

Evangelism for a life:

Does Oral Roberts have a future?



In a recent "Doonesbury" series, cartoonist Garry Trudeau referred to evangelist Oral Roberts' crusade as a "death watch"

God, it's me, Oral.

Oral. . . . Oral Roberts. I'm returning your call. Uhm hm. But Well, listen, God, I I'm really not into ultimatums, but

Raise what? Raise \$4.5 million before March 31? Or die?

Call it hotline to the Hostage Crisis. Religious figures are taking stands.

By CHRIS CAIN
Staff Writer

Oral Roberts, television evangelist and faith-healer extraordinaire, has surprised Americans many a time before.

But for many religious leaders, his most recent claim beats them all.

If his proclamations are to be believed, the chips are down for the Rev. Oral Roberts, and the stakes are sky high perhaps heavenly high. For in Oklahoma, where in the bygone days of the Wild West roulette wheels whirred and 5-card stud often ended with duelling six-shooters, Reverend Roberts may be caught up in a deadly poker game of his own. And he has set himself up against what some would call a mighty p'werful adversary: God.

According to Roberts, the Deity has given him an ultimatum: Either raise a lot of money quick or, quite simply, die. The evangelist claims that if, by March 31, Americans have not sent in \$4.5 million for overseas medical missions, God will strike him dead.

Consequently, over the last few weeks Roberts has been pleading with the American public to do him a good turn — to save his life by sending in donations of at least \$100. His son Richard writes in a recent mass mailing, "Let's not let this be my dad's last BIRTHDAY!"

With this news revealed, doubtless many eyes will be looking toward calendar date March 31 — most especially Roberts'. Though the press has raised many questions concerning the TV preacher's thoughts and motives, they haven't uncovered what is going on in Roberts' head.

However, he may well be thinking about the four ways this deadly game could end. First, he may fail to reach his goal and consequently be called home to face a disappointed God.

The Rev. Jim Bakker's press secretary, Neil Escalin, says that such a move, though uncomfortable for Roberts, could well convert half of America's atheists on the spot.

On the other hand, if Roberts doesn't raise the money and lives, he may see himself as the butt of a few distasteful jokes as he tries to explain God's benevolent bluff.

Assuming, however, that he does reach his \$4.5 million jackpot and he's moving toward it at a rate of

himself from the evangelist. "It's a poor representation of the Methodist Church," he said.

"The Methodist Church recognizes the power of the TV medium," but as far as TV preachers are concerned, "every time I look at one, they're looking for money — and there's a lot of money to be made," said Gattis.

At the heart of the Roberts debate, according to some religious figures, is not the amount of money he will make, but rather the way in which

for it. "Partners" were to send in donations of \$7, \$77, \$777 or \$7,777.

In 1980, with the hospital nearing completion, Roberts had another vision, this time of a 900-foot-high Jesus. As a result, Roberts pulled in \$5 million and completed the "City of Faith" in 1981.

Jesus called again in 1984, in an abridged form, this time for a seven-hour interview with Roberts. Jesus' instructions were that each "prayer partner," a TV viewer, send in \$240 in order to find a cure for cancer.

For such a donation, the viewer received 48 tapes of New Testament commentary, each with a retail value of about \$5. Along with the tapes came 14 special blessings, including health and financial success, according to Roberts. Roberts said Jesus told him, "Tell them that this is the

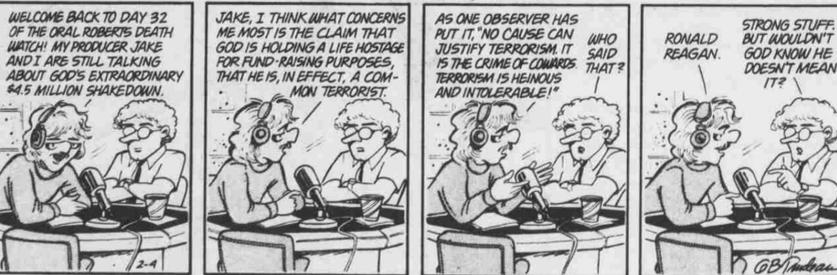
"Biblically speaking, the idea of God speaking in dreams is legitimate, but ordinarily it should be open to the confirmation or refutation of the community."

Abrahamson sees Roberts as a "lone ranger" of sorts and has strong reservations about the evangelist's message. "God is not a terrorist," Abrahamson said. Though the minister admits that he and Roberts are both fundamentalists and share many of the same beliefs, he draws a line between what he sees as two types of fundamentalism. He calls himself a "classical fundamentalist," holding "historical, doctrinal values and beliefs." He sees preachers such as Roberts and Jerry Falwell as "cultural fundamentalists" that are outspoken, arrogant and anti-intellectual. Roberts does little to inspire trust in the minister. "He's not the kind of guy I would buy a used car from," Abrahamson said.

Father Byron at St. Thomas More Church doesn't believe Roberts' claim either. "It's a hype thing," he said, adding, "Theologically, this is not the way God acts." Roberts' action springs from imagery that is not restricted solely to the Protestant religion, Byron said. "We have the same type of thing with the Catholic faith. The Blessed Mother is supposed to have appeared somewhere and people flock to the sight — it's happening today in Yugoslavia." Like Abrahamson, Byron doesn't view Roberts cynically. "Oral Roberts is not venal, but deluded."

National mass media preachers have less to say on the matter. Jerry Falwell in Lynchburg, Virginia and presidential hopeful Pat Robertson had no comment on the matter. Closer to home, Billy Graham's ministry in Montreat did not comment. Jim Bakker, who runs the PTL Club from Charlotte, said, "We are praying that Oral Roberts has a long and happy life."

Escalin, who is an old associate of Roberts, cited a recent Gallop poll that found a majority of Americans feel God speaks to them. "Then, when someone says they have heard from God, the media is always



over \$100,000 per day — he can't discount the possibility that God would, well, strike him down anyway.

The rosier scenario of all, though, has about \$5 million rolling in and Roberts, smiling and healthy, proclaiming victory. Thus the Roberts' organization would be happy (they have lots of money to spend), the TV audience would be happy (they have saved a life), and America's cartoonists would be really happy, for they will have something to lampoon for a couple of months.

Not everyone is pleased with Roberts and his fatal claim, including many of his fellow ministers. Roberts has been affiliated with the United Methodist Church for years, but the Rev. William Gattis of University Methodist is quick to distance

he will make it. Gattis said Roberts "has done some marvelous things" with his evangelical earnings in the past. "The deciding factor for me . . . is the predicting of his death," Gattis said. He finds the prediction unsettling and theologically unsound. "I don't know of any other historical or biblical precedent for such action," he said. "He has gone beyond his limits with this as a way to persuade people to donate money."

Roberts has stretched the limits of conventional etiquette before. His most recent pleas have been for money for the City of Faith Medical and Research Center, which he began building in 1977. In that year, he said, God came to him in the California desert and gave him instructions of how to build the hospital, how large to build it, and how to raise money

for it speaking through you. Oral Roberts, to them. When are you going to obey me? When?"

Roberts is betting that his congregation will obey this time. If it does, he will not only gain a few more years, but also some much-needed money. The New York Times reported last year that the "City of Faith" hospital complex was rarely over half full and was draining millions of dollars from his ministry. In 1986 Jan Dargatz, Roberts' press secretary, said that the hospital wouldn't have to close but that "Plan A isn't working and it's time to start looking for plan B."

Could this vision be plan B? Probably not, thinks the Rev. James Abrahamson of the Chapel Hill Bible Church. "I think he probably believes that it is a genuine vision," he said.

surprised." He said, however, that nothing as dramatic as a death threat has come to Bakker.

While Roberts' weekly TV audience is down by about half since 1977, PTL's ratings are up, Escalin said. The most recent vision "will probably increase Roberts' ratings," Escalin said. He says he can't determine whether Roberts' vision was a hoax or not. "I don't have the answer. Only God has the answer . . . and Oral will ultimately have to stand before God."

Dr Grant Wacker, who teaches contemporary American religion at UNC, also thinks that Roberts is at least sincere in his claim. "He believes he's gotten a message. This is no different than what he's been doing for decades."

Were it simply that Roberts needed money, he could raise it in a less dramatic manner, he said. "Next to Billy Graham he's the most effective fund-raiser this country has ever seen." Thus, he sees the press coverage given Roberts as unneeded. "They are acting like sharks circling for the kill. He is simply taking advantage of the means of publicity available to him . . . what he's doing is very much like many advertisers, Reylon or whoever." He cites advertisements that claim cigarettes cause cancer as being much more damaging than an Oral Roberts broadcast. But he hastens to say, "I'm not sending him my money."

Many, however, have already sent their money, and Roberts is calling the nation (through TV ads, mass mailings and personal appearances) to keep the contributions coming. He is scheduled to speak to a PTL Club banquet in Charlotte on March 7.

If, on March 31, death should strike, it would do so on the heels of another Roberts family tragedy, the suicide of his son in 1982. After that event, he called death "The devil's last card." Now he says it is God's last card as well. And according to Roberts, if America doesn't send in a lot more money, he will be forced to use it.

Roundup on religious opportunities

By JOANNE GORDON
Staff Writer

Far from Oklahoma as it is, UNC has plenty of religious organizations. Among the religious organizations on campus are those affiliated with the University Chaplain's Association, a group of local ministry leaders and university administrators. What are these organizations?

Baptist Student Union, sponsored by the Baptist church nationwide, yet open to non-Baptists, has about 50 to 120 students attending its regular meetings. Rev. Robert Phillips said, "The ministry has a choir that tours in the state, holds weekly Bible discussions, mission projects at Koinonia Farms outside of Plains, Ga., fellowship meetings, parties, retreats, works at Chapel Hill's soup kitchen, and sponsors missionary students, Phillips said.

Student fellowship meetings are held on Thursdays at 5:45 p.m. at the Baptist Student Center, 203 Battle Lane.

Newman Catholic Student Center, which functions as both a church and a student fellowship, offers "prayer and worship, service to the community, and provides a place for students to gather for social events." Pastoral Associate Sister Mary Lynch said.

The center has service and missionary projects including a senior support program, soup kitchen volunteer work, and Yokefellow communion services.

The center, located at 218 Pittsboro St., holds masses at 11 a.m., 12:15 and 5:15 p.m. everyday and at 9 p.m. on Sundays during the school year. On Wednesday evenings, students attend dinner and a program featuring speakers and peer presentations by students in the group.

Campus Christian Fellowship, although associated with the Churches of Christ, is a non-

denominational group, minister Frank Dodson said.

In addition to weekly programs and Bible studies, Campus Christian Fellowship sponsors service and missionary projects, conducts monthly activities, conferences and prayer brunches. Locally, the fellowship conducted last year's Carnival for Kids for the Frank Porter Graham after-school program. Fellowship members work with nursing homes, provide gifts for needy children and mentally retarded adults, work with the pregnant support services and support missions through offerings, according to Dodson.

CCF meets Sundays at 11 a.m. in the Student Union and holds a supper and program at the Campus House on Glenburie Street at 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays.

Episcopal Campus Ministry (Anglican Student Fellowship) is directly integrated into the parish of the Chapel of the Cross. Fellowship members participate in other local service projects, working with the YMCA, repairing and building homes and volunteering at the soup kitchen.

The 35-to 40-member fellowship meets on Tuesday at 5:45 p.m. for dinner and group discussions and for Saturday morning breakfast at 10 a.m.

In addition to the fellowship meetings, Chapel of the Cross, located at 304 East Franklin St., holds services on Sundays at 7:30, 9, 11:15 a.m., student group meetings at 5 p.m., and Eucharist at 5:15 p.m. Communion is also held at 7:30 a.m. Tuesday and 5:15 p.m. Thursday. Daily evening prayer occurs at 5:15 p.m.

Hillel Foundation, a Jewish student community center on campus, has been active for over 50 years.

Rabbi Frank A. Fischer said.

Students participate in the Soviet Jury Committee, a community action program to free Jews in the Soviet Union who want to leave and the Israel Committee, a program on Israel education and political events. Students also raise money for social service in the community and Israel.

The Hillel House, located at 210 W. Cameron St., holds Friday services and dinners, Sunday morning brunches twice a month, Tuesday evening fellowship, Monday and Tuesday evening Hebrew classes and Saturday study groups.

Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, which has 375 to 400 members, is the largest of the 800 IVCF chapters across the country. Its members meet weekly in 45 dormitory and apartment Bible study groups.

These groups conduct outreaches, work with the soup kitchen and in nursing homes, and sponsor full dorm discussions. Twenty-five members will travel during spring break — one group to Ft. Lauderdale to conduct beach evangelism and the other to the inter-city Washington community, according to director Jimmy Long.

IVCF members participate in the Young Life summer camp at Windy Gap in Asheville, N.C. About 20 students will go overseas on mission projects this summer in Mexico, Ireland and Kenya.

Intervarsity is helping to sponsor the Michael W. Smith concert to be held on March 17.

Lutheran Campus Ministry, although affiliated with the Lutheran church, is open to students regardless of their denomination. Pastor Larry Hartsell said.

Ministry members participate in retreats, gatherings with N.C. State University and Duke, other Bible study groups, and service projects.

such as the community kitchen. This year students will participate in Chapel Hill's first annual CROP walk to raise money for world hunger. And over the past five years the Lutheran Campus Ministry has sponsored three refugee families, Hartsell said.

Ministry meetings are at the campus center on 300 East Rosemary St. On Mondays the Lutheran Peace Fellowship group meets to discuss ways to promote peace making; on Wednesdays the ministry offers a group fellowship, communion service and a meal at 6 p.m., and, on Thursday evenings, the fellowship holds a Bible study and discussion. The Holy Trinity Lutheran Church holds services on Sundays at 8:30, 9:45 and 11 a.m.

Presbyterian Campus Ministry has about 45 to 50 students involved in its programs, weekly dinners, Sunday Bible studies and mid-week Eucharist services, according to Reverend Rebecca Reyes.

The ministry sponsors retreats, special speakers, occasional activities with N.C. State, UNC-G and Wake Forest groups, and service projects with the soup kitchen, Habitat for Humanity and the Rape Crisis Center.

The Presbyterian Campus Ministry holds programs at its student center at 110 Henderson St.

United Christian Fellowship, although non-denominational, is associated with the Charismatic churches throughout the country, according to Pastor Michael Evans.

The 50- to 75-member fellowship does door-to-door witnessing and evangelism and raises funds to help people pay electric, heating and food bills.

The fellowship holds services at Chase Cafeteria in the Upendo Lounge every Sunday, weekly Bible studies in dormitories and community homes and informal fellowships on Friday nights.

Wesley Foundation, sponsored by the United Methodist church, is non-denominational and open to any student, according to Reverend Manuel Wortman. Students participate in weekly programs, discussion and community service projects.

This year, Foundation students have repaired and winterized three or four homes in the community. In the past, the Foundation worked with the Interfaith Council and with the Habitat for Humanity.

Wesley Foundation sponsors communities in Kenya and Central America and a mini-dorm in which 11 undergraduate and graduate students live together in a multi-racial community.

Sunday services are held at the University Methodist church on Franklin Street at 11 a.m. Student church school class meets at 9:45 p.m. The 45-member Wesley singers rehearse at 6 p.m., and graduate and young professionals meet at 7:30 at the Wesley Foundation on 214 Pittsboro St.

