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Encouraging people to sing secret of Cliff Barrows' success

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- He might be America's best-known song leader, but Cliff Barrows doesn't consider himself an accomplished musician.

"I don't play the piano," Barrows, 78, said just before the recent Billy Graham crusade in Louisville, Ky.

"I think a musician who is not familiar with the keyboard has a great handicap unless he has somebody that he's married to who can play for him," he said.

"And, of course, I was for 50 years," he said, referring to his first wife, Billie, who died of cancer in 1994.

From the beginning, Barrows has directed music for Billy Graham's rallies and crusades.

Part choir director and part master of ceremonies, Barrows is responsible for the seamless progression of singers, speakers and other events leading up to Graham's message and invitation to become a Christian.

"Cliff Barrows is that important person who really holds the service. He's the platform manager," said Don Hustad, a professor of music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a former organist for the crusades.

"He emits a magnanimous spirit of welcome and of joy," Hustad said.

Yet if it wasn't for a chance encounter during his honeymoon, America might never have gotten to know and love Barrows. He said it was a youth rally near Asheville, N.C., that eventually linked his fate with the famed evangelist.

"I met him when I was 22 and he was 26," he recalled of his meeting Billy Graham in 1945.

Barrows and his wife had just graduated from college and were staying at the home of a friend who invited them to an event where Graham was speaking.

"When we arrived, the director of the conference said, 'Well, we have a little problem tonight. We don't have a song director.'"

Before they could object, the Barrowses' host enlisted Billie Barrows to play the piano and Cliff Barrows to direct the music.

"With a big smile he said, 'Come on Cliff; we won't be choosy. Let's go,'" Barrows recalled.

Within a month, Graham and Barrows were at Winona Lake, Ind., at the founding of Youth for Christ International.

The two worked together with Youth for Christ before they later formed the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

"We traveled all over Europe together. I would lead the music and he would preach at these big youth rallies," Barrows said. "The Lord just knit our hearts together in a very special way."

But Barrows said that for three years he entertained thoughts of going back to school for ministry training.

"And I made the decision about 1948 to not try to go back to seminary and preach. I like to preach, but the Lord spoke to our hearts and said, 'You be content to just stay where you are and lead the music for Mr. Graham and help him any way you can, and I'll take care of the preaching end of it,'" he recalled. "Well, he has, and I've been able to preach in so many different places."

Hustad noted that Barrows fills a role important in the history of American revivals. "They never talked of (evangelist Dwight L.) Moody alone. It was Moody and (song leader Ira D.) Sankey." Likewise, Billy Sunday had Homer Rodeheaver, Hustad said.

"In a sense, we should have been talking all these years about 'Graham and Barrows,'" he said.

While Barrows calls it a "great privilege" to serve with Graham, Graham is equally complimentary of Barrows' importance to the success of the crusades.

"From the moment I met Cliff Barrows, I knew he had a rare combination of strengths," Graham wrote in his autobiography, "Just As I Am."

"He loves music and he knows the importance of music in touching the hearts of an audience," Graham wrote. "When he leads the choir in singing 'Just As I Am' when I begin the invitation, he is just as much a part of what the Holy Spirit is doing in people's hearts as I could ever be."

For his part, Barrows said he appreciates the uniqueness of each crusade these days.

"I think each one is a little more unique and special in that God has extended our ministry to allow us to hold another one," he said.

During the team's prayer time each day of a crusade, that special feeling is invoked, he added.

"Our prayer is, 'Lord, make this as exciting to us as if it was the first one and as urgent to us as if it were the last one,'" he said. "And it could well be. We don't know when our time is coming."

Barrows' theology of music covers both Christians and non-Christians.

"A crusade gives the world outside a chance to see what the body of Christ is like when they work together, sing together, pray together," he said.

Christians get to experience the joy of singing with other Christians of various denominations, races and backgrounds, he added.

"The Scripture says the Lord inhabits the praises of his people, and I think his spirit is evident in a special way where his people are praising him."

For non-Christians, songs prepare their hearts for Graham's upcoming message. "I think the music, more than anything else, prepares the hearts of the people for the service."

Working in Louisville with thousands of singers who composed a massive 4,000-member choir, Barrows was nonchalant about how so many voices can come together in just a few hours of rehearsal.

"If they start together and stop together, that's the important thing," he said. "And hopefully they'll get the right notes in between, and they do."

Besides, most choir members already know how to read music, he noted. Others can follow the lead of the person standing next to them, and most of the songs are familiar to them.

"There have been many times in years past where we only had one rehearsal 30 minutes prior to a crusade service," he said. "It's no genius that does this. It's just the fact that they're anxious to sing and they're attentive."

Ultimately, it is passion, not ability that Barrows said has driven his role with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

"The Lord put a great love in my heart to encourage people to sing, and I've worked with volunteers all my life.

"I would rather have a choir of 100 volunteers than the finest professionals in the city if I had my choice," he added. "We have a message to sing about with joy, and that makes all the difference."

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Churches must reach hearts, not heads, to thrive, expert says

By David Winfrey

ATLANTA (ABP) -- In today's multiple-option world, thriving churches are those that can adapt to the culture around them to reach people's hearts -- not their heads -- according to a church-growth specialist.

"In the 20th century, we grew Christians based on knowledge first and experience second," said Tom Bandy, a consultant with Easum, Bandy and Associates Inc. in Port Aransas, Texas. "In the 21st century, it's just the opposite. You don't start with the head. You start with the heart."

Speaking in a workshop during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's recent General Assembly, Bandy said that the church is no longer a valued component in many communities. He said many people who visit churches are embarrassed to tell their friends.

"They have not come because they need a youth group for their child," he said. "People come because they have an itch they cannot scratch any other way."

Reaching these people requires churches that are focused on helping people discover new meaning in their lives through Christ and equipping them for ministry and meaning, Bandy said. But too many congregations are based on a static model that doesn't attract today's non-Christians, he added.

"Nine times out of 10, churches are not growing because their structures are based on getting people enrolled, informed, supervised and kept," he said.

Not so, however, with today's thriving churches, he added. "This church grows, not because you have an evangelism committee and not because you have a paved church parking lot," he said. "It grows because every day, in every way, people are being changed, gifted, called and sent."

Bandy outlined a five-point path that many thriving churches use today to help transition visitors into active members who participate in ministry:

-- Mission. Mission-focused churches focus their programs and worship so that non-Christians experience God, Bandy said. Often this won't occur first in a worship setting but in a ministry such as divorce-recovery workshops or other programs to meet the needs of people who aren't attracted to the front doors of a church. As a result of that mission, visitors are attracted to Jesus, who is the motivating factor for the mission activity, he said. Likewise, Bandy added, worship is designed to help people feel the touch of God.

-- Membership. After visitors have experienced God and become Christians, they move to membership in the church, Bandy said. But that doesn't involve the same commitments as were seen in the past, he added.

"Membership in a thriving church has nothing to do with voting rights," he said. "Membership is nothing more than a covenant to go deep."

He added that he has been encouraged to find that new Christians coming from unchurched backgrounds these days have an interest in deeper spiritual experiences often not found among nominal Christians who grew up in the church.

-- Meaning. As members grow through discipleship, they discern that God has gifted them and called them to service, Bandy said. Members learn about their spiritual gifts and how they can use them to serve God, he noted.

-- Maturity. Members grow in spiritual maturity as they begin to develop their gifts and explore ways to apply them in service.

-- Ministry. Members serve others who have needs that Christians are especially gifted to meet, helping them to experience God.

Helping Christians grow will result in members taking their faith out in the community, he said. Whereas church leaders used to ask, "How can I get more people into the church?" church leaders at thriving churches are now asking, "How can I motivate more people to walk with Jesus?"

"All that matters is that people experience God and walk daily with Jesus," Bandy said. "The rest is tactics."

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