

This is a complete transcript of the oral history interview with **Benjamin Leighton Armstrong, Jr. (CN 416, T6)** for the Billy Graham Center Archives. No spoken words that were recorded are omitted. In a very few cases, the transcribers could not understand what was said, in which case “[unclear]” was inserted. Also, grunts and verbal hesitations such as "ah" or "um" are usually omitted. Readers of this transcript should remember that this is a transcript of spoken English, which follows a different rhythm and even rule than written English.

... Three dots indicate an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence on the part of the speaker.

.... Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

() Words in parentheses are asides made by the speaker.

[] Words in brackets are comments by the transcriber.

This transcript was created by Hannah Ting and Katherine Graber and was completed in August 2018.

Please note: This oral history interview expresses the personal memories and opinions of the interviewee and does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Billy Graham Center Archives or Wheaton College.



Collection 416, Tape 6. Oral history interview with Benjamin Leighton Armstrong, Jr. by Paul Ericksen on June 16, 1989.

ERICKSEN: What contact did you have with NRB before joining its staff?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I...I was always a supporter of NRB and attended the conventions representing Trans World Radio. As a matter of fact, Trans World Radio owes its programming support to NRB membership because that's where I would go to recruit support for NRB ... I mean for Trans World Radio. I would attend the meetings; I would speak and would literally sign up American broadcasters, NRB members, because of their stance and their interest, and it became a recruiting place for personnel as well. So, I was very much involved but as a...as a constituent member, not as a...I wasn't an officer; I wasn't a particular leader in that group. In a way, I...I just...I was one of the group of people, but it wasn't all that big—we were 104 members at that time.

ERICKSEN: And just for comparison, what's the membership now?

ARMSTRONG: It's at 1,450 organizational members.

ERICKSEN: Now, at the point where you moved over from Trans World Radio to NRB, were you looking to do something else? Or were you invited to join NRB and decided to do that?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I was being...I was being talked to for maybe two years by Dr. Bertermann. You know, "Would you please join us?" He talked to me at the dedication of the Bonaire studio and station when I was still with Trans World Radio, and said, "You know, you really need to help us," you know, "We need to have you." And I said, "Well, I really can't." And then...and...and I resigned Trans World Radio not to go to NRB, but I resigned Trans World Radio in order to complete my doctorate. I was in the critical stages of it. And...and it was in that interim period that I finally decided that I would do it on a part-time basis. And the part-time lasted from September to...to January ... to February of 1967, I became full-time executive secretary. But not too much changed except the salary was a little more and I...and...but I still was in my house. And it still was a kitchen-table operation for quite a little while.

ERICKSEN: What did your job description look like since it was a new position?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, it was a new position. Nobody knew quite what it was that I was to do, except that I was to continue the work of the association between the conventions and help plan the convention; put out a magazine, which I started to do...I did.

ERICKSEN: What else did you want to do?

ARMSTRONG: I wanted to develop the annual Directory of Religious Broadcasters, a listing all of the ministries. So, those were the real tangible things—the monthly magazine, the Directory of Religious Broadcasting, which was just a...a pamphlet...just a pamphlet when I was

there, a mimeograph pamphlet done by Willis Mayfield of Moody Bible Institute. And he said, “You know, you should be doing this on a regular basis.” So, he handed me the mimeograph sheet and this developed, you know, until we now have a fairly sizable volume. You’ve seen the directory.

ERICKSEN: How long did this take?

ARMSTRONG: We do that on an annual basis. And...and the magazine has a subscription list of about 10,000 people and goes through all the denominational headquarters and the ministries in...in the United States.

ERICKSEN: What was the relationship between the NRB and the National Council of Churches when you came in?

ARMSTRONG: Well, since I came from a mainline denominational church and have credentials in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I would say that the...the decision about these relationships were quite friendly. And I was invited to be a member of the steering committee of the...the formation of what they called the...the North American Broadcast Section of the World Association for Christian Communication (NABS-WACC). And I was invited to be a member of the steering committee and helped to form that organization. That was a mainline group. And I was invited to be present at the...the meetings of the...of what they call the Communication Commission of the World Council of Church...or the National Council of Churches. Not as a member but just as observer. And as time went on, the...they...the National Council of Churches grew more antagonistic to Christian broadcasting. They...they had no reason to be upset at the beginning because they had their whole part, but as the evangelicals started to get these stations and started to develop, they became more hostile—not so much that they were against the evangelicals. I...I insist it was a...it was...it was a...not an unfriendly attitude personally toward anybody, but it had to do with the genuine belief on the part of Bill Fore, that television was satanic. That there was something against Christian values of television, that television... that the church should not be on the air, that they were going into a hostile territory, that this was...was an area that was commercial, and commercial for Bill Fore the worst word you could get in the English language. I mean, it was like *mercantilism* or something like that. This was like a sin, the biggest sin there is. And that...that idea was what was...was militating the attitude loss of relationship between the evangelicals and the mainline churches. And as...as time went on, the evangelicals began to make themselves felt. And finally, Jimmy...Jimmy.... What was the name of that guy? He was the President of the United States at one time.

ERICKSEN: Carter?

ARMSTRONG: Jimmy Carter announced, “I too am an evangelical.” And then that was in ’76 and...and the evangelicals suddenly became aware of their strength. You know, that they.... “We taped him.” “We taped Jimmy.” “I taped him in Indianapolis.” And at a meeting that I have a picture of somewhere. I think it’s around here. Must be [unclear] around here of Jimmy and...and this taping session we did. We asked him ten questions and he answered and he answered perfect. I mean, he was...he was...he was beautiful. I mean, he...he...he scored with

evangelicals. And we sent this to a thousand stations...thousand stations...radio stations in the United States. And they played this thing ad infinitum. Got a lot of support for Jimmy. He was saying how, "Look, last night, this was what I was reading in God's Word, and I was reading it in Spanish too. It was the Spanish New Testament I was reading, and this was what I read, see." I mean, it was like he...he...he just.... Anyway, that was the beginning of...of the realization that there was a group of people out there known as the evangelicals who were...bore traditional values and who were going to put in their kind of a guy. And that carried on right through to Reagan and...and to Bush. And it was a case of...of this movement that I talked about back in the '40s where they went to Washington. They had no place to go, but they went to Washington and now Washington became more important than New York to the evangelicals. And...and they don't go to New York, nor do they care about going to New York because New York has dropped in its significance. And you can rent rooms at 475 Riverside Drive for very little because they're not in demand any longer. And the church has moved out, you know, the Presbyterians to Louisville. And, you know, it's, like, decreased in importance because it hasn't been supported by the general public. And NRB, on the other hand, has risen in its number of stations, forming one new Christian radio station every week and one new Christian television station every month. And there wouldn't be any...any presidential candidate that I know of in the last, you know, three or four, would...would listen with rapt attention to what we had to say over anybody from New York or from Boston or, you know, through the normal political setup. It's just the way it is. I mean, you know, it's been described as being the Christian Right and all of these things. But what I...the way I like to describe it is just that it's the people religion. It's like...it's like personal religion has won out over the structural religion in the United States. It's a personal encounter, call it born-again movement, call it the evangelical experience, call it...but it's... [door knocking in background] it's a grassroots phenomenon. Come on in [to the door knocker].

[Recording is stopped and restarted]

ERICKSEN: A while back, you mentioned at the beginning of NRB, establishing the relationship with the FCC.

ARMSTRONG: Right.

ERICKSEN: Has that continued to be friendly?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, yeah. That relationship has been...has been maximized, I would say. Yeah, so this...this relationship...friendly relationship between the NRB and the FCC has continued. There have been some ups and downs where we've had speakers where they haven't realized the...the sense and nature of this relationship and have been overly tough on the FCC for allowing some pornography, or some sex and violence on the...on the airways when it is a reality that the FCC does not control content of programming. It's not their...not their prerogative to dictate content. So, there's been some...some problem areas, but overall, we have won big by having a good relationship in Washington, D.C.—both at the White House and on the Hill and at the FCC. And we've been very successful. Now, I'm not saying that's going to continue forever that way, but it's important to know the background because at one time, we

were completely out of the spectrum. And now, the National Council of Churches and...and these big power groups, they used to control everything, are completely...are not completely out but they are basically out. And that is a triumph for grassroots America over...over the big bosses. You know, the...the structural liberal establishment of the East that the corridor of power that exists between Boston and Washington, D.C. And the evangelicals have...have made great progress through, in...in the case of the broadcasting thing, through the FCC and the White House.

ERICKSEN: Who would you say have been NRB's more surprising supporters and opponents?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I would say that the...that the members of Congress, both Democratic and...and Republican, have...have listened very attentively to us. Whenever we've gone after something, we've scored big with them because we represent constituency.

ERICKSEN: Uh-huh.

ARMSTRONG: We have the...the talk about the NAE with its 40,000 local churches and they're real live churches that are counted on to be unified on a particular position. They take seriously the.... Whereas, the National Council is not seen as representing all that they claim they have, and their people aren't all that into the...what they're doing. They don't have control of their constituency; their...their people are polarized, their members are more conservative than their leadership, and all of these factors can play a part in it.

ERICKSEN: So, you would say that congressmen would be more unexpected supporters?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I would say that we have congressmen because they represent constituencies out there the same as we have, and we have them. And we...we can turn the...turn the heat on awful fast, as we have in a couple of instances by virtue of local pastors being concerned over a particular issue. And....

ERICKSEN: You want to talk about those instances?

ARMSTRONG: Well, we have that instance of the Copyright Act, which we...we basically changed in our favor to work with the Congress. Senator McClellan was very helpful to us and...and he was chairman of the copyright legislation. It was major legislation that represented millions of dollars and we were able to get a provision exempting religious broadcasts from the copyright rates. And that means that a reproduction of...of programs simply to reproduce them, is not subject to the Copyright Act, and we were able to work that out. It was a very important piece of legislation. That's just one instance of it. And an area where we were terribly successful and lived to regret it was the...the famous Marilyn Murray O'Hair...Madalyn Murray O'Hair phony petition that wasn't phony at all. It was the RM-2493, which began in 1974 as a petition from two men in California...two liberal guys that wanted religious broadcasting off the FM educational frequencies, and they petitioned the FCC. The FCC, being advised that on our side, at the beginning responded to the 700,000 letters that we generated from our constituency.

ERICKSEN: Is this the Lansman and Milam?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. Lansman and Milam. Those were the two men. And in August...on August 1, 1975 the...the FCC unanimously voted to deny the petition. So we'd won. We'd won a hundred percent. It was all seven members voted. I mean, it was like a unanimous decision. We'd won a hundred percent. Which is very important because it would have taken...would have dealt a terrific blow to Moody Bible Institute and to Northwestern and many of our stations operating on on the FM educational band. And we won big on it. But then Madalyn Murray O'Hair suddenly got into the act even though she didn't have anything to do with the original petition. Apparently was sympathetic. We don't know what happened, but we...we know that...that they started writing...this letter-writing campaign, you know, to stop this thing that she was involved.... This was an error, in...in fact, that she wasn't involved in. And we've been trying to put out the thing and there's still now letters coming in by the thousands to the FCC: "Please don't let Madalyn Murray O'Hair take religious broadcasting off the air." And now, 21 million letters have come in to the Commission. And they're tired of it because they have to... this big bunch of mail that's irrelevant. They're tired of it, and we're tired of it. You know, the good thing about it is that it shows that there are a lot of people out there that like religious broadcasting, see? And even if erroneously believe that she's involved, are writing.... And if anything does happen that does jeopardize religious broadcasting, you can imagine we have a lot of people out there that they would do something about a real issue. In the meantime, we keep trying to put this out. Well, that's an illustration of, you know, something that backfired on us where we were successful, but maybe too successful, you know?

ERICKSEN: Have there been more recent cases of legislation or....?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. We had ... just two stations were attacked by...by militants, by people who want to take over, atheists or whatnot, to take over the two frequencies: WAWZ in Zarephath, New Jersey, one of our stations, and WCTN in Potomac, Maryland owned by Christ Church, Assembly of God church. They had cases where militant groups filed against them, that they were Christian groups, and they shouldn't be, you know, they...they weren't in a position to...to have the frequency any longer. And they had to battle. They were big battles in both cases. A lot of money was spent and both cases turned out in our favor. And again, the case of an issue where religious broadcasting was at...at stake, and it could have been interpreted as being unconstitutional to license a religious body, Christ Church, with a radio station, see? It could be...I mean, the Constitution could be interpreted that way. But because of...because of what NRB has done over the years in establishing an environment of...of trust and confidence, the FCC has...has supported us and Congress has too. And behind us are a lot of listeners, see, who...who can be.... And so, we kind of hesitate to go into a bunch of political things because we don't...we're not...we're not jeopardized all the time, but when we are, we do want to do something. So, we want to take advantage of that act, but we have real access now. There has developed what I consider to be a "fourth network" of...of stations—336 television stations and...and about 1,350 radio stations—a fourth network that aren't owned by a single entity, which is the definition of a network. So, it's not a real network, but it's like a fourth network in that they have the same general position...philosophical position and operate pretty much unified on basic traditional values. And that fourth network is not recognized by the liberal



establishment but it's.... But maybe they're increasingly recognizing it, but it's there. It's like a...a silent partner in...in the arsenal to...to win the country for Christ. And it's maybe not so silent in terms of what they're doing, but in terms of its political activity, silent.

ERICKSEN: What about surprising opponents to NRB? Any of those?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I...I think that...that the recent scandals would constitute opposition within the body, where you have activities that are going on that are not only illegal but unconstitutional, but unbiblical. And the opponents have come from the inside; the opposition came from the inside. And you would think that you would get opposition from the left or something from the...from the Atheist Society or something like that and.... But to have major ministries operate out of the...outside the law and outside of biblical mandates is a surprising development. It represents that the most difficult thing for us to...to contend with (the most difficult thing) is a Jimmy Swaggart or a Jim Bakker problem, because they are supposed to be one of us, you know. And they were accepted as one...as members in this, you know, as people who were on the same track. So, that is...I would say that's the biggest problem we've had in recent years. I mean, the other smaller things have come up like the must-carry legislation; fairness doctrine. These are problems you can talk about, but they're not clear-cut cases whether must-carry should exempt religious stations from having to cover...to carry the...the signals of the local television station. I mean, are cable systems supposed to carry free of charge the signals of the...the local television station regardless of what it is or how many audience...how many listeners it has and how popular it is? It's debatable. It's.... Obviously, we'd like to have all of our religious stations carried and mandated. But we've done very well in the...in the atmosphere of what you call deregulation in the United States. The atmosphere of increasing deregulation of FCC rules and regulations has been a climate of growth for religious broadcasting. We do best if we're regulated the least, and...it seems. I mean, I'm talking now about not management of the frequency (that's something the FCC should do) but when it comes to content of a program, the less done, the better. And we've done very well in the United States. Religious broadcasting has flourished. And fairness doctrine has been another questionable thing, and we take the position that we are against the fairness doctrine because it's...it's a kind of impeded programming, that people tend to shy away from controversial issues because of the fairness doctrine. Because they have to sell time to ... or give time to the opposing point of view, they tend to feel it's not worth it. So instead of encouraging the discussion of controversial issues, it is...has a chilling effect on...on that. These are issues that are, I would say, important issues. They're not...they're not crucial issues, you know. They're not life and death matters like.... The Lansman and Milam thing was a life and death matter for religious broadcasting on all FM educational frequencies. It was a...it was an extremely important piece of legislation, considered a landmark decision, and we won that. And so when they mention this petition as being unimportant, it...it was terribly important, much more important than these other recent decisions on fairness doctrine and must-carry, in my judgement.

ERICKSEN: What kind of...What was the mood among the membership of NRB following the two scandals...the big scandals?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I think terribly dissappoint...terrible disappointment, and shock, outrage

in some cases, outrage, shock, disappointment, confusion. [Pauses] The...I would say that overall it was a great learning experience for our people. I mean, the idea that you were so invincible or let's say so sure of what you're doing is...is cut down quite a bit. In other words, it was a humbling experience, and catharsis. You know, there was...there was some very good aspects to it that caused us to start think about the whole question of accountability and though we had started up EFICOM [Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission] before this all started, yet it gave impetus to EFICOM and the Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission came into effect and was supported unanimously by our board and almost unanimously by our membership elect. Something like eight votes would make it unanimous at the annual meeting. And...so there was a concern for accountability and for disclosure and letting openness.... A lot of openness occurred because of this. So, there are the good aspects, but I would say that financially, in other words, we took a bath on it. Especially those who got in the eye of the controversy. There are some indications that people didn't stop feeling but they switched to other...others who were really thought to be more...more open and more dependable.

ERICKSEN: Did you have to play a different role than you had previously among the membership?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. It was during that time I...I had my role was...as one of...to the public trying to interpret this to my own people and push for EFICOM, and try to show the need for it and why it was necessary among the membership, get their support for it. And...but the biggest job that I had was a public relations job with the outside press. I mean, I'd been on every talk show you can imagine, from *Nightline*, *Today Show*, *Good Morning, America*, trying to interpret this, and I must have been on over 100 different programs during this two year period with the idea of trying to explain what was happening, why did this happen, what was...what were the consequences, who did what and why, and...and, you know, aren't you in bad shape because of it, kind of thing. It was a chance for the secular media to really leap onto the scene. And, you know, escalate a story and castigate the whole...everybody that they had seen as their competitors in the marketplace, see? Or church people who were upset that the evangelicals were doing so well and making such headway. I mean, there were a...there was a lot of, you know, dynamics in this whole thing. My goal was to try to unify our people so they wouldn't run away, disappear. And at this...and... and try to encourage security in what they were doing, and...and to interpret to the outside sector of people that...that this was not really typical, that this was atypical. That this happened to two people in thirty or twenty-three years that I had been around and...and that's not a bad, you know, not a bad average. I tried to interpret to them that...put this in the position of...of perspective. I mean, I'm not saying that I'm satisfied with it. With what...what...what has happened, but I mean I'm...that's what I've been doing.

ERICKSEN: Have things settled down or are you...

ARMSTRONG: No, I think things have settled down, and I feel comfortable enough so I can kind of leave the scene now, you know, with the feeling that we do have a code and practice. We...it is a successful thing we have. We made great progress in getting our people signed up and accepting the principles. I mean, after all, these people didn't start with these principles. We...we lowered them to them. I mean, they were new to them. And they're pretty strict, and the

people need education. It will take a while yet, but I mean, it's...it's a growing proposition. And in another area that we have been successful on is the insurance program. We started an insurance program and...and called it preliminary...called it Comprehensive Benefit Plan. And that program has started off as being a self-insured program. Yeah, we were standing behind it. NRB was standing behind it. And it has been so successful that 3,000 people have...have now joined the plan, and it's now backed up by Omaha. So we...we have a fully insured health program now. It started out as a self-insurance program two years...three years ago. That's been very successful. We have 500,000 dollars in the bank sitting there just backing that up. So it's been a, you know, it's been fiscally sound, this plan. So I would say in the last couple of years that the formation of EFICOM and the...and the insurance plan have been very successful new things that have...have been put into place and are operationally successful.

ERICKSEN: I noticed in the...out in the office there was a plaque to the...was it the Bertermann Legal Fund...Defense Fund?

ARMSTRONG: Right, right.

ERICKSEN: When was that developed?

ARMSTRONG: That was developed a few years ago after the must-carry legislation that...that the thought was that if any big attack was made against religious broadcasting, that we would have a war chest to fall back on. And so collections and donations were made and we have about 100,000 dollars now that has been given and is in the bank. And has been steadily increased as a...for a legal defense fund. Any event that something comes up that warrants our attention...

END OF TAPE