on the Internet than on traditional Graham mainstays like *Decision* magazine, whose circulation is down because the ministry

cut costs by cutting the number of nonsubscribers receiving the publication in the mail. The Web site (billygraham.org) rings with bells and whistles and sharp graphics.

“Every communications device the secular world uses, I’m going to use it, too,” Franklin Graham said during a telephone interview from his Charlotte office.

The days when a Graham would roll into a city and command the crusade stage night after night are long gone. Franklin Graham still draws impressive numbers with some multinight crusades, often overseas. A four-night stand in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2008 drew 183,302 people. Other Graham meetings draw smaller crowds, even after months of buildup from local media and the courting of local congregations to join the effort. Three nights in Charleston, South Carolina, last autumn drew 34,197 people. In Belfast, Northern Ireland, 32,783 turned out over three days in April 2008. It might be comparing apples and oranges, but the difference between the new and old numbers is striking: Billy Graham’s last crusade in New York drew 242,000 over three days.

This summer Franklin Graham is pushing a series of one-day stands in four cities along the Mississippi. “Rock the River,” the BGEA calls it. The plan is for Franklin Graham to preach three or four times each day, interspersing sermons with seven to eight hours of Christian rock music. That way, he said, kids can come forward to get saved, then text about it to family and friends so they can come down to the river for more music and the message. If “Rock the River” is a hit, Franklin Graham said, it could become a BGEA summer tradition.

These one-day Graham stops are a far cry from the May 15 to September 1, 1957, crusade, during which Billy Graham transfixed New York. It drew nearly 2.4 million people and catapulted the elder Graham to world renown.

Franklin Graham is confident that the ministry will continue to resonate despite financial challenges and shifting strategies. The proof, he said, is in the number of people who have come to Christ through the BGEA. Franklin Graham said 3.5 million came to Christ during Billy Graham’s 50 years of ministry, compared to the 11 million who, he says, have answered a Graham altar call in some form during the past four years.

Those increased commitments, Franklin Graham said, are the result of the BGEA’s harnessing modern technology to spread the word in new ways, such as by live-

streaming stadium events into homes; dubbing old Billy Graham sermons into other languages and replaying them around the world; and recruiting and training counselors in distant lands to invite people into their homes to watch a Billy Graham sermon and answer the call. In India, Franklin Graham said, 800,000 counselors helped lead 4 million people to make decisions for Christ. In Sudan in one day, he said, 30,000 people committed their lives to Christ.

William Martin, who wrote the 1991 biography of Billy Graham *Prophet with Honor*, praises Franklin Graham for finding cost-efficient ways to evangelize via the Internet and small-group settings. “The early results,” Martin said, “have been spectacular.” The BGEA is counting on these new ways of doing ministry to usher in a new financial day.

There’s one more sign of change: A member of the third generation of Grahams is preaching now—Will Graham, son of Franklin and grandson of Billy.

Billy Graham remains CEO of the organization, though at 90 he is largely confined to his home in Montreat in the North Carolina mountains. He has trouble seeing and hearing, and spends much of his time in bed, surrounded by photos of his beloved wife, Ruth, who died in 2007 at age 87. She is buried just outside the Billy Graham Library on the BGEA campus.

Despite his father’s fragile health, Franklin Graham said, “I report to him every week—often for Sunday lunch. Now he doesn’t want to handle problems. He wants to know about ministry, . . . how it’s going.” The answer is complicated, and it depends on who you ask.

Martin and other students of the Graham ministry agree that the association has the ability to survive at some level by transforming itself in the face of changing technology, shifting cultural and religious tastes and, perhaps most significantly in the long run, the waning of the Billy Graham name. Duke Divinity School professor and church historian Grant Wacker, who is working on a book on Billy Graham, said one Duke undergraduate told him that many of her evangelical Christian friends don’t even know who Billy Graham is. Wacker predicts that giving to the BGEA will continue to drop—and will do so dramatically when the elder Graham dies. Said Wacker: “People give to support a world-renowned leader, and it is hard to stir them to support a cause—as opposed to a person—with the same fervor, even a cause they generally believe in.”

No business transition from a father to a son is seamless. There are always challenges and invidious comparisons. Most observers agree that Franklin Graham does not match his father in rhetorical skill, and biographer Martin believes that Franklin Graham's politically edgy style will narrow the BGEA's reach—for example, he has long condemned Islam publicly and has generally aligned himself more with conservative Christian causes and conservative politicians than did the elder Graham in his later years.

“Because Franklin is willing to draw bolder lines—theological, social and cultural—I suspect he will have difficulty attracting and holding the support of, say, members of mainline Protestant churches who willingly cooperated with his father despite theological differences, which Billy consistently played down,” said Martin. “Franklin is perceived as lining up with the Christian right on most issues. While that may endear him to some, it unquestionably alienates others.”

The climate for the BGEA has changed in recent years with the advent of megachurches. Large nondenominational churches like Willow Creek outside Chicago and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in southern California exercise great influence—and versions of these churches can be found in most decent-sized cities. Their ability to draw evangelical Christians with high-quality, theater-style worship and an array of faith and entertainment options presents a challenge to ministries like the BGEA. If your own church is putting on its version of a crusade each weekend, with vibrant speakers and worship services featuring top-of-the-line production values, then why attend or support Franklin Graham's or anyone else's crusade?

Wacker and Martin agree that no one personality and preacher can consistently fill a stadium and command attention over time the way Billy Graham did. Evangelists today tend to fill a particular niche: T. D. Jakes draws a largely black following taken by his charismatic call for social action and economic empowerment. Joel Osteen appeals to those comforted by a folksy, optimistic brand of the gospel. However powerful a preacher might be, some believe the culture today is too diverse and fractured for one man's voice to fill the void.

Billy Graham emerged “at a particular time in U.S. history,” observed Wacker, “and that time, like all times, was unique. The age—just after World War II—required a figure who seemed to stand above the fray of denominational squabbling and theological partisanship. . . . The age also called for a figure who stood in the

moderate forefront of evangelical social consciousness.”

Martin noted that when Billy Graham came to prominence in the 1940s and '50s, “evangelicalism was much weaker, making it easier for him to achieve singular prominence. Today, in no small measure because of his leadership over the decades, evangelical Christianity is far more robust and diverse, with hundreds of megachurches and parachurch ministries. . . . There are certainly recognized stars, but it is hard to imagine any of them filling quite the role that [Billy Graham] has.”

Wacker said organizations like the BGEA, Franklin Graham’s Samaritan’s Purse and others may have to consolidate out of economic necessity. Franklin Graham said that some Christian ministries could combine forces, though he has no plans to unite the BGEA and Samaritan’s Purse, a Christian relief organization based in his hometown of Boone, North Carolina. Martin suggested that merging the BGEA and Samaritan’s Purse could be counterproductive: “Those who favor the work of one more than the other might be less attracted to a hybrid.”

Some believe that the best hope for the future of the BGEA and Franklin Graham is to emphasize Christian relief work. Even those who criticize Franklin Graham’s forays into political partisanship embrace his Operation Christmas Child, a worldwide campaign to fill shoe boxes with gifts for children. His work with U2 rock star Bono to speak out for AIDS patients in Africa has won him a broader, even nonreligious following that he otherwise might not be able to claim.

Thomas Currie, dean of Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Charlotte, said, “The American evangelical impulse toward mission is deep and will need to find an outlet somewhere. Whether Franklin can channel that impulse without the energies associated with large evangelical meetings, I don’t know. Maybe he can. . . . Maybe Franklin will thrive just on the impulse to help those in need.”

Since opening with fanfare in 2007 on the grounds of the BGEA (just off Billy Graham Parkway), the Billy Graham Library has welcomed more than 280,000 people. They come from all over to see archival footage, photos and artifacts celebrating the evangelist’s life and times. The experience ends, appropriately enough, with a film documenting a long-ago Graham altar call, and then a chance for visitors to commit their lives to Christ. The mechanical talking cow at the start of the exhibit—an homage to the Grahams’ dairy-farm roots—rankled a few purists when it was first

unveiled. But Bessie has become a popular attraction for children who come with their parents or grandparents. And it is mom and dad, or grandma and grandpa, who make up most of the flock of visitors.

On my visit, I ran into Paul and Jenny Wright of Vincennes, Indiana. He's 83, she's 80. They found each other after the death of their first spouses, and their visit to the library is a part of a honeymoon trip. They pray for the Graham ministry to flourish as it did when they watched Billy Graham on TV and read *Decision* magazine, but they know that the culture has changed. "Different times," Paul Wright said. People were hungrier decades ago to hear Billy Graham's message of hope through Christ, the Wrights believe, and there are too many distractions today that cloud the Christian message—too many channels on TV, too much sports to watch, too many temptations.

Jenny Wright, who sent Billy Graham a birthday card when he turned 90, thinks Franklin Graham is a great leader. But with her new husband nodding agreement, she added that she is not sure the world will respond to the son the way it did to the father. She said she plans to continue supporting what Billy Graham built and Franklin Graham seeks to nurture. With words that perhaps echo more strongly than she knows, she stated: "We'll die with it."