



William and Virginia Fagal along with quartet members (left to right) Larry Fillingham, Stan Schleenbaker, Herbert Hohensee and Don Siebenlist, on set of Faith for Today, 1962.

Photo courtesy of International Adventist Musicians Association.

Faith for Today

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Faith for Today, a television ministry sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, became the first national religious telecast in North America within a few months of its first broadcast in New York City in 1950!¹ Instead of making preaching its central feature, the ministry has for more than 70 years offered programming in a

variety of formats intended to draw viewers to the gospel message by showing how it connects with contemporary issues.

Beginnings in New York City

In early April 1950 representatives of the General Conference contracted with WABC-TV in New York City for a series of 13 half-hour broadcasts to air weekly on Sunday evenings at 9:30. William Fagal (1919-1989), pastor of the Washington Avenue church in Brooklyn, New York, was called upon to take responsibility for the program. Fagal had been broadcasting *The Bible Auditorium of the Air* by radio on Sunday nights since 1945 and had expressed interest in television. Now, he and his wife, Virginia Rittenhouse Fagal (1917-2010) had just six weeks to prepare for the first live broadcast on May 21.² During those intense weeks they chose the name Faith for Today, decided on the format and content, arranged for music, and prepared themselves for hosting a religious program in this relatively new medium.

The centerpiece of the first program was an interview with Walter Ralls, an historian who talked about current events in the light of history and his concerns about the future. This conversation led naturally into remarks by Fagal about the prophetic depiction of empires through history found in Daniel 2. An organist provided background music and a quartet sang at intervals throughout the program and at the end, after Virginia Fagal had invited listeners to send for a free Bible course.³

The first broadcast established the format outline, but after further consultation, the opening segment was adjusted to feature a short drama depicting an everyday life problem, with the follow-up five-minute homily from Pastor Fagal reinforcing a biblical perspective on the issue. Elaine Giddings, a gifted writer and producer, joined the Faith for Today (FFT) staff in 1951 to lead out in creating the 15-minute dramatic skits.⁴

The first program generated 66 requests for the Bible course and other literature offered, and the mail response numbers increased thereafter. The General Conference Committee deemed the 13-week experiment with television as an evangelistic medium enough of a success to continue and, at the 1950 Autumn Council voted to add additional stations so that by December, FFT was airing on 12 stations located throughout the nation.⁵

Initially, requests for Bible studies were referred to correspondence schools operated by local conferences. FFT started its own Bible correspondence school in January 1952. Virginia Fagal was appointed director, a role she continued for the next 30 years. Eventually more than 450,000 would complete one of FFT's correspondence courses.⁶

Controversy and Expansion

FFT also faced formidable challenges in its early history. Many questioned the appropriateness of using drama in a program representing the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its value as a means of evangelism, especially in view of spiraling costs. Strong speeches expressed these concerns at the 1952 Autumn Council and only two votes out of more than 150 were cast in favor of continuing to fund FFT. However, the chair refused to declare the vote, asking the group if they indeed did not want a television program sponsored by the church. Fagal was invited to speak and pointed out how God had blessed the program and talked about its successful soul winning efforts. After two other leaders also spoke in defense of continuing the program, the council took another vote that supported continued funding by the same overwhelming margin that had previously voted against it.⁷

A breakthrough earlier in 1952 had already begun to make possible expansion of the broadcast's coverage at minimal additional cost. A television station in Utica, New York, offered to air FFT free of charge as a part of its public service responsibilities and by 1954 more than 100 stations were doing the same. Rather than broadcasting the program live, these stations were sent kinescopes—films of the broadcast as it appeared on a television screen. By March 1968 the number of stations carrying FFT numbered 286, about half the total number of stations in the United States and Canada. The broadcast also went overseas—to the Philippines in 1955, Australia in 1956, and Nigeria in 1960. In November 1962, the South American Division launched a Portuguese-language version of FFT broadcast from São Paulo, Brazil.⁸

Meanwhile, technological advances brought improvements in the program's presentation quality. FFT was broadcast live during its early years. Some harrowing moments resulted as speakers, actors, and musicians had no margin for error.⁹ A major step forward came in January 1956 when FFT switched to filming the program in black and white in a studio where retakes could be done. The quality of the music, for example, could now be ensured through pre-recordings. When the program was finally filmed, the quartet sang along with previously recorded audio tapes off-mike so that their physical effort in singing looked natural and the pianist played along on a silent piano to previously recorded music.¹⁰ In 1962 FFT began filming in color, at the time an innovative and visionary practice which predated the introduction of color telecasts.¹¹

With the introduction of pre-recording, other features such as documentaries and interviews could be incorporated into the program. Fagal produced at least three documentaries, in 1958, 1962, and 1966, respectively, for which he traveled to Israel, Japan, Korea, and the Middle East.¹²

Music and Musicians

Music and musicians in FFT's formative years were a significant factor in its success. The telecast's first 16 years featured music similar to that used on the Voice of Prophecy, the church's leading radio broadcast.¹³ Because of the rushed start for the telecast, the quartet on the first program was an interim group that included two students from Atlantic Union College singing first tenor and bass; Walter Isensee, a friend of the Fagals, as second tenor; and a student from Westminster Choir College singing baritone. When school resumed at the end

of the summer, the three students left the quartet. Herbert Hohensee, a music teacher from Union College who was on a graduate study leave at Westminster, joined the quartet as baritone in October 1950 on a part-time basis until February 1951, when he was hired to sing full-time. Two professional musicians were contracted to fill out the quartet until the summer of 1951, when Harold Lickey, first tenor, and Lyle Jewell, bass, were hired to form what is now regarded as the first Faith for Today Quartet. This group remained intact for the next three years.¹⁴

Pressures on the members and their young families, including the stress of living in or commuting to New York City, led to several quartet personnel changes during the program's 22 years there. Stan Schleenbaker, who sang in the quartet in its final years, recalled singing in five different quartets in his seven years with the group. Hohensee had the longest tenure, serving as the group's leader for 13 years, until 1963.¹⁵

The first organist, Retta Rippey Valerio, was a graduate of the Juilliard School of Music and organist at Fagal's Washington Avenue Church in Brooklyn. A friend of the Fagal family, having also worked with them in evangelistic meetings, Valerio, along with Robert Quade, served as organist on Faith for Today in its first two years. She was followed in 1952 by Melvin West, who had just graduated from Emmanuel Missionary College, now Andrews University. He played for one year before accepting a teaching position at Atlantic Union College. Marjorie Hohensee, Herbert's wife, and Mary Bidwell Haloviak then played organ as needed until 1963, when Van Knauss, a recent graduate from Union College and the University of Nebraska, became organist. He continued in that position until the spring of 1967.¹⁶

While the quartet and organist provided the musical base for the program, other singers and groups also performed. One of these, a women's trio from Southern Missionary College, now Southern Adventist University, that included Frances Bumby, Marilyn Dillow (later Cotton), and Mary Ellen Carden (later Byrd), was added to the program in 1952. They took a year off from school and sang as a regular feature through the autumn of 1953.

From his first year at FFT, quartet member Hohensee was involved with other aspects of the program. He established the first in-house offset printing press, helped organize tracking records for those who contributed and requested materials, and oversaw the audio aspects of mixing and production. He also oversaw post-production work on the show, including the creation of the sound track used with the film. Schleenbaker, who joined the quartet in 1959, served as the recording technician and editor for the audio recordings of the quartet and demonstrated skill at producing a polished final product. The work done by Schleenbaker and Hohensee meant that the program could continue when the organist and quartet were away or performing at camp meetings and on Adventist college campuses. In a typical year, the quartet and organist were on the road for as many as 150 days, traveling as much as 40,000 miles.

The pressure of the travel schedule, plus desire on the part of some of the members to pursue other careers, led to a dissolution of the quartet in the fall of 1966. Financial pressure on FFT from dramatically increasing

production costs, a large decline in free television slots, and phased reduction of church financial support, was also a factor. Organist Van Knauss continued until the following spring, when he accepted a music teaching position at Columbia Union College, now Washington Adventist University.¹⁷

Westbrook Hospital

In 1972 Faith for Today moved its headquarters from New York to Thousand Oaks, California, and in late 1974 the ministry joined other Adventist broadcasts in relocating to the Adventist Media Center established in Thousand Oaks. The move to the west coast entailed a transformation of the broadcast and programming innovations would continue through the subsequent decades. Soon after the move in 1972 the original format that, with variations, had been followed for more than two decades was discarded in favor of a weekly dramatic series titled Westbrook Hospital. The change represented a renewed focus on reaching unchurched viewers by portraying Christian virtues such as honesty and love at work in a real world setting rather than by preaching. The program won Gold and Silver awards at the Houston International Film Festival and the Silver Plaque at the 1977 Chicago International Film Festival.¹⁸ Beginning in 1979 the Canada-based International Satellite System began carrying the program and relaying it to other satellites with signals covering Europe, Asia, and South America.¹⁹

In 1975 FFT produced an hour-long historical drama on the reformer and martyr John Hus. This was followed by dramatic features for television beginning with *The Harvest* in 1979. This drama portraying the healing of a stress-torn family won an Angel award for “the highest production and artistic excellence” in February 1980.²⁰

Lifestyle Magazine

Thirty years after pioneering Faith for Today in the then-new mass medium of television, during which they led the ministry in creative adaptation to vast changes in the media landscape, the Fagals turned over leadership to Daniel G. Matthews in 1980. Matthews, who came to the role with experience in pastoral ministry, conference administration and public relations, led in developing a new program, Christian Lifestyle Magazine (CLM), that premiered in 1985. Using a news-feature format in which Matthews was joined by co-host Suzanne Austin and later, Lena Nozizwe, CLM offered interviews and mini-documentaries highlighting people who made a positive impact on their communities and the wider world by putting their faith into action. The program’s name was changed to Lifestyle Magazine in 1990 so as to reach a broader audience in a religiously pluralistic society. This was in keeping with FFT’s long-standing goal of reaching people who would not be attracted by overtly religious, church-oriented programming. A talk-show format was adopted with Patty Cabrera, Clifton Davis, and Tami McGrew joining Matthews as the initial team of co-hosts. The show emphasized contemporary health-related issues, addressing problems involving both emotional and physical well-being.²¹

Another venture into film, the docudrama *Out of the Night*, was released in 1995. It told the story of former navy diver Stephen Arrington's involvement in the John DeLorean drug trafficking scandal and subsequent conversion. The film won three major awards, including the Gold Medal at the 28th Annual Wordfest-Houston International Film Festival. A new series, *McDougall, M.D.*, was launched in 1996, with author and internist John McDougall and co-host Mary McDonough, well-known for her role on the popular TV series *The Waltons*. This program probed health issues such as the dangers of dairy products, new ways to combat diabetes, and using natural means to control depression. Another series, *The Evidence*, began in the year 2000. Dwight Nelson, pastor of the Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University, hosted the half-hour news magazine/docudrama program that explored evidence for faith found in science and nature.²²

Mike Tucker, senior pastor of the Arlington Seventh-day Adventist Church in Texas, was appointed FFT speaker-director in 2004. Under his leadership, FFT connected more directly with local congregations. In 2007, FFT's first evangelistic series delivered via satellite, *HeartQuest: Finding the One Who Has Loved You All Along*, was the first in the denomination's NET evangelism series targeted for home audiences, with local congregations mobilizing and coordinating the outreach. It was followed in 2009 by a similar series, *LifeQuest*.²³

The *Lifestyle Magazine* series with Tucker and his wife, Gayle, as co-hosts, was given a fresh look in 2007 while it continued to focus on such themes as relationships, spirituality and health, that had long made the program appealing. "Mad About Marriage," a special *Lifestyle Magazine* series introduced in 2010, was designed for use in conjunction with live seminars and small group study. *Miracle at Gate 213*, a holiday-season television drama released in 2013 with several well-known actors attracted a large audience.²⁴

As with his predecessors, FFT benefitted from the stability of long-term leadership from Tucker, who served 16 years before turning the helm over to Roy Ice, a pastor and Bible teacher from California in 2020. Along with hosting *Lifestyle Magazine*, Ice leads the Bible Lab, a Bible study fellowship accessible online.²⁵

Legacy

According to the Faith for Today website, more than 30,000 people have joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church through its ministry. The impact of its distinctive work of reaching people not likely to be attracted by preaching or traditional religious programming, and its decades-long record of innovation toward that end, is less easily measured. Testimony to the ministry's effectiveness, though, was encapsulated in 2000 when the National Religious Broadcasters awarded Faith for Today its Milestone Award in recognition of its pioneering work in the middle of the 20th century and its ability to adapt to changes in the media.²⁶

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