

Garner Ted Armstrong

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Garner Ted Armstrong, who died on Monday aged 73, was one of the most successful, but also the most controversial, of American television evangelists.

His folksy radio and television persona, combined with a huge investment in buying airtime, made him a household name in America. During the 1960s and 1970s, he was seen by an estimated 20 million Americans on television every week, and his radio show was transmitted to every continent on about 300 radio stations.

His energetic stance on the issues of the day is typified by recent articles posted on his website. These include: "Sodomite Elected As Bishop In Episcopal Church!" and "Won't It Be Wonderful, When Iraq Becomes Just like America?" He wrote dozens of articles and booklets arguing, among other things, that America and Britain had become the leading powers because the Anglo-Saxons were the true descendants of the tribes of Israel. He warned that a United States of Europe would challenge the United States and would fulfil the Biblical prophesy of "the Beast" which would fight Jesus Christ at His return.

The sanctity of the family was, naturally, a staple theme; and Armstrong specialised in highly charged sermons against our "decadent society", lambasting wife-swapping and adultery (including "spiritual adultery"), and demanding the enforcement of God's laws regarding sex. But his own sexual peccadilloes caused him to be suspended from the various churches he represented on three occasions, and led to a series of damaging scandals which undermined his ministry.

Garner Ted Armstrong was born on February 9 1930 in Portland, Oregon. He was brought up at Eugene, in Oregon, where he attended the local high school. His father, Herbert Armstrong, was an early radio-evangelist and founder, in 1934, of the Radio Church of God. After moving to Pasadena, California, in 1947, he renamed it the Worldwide Church of God.

After serving in the Navy during the Korean war, Ted Armstrong enrolled at the church's Ambassador College at Pasadena, and in 1955 was ordained to the ministry, becoming vice-president of the church and of Ambassador College in 1958. His talents as a radio and television performer marked him out and, before long, he had displaced his father as the church's principal public spokesman and evangelist on its weekly radio and television programmes, *The World Tomorrow*.

Silver-haired and good-looking, Armstrong became a national celebrity. His shows, interspersing serious political discussion with fundamentalist sermons and prophecies, drew political as well as religious leaders - including Anwar Sadat, Moshe Dayan and Itzhak Rabin. Although some of his predictions were wide of the mark (in 1957 he claimed that a third of the American population would die in the next 15 years of disease and famine) he continued to draw millions of listeners and viewers, helping to increase the church's membership to 80,000.

But by the early 1970s rumours of sexual improprieties and gambling were beginning to cause concern among the church elders, concerns which reached a crisis when it emerged that Armstrong intended to leave his wife for an air stewardess.

In early 1972, his father, Herbert, the self-proclaimed apostle of God's "only true church" expelled his son on the ground that that he was "in the bonds of Satan", although all allegations of wrongdoing were staunchly denied.

Yet without Ted Armstrong's drawing power the church began to lose support and income, and six months later, a "fully repentant" prodigal son was reinstated, with full rights and privileges, into his father's church. "Ted is above the scripture," his father told his flock.

But as the 1970s wore on, persistent allegations of adultery and gambling were joined by disputes over doctrine. In 1978 Herbert's patience finally snapped, and Ted Armstrong was excommunicated from the Worldwide Church of God. The elder Armstrong accused his son of trying to put him aside, take over the church and move its Ambassador College to Texas; Ted, meanwhile, denounced what he called the church's lavish expenses.

Realising that there was little hope of reconciliation, Ted Armstrong immediately launched his own church, the Church of God, International, based at Tyler, Texas, and returned to the airwaves armed with a new magazine, Twentieth Century Watch, to rival his father's organ, The Plain Truth.

The Worldwide Church of God went into receivership in 1979, and Herbert Armstrong died in 1986 amid allegations that he had siphoned off more than \$70 million in church funds for his personal use. But the demise of his father's enterprise failed to do anything to improve Ted's own fortunes; his new church never had more than about 5,000 members.

In 1995 he suffered further indignity when The Church of God, International, removed him from ministerial responsibilities following an incident involving massage "therapy". Two years later video footage of the incident, with Armstrong allegedly sexually harassing a nurse, received national coverage and he was removed from the church.

Armstrong continued his on-air ministry through a reconstituted Garner Ted Armstrong Evangelical Association, and in 1998 founded yet another new church, the Intercontinental Church of God. He was president of both until his death.

He married Shirley Hammer in 1953. The marriage was dissolved, and he is survived by three sons.