

Spirit under the tent

"YOU ARE INVITED. HOLY GHOST MIRACLE REVIVAL CRUSADE. COMING TO RALEIGH, N.C. AUGUST 1-24. OLD FASHIONED TENT REVIVAL. WITH DYNAMIC FAITH EVANGELIST FREDDIE POWELL. FOR PEOPLE OF ALL FAITHS. PREACHING AND PRAYING FOR THE SICK ... COME EXPECTING MIRACLES."

By **RICK WARNER**
Staff Writer

Dusk, Saturday. A charcoal hot August sun is fading. A few miles east of Garner, a white school bus pulls off Highway 70 and turns into an open field.

Ten people, mostly elderly women, get out and walk slowly toward an old mud-colored tent in the corner of the field.

"We're all from Rev. Powell's church in Kinston," says the driver, a construction worker named Paul Dunn. "We're here to get the spirit. You know there's got to be some spirit here to get us all the way from Kinston."

As Dunn and the other early arrivals move under the tent, they are greeted by Jimmy Freeman, the associate pastor of Holy Ghost Miracle Revival Crusade. Freeman functions as the crusade's Ed McMahon, warming up the audience and occasionally filling in for the Rev. Freddie Powell. Freeman is wearing a flashy cream-colored suit with white suspenders.

"So good to see you, Brother Dunn," he says, putting his arm around Dunn's shoulder. "It's going to be a great night for Jesus, isn't it?"

"That's right," says Dunn, breaking into a big smile. "Going to be some souls saved for Jesus tonight."

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"THANK YOU, JESUS. THANK YOU, JESUS."

Freeman, microphone in hand, is strutting across a small wooden stage, pumping his hand wildly in a windmill motion. In the audience several women are fanning themselves

with folded paper and looking warily toward the ceiling lights, which are covered with buzzing mosquitoes.

"Thank you, Jesus," Freeman says. "Thank you for bringing us together tonight. You know, the devil don't like us being here tonight. Noooooo, he don't like it at all. 'Cause Jesus is going to make some miracles tonight. He's going to make the lame walk. He's going to make the deaf hear and the blind see . . ."

Freeman hops across the stage on one foot as his wife, Brenda, the crusade's organist-singer, leads the group in a gospel song.

A different spirit

An elderly woman in a lime-colored dress gets out of her chair, moves toward the stage and begins frantically kicking her legs in chorus-line fashion. A few feet away, a young boy is running in place, both arms shaking toward the roof.

"There's a different spirit under the tent," Freeman will say later. "Maybe it's the fresh air. Maybe it's the music. Whatever it is, I know people are more responsive. If they feel like dancing, they dance. If they feel like singing, they sing."

Music plays an integral part in the service. Besides Mrs. Freeman on the organ, there is a man on stage playing the guitar and another plays the saxophone. Freeman plays tambourines and maracas.

"The other night, we even had an accordion," says Mrs. Freeman, a large, friendly woman with long chesnut-colored hair.

"When I was in Bible school in Missouri, I was taught that music is the language of the soul. It speaks to everyone. A lot of churches frown on music, especially when it's played as loud as we play it. But I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I think Jesus likes to listen to happy sounds."

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As the night wears on, the congregation grows to about 40 people. Some are merely late. Others, mostly drivers, spot the lights from the highway and drift in out of curiosity.

"A lot of people come under the tent who wouldn't go to a regular church," Freeman says. "We get all types — alcoholics, drug addicts, homosexuals."

"In Greensboro, we had a young man possessed by the demon of homosexuality. He was in trouble with the law and was going to prison. But he came to us, and God set him free."

"One night, we had seven alcoholics come in and they all got saved. If you see that in a regular church, I'd like to know where."

Midway through the service, Freeman hands over the microphone to Powell, who has just arrived from his trailer home a few miles away. Powell, 41, has been a tent preacher since 1967 and until recently lived in Cary.

On the road

Each year Powell spends at least nine months on the road, setting up tents in towns all along the East Coast. He usually stays two to three weeks in each town, then packs up and spends a few days traveling to the next stop.

During the winter, when cold weather makes tent preaching impractical in most areas of the United States, he holds revivals in places like Haiti. He also preaches regularly at his home church, the Miracle Temple in Kinston.

"It's a demanding life," says Powell, whose father, Leon, is pastor of the Longview Holiness Faithful Church in Raleigh. "I haven't had a vacation in five years and I feel like I need one."

Family left behind

Powell is married and has two children, a son, 18, and a daughter, 16. The tent life has meant many hours away from his family.

"It's very lonesome and heartbreaking to be away from the ones you love," he says. "But I know Christ is coming and I've got to preach every day like it's the last."

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Over the years, Powell says he has noticed a general decline in tent revivals.

"They're still very strong in Florida and a few other areas, but overall I don't think there are as many as there used to be." One of the main reasons, he says, is money.

"We used to get most of the lots for free, but now we've got to pay for them. Then there's things like insurance, which cost money. Then there's the permits. You need to get all kinds of permits — building, electrical, you name it. To some preachers, it's just not worth the trouble."

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Tent revivals date back to colonial days, but they didn't reach their peak until after the Civil War.

"Originally, tents were used by revivalists because they couldn't get enough room in church," says Glenn T. Miller, associate professor of church history at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest.

"The churches in those days were very small. If a preacher wanted to reach a lot of people, he went outdoors, where the room was. A church might hold 20 people, but a tent could hold a whole town."

Since World War I, tent revivals have been on the decline. And the major reason, Miller says, is the rise of mass media.

"Many of the types of evangelists who might have taken to the tents have taken to the airways," he says. "You can go all the way back to the 1930s and 'Fuller's Old-time Revival Hour' on radio. Evangelists discovered they could reach more people in one broadcast than they could in 20 years of traveling around the country."

Miller says another thing that has hurt tent preaching is the spread of revivals to large auditoriums and stadiums.

"When people like Billy Graham can fill a 70,000-seat stadium, that wipes out the audience for a lot of tent preachers."

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Powell is cranked up now, his lavender suit drenched with sweat.

The tent is filled with chants of "Amen" and "Hallelujah."

"I want to tell you about this old widow I know," he says. "She got a \$290 gas bill and she couldn't afford to pay it. So she came to me and said, 'Rev. Powell, what am I going to do?'"

"I'll tell you what I did. I anointed her billfold ... and I want you to know that the next day she got a letter from the gas company saying it was all a mistake and she only owed \$8 instead of \$290. It just goes to show you that GOD IS BIGGER THAN THE GAS COMPANY."

Money is the topic of the hour. The collection plate has been passed around, and it's come up short. Powell says it costs \$100 a day to pay expenses, but only \$40 has been collected.

"We've been here two weeks and last night was the only night we met our need," he says after the service. "We're not trying to get rich. But we have to eat like everyone else."

Powell says he gets a salary of \$150 a week from his corporation, Miracle Temple Inc. But he says he puts half of it back to meet expenses.

"I know there are preachers who are shysters, and they give everyone a bad name. But we don't use any gimmicks. We wouldn't have lasted all these years if we did."

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It is not your everyday scene. An old man wearing a "Don't Turn Back on Jesus" button has collapsed in front of the stage after Powell touched him on the forehead. To evangelicals, this is known as the "laying on of hands." To outsiders, it's known as faith healing.

As the old man lies motionless on his back, fellow worshipers continue to parade in front of the stage, seemingly oblivious to the fallen body. In the background, Mrs. Freeman has struck up "When The Saints Go Marching In" on the organ.

Suddenly, the old man springs to his feet. He walks toward Powell and whispers something in his ear.

"Look at that," Powell shouts into the microphone. "The man was very sick. He was lost. He's been smoking too many cigarettes. Now he says he's going to quit. Praise the Lord."

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Midnight. A cool breeze is rustling through the empty tent. Outside her trailer, Mrs. Freeman is cradling her 9-month-old baby, Jonathan, waiting for her husband to return from an all-night grocery store.

"Yes, sometimes I get tired," she says, gently rocking the child in her arms. "But I know I wouldn't be happy doing anything else. When I had my little boy, we came off the field for a while and my husband got a regular job. But he wasn't happy."

"My husband is a preacher. That's his calling. When he wasn't preaching he felt empty inside."

She pauses, waiting for the right words. "No, I think this is the only life for us."