

# ‘Chaplain of Bourbon Street’ dies at 89

July 6, 2017

NEW ORLEANS (BP)—Famed New Orleans evangelist Bob Harrington, known by many as “the Chaplain of Bourbon Street,” died of kidney failure July 4 in Stigler, Okla., where he had lived the last seven years with family. He was 89.

Harrington became a well-known evangelist during the 1960s and 1970s following his conversion to Christianity at age 30 in his hometown of Sweet Water, Ala.

He was a popular guest on national television shows including *Phil Donahue*, *Merv Griffin* and *The Tonight Show* due to his one-liners and unconventional religious wit.

In the 1970’s, Harrington met atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair, and the unlikely duo toured 38 cities debating the existence of God.

“Yes, many may say Madalyn knows the Scriptures better than I do, but I know the author,” he said.

## **Missionary to ‘the nearest pocket of sin’**

Harrington’s eight-day crusades, first held in tents and later high school stadiums and convention centers, produced thousands of converts.

In 1960, after only a few years of preaching throughout the South on flatbed trailers and in tents, Harrington moved to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary with his wife Joyce, and daughters, Rhonda and Mitzi.



Famed New Orleans evangelist Bob Harrington, known as “the Chaplain of Bourbon Street,” died July 4 in Stigler, Okla., where he had lived the last seven years with family. He was 89. (Photo courtesy of BP) During his time in seminary, Harrington served as assistant pastor of First Baptist Church of New Orleans with J.D. Grey and continued his ministry as an itinerant evangelist. In a seminary chapel service, President Leo Edleman said, “Wherever there is a pocket of sin, there is a mission field, and the nearest Christian to it is a missionary.”

“The nearest pocket of sin was Bourbon Street,” said Harrington, who immediately began a street ministry armed with a microphone and a Bible.

### **Preaching in bars and strip clubs**

Several months later, deacons at First Baptist Church in New Orleans loaned him enough money for a few months’ rent to open a chapel on

Bourbon Street in the heart of the French Quarter. Harrington began witnessing and preaching in the bars and strip clubs of Bourbon Street.

In 1962, Mayor Victor Schiro proclaimed him “The Chaplain of Bourbon Street.”

Harrington’s street ministry message was bold and simple: “God loves you just as you are. He knows you are a sinner and wants to save you. Don’t figure it out. Faith it out!”

In 1968, he held a revival at Castle Hills First Baptist Church in San Antonio. During the revival, the owners of a burlesque club attended an evening service and became Christians. Guy and Evelyn Linton immediately closed the club and posted a sign: “Closed forever. See you in church.”

### **National fame followed**

Doubleday Printing published his story, *The Chaplain of Bourbon Street*, written by Harrington with Walter Wagner, in 1969. Harrington went on to publish seven more books and released more than 30 record albums.

The sermon album *Laughter, Truth and Music* was released in 1965, and it became a gold album with more than \$1 million in sales worldwide. Later, Harrington earned a second gold album for *Chaplain of Bourbon Street*, a recording of his first television show.

His legacy includes invigorating the Christian community with his signature slogan, “It’s fun being saved.”

### **Derailed by personal issues**

But in time, personal issues led to Harrington’s departure from ministry for a time. The “devil threw me a pass, and I caught it and ran for defeat,” he said regarding his years out of the ministry.

In the 2000 November issue of *SBC LIFE*, Harrington told about his past struggles in the article titled, "Chastened Chaplain: A forthright account of failure and renewal." In the article, he referred to the "pass" Satan threw the evangelist during the height of his success as "pride, arrogance, self-centeredness and stubbornness."

His first marriage ended, along with his ministry on Bourbon Street, in 1977. He married again and moved to Florida but later divorced. During the 1980s and 1990s, Harrington was a popular motivational speaker, primarily with car dealerships and real estate companies.

One evening in 1995 in his hotel room, he was robbed and nearly beaten to death.

Harrington had said at that time "the phone rang, and it was Rex Humbard (long-time pastor of the Cathedral of Tomorrow in Akron, Ohio, where Harrington had preached many times), my old friend. He said it was time for me to come back to the Lord, and I did."

After divorce and bankruptcy, Harrington recalled being at the bottom, which he said "is right where God can use you!" Harrington began a restoration period and moved back to New Orleans.

In 1998, he married Rebecca Harris Birdwell and moved to Mansfield, where he continued preaching. His wife died of a heart attack in 2010.

That same year, he moved to be near his younger daughter Mitzi Woodson and her husband, Steve, in Stigler, Okla, where he regularly attended First Baptist Church in Stigler.

Harrington said many times: "I want my tombstone to read: 'Born the first time—September 2, 1927 in Cox Heath, Ala. Born again—April 15, 1958. Died—He didn't. Transferred to heaven.'"

Harrington is survived by two daughters: Rhonda Harrington Kelley (Chuck) of New Orleans and Mitzi Harrington Ramsey Woodson (Steve) of Stigler, Okla.; four grandsons; and two great grandchildren.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Rebecca Harris Harrington; one brother, Jerry Hill Harrington of Thomasville, Ala.; and one son, Robert Grey Harrington.