

Stanley Rader. The Jewish Evangelist at the Heart of the Worldwide Church of God

Author unknown

Stanley Rader (August 13, 1930 – July 2, 2002) stands as one of the most fascinating and controversial figures in the history of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). Born a secular Jew, he became Herbert W. Armstrong's (HWA) closest advisor, general counsel, treasurer, and eventually an ordained evangelist — all while openly maintaining his Jewish identity. For nearly 25 years, Rader was the sharp-minded strategist who professionalized the church's operations, launched ambitious cultural initiatives, defended it in high-stakes legal battles, and wielded enormous behind-the-scenes influence.

From Accountant to Trusted Insider

Born in White Plains, New York, to a non-observant Jewish family, Rader moved to California as a young man. He graduated from UCLA in 1951, became a certified public accountant in 1954, and earned a law degree from the University of Southern California in 1963 — with financial support reportedly provided by HWA. In 1956, he was hired to reorganize the accounting systems of the Radio Church of God (the WCG's predecessor) in Pasadena. HWA quickly recognized his talent, and by 1969 Rader had become the church's full-time general counsel and treasurer. Rader built and oversaw a network of affiliated companies handling the church's legal, accounting, advertising, travel, and aircraft needs. While these ventures improved efficiency, critics later accused them of creating conflicts of interest and enabling personal gain.

Baptism, Ordination, and Dual Identity

In 1975, HWA personally baptized Rader in a hotel bathtub in Hong Kong. Four years later, in 1979, Rader was privately ordained as a WCG evangelist alongside Joseph Tkach Sr. and Ellis LaRavia. The ordination helped quiet internal criticism about an unordained advisor holding such power. Remarkably, Rader never renounced his Jewish identity. The church's observance of the biblical holy days (which mirror Jewish festivals) and its non-traditional doctrines made the environment relatively comfortable for him.

Cultural Ambassador and Global Traveler

In 1975, Rader founded the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation (AICF), funded primarily by church tithes. The AICF gave the WCG a sophisticated public face. It turned the Ambassador Auditorium into a premier performing arts venue, launched the high-quality Quest magazine, acquired a publishing house, and even helped finance films. Most significantly, the foundation enabled HWA to travel the world as an unofficial

“Ambassador for World Peace.” Accompanied by Rader and Robert Kuhn, HWA flew on private jets, met heads of state, and presented expensive gifts. These high-profile trips were extensively documented in church publications.

Conflict with Garner Ted Armstrong

Rader’s rising influence created tension with HWA’s son, Garner Ted Armstrong (GTA), the church’s popular television evangelist and presumed successor. GTA saw Rader and the AICF’s worldly direction as threats. Their rivalry ended in 1978 when HWA disfellowshipped GTA amid personal scandals. Rader assumed a more dominant role, moving into GTA’s former office.

The 1979 California Receivership Battle

In 1979, the California Attorney General placed the WCG under temporary receivership following complaints from six former members. The state alleged that HWA and Rader had misused millions in tax-free donations for personal luxuries. With the church generating over \$70 million annually, the stakes were enormous. Rader mounted a fierce defense: he assembled top lawyers, rallied support from other religious groups, and successfully lobbied for new legislation limiting the Attorney General’s power over churches. The receivership was lifted after just weeks. In 1980, Rader published *Against the Gates of Hell*, a book defending religious liberty. His combative 1979–80 interview with Mike Wallace on 60 Minutes — during which he walked off the set — became widely remembered.

The “Raiders of the Lost Ark” Lawsuit

In 1981, Rader and Robert Kuhn filed a major copyright lawsuit against George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Paramount, claiming the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* stole key ideas from Kuhn’s earlier screenplay about the Ark of the Covenant. The \$100–210 million suit was eventually dropped.

Resignation, Severance, and Later Life

By early 1981, amid shifting internal dynamics, Rader resigned as general counsel and treasurer. Some insiders called it a “banishment,” yet he continued briefly as AICF director and personal advisor to HWA. He received a generous severance package, including a \$250,000 after-tax bonus and ongoing retirement payments. Rader and his wife, Natalie “Niki” Gartenberg, owned several properties, including a notable home at 360 Waverly Drive in Pasadena.

Death and Legacy

Diagnosed with acute pancreatic cancer, Stanley Rader died on July 2, 2002, at age 71 — just two weeks after diagnosis. His funeral at Mountain View Cemetery in Altadena was conducted by Joseph Tkach Jr., and he was buried near the Armstrong family plot.

He is buried next to his wife, Niki. He is survived by his children Janis, Carol, and Stephen, and several grandchildren.

Rader was a complex man: a brilliant lawyer and accountant who became an ordained minister in a church that observed Jewish holy days. Supporters credit him with saving the WCG from government takeover and modernizing its operations. Critics viewed him as a symbol of the church's 1970s excesses. Regardless of perspective, his life remains deeply intertwined with the rise, turmoil, and transformation of the Worldwide Church of God.