

Church Founder to Divorce Wife

Herbert W. Armstrong, 89, Married Second Mate, 44, Five Years Ago

By RUSSELL CHANDLER, *Times Religion Writer*

Herbert W. Armstrong, founder-patriarch of the Pasadena-based Worldwide Church of God, plans to divorce his second wife, Ramona, after a five-year marriage.

Armstrong, 89, a widower, and his 44-year-old wife, a divorcee, were married in April, 1977, one year after the church ended its ban on remarriage by divorced persons. The marriage ceremony was performed in Tucson, Ariz., by Armstrong's son, Garner Ted Armstrong, who has since fallen out of favor with his father and founded his own church.

"Mr. Armstrong deeply regrets that he has to seek a legal dissolution of his marriage bonds," a church spokesman in Pasadena said Wednesday. The spokesman would not comment on reasons for the dissolution except to say they are "very biblical."

The 75,000-member church, which is a blend of Christian fundamentalist, non-Trinitarian and Seventh-day Sabbath doctrine, allows divorce for adultery, fraud, desertion and being "unequally yoked" with someone who has left the church.

The Pasadena church spokesman would not comment when asked if Ramona Armstrong had been "disfellowshipped" (ex-communicated) from the Worldwide Church of God.

In 1977, announcing his marriage to Ramona Martin, Armstrong wrote to ministers of the church: "God has now graciously provided the wife to be constantly at my side—a woman truly led by God's Holy Spirit. We have given the matter much time, to be sure it has grown into true love and like-minded rapport, as well as definitely sure it is God's will."

Several months later, he wrote in the church's magazine, the Plain Truth, "God knew the help I needed by my side to accomplish his work for the remainder of my life—for both of our lives"

Until 1974, the church had a policy requiring new members who had been divorced and remarried to dissolve their current marriages—which it considered adulterous—and whenever possible to be remarried to their original mates. Through the years, hundreds of marriages were terminated and families broken up because of the ruling.

Then, in 1976, the year before Herbert and Ramona Armstrong were married, a new statement was adopted: "The church accepts new converts in whatever marital state they enter the church A previously divorced person who has entered fellowship is free to remarry within the church."

Garner Ted Armstrong telephoned The Times to tell a reporter that his father is divorcing his stepmother.

"I'm ambivalent about it," the younger Armstrong said. "I don't think he should have ever married the woman anyway. I pleaded with him for 2½ years not to do it."

Sources close to Herbert Armstrong said the church has not made any announcement about the divorce but that Armstrong had confided to high-level associates several weeks ago that the divorce community-property settlement is "going to cost me everything I have."

No financial statements were attached to the petition for dissolution, filed in Pima County Court in Tucson. The extent of Armstrong's personal wealth has not been made public.

Members of the Worldwide Church of God are taught to tithe (give 10%)—and even double and triple tithe—their income to the church. The church's \$100-million empire includes Ambassador College, its campus auditorium and Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, all in Pasadena.

The Armstrongs had lived in their Tucson home until a few months ago, when Herbert returned to his Pasadena residence. Armstrong's first wife, Loma, died in April, 1967.