



Advertisement for Breath of Life's first campaign, Detroit, Michigan, 1975.

Photo courtesy of Benjamin Baker, received from the late C. D. Brooks.

Breath of Life

ANNA ESTEP

Anna Estep was a student at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, when this article was written.

Breath of Life is a media ministry of the North American Division, begun in 1974 with programming targeted primarily to reach African Americans.

Beginnings

Breath of Life (BOL) came about through the vision and initiative of Walter E. Arties, an Adventist musician, recording artist, and television producer in southern California. The Adventist church had demonstrated success in using television for evangelism with Faith for Today (begun in 1950) and It Is Written (begun 1956). Arties believed that the medium could also be used to evangelize Black America far more effectively, and that the endeavor would meet a widely-felt need for higher quality Black-oriented programming. He developed a pilot program in 1973 featuring the Breath of Life Quartet (Clyde Allen, Walter Arties, Shelton Kilby III, and James Kyle)

and a message presented by Samuel D. Meyers, pastor of the University Boulevard church in Los Angeles. Positive response to the pilot from California-based Adventist leaders and then at other church councils and camp meetings led to partial funding from the General Conference for the first 13 programs, taped in 1974 at the Seventh-day Adventist Radio and Television Center (later Adventist Media Center) in Thousand Oaks, California.¹

Evangelist and General Conference field secretary Charles D. Brooks (1930-2016), whom Arties and denominational leaders readily agreed upon as the best choice to be the program's speaker, reluctantly agreed to try a medium unfamiliar to him.² Arties was the program's producer and coordinator and Shelton E. Kilby III the musical arranger. Louis B. Reynolds, an accomplished author and former editor of *Message* magazine, wrote the scripts. The initial 13 programs, collectively titled "The Heritage Series," opened with vignettes on Bible characters such as the Ethiopian treasurer and the Queen of Sheba to introduce a biblical theme.³

Evangelistic Formula

Launched prior to the emergence of cable television networks and long before development of the internet and streaming services, BOL lacked the funding to be a national weekly network telecast. However, the ministry came up with an effective formula for combining local broadcasts with traditional evangelism on the ground. It was first tried in Detroit, Michigan, in 1975. BOL purchased airtime for 26 weekly broadcasts on a local station, WXON. After the telecasts began, a team of pastors, Bible workers, and lay members followed up requests for Bible studies or prayer made in response to the broadcasts. Then, taking advantage of the awareness generated by the program, they saturated neighborhoods with literature advertising the upcoming series of meetings that would feature the speaker and musicians as seen on television. Eight weeks into the broadcasts, the three-week series of meetings commenced at the Adventist-operated Better Living Center with Brooks preaching. At a baptismal service held at the conclusion of the final meeting, 58 people were baptized. The weekly broadcasts continued during and after the series of meetings, and ultimately more than 200 baptisms were attributed to the campaign.⁴

The formula was followed with success in other cities, with another element soon added. New churches, often taking the name "Breath of Life" were organized comprised of those led to Adventism as a result of BOL evangelism with a small selection of members transferring from existing congregations to help nurture the new believers. The first three churches established due to Breath of Life's impact were in Memphis, Tennessee (1976); the Washington D.C. area (1979); and Los Angeles, California (1983).⁵

During its first decade, BOL proved itself as a powerful and cost effective instrument of Adventist evangelism, credited with leading nearly 3,000 individuals to baptism. The ministry had produced 105 programs by 1984, though the funding to create more presented a continual challenge. Reginald O. Robinson was added as associate speaker and director of field services, responsible for promotion, fund-raising, and management of

BOL's Bible Correspondence school.⁶ It was with the growth of cable television that BOL became a weekly program, carried on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) and VISN networks in the United States and the VISION Network in Canada.⁷

During the 1980s, BOL began filming programs at venues outside the production studio in Thousand Oaks. By filming "on location" at the Oakwood College church in Alabama, the La Sierra College church in California, the Berean church in Los Angeles, the Shiloh church in Chicago and Central American Union College in Costa Rica, for example, the BOL team sought to help viewers experience "the multi-dimensional aspects of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."⁸ This innovation anticipated more recent developments in the 21st century.

BOL also began extending its ministry beyond the borders of the United States in the 1980s, conducting major evangelistic campaigns in Trinidad, St. Kitts, Bermuda, and Micronesia.⁹ As a result of the Breath of Life campaign in Barbados in 1989, 520 people were baptized setting a record for the largest number of Adventist baptisms at one time in the island country.¹⁰

From Brooks to Pearson to Byrd

C. D. Brooks served as BOL speaker-director for the first 24 years of its history (1974-1997). During those years, the ministry's endeavors led to formation of 13 new Seventh-day Adventist congregations that took the name "Breath of Life," along with several others that took varying names. The number of individual believers who became Adventists through the work of BOL during that same time period surpassed 11,000.¹¹

After Brooks' retirement, Walter L. Pearson, Jr., director for evangelism and church growth for the General Conference Ministerial Association became BOL's new speaker-director. During an eight-year stint as pastor of the large Atlanta Berean church (1985-1993), Pearson had become in 1991 the first Seventh-day Adventist inducted into the Martin Luther King Jr. Board of Preachers and Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College in Atlanta.¹² A highlight of Pearson's years at the helm of BOL came in 2004 when he was called upon to be the speaker for the North American Division's NET 2004 satellite evangelistic initiative entitled "Experience the Power." His sermons, preached "live" at the Miracle Temple church in Baltimore, Maryland, were uplinked by satellite to 1,100 locations in North America and many thousands more throughout the world. The international media recognition he had achieved during six years as BOL speaker no doubt contributed to the strong international reception given the initiative while in turn the success of the NET campaign must surely have further boosted the viewing audience for BOL broadcasts. More than 4,000 people were baptized as Seventh-day Adventists due to the influence of the "Experience the Power" satellite campaign.¹³

During a portion Pearson's tenure as BOL (1998-2009), Malcolm Taylor served as associate speaker. In 2009, Pearson, hampered by serious health setbacks, relinquished his position at BOL.

The BOL executive committee turned to Carlton P. Byrd, 38-year-old pastor of the Atlanta Berean church, to step in as the ministry's third speaker-director in 2010. Under Byrd's leadership, Berean had experienced phenomenal growth. He remained as pastor, making the church the home setting for the BOL broadcasts. He continued this same approach when he was called to the pastorate of the Oakwood University church in 2011 and BOL moved with him to the campus church in Huntsville, Alabama.¹⁴

Byrd has followed the trail blazed by Brooks, in not only conducting major evangelistic campaigns in cities throughout the nation and abroad each year, but also in planting new churches following the campaigns. As of 2020, four Breath of Life congregations had been organized with new believers won through Byrd's evangelism.

Probably the most striking BOL evangelistic event thus far during Byrd's time as speaker-director came in the East African nation of Tanzania where he preached for a two-week series of evangelistic meetings, February 23 – March 7, 2020. The meetings, held in the city of Chato, were broadcast live on Hope Channel Television – Tanzania, the internet, and radio to over 3,000 satellite locations across the nation. The number of baptisms, including those at satellite locations as well as Chato, were counted at 16,806. That striking outcome brought the overall baptisms credited to BOL evangelism during Byrd's years as speaker-director to more than 20,000.¹⁵

As of the end of 2020, BOL, in cooperation with the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission has produced six holiday specials broadcast nationwide on NBC and the ABC television networks. The 2020 specials were entitled "Awakening" (Easter) and "Glory!" (Christmas).¹⁶ By arranging performances by well-known Christian musicians for these specials, as well as through occasional interviews with Christians prominent in public life during the weekly broadcast, Byrd has built bridges for a wider Adventist witness in American society.

Recent Innovations

In 2019, Byrd and Christopher C. Thompson, the ministry's communication and marketing director, co-authored Breath of Life's first book: *FREE: Revisiting God's Plan for Oppressed People*.¹⁷ With the advent of the internet and social media, BOL has remained adroit at utilizing new means for getting its message out. The telecast airs on four international television networks and is available in twenty-five different countries through cable, the internet, and the Breath of Life mobile app. On the "Breathe" podcast, Byrd discusses contemporary issues with journalist David Person.¹⁸

SOURCES

Baker, Benjamin. "Brooks, Charles Decatur (1930–2016)." *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. Accessed May 4, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=3CE6#fn17>.

Booker, Robert. "Breath of Life Converts Form 177-Member Breath of Life Church." *Columbia Union Visitor*, February 8, 1979.

"Breath of Life Blankets the U.S. Via Satellite." *North American Regional Voice*, March 1987.

"Breath of Life Crusade Wins More Than 100." *North American Informant*, January 1977.

"Breath of Life in Detroit." *North American Informant*, January 1976.

Breath of Life Ministries. "Former Breath of Life Speaker/Director, Walter L. Pearson Jr., Passes." *Southern Tidings*, September 2020, 10-11.

"C. D. Brooks in St. Kitts." *Inter-American News Flashes*, April 1979.

Campbell, Kay. "'Breath of Life' and new minister comes to Oakwood University Seventh-day Adventist Church." AL.com, December 16, 2011, updated January 14, 2019. Accessed September 21, 2021.

https://www.al.com/living/2011/12/breath_of_life_and_new_ministe.html

Campbell, Kay. "'Breath of Life' reunion brings speakers, quartets to Oakwood's Seventh-day Adventist Church." AL.com. Last updated January 14, 2019. Accessed September 20, 2021.

https://www.al.com/living/2012/10/breath_of_life_reunion_program.html

Henry, K. C. "Breath of Life Producer Visits Jamaica." *Inter-American Division News Flashes*, April 1987.

"The History of Breath of Life TV Ministries." Breath of Life TV. Accessed September 21, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6Tr6feDJYs>

Howell, Everette W. "'Breath of Life' Campaign in Barbados." *Inter-American Division News Flashes*, June 1989.

Joseph, Vivian. "'Breath of Life' Tapes At Shiloh." *Lake Union Herald*, February 28, 1984.

Lee, Harold L. and Benjamin Baker. *C.D.: The Man Behind the Message*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013.

Kyle, James L. "Breath of Life: A Key to the Hearts of Millions." *North American Regional Voice*, April 1981.

Reynolds, Louis B. "Breath of Life Our Newest Television Program." *North American Informant*, July-August 1975.

Robinson, Reginald O. "The Breath of Life's Tenth Anniversary." *North American Regional Voice*, April 1984, 2-3.

Rolle, L. C. "Breath of Life Crusade Wins 280 Souls." *Inter-American Division News Flashes*, June 1993.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. 2nd rev. edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996. S.v. "Breath of Life."

"Tanzania, Africa – Breath of Life Evangelistic Effort Nets 15,000 Baptisms." Breath of Life TV, March 12, 2020.

Accessed September 21, 2021. <https://breathoflife.tv/tanzania-africa-breath-of-life-evangelistic-effort-nets-15000-baptisms/>.

Thompson, Christopher and Carl McRoy. "Breath of Life Ministries Empowers Members, Publishes its First Book for Literature Evangelism." North American Division. Last updated September 17, 2019.

<https://www.nadadventist.org/news/breath-life-ministries-empowers-members-publishes-its-first-book-literature-evangelism>.

NOTES

1. "The History of Breath of Life TV Ministries," Breath of Life TV, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6Tr6feDJYs>; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Breath of Life"; Louis B. Reynolds, "Breath of Life, Our Newest Television Program," *North American Informant* July-August 1975, 1-2.
2. Benjamin Baker, "Brooks, Charles Decatur (1930–2016)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=3CE6#fn17>.
3. Reynolds, "Breath of Life," 1.
4. "Breath of Life in Detroit," *North American Informant*, January-February 1976, 7-8; Harold L. Lee and Benjamin Baker, *C.D.: The Man Behind the Message* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 187-188.
5. Reginald O. Robinson, "The Breath of Life's Tenth Anniversary," *North American Regional Voice*, April 1984, 2-3.
6. *Ibid.*, 3; Vivian Joseph, "'Breath of Life' Tapes At Shiloh," *Lake Union Herald*, February 28, 1984, 9.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Breath of Life."
8. Joseph, "'Breath of Life' Tapes At Shiloh," 8.
9. *Ibid.*, 9.
10. Everette W. Howell, "'Breath of Life' Campaign in Barbados," *Inter-American Division News Flashes* June 1989, 2.
11. "The History of Breath of Life TV Ministries."
12. "Former Breath of Life Speaker/Director, Walter L. Pearson Jr., Passes," *Southern Tidings*, September 2020, 10-11.
13. "History of Breath of Life TV Ministries."
14. Kay Campbell, "'Breath of Life' and new minister comes to Oakwood University Seventh-day Adventist Church," December 16, 2011, updated January 14, 2019, AL.com, accessed September 21, 2021, https://www.al.com/living/2011/12/breath_of_life_and_new_ministe.html.
15. "Tanzania, Africa – Breath of Life Evangelistic Effort Nets 15,000 Baptisms," Breath of Life, March 12, 2020, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://breathoflife.tv/tanzania-africa-breath-of-life-evangelistic-effort-nets-15000-baptisms/>; "History of Breath of Life TV Ministries."

16. "History of Breath of Life TV Ministries."

17. Christopher Thompson and Carl McRoy, "Breath of Life Ministries Empowers Members, Publishes its First Book for Literature Evangelism," North American Division, accessed September 17, 2019,

<https://www.nadadventist.org/news/breath-life-ministries-empowers-members-publishes-its-first-book-literature-evangelism>.

18. "Broadcast Schedule," Breath of Life, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://breathoflife.tv/broadcast/>.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000