

**G O F O R T H  
W I T H T H E  
G O S P E L**

**WHY RADIO IS THE MOST  
EFFECTIVE MISSION TOOL  
KNOWN TO MAN**

**WILBUR GOFORTH  
WITH JESSE BARNETT**

# **Goforth With The Gospel**

*Why Radio Is The Most Effective Mission Tool Known To Man*

**Wilbur Goforth**

with Jesse Barnett

**2017**

*The bottom of the FM dial  
now blasted the top message on radio:  
God's great love and offer of salvation.*

They say God speaks to you in mysterious ways. For me, he spoke through a blinking red light on top of a radio tower. Every weeknight, for nearly three years, that blinking red light drew my eye upward.

It didn't matter what I was thinking; when I drove past the radio tower on Broad Street in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, that red light caught my eye.

As I looked up, I'd say a simple and quick prayer: *God, one day let that station broadcast Christian music full-time.*

When I spoke those words, I never could have guessed how God would answer that prayer, using my life and my passion.

Each person's life has a theme, but I never gave mine much thought until I set out to write this story. When I did, I realized that my life's theme is this:

Faithfulness to God will lead to a fulfilling life.

I hope I have many more years left on this Earth, but I'm much nearer to the end than the beginning. As I've reflected on my life, I've come to see that when circumstances looked like a no, God had a way of making them a yes.

I hope that my story will encourage you to discover what you are passionate about, look for opportunities to engage your passion, seek God's guidance for each next step, expect to hear an answer, and, when you do, follow obediently in that direction.

That's been my life for as long as I can remember. It sounds simple, but God has never let me down, and he's used me to impact countless lives through my faith and ministry.

Now pull up a chair, dig in, and let me share my story with you.

### **A Radio Man in a Tobacco Town**

I grew up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in the heart of tobacco country. At the time, just about everyone worked for one major tobacco company, R.J. Reynolds. When you got a job there, you were set for life. There was room for advancement and room to grow. Tobacco was big business in those days, and our town cashed in.

As a boy growing up in the 1940s, I witnessed first-hand the optimism that flooded towns and cities across the nation at the end of World War II. There was relief and excitement, and you could sense that better days were around the corner.

In those early days, we didn't have a television, but we had a radio that sat on a small wooden table in the corner of the kitchen. Radio fascinated me. My dad worked the evening shift at Reynolds, and every evening before he left for work, I would sit on his lap and listen with him to the voice coming out of the box. All I could see was a small wire going from the wall to the back of the radio. Yet

somehow, we could hear rich music, the deep bass of men's voices, and radio advertisements for Buicks, laundry detergent, and General Electric appliances.

Like any young boy in awe of the unexplainable, I asked my dad hundreds of questions. I wanted to know where that voice came from. He didn't know either. He shared my passion for listening to the radio, but the desire to know how it worked was mine alone.

Then, for two hours each Sunday afternoon, we'd sit in the kitchen and listen gospel radio shows. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* were my dad's favorites. We also listened to Billy Graham preach. He would share his message of God's love, and it felt like he was only talking to us. We'd direct the music together, arms waving, as the soloists, trios, and quartets sung songs and hymns.

At some point, the seed of an idea must have lodged in my brain, because radio later became my calling and my life. Those early experiences with my dad and that old radio made a lifelong impression on me.

### **An Attraction to Electronics**

Like most boys my age, I enjoyed playing baseball with my friends at the park near my house. But it was electronics that really captivated me. Whenever I was around electronic equipment at church or school, I would doggedly ask questions of the adults operating it, until I understood how each component worked. I often asked teachers to let me help them. Each time, I persisted until either I wore them down, or they ran me off.

Eventually I learned how to set up and break down many different types of equipment. I got to help show movies in the classrooms. I was often invited to set up and operate the sound systems for dance classes and operate the school-wide public address system for special in-class story time radio programs.

Armed with this budding knowledge, I put my electronics skills to work at home. By this time my dad and my sister had gone in together to purchase an old Crosley seventeen-inch black-and-white television. My parents had gone to Myrtle Beach on vacation so I decided to experiment. I connected the audio output of the TV's FM signal to a used piece of antenna wire. Then I ran that wire to the other AM radios we had in the house. My parents did not know the FM radio band was located between channels six and seven on the TV dial. By the time my they got home, I had succeeded in getting every AM radio to play FM stations from the television.

From that experiment, I learned two valuable lessons. First, unplug the TV and radios before you stick your hand inside and fiddle with the wiring. Second, parents don't have the same sense of wonder as their kids. My parents couldn't understand why I would take a perfectly-working TV apart and hook it to a bunch of radios just to play FM signals. I didn't get a spanking, but I had to return everything to normal operation and promise never to do it again.

## **Following My Passion**

In my early teen years, I spent a lot of time in Washington Park, a block away from my home. The city recreation department provided an audio amplifier and turntables for the youth to play music while at the park. I often played 45-RPM records – usually used ones that I'd picked up from a company that serviced jukeboxes for restaurants. It was my first experience playing DJ and I loved it.

I continued to follow my passion. In the mid-1950s I started visiting the studios of WTOB-TV on Stratford Road in Winston-Salem. At first, they wondered why some kid was hanging around peering through the glass, but once again, my persistence paid off. Soon they were letting me help set up the sets for live news and weather. I even got to help with audio for some live studio broadcasts. When the station hosted teen dance parties in the parking lot, I didn't dance because I preferred working with the equipment instead.

In those days, I was a sponge, soaking up knowledge of the broadcasting business wherever I could find it.

## **A Faith-Driven Life**

I was raised in a Christian family in the Bible Belt. We attended Sunday school and church at Southside Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. As a young teen, I began to see how Christ coming into your life could fill it with joy in a way nothing else could. One Sunday morning at Southside Baptist Church when the invitation was given, I went forward to give my life to Jesus Christ. I found that knowing Christ as my personal Savior was far more than just attending Sunday school and church. I was filled to overflowing with the love of God.

In addition to hearing the Gospel at church, I enjoyed listening to our radio whenever it played Gospel music. I began to understand that people who would never set foot in a church could still be reached through the radio. I was starting to see what an impact radio could make in their lives.

## Johnny Miller

At that time, there were no full-time Christian radio stations like there are today. Most stations played secular pop music or country and western. Some stations would broadcast a Christian radio program, but only for a couple hours.

But when I was a teenager, a gospel singer named Johnny Miller played Christian music on the radio for two hours every afternoon. The message in the songs told a story that made a great impression on me. This kind of music made me feel the Spirit of the Lord. Often one line of a song would stick in my mind for hours, just like an advertising jingle.

I began to really admire Johnny Miller. I knew from listening to his show that he broadcast from the WTOB radio station right in my town on 4th Street. One day I pedaled my bike to the station to see him work.



Working With Johnny Miller

When I walked into the studio that day, the station management could tell instantly that I was determined to see Johnny Miller in action. He offered to let me watch quietly through the glass. I watched intently as Johnny picked the songs from the albums in the control room, took requests over the telephone, and logged transmitter readings every 30 minutes. Just listening to the radio, I had thought all he had to do was talk and introduce the songs. Watching him from the hall outside the control room, I learned that there was much more to it than that.

Johnny Miller's two-hour radio program opened my eyes even more to how radio could reach the masses with the message of God's grace and love. I knew the Gospel aired over the radio could change lives, because it had changed mine. I was learning that radio could offer different types of Christian programs, music, or talk shows. As long as the Gospel message was there, the effect would be the same, and God could use it.

## The Birth of a Vision

In 1955, Dr. Paul Freed, founder of Trans World Radio, came to a Youth for Christ meeting held at the First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. There he spoke about

the missionary radio station they were building in Tangier, South Africa. His story about how radio could reach the masses overseas made another strong impression on me. As Dr. Freed spoke, the Lord laid on my heart how much America also needed Christian radio stations.

### **Standing Together in Service**

As God placed this vision for radio ministry in my heart, he also blessed me with someone to share it with. When I was in high school I met a young lady named Jane Mason. She lived in the country, and I lived in the city. But we became friends when we worked together at the Biltmore Dairy Bar. I would bike there from my house, and she would take a school bus in and walk the rest of the way.



With Jane at the Biltmore Dairy Bar in Winston-Salem 1956

We married in 1958, and Jane has walked with me on this journey ever since, with unwavering support. She put off her own dreams of going to college to help me pursue the vision God gave me. Jane trusted me to listen to God's leading and followed me even when it was difficult and hard to understand. We met when we were 16, married when we were 18, and we've spent the last 59 years together in ministry. It's been said that behind every good man is an even better woman. This is certainly true of me.

### **Working Overtime For Christ**

In May of 1958, newly married, I took a full-time job at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, working the night shift. I would work there until 1967. Many of the jobs I had at Reynolds were not very demanding. I could sit around and supervise the processes and keep things running on the line. With this flexibility, I spent a lot of time lost in thought, especially about radio and how it could be used to impact people for Christ. It was a time that God used to help me get my

thoughts in order about helping radio stations transition to full-time Christian broadcasting.

Working the night shift, I was able to be active in church work during the day and on the weekend. However, I couldn't attend the Wednesday night services, revival services and other evening church activities. Many of my coworkers at Reynolds also missed that time of worship. Fortunately, God opened a door and allowed me to begin ministering to my coworkers.

Parking was limited at the company, so a lot of second-shift workers like me came in early to get parking places. We would congregate in the cafeteria with coffee and pastries and wait until our shift started. One day as I sat there drinking coffee, I suddenly realized that a lot of Christians worked at Reynolds, and, like me, they couldn't go to church on Wednesday nights.

I decided to see if I could do something about that. I had already been making records of gospel music and Christian teaching in my basement studio on a part-time basis to help out local churches. Now I wondered if I could find a way to play my records for the people in the cafeteria. It would give them something to look forward to each week.

After thinking it through, I went to my foreman.

I said, "You know, I have programs that I record for churches. If we had a sound system down there, I could put together a music program so people can hear good Christian music. I would like to play some of my records on Wednesday evenings. Would that be possible?"

My foreman looked at me like I was crazy. He said, "I can't answer a question like that. Anything like that's gotta go through the home office. You know, this is ridiculous."

Well, he didn't say it was ridiculous but that was what he implied.

R.J. Reynolds was a big company. He was probably trying to discourage me, but I said, "Okay. No big deal, I'll go."

### **Making a Ridiculous Request**

The home office was only open during the day, so one morning I went and told them what I wanted to do, and asked who I could talk to. They connected me with the building manager.

I explained my whole plan to him. He thought for a few minutes and said, "Well, that sounds reasonable. Let me see what we can do. Maybe we can help you out with that. "

I was excited. If this worked out, I could begin bringing the Gospel to a group outside of church. I left the home office and waited for his call.

It wasn't long before he called me back and asked, "What do you need to do what you're talking about, to play music?"

I said, "I need an amplifier and some speakers and a little control system."

He goes, "Okay. We'll see if we can do that for you."

I hung up the phone, astonished. Even though there were a lot of Christians in management at the time, this was still a secular tobacco company. Yet I had just convinced them to supply me with the equipment I needed to play Christian music and teaching to their employees on Wednesday nights, as well as during the evening lunchtime and the Christmas and Easter seasons.

A week later, the building manager installed a simple broadcast system for me at the Number 12 factory of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

### **The Story Gets Better**

One day soon after the building manager said yes, my foreman pulled me aside and said, "The building manager says we're to relieve you on the days you play music, for 30 minutes or however long you need to play your music."

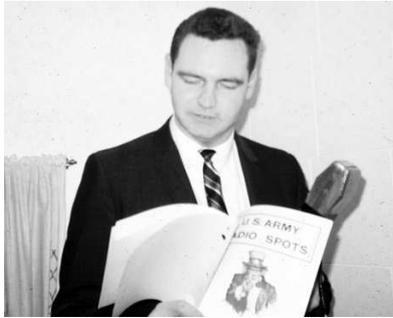
The man who had first scoffed at my idea was now giving me time away from my job to minister to other employees! Who would have believed that a tobacco company the size of R.J. Reynolds would allow Christian music to be played for its employees?

God often asks us to step out in faith and follow him in obedience. I did that when I asked to speak to someone in the home office. Now I was bringing Christian music and teaching to Reynolds.

The desire to work in radio continued to grow stronger in me each day.

### **Radio or Bust**

Encouraged by my success in bringing Christian music to Reynolds, I tried to get part-time work at local radio stations around Winston-Salem. At WAIR, I was all but thrown out after trying to submit an application. But they finally let me do an audition, reading public service announcements.



My first radio audition.

After the manager listened to the tape, he told me that I should look for another line of work. This was a disappointment, but I believed my vision for radio was God-given, and I would not be discouraged. I was convinced that God was calling me, and I kept Revelation 3:8 in mind, "I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it."

### **Hands on the Controls**

Over time, I purchased better recording equipment for the basement studio in our home. While still working at Reynolds full-time, I produced other radio broadcasts for local churches in the Winston-Salem area.

One church I produced for was Urban Street Baptist Church. Every weekend, I would deliver the tapes to the stations where they aired and hang around getting to know the weekend announcers. They didn't run me off because I came armed with hamburgers, soft drinks, and sometimes milkshakes. Once again, they answered my questions about radio and began letting me run the control board.

It was during this time that I met Don Matney, the Program Director at WBUY in Lexington. Don and I quickly became friends. He knew I wanted to learn more about the radio business, so he let me take over the control board on Saturday afternoons when commercials aired. Don did the live announcing from the studio desk in the other room. The more I got into volunteering at the radio station, the more I loved it.

### **My First Break in Radio**

My persistence in trying to find work in radio finally paid off. When I was 22 years old, I got my first paying job. WBUY had begun broadcasting New York Yankees baseball games in the afternoons. They needed extra part-time help, so they offered me the job. They probably figured that since I was going to be there anyway, they might as well put me to work. Every game day, I went in at 1:00 PM and played commercials and other spots throughout the game.

The first time I sat behind the microphone to give the time, I was so nervous that I got it wrong. But I quickly grew comfortable and was soon in my element. The 1964 Yankees had a great year and finished in first place in their division, but I felt like the real winner. I was working in radio, and I could sense this was where I belonged.



Hands on the controls

After the baseball season ended, I began to get other part-time radio work on the weekends and some afternoons. God continued to open doors for me, and I made sure to obediently walk through them.

### **The Radio Tower Light**

Those were busy days for me. I devoted most of my free time to working in radio, while still earning a decent living working nights at Reynolds. Every night when I finished my shift at 3:00 AM, I would drive down Broad Street to our home in the southern part of Winston-Salem. And every time, I would stare up at the WAIR radio tower.

It wasn't a very high tower at the time, about 250 feet tall. But each night when I'd see that light blinking, it would stop me in my tracks and I'd start to pray. My prayer was simple. I said, "Oh, Lord. They've got an FM station in there that could go Gospel. Make that happen so people can hear about your great love."

My mind could be on other things as I drove, but as soon as I saw that blinking light, it was like flipping a switch. I knew God wanted me to pray for that station to begin playing Christian programming full-time. I had no way of knowing that God was going to answer that prayer, or how he was going to use me to do it.

It would require sacrifice and a step of faith on my part, but I was ready. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

### **The Birth of WGPL**

In 1967, I was working full time at Reynolds and part-time at WAIR in Winston-Salem. God was moving in my heart, and my desire to bring Christian music to more people was at an all-time high. My mind was constantly puzzling over

ways to get this done. Then I remembered that I just had to keep moving forward. It soon became clear that God was calling me to leave the security of my job and dedicate my life to working full-time in radio.

I set up an appointment with John Googe, the president of Holiday Broadcasting, the parent company of WAIR. Even though I was just a part time DJ, he agreed to meet with me. I had a plan that would completely change the face of one of his stations. I hoped he would listen with an open mind.

Expressing more confidence than I felt, I proposed changing the format of WAIR-FM from easy listening to full-time Christian. I had a complete plan laid out on paper for how we could do it, down to the smallest details. He was intrigued. After hearing this 27-year-old part-time DJ offer a plan to radically change one of his stations, he actually invited me back for another meeting with the full board of directors.

### **No Guts, No Glory**

Looking back, I see that I had more guts than I realized. In that second meeting before the board, I again proposed this new full-time Christian FM station. Then I proposed that I would manage day-to-day operations with the staff and be in charge of programming. And I recommended my friend Don Matney as General Manager and Sales Manager.

At this time, FM radio was just starting to gain listeners. Few cars and trucks were equipped with FM radios. Originally, the board suggested airing just a block of Christian programming, then country music for the balance of the day. But I explained to them that in order to get people to go out and buy FM radios, we had to offer new programming that was completely different, and not currently in the market. I said we would need to put our full efforts into Christian programming.

I stood my ground and waited nervously.

After several more board meetings, the format change was voted upon and accepted. The new call letters were WGPL--*Witnessing God's Precious Love*.

At 34,000 watts and broadcasting at 93.1 FM, this new station reached the Piedmont triad of Winston-Salem, High Point, and Greensboro, North Carolina.

God had heard my prayer all those years driving by the radio tower. He had used me to help turn that radio tower with its blinking red light into the first full-time Christian radio station.

Now the real work began.

### **A Step of Faith**

In 1967, even though I had been offered a promotion in my position with Reynolds, I left my full-time job there, taking a 50% pay cut. Although my wife stood beside me in my decision, my extended family couldn't understand why I would leave the security of Reynolds, when I had a wife and two small children to support. I felt no different than a missionary going overseas, but this was my mission field and radio was my ministry. It was a very difficult time, but God provided. Seeing full-time Christian radio come to life was an answer to prayer and a dream come true. To me, the changed lives of those coming to Christ through radio were worth any sacrifice.

### **Growing Pains**

Starting a new business is difficult, and this was no exception. I had survived the first challenge by convincing the board to change formats. Now I had to deliver on my promises.

The facility that housed the WAIR-AM offices, studios, transmitters, and towers did not have the space needed to add a full-time FM Christian radio station. So we purchased a mobile home and placed it next to the existing brick building. The bedroom became the main control room, and the kitchen became the sales office. The bathroom was used for mailing and receiving program tapes for broadcast use.

Because there were almost no FM car radios at the time we went on the air, about 90% of those who listened to FM radio heard it in their home. When the public heard about the new Christian format, the sales of FM radios started to climb, because there was something new on the air that no one had ever tried before. We soon received many calls from listeners telling us how much the programming meant to them.

Within 90 days, WGPL was able to make payroll. Shortly after that, the station was operating on its own without being funded by the AM station.

Full-time Christian FM radio had arrived in Winston-Salem, and it was a success.

### **A Window on a World in Need**

For two years I worked at WGPL, learning all I could about the day-to-day challenges of managing a radio station. I was constantly pushing to reach more people and bring in more revenue to fund the station.

I also began working as a reserve officer with the Winston-Salem police on Friday and Saturday nights. It was a surprising experience for me. I had grown up in a Christian home and was in church two to three times a week. Riding with a patrol officer to the tougher parts of town, I saw firsthand the effects of drugs and alcohol on people's lives.

Witnessing the struggles and desperation of these broken people only strengthened my vision for Christian radio. Most of these people would never set foot in a church, but they all had radios in their homes and their cars. Radio could reach into their lives in a way that church couldn't.

Radio is the most effective mission tool known to man.

### **Leaving Home, Learning the Ropes**

In January of 1969, God opened a new door for me. I was offered a job in Ashland, Virginia, at a new radio station serving the Richmond market. Taking this job would be hard on my family, but I felt certain that God would take care of us. For six months after I began working there, while my family stayed in Winston-Salem, I drove four hours to Richmond every Monday morning, spent the week there working, and after lunch on Friday headed back to Winston-Salem.

We finally sold our house and moved to Richmond. I knew it was tough on Jane, but I didn't fully understand the sacrifice she was making. Winston-Salem was home. She was leaving our home, our families and our church behind, and it affected her greatly. Sometimes the spouse bears the greatest burden when a person is called to ministry. I'm thankful for the sacrifice Jane made and how she supported me in those days.

### **Up and Running**

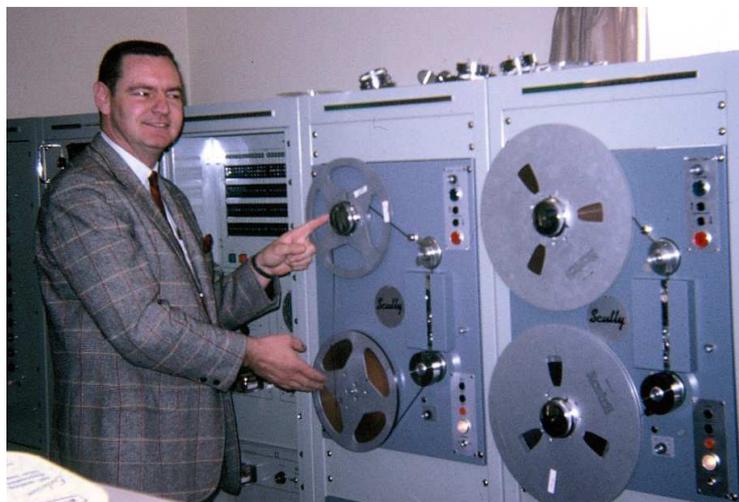
Richmond's WIVE AM and FM got its start through a wealthy man named Gerald. He was the millionaire owner of Gerald's Truck Plaza, and he started going to Carmel Baptist Church where Reverend Jim Burkitt pastored. He soon realized that if he started giving his tithe to the church, they wouldn't know what

to do with that much money. It was just a small country church, and his tithe would be greater than the contributions of all the other members combined.

Gerald came up with a unique solution—he formed a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and named Reverend Jim Burkitt as president. He then bought a radio station and gave it to the church ministry. Reverend Burkitt became the station's general manager, but he kept preaching, so I was hired as his Administrative Assistant. I managed the staff, planned the format, oversaw the sales and produced the programming.

As members of the National Religious Broadcasters, we attended the national convention in Washington, where we got to see the newly-released Shafer automation system in action. This machine consisted of four stacks of equipment, including reel-to-reel playbacks, a cart carousel, and auto time machines. This was in 1969, before computers were used in broadcasting.

Reverend Burkitt immediately purchased one of these new machines for the radio station. It came with very few instructions, but I jumped in and got to work. For a while, I was transported back to my childhood. I was once again that ten-year-old boy hooking wires up to the black-and-white Crosley TV, except this time I was getting paid to do it.



Programing the new automation equipment

### **Continuing to Move Forward**

As we were getting the station up and running, I faced a familiar dilemma. The owners were unsure about whether full-time Christian radio would work. So they

wanted me to play some secular music and country, and sprinkle in Christian music here and there.

I was determined to play only Christian programming. And since I knew the most about how the automation system worked and did all the programming, that's what I did. Because there were no recorded Christian music formats available on the market at the time, this was complicated. We had to set up our own music by playing a record on the turntable and recording it on reel-to-reel tapes, which then had to be spliced onto 10-inch reels to fit on the automation system. I spent much of my time mixing solos, duets, choirs, and instrumentals on each reel, giving listeners variety so that they would look forward to hearing this different kind of music.

In a few months, I had turned my second radio station into a full-time Christian format. WIVE-FM now broadcast the message of God's love to the market.

During my time in Richmond, from January 1969 to January 1973, we also added additional tower height to improve the coverage over the Richmond area. Later we added translator stations in Charlottesville, Virginia, and other areas in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to expand coverage to those markets.

I kept learning and growing during those four years. The engineering experience I gained in working with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was invaluable as I learned to navigate power increases and to work within government regulations.

The desire to have my own station was stronger than ever. I was about to face a great disappointment that would test my faith but increase my determination.

### **The Rise of Tar Hill Sounds**

Even as I worked in Richmond, Virginia, I still dreamt of having my own station. Of course, I didn't tell my boss this, but it was a goal the Lord seemed to lay before me. I wanted it so bad that it was all I could think about. I began to search to see where a broadcast frequency might be available. After months of searching, I found one on the coast of North Carolina. It was a class C license, which could operate at 100,000 watts with a 2,000-foot tall tower.

At the time, many FM frequencies were available because nobody was making much money in FM. I was excited and thought this could be my chance to get in on the beginning of something big. I formed a company and named it Tar Hill Sounds, Incorporated. I hired an FCC attorney to do the legal work and a consulting engineering firm to file with the FCC on my behalf.

With some of the profit-sharing money I received when I left Reynolds, I found and leased property for a tower. Tar Hill Sounds was in business. I was ecstatic; my dream was starting to come true.

My dad had a friend in Winston-Salem with some money to invest. He offered to back me and help me get my station on the air once we cleared the hurdles with the FCC. However, when we were ready to file with the FCC and I needed his money to launch, I discovered he had changed his mind. Because I had no other source of funding, the venture folded. I lost everything - the money I had put down on the lease, the lawyer's fees, and the consulting engineer's fees.

Everything I had invested was gone, even my safety net of profit sharing from Reynolds.

### **And the Fall of Tar Hill Sounds**

I felt the hurt from this deep down in my soul. I wanted to build my own station more than anything else, but it appeared that it was not in God's plan at that time. I had no choice but to accept it.

I knew God had to have another plan, and that these difficulties would make me stronger. That has been the theme of my life. Whenever I would appear stuck, God would make a way for me to proceed. But the loss was still very hard.

To make matters worse, not only did I lose the money I had invested, but I had trouble with the IRS. When I filed my income taxes, I recorded the loss of money from the failed radio station deal. But with no more obvious income than the salary I was paid, the IRS thought the loss I had filed was incorrect, and they audited me. Fortunately, when the audit took place, they actually determined that I had not deducted all that I could have. Later, they actually sent me a check for the difference.

### **Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future**

Through the whole process, I continued working and seeking God's will in my life. My faith was tested but didn't falter. Looking back, I realize now that my time in Richmond was vital to my growth—both as a broadcaster and a man.

I continued to learn more and better ways to produce Christian programming and bring it to the market. I began recording a 15-minute daily program that

aired on other stations in the US and the Caribbean. The audience continued to grow, adding more listeners in the Richmond area.

With every letter from a new listener, Reverend Burkitt would put a pin in a map on the wall. When the mail came in and the pins were added to the city map, we could see how Christian radio was penetrating the city of Richmond. The station's impact continued to grow and letters poured in telling of changed lives through the power of the Gospel on the radio.

I put the loss of Tar Hill Sounds behind me and decided to only look forward for God's will in my life.

### **Christian Radio in South Georgia**

At the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in 1973, I met a Christian broadcaster named William R. Crews. He was in the process of buying a radio station near Albany, Georgia, and was looking for a manager who could convert the format from country to full-time Christian.

Because of my experience in that area, I was naturally intrigued. After talking with my family and much prayer, I felt it would be a good growth opportunity to change another station to a full-time Christian format. I accepted the job as General Manager. Converting the format and managing the Albany station, I continued to expand my experience to all areas of broadcasting - including sales, engineering, bookkeeping, and programming. The owner also operated an advertising agency that placed Christian programs on radio stations. Seeing that process gave me a better understanding of how programs were placed and what broadcasters were looking for when buying radio time.

### **The Beasley Broadcast Group**

After 2-1/2 years of working in South Georgia, I was ready to move to a larger radio market. I began to look for open management positions in a broadcasting magazine. After checking out a few postings, the one that interested me the most was placed by George Beasley. He was looking for a manager for his 50,000-watt AM station in Mobile, Alabama.

On a visit back home to Winston-Salem that summer, we stopped at the Beasley Broadcast Corporate offices in Goldsboro, North Carolina, where I met with George Beasley. We had a good meeting, and a few weeks later, after much prayer, I accepted the job with his company. I had a sense that God was putting me in position to reach far more people with the Gospel than in South

Georgia. The Mobile area had very little Christian music and programming on the radio. This was an opportunity to make an impact for Christ on an entire region.

My time working for the Beasley Broadcast group was educational and rewarding. Beasley wanted to help his employees grow and improve. He hosted development meetings for his station managers and brought in professional radio people to train us in every area of radio station management and sales.

### **Honing My Skills**

Working for Beasley, I added to my skills by assisting with special projects such as purchasing property for studio and office space, setting up stations in new locations, and upgrading antenna systems.

Beasley owned only a few stations when I went to work for him. So I was also able to help convert stations in Reidsville, North Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, to a full-time Christian format. The Beasley Broadcast Group soon began purchasing stations in several major markets.

One afternoon, a major fire destroyed the transmitter and broadcast equipment at the Mobile station, WMOO. When we tried to replace them, we realized they were underinsured. Because of the group's expansion efforts, they didn't have the money needed to get WMOO back up to full power in the Mobile area.

Because of this reduced power, our broadcasting range decreased, and we began to lose broadcasters and advertisers. The station began to collapse.

### **How Are We Going to Afford a Radio Station?**

It was clear that I had done all I could with Beasley Broadcasting. Again, I felt that desire to have my own radio station. So my engineer Steve Riggs and I began looking to lease or purchase a station in the Mobile area. I soon discovered that another AM station, WBHY, had filed bankruptcy and was now owned by a bank in Texas.

I immediately sensed that I needed to pray about purchasing that station. So I called Steve, along with my son Stephen, who was working with me at the time, into my office. After closing the door, I told them about the station in bankruptcy. Most of my prayers are conversational, talking to God as I'm driving or working on something. But that day, the three of us sank to our knees on the worn carpet of my office floor and brought that station to God. We asked his

direction and wisdom, and asked him to provide us with the means to get it up and running. We asked his blessing on the people of Mobile who would hear the songs that praised him and the programs that taught about him. When we stood up, I had a peace that I couldn't explain. This was it.

I drafted a letter to the bank with an offer to purchase.

At the time, my wife was working part-time at Grillo Electronics on Dauphin Island Parkway. At lunchtime, I drove over and showed her the letter I had written.

Jane read it, looked up at me, and said, "How on Earth do you think you're going to buy a radio station when we can barely afford groceries?"

I told her about my prayer and said I felt I was supposed to send the letter. I had management experience, and Steve Riggs had engineering experience. I thought that together we could make it work.

She just smiled. She knew that once I had an idea in my head, I was like a bull charging forward. And she did what she's done our whole life together. She backed me up.

### **Proposing the Impossible**

Pulling out a clean white piece of paper and feeding it into her typewriter, Jane said, "I don't think anything's going to happen, but I'll type the letter."

After she finished, I signed the letter and put it in the mail to the bank in Dallas. To my surprise, a week later the banker called me about my proposal. He liked the idea of selling the radio station intact, because the bank didn't want to go to the trouble of auctioning off everything to the highest bidder. He accepted our offer.

Of course, we did not have cash to buy the station. So I used my home as collateral for the down payment. Fifteen years after the failure of Tar Hill Sounds, I filed the paperwork for Goforth Media, Incorporated.

I was the owner of a radio station.

### **Instant Struggle**

We stepped out in faith to purchase WBHY AM 840 with the FCC license power of 1000 watts. Without God, the challenges we faced would have been insurmountable. The station was off the air. The tower was on the ground, where it had been since a storm toppled it a year before.



Next to the fallen tower

Undeterred, we rebuilt the station from the ground up. WBHY Christian 840 signed on the air in April of 1986.

As soon as I knew the sale was going through, I began selling advertising space and programming. These commitments were vital to our budget. But when a radio station changes ownership, you have to file what's

called a "transfer of control" with the FCC, and the process was taking

much longer than expected. Because of the FCC delay, many of the programs and advertisers couldn't wait for us and went to other stations.

When the FCC finally approved us, I didn't have any business left. This caused a severe financial shortfall.

During this time of severe need, we contacted many local churches and Christian-owned businesses, asking them to support the station by buying time for their church programs or running ads.

But many of the pastors and business owners would not return our phone calls, or even allow us into their offices to talk. I was discouraged, but I recognized that Goforth Media was new and not well-known. I also knew my unusual vision for the station as a local mission work to reach un-churched people was a new concept for churches to consider.

### **Trying to Stay Afloat**

I was running what Christian programming I could, but I felt the pressure building. I had a little bit of money coming in, but not a lot. I made a few loan payments to the bank in Dallas, but I knew there would come a time when I couldn't do it anymore. The money just wasn't there.

In October, only six months after launching, we moved the station to the Van Antwerp Building, which reduced our rent from \$2,000 a month to \$500 a month. I cut every unnecessary expenditure from the budget. For a while, I even stopped taking a salary.

But eventually, I had to quit making the payments to the bank. At that point, I thought, "Well, this is the end. Somebody will come in here and just take over."

I didn't call the bank. I couldn't say anything to them, because I didn't know what to say. I kept operating and sharing the Gospel to whoever was listening. I was unwilling to walk away, so I took one day at a time. I figured I would just have to see what God had planned. Throughout my life, I've learned that if you stick with something the Lord has led you into, somehow he makes a way. I kept praying for that to happen.

This went on for a month or two, and I didn't hear anything from the bank. So I just kept going. For nearly six months from the time I stopped paying on the loan, I waited for the call. Can you imagine just waiting for somebody to show up and shut you down? I waited day after day for someone from the bank to arrive, demanding all that was due. I imagined they would shut me down and take my personal property to pay the debt. This was a terrible feeling, but I still did not think God wanted me to give up and walk away. God had placed me there; he would make a way.

### **Banking on a Miracle**

One day, the phone call finally came. The voice on the other end of the line was polite but blunt. He said, "Your note is five months and thousands of dollars past due. We need to get that cleared up. We need a check from you today."

Of course, I had been preparing myself in my mind for this moment, but my next words came straight from the mind of God. First, I apologized. Then I explained how a lot of our programming had fallen through during the FCC transfer delays. I told him that now I was in a much better place financially and was beginning to get back on my feet. Our cash flow was better, but I couldn't afford to pay the entire past-due amount.

Then, whether from confidence, craziness or the Spirit of God, I asked this big question: "Can you just take the amount that I owe you, and put it on the end of the note and let me start making current payments?"

I held my breath and listened to the deafening silence on the other end of the line. I could hear papers shuffling and the creaking of his chair. After what

seemed like hours, but must have been only a few seconds, he said, "I don't think we can do that. I've never heard of them doing that before, but I will ask."

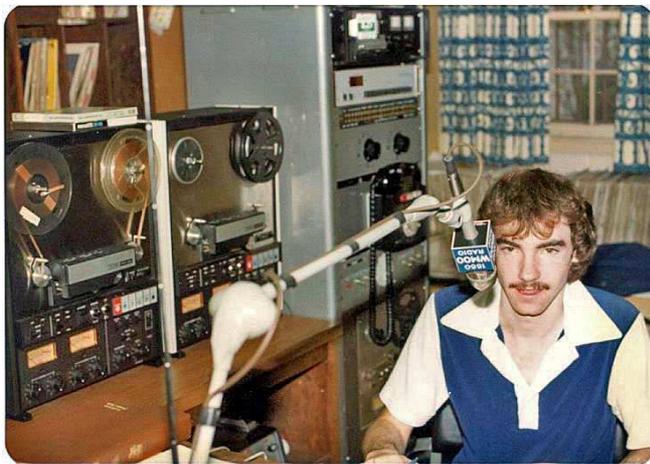
We hung up, and I let out a deep breath. If this didn't work, I wasn't sure what else I could do.

I didn't hear from him for a week. It was one of the longest weeks of my life. But he finally called to tell me that my offer had been accepted. They would be sending a new loan agreement and the new monthly note amount. God had made a way!

At the end of the phone call, I asked the gentleman why I had not heard from the bank in over five months of delinquency. He told me that the banker who was supposed to contact me had suffered a heart attack. All the paperwork regarding my loan had been in his briefcase, and they had just found it.

Once again, God had worked in my life in a way that only he could. Goforth Media was saved and our work was just getting started.

### **Power 88 Is Born**



Stephen on air

In June of 1988, my son Stephen began broadcasting a new program on Saturday afternoons called *Heartbeat*. It was the first Christian Contemporary music program in the Mobile area. One day a listener who was struggling with drug and alcohol addiction called in to the show. He said its message of encouragement had helped him get through some difficult times. It was exciting to hear how the radio broadcast had helped him. Over the last 25 years

we have had thousands of testimonials from listeners sharing how Christ has turned their lives around after hearing the word of God over the radio.

From that exchange, I was reminded that we could reach even more people on FM. Stephen found that 88.5 FM was available in Mobile from our FCC attorney's newsletter. The stations on the lower end of the dial are typically educational frequencies, but we decided to give it a try. Working with our FCC attorney in Washington, I discovered that we could file for the frequency

because of our 501(c)(3) non-profit status, but the deadline was only two weeks away.

We had to work quickly. Putting together one of these applications is very time-consuming and detailed. For example, one entire section consists of engineering exhibits by the consulting engineer. My friend, and consulting engineer, Robert Jones flew into town and helped us get everything we needed together. We completed the application and submitted it before the deadline by only a matter of minutes.

I thought we were finally home free, but as my life had taught me over and over, following God's will for your life is seldom easy.

### **Making a Crucial Stipulation**

In April of 1990 the Federal Communications Commission received Goforth Media's application for educational FM to operate at 88.5 in Mobile, Alabama. However, a group in Florida had also filed an application for 88.5.

As both parties continued to file information with the FCC describing how we would use the station, our legal fees escalated to the point that we could no longer afford them. We had to withdraw our application.

After all our hard work, the group from Florida was awarded the construction permit for 88.5 FM. The only thing we could do was have our attorney file a stipulation that if the Florida group could not build the station in the time allotted by the FCC and had to sell it, we would have the right of first refusal.

A few months later, their attorney walked into my office and told me that they would not be able to build the station. They wanted to sell the construction permit to another buyer, but needed me to release them from the clause that we had put in the agreement. After politely refusing to sign it, I called Steve Riggs and asked if he thought we should give it another try.

After praying and discussing our options, we agreed that we would not release the Florida company from the stipulation. I called our FCC attorney and had the construction permit signed over to Goforth Media. Of course, we were barely breaking even keeping the AM station on the air. We had no idea where the money would come from for the FM station, but we took one day at a time.

### **Where Would We Get the Money?**

I began talking to local banks to secure the money to build Power 88. For the next few months, I went to bank after bank. They told me over and over that without the ownership of physical property, we couldn't get a loan. They wouldn't accept the FCC license for our AM Station as collateral. I even tried to get a grant, but most grants would not donate to radio.

After I trying everything I could think of, I came across an ad in the Alabama Baptist publication for a bond company that offered programs for church construction. I contacted them, and since we were set up as a non-profit organization they were willing to put together a program. We quickly sold \$800,000 in bonds, which we used to pay off the balance of the loan on the AM station, our legal fees, consulting engineers, attorneys and the start-up operating costs for Power 88.

The pathway to realizing this goal was long and challenging. More than once, starting an FM station appeared too difficult to achieve. But every problem and obstacle simply drove us to our knees.

Thanks to God's faithfulness, WBHY FM POWER 88 swept onto the Gulf Coast in March of 1992. The bottom of the FM dial now blasted the top message on radio: God's great love and offer of salvation.

### **Moving the Vision Forward**

When Power 88 began broadcasting, it transported me back to that old radio we had in the kitchen of my childhood home. I remembered the excitement of running wires throughout the house and hearing the FM signal come in clearly.

I also thought back to the blinking light on the tower that I passed in the middle of the night, and how I prayed that God would bring full time Christian radio to life. It had been over thirty years since I'd prayed that prayer.

My journey had taken me from my home in Winston-Salem, to Virginia, to Georgia, to Alabama. Along the way, I learned and grew. I experienced hardship and felt frustration, as plans took longer than expected. But I felt the excitement each time a station would go full-time for God, playing Christian music and programming.

Through it all, I've never lost the vision that God gave me in those early days - for reaching people in need of God through radio. Over and over, we experienced the wonder and joy as radio reached into places where the church could not go.

That vision excites me and keeps me going to this day. Every day, as Christian music plays, I visualize the people listening, and I pray for them.

I pray for the downtrodden who have lost hope.

I pray for the weary who are tired and need peace.

I pray for the incarcerated who have lost their freedom.

I pray for the single mom who struggles to get by.

I pray for the Christians walking in faith, who are encouraged through our music.

And most of all I pray for the one who doesn't yet know Christ.

I pray that the Gospel message that's been changing lives for thousands of years will continue to resonate with people through our work.

### **Keeping the Faith and Pressing On**

Above the microphone in the control room at Power 88 is a sign that says, "You are now entering the mission field." I want our DJ's to remember that their words and songs bring life. Everything they say and do has the power to impact listeners.

It's been 25 years since Power 88 first started broadcasting, and I feel like we've got so much left to give. We've just received approval to increase our power to 100,000 watts. This will increase our coverage and expand our impact even more.

I've lived my entire life pursuing my passion and looking for opportunities that aligned with it. When I found them, I prayed and sought God's counsel. I always expected an answer. Then, when God answered, I followed obediently. The lesson of my life is this: often when the answer looked like a no, God found a way to make it a yes.

I'm wearing out but I'm still walking in faith.

I see no reason to change now.

Wherever I go, I go forth with the Gospel.

It is my standard. It is my message. It is my mission. It is my name.

