

About Harry Denman

The Inspiration for the Harry Denman Evangelism Award

The man with one suit... it sounds like the opening line of a tall tale. For many people across the US, and even around the world, that crumpled, driven, faithful man was the person who introduced them to Jesus Christ. His name was Harry Denman, and he was a friend to taxi drivers, missionaries, housewives, students, pastors, world leaders and the United Methodist Church. A force to be reckoned with, Denman's service and commitment to Methodism spanned more than 60 years.

A layman, Denman was a skilled administrator who began his career in 1915 at a local church in Birmingham, Alabama. He was elected to the Commission on Evangelism and called upon to establish the General Board of Evangelism of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1938. He became the first General Secretary of the Board of Evangelism of the newly formed United Methodist Church in 1939. It is said that he knew both the local church and the general church as few others did in his time.

An evangelist, Denman sought to live his life as a testament to Jesus Christ in whom he believed passionately. His was a single-minded obsession to fulfill his calling to evangelize. His was a personal ministry brought to life with warmth by friends who spoke of their inability to keep the man equipped with a warm coat because he insisted on giving them away to the less fortunate. Or of a like tendency to give away watches because conversations about Jesus Christ could begin simply by asking for the time. Or of sheaves of papers filled with personal encouragement, words of wisdom and vision casting for his beloved church.

An inspiration, Denman was considered a friend by fellow evangelists of the day, Oral Roberts and Billy Graham. Graham wrote of Denman, "He was my mentor in evangelism." Denman corresponded with and supported Martin Luther King, Jr. "I never think of anyone as a person of another race. To me we are just children of God," Denman is quoted as saying. His friendship with Dr. Ellen Kim, President of Ewha Women's College (Korea), took Denman annually to Korea for evangelism events during which thousands answered the call to become disciples of Jesus Christ and fostering in Denman a lifelong love for the Korean people. But the impact of his ministry was far greater than these few well-known folks. One example can be found in the Rogers' Denman biography¹, "We thought he was good in the pulpit but honestly he was at his best sitting on the floor with us, talking with us, telling us stories... Suddenly, rather than talking about football and parties, we were talking about Jesus Christ. He did it so naturally, so easily, we were not embarrassed to talk about something we had always been hesitant to talk about before. It has made it easier for me ever since."

A skilled communicator, Denman wrote and spoke tirelessly on the subject of evangelism and living a Christ-filled life. Books written about his ministry quote those whose lives were transformed by profoundly impactful sermons delivered to thousands, reveal the contents of handwritten notes of encouragement, and recount stories from the road. Denman is often remembered for his famous farewell statement, "Pray for me!" Not only did he provide prayer and encouragement to the masses, he constantly sought prayer and support from his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The memories shared and stories told by those who were impacted so profoundly by his works were sometimes delivered with such reverence that Denman himself seemed almost the stuff of legend. He was a bold, strong personality but his nature was not to seek glory for himself. Instead he was driven to model for others his philosophy of evangelism.

In the end, he considered himself no different from anyone else. He was called just like every Christian to show the love of Christ, writing: "Today the only way one can see [Christ's] love is to see it wrapped up in a person. This is true of faith. The only way we can see Christ is to see him wrapped in a person. Evangelism can only be seen in a person. We need to become a package of love, a package of faith, a package of Christ. Then we will be a package of evangelism."²

¹ Rogers, Harold. **Harry Denman: A Biography**. Nashville, TN. The Upper Room, 1977. Page 130.

² Ibid page 47