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Religious Broadcasting: Staying in the Mainstream

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"Our message is that God was making all mankind his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends."
2 Corinthians 5: 19 (Good News Bible)

Introduction

This paper arises out of my 15 year involvement in religious broadcasting and my theological thinking over the past few years. I have aimed to make it widely accessible - what is presented is very much an opinion piece rather than any closely argued piece of academic theology.¹

It is also hoped that this paper may be of some practical interest to the church. I believe religious broadcasting is an important activity but that the church sometimes only gets a skewed idea of what Christian work in media can mean.

The Whitefield Institute itself knows that effective Christian involvement in the media is important - one of its stated aims is to seek 'to help Christians [in the media] express a biblical perspective in ways that make for stimulating viewing and listening.'

Broadcasting models

There are different models of work in religious broadcasting in Britain today. Some involve working in the mainstream by being employed full- or part-time in a religious department for network BBC TV or radio; or as a religious producer for Independent Local Radio (ILR) or BBC local radio stations.² There are also independent producers such as GRF Christian Radio in Glasgow and HCJB-UK in Bradford. These organisations are programme makers that provide programmes for mainstream and Christian stations and are staffed by a mix of paid and voluntary staff. In the case of GRF, an interdenominational voluntary team makes all programmes. There are also dedicated Christian stations or channels, such as Premier Radio in London or the satellite radio station, United Christian Broadcasters (UCB). Again, such organisations are often partially staffed by dedicated volunteers working in their spare time.

I will firstly take a closer look at Christian stations. I will then briefly outline what can be called 'pre-evangelism', which is based on a theology of involvement, a desire to get alongside the listener and viewer. This will lead me to conclude that Christian broadcasting is most effective when contributing to mainstream radio and television.

Who is my Audience

There are two strands to be distinguished when considering Christian channels or stations, and they are to do with one of the most basic and important questions a broadcaster can ask herself: that is, *who is my audience?*

In fact, in every type of communication it is necessary to know the answer to that question. Christian stations, however, often have competing answers. They may identify themselves ex-

PLICITLY as evangelical - i.e., they are broadcasting to those with whom they would like to share the good news of Christ and to bring into the Christian church. The media is a tool to be used for a greater purpose. That is a clear focus and I will discuss it below.

But there is another argument increasingly put forward for the existence of Christian channels or stations: that of providing a targeted service for Christians. Here, the output is explicitly tailored for the Christian listener or viewer. For example, the station may play music that some Christians like but cannot hear on other channels. This is a different argument and, I think, a stronger one. After all, if sports fans can have their own station, why not Christians?

However, the main point to be proved here is whether there is the demand for it. Is there a large enough audience to maintain such a station?

The evidence is not encouraging. If we look at the United States' experience, Christian stations proliferate - but they have tiny audiences. This can be attributed, not only to the fact that some stations have low-power transmitters which are only able to cover a very small area, but also to a lack of general appeal in their output.

The other recent example, this time in Britain, is Premier Christian Radio in London. This started out for explicitly evangelical purposes, but now seeks to serve the local community and in particular the Christian community. However, despite the innovation, talent and hard work of those involved at the station, its audience figures remain very poor.³

The trouble is that the two purposes - (a) evangelism and (b) serving Christians - are often routinely conflated, with the evangelistic purposes of a station or channel usually to the fore when it comes to fund-raising and support. But a channel or station which attempts to cater for both audiences cannot survive - all experienced broadcasters know that it is impossible to serve two such distinct audiences.

There is also a question mark against the idea of *using* media as a tool for some further purpose. I remember interviewing the Christian writer Nigel Forde many years ago for a news report for Trans World Radio about his play writing, and carelessly asked him how he hoped to use his plays. He replied that he didn't want to 'use' his plays at all. A play, he said, is not a guided missile to be fired at the audience. Rather, his intention was to write material which would be of a quality in it-

self to engage and entertain. Of course, if it also caused the audience to think about certain issues, then even better, but the play wasn't there to force a particular thought into people's heads. I want to suggest that Nigel Forde's approach is an example of what I will go on to call 'pre-evangelism'.

'Pre-evangelism'

Radio is a very intimate, personal medium. As such, it can have a very powerful effect on those who listen. At its best, it is an open-ended conversation which shows respect for all participants.

Jolyon Mitchell, in his recent interesting book about the relationship between radio and preaching, *Visually Speaking*, makes this point quoting Rabbi Lionel Blue, the well-known religious broadcaster. Blue believes that he is involved in a *dialogue* with his audience and that the "time of telling people what their problem should be and what their answers are ... has gone."⁴

In fact, telling people things - preaching at them - works very poorly on radio because it often fails to show respect for the listener. When this happens, the listener switches off - if not physically, then at least mentally. Recent audience research commissioned by the BBC suggests that many people want religious programmes to be a 'toolkit' that provides them with resources for life. They are not looking for a set of directions or rules.⁵

I would argue that what can be done, rather than a sort of 'telling' that misunderstands the nature of the medium, is what can be called 'pre-evangelism'. This is a preparing of the soil, a sowing of the seed, that the harvest may come later. This is biblical - it is also practical, being aware of the limitations and the strengths of the medium. Television and radio, at their best, can stimulate the mind; quicken the heart; and prick the conscience. They cannot replace all the functions of the church.

One other important point that has a bearing on this is the fact that the audience positively wants to listen or to watch (I heard a commercial radio Managing Director re-iterate this at a broadcasting conference this year) and will only switch off if we do something to lose their interest.

Furthermore, there is an extremely large potential audience for religious programmes on radio and television. Recent research concludes that 80% of people in Britain are interested in faith and spirituality. In fact more than 70% still believe in God (whether as a personal entity or as a 'spirit/life-force').⁶ Consequently, religious programmes

should not be considered 'marginal' in any sense, but part of mainstream life and experience.

Given all of this background, concerning both the media and the audience, we need to think of what might be the most effective ways of working in the media.

Mainstream audience and Stewardship

The different models of Christian service in broadcasting all have their own strengths and weaknesses. The main strength of people working within existing mainstream stations is that they have access to a large audience. Independent programme producers can also reach this audience and, since they can supply a number and variety of stations, it can be an extremely large and varied audience. However, a weakness, particularly concerning Independent Local Radio (ILR) is that station ownership and/or policy can change without much warning. Also, because independent producers work in 'silent partnership' with those stations, augmenting the stations' own output, their contribution is less visible. By comparison, Christian broadcasting stations often have a high profile within the Christian community, but they have a very small audience and restricted appeal.

Taking these things into consideration, I want to argue that getting involved in mainstream broadcasting is by far the most effective model of involvement in Christian broadcasting.

The first thing to re-iterate is that there already is an audience - and a large one - available on mainstream stations. So, for a commercial radio station, the remit is to make a programme which fits their schedules, fits the 'feel' of the station, and does nothing to lose listeners. These are not unacceptable constraints - they are the constraints any broadcaster, Christian or otherwise, works under. The audience for established stations is still also extremely loyal despite the growing number of stations.⁷ This underlines the wisdom of being on the stations to which people already listen.

Through the programmes we make, our role is to show people the message of God, that he is making us all his 'friends' - as the Good News Bible translation I headed this paper with puts it. To do this we must get alongside the audience. This means getting inside their heads and starting where they already are - and not where we would like them to be. We need to know what people's interests are - what entertains and amuses them, challenges and inspires them. Often we only need to ask these questions honestly of ourselves to find the answers. This is how to make pro-

grammes which people will listen to.

Robert McLeish, ex-head of BBC management training and now an independent media training consultant, agrees that we must get 'alongside' the audience:

" [being alongside] is surely what 'dwelling among us' means - communicating in ways which are personally or at least culturally relevant. God's messengers have always brought the news of his love for us in terms which underline and sustain our significance and our security; and broadcasting should do the same."⁸

There is also a question of stewardship. Professional broadcasters get paid by the broadcast organisations they work for, or the churches fund them. Christian stations, such as Premier and UCB, and independent producers such as HCJB-UK and GRF, all rely on funding from Trusts and other backers, churches, and individual Christians.

Making programmes for others to broadcast is extremely cost-effective, and it is encouraging to hear that there are embryonic Christian production teams setting up across Britain. On the other hand, radio stations themselves cost a large amount of money to run. According to the latest figures available in the 2000 *UK Christian Handbook*, Premier Radio has an annual turnover of £1,600,000. UCB's annual turnover for the same period is listed as £3,000,000. GRF's annual turnover is tiny by comparison - £18,000.⁹

Even the short-term Restricted Service Licence stations (RSLs), which many budding broadcasters are usefully cutting their teeth on, cost tens of thousands of pounds just to transmit for a few weeks. And, of course, radio is small fry in the financial stakes compared to television. I have been impressed by Premier Christian Radio's efforts in recent years to integrate, to try to build an audience in London and to provide a service for their community. I wish them success - apart from any other consideration, it would be a disaster for the profile of Christian broadcasting in Britain if they failed. However, the history of Premier should surely give us pause for thought - certainly concerning stewardship of resources - before we think about setting up any *new* Christian stations. Our response to these hard facts of life requires a lot of consideration, but we must surely use the gifts and the time that God gives us to best advantage.

Conclusion

One of my concerns is that certain Christian broadcasters have gained so little feel for their chosen medium and understanding of how it works. As I have said, knowing your audience and making programmes which allow you to get alongside the listener and viewer are key. It is worrying when the literature produced by some Christian broadcasting organisations hardly ever mentions programmes or listeners at all.

These are not new issues in religious broadcasting, but they have become more important since public service broadcasting (and religion's place within that) is coming under severe scrutiny as new technology leads to a proliferation of channels.

It is clear, though, that the large audiences will remain with established channels for a long time yet. Tim Dean of the BBC's World Service points out,

"In the United States they have had an 'open and free broadcasting culture' with a multiplicity of broadcasting stations and channels, but the great majority of viewers still watch the three major networks. And in this country public service broadcasting is going to take a vast majority of the audience for decades to come, whatever else is broadcast on cable or satellite."¹⁰

Despite all this, there will still be calls to 'separate out' from the mainstream. I hope that I have demonstrated why I think that such a move would be wrong.

REFERENCES

¹ This paper deals mainly with radio and Christian broadcasting because these are what I know best. I do believe the wider points I make are true of both radio and television, and of broadcasting in general.

² Many religious producers for local radio are funded partly or fully by churches, often by the Church of England.

³ The most recent quarterly summary (June 2000) published by RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research Limited, established in 1992 to operate a single audience measurement system for the radio industry - BBC, UK-licensed and other commercial stations) states that Premier Christian Radio has only a 1% share of listening audience. A large commercial station will have a considerably higher share, for example, Clyde 1 FM has an audience share of 21.5%.

⁴ Jolyon P. Mitchell, *Visually Speaking: Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1999, p.121.

⁵ 'Vague Faith' focus groups, 1999.

⁶ *UKCH Religious Trends 2000/2001 No.2*, Peter Brierley (Ed.), Harper Collins, London, 1999, p. 5.9.

⁷ RAJAR believes that 'there is little evidence that an increase in the number of stations available for listeners to choose from has led to increased [station] promiscuity.' In July 2000, results of a joint research by the Radio Authority and the Broadcasting Standards Council have suggested more 'promiscuity', but still a marginal amount.

⁸ R McLeish, 'Public Broadcasting - Servant or Leader?' *The Word on the Box*, D Porter (ed.), Paternoster, Carlisle 1997, p.22.

⁹ *UK Christian Handbook: Millennium Edition 2000/2001*, Peter Brierley and Heather Wraight (Eds.), Harper Collins, London, 1999.

¹⁰ Tim Dean, 'Religious Broadcasting - For the Nation or the Ghetto?' in *The Word on the Box*, op cit, p.99.

For Further Reading

Robert McLeish, *Radio Production*, (4th edition) Focal Press, Oxford 1999

David Porter (ed.), *The Word on the Box*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1997.

Jolyon P. Mitchell, *Visually Speaking: Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999.

(Although this book is mainly aimed at those with an interest in preaching, it contains some good case studies concerning religious broadcasting and some suggestions for a theology of media.)

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