

50 Years of Miracles: The Cross and the Switchblade

By David Batty

Published in *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 1, 2014

How does a book about a young unknown Assemblies of God country preacher become a best-seller with more than 11 million copies sold in 10 years? The story of David Wilkerson coming to New York City to share the love of Jesus with seven teenagers on trial for the murder of Michael Farmer is told in the book *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

Instead of being able to witness to those seven teens, Wilkerson was thrown out of court on Feb. 28, 1958, and ended up with his picture on the front page of New York City newspapers the next morning. But that failure was part of God's plan to use David Wilkerson to help more than just seven young men. In the months that followed, Wilkerson founded Teen Challenge, a ministry to youth, adults and families affected by drug addiction and other life-controlling problems.

Wilkerson's passion for evangelism soon produced results. In July 1958, Nicky Cruz and members of his gang, the Mau Maus, committed their lives to Christ in a rally sponsored by Wilkerson.

In 1961, Wilkerson's ministry came to the attention of John and Elizabeth Sherrill, "roving editors" at *Guideposts* magazine and also freelance writers. Their life mission was to identify ordinary people doing extraordinary things through the power of the Holy Spirit.

After investigating the fledgling ministry of Teen Challenge, the Sherrills offered to help Wilkerson write the story of what God was doing to transform lives through the outreach. Early in 1963, *The Cross and the Switchblade* was published and soon was on The New York Times best-sellers list.

As the book swept across America, Christians were captivated by this story of modern-day faith in action. The problem of drug addiction was exploding throughout the U.S. Soon Teen Challenge centers were established in Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other cities. Today there are more than 200 Teen Challenge facilities in the U.S. and 1,000-plus ministries in 94 other nations.

The Cross and the Switchblade became a motivating force for many readers to commit their lives to Christ. For others, it was one of the first books they read after becoming a Christian, challenging them to boldly share their faith with others. The book was also a key influence in the charismatic movement that swept across the United States in the 1970s and has been the catalyst for many to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

"In 1971 when I came back from my first tour of duty in the Vietnam War, I was an atheist," says Bill Boubek. "But then I met this couple who were part of the charismatic movement. They showed me love, even though I rejected their God. I finally agreed to go to a prayer meeting with them. It was a Pentecostal service with tongues and interpretation.

“I started asking questions, and they put in my hands *The Cross and the Switchblade*. This book put me on a path that opened my heart to what God wanted to do in my life.

“I left a career in law enforcement and attended seminary and entered the ministry as pastor of a Lutheran church. Since that first encounter almost 40 years ago, I have passed this book on to many veterans returning from war. I’ve seen this book soften their hearts toward God, much as it did in my heart.”

In 1970 the film version of *The Cross and the Switchblade* was released in American theaters. The film, starring Pat Boone as Wilkerson and Erik Estrada as Nicky Cruz, was translated and dubbed in more than 40 languages. Tens of millions have viewed it. A comic book version of this story was also released, capturing the interest of children.

“I was 8 years old when I saw the movie *The Cross and the Switchblade* at our church,” says Mike. “The message got through to me, and I came to the realization I needed to go forward for salvation, even though I had been raised in the church. I also remember reading the comic book version of this story over and over as a preteen. What sticks in my memory is how Dave Wilkerson persevered in the face of adversity, and also how Nicky Cruz made a 180-degree turn in his life.”

In the past 50 years *The Cross and the Switchblade* has been published in more than 40 languages. The book has inspired many to work at Teen Challenge.

“In 1974 I had the opportunity to read *The Cross and the Switchblade*,” Valter Rogato says. “When I read that it was possible to evangelize and rehabilitate drug addicts, I felt God put a desire in my heart to be involved in this work.

“Seven years later I founded Teen Challenge in St. André in São Paulo, Brazil. We began to see the same move of God I read about in the book — now it was happening in our ministry as I saw lives of addicted people transformed by the power of God!”

For those called by God to work in Teen Challenge ministry, *The Cross and the Switchblade* continues to provide a powerful story of faith in action today and encourage everyday followers of Christ to be a part of God transforming broken lives.

“I didn’t read *The Cross and the Switchblade* until I had served almost a year as the program director of Teen Challenge Jamaica as a missionary,” says Karissa McCarter. “God used that book to plant in me a long-term call to Teen Challenge. I was struck by the rich heritage I was now a part of — Teen Challenge was not just a Christian drug recovery program, but a move of God!”

In 2006 *Christianity Today* listed *The Cross and the Switchblade* as one of the 50 most influential books in Christianity during the previous 50 years. The book continues to be used as an evangelism tool to share the message of hope that God can change the broken lives of addicts.

In Israel, Teen Challenge recently printed 10,000 copies of the book in Hebrew, Arabic and Russian, to distribute across the nation.

“Right after we printed the book, we went to Tel Aviv to distribute some,” says Petr Ministr, national director of Teen Challenge in Israel. “We met a group of young men and gave them a few copies, telling them to give the book to those who might be struggling with addiction. It was no more than 5 minutes later that we met a drug addict on the street who was reading the book!”

In 1969, a Catholic translated *The Cross and the Switchblade* into the Czech language for distribution in Czechoslovakia. Originally the book was printed and distributed by the underground church during communist rule.

Petr Ministr was a new Christian who received a copy, and God placed a call on his life to start Teen Challenge in his country. Teen Challenge began as an underground ministry in 1987 and was officially recognized in 1994. *The Cross and the Switchblade* has inspired hundreds to come to Christ in the Czech Republic.

One man living in an underground sewer channel in Brno, Czech Republic, was given a copy of *The Cross and the Switchblade* by Teen Challenge street workers. They invited him to a mobile coffeehouse. The man read the book, and seeds of hope were planted in his heart.

The next week the man came to the outreach coffeehouse and decided to go into the Teen Challenge program. His first day in the program he finished reading the book and prayed to receive Jesus as his Savior.

In countries around the world, *The Cross and the Switchblade* continues to spread a message of hope to the addicted. The U.N. estimates there are more than 270 million drug abusers worldwide. New translations and printings in countries where Teen Challenge ministries are starting — Thailand, Mongolia and Tajikistan are three of the most recent — help reach more of these hurting people.

Shortly after *The Cross and the Switchblade* was released in 1963, *Good Housekeeping* magazine published a condensed version of the story. In recent years, this condensed version has been repackaged into a small book of 56 pages and printed in several languages as an outreach tool. During the past two years more than 300,000 copies have been printed in the U.S. and are being used by churches and individuals for ministry to youth and adults.

David Wilkerson concluded *The Cross and the Switchblade* by saying, “The Holy Spirit is in charge. As long as He remains in charge, the programs will thrive. The minute we try to do things by our own power we will fail. This is the guiding principle of the Center here in New York. ... The Holy Spirit is in charge here. We should write it for all to see on the lintels of every doorway we build. But since that might seem like so many words, we will do better: we will write it on our lives. And in all the lives we can reach out to and touch and inspire with the living Spirit of God.”

One lady who came to Teen Challenge was assigned to read *The Cross and the Switchblade* for one of her classes.

“At first I was not happy with this assignment,” says Laverne, “but then I began to see that I was not alone. God had touched other people like Nicky Cruz, and He would do the same in my life. I saw my life as one more chapter in this book.”

During the past 50 years thousands of new chapters have been written to *The Cross and the Switchblade* — each a life transformed by the power of God.

The same week Pastor Bill Doubek was interviewed for this article he gave *The Cross and the Switchblade* to a young soldier who had just returned from the war in Afghanistan.

“This young man read the whole book in one day,” says Doubek. “God used it to soften his heart, and he told me he was passing it on to another soldier. I believe this story is just as contemporary today as it was 50 years ago when it was first written.”

This story was originally published in *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 1, 2014. Another version of this story is available with pictures at the website www.Equiptc.org in the “Project Updates” section.