



A rare photo of early Youth for Christ leaders, taken at fifth annual convention of Youth for Christ, Winona Lake, Indiana, July, 1949. Those now deceased are indicated by asterisk (*). From left to right in front row: Roy McKeown, Jack Cochran, John Henderson, Paul B. Smith, Phil Palermo, Floyd Ankerberg, Louis Palermo, Charles Anderson*; second row: George M. Wilson, Walter H. Smyth, Robert A. Cook, Torrey Johnson, Billy Graham, Paul Maddox, Frank Phillips,* T. W. Wilson, Cliff Barrows; third row: Bill Stevens, Harold Jordan, Evon Hedley, Jack Hamilton, Herb Tyler, Clyde Rowe, Ed Darling; fourth row: Mel Larson,* Ken Anderson, Dick Hillis, Chuck White, Al Meisker, Cy Jackson, and Cedric Sears

the Lost prayer meeting

In all the thousands of words written about the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade, no one has ever mentioned this incident at Winona Lake; yet can anyone doubt that God used it?

It was 3 o'clock in the morning on Wednesday, July 13, 1949. Between forty and fifty young men were gathered in the Rainbow Room of the Westminster Hotel in Winona Lake, Indiana. They had been there for five hours — praying.

The occasion was the fifth annual convention of Youth for Christ. The newly elected president of the organization, Robert A. Cook, had sounded the keynote by telling the young rally directors from all over the United States and Canada, "The price of leadership is prayer." Evangelist Armin Gesswein of southern California, who had been invited to conduct the prayer sessions, had added, "If you are going to have prayer, it has to be frontal, not peripheral."

That was how an all-night prayer meeting happened to be called in the midst of a busy week-long convention. The men had been alternating prayers with praise, verses of Scripture, and requests for more prayer. At midnight Cook had challenged the group: "Who is dry? Who feels out of the will of God? Who senses that his work is fruitless?" When someone expressed a need, a brother would join him and they would move to a quiet corner for prayer.

Now it was 3 a.m., and things were beginning to warm up. Hearts were poured out before God. The tide was running high. Gesswein stood to his feet. "You know," he said, "our brother Billy Graham is coming out to Los Angeles for a Crusade this fall. Why don't we just gather around this man and lay our hands on him and really pray for him? Let's ask God for a fresh touch to anoint him for this work."

At that time Billy Graham was

vice president of Youth for Christ. He got up from his seat, walked to the front and knelt on the oak floor. A dozen men joined him, including Gesswein and another Californian, Roy McKeown. Hands were laid gently on him who was the subject of the prayer burden, and the intercession began.

When it was over and the men were still kneeling, Billy Graham opened his Bible to Joel 3:13 and read aloud the words, "Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down: for the press is full, the vats overflow." Then he said, "Fellows, I'm taking that verse with me to the West Coast. I believe if we will put in the sickle, we shall reap an unprecedented harvest of souls for Christ."

Prayer went on in the Rainbow Room for another hour before the men retired. Two months later, at the corner of Washington Boulevard and Hill Street, Los Angeles, the tent Crusade began, sponsored by Christian pastors and laymen who had banded together as "Christ for Greater Los Angeles."

This is not the place to tell the story of the Crusade, of its extension to an unparalleled eight weeks, of the dramatic conversions that occurred, of the crowds that began to flock to the great tent, of the sudden nationwide interest that sprang up following a feature story in the Los Angeles *Examiner*, or of the emergence of Billy Graham's ministry as a religious phenomenon of the 20th century. Hundreds of thousands of words have been written about the events of those exciting days.

Curiously, none of the published accounts seem to have mentioned the spiritual preparation that took place at Winona Lake. Other prayer meet-

ings related to the Crusade have been well documented: the student revival at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, late in 1948; an intensive prayer meeting at Northwestern Schools, Minneapolis, in May, 1949, during the visiting ministry of J. Edwin Orr (the president of Northwestern was Billy Graham); the revival prayer conference at Pacific Palisades, California, in July, with Armin Gesswein and several hundred ministers, evangelists, missionaries and their wives; and the September college briefing conference at Forest Home, California, at which Mr. Graham was the morning speaker to some five hundred students.

All of these played a role in the spiritual groundwork for Los Angeles; and yet none of them seemed to "explain" the mid-century explosion that occurred that fall. Spiritual events always cast their shadows before them in the form of prayer. That is why I have chosen to describe what happened at Winona Lake as "the lost prayer meeting." In a way, it tells us as much about the operation of the Holy Spirit as does the arduous and faithful preparation that went into that city-wide Crusade.

Several of the men who were present in the Rainbow Room at Winona Lake have made the final transition from prayer to praise: they are forever with the Lord. Others have moved into positions of leadership in the church. None of those living have forgotten the occasion. Here are the comments of some of them, after 23 years:

Peter Deyneka, Slavic Gospel Association, Chicago, Illinois: "We had prayer every morning from 7 to 8 o'clock at those conventions, and from 4 to 5 o'clock every afternoon,

and then special all-night meetings. They were great times, and great things happened."

Roy McKeown, World Opportunities, Inc., Los Angeles, California: "In my opinion the Rainbow Room played an extremely significant role in Billy's ministry, and not only in his. A number of the rest of us have branched out into worldwide ministries that God has blessed. I remember that Peter Deyneka used to say in those days, 'Roy, much prayer, much power.' God just spoke to all of us. We fell on our faces before him."

Dr. Robert A. Cook, president, The King's College, Briarcliff Manor, New York: "I remember that night clearly. We prayed in faith, and felt that we had got through to God. Billy then told us that he felt God was speaking to his own heart through that verse in Joel. I am grateful to have had some share in those beginning days."

Dr. Ted W. Engstrom, executive vice president, World Vision International: "No one who was at that prayer meeting in Winona Lake in 1949 could possibly have forgotten it. It was one of the greatest nights that those of us present could ever remember. One aspect of it was the complete unanimity of spirit. Practically all of the men present found places of significant leadership in evangelism in the days following."

Reverend Armin Gesswein, founder, Revival Prayer Fellowship, Los Angeles, California: "It was probably the greatest of the many nights of prayer we had in those days. A tremendous spirit of prayer came upon the meeting. The fellows really took hold. We had a very special burden of prayer for Billy, and we were really asking God to do a new thing on the evangelistic front."

In addition to those already mentioned, and those appearing in the accompanying photograph, Bob Pierce, Ben Weiss, and Jack Sonnavelt were also present at Winona Lake.

This is an unfinished story. I hope that in future issues of DECISION more information about "the lost prayer meeting" will be gleaned from those who remember it. Please write us!

S.E.W.