

Vandeman, George Edward (1916–2000)

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George E. Vandeman, 1960s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

George Vandeman was an ordained Adventist minister, founder of the *It Is Written* telecast, and its lead speaker for thirty-four years.

Early Life

George Edward Vandeman was born on October 21, 1916, in Pueblo, Colorado, in the United States.¹ His parents were Pastor Herbert Allen Vandeman (1878-1948)² and Nina Mae (Royce) Vandeman (1879-1962).³ Vandeman spent much of his childhood in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where his father was the pastor of the local Seventh-day Adventist church. Their home was in Fullerton, an unincorporated community about three miles (5 kilometers) north of Allentown, Pennsylvania, and sixty-three miles (101 kilometers) north of Philadelphia. The youngest of four children, George's siblings were Herbert Spencer (1903-1976),⁴ Dorothy Royce (1908-1998),⁵ who married dentist Newton Russell Lemmon; and Allen William (1914-1973),⁶ who worked in public relations for Adventist hospitals.

After the Vandemans moved to Pennsylvania, Herbert Vandeman broadcasted weekly sermons on a radio station⁷ operated by a Charles W. Heimbach, who built a studio in his living room. This station grew into WCBA.⁸ Vandeman would accompany his father to the station and listen to these programs. Heimbach also aired other preachers on his station. In his memoirs, Vandeman recounts that Heimbach once told Herbert Vandeman that if he did not like what a preacher was saying, he would switch the broadcast to music; however, he never stopped one of Herbert Vandeman's sermons.⁹ Herbert Vandeman's vision and enthusiasm for radio ministry inspired his son to follow him into first radio evangelism and eventually television.

Education, and Marriage

Vandeman began his college education in 1936 at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) where he studied theology. He graduated from Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC) in 1942.¹⁰ He earned a Master of Arts in speech and communication from the University of Michigan in 1946.¹¹ His thesis, "Spurgeon's Theory of Preaching,"¹² was motivated by his interest in evangelism. In 1978 Vandeman received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Andrews University.¹³

While at EMC, with the encouragement of the religion department, Vandeman began a weekly fifteen-minute radio broadcast in Elkhart, Indiana.¹⁴ Consequently, he became known as the boy evangelist.¹⁵ It was also during this time that Vandeman met Nellie Johnson (1916-2001), a fellow student at EMC. Along with others in her college dorm, she would listen to Vandeman's radio programs as he led an evangelistic campaign in Elkhart. Eventually, George asked Nellie to assist with these meetings.¹⁶ They began dating and were married on October 2, 1938, in South Bend, Indiana.¹⁷ Nellie's parents were Sverre Leonard Johnson and Inga (Anderson) Johnson.¹⁸ Nellie assisted George in his evangelism throughout their marriage, traveling around the world with him.¹⁹

The Vandemans had four children, George Allen, (1940-2023) who became an attorney and senior partner at the international law firm Latham & Watkins;²⁰ Ronald Leroy (1942-2010), who attended Takoma Academy and had a talent for oration; Robert Malcolm (1949-2009), who was a Vietnam war veteran and car salesman; and Connie (1956-) who has been the associate director of communication and community engagement for the Pacific Union Conference since 2019. She has worked in media as a radio announcer, speaker, television host (All God's People), producer, and singer for several ministries. She holds a BA in English from La Sierra University.²¹ A fourth son, Philip Charles, born while the Vandemans were in London, did not survive his premature birth.

Career and Ministry

After his marriage in 1938, Vandeman began working as a full-time evangelist in the Indiana Conference²² before returning to EMC in 1940 to complete his bachelor's degree.²³ Following graduation he served EMC as evangelism field instructor for the religion department. He was ordained in 1945.²⁴

In 1947, Vandeman was hired by the General Conference Ministerial Association and his family moved to Takoma Park, Maryland.²⁵ As an associate secretary, he helped to spearhead public evangelistic efforts in major cities. At the time of his hire, he was one of the youngest church leaders within the General Conference.

In January 1950 radio programming was discussed by the General Conference executive committee. Vandeman, along with Paul Wickman, secretary of the radio department, spoke of television's potential possibilities to reach the people in the cities of the eastern United States. Wickman reported that the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) had tentatively offered the 4:30 to 5:00 p.m. Sunday time slot to the General Conference. Vandeman, along with fourteen others, was charged with studying television as a medium for evangelism and to move ahead with the ABC offer.²⁶ The next month, the decision was reversed under the "conviction that it would be unwise to attempt such a project at this time."²⁷ Further discussion implied that it was a matter of funding.

During his time at the General Conference Ministerial Association, Vandeman maintained a busy itinerary, conducting evangelistic meetings, training other ministers in evangelism, and speaking at camp meetings and Adventist schools.²⁸ He traveled across the United States, and international trips took him to places such as Mexico, Great Britain, and the Middle East.²⁹

From 1952 to 1953, Vandeman conducted evangelistic meetings in England. His wife and three sons accompanied him. In London, Vandeman began meetings in the Coliseum Theater, which seated 2000 people. His presentations became so popular, on some Sundays, he presented two or three sessions, each to a full house. Vandeman also helped establish the New Gallery Centre, an evangelism center for the Adventist Church in London.³⁰

Upon his return to the United States, General Conference President R. R. Figuhr asked Vandeman to continue exploring television as a means of evangelism. As a result, Vandeman became one of the first Christian televangelists in the United States.³¹ The first step toward this new ministry was the production of a series of sixteen-millimeter films for home Bible study use in the Pacific Union.³² These were later adapted for television and broadcast in Midland, Texas, by an Adventist businessman, Paul James.

Encouraged by the positive response of the Midland audience, Vandeman imagined a series of television episodes to be aired locally for several weeks prior to evangelistic meetings in a particular city. Both Vandeman and General Conference leaders were impressed by the work of William Fagal's *Faith for Today*, which used dramatic vignettes to address contemporary issues and faith.³³ They believed that it was time to introduce a full message Bible study program. In the spring of 1956, *It Is Written* aired its first black and white broadcast. The topic was the major tenets of Adventism.³⁴ This first program contained a sermon-type message and Bible study, and was aired in Washington, D.C. Later programs were broadcast in color.

The first episodes of *It Is Written* by Vandeman aired in Fresno and Bakersfield, California, in 1956.³⁵ They later replayed in other cities such as Detroit and Philadelphia. Vandeman's program first aired in Canada in 1959 in Sydney, Nova Scotia.³⁶ Following the airing of the *It Is Written* program in Sydney, Vandeman held a two-week

evangelistic series. As a result of the program and the series, two churches were organized.

Broadcast of *It Is Written* was extended across all of California in 1962 and was followed by a month-long evangelistic campaign. By the mid-1960s, *It Is Written* was being broadcast internationally on a weekly basis. In 1972, *Faith for Today* and *It Is Written* became the first media ministries to move to the General Conference Radio, Television, and Film Center (later the Adventist Media Center) established by the General Conference in Thousand Oaks, California.³⁷ At this time, the Vandeman family also settled in Newbury Park.

Vandeman's goal for the *It Is Written* program was create a personal experience, as if he was studying the Bible with each viewer individually in their homes. Other media programs focused on sermons and church services, or in the case of *Faith for Today*, drama. Instead, Vandeman sought to share, explain, and illustrate using the Bible, object lessons, and short documentaries. To enhance the personal experience, the *It Is Written* set looked like a living room, complete with fire place, book shelves, and upholstered furniture. However, the television program was only the first step of a larger vision. Broadcasts were to be followed by mailings and an intensive program of home visitations and Bible studies conducted by local church members, culminating in "decision meetings," which were intended to lead to baptisms.³⁸

Vandeman conducted evangelistic campaigns in many cities across North America, among them Orlando, Florida; Moline, Illinois; and Wichita, Kansas.³⁹ In 1975, Vandeman started presenting Revelation seminars which consisted of a one-day Bible study. These in-person seminars reached tens of thousands of people over a ten-year period.⁴⁰ In 1981, Vandeman launched a series of Teleseminars uplinked to over twenty-two cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Montreal.

As the founder and lead speaker for *It Is Written*, Vandeman traveled around the world for speaking engagements and to produce films. On many of these trips he was accompanied by Nellie and their children. In December of 1957 and January of 1958, the General Conference funded a trip to Jordan during which Vandeman produced film footage later used in *It Is Written* episodes.⁴¹ In 1967 he spoke in Australia.⁴² He accepted engagements in Canada as well, speaking at a Quebec camp meeting in Montreal in 1971 and an evangelistic campaign in Toronto in 1972.⁴³

In 1978, Vandeman and his family traveled to Hunza, a region in northern Pakistan, to learn about the lifestyle of these people well known for their long lives and excellent health. While there, Vandeman was hosted by the king and queen of Hunza. The results of this trip were broadcast as an *It Is Written* telecast series and turned into a book, *The Miracle of Hunza*.⁴⁴

Vandeman was a prolific writer, publishing many books. Some of these books include *Touch and Live*,⁴⁵ *Planet in Rebellion*,⁴⁶ *Life After Death*,⁴⁷ *Empires in Collision*,⁴⁸ and his memoirs—*My Dream: Memoirs of a One-of-a-kind Disciple*.⁴⁹ His book *Planet in Rebellion* contained many of the themes on which he preached during his time at *It Is Written*.

Aside from his professional work as an evangelist, Vandeman was interested in archeological research and founded the Archeological Research Foundation. He was chairman and president for several years. The foundation did extensive work in studying and searching for Noah's Ark, making several expeditions to the mountains of Ararat. As there no conclusive evidence was found, the project was ended on the advice of the General Conference.⁵⁰

Later Life

Vandeman was the primary speaker for *It Is Written* until he retired in 1991. Mark Finley succeeded him. Under Vandeman's leadership, *It Is Written* grew from more than 600,000 regular viewers in the 1980s to over 1.5 million in the 1990s. In 1990 Vandeman and the *It Is Written* production team traveled to the former Soviet Union to film an eight-part series called *Empires in Collision*.

In 1988 George and Nellie Vandeman celebrated fifty years of marriage. George died on November 3, 2000, in Newbury Park, California.⁵¹ Nellie died the following year, on July 25, 2001.

Legacy

Vandeman spent thirty-four years in broadcast ministry. During that time, he became a well-known television personality and was often recognized by viewers when he was in public. Vandeman became personal friends with newscaster Paul Harvey, who frequently shared information about Seventh-day Adventists in his programs. He also enjoyed friendly relationships with other celebrity evangelists, including Billy Graham. Over the course of his ministry, Vandeman had opportunity to meet United States presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, attending the latter's inauguration.⁵²

In 1970, Vandeman received the Andrews University Alumni Association's citation for outstanding alumnus preacher. He received the Religious Heritage of America Faith and Freedom Award for Television Religious Personality of the Year in 1980.⁵³ Adventist World Radio (1976), Pacific Press Publishing Association (1986), and the Adventist Broadcasters Association (1990) all honored him for his service to broadcasting evangelism. Posthumously, Vandeman was among the pioneers honored for their achievements in Adventist television ministry on December 10, 2000, by the General Conference Ministerial Association in conjunction with the Voice of Prophecy.⁵⁴

Mark Finley, who succeeded Vandeman as *It Is Written* speaker, gave an overview of his work:

George Vandeman was a visionary who often was far ahead of his time. He had the unique ability to see possibilities where others saw only problems. George had the ability to communicate to people at all levels, but he especially ministered to people who were highly educated, affluent, and in the upper echelons of society. He seemed to understand their heartaches, their longings, and their basic human needs.⁵⁵

Due in major part to Vandeman's efforts at *It Is Written*, over 95 percent of the world's population can view *It Is Written* programming either on television or online.⁵⁶ Vandeman's spurred efforts to produce *It Is Written* programming in other languages such as the Spanish-language, *Escrito Está*.

According to Vandeman's daughter, Connie Vandeman Jeffrey, beyond *It Is Written* and those it reached through its programming, or Vandeman's extensive writing and preaching career, his greatest legacy was being "a humble, loving, gentle family man who relied totally on Jesus."⁵⁷ Connie recounts, "My enduring image of him in my mind's eye is walking into his study early in the mornings to see him on his knees in prayer. That's his legacy."⁵⁸

In his memoirs, Vandeman recounted his greatest desire in life. He wrote, "Nellie and I vowed that "turning many to righteousness" would be our deepest desire and our fondest dream as we looked to the future."⁵⁹

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