

# Winter Haven

# The Ledger

Auburndale/Lake Alfred/Eagle Lake/Lake Wales/Haines City

## WGTO is sold; goes gospel

By Sam Cardinale  
The Ledger

WINTER HAVEN — Polk County's leading AM radio station — WGTO 540-AM — has been sold for \$1.5 million to a limited broadcast partnership based in Washington, D.C., and will drop its country music programming.

One of the station's new owners said Wednesday from Washington that he and his partners plan to change the station's country music sound to religious programming.

Cypress Broadcasting Ltd. will take control of the station from Hubbard Broadcasting on Dec. 16, according to Mike Bader, one of the station's new owners.

Bader said Wednesday that the change in program-

ming will occur at midnight Dec. 16.

He also said some on-air employees will be replaced. "We'll try to keep some of the current personnel, but we probably won't be able to keep them all," he said.

Bader was scheduled to meet with the staff this morning to discuss the options.

Station Program Director Henry Jay said Wednesday that he's not sure what will become of his staff. "We're going to have to wait until the meeting before we know any more," he said.

The 50,000-watt station, located at Cypress Gardens, which has been the AM giant in Polk County since the mid-1950s, was put up for sale in July.

Ratings reports from the past two years show the sta-

tion has been losing listeners. In 1984, among Polk County listeners 12 years and older, it had a 5.0 rating, according to Arbitron ratings. In 1985, those same ratings show, the station dropped to 4.0. And this year it dropped to a 2.9.

The Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D.C., recently approved the sale, according to Dick Bennick, the station's general manager.

Hubbard bought the station in 1955 for \$150,000, according to Jim Bocock, the station's former general manager. The station went on the air as a 250-watt "tea kettle," or a small station, in Haines City but later moved, Bocock said in an interview after the station was put up for sale.

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## WGTO was leader in country music market

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Bocock left the station and moved to Clearwater after the station's sale was announced this summer.

Bennick said he doesn't plan to stay with the new company once the transfer is complete.

The station has been playing country music since 1976. That's the same year it won the Country Music Association's Small Market Radio Station of the Year award. It has played rock 'n' roll, disco and oldies, according to Jay.

It was also known as "The Rock of Central Florida" during the mid-1960s, Jay said.

The station constantly ranks third or fourth overall in Polk County in the ratings behind first-ranked WPCF 97.5-FM and second ranked WVFM 94.1-FM. One other AM station has tied WGTO in the ratings.

WGTO also pulls in rating numbers from Tampa to Orlando and is heard in Miami. The station's 50,000-watt power and its location on the low end of the AM band helps to carry the signal greater distances than other AM stations.

The call letters, GTO, stand for gulf to ocean in recognition of the strong signal.

According to Bocock, the station was put up for sale because Hubbard, which also owns St. Petersburg TV station WTOG channel 44, is expanding its interests in television and satellite communications.

The company wants to expand in the Conus market, according to Bocock.

Conus is a network of TV stations which own mobile satellite trucks that are able to electronically link with a satellite to broadcast live news reports from anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

WTVT-TV, Channel 13 in Tampa and WESH-TV, Channel 2 in Orlando are the only Central Florida Conus Network stations.

Hubbard has sold its Albuquerque, N.M., radio stations for the same reason, Bocock said.

The company plans to keep KSTP-AM/FM in Minneapolis-St. Paul because they are part of the KSTP-TV operation where Hubbard runs its corporate offices, according to Bocock.

The current on-air staff at WGTO include: the morning team of Jack Robson and Harry Sharp; mid-day and 1981 County Music Association Small Market Disc Jockey of the Year Jackie West; afternoon jock Henry Jay; evening fill-ins by station part-timers; and all-night disc jockey Patti Jordan.