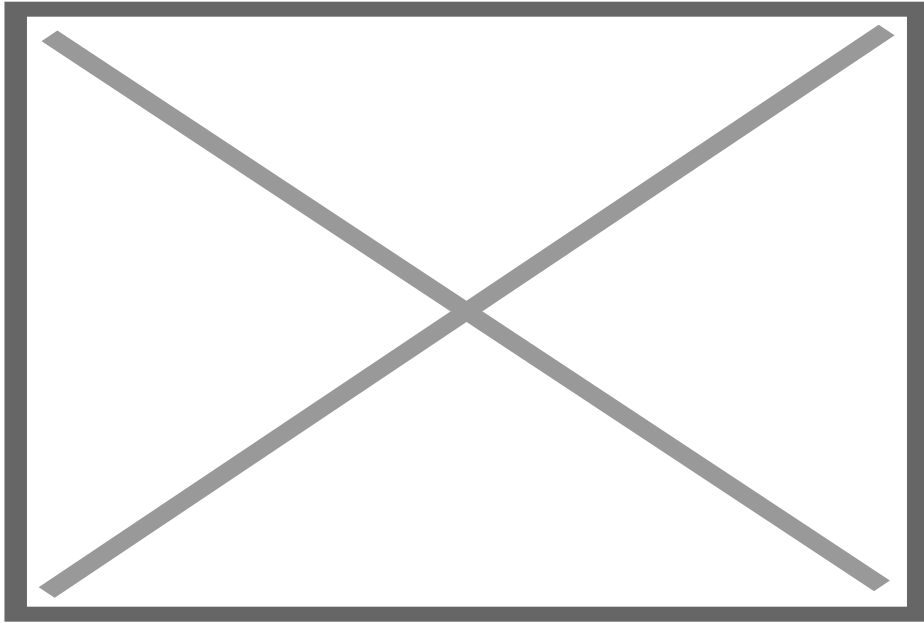


How Christianity shaped Dolly Parton's music and spirit

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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Dolly Parton performs in Overland Park, Kansas, on August 14, 2023. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File)

Dolly Parton, the country music icon who sang and spoke frequently of her Christian faith, died at age 80 on Tuesday, her family [announced](#).

“Sadness lies with us, not with Dolly,” said Bryan Seaver, Parton’s nephew and head of security, in a [video](#) released by the family. “Dolly has lived in the light and is in the arms of Jesus, surely met by Carl (her husband), her parents and countless others who have watched her and longed for her to meet them in the heavens.”

The winner of 11 Grammy Awards, Parton was a performer with broad, enduring appeal, crossing religions, races, and political parties, over seven decades, and she spoke of how faith grounded her and her family.

“We all believe in God, and we’re very close,” she [told](#) KCRA, a Sacramento station. “We have a good communication with God, and I think that’s a positive attitude. That’s one of the reasons that we stay sane, and a lot of people in the business seem to be crazy.”

Born in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, she was one of 12 children. Her grandfather was a Pentecostal preacher, and Parton sang from a young age with her family. She wrote her first song at age 5 and by 13 had made her debut at the Grand Ole Opry, introduced by [another country icon, Johnny Cash](#).

She became a recording artist in the 1960s. Her song “I Will Always Love You”—written as she ended her singing partnership with Porter Wagoner—reached No. 1 on the country charts in 1974 and 1982 before becoming a global hit when [Whitney Houston](#)’s version of the ballad was released in 1992 on *The Bodyguard* soundtrack.

After global tours in the 1970s, Parton became a movie star, acting in *9 to 5* with Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin—a film whose theme song became an anthem for working women. In the 1980s, she recorded “Islands in the Stream” with Kenny Rogers and opened Dollywood, a theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

Even amid her mainstream hits, Parton kept gospel music in rotation, with her 1971 gospel album *The Golden Streets of Glory* and the 2019 song “[God Only Knows](#)” with Christian musical duo For King & Country, and a [hand-clapping medley](#) on her 2022 NBC special, *Dolly Parton’s Mountain Magic Christmas*.

Parton was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1999, the Gospel Music Association’s [Gospel Hall of Fame](#) in 2009, and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2022.

She also was a famous philanthropist. In the 1990s, Parton created a program to give free books to children as a tribute to her father, who was unable to read or write. Her Imagination Library has donated more than 300 million books across the globe. [In a 2018 interview](#), she also cited the Bible as inspiration for this program.

“In the Bible, where it talks about honor your father and mother, . . . I think means to bring honor to their name.” In more recent years, she gave a [\\$1 million donation](#) for COVID-19 research that was partly used to fund the Moderna vaccine and announced a similar donation to help victims of Hurricane Helene, which affected Tennessee, her home state, and six others in 2024, *People* magazine [reported](#).

Her fans included clergy. The Church of the Three Crosses in Chicago made Parton the [subject of a five-part sermon series](#) in 2022. “We’ve been using Dolly as a way to talk about story and our larger story of faith and that all of our stories matter and that God’s story is continuing on in us,” Britt Cox told the congregation at the time as she concluded the series titled, “The Gospel According to Dolly.”

The sermon series featured Parton’s songs, including “Jolene,” “My Tennessee Mountain Home,” and “I Will Always Love You.”

Parton, who performed in sold-out concerts even in the last years of her life, drew a firm line between admiration and worship.

“I don’t want to be worshiped, because there’s a scripture in my Bible that talks about idol worship,” she told *People* in 2021. “And I see that happening all the time with movie stars and these celebrities. People literally worship them more than they worship God. And I just—I cringe at it sometimes.”

After the death of her husband of more than 60 years, Carl Dean, last year, Parton [spoke](#) to the Associated Press about how her faith was a comfort.

“I am a person of faith, and I truly believe that I’m going to see him again someday,” she said in the May 2025 interview. “And I see him every day in my memories and in my heart, and in all the things that we used to do and all the things that we’ve built together.”

After the announcement of her death, a wide array of politicians and religious leaders lauded Parton for her accomplishments.

President Trump [announced](#) that he would order the lowering of the American flag in Parton’s honor for a week. “Very sad to report that Dolly Parton, one of the greatest Country singers, and far beyond, EVER, has just passed away,” he added. “This is a true loss for millions of people. There has never been anyone like her, and never will.”

In a post on X, US Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent, called Parton “one of the great entertainers of our era. She was not only a talented musician & songwriter, but a lifelong philanthropist and advocate for literacy, education, LGBTQ+ rights, healthcare and disaster relief. Her music and humanity touched millions. She will be sorely missed.”

On Bluesky, New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani [praised](#) Parton as an “irreplaceable champion of the working class.”

“Dolly invited us all — poets and historians and tired moms alike — to a ‘glammed up’ life of song,” [wrote](#) theologian Diana Butler Bass in her newsletter. “Thank you, Dolly Parton. For the high heels and the music. For dressing up our days. And for your smarts and courage and honesty and generosity of spirit. We will always love you.”

Bernice King, CEO of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, [posted](#) on X: “I am deeply saddened by the passing of Dolly Parton. Her extraordinary voice entertained and brought joy to generations, and she used her influence beyond music to affirm human dignity, inclusion, and the importance of treating people with love and respect.” — Religion News Service

Aleja Hertzler-McCain contributed to this report.