



Ruth Graham, youngest daughter of evangelist Billy Graham, speaks at a conference in Nashville, Tenn., Oct. 4, 2008. As part of her ministry, Graham addresses what she calls the "the elephants in the church world," issues like addiction, depression, eating disorders, sexual infidelity, anger, divorce, loneliness and pornography. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey)



Religion today By ROSE FRENCH

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Ruth Graham knows firsthand how life can be filled with heartache.

The third of evangelist Billy Graham's five children, she has dealt with a daughter's teen pregnancies, another's bulimia and a son's drug use.

She also struggled with suicidal thoughts after learning that her first husband had been unfaithful — a discovery that led to a second "rebound marriage" lasting only five weeks.

These low points eventually led her in 2004 to form a ministry, Ruth Graham & Friends, that helps others address problems that she said are too often ignored in the Christian community.

"Once we're in the church, we pretend all the sinners are on the outside. We want to keep the rules, and when we can't, we become shameful and pretend we have it all together," Graham said in an interview.

Graham is trying to educate Christians about these issues through her "Get Growing" conferences, including one held last month in Nashville that drew about 400 people.

The events address troubles such as addiction, depression, eating disorders, marital infidelity, anger, divorce, loneliness and pornography.

"The world is tired of plastic Christians," she said. "I was tired of being a plastic Christian. I told everybody I had it all together, and I was falling apart. And I was scared to death to tell somebody."

At the conferences, she talks about her experiences and how her faith and family's support helped her survive. The meetings include workshops where participants can get one-on-one guidance. Graham received psychological counseling after her second divorce, and says in her workshops that some Christians might need therapy in addition to spiritual counseling.

Graham has also written several books, including "In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart," about her own family's hardships, and "I'm Pregnant ... Now What?" about teen pregnancy.

"My concern is for the person who's in the church and is either stuck because of one of these major issues in their life or they're just struggling with a family member or someone they know," she said. "And they want to know how to get unstuck."

Graham, 57, has the same tall, graceful bearing as her famous father. A lifelong Presbyterian, she doesn't consider herself an evangelist, instead describing what she does as "sharing."

"I think I'm dealing with believers already who are just struggling in their lives like I did," she said. "A lot of people have been taught that if you're depressed there's something wrong with you spiritually. That's so unfair. It's a physical issue. No one was addressing it with me. I was told to get a Bible and go up into the mountains and I'd be fine. And I knew I wasn't. I wanted to take a gun into the woods and shoot myself."

Graham's life began to change dramatically when she found out about her first husband's infidelity after 18 years of marriage. They tried to save the union, but it dissolved about three years later, causing her to fall into a deep depression.

Graham said being Billy Graham's daughter made the situation even more difficult.

She said she tried to "live up to people's expectations, and you become inauthentic and you pretend you have it all together, but inside you're dying," she said.

Following her divorce, she says she was introduced to a handsome widower and married him after six months, despite warnings by her parents and others.

"Within 24 hours, I knew I had made a very bad mistake. I became afraid of him and decided not to stick around," she said.

So Graham, who has lived in Virginia the past 27 years, went to her parents home in Montreat, N.C., where her father, who turns 90 on Friday, still resides. Her mother, Ruth, died at age 87 last year.

"I had to go tell my parents. I thought, 'What are they going to say to me?' As I rounded the last bend in my father's driveway, he was waiting for me. He wrapped his arms around me and said, 'Welcome home.' He showed me enormous grace.

"As I was talking to him one day, really beating myself up and taking responsibility for everything and just pouring my heart out, he said, 'Quit beating yourself up. We all live under grace and do the best we can.' That's a very grace-filled statement from a man who could very well have said 'You're out of here. I'm tired of it.'"

In the midst of her relationship turmoil, Graham's children were hurting too.

One of her daughters had a child at age 16 and another baby not long after. Her son was treated for drug abuse and another daughter suffered from bulimia.

It was during these trials when she decided to go back to college to finish her degree at Mary Baldwin College, a women's school in Staunton, Va., where she majored in religion communications. She began to fill in for her sister Gigi when she couldn't make it to speaking events and found she had a talent for it.

"Then people started to ask me on my own right," Ruth Graham said, which led her to start her ministry.

Each of the five children of Billy and Ruth Graham is an evangelist or involved in some Christian ministry. Anne Graham Lotz, Ruth's older sister, holds revival meetings worldwide through her AnGel Ministries. Franklin Graham has succeeded his father as head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The youngest sibling, Ned, spent years in ministry to China.

This month, she says her family will celebrate her father's birthday with a family only gathering in Montreat and another later this month for friends, political leaders and others.

Retired from preaching, her father stays close to home these days and goes to the Mayo Clinic for "tuneups every once in while. He's doing remarkably well," Graham said.

Ruth Graham said it was more than her father's six-decade career that inspired her own ministry. She said both her parents were living examples of how to follow biblical teachings.

"Our dinner conversations were about people whose lives had been changed because of the Gospel," Ruth Graham said. "Everybody wants to make a difference in life. We saw it was clear that Jesus made a difference."

On the Net:

- Ruth Graham & Friends:
<http://www.ruthgrahamandfriends.org>

