



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 29, 2011

Teen Challenge Founder David Wilkerson Dies

David Wilkerson, who pastored the 5,000-strong Times Square Church (left) in one of New York City's seedier red light districts, and who founded the highly successful faith-based Teen Challenge drug treatment and Christian mentoring program, has died at the age of 79. As reported by the Associated Press, Wilkerson was killed April 27 "in a car accident in East Texas, Texas Department of Public Safety spokeswoman Tela Mange said. Wilkerson's car smashed head-on into a tractor-trailer rig after veering into oncoming traffic on U.S. 175 west of Cuney, about 95 miles southeast of Dallas, Mange said."



In 1958, while pastoring a small Assemblies of God church in Pennsylvania, a young Wilkerson read a [Life](#) magazine article about a group of teen-aged street gang members in Brooklyn who were on trial for the brutal murder of a disabled young man. Touched deeply by the plight of the youth, Wilkerson felt compelled to travel to New York to reach out to them, and while the judge at the murder trial threw the minister out of the courtroom, Wilkerson decided to stay on and reach out to the drug addicts, pimps, prostitutes, and gang members whom he met on the streets of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn.

Wilkerson later chronicled his ministry among New York's most desperately needy in his book [The Cross and the Switchblade](#), which has sold more than 30 million copies since its 1963 publication. The book has impacted millions of people, including one Baptist pastor in Europe, who told Wilkerson that he came to faith in Christ after reading a hand-written copy of the book while he was jailed in a Russian prison. The evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* ranked the book number 32 on its list of the "[Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals](#)."

In 1970 *The Cross and the Switchblade* became a popular feature film, with singer Pat Boone in the role of David Wilkerson and Hollywood television star Erik Estrada playing Nicky Cruz, one of Wilkerson's early converts among New York's street gangs.

Cruz, who has been involved in fulltime ministry for over 50 years, recalled the impact Wilkerson had on his life. Growing up in a rough inner-city neighborhood in the 1950s, Cruz said that he "lacked the influence and guidance of a father in my life. David stepped in and took on the role of not only my spiritual father, but also that of an earthly father. I loved him."

The gang member-turned-evangelist said that Wilkerson once confided that he sometimes got discouraged in his ministry. "When I do," he told Cruz, "I think of the day of your conversion and the miracle Jesus did in your life. Thinking of that day always lifts my spirits and I keep going. That memory always makes me happy."

Wilkerson's early ministry on the streets of Brooklyn was destined to birth an international outreach



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called Teen Challenge, which today includes hundreds of centers around the world that use biblical principles to help people of all ages with substance addictions and other life issues.

In 1987, after nearly 30 years of ministry on the streets of New York, Wilkerson founded the non-denominational [Times Square Church](#) “in an area of Manhattan that was then riddled with X-rated movie houses, strip clubs, prostitution, and drugs,” reported the Associated Press.

[National Review](#) columnist Nancy French recalled that when she was in New York she attended the church, whose congregation is composed of an assortment of down-and-outers, students, families, and professional people — who all come to worship God. “One Sunday you might sit between an investment banker who graduated from Princeton on the right and an unemployed garbage collector on the left,” she noted.

French wrote that the first time she attended a service at Times Square Church, Wilkerson announced to the congregation: “Ladies, when we stand to sing, please don’t leave your pocketbooks on the ground. Some thieves are here in the sanctuary, so keep an eye out on your belongings.”

Then, French recalled, Wilkerson added: “And for those of you who came here expressly to steal ... we welcome you. You came here thinking you’d leave with a few bucks, but you’ll leave knowing the life-changing love of God. Stay as long as you’d like.”

While millions knew David Wilkerson as “Pastor” through the monthly newsletter he had mailed to ministry partners and supporters for over 30 years, perhaps no one knew him better than his son, Gary Wilkerson, who followed his father into fulltime ministry. Looking back on his father’s life, the son said that David Wilkerson would be remembered for his unlimited faith. “He believed God could change the lives of gang members and transform the most desperate drug addicts,” recalled the younger Wilkerson. “He believed that a dynamic church could be launched in the heart of Times Square, New York City. He believed he could be a man who loved his wife and children well. And he did.”

Reflecting on the tragic death, Wilkerson said, “I don’t think my father would have retired well. I don’t think he was one to sit in a rocking chair and reminisce about times past. I believe that Jesus, knowing this, graciously called him home.”

Gary Wilkerson noted that his father’s “last mission on earth was to be an advocate for the poorest of the poor — to provide relief and support for hungry children and widows and orphans. After founding Teen Challenge, World Challenge and Times Square Church, he sought to feed starving children in the most impoverished countries in the world. Today, [Please Pass the Bread](#) is saving the lives of thousands of children, through 56 outreaches in 8 countries.”

On the final day of his life David Wilkerson, who published a [daily devotional](#) that was e-mailed to hundreds of thousands of subscribers, wrote an encouraging word to “those going through the valley and shadow of death,” telling them: “Weeping will last through some dark, awful nights, and in that darkness you will soon hear the Father whisper, ‘I am with you.’ Beloved, God has never failed to act but in goodness and love. When all means fail — his love prevails. Hold fast to your faith. Stand fast in his Word. There is no other hope in this world.”



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