

IN MEMORIAM: DR. JAMES B. BUSKIRK (1933–2020)

FOUNDING DEAN OF ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY (1976–1984)

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Abstract

James Buskirk is honored as the founding Dean of ORU’s Graduate School of Theology. A Master of Arts degree was already in place; Buskirk was tasked with establishing a Master of Divinity, a Doctor of Ministry, and a PhD in theology—each fully accredited. During his tenure, faculty and student numbers increased along with denominational diversity. The MDiv and DMin achieved accreditation. The PhD was not started, however, as Oral Roberts dealt with competing financial priorities. Roberts’ declared decision not to offer a PhD led to Buskirk’s departure. He remained on good terms personally with Roberts. Buskirk’s effect on others is notable particularly in encouraging each to serve selflessly in the Holy Spirit’s power.

Introduction

Summing up his earthly ministry, Jesus prayed to the Father: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4, English Standard Version). That is a worthy aspiration for everyone—to do what God calls us to do. Yet there is another way to define what it means to live for the glory of God: “to live in such a way that people have a better opinion of God.” James

(Jimmy) Buskirk lived for God's glory in both ways. He remained focused on what God gave him to do; he lived and spoke in ways that caused people to have a good opinion of God. Anyone who met Jimmy (especially those who heard him preach!) found him impressive, but he consistently deflected all the glory to Jesus. At the climactic moment of his sermons, he would often say, "What a Savior!"

As we seek to honor Jimmy Buskirk with this memorial article, we are confident he would want to give glory to God for any and all good things accomplished through his servant. The writers and contributors here have a good opinion of Jimmy Buskirk, in large part because his life—his testimony, his preaching, and his example—gave us a better opinion of God.

Early Life and Ministry

Jimmy was born in a Methodist parsonage in Shannon, Mississippi, in 1933. In his youth he enjoyed sports, particularly basketball, and was an Eagle Scout by age fourteen. He became a Junior Scout Master for a rapidly growing troop of over 100 boys. He later said most of his professional abilities had their start with scouting: planning and executing meetings, motivating scouts, raising funds by speeches, and inspiring local civic clubs.¹

In 1951, he was called to ministry while a student at Millsaps College in Mississippi. The next year, he was appointed to a charge of five Methodist churches at age 18. While preaching one of many revivals, he met the pianist who became his beloved wife for sixty-six years, "my Nancy."²

Jimmy and Nancy had many good experiences in those early years of ministry in Mississippi. But it was sometimes challenging. Interviewed by John Erling for *Voices of Oklahoma*, after Jimmy retired, he recalled the following incident. While serving as pastor in Coldwater, Mississippi, his character and courage were tested by the racial turmoil of that era. After James Meredith enrolled as the first African-American at the University of Mississippi, Buskirk was warned not to talk about race from the pulpit—it would fan the flames, he was told, and it might prove fatal to the pastor! But taking seriously his responsibility as a minister of the gospel, he preached on the high cost of hate, dwelling particularly on the principle that it is impossible to love God and hate one's neighbor.³

After a Sunday evening sermon, unknown to the young pastor, sixteen men gathered and were on their way to teach him a lesson. One vigilante's wife asked for a private word with her husband and talked him into coming home. The others proceeded with their plan until they met an alcoholic whom Buskirk had befriended

while trying to lead him to Christ. When this man heard their violent intentions, he spoke up for Buskirk, convincing them also to go home. The following day he gave Buskirk the names of the men in the small mob that intended to hurt him, if not kill him. That week Buskirk visited each man; by the next Sunday they were back in church.⁴ Jimmy Buskirk was courageous and persuasive.

A more well-known incident from his early ministry was the healing of his eyes. He told the story many times, and audiences never tired of it. At age 25, he was told he would be blind in six months from chorioretinitis, a degenerating eye disease. Through ongoing prayer (by “Miss Virginia” and others) and through medical care, he miraculously recovered with 20/20 vision (not instantaneously but gradually). A crucial moment of that transforming experience was a conversation with his earthly father, Bob Buskirk, who said to him: “Son, I want you to call your specialist in Memphis and tell him we are going to exchange eyes. With yours, I can function until retirement; with mine, you can have your ministry and life back.” That impossible suggestion moved the younger Buskirk deeply. In his own words, he described what happened next:

[My dad] left and I put my head down on my desk and I didn’t just pray, “Lord, I give You my ministry” . . . I really did give it to Him. I realized that all my begging God to give me back my sight was not really faith. It was lack of faith. I was trying to convince God. And suddenly I realized if my earthly father wanted me to have my vision so much that he’d give me his eyes, that I could afford to trust whatever God would do for me, because my dad’s love is just a little reflection of my heavenly Father’s love. And my vision started returning from that point. It returned gradually within about a year.⁵

This revelation of God’s love opened a new level of trust and deep surrender to the Lord. This realization and the unfolding miracle of restored sight launched a creative burst of ministry. With newborn passion Buskirk pastored growing churches in Mississippi and Georgia over a period of seventeen years.⁶

Having received his Master of Divinity from Candler School of Theology (Emory University in Atlanta), he returned there to earn his Doctorate in Sacred Theology (1972). While completing the degree, he became the first professor to hold the Arthur J. Moore Chair of Evangelism at Candler. He trained students in effective evangelism in the classroom through an original program called Motivation for Ministry. He also took several students with him each time he preached, to observe and share the work of evangelism.

What Brought Him to ORU?

Occupying an endowed chair at a prestigious United Methodist seminary, with significant opportunities to impact students at Candler, why would Buskirk consider leaving? Indeed, he was initially reluctant to accept ORU's invitation, which came as a surprise.

As a guest preacher for ORU chapel (invited by Rev. Bob Stamps, campus minister), Buskirk was well received by students, faculty, and Oral Roberts himself. This reception went far beyond Buskirk's expectation or imagination. When he arrived in Tulsa he was not feeling well, and he prayed for God's help just to get through that one sermon. He made it through and gave an invitation, as usual. He was surprised to see Oral Roberts come forward—weeping! When Oral asked for a microphone to speak to the students, he surprised everyone there by confessing he had not been as close to the Lord for the last thirty days as he normally felt. He apologized to the students; he feared his spiritual half-heartedness might have negatively affected them. President Roberts asked the students to pray for him. Several laid hands on Oral and prayed, along with Jimmy Buskirk. The after-effect was something Buskirk had not witnessed before: the chapel was filled with corporate singing in tongues. Jimmy prayed in tongues himself, but he had never heard anything quite like that!⁷

Jimmy was asked to stay longer and speak for Friday night communion; he accepted. After that, he was invited to speak to theological students on Saturday and then to the popular Sunday evening vespers on campus. On all these occasions, Oral Roberts was moved deeply by what he experienced.⁸

During this extended visit, Jimmy and Bob Stamps went to Roberts' home for conversation on Sunday. Oral asked Jimmy, "If you were going to build a school of theology, what kind would it be?" Jimmy answered with what he later described as his "wish list for Candler," not suspecting where this conversation was headed. After hearing Jimmy's "wish list," Oral asked him, why not come here and build that school "and be the Dean of it?"⁹ Buskirk was so surprised he hardly knew how to answer. He felt he was already where God wanted him, making a difference for Candler students who would, he hoped, make a difference in the United Methodist Church and beyond.

At the end of that surprising first visit to ORU, Oral had one more question to ask Jimmy. Oral drove his guest to the airport and asked, "If the Lord were to ask you to come and be our Dean, you would not refuse, would you?" Jimmy disliked being put on the spot like that, and he told Oral so. Not deterred, Oral followed up

by telephone “about every month or so” to ask what the Lord was telling Jimmy. For about a year, Jimmy’s answer remained unchanged—he did not think God wanted him to move to ORU.¹⁰

A year later, there was a second visit. Tommy Tyson (ORU’s first campus minister, 1965–68) was scheduled to preach at ORU, but he was in the hospital and unable to go. He called his friend, Jimmy Buskirk, asking him to go instead. God’s Holy Spirit blessed this visit as much as the first. ORU faculty responded to the preaching with soul-searching examination of their commitment to Jesus. And faculty members from the still-small School of Theology urged him “to pray about being their Dean.” Having endured the petty jealousies and competition which can plague any school’s faculty, Jimmy sometimes thought of his colleagues at Candler “as a tough thirty-two-member obstacle course.” In stark contrast, here were faculty asking him “to consider being their Dean.” He was quite overwhelmed.¹¹

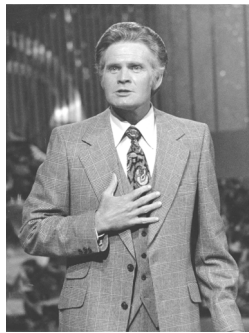
During that visit, in 1975, Buskirk recalls Oral Roberts telling him he felt called to be “a leader in the healing of the whole Body of Christ.” Buskirk had not heard that aspiration voiced by anyone else. It was not a new concept for Oral, however. One author of this article (Autry) remembers that Oral Roberts had earlier said something like that to ORU students in chapel (1967–70): “ORU is called to bring healing to the Body of Christ.” Even before that, Roberts had acted energetically on his belief in “spiritual ecumenicity.”

Oral Roberts was a key partner with Demos Shakarian in launching the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGBMFI) in the early 1950s. The FGBMFI encouraged participation by people from Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal backgrounds. What unified the FGBMFI was not doctrine per se but strong commitment to Jesus as Savior and pursuit of the baptism with the Holy Spirit.¹² Those who have experienced such unity—centered on Jesus and the Holy Spirit—long for divisions among Christians to be overcome by the greater reality of God’s gift. Even when separate institutional structures remain, Christians with the same focus can work and worship together. Oral Roberts sought and practiced this unity.

To be part of “healing the whole Body of Christ” was a calling that resonated with Jimmy Buskirk’s heart. In their conversations, he heard Oral saying that the Charismatic churches had “the power without the theology,” while the church at large had a “critical theology without the power.” For the church to be whole, and fully effective in ministry to the world, theology and power need to be brought together and kept together. Any seminary that wants to help heal the body of Christ needs both. Oral was saying (using other words) exactly what Jimmy believed.¹³

After that second visit, Jimmy “went back to Georgia in trouble”—committed to what he had started at Candler but attracted to what he saw at ORU.¹⁴ Buskirk was loved and appreciated by Candler students; he was not easily willing to let that go. (Once, Oral and Bob Stamps visited Buskirk at Candler, to press the case for coming to Tulsa. Bob observed how much the Candler students loved Jimmy.)¹⁵ Finally, after a second year of prayer, calls from Oral, and thoughtful comparison of his opportunities at Candler and ORU, Jimmy Buskirk decided, in April 1976, to come to Tulsa

Years at ORU (1976-1984)



Buskirk came to ORU clearly understanding what was expected of him and what he could expect to do: first, establish an accredited Master of Divinity (MDiv) program in addition to the existing Master of Arts in Theology; second, add a Doctor of Ministry program (DMin) to provide further professional training for pastors who had completed an MDiv; and third, build toward an eventual PhD program.

MDiv and DMin programs aim at equipping pastors and chaplains. The third objective—the PhD—was expected to be the most challenging. Significant expenditures would be required to upgrade the library and recruit additional faculty. But a PhD program was critical to the vision of renewing theological education across denominational lines—a vision shared by Oral Roberts and Jimmy Buskirk. They knew the “liberal” theology that had weakened “mainline” Protestant churches started with the seminaries’ faculties and then spread to the pastors they trained. To counter that influence required faculty empowered by the Holy Spirit and trained at the highest levels. Such faculty could train pastors for coming generations—at ORU but also at other seminaries staffed by ORU PhDs.

Pursuing this strategy, Jimmy and Oral were convinced of the need for “spiritual ecumenicity.” Both men had experienced this in the Neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement, which promoted Christian unity—“making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3, New Revised Standard Version). Oral had already hired Charismatic professors, not just classical Pentecostals, unifying and drawing on the strengths of varied Christian strands. As Jimmy expanded the faculty, he included members from the Pentecostal Holiness, Assemblies of God, United Methodist, American Baptist, Southern Baptist, Mennonite, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic traditions. The constituency of the student body also shifted more toward historic churches.

The first several years of Buskirk’s deanship were filled with growth and achievement. In his well-written history of the graduate program Dr. Larry Hart provides important facts and perspective:

Buskirk’s first task then was to recruit a world class faculty as well as to attract students from across the globe. Half of the faculty and up to one-half of the student body initially were United Methodist. But Oral Roberts was not troubled by this, having joined the United Methodist church himself [in 1968]. Perhaps this imbalance was necessary at the outset to maintain the seminary’s ecumenical flavor. The school would evolve to much greater denominational (and nondenominational) diversity in the years to follow. Of utmost importance, it would continue to have a vital charismatic ethos, in harmony with the ministry of Oral Roberts.¹⁶

Successful recruiting of excellent faculty was key to a major accomplishment vital to the vision Roberts and Buskirk had for the School of Theology: in June of 1980, the Association of Theological Schools granted full accreditation for ORU’s MDiv program.¹⁷ This was the first of three major objectives to which Oral and Jimmy were committed.

Hart continues:

After five years of rapid development, the seminary was hitting full stride. May 1981 saw the largest graduating class thus far of 55 graduates. The 1981-82 year saw the following important developments:

1. Addition of first full-time woman professor;

2. Development of first class in Koinonia ministry;
3. Addition of first cross-cultural field education class to enable international students to assimilate their education into their native cultural settings;
4. Establishment of the first missionary internship;
5. Official approval by the University Senate of the United Methodist Church to train candidates for ministry in that denomination;
6. Inauguration of the Doctor of Ministry program with 11 students participating in the first seminar;
7. Offer of Holy Spirit conference[s] as continuing education with a national audience of over 1200 participants.¹⁸

Why Did He Leave ORU?

All of the developments of 1981–82 were important in Buskirk’s departure from ORU. Establishing a DMin program was the second of three major objectives on which Oral Roberts and Jimmy Buskirk had agreed. Approval by the University Senate for United Methodist ministers to be educated in ORU’s MDiv program was equally important. Both Buskirk and Roberts valued it, as both were ordained elders in that denomination.

Buskirk grew up Methodist; his ministerial credentials as an “elder” had always been with that body. Roberts, however, was first ordained by the Pentecostal Holiness Church. When he joined the United Methodist Church, he was received as an “elder,” with the same standing as Buskirk or any other United Methodist minister. But that changed when the United Methodists invoked a distinction between “traveling elder” and “local elder.” [Theoretically, a “traveling elder” is subject to being moved by the church hierarchy.] According to Buskirk, Roberts received some bad advice and allowed his standing to be defined as “local elder,” which effectively downgraded his status from “ordained” to “laity.” Buskirk saw that Roberts was hurt by that action, but he knew Oral well enough to know he would not fight back. Any initiative to reinstate him as a full “elder” would have to come from the United Methodists.¹⁹

Oral’s loss of full standing in the United Methodist Church was likely a factor in his cooling enthusiasm for developing a PhD program. Buskirk clearly expressed his opinion: there “was a connection between the fact that he was not an elder in the mainline church and his spending money to have a PhD program which would help the mainline church.”²⁰ At that time in the Roberts ministry, there seemed— to Oral if not to Jimmy—more pressing needs for “spending money.”

The years-long struggles to build the City of Faith medical complex and try to keep the medical school going took a toll on many programs at ORU. In particular, Buskirk's and Roberts' commitment to build a PhD program was jeopardized, not all at once but over time. As early as Jimmy's fifth year at ORU, Oral began "asking if they should have a PhD." Then Oral told Jimmy he should raise the money for it himself, which was not consistent with the original agreement before Jimmy left Candler. The agreement had been that Jimmy would ensure the quality of faculty and education, while Oral ensured the resources.²¹

Jimmy asked, "What are you going to tell the Lord when He asks you what you did about His PhD?" Jimmy told Oral that, if the Lord asked him that question, he was going to tell the Lord that Oral "forgot the vision." Obviously the two men had a close relationship—they genuinely loved and admired one another. Jimmy knew he could speak candidly to Oral. Jimmy now spoke to Oral with a broken heart, but not in anger. After many discussions of how to fund a PhD, the final resolution (in Jimmy's mind) came when Oral indicated they simply "were not going to do it, which meant there was no point in raising the money."²² Oral and Jimmy still loved each other, but Jimmy was deeply grieved by Oral's decision. Oral's decision—driven by perceived necessity—made Jimmy's decision to leave possible.

That was Buskirk's view of his reason for leaving: "when Oral said they were not going to do it," Jimmy felt released from the commitment. Together they "had done all the things they had planned to do—except the PhD." The MDiv had been established and accredited; the DMin had been started and approved.²³ Failure to start the PhD before Buskirk left ORU should not diminish the stellar accomplishments of his tenure as Dean.

[Buskirk would not want all the credit for these accomplishments. The Provost of the University, Dr. Carl Hamilton, had wisely and patiently helped Buskirk learn how to navigate the administrative challenges of an academic program, since Buskirk had never been a dean before. Hamilton was of incalculable value also in dealing with accreditation issues, since he had dealt with those issues for the larger University.]

After leaving, Buskirk still believed a PhD was God's will for ORU's School of Theology. We are grateful that God—in his wisdom, patience, and mercy—has enabled subsequent leadership to bring the PhD dream into reality (under the current Dean, Dr. Wonsuk Ma). Jimmy Buskirk was certainly grateful. He remained steadfastly committed to seeing ORU have a PhD, even if he had to leave to see it happen.

Ministry after ORU

After growing a faculty of twenty-one professors and over 300 students in an amazingly short time, Buskirk left ORU in 1984 to become Pastor and Senior Minister of First United Methodist Church (FUMC), Tulsa. He served the Lord in this already prominent church until his retirement in 2001.

One innovation he brought to FUMC was “community ministries,” which encouraged and enabled laity to reach out locally. If anyone saw a need, and at least one other person was interested in meeting that need, the church would help them form a ministry team. Importantly, the commitment to serve was for six months at a time. This encouraged people to “try it out.” If it turned out not to be a good fit, or the person needed a break, they did not “have to die to get out of it,” Buskirk would say. Every six months the entire menu of newly discovered needs and ongoing ministries was presented to the congregation, so that each person could volunteer, volunteer again, or change their focus to another outreach. Besides the blessing this was to recipients (like those whose car was repaired by the “used car ministry”), the spirit of service became contagious in the church.

The congregation grew to a membership of 8,600 (eighth largest United Methodist Church in the nation at the time). More than 6,200 conversions were recorded during the tenure of this pastor who always had the heart of an evangelist. Indeed, no single word captures the essence of Jimmy Buskirk better than “evangelism.” Before, during, and after his time at ORU—all his life—he was a tireless evangelist. He preached for sixty-eight years. He spoke in 554 churches throughout the country.²⁴

In addition to his own evangelistic work, he saw the potential contributions others could make to the cause of Christ. That was his motive for establishing the Jimmy Buskirk Ministries, a fund supported by Buskirk and those touched by his ministry. Over the years, that fund helped 368 students with scholarships for theological education.²⁵ This was not something he talked about much in his sermons. Rather, in this quiet way he showed how he believed in others and the ministry they could do by the Holy Spirit’s power.

After Retirement

When he left the deanship at ORU, Buskirk did not cut all his ties with the University or with Oral Roberts. He continued to serve in various capacities and committees. He never became a Trustee because that might present a conflict of

interests, especially regarding the School of Theology. He did serve, however, on the Board of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

After retiring from the pastorate, Jimmy had the opportunity to teach evangelism at Asbury. (The president of Asbury, Dr. Timothy Tennent, did undergraduate studies at ORU.) Plus, Buskirk continued to give time to organizations among United Methodists working to preserve orthodox theology and practice. He strongly believed in the importance of the church—as a local organism but also as an expression of “connection” to other locations in America and abroad. He was a faithful follower of Jesus, but he was also always “a churchman.”²⁶

Personal Encounters and Reflections

Michael Postlethwait, an ORU alumnus, credits Jimmy Buskirk with significant impact on his life during a weekend seminar on the Holy Spirit. At a morning session the speaker (not Buskirk) invited students to pray for those indicating their need by a raised hand. In turn, they were instructed to ask the prayed-for person to pray for them.

As an ORU student confined to a wheelchair, Mike was accustomed to receiving prayer. This time he received prayer from other students. Then, he says, “Despite many people having prayed for me, I did not have the opportunity to pray for others as instructed.” Afterwards, people went their own way. Even those who remained in the area long enough showed no interest in having a student in a wheelchair pray for them. Mike felt very frustrated.

Before the evening service (when Buskirk would be speaking), Mike shared his lingering frustration with friends seated near him at the front of the audience, “only to look up and realize that Dr. Buskirk had heard the whole thing from stage! He immediately came down to where I was seated and asked me to remain afterwards with my friends so I could pray for him! At first, I was quite embarrassed that he had heard my complaint from stage, but he immediately put me at ease.”

Remaining afterwards as instructed, Mike reports that Dr. Buskirk “came to where we were seated as promised.”

As he knelt down next to me, we joined hands and prayed as my friends joined in the background. During that time of prayer, I was surprised that I was “seeing” an image “in my head” that I can only conclude was meant to minister to him. With humble hesitation, I carefully described what I perceived I was seeing. At first, I was scared

he might regret the offer he had made if indeed I had missed hearing from God properly. Before I could even begin to process the implications of what I had just done, he immediately reassured me my description was on target and he knew exactly to what it referred. As our short time together ended, I think all parties involved were blessed at what we had just witnessed. We all knew we had just witnessed something special.

In following weeks, Mike was “inundated with people asking me to pray for them. Moreover, nearly everyone I prayed for during that period was touched or healed in a significant way! In retrospect, I suspect that Buskirk’s humble anointing stirred God’s gifts in me.” Decades later, Mike says, “God has continued to move in and through my life in unique ways to bless others from that day forward.”

Mike further observes about Buskirk’s humility: Even when sharing the remarkable story of how his eyes were healed, “Buskirk resisted the tendency to make himself the central character. . . . The ladies who interceded and prayed for his healing were the central characters.”²⁷

Dr. Robert Tuttle, former professor at ORU Graduate School of Theology, says,

My first memory of Jim Buskirk was at a Laity Conference for the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church at Lake Junaluska, NC, nearly 50 years ago. Jim was the Bible teacher, and I was the evangelist. I preached every evening and Jim would sit on the front row. When the invitation was given, he was always the first one to the communion rail asking for prayer. That so impressed me that when I moved to Tulsa a few years later I applied for a position on the faculty of the ORU Graduate School of Theology. Jim was the Dean and he hired me on the spot. Under his leadership, I then spent six of the most fruitful years of my ministry. His office was always open. His sweet humble spirit spoke to me on a weekly basis. I became close friends with both Jim and his dear wife Nancy and spent many hours in their home with family and friends. I will be forever in his debt. Heaven is now a better place!²⁸

Dr. Steve O’Malley, former professor at ORU Graduate School of Theology, remembers his decision to come to ORU and Buskirk’s impact on him personally:

We saw the vision Jim had for the new School as integral to the larger mission of impacting the world with the needed message of full salvation in Christ, through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with focus on healing, understood by Jim as involving all areas of our lives and ministries. Yes, he led us in an upbeat, Spirit guided vision for the Kingdom in fresh encounters with the active work of the Holy Spirit, . . .

Jim helped me to see and internalize what it means to take every challenge in life and make it a space where the Holy Spirit can intervene redemptively in persons' lives, especially at their points of deepest need. For that, I am eternally grateful, as well as for the community of brothers and sisters in Christ formed at our School through his guidance.²⁹

Margie McAdoo, Administrative Assistant for Dr. Buskirk at First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, spoke of his transition from being Dean to being Pastor:

He was returning to his first love, preaching from the pulpit. However, his love of teaching students how to effectively do ministry did not stop with the deanship. He continued to take groups of students with him on ministry trips, making provision for their expenses, to give them a firsthand opportunity to do the work of evangelism.³⁰

Dr. James Hewett taught New Testament Greek at ORU's Graduate School of Theology. Later, he joined the pastoral staff at First United Methodist, again under the leadership of Dr. Buskirk. Thus, Hewett heard many Buskirk stories and sermons. He remembers one story that many perhaps did not hear:

Jim had his "salty" side. He preached passionately. He lived what he preached—to my knowledge. But he wasn't afraid to step up and face down a challenger. Once in his pastoring days down in Mississippi he was being hassled by some local rowdies. One evening they pulled up alongside him. As they waited for the light to change and challenged him, he leveled a shotgun out his window, asked how far they wanted to push the matter! He said he was never bothered again by local ruffians.³¹

What impressed Hewett most about his dean and pastor was this: "Jim believed in education, but he believed more in salvation. I do not recall any

academically mind-stirring moments with him, either in a class or sermon. But, oh, how he could stir the soul.”³²

Dr. Robert Mansfield, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at ORU Graduate School of Theology, wrote this tribute:

My admiration for and indebtedness to Jim Buskirk are great. We both began our careers in North Mississippi as United Methodist ministers and actually served the same church (my wife Jane’s home church). Twelve years later, when he was appointed Dean at ORU and began building a faculty, we were already well acquainted. I was teaching at Mount Union College in Ohio, and Dr. Buskirk contacted me in 1978 about coming as Professor of New Testament. We came for an interview; he offered me the position on the spot. I accepted, resigned my position, sold our house, and came on a handshake without a signed contract. So strong was my trust in Jim as a man of integrity. There was great camaraderie among the faculty as we worked together under Dean Buskirk’s strong leadership to achieve ATS accreditation and certification by the UMC for training United Methodist ministers. Those were exciting years, beginning a fulfilling forty-year tenure at ORU for me. In large measure, I owe my career to the leadership of Jim Buskirk, my Dean, colleague, and friend.³³

Dr. Arden Autry, former professor at ORU, former staff member at First United Methodist Church, and co-author of this article, said this about Jimmy Buskirk:

Dr. Buskirk hired me twice: first to join the undergraduate department of theology at ORU and later to work fulltime on the church staff. I told him I felt honored he would offer me a position twice. With characteristic humility he replied, “I’m honored you would accept it twice.” Then we both laughed.

When favorably impressed by public figures (such as pastors or deans), you might be disillusioned by getting to know them better. The opposite was the case for me with Jimmy Buskirk. The longer I knew him, the more I respected him. Even when he chided me for not doing something I was supposed to do, or for doing it in a way he disapproved of, his sharpest rebukes were given in private. I never felt he was trying to embarrass me or make me smaller in the eyes of

others. I never feared he might use his frustration or his (justified!) anger to sabotage me and the ministry God called me to do. On those occasions when I had to endure his rebukes, I still knew I could trust that his trust in me ran deeper. I knew he loved me and wanted me to succeed.

Dr. James Shelton, professor at ORU and co-author of this article, recalled this about Jimmy Buskirk:

When he was at First United Methodist some people often spontaneously raised their hands during the “Alleluia” that was sung before the reading of the Gospel. Some of the staid members asked Jimmy to demand that the more charismatic members not raise their hands in the service. He responded, “I will tell them to lower their hands when you give me permission to tell you to raise your hands.” A pastor that stared down racial bigots and risked his life in racial reconciliation in segregated Mississippi was not to be cowed by such divisiveness.

On a more personal note, Shelton remembers this: “Most every time he preached at First United Methodist, he gave an altar call for people to commit their lives to Jesus and to receive prayer for healing and special needs. It was after a stirring sermon that our daughter Jenny settled in her young heart to follow the Lord seriously.”

Shelton also recalls with heart-felt gratitude the generous support that Buskirk’s ministry gave during the three years he read for a PhD in biblical studies at the University of Stirling in Scotland (1979-82). Furthermore, when Shelton first revealed the call he had received to enter the Catholic Church in 1996, Buskirk, who had been his dean while at ORU and then his pastor at First United Methodist in Tulsa for over a decade, in demonstration of his commitment to the unity of the church regardless of denomination, sent him forth with his blessing as “a missionary” to assist in the re-evangelization of the ancient church.

Dr. Robert Stamps, Campus Minister at ORU, 1968–1984, was known as “Brother Bob” to many ORU students (including the co-authors of this article). Bob first heard Jimmy Buskirk preach in 1970, at a Prayer Conference in Knoxville, Tennessee. Jimmy impressed Bob with his masterful ability to tell stories that were hard to forget, especially the story of how his eyes were healed. Four years later, Bob

invited Jimmy to preach for the ORU chapel service that eventually led to Oral Roberts' invitation for Buskirk to become Dean of the School of Theology.

When Buskirk finally agreed to come to ORU, he brought with him a vision for the theology school to serve the whole church, and not just a part. According to Bob Stamps, Jimmy Buskirk was “a man of the universal Church, a man of the Gospel, and a man of the Bible.” The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are part of that universal church, and Buskirk always “believed in the rest of us” (i.e., any Christian who might feel excluded by other Christians; if they belong to Christ, they are part of “us”). Believing God is at work in the whole church in no way diminishes the Pentecostal/Charismatic experience. If anything, that perspective on the whole church provides the context for appreciating what God is doing in the Charismatic Movement to bless the whole church and the whole world.

For ORU's School of Theology to represent the whole and not just the part, there would need to be diversity in the faculty as well as in the student body. There would need to be diversity of experience and even diversity of theological positions. The unifying value would be openness to the charismatic experience of the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues would be strongly encouraged but not required of everyone—a “huge” point for Buskirk, according to Stamps.

Bob remembers that Buskirk enjoyed putting the seminary together the way he thought it should be, according to his vision for it. He willingly did the work and fought the battles to achieve full accreditation for the MDiv with the Association of Theological Schools and with the University Senate of the United Methodist Church.

Along with being Dean of the Graduate School of Theology, Buskirk was also Vice-President for Spiritual Life for the University, an office previously held by Bob Stamps. Bob was glad to relinquish the title and continue as campus minister directly answerable to Buskirk. That meant the two men met weekly to assess matters and plan ministry. Bob always enjoyed those meetings, and there was “never a cross word” between them. Buskirk sometimes asked questions about things Bob proposed, but he never opposed him. Bob relished such great support from a supervisor whose theology was the same as his.

While experiencing the memorial service for Dr. Buskirk (First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, September 29, 2020), Bob recalled many reasons to give thanks. Prominent among those points of thanksgiving was Jimmy's great marriage with Nancy. Better than many would know, Bob knew how much strength she was to Jimmy through sixty-six years of marriage. The way she researched illustrations

for his sermons was just one way she supported him in ministry. Bob was grateful for how much Jimmy loved Nancy.

Bob was grateful for how Jimmy's parishes in Mississippi and Georgia loved him. He was "like Jesus to them," said Bob. Jimmy was grateful for their love, which continued even after he moved on to academia. "He loved the memory of his parishes." Throughout the memorial service Bob gave thanks for Jimmy's life. He called it "a big life," the kind of life that makes you wonder how the world can go on without this person.³⁴

Conclusion

Those who personally know Jimmy Buskirk's influence on our lives share the gratitude Bob Stamps expressed. Such was Jimmy Buskirk to so many—to his family, his friends, his parishes, his students, and a Graduate School of Theology that he shaped for generations to come according to a God-given vision for serving the whole church. Thank God for the life of Jimmy Buskirk. Thank God for a man whose life gave us a better opinion of God. Thank God for doing such glorious things through a humble servant like Jimmy. Thank God, who can do such things to his glory in "the rest of us." Amen.



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Notes

- ¹ Family obituary, read at memorial service, 29 September 29 2020.
- ² Family obituary.
- ³ John Erling, “Interview with James and Nancy Buskirk,” *Voices of Oklahoma*, 29 February 2016, ch. 8, www.voicesofoklahoma.com/interview/buskirk-dr-james-b/ (11 January 2021).
- ⁴ Erling, “Interview,” ch. 8.
- ⁵ “The Spiritual Awakening in America—and a Miracle of Healing,” *Abundant Life* 30:7, July 1976, 8–13, <http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/almag/260> (11 January 2021). This is a transcript of a televised interview with Oral and Evelyn Roberts.
- ⁶ Family obituary.
- ⁷ Harold Paul, “Interview Granted Dr. Harold Paul by Dr. James Buskirk, Founding Dean of the Graduate School of Theology at ORU” (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts University, 1985, Holy Spirit Research Center archive), 2.
- ⁸ Paul, “Interview,” 2.
- ⁹ Paul, “Interview,” 3.
- ¹⁰ Paul, “Interview,” 4.
- ¹¹ Paul, “Interview,” 4.
- ¹² David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 153–55, 288–90.
- ¹³ Paul, “Interview,” 4.
- ¹⁴ Paul, “Interview,” 5.
- ¹⁵ Robert Stamps, telephone interview by authors, 2 December 2020.
- ¹⁶ Larry Hart, “The Seminary: A History of Graduate Theological Education,” 2016, 8, https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=theo_history (11 January 2021).
- ¹⁷ Hart, “The Seminary,” 11.
- ¹⁸ Hart, “The Seminary,” 12.
- ¹⁹ Paul, “Interview,” 7. Paul concurred on Oral’s characteristic response to criticism.
- ²⁰ Paul, “Interview,” 8.
- ²¹ Paul, “Interview,” 8.
- ²² Paul, “Interview,” 8.
- ²³ Paul, “Interview,” 9.
- ²⁴ Family obituary.
- ²⁵ Family obituary.
- ²⁶ Stamps, telephone interview.
- ²⁷ Michael Postlethwait, written response, December 2020.
- ²⁸ Robert Tuttle, written response, 15 December 2020.
- ²⁹ Steve O’Malley, written response, 15 December 2020.

³⁰ Margie McAdoo, written response, 15 December 2020.

³¹ James Hewett, written response, December 2020.

³² Hewett, written response.

³³ Robert Mansfield, written response, 5 January 2021.

³⁴ Stamps, telephone interview.

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