

'Rock the River' draws thousands of teens

By Staff

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ST. LOUIS (BP)--More than 65,000 people gathered at the Gateway Arch in St. Louis for the second stop on the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's "Rock the River" tour, yielding more than 500 professions of faith in Christ.

"There were more than 65,000 in attendance, around 800 spiritual decisions made, 538 salvations, 300 decibels of sound, I was wearing 100 SPF sunscreen, I went through four quarts of water, and it all made for one remarkable day," Bruce McCoy, president of the Missouri Baptist Convention and pastor of Canaan Baptist Church in St. Louis, said.

The free event Aug. 2 included seven hours of performances by a variety of Christian music artists interspersed with Gospel messages by Franklin Graham. The concert kicked off with hip-hop artist Canton Jones followed by Red. It also featured rapper Lecrae, the band Hawk Nelson and Gospel music artist Kirk Franklin. Performances by Skillet and Flyleaf capped the event.

"I heard Ruth Graham [Franklin's late mother] say that the bands and music artists attracted the fish to the pond so that Franklin could fish for souls there," McCoy, chairman of counseling and follow-up for the event, said. "And it worked. They were able to bring in a lot of people who needed to hear the Gospel message."

Though people of all ages attended Rock the River at the Arch, the vast majority fell between the ages of 15 and 25 -- exactly the age group BGEA was targeting. Graham catered specifically to youth each of the three times he presented the Gospel.

"Do you have emptiness in your life?" he asked. "Many of you may know the story of Kurt Cobain. It has been said that not long before he killed himself he had written somewhere that he had a great big empty hole inside that he just couldn't fill.

"He couldn't fill it with drugs, with sex or with fame," Graham said. "Nothing could fill it. I know that hole that he talked about. I had it too. But I thank God that when I was 22 years old I finally got on my knees and I asked for Jesus Christ. There is only one road to God, only one way to fill that hole, and that is through Jesus Christ."



More than 65,000 people attended "Rock the River," an evangelistic event aimed at youth, at the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. *Photo by Bob Greenlee/The Pathway*



Franklin Graham presented the Gospel at the St. Louis stop for "Rock the River," a four-city youth event sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. *Photo by Bob Greenlee/The Pathway*



Counselor Lori Trakas (left) of South County Baptist Church in St. Louis, assists Randi Brooks of New Salem Baptist Church in Ashland, Mo., with her information packet. Randi rededicated her life at the "Rock the River," an event attended by more than 65,000 people.

McCoy said one of the greatest highlights of the day for him was watching some of the youth from his church step into counseling roles.

by more than 65,000 people
Aug. 2. Photo by Bob
Greenlee/The Pathway

"One young lady, an underclassman in high school, was able to lead three people to Christ," he said.

Another student, 15-year-old Jesse Wright, had his first experience of leading someone to Christ. McCoy said Wright is the type of person who will be a dynamic minister of the Gospel wherever he goes in life.

McCoy also said the large number of people who attended Rock the River in St. Louis was evidence of God at work. During one of the planning meetings for the event in February, the organizers discussed the potential size of the gathering and some thought it sounded smaller than what God was capable of doing.

"I remember telling them that I was praying and believing God for 60,000 people," he said. "However, He didn't give us that many, did He? He exceedingly and abundantly gave us even more."

The Gateway Arch groundskeepers weren't as optimistic about numbers. Their plan for limiting concessions and restrooms to one area of the park caused congestion to abound. "We would have wished for those things to be more spread out," McCoy said.

Despite the overcrowding, the event was a huge success, he said.

"We may have looked up and seen the Arch, but people really came to the Cross," McCoy said.

Rock the River is a four-city concert tour that began in July in Baton Rouge, La., and proceeded up the Mississippi River to St. Louis and the quad cities in Iowa and Illinois before concluding in Minneapolis/St. Paul Aug. 16.

"The purpose of Rock the River is to share the Good News of the Gospel with tens of thousands of young people and young adults along the Mississippi River basin from Louisiana to Minnesota in a fun, festival setting," a news release from the BGEA said.

Nearly 11,000 people gathered on the campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge for the first concert of the tour, which featured an appearance by Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal.

Organizers reported more than 550 decisions for Christ, including 270 professions of faith in Baton Rouge. More than 200 local churches and 1,000 volunteers helped stage the event.

"Considering this was the first time this has ever been tried, I thought the turnout and the number of decisions was simply tremendous," said Roddy Conerly, director of missions for the Baptist Association of Greater Baton Rouge.

Graham spoke four times during the event, conveying the Gospel story to an audience of mostly youth.

"Do you know why Flyleaf and these other great bands are here? They want you to know God loves you," Graham told the crowd. "... God didn't send Muhammad or Buddha to save us from our sins. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins, and He loves you. God loves you and will forgive you of your sins if you only pray and ask Him to."

Jindal, in a surprise appearance, received a warm welcome from the young crowd.

"You don't have to be Franklin Graham ..., you don't have to be the governor of Louisiana to know God loves you and His Son died on the cross for you. Our God is an awesome God, isn't He?" Jindal said. "I welcome you not only as governor but as a brother in Christ. And I'm honored that Franklin Graham is kicking off his tour here in Baton Rouge."

Rock the River has been described by BGEA officials as a "massive rescue effort for youth" in which churches unite to reach that age group for Christ while they are still reachable.

"It's a burden that's been on my heart," Graham said in comments to Baptist Press as the tour was being planned. "We are becoming a godless nation. Our country is getting worse. I'm coming to this city to fight for the souls of the young."

"I sense the Lord Jesus Christ is close to returning. Are we going to relax and say, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' or are we going to use every possible moment to gather as many as we can?"

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Based on reports by Kayla Rinker of The Pathway, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention, online at mbcpathway.com, and Philip Timothy of the Louisiana Baptist Message, online at baptistmessage.com.

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