

## Crusade's closing night is not the end, but the beginning

By Will Hall

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PARIS, Tenn. (BP)--Surveying the roughly 300 new believers and others crowding the platform for the last altar call of a four-day crusade, evangelist Rick Gage of Duluth, Ga., confidently proclaimed, "With a team of committed followers this size, we can turn Paris and Henry County upside down for Jesus."

For Gage, it is not just an empty expression; instead, it is the focus of his ministry. He organizes crusades in county-seat cities across America not simply to evoke professions of faith, but to help those who truly are saved make a commitment for life. He comes alongside churches in the area to help them continue to evangelize the city long after his group leaves for the next town.

"We want each person we touch to become a real disciple for Christ and a difference-maker for Christ right there in that community and get plugged into a local church so they can continue fulfilling the Great Commission, not only there but abroad," said Gage, who launched his evangelistic ministry in 1990.

More than 10,000 people attended the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade, Sept. 16-19, in Paris, Tenn., a town of about 10,000 people in Henry County. An estimated 4,000 area residents were present the last night.

The foundation for the crusade and the discipleship that now is underway was laid nearly six months earlier. In March, Gage and some of his advance team first met with area pastors who had been praying for something spiritually significant to happen in their town. James Twilbeck, director of missions for the Western District Baptist Association, contacted Gage to enlist his help. Gage recalled Twilbeck saying he had read an article about Gage's crusade evangelism and phoned to get more information.

"Hey, we're talking about praying, about having a crusade here in Paris, Tenn., and I just got my SBC Life magazine and saw you had an article in there, and I'm getting ready to meet with my evangelism committee," Gage said in recounting Twilbeck's initial contact. "Could you overnight me a packet about your crusade ministry?"

Bob Thompson, a member of Gage's ministry board who served as crusade director for the Paris campaign, remembers that about 70 people came to the first meeting. However, when Gage and he returned for a banquet several weeks later, a 500-seat facility was sold out to those eager to be part of the crusade effort.

Thompson said it took a good amount of time over five more trips to organize the counseling, training, discipling, prayer committee and arrangements committee, and to get commitments to set up the staging, lighting and other little things. "But, the



Evangelist Rick Gage, holding his Bible aloft in Paris, Tenn., continues to see responsiveness in his ministry in county-seat towns. Nearly 900 decisions for Christ were recorded at the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade. *Photo by Robin Nelson*



Even as the lights dim at the high school football stadium in Paris, Tenn., a volunteer with the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade continues to talk about faith with one of the 893 people who made decisions for Christ during the four-day outreach. *Photo by Robin Nelson*



In Paris, Tenn., a volunteer with the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade prays with two young men who responded to evangelist Rick Gage's call to faith in Jesus Christ. *Photo by Robin Nelson*

counseling training itself was an ongoing process," he said in punctuating the emphasis of their preparations.

Thompson also explained that the four nightly services were not the whole of the crusade.

"Rick Stanley and I went and visited every single school in the [area] surrounding Henry County [High School]," Thompson said.

Stanley is an evangelist and stepbrother of Elvis Presley. He regularly travels with Gage's crusades, giving his testimony.

"Then on Monday, the Henry County superintendent brought every single young person from fourth grade to 12th grade to the stadium on Monday morning," Thompson added. "They wanted to do a session on bullying. And they wanted to know if they could use our screen and staging and lighting."

They also asked Gage and Stanley to address the students about bullying.

Thompson said the superintendent had been uneasy about the crusade taking place in the high school's stadium, but after the Monday session, praised the professionalism of Gage and Stanley and offered to let Thompson use him as a reference in trying to secure facilities in other towns.

"The local college [Bethel] asked Rick [Gage] to speak, too," Thompson added. "And 100 of those people made decisions in one day, and Rick Stanley on Wednesday morning spoke at the local jail."

At the jail, Stanley learned that 62 pastors come through monthly to visit with inmates.

He recalled vividly the eager response of one group of inmates after they listened to the Gospel of Christ and how it changes lives.

"There was weeping and crying, which moves me," Stanley said.

"I told them, 'Now if you really, really mean it and you're willing to read your Bible and you're willing to let these different people -- these 62 different pastors disciple you, I want you to stand up.' And every one of them stood up.

"I knew the prayer committee had been praying."

Stanley was awed by what took place during one transition between pods [housing units of 30 or so prisoners].

"I went to one pod," Stanley said, "and the officer says, 'This young guy just got finished talking over here, and he told the ladies how to become a Christian and how to be saved.'



A decision for Christ is recorded in Paris, Tenn., by one of the volunteers with the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade led by evangelist Rick Gage. *Photo by Robin Nelson*



Heavenward worship preceded evangelist Rick Gage's Gospel preaching in Paris, Tenn., as nearly 900 decisions for Christ were recorded through the Greater Kentucky Lake Go Tell Crusade. *Photo by Robin Nelson*



Hands of new believers are raised in Paris, Tenn., as evangelist Rick Gage tells them, "With a team of committed followers this size, we can turn Paris and Henry County upside down for Jesus." *Photo by Will Hall*



Evangelist Rick Gage, preaching in Paris, Tenn., holds forth the Bible's words in calling non-believers to truth Christ for salvation at the Greater Kentucky

"And with tears in his eyes," Stanley added, "he said to them, 'I want you guys to know, I just prayed to receive Christ, to become a Christian about 10 minutes ago.'"

Lake Go Tell Crusade. *Photo by Robin Nelson*

Other officers joined in listening to Stanley's message.

"It was powerful, and I just kept praying, 'Lord, don't let me say anything to quench the Holy Spirit.'"

During the visit, all of the 126 inmates who heard the Gospel presentation made decisions for Christ.

Gage underscored that a profession of faith is only the starting point for the crusade team. The focus after that is to connect every person with a church for immediate follow-up.

"Every decision, every night is taken back to an office, and all that data is inputted into a computer," Gage said. "The next day, at our noon lunches we give every church involved in the crusade a copy of every record."

Gage said the push is to start follow-up for discipling, but that every decision also offers further potential evangelism opportunities.

"We tell them, let's follow up now. Let's fish while the fish are biting," he said. "The example I use often is: If 'Johnny' got saved last night, I guarantee Johnny knows somebody in this town who needs to encounter, who needs to experience what he experienced last night.

"It could be Johnny has some family members in his home who need to be reached for Christ. So, let's reach out to Johnny, but also, let's reach out to Johnny's friends and get Johnny's friends to the crusade while this event is still taking place."

Gage's organization holds the churches accountable, pushing them to make sure everyone is contacted at least once within 72 hours. Over the course of weeks, ideally every church involved will make a contact with each person, with the potential of 40-50 touch-points. His team contacts the churches again in two weeks to check the progress of the follow-up process.

Gage says the ongoing harvests from each of his crusades dispute critics' claims that crusade evangelism doesn't work.

"Go tell those 893 people that just made decisions for Christ that it doesn't work," Gage offered. "Go tell those 50-plus churches that were involved in the crusade there in Henry County, Tennessee, that it doesn't work."

Gage already has received feedback from some touched by the Greater Kentucky Lake Crusade. He excerpted from one letter:

"On the first night, my family came to the crusade and my two older children, ages five and seven, were saved, and my husband and I rededicated our lives back to God.

"I'm telling you, you can't even know how much closer our once almost broken family has come together and the things that God has blessed me with. My cup runneth over. I get into the book "Download" [a discipleship book given by the crusade] and the Bible, and I can't be pulled away. Like a child at a candy store, I'm so blessed in my heart and I just wanted to thank you and God bless you. I thank God every day for your whole team and the crusade and what He has done in my life. A million thank yous are not enough. God bless you in everything you do."

In four days, in a town of about 10,000, the nightly services drew more than 10,000, and 893 decisions for Christ from all outreach activities combined were recorded for follow-up.

"Paul told Timothy, in 2 Timothy 4:5: 'Timothy, work at bringing others to Christ,'" Gage said. "When we go into a town, we let them know we're coming to work, join hands, lock arms with them in the community to reach every lost soul we can in that part of the world."

Closing the thought, he added, "The only thing that's going to matter 10,000 years from today is how many people we reached for Him."

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