

THE REV. RUSS BLOWERS: 1924-2007

Longtime pastor saw church grow

By Francesca Jarosz

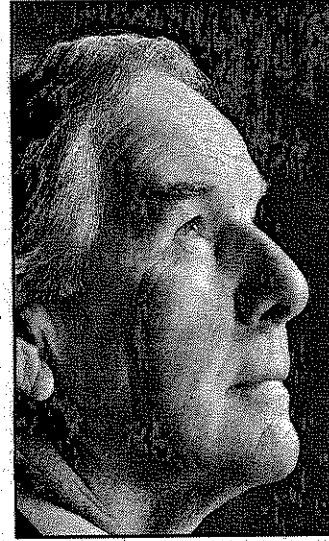
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Russ Blowers, who in 45 years of ministry increased a local congregation 30-fold through his love for people and passion for spreading the Gospel, has died of an undiagnosed illness at a Northside hospital.

He was 83.

Blowers, who died Saturday night, was the longest-serving minister at one of Central Indiana's largest congregations, East 91st Street Christian Church near Castleton Square Mall. He was a nationally known leader in the Christian community.

In 45 years with the East 91st Street congregation, he shepherded the church's growth from about 150 members in



RICH MILLER / The Star file photo

LONG TENURE: The Rev. Russ Blowers had served East 91st Street Christian Church 45 years.

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Pastor

◆ Blowers helped bring Billy Graham to Indianapolis.
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1951 to the nearly 4,500 who attended services Sunday.

Over those years he performed thousands of weddings, baptisms and funerals and molded his congregation into a "mission-minded" church with a focus on international outreach, said his younger son, Paul, 52.

A friend of Billy Graham, the Rev. Blowers led the way in bringing Graham to Indianapolis on three separate crusades and was invited by the minister to speak in North Carolina. He counseled politicians from Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., to former U.S. Rep. Andy Jacobs, D-Ind.

Family members and friends say Blowers' gift for ministry stemmed from his keen people skills. He rarely forgot a name and spent countless hours making hospital visits and helping parishioners solve problems. Though in later years his congregants numbered in the thousands, he had a knack for making

RUSS BLOWERS

Age: 83.

Hometown: Zanesville, Ohio.

Education: He attended Ohio State University on the GI Bill, studying journalism and commerce before realizing he had a calling to attend seminary. After getting married, he moved to Indianapolis, where he did his graduate work at Christian Theological Seminary.

Military career: Joined the Army Air Forces when he was 18 and was assigned as a ground crewman for the 55th Fighter Group Association based in Albuquerque, N.M. Served in World War II.

Church career: He served as pastor of East 91st Street Christian Church for 45 years. He retired to take care of his wife, Marian, who developed Alzheimer's disease in the mid-1990s. She died in 2004.

personal connections.

"Everybody in the church felt they were his friend," said Bob Walters, a close friend of Blowers' who joined the church six years ago after hearing him give a sermon. "What compelled so many people over the years was his ability to connect."

Blowers was born in Zanes-

ville, Ohio, in June 1924, the same month and year the congregation he served throughout his life was started. He grew up in White Cottage, Ohio, among a blue-collar family of non-believers.

He served in London in the Army Air Forces during World War II and returned to meet his wife, Marian, who introduced him to his faith. They married in 1946.

Blowers came to Indianapolis in 1950 to attend Christian Theological Seminary.

Walters said Blowers was the 19th pastor to lead the small congregation that would become East 91st Street Christian Church.

Back then the church, called the East 49th Street Christian Church, was in a ramshackle building south of Broad Ripple. Later that decade, the church moved to a larger building across the street and in 1977, cramped for space, it moved to its current location on the Far Northside.

Derek Duncan, the church's current senior pastor, said Bowers had a passion for the Gospel but conveyed it in a manner that was more akin to a teacher than a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

"He had the heart of Billy Graham, but he was a local shep-

herd," Duncan said. "He loved Indianapolis, and he just wanted to shepherd the people here."

After more than four decades with the congregation, Bowers retired in 1996. He remained an active leader in the church and community.

Many said his post-retirement ministry was serving Marian, who was stricken by Alzheimer's disease in the early 1990s. After she went to live in a retirement home in 1997, he visited her daily to share meals and sing to her. She died in 2004.

His older son, Phil, 56, said one of the greatest lessons he learned from his father was the importance of a faithful relationship with his wife.

Last summer Blowers, his two sons and his grandson, Colin, 17, took a trip to England and Normandy, France, to visit the sites of his World War II days. When they returned, Blowers fell ill and never recovered.

Despite several tests, doctors could not diagnose his illness. In the last three weeks before his death, his condition worsened, and emergency surgery caused him to deteriorate further.

Funeral services are pending.

★ Call Star reporter Francesca Jarosz at (317) 444-5527.