

Pioneer televangelist Oral Roberts dies at 91: Brought Pentecostals into the mainstream

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Oral Roberts, the pioneering television evangelist and faith healer who became the dean of Pentecostal preachers in the U.S. died December 15 at the age of 91, in Newport Beach, California, of complications from pneumonia.

In 1954, Roberts became the second evangelist to appear on television— Rex Humbard was the first by a few months—when NBC began broadcasting his tent crusades. He switched to a half-hour Sunday show 13 years later, and by 1977 his Sunday morning show reached 1.1 million households and was the top-rated religious program on television.

Ordained by the Pentecostal Holiness Church, he joined the United Methodist Church in 1968 but left after 19 years. To millions, Roberts's name was synonymous with faith healer, though it was a term Roberts himself disliked, saying, "God heals—I don't."

Before Roberts came on the scene, "the idea of healing within a religious service was left to Christian Scientists or people who went to Lourdes," Harvard theologian Harvey Cox told the Associated Press. "Now, it's fairly common in churches across the board. In his own way, he made that happen."

Vinson Synan, a Pentecostal historian, ranks Roberts among the three or four most important Christian leaders of the last half of the 20th century. Synan said that Roberts was widely loved for bringing Pentecostals, once derided as "holy rollers" for their spirit-filled worship and speaking in tongues, into the mainstream

"If God had not . . . raised up the ministry of Oral Roberts, the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred," said Jack Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

In 1961 Roberts declared that God told him to build a university. Most Tulsans assumed that Roberts foresaw a small Bible college, but Roberts had other ideas. Oral Roberts University, a four-year, liberal arts institution, now with 3,000 students, opened its doors in 1965.