

# Bicentennial project

## There's still time to create William Wilberforce's 'better hour'

By Joel Belz

**I**f you're a bit bewildered, as the year 2007 rolls into its final quarter, by all the ballyhoo over William Wilberforce, get set—because the tempo is about not to die down but to pick up. Just about everybody, it seems, wants to hitch his wagon to the Wilberforce star.

That's partly because Wilberforce was some star. His story, popularized especially for Americans earlier this year in the very well done film *Amazing Grace*, was a picker-upper during a period when Christians seemed so regularly frustrated in their efforts to do anything significant to influence public policy in the United States. If that little pipsqueak of a man could make an impact, people seemed to respond, why should we give up?

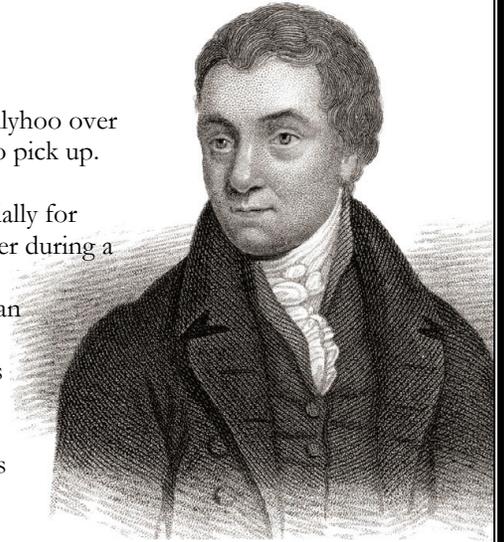
The Wilberforce story is getting special attention this year, of course, because 2007 is the 200th anniversary of his success in bringing an end to Great Britain's approving involvement in the transatlantic slave trade of that time. But to narrow the Wilberforce story to a single year would be to miss the heart of the drama. It was, after all, the man's relentless persistence—his disciplined year-after-year-after-year determination—that accounts for the fact there's even a story to tell a couple of centuries later.

So it comes as good news now that the Wilberforce story will continue to be widely told over the coming year—in a variety of venues. A documentary film (funded by the John Templeton Foundation) is set to be nationally televised, probably in February. A scholarly but clearly written compendium featuring 20 Christian authors provides new insights about what goes into transforming a culture. Small groups are being formed with a focus on changing specific culture on the local level—all in the spirit of Wilberforce's famous "Clapham circle." Even at the level of high-school students, a \$10,000 first prize is being offered (with up to \$40,000 in total prizes) for demonstrated leadership in specific service projects that reflect Wilberforce's values.

All that is happening because of the efforts of a number of individuals and organizations involved in The Wilberforce Project. And while *WORLD* doesn't make a habit of endorsing even worthwhile organizations and projects, there are several reasons why I don't hesitate to mention this one in this space.

First, the work of William Wilberforce 200 years ago was so much a model of what *WORLD* magazine stands for. Here was a man whose Christian faith was no mere appendage to his calling as a statesman and a legislator. More and more, his faith became the essence of his calling. *WORLD* readers who know Wilberforce only by vague reputation should spend the next few months getting to know him in detail—and then they should emulate him.

Second, I would love it if the high-schooler who wins that \$10,000 first prize for a meaningful service project came from a family that subscribes to and reads *WORLD* magazine. *WORLD* enjoys thousands of teenage readers (you see their letters from time to time in our Mailbag



section), and it would make sense if the same worldview that feeds them in these pages took solid form in some worthwhile project.

More details about this opportunity are available at [thebetterhour.com/contest](http://thebetterhour.com/contest).

Pass that information on to a bright teenager you know. Final projects aren't due until next March 1—but online registration is open right now and will equip young people with an awareness of the contest's guidelines.

Third, my understanding is that the Wilberforce Project is just that: a project with an important but limited focus. No future organization or enduring program is envisioned. Indeed, most of their announced projects are already funded. The whole project, incidentally, operates under the title "The Better Hour"—a reference to a sonnet written to Wilberforce by William Cowper.

"William Wilberforce," according to an introduction in the book referenced earlier, "was for creating a better hour for humankind—an hour in which goodness is more fashionable than evil, in which generosity is more fashionable than greed, and in which freedom is more fashionable than slavery."

Because of those hard-earned accomplishments, Abraham Lincoln knew who Wilberforce was, and actually said in 1858 that "every schoolboy" also knew. But these days, according to the Wilberforce Project's chairman Chuck Stetson, no more than 3 percent of Americans and 10 percent of Brits can identify him.

Doubling or tripling those embarrassing numbers seems like a worthwhile assignment.