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Herbert Armstrong, head of Church of God, dies

By Betsy Bates
Herald staff writer

Private funeral services are being planned for television preacher Herbert W. Armstrong, who died peacefully yesterday morning, having prepared church leaders for "passing the baton" at his Worldwide Church of God.

He was 93. A pioneer of radio evangelism in the 1930s, the fiery Armstrong cultivated a ministry over the decades that eventually claimed 80,000 church members, television viewers from 374 stations worldwide and a magazine, "Plain Talk," with a stated circulation of 7.9 million.

Church spokesman David Hulme

said Armstrong died quietly at home on the Pasadena campus of his Ambassador College, just two days after officially choosing a successor to rule the church he founded.

Heart ailments had plagued the clergyman for years, beginning in 1977 with congestive heart failure. Hulme said the exact cause of death wasn't known, but added, "He was 93. Essentially, the clock ran out."

Armstrong this week issued a statement to his followers saying he was "in a very weak, physically weakened state enduring severe pain and with virtually no strength whatsoever."

The last months of Armstrong's

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life were spent preparing church leaders for an orderly transition, including warnings to guard against Satan, should the devil attempt to take advantage of the shift in leadership, Hulme said.

Armstrong wanted his successor as pastor general to be Joseph Tkach, 59, director of church administration for the past six years. Church elders concurred with that choice earlier this week, thus ending speculation that Garner Ted Armstrong, the preacher's son and one-time partner in the electronic pulpit, might be taken back into the fold after twice being "disfellowshipped," or excommunicated, from the church.



Herbert W. Armstrong
He prepared for "passing of baton"

Hulme said the elder Armstrong made it "very plain that (Garner Ted Armstrong)... was not to succeed him or have a leadership role in the Worldwide Church of God."

Garner Ted Armstrong leads his own ministry, the Church of God International, and broadcasts his own evangelistic television show from Tyler, Texas.

In a telephone interview from Tyler yesterday, Garner Ted said that although he had "stepped up" attempts to communicate with his father in recent months, "He would have nothing to do with me."

"I have unfailingly and unceasingly attempted to get in touch with my father for the last 7½ years," Garner Ted said. Once, he claimed even to have sent his father a newspaper headline: "Son Defers to Father's Authority."

The young Armstrong said his dispute with his father stemmed from his outspoken criticism of his father's use of church resources, and his father's marriage to a woman many years his junior.

The adventures of Garner Ted, who was accused by church leaders of trying to take over the fellowship after his father's heart failure, were just a few of the many scandals and controversies that kept the church in the headlines for decades.

Armstrong founded his opulent and controversial ministry in 1934 as a spinoff of the Oregon Conference of the Church of God. His Worldwide Church of God burgeoned into a world-renown institution, especially after he moved the ministry to Pasadena in 1947 to take advantage of broadcasting opportunities in southern California.

Beginning with a radio show broadcasting from a tiny, 500-watt station in Eugene, Ore., the former advertising salesman from Des Moines eventually travelled the globe in a mission he called "The Great Commission." He took his message to world leaders such as Emperor Hirohito of Japan, King Juan Carlos of Spain, Menachem Begin, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines.

Armstrong appeared weekly on the television ministry "World Tomorrow," which he last taped in August.

He wrote six books, including "Mystery of the Ages" in 1985, the work Hulme said Armstrong considered "his crowning achievement as a writer."

Armstrong's "Plain Truth" magazine claims to have 7.9 million readers, many of whom contributed to the church's great wealth. Television followers and members who tithe 20 to 30 percent of their income also helped to amass the tax-free fortune, said by church officials to exceed \$100 million in assets a year.

How church money was spent

became an issue in the 1970s. Dissident church members sued Armstrong and church leaders for fraud, claiming they squandered money on lavish homes and furnishings, and on the global journeys by private jet by Armstrong and his then top aide, Stanley Rader.

The state attempted to take over church records as a result of the suit, but pulled out of the dispute in 1980 after state legislation greatly reduced state authority over churches.

During the controversy, Armstrong commissioned full-page newspaper advertisements lambasting state officials and offering \$100,000 rewards for information about the state's investigation into church affairs.

He also fought the state from the pulpit, and accused state leaders of being manipulated by Satan.

The conservative and evangelistic Worldwide Church of God is based on the Old and New Testaments. Although it is a Protestant faith, some tenets are borrowed from Judaism, such as the keeping of a Saturday sabbath beginning at sundown Friday night.

Over the years, Armstrong made numerous prophecies about the world's end. In 1981, Rader said Armstrong knew the "end time" was not far off, and said the preacher would not die before his prophecy came true.

"We believe God has never put a man into a job and taken him from that job before that job, in fact, was completed," Rader said in a 1981 interview.

In the most recent issue of "Plain Truth," the church predicted a coming Utopia for believers, but warned of increasing signs that the world as we know it is doomed by warfare, famines, lawlessness, wickedness and pestilence.

Hulme said church leaders do not fear a breaking down of the membership of the Worldwide Church of God in Armstrong's absence, since "the membership has it very clearly in mind they were not following a personality."

"He always said, 'Don't believe me. Believe what you can prove I say to be true,'" Hulme said.

Garner Ted Armstrong said his father will be buried in a family plot in Altadena, after a funeral Sunday or Monday.

In addition to his son, 55, Armstrong is survived by two daughters, Dorothy Mattson, 65, of San Luis Obispo, and Beverly Gott, 67, of La Canada. A second son, Dick, died in 1958 in an automobile accident.

Armstrong's first wife, Loma, died in 1967, and in 1983, he was divorced in a highly publicized battle over property from his second wife, Ramona, 45.

In lieu of flowers, the church requests that donations be made to the church's Herbert W. Armstrong Memorial Fund in Pasadena.

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