

Remembering NRB's Dr. Ben Armstrong

There are seldom words to describe the emotion felt by  those who are left, when a giant of the faith passes to glory. That is certainly true this week, as the National Religious Broadcasters mourn the loss of Dr. Ben Armstrong, the association's first Executive Director. Armstrong's legacy is far-reaching, and his life was lived well; it is a privilege for us to share even a brief overview of his time at NRB.

Ben Armstrong began working for NRB in 1966, just 22 years after the association's founding. The early pioneers of religious broadcasting had recognized the dwindling of religious radio, as the "Golden Era" of radio broadcasting in the 1930's gave way to draconian restrictions on paid religious programming in 1943. Almost overnight, evangelical ministers were unable to purchase radio airtime, and in 1944, 150 forward-thinking leaders met and created the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB). By 1966, NRB was effective, but its reach was still small. The Executive Committee decided to make Armstrong, then the Director of Radio for Trans World Radio (TWR), NRB's chief administrator. He was given a \$9,000 budget, a part-time secretary, and no office space. Armstrong was already a seasoned religious broadcaster who knew the impact of using media to take the Gospel to the world, and during his 23-year tenure he grew NRB from a small office in his home to an influential association with a full-time staff of 25.

As one reads the history of Armstrong and NRB, one word is oft repeated: Vision. Anne Dunlap, his long-time Executive Assistant, recalls that Armstrong often demonstrated more faith in people than they felt in themselves. When anyone told him that something couldn't be done, Armstrong would always say: "Why not?" He had an uncanny ability to convince someone

they *could* do something, achieving their goal when they doubted “like starting up that small radio station or hosting a new program,” says Dunlap with a smile. He told them it was possible, and – far more often than not – they did it.

In addition to his work leading NRB, Armstrong was an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and an alumnus of The Stony Brook School, Houghton College and Nyack College. He earned B.S. and M.A. degrees from New York University, studied theology at Princeton, and received his . from Union Theological Seminary in 1955. Before becoming TWR’s Director of Radio in 1958, Armstrong pastored Presbyterian churches in the New York metropolitan area. In 1967, just one year after joining NRB, he obtained a Ph.D. in mass communications (written in English, French, and Russian) from New York University. He later published *The Electric Church*, and lectured around the world. When Armstrong retired from NRB in 1989, he and his wife, Ruth, relocated to Bucks County, PA. In 1998, Armstrong was inducted into NRB’s Hall of Fame. He also continued to teach until last year, holding the position of Director of Doctoral Studies at Faith Theological Seminary in Baltimore, MD.

“Not only did Armstrong bind together the diverse, pluralistic membership of our own association,” recalls Dunlap, who continues to serve NRB as a Special Assistant to the President, “but he was able to reach out to those outside the Evangelical realm and win friends’ friends in the FCC, in The White House, in the press, and at major networks. And through his efforts, Armstrong generated for religious broadcasters both acceptability and major influence. Indeed, even the President of the United States recognized the work of this man. You understand,” said Ronald Reagan in a 1986 tribute to Ben Armstrong, “that unless the Lord builds the house, we workmen labor in vain. For being the patriot that you are, the man of God that you are, my thanks. May He bless you and Ruth as you start your next 20 years.”

The National Religious Broadcasters owes a debt of gratitude to Armstrong – a man of courage and vision who grew the association, and a man of deep faith who personally carried forward the banner of Christ through the medium of mass communication. He will be missed, yet Heaven rejoices.

Dr. Ben Armstrong is survived by his wife Ruth, son Robert, and daughters Bonnie and Debbie. His memorial service will be held at the Silverdale Brethren in Christ Church in Silverdale, PA, on Saturday, Jan. 22, 2011, at 1:00 p.m. Friends may meet with the family from 12-1 p.m. For additional information or to send condolences, please contact the Anders-Detweiler Funeral Home.

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