

on the frontier:

The amazing story of the Far East Broadcasting Company

It began in the thick jungles outside Manila, Philippines, where VU alums built a radio station and tower while battling tropical disease, midnight theft and social chaos on the heels of World War II. They had no guarantees, no money. Their goal: take the gospel to the world by radio. It was a risk that proved worthwhile: Their efforts grew into one of the most strategic evangelistic ministries of the 20th century, the Far East Broadcasting Company, which today has a staff of 1,200, radio towers in a dozen countries and a potential audience of 3.1 billion people.

One of those missionary-adventurers, Bob Bowman, 88, stands in the foyer of the bustling FEBC building in La Mirada, a cheerful and proud papa, admiring what's become of the organization he ('36), John Broger ('39) and Bill Roberts ('30) founded in 1945.

"This is where it all started," he says, showing visitors large wall photos of Manila, Saipan, the Seychelles Islands and countries where FEBC has stations and devoted listeners.

"We had no idea [the network] would become what it has. If we'd have known, our faith probably wouldn't have been up to it."

FEBC stations air the gospel along with music and teaching tailored to the specific culture they are targeting, whether it's in Vietnam, China or the Middle East. They receive 84,000 responses a month by fax, mail and e-mail.

That's a long way from where the vision began, with \$1,000 and a one-way ticket to China. But first, God sent the men to school.

Bowman says he was "prayed into" Southern California Bible College, now Vanguard, by his mother.

"The missionary vision was born in my heart there," he says. "On the wall behind the platform was a large map of the world bearing names of missionaries, and the words of missionary William Carey: 'Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God.'"

Bowman became a founding member of the popular Haven of Rest radio show, which he would travel with for 12 years and which would lay a network of contacts he drew from later when starting FEBC.

John Broger, meanwhile, had met the Lord while vacationing in Florida and boldly came to SCBC three weeks later by train. His background in radio production meshed with the

missionary call, and he felt sure God was preparing him to build missionary radio stations. When he met Bowman, they became fast friends. Seeds of the vision were planted in their hearts as early as 1938, but the growth of that vision was interrupted by World War II.

Bill Roberts had taken a dying church in Los Angeles, merged it with a congregation in Inglewood and made it thrive. When the Haven of Rest was grounded due to gasoline conservation measures, Roberts asked Bowman to help in the music of his church. One result was the Gospel and Song radio program.

During those days Bowman shared the international radio vision with Roberts.

"Radio is a ministry just as pastoring is a ministry," Roberts says. "It's an extension of church ministry."

As the war wound down, the strands of the vision came together. Broger, during his exemplary service aboard the carrier *Bon Homme Richard*, had established himself as a premier radar technician, and yet he yearned to launch missionary radio stations. When he arrived in San Francisco after the war, Bowman met him at the docks and they and their wives prayed about the vision they shared. Broger left a well-paying business partnership, and Bowman left active membership in the Haven of Rest, and in December 1945, the threesome incorporated FEBC, with Roberts' church as the first sponsor.

"Many people thought our vision was crazy, but we kept at it with reckless faith," says Bowman.

In the years that followed, frustration was great, but victory was greater. Broger's exploratory trip to Asia succeeded when the Philippine government granted them a license. Their first piece of land was a dense, tangled jungle littered with remnants of the fierce battles over Manila. They cleared this, erected a station and called it Christian Radio City Manila.



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"Portable missionaries," or PMs, as the FEBC-supplied radios were nicknamed, took the gospel throughout the Philippines and many other countries, proving radio was an incredibly effective tool for spreading the gospel. "Many people thought our vision was crazy, but we kept at it with reckless faith," says Bowman.

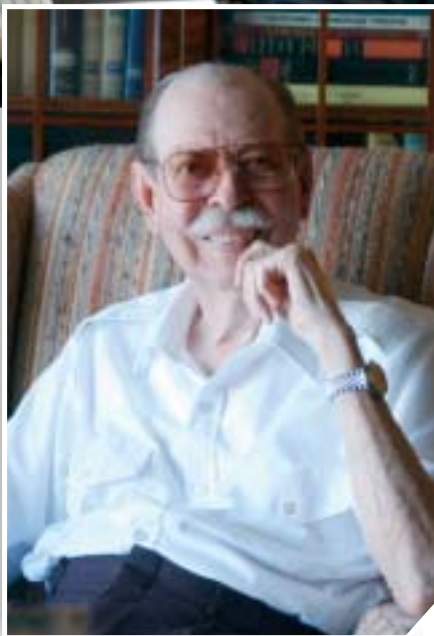
God intervened to help Bowman raise money back in the U.S., and they learned more hard lessons — how wood would warp in humid environments, how governments could be fickle. But with Bowman and Roberts' relentless fundraising and Broger's non-stop efforts overseas, the towers went up, and by the time Bowman and his wife made their first trip to Asia and heard the FEBC broadcast from the deck of their ship — a memory that brings tears to his eyes — their humble stations were taking the gospel to more people than they'd dreamed possible.

And FEBC continued to grow. They erected 20 radio stations in their first 20 years of operation, adding short-wave transmitters to broadcast to nations in Asia, the Middle East and the Soviet Union.

And they found themselves in the fray as communist movements struggled to take over various countries. Atheistic governments stopped the gospel at their borders, but FEBC's radio signal flew past and reached people within. Russia began to jam the signal "like fury" when the gospel was preached, says Bowman, so FEBC played Tchaikovsky until the jamming stopped, then quickly slipped in a gospel message before the signal was jammed, then went back to Tchaikovsky.

They also found that FEBC drove people into local churches. In Manila they built little wooden radios dubbed "portable missionaries," or PMs, and distributed them in the barrios. The radios helped start hundreds of churches in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Soon, Broger was offered a job at the department of defense, and went on to serve 20 years heading up the Office of Information and Education. He was the first civilian to hold the post since Thomas Paine in General George Washington's army. Roberts continued pastoring and developing his own ministry by buying a radio station, KWRN, broadcasting out of Corona. It continues to train



Bill Roberts (above), here in his home studio, is active in radio ministry, particularly in the growing field of mini-transmitters. John Broger led the department of defense's Office of Information and Education for 20 years, and now lives in Palm Desert.

DJ's and producers for missionary work. Paul Crouch was the station manager for 5 years. Later, Roberts served as district superintendent of the Southern California district of the Assemblies of God.

Bowman stayed with FEBC as it grew, adding stations and production centers in Thailand, Korea, Mongolia, Indonesia, the UK, Canada, Cambodia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere. They made a point of turning the stations over to nationals in each country, so today 90 percent of FEBC staff are nationals.

"That was a big part of its success," Bowman says. "We trained many to be engineers and station workers,

and they'd get saved in the process."

Today, FEBC's track record is mind-boggling. Their stations cover Asia, the Middle East and Russia, broadcasting with five times the power of Los Angeles' most powerful secular stations. An estimated half of the Christians in China first heard the gospel through radio. A newspaper in Vietnam once reported angrily that thousands of Hmong tribal people were leaving spirit worship for "the God of the radio."

"Radio is the easiest way to reach the masses with the gospel because most everyone has a radio now," Bowman says. "The Lord has wonderfully blessed."

Less than 10 percent of the \$36 million a year needed to run FEBC comes from the U.S. The people in those countries support the stations. Chinese speak to Chinese, Japanese to Japanese and so on.

Bowman continued with the Far East Broadcasting ministry as president for 42 years before retirement. Roberts remains active in radio. At 94, he is entering the field of mini-transmitters which can be carried in a suitcase and broadcast up to 1,000 watts to serve a specific community. John Broger, 89, is retired and lives in Palm Desert. And Jim Bowman, Bob's son, serves as FEBC's international chairman. FEBC

now operates 40 stations and leases time on 85 more in other countries. It broadcasts in 159 major languages, airing 600 broadcast hours a day. This year it was named by *Christianity Today* magazine as one of the top 40 Christian places to work.

Bowman still draws from lessons learned at Vanguard, almost 70 years ago.

“Vanguard is a fine university,” Bowman says, noting that there were 17 graduates in his class. His wife, Eleanor, was also a graduate, and their diplomas hang in the FEBC offices. “When I was there, Mother Farmer, one of our teachers in her 70s, looked at me over her granny glasses and said, ‘Bob, always remember, what you are to Jesus Christ is far more important than what you’ll ever do for him.’ That has been my lodestar. It all depends on God.”

Down the hall, a prayer meeting proceeds among FEBC’s international board. Bowman glances at his watch which has two dials on it. One tells time in L.A., the other, Greenwich

Mean Time so he can quickly know the time in any country where FEBC has stations. As the prayer meeting wraps up we go into the room and look upon a wall-sized map lit up with red dots where FEBC stations and production studios operate. A worker walks in, breathless, and says they just received a \$500,000 donation to complete a project. “We still have Bob Bowman-sized miracles happening,” he says, laughing. Bowman smiles and says simply, “Praise the Lord.”

Later, reflecting on his ministry career, Bowman says, “I hope young people see it’s worthwhile to give your life to Christ. God has a plan for every willing person. My wife always said, ‘If you have a heart willing to do what God is telling you to do, God will make whatever provision is necessary.’ Get the training you need, and know what the Lord is telling you to do.”

That vision has been constant from the beginning, as has the FEBC motto, spelled out in large letters on the building’s façade: “Christ to the World by Radio.” 