Pat Robertson, ultra-right-wing pastor, dies at 93

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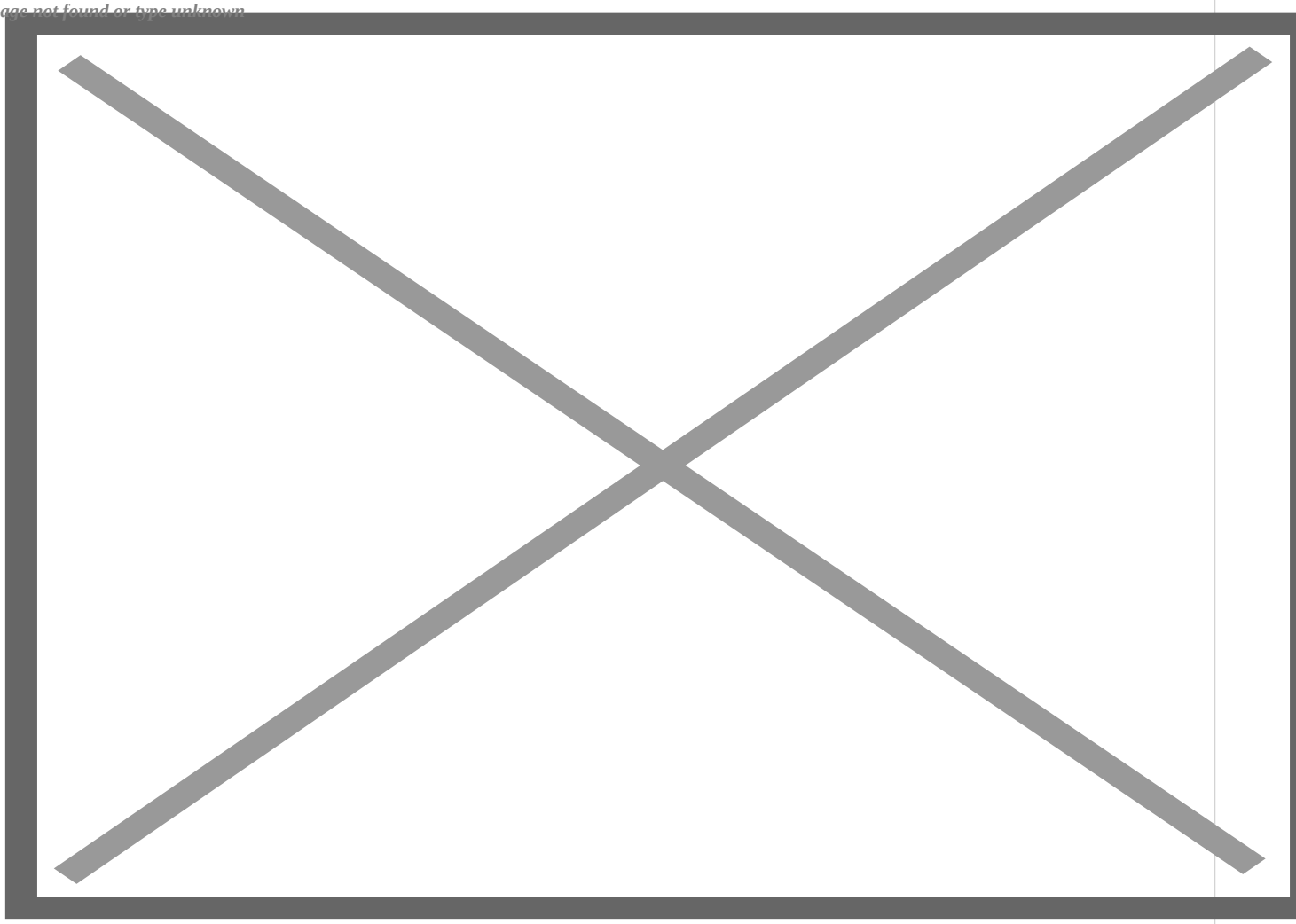

Donald Trump is greeted by Pat Robertson at an event during Trump's presidential campaign at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, on February 24, 2016 [File: Joshua Roberts/Reuters]

Virginia Beach, June 8 (RHC)-- Pat Robertson, a religious broadcaster who turned a tiny Virginia station into the global Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and helped make religion central to Republican Party politics in the United States through his right-wing Christian Coalition, has died at the age of 93.

Robertson's death on Thursday was announced by his broadcasting network. No cause was given.

Robertson's enterprises also included Regent University, an evangelical Christian school in Virginia Beach; the American Center for Law and Justice, which defends the religious rights of Christians; and Operation Blessing, an international humanitarian organization. He also tried to run for U.S. president in 1988.

For more than a half-century, Robertson was a familiar presence in American living rooms, known for his 700 Club television show, and in later years, his televised pronouncements of God's judgement, blaming natural disasters on everything from homosexuality to the teaching of evolution. Robertson regularly made anti-Muslim statements, especially after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, helping make Islamophobia mainstream in U.S. society.

The late pastor attacked Muslims, Islam and the Prophet Muhammad throughout the years. He called the religion a "monumental scam" in 2002. He often warned that the goal of Islam is "world domination," fuelling conspiracy theories that Muslim immigrants aim to take over Western societies. In 2013, he compared Islam to Nazism, urging policymakers to "identify our enemy" as the U.S. did during World War II.

His American Center for Law and Justice helped lead legal opposition in 2010 to a planned Muslim community center in New York City over its proximity to the World Trade Center buildings that collapsed in the 9/11 attacks. The developers eventually abandoned the plan for the center after nationwide pressure from right-wing groups.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an advocacy group, previously denounced what it called Robertson's "bigoted, hate-filled views." "His legacy is a potent reminder of the urgent need for more understanding and respect in our global dialogue about religion," Abed Ayoub, executive director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), told Al Jazeera on Thursday.

"His problematic Islamophobic rhetoric often created unnecessary divisions in our society. We hope that in the future, religious leaders strive to promote peace, empathy and interfaith understanding, rather than fostering fear and discrimination."

But Robertson's influence grew over the years and persisted in mainstream conservative politics. In 1988, he brought a huge following with him when he moved directly into politics by seeking the Republican presidential nomination. Robertson pioneered the now-common strategy of courting Iowa's network of evangelical Christian churches and finished in second place in the Iowa caucuses ahead of Vice President George HW Bush.

Robertson's masterstroke was insisting that three million followers across the U.S. sign petitions before he would decide to run, Robertson biographer Jeffrey K Hadden said.

The tactic gave him an army. ?He asked people to pledge that they'd work for him, pray for him and give him money," Hadden, a University of Virginia sociologist, told The Associated Press in 1988. ?Political historians may view it as one of the most ingenious things a candidate ever did.?

Robertson later endorsed Bush, who won the presidency. The pursuit of evangelicals in Iowa, which holds the first caucuses every presidential election year, is now a ritual for Republican hopefuls, including those currently seeking the White House in 2024.

Robertson started the Christian Coalition in Chesapeake, Virginia in 1989, saying it would further his campaign's ideals. The coalition became a major political force in the 1990s, mobilising conservative voters through grassroots activities. By the time of his resignation as the coalition's president in 2001 — Robertson said he wanted to concentrate on ministerial work — his impact on both religion and politics in

the US was “enormous,” according to John C Green, an emeritus political science professor at The University of Akron.

Many followed the path Robertson cut in religious broadcasting, Green told the AP in 2021. In U.S. politics, Robertson helped “cement the alliance between conservative Christians and the Republican Party.”

Pat Robertson was born on March 22, 1930, in Lexington, Virginia, to Absalom Willis Robertson and Gladys Churchill Robertson. His father served for 36 years as a US. .congressman and senator from Virginia.

One of Robertson’s innovations was to use the secular talk-show format on his network’s flagship show, The 700 Club, which grew out of a telethon when Robertson asked 700 viewers for monthly $10 contributions. It was more suited to television than traditional revival meetings or church services and gained a huge audience. His guests eventually included several U.S. presidents — Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump.

At times, Robertson’s on-air pronouncements drew outrage. He claimed that the terrorist attacks that killed thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001 were caused by God, angered by the federal courts, pornography, abortion rights and church-state separation.

He called for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2005. Later that year, he warned residents of a rural Pennsylvania town not to be surprised if disaster struck them because they voted out school board members who favored teaching “intelligent design” over evolution. And in 1998, he said Orlando, Florida, should beware of hurricanes after allowing the annual Gay Days event.

Though Robertson had been a staunch supporter of Israel, the Israeli government broke ties with him and groups associated with him in 2006 after he suggested then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s stroke was divine punishment for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip.

In 2014, he angered Kenyans when he warned that towels in Kenya could transmit AIDS. CBN issued a correction, saying Robertson “misspoke.”

Robertson also could be unpredictable: In 2010, he called for ending mandatory prison sentences for marijuana possession convictions. Two years later, he said on The 700 Club that marijuana should be legalised and treated like alcohol because the government’s war on drugs had failed.

Robertson condemned Democrats caught up in sex scandals, saying for example that President Bill Clinton turned the White House into a playpen for sexual freedom. But he helped solidify evangelical support for Trump, dismissing the candidate’s sexually predatory comments about women as an attempt “to look like he’s macho.”

After Trump took office, Robertson interviewed the president at the White House. But after Trump lost to Joe Biden in 2020, Robertson said Trump was living in an “alternate reality” and should “move on,” news outlets reported.

Robertson’s son, Gordon, succeeded him in 2007 as chief executive of CBN, which is now based in Virginia Beach. Robertson remained chairman of the network and continued to appear on The 700 Club.

Pat Robertson stepped down as host of the show in 2021, and Gordon took over the weekday show.

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