

Move of God:

How Billy Graham's legacy in the workplace is fuelling the Church's mission

*Billy Graham has preached to more people, in more countries, and seen more converts, than anyone else in history. He has also gathered the largest live audience of any preacher: 1.1m in Seoul. In this article, **Peter Heslam** and **Eric Wood** consider his work, and that of business leaders like Nigerian Paul Ubwe, in suggesting a sustainable model of mission.*

It is often assumed that Billy Graham's sole focus was on the need to be 'born again'. If he had another agenda it was only to generate more professional preachers, evangelists and missionaries to help carry this message. He has indeed, for more than 70 years, consistently emphasized both these needs. He has also given them robust institutional form, such as in his co-founding of Gordon-Conwell, one of the world's leading seminaries.

But when Graham's vast publication output is considered as a whole, he places far more emphasis on what today might be called 'whole-life discipleship'. Indeed, living the Christian life in whatever sphere of work we find ourselves is a constant theme throughout his ministry. He writes, for instance:

God wants to use you right where you are. Every day you probably come in contact with people who will never enter a church, or talk with a pastor, or open a Bible – and God wants to use you to point them to Christ.

In numerous other writings he stresses the dignity of work, the need to live the

Christian life 24/7, and that there should 'no discrepancy between our walk and our talk'. 'Becoming a Christian', he writes, 'is the work of a moment; being a Christian is the work of a lifetime'. He challenges people to pray for their colleagues and to empathise with them in tough times. They should also model integrity: 'Christians should be known in their neighbourhoods or places of business as honest people'.

Some missionaries, after catching a vision of the all-encompassing nature of Christ's call, have decided to pursue a wider mission in so-called secular employment. Despite the misgivings of some of those around them, they have seen this as an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of their witness.

One such person is Paul Ubwe in Nigeria, who we interviewed as part of our international survey of

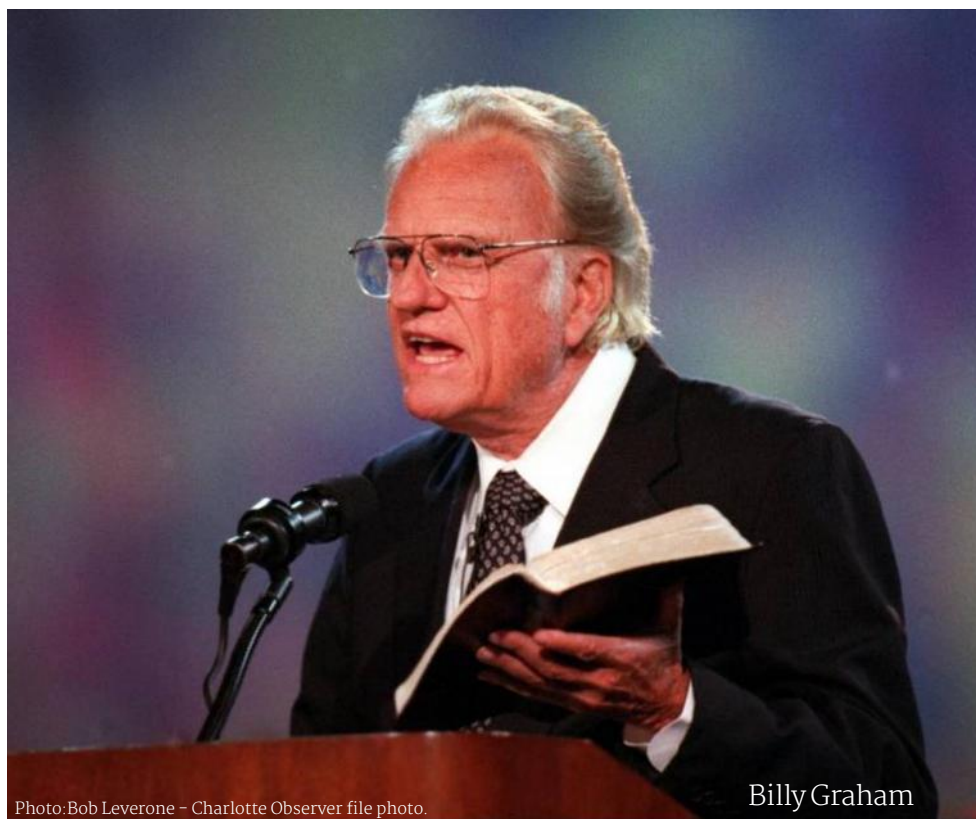


Photo: Bob Leverone – Charlotte Observer file photo.

Billy Graham



Photo: Serumun Ubwe

Paul Ubwe

Christian entrepreneurs. After working for twenty-two years with a mission agency that Billy Graham helped inspire, he and his wife felt they were being called to join God's mission in and through business. With a passion to address unemployment, they decided to launch a business that would create jobs and meet the transport needs of people already in work.

The result is a group of companies, the largest of which is Pleasure Travels, which has almost 500 employees. With locations around Nigeria, it provides safe, reliable and comfortable transport for around 2000 passengers per day. A key reason for its success, Paul insists, is the respect with which it treats its customers and employees. Pleasure Travels boosts its drivers' self-esteem by providing the following: constant reminders that they have custody over the lives of their passengers; rigorous safety

training; help with house-building loans; counselling; and generous remuneration.

Such is the trust and excellence this generates that the police increasingly allow Pleasure Travels coaches to pass unchecked through roadblocks. More importantly for a country suffering widespread poverty and unemployment, it means that for every employee the company takes on, at least twenty other people are fed. All this Paul sees from a mission perspective:

We set up the company in such a way as to help workers know the Lord and grow in their faith. My work as a missionary has a bearing on all my business activity. My calling as a business person is to positively influence lives. I allow my Christian values to put their stamp on my companies.

For Paul, his business work is as much God's work as his previous missionary work:

Christ said that he came so that we might have life and have it to the fullest. This means that if what I'm doing helps other people to be more comfortable, to live a fulfilled life, to put food to their table, and to pay for their children's medical and educational needs, I'm doing God's work. He wants us to live like human beings.


Placing people, rather than mere profit, at the heart of the business has helped it win public recognition. Following a government-led investigation, Pleasure Travels emerged as one of Nigeria's best companies. It has received,

consequently, government assistance in acquiring more vehicles so that more customers can be served.

Paul's story prompts fresh reflection on how the great commission Christ gave to 'make disciples of all nations' can be accomplished, especially when mission giving is in decline. While the gospel itself is free, the sharing of that gospel inevitably comes at a financial cost. Even Jesus' ministry depended on the support of small traders.

It ought not, therefore, to be shocking to claim that most of the church's mission and ministry is funded by 'secular' employers. This is because most of it happens through the lives of ordinary Christians in the workplace. Almost all the witness of the entrepreneurs in our study is funded by their customers. Customers pay for the value they perceive in the products and services that result from that witness.

When the locus for most of the church's mission is seen for what it is - ordinary everyday life - the great commission starts to look achievable. This is something to bear in mind when confronted with gloomy giving statistics.

Meanwhile, there is still a place for professional missionaries, and for large-scale evangelistic events of the sort Billy Graham championed. Communicators are needed with his clarity, conviction and integrity. But the challenge for most of us is to pick up the prophetic mantle he has laid down and rise to his claim: 'I believe one of the next great moves of God is going to be through the believers in the workplace.' 



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