

# The Founding of Catholic SPIRIT Radio (Abridged)

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*Catholic Spirit Radio* had its origin in the creation of WSPI 89.5 FM, an independently owned and operated Illinois radio station originally dedicated to broadcasting generic, royalty-free music.

**WSPI ORIGINS** – WSPI grew out of a casual conversation between two workplace friends in 2007. Radio engineers Jon Hall and his friend – an evangelical Protestant – worked for [New Life Radio](#). They were installing studios, transmitters, and antennas around the Midwest. They worked as a team and often held long conversations during drives between worksites. They frequently discussed the possibility of starting their own Christian radio station “because of the negative influence of popular music.”

In mid-2007, Jon left *New Life Radio* to take up a job as a radio engineer for a company in Normal, Illinois. Jon was now in charge of maintaining three radio stations with four transmitters. Still, this did not sate his desire to have a radio station he could call his own.

Despite severing work ties, Jon and his friend continued efforts to establish a Christian radio station. In 2007, they applied to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for four radio licenses to broadcast to central Illinois in the hope of receiving at least one. The merits of an application are based on a points system and, even with multiple bids, there was no guarantee of getting even a single license. They received one license after a year’s wait. The license was for the [Saybrook AT&T Long Lines tower](#) – their most desired location.

The license was issued in 2008 under the corporate name of *2820 Communications, Inc.* The requested callsign, WSPI, was granted. The “2820” in the corporate name was chosen in reference to Matthew 28:19-20, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This passage from Sacred scripture had motivated the Christian broadcast efforts. The SPI in the WSPI callsign was chosen to recognize the Holy Spirit, who had inspired the founders in their efforts earlier.

Due to the great height of the [Saybrook AT&T Long Lines microwave transmission tower](#) above the local terrain and the potential for interfering with another station broadcasting on the same frequency (89.5 FM), the FCC required WSPI to use a directional antenna even to transmit at 325 watts – an antenna that the founders did not have and could ill afford. The conventional \$10,000 price tag made it far too expensive to begin broadcasting from the approved location. The requirement forced the founders to set their sights lower. They asked for and received an amendment to the original FCC license that permitted them to broadcast from the [Buzb Tower](#) – a cell phone tower located 3.5 miles southeast of Arrowsmith, Illinois.

The founders cobbled together whatever unused and unwanted broadcast materials they could find to “build” the Arrowsmith transmission site. Between the two, they had a 300-watt exciter/transmitter, an inexpensive omnidirectional antenna, enough RF (radio frequency) cable to connect the transmitter to the antenna, and the required Emergency Broadcast System electronics. Jon paid for the necessary telephone line connections, and his friend paid tower rent. WSPI went on air in early 2011 at a licensed operating

power of 290 watts. The format was generic, royalty-free music. An onsite CD player provided the music feed with a shuffler. There was no office or production facility, and none was needed.

**THE FOUNDING OF CATHOLIC SPIRIT RADIO** – Within weeks of WSPI’s initial broadcast, Jon’s friend moved to Tennessee to pursue a new job. Jon became the sole proprietor of 2820 Communications, Inc. It was at this point that Jon’s thoughts turned to establishing a Catholic radio station.

Earlier, while working temporarily in Carlinville, Illinois, for *New Life Radio*, Jon had heard the voice of EWTN’s Mother Angelica on Covenant Radio for the first time and was hooked. He was inspired by Mother Angelica’s words, “Unless you are willing to do the ridiculous, God will not do the miraculous. When you have God, you don’t have to know everything about it; you just do it.” And so, that became Jon’s personal motivation for starting a Catholic radio station.

Desirous of doing good, Jon noted, “My goal was to reach the most people possible with the truth of the Catholic faith.” He later stated, “I saw that EWTN had more effect on peoples’ lives” than other forms of Christian radio. Jon then reached out to Jack Williams at EWTN Global Catholic Radio network. Jack was manager of affiliate relations. Before long, WSPI was admitted to the EWTN network.

On March 9, 2011, WSPI began transmitting the *EWTN Global Catholic Radio* signal from Arrowsmith, Illinois, for the first time. WSPI now carried the name *Catholic Spirit Radio* and operated under the corporate banner of 2820 Communications, Inc. Unfortunately, the low-wattage signal could barely be heard in the Twin City of Bloomington-Normal, only 20 miles away. Remarkably, the signal could be heard much better in the tiny town of Wapella. This would remain the status quo until 2014 when a generous donor stepped forward to pay for the necessary directional antenna. Jon nearly simultaneously found out about the availability of a 6,000-watt broadcast license in the area and quickly obtained it. He had enough of his own money to purchase a used 1,000-watt transmitter. Catholic Spirit Radio was on its way to becoming the 7,000-watt station heard today across McLean County in Central Illinois, an area larger in size than the state of Rhode Island. Today Catholic Spirit Radio broadcasts to a 100-mile-long corridor along Interstate-55 in Central Illinois with transmitters in Saybrook, Bloomington, Pontiac and Lincoln, Illinois.

#### **UPDATES:**

These stations create The Catholic Spirit Radio Network:

89.5 FM, WSPI - Established in March 2011 in McLean County

92.5 FM, W223CA - Bloomington in July 2017

88.3 FM, WPJC – Pontiac & Livingston County in November 2018

97.1 FM, W246CO - Lincoln & Logan County in July 2019

89.1 FM, W206CE - DeKalb-Sycamore in December 2021

89.3 FM, WUON - Morris-SSW Joliet in September 2022

88.9 FM, WYWL - Rockford-Harvard in October 2023

Clinton-Wapella coming in 2024

With the addition of Rockford, **The Catholic Spirit Radio Network** hit a milestone with one million potential listeners!