

Garner Ted Armstrong, Evangelist, 73, Dies

By **DOUGLAS MARTIN** SEPT. 17, 2003

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Garner Ted Armstrong, a silver-haired television evangelist known for his easy charm and dark message, died on Monday in Tyler, Tex. He was 73.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, his son Mark said.

Mr. Armstrong was the son of the evangelist Herbert W. Armstrong, who called himself the "only apostle of our time" and used radio to build a ministry that eventually reached millions with its message of the imminent end of the world to be followed by the second coming of Christ. An advertising man, he called his denomination the Radio Church of God.

Garner Ted Armstrong took the story into the television age. Speaking extemporaneously and informally, he brought wry humor to his apocalyptic forecasts, which were routinely peppered with actual news reports of disasters.

He was at first reluctant to follow in his father's footsteps, but by the 1950's had become the star of the radio and television programs of his father's church, by then renamed the Worldwide Church of God. Both programs were called "The World Tomorrow," with the radio version heard on 360 stations on five continents and the television version seen by 20 million people on 165 stations.

In addition to spreading a spiritual message, the church grew materially to include Ambassador College in Pasadena, Calif., and a sizable publishing operation. By the end of the 1970's, The New York Times reported that it took in more than \$70 million a year, more than Billy Graham and Oral Roberts combined.

The narrative of Mr. Armstrong's life had elements of biblical stories and some that recalled Elmer Gantry, the lustful evangelist of Sinclair Lewis's novel.

The most dramatic event came in 1978, when his father excommunicated him because of doctrinal disagreements and accusations that were widely reported in the news media. Six years earlier, he was taken off the air for four months after it was discovered that he had been engaged in an extramarital affair, according to the reference book Contemporary Authors.

After his excommunication, Mr. Armstrong formed another church, the Church of God International.

But with each division, Mr. Armstrong's reach lessened. At the end, he was on about 100 cable television stations and a handful of radio stations.

The rift with his father never healed, in part because Garner Ted had accused Herbert of stealing millions from his own church.

"I tried repeatedly to call him and get in touch with him through letters, but he refused to talk to me," the younger Mr. Armstrong said in an interview with The Associated Press at the time of his father's death, at 93, in 1986.

"My biggest regret is not being able to see my father face to face during these past years," he said.

Garner Ted Armstrong was born on Feb. 9, 1930, in Portland, Ore. His father saw his birth as a miracle, because his wife had recovered from an anemic condition shortly before he was born. Herbert Armstrong dedicated his newborn son to God "for him to use as he had need," he said in his privately printed autobiography.

In October 1933, Herbert made his first radio broadcast in Salem, Ore. Early the next year, he published the first Plain Truth magazine on mimeographed paper.

The theology he espoused was the same his son would later hold, even as he moved between churches. It blended fundamental Christianity with some tenets of Judaism and Seventh-Day Sabbath doctrine; it departed from mainstream Christianity in rejecting the Trinity and regarding Christmas and Easter as pagan holidays; it held that Anglo-Saxons are the lineal descendants of the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

Members gave the church 10 percent to 40 percent of their income, a tradition Garner Ted continued.

He graduated from high school in Eugene, Ore., in 1947, the year that his father moved his religious headquarters to Pasadena because of the broadcasting facilities there.

Mr. Armstrong joined the Navy in 1948, partly to escape his father's authority. After his honorable discharge, he worked in his father's mail processing office. He entered the church's Ambassador College in 1952.

The next year, he underwent a spiritual conversion and was baptized in his father's church, and married Shirley Hammer, who survives him, along with their sons, Mark, David and Matthew. All live in Tyler.

A daily feature on Mr. Armstrong's Web site is news that may portend the end of the world. Yesterday's report included a water crisis in the Russian Far East, cholera in Liberia and the death of 200 civilians in the Congo.