



## HISTORY OF ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY

Oral Roberts once said, "When God is ready to do a new work in the earth, He causes a baby to be born." The distinctive character and uniqueness of Oral Roberts University is best understood in the person of its founder, Chancellor Oral Roberts, and his parents. From a Methodist background, the chancellor's parents embraced the new Pentecostal movement and pastored churches within the Pentecostal Holiness denomination. Chancellor Roberts' history is told by David Harrell, Jr., in his 1985 book, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*.

The early Pentecostal revival involved a great diversity of people from all walks of life and denominational backgrounds. They found their unity in four cardinal doctrines: Jesus is Savior, Healer, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, and soon-coming King. That focus on Jesus and openness to all people is an enduring value God gave to ORU through its founder.

The pivotal moment in Oral Roberts' life was his healing from tuberculosis and stuttering at age 17. He heard God's voice that he:

- 1) would be healed.
- 2) was to take God's healing power to his generation.
- 3) was to "Build Me a university. Build it on My authority, and on the Holy Spirit."

God's voice has been monumentally important in the subsequent founding and operation of ORU.

Chancellor Roberts soon began preaching as an evangelist and pastored Pentecostal Holiness churches, but he was never comfortable with the constraints of denominational dogma. In the 1970s a Methodist bishop described him as a maverick they could not control. His openness to all truth later gave rise to incredible academic freedom at ORU. He trusted faculty to honor and live by the Bible, to constantly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to be people of integrity—so different from professors he encountered as a student. In Enid, Oklahoma, while Oral Roberts was listening to a skeptical theology professor, the Holy Spirit spoke to him: "*Don't be like other ministers. Be like Jesus and heal the people.*" It was also in Enid that one scripture, 3 John 2, transformed the lives of Chancellor Roberts and his wife, Evelyn. "*Beloved, I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers.*" That plus John 10:10—"The thief comes not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"—became the core of his message when he began his ministry of healing evangelism.

The chancellor's healing crusades, notable for being among the first to be racially integrated, broke upon America like a prairie fire. ORU is often described as having been **forged in the fires of healing evangelism**. Oral Roberts' name became a household word, second only to Billy Graham. Televised programs from the big tent were seen by

millions across many denominations and lifestyles. Soul-winning, described by Oral Roberts as “the greatest miracle,” was always the primary emphasis.

In the early 1960s the focus of Oral Roberts’ ministry changed dramatically as he announced plans to build ORU. Not knowing how to build a university, he walked the grounds, praying in the Spirit and receiving back picture images of what to do. Partner seminars followed, as ministers from around the world were brought to ORU to learn about the work of the Holy Spirit and God’s command to build Him a university. Chancellor Roberts was told he would never find qualified faculty, but the Holy Spirit was already calling Spirit-filled Christians to prepare themselves for careers in higher education.

ORU's first prime directive, the mandate to "Build Me a university . . . ," was given to Oral Roberts as a teenager. The second came 25 years later and is ORU's most frequently quoted word from God.

"In June 1960, while having dinner with Pat Robertson in Richmond, Virginia, Oral began to write on his napkin. He has repeated the message thousands of times since, rhythmically, as if reciting poetry:

'Raise up your students to hear My voice,  
to go where My light is seen dim,  
My voice is heard small, and  
My healing power is not known.  
Even to the uttermost bounds  
of the earth.  
Their work will exceed yours  
and in this I am well pleased."

(From David Harrell's interview with Oral Roberts on February 16, 1983.)

Ground was broken for ORU in 1962. Officially chartered in 1963 with the State of Oklahoma, ORU opened in 1965 with 303 students and seven major buildings. The Reverend Billy Graham was the keynote speaker at ORU’s Dedication in 1967.

The chancellor gave high priority to campus architecture. He worked with architect Frank Wallace to create unique campus buildings, especially the Prayer Tower, a campus icon. In the shape of a cross with a crown of thorns, its construction in 1967 was the source of considerable tension, as described by the chancellor in his 1986 address to the regents. Academic leaders feared that ORU would never be able to obtain accreditation with a Prayer Tower in the center of the campus. The chancellor wavered, but

"Lee Braxton stood and fought like a tiger. He said, 'Oral Roberts, you said that God told you to build Him a university, on His authority and on the Holy Spirit. You said that. And you published it and you've sold it to the partners. You sold it to us. You sold it to a bunch of people who could care less about higher education. All they want from you is your sermons and your prayers. Now you went and sold the most unlikely group of people to give you money and support to build a university. You told them

you were going to put a Prayer Tower in the center. I'm telling you, Oral Roberts, if I have to walk away it will destroy me."

The Prayer Tower cost two million dollars, a considerable sum in the face of other startup needs. Deliberately placed in the center of the campus, students and faculty see it constantly. To illustrate the seriousness of this issue, the chancellor described a three-day period of fasting and prayer for his partners, followed by a chapel service.

ORU graduated its first partial class in 1968, and its first four-year class in 1969—the period in which it encountered its first crisis. Chancellor Roberts announced plans to join the Methodist Church. This was a direct result of his leadership in the growing charismatic renewal. Spirit-filled adherents of denominational churches rejoiced, but his Pentecostal followers felt abandoned. The crisis passed, and was soon supplanted in March 1971 by the greatest day in ORU's history: the granting of full accreditation for 10 years by the North Central Association.

In many ways the first decade was ORU's golden era. Chancellor Roberts was intimately involved with every aspect of ORU life. Looking back at the first twenty years, mathematics professor Dr. Verbal Snook described a team effort by faculty, administration and president.

"As we worked together on committees, we developed respect for each other. . . . This mutual respect, coupled with competence in our disciplines, made us effective.

"By the early '70s, we had excellence within our grasp. Not because of scholarly activity, but because a nucleus of adequate scholars with adequate funding developed compatibility, and congealed solidly behind the challenge to build a university worthy to be called 'God's University.'"

Enrollment climbed rapidly during this time. In keeping with its mission, ORU began a summer missions program that continues to this day. More buildings were added—Mabee Center, four new residence halls, Howard Auditorium, the Aerobics Center, Christ's Chapel, J.L. Johnson Stadium and the "Baby Mabee" Television Production Studio. Graduate and professional schools in business, dentistry, education, law, medicine, nursing, and theology were opened. The Learning Resources Center was greatly enlarged by the Graduate Center addition, and a different kind of student became common: highly intelligent, with a greater focus on academic work. ORU always has been blessed with a core of highly committed Christians, but student quality, spiritually and academically, has varied with the times.

In the midst of everything good that was happening at ORU, tragedy struck the Roberts family with the 1977 deaths of Marshall and Rebecca (Roberts) Nash. A few months later Chancellor Roberts shared the vision God gave him for the City of Faith Medical and Research Center, citing God's promise that "I will rain on your desert." The center opened in 1981. (During this time, ORU became the number-one tourist attraction in Oklahoma and was considered a major economic leader in the city of Tulsa.) The economic model proposed for the City of Faith was soon challenged by a severe

recession. The financial health of the Oral Roberts Ministries was also weakened by a decrease in donations, partly due to the number of televangelists who began using the new medium of cable television.

In November 1985, the Board of Regents voted to transfer the ORU law school to Regent University. In 1986, the university closed its dental school. A year later, scandals occurred at two major television ministries, and that had a negative effect on the attitudes of many who supported Christian organizations, including ORU and the Oral Roberts Ministries. Faced with inadequate income to support all of its operations, ORU closed the City of Faith in 1989 and announced that the medical school would close at the end of the 1989-90 academic year. Today, the City of Faith is known as CityPlex Towers and serves as a commercial office center.

Athletics and aerobic exercise have always been a major part of ORU. Chancellor Roberts' stated goal was to win the national championship in basketball. Mabee Center and Johnson Stadium are clear witnesses to the chancellor's desire to be competitive in intercollegiate athletics. He saw this as a tool for soul-winning and promoting his healing ministry, often stating that most men turned first to the sports section of the newspaper. However, the success that ORU teams enjoyed in the 1970s declined in the 1980s. In 1989, a period of financial challenges, ORU left the NCAA and joined the NAIA.

In 1991, ORU rejoined the NCAA and began its climb back into the national spotlight. In 1994, President Richard Roberts hired Mike Carter as director of Athletics, marking a turnaround in the direction of this department. ORU joined the Mid-Continent Conference (now the Summit League) in 1997. The current athletic program has proven to be the best fit with the ORU mission and culture, primarily due to the director's leadership and ability to hire Christian coaches who support ORU's reason for being.

The transition to Richard Roberts as president came on the chancellor's 75th birthday, January 24, 1993. President Richard Roberts' first years were effective, as he assembled a quality team of vice presidents and deans to run ORU. He went out of his way to show his love for the students.

In 1998, ORU marked three noteworthy achievements: two new graduate programs, the Master of Management and the Doctor of Education, were established; the NCA continued ORU's accreditation for another ten years; and the university became affiliated with Livets Ord University in Uppsala, Sweden and Peniel College of Higher Education in Brentwood, Essex, England. In subsequent years, ORU started a highly successful honors program, a Leadership Academy, and a service learning program. Individual departments, schools and programs continued to impress their respective accrediting agencies and achieve sought-after approvals.

Most recently (2007), the School of Business received accreditation from the Association for Collegiate Business Schools and Programs.

Other welcome initiatives in the past decade have included small pay increases for faculty and staff, campus-wide summer renovations, new scholarship programs and the launch of a cutting-edge, award-winning student assessment program called ePortfolio.

ORU welcomed another HLC site team to campus in November 2007, which indicated at the exit interview that they would recommend continuing accreditation for ORU. However, that site team cited three major deficiencies: leadership, finances, and governance, and recommended a return site visit in 2009 to measure progress toward correcting those deficiencies.

In November of 2007, President Richard Roberts resigned and is now devoting himself to full-time evangelistic ministry. In the wake of his resignation, the Green family, founders of two successful corporations based in Oklahoma City, came forward with an offer of substantial financial help if ORU would make massive changes in its form of governance. The Board of Regents voted in January 2008 to accept the Green family's proposal, which outlined plans for a new Board of Trustees, greater financial accountability (including ECFA membership), new bylaws and other changes.

With the acceptance of this proposal ORU has entered an era of significant change. The new leadership, including the next president, has a **momentous opportunity** and a **grave responsibility** to transition ORU from a founder-governed system to a shared governance system, while holding fast to its God-ordained mission and the enduring values set in place by its founder. There is renewed excitement and interest on campus, as expectations of needed changes and new opportunities are building faith and hope that ORU once again may be worthy of the title, "God's University."