

# Why use the Media?

## A paper by Rev Karl Faase

### **The Need**

The statistics from the Australian census has shown that the Christian church is losing membership and is in danger of 'slipping off the landscape'. As well, recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS) results indicate that while in some areas the church is growing, in others it is stagnant and aging.

The church has lost numbers, influence and presence.

### **Influence**

Along with the drop in numbers comes a reduction in influence. Where the church was once at the centre of the community's life, it is now relegated to the edges. The present publicity over sexual abuse within the church only helps to deepen the community's suspicion of the church, it's leaders and it's message.

All this means that the church's voice is being heard less and less and the response to its message is becoming more and more cynical. Rather than being viewed as a key community institution, it is becoming a relic of a past age.

### **Presence**

Does this lack of influence matter? There are those that would argue that the church's proper place in the community is on the margins and that is where it ministers best.

It can be asserted that opportunity to minister is being diminished by our reduced presence. The less the community know of the Christian message, the harder the task of sharing Jesus. We live in a community where the McDonald's golden arches are more prominent than the cross. We need to seriously consider taking some radical steps to increase our presence.

### **How many are we influencing?**

The problem with much of the efforts used to respond to this issue is that the church largely talks to itself. The National Church Life survey of 1996 revealed that in a typical week about 1.8 million people or 10% of the population attend a Catholic, Anglican or Protestant church in Australia. Of those attending about 50% are Catholics. While many Australians say they are affiliated with a Christian denomination that does not mean that they are in church. Of the 3.9 million who indicate that they are Anglicans only 5% are in church on any given Sunday.

Churches who strive to be involved in evangelism often have large numbers attending, but who comes? It is mostly Christians. That is not to say that evangelism is not happening, or that people are not responding to the Christian message, but the numbers are small in relation to the community and the need.

## **How does the church put Jesus on the map?**

The problem is that Jesus is seen to be irrelevant to much of Australian society. He is rarely considered. This is ironic because we are living in a time of enormous spiritual hunger. Spirituality is in. People are searching, but sadly Jesus is not considered as an option and church is also seen as irrelevant, taking a distant place behind the icons of the New Age, crystals and eastern mystical faiths.

This situation will not change if we wait for the local church to make the changes. We know that generally the church is trying hard to be heard, but the vast number of people are not listening and the message of Jesus is not being heard.

The church at a corporate level needs to act. The problem is much bigger than any one denomination at either state or national level. The church needs a co-ordinated national response to reassert that the message of Jesus is relevant in the Australian context.

One of the most effective ways of making this statement is through a co-ordinated approach in the electronic and print media. The media in some form or another is in every Australian home. The electronic and print media has enormous influence. Free-to-air television reaches 98 percent of the population, and is in over 7 million homes covering all demographics and all income levels. Every Australian watches over three hours of free-to-air TV per day, which has remained steady for the last ten years despite new entertainment choices. Channel Nine News has a daily audience of 1.974 million viewers. The current top rating programs have remarkable community reach; *Room for Improvement* 1.97 million, *Millionaire* 1.8 million, *Location, Location* 1.8 million and *Getaway* 1.7 million.

An advertising campaign in the electronic media can reach many of these viewers. For instance, a four week campaign with a 60/40 percent spread between peak and off peak time slots over the capital cities of Australia, would result in 2-2.5 million people seeing the ad with 75 percent seeing it at least three times (ad shown 80 times in each city per week). If you calculate a response rate of 1-2 percent there would be over 20,000 people seeking more information.

The electronic media's reach and influence are unparalleled in our society. This last statement seems so obvious, it's self evident. So why is the church not using the media in a positive and organised fashion to put the name of Jesus into every home in Australia? Is it the cost? Is it unfamiliarity with the medium? Is it the fear of the unknown?

## **Why use the electronic media in sharing Jesus?**

Perhaps the key text of most evangelistic ministry has been the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus is sending out His disciples both then, and we believe now, to "make disciples of all nations". This is a clear command that the church's role in the world community is to bring the message of Jesus to all people. This command does not stipulate the method or medium but makes it clear that the church is to be committed to fulfilling this task.

The past 100 years has seen the explosion in communication through electronic means; radio, television and most recently the internet. In considering the revolution in electronic communication, it is important to ask the questions - does this type of communication still fulfil the great commission? Does sending an electronic message to millions of people en mass, constitute reasonable evangelistic endeavour? Television is in every home but can it carry the message of Jesus and influence people's lives?

The electronic media is awash with messages. We like to think of the sharing of Jesus as an intensely personal interaction between two people in relationship. The most effective communication occurs in this way and so does the most effective evangelism. Therefore is this mass dissemination of the Christian message just a waste of time?

## **Will the message just be wasted?**

Luke 8:1-15 records the Parable of the Sower. Here Jesus uses the picture of a farmer sowing his crop. Sowing in Jesus' day was an inexact science. The farmer would walk his fields, liberally spreading the seeds by hand. After the seed had been distributed the field would then be ploughed to bury the seed. Often the sower could not be sure of the quality of the soil while spreading the seed - that would only become evident at either the time of ploughing or more accurately at the time of harvest.

The point of the parable, as Jesus himself interprets it, is that we can't know the response to the seed of the gospel. The seed falls on all types of soil and responds differently over time. There is no reflection on the skill of the sower in the parable or the worth of sowing in areas where the crop fails. Jesus makes the point that there will be all sorts of responses to the message.

In sowing the Christian message in the electronic media there is a high degree of spread, limited control on the audience and due to the nature of the medium a short and contained message. Yet this does not reduce the importance of the sowing. The issue is that the seed of the gospel is spread to as many fields as possible without the value judgement of whether every seed will return healthy plant and yield.

The Australian church needs to take up the opportunity to sow the seeds of the gospel in the medium with the highest possible spread. The greatest influence will be as people find a personal relationship with the living God. The media can give us the opportunity to

have a positive presence to help bring about changed lives. The church needs to realise that simply hoping people will walk through the doors of a church unprompted is unrealistic. We need to give people the 'stimulus' to which they can 'respond' if they choose.

A wonderful story of how this stimulus works is told by Prof. James Haire the National President of the Uniting Church of Australia. After arriving at Brisbane airport James caught a taxi into the City. Once the driver had established that it was actually James that he had in his taxi he pulled the car to the side of the road and wanted to speak personally with him. Being Scottish James agreed as long as the meter was turned off. The driver, a middle-aged family man, wanted to share his experience. The taxi driver had recently heard James interviewed on radio. He wasn't sure what James had said but heard that he was from the Uniting Church and felt constrained to attend the next week.

The driver explained that he went to a Uniting church and sat on a bench while a guy spoke from behind a box. He didn't really understand what was said. At the end of the service the fellow seated next to him on the bench asked if he was new and began to speak with him. The fellow bench sitter explained that he had only joined the church himself just recently and that at first he didn't understand what was happening either. Following some more conversation the driver agreed to go to lunch with his newfound companion. Over lunch they continued to talk. That evening the taxi driver found faith in Christ. This is the story he had to share with James Haire, how a simple interview on radio began a process which ended in him finding faith.

### **'But an ad won't make someone a Christian'**

Christian ads will not contain all the aspects of the gospel message but an ad can be a presence in the community so that Australians will consider Christian faith as an option. This has become known generally as pre-evangelism. It is building a climate of awareness in which the message of the gospel will be more readily accepted.

Evangelism through the media functions in much the same way. While the messages will not cover all of the gospel message, the seed sown can be the precursor to a gospel presentation. The media allows the church the opportunity for a short message that will draw people to discover more.

### **Should we use such a medium for the gospel?**

The electronic media has, in places, a poor reputation. It is used by the materialistic secular community to pedal everything from body lotions to kids toys, from sex to luxury cars. Would the church just become another consumer of the media and advertising machine?

As the church grew and took up the great commission with passion and energy we see exemplified in Paul on his missionary journeys. In Acts 16 Paul sets out on his second missionary journey. What were the highways that he travelled in his endeavour to take

the gospel to the 'very ends of the earth' Paul, on many occasions, used the Roman roads. These were highways built by the Roman Empire, up to 80,000 kilometres through a vast area which now covers more than 30 modern nations. They were designed to facilitate the quick and efficient movement of Roman armies in response to any potential danger. The reason for these highways was to control nations and maintain the power of the Roman Empire. The Romans, a pagan nation, charged tolls for others to use their highways.

These highways helped merchants and traders build economic empires. These 'empires' included legitimate businesses as well as crooks and charlatans. Paul used these same highways to take the gospel to the cities of the Roman Empire. He used the military highways of a pagan nation to take the gospel to the world.

Roads were the first 'highways of information'. It took one and a half thousand years before the next development in the spreading of information. Throughout history, the ability to read and write had been confined mostly to elite groups of nobles, priests and scribes. But in the 15th century a literate middle class arose in Europe. Its hunger for knowledge led inventors to seek a way to mass-produce the written word. When German goldsmith Johann Gutenberg succeeded in creating his masterpiece, a run of 200 gorgeously typeset Bibles, in 1455, he created an information highway, ie the printed word, that is used to this day.

Each page of his Bible probably took a worker a day to set, but once the type was in place, the rest was relatively easy. Gutenberg's methods spread with stunning rapidity. By 1500, an estimated half a million printed books were in circulation: religious works, Greek and Roman classics, scientific texts, Columbus's report from the New World. An acceleration of the Renaissance was only the first by-product of the Gutenberg press. Without it, the Protestant movement might have been stillborn, as well as the industrial and political revolutions of the succeeding centuries. Gutenberg was actually motivated by the Christian message and used the printing press to get the Bible into the hands of ordinary people.

While the printed word is still important we need to grasp that the Roman roads of today are the electronic highways of the media and cyberspace. While the printing press had the dissemination of the Scriptures as its initial motivation the electronic highways of today are capable of wide utilization to disseminate the Christian message. These electronic highways are, like the Roman roads of old, designed for both the military and business. They are used for all sorts of ungodly and secular activities. Yet they are the highways to the mind and heart of the vast majority of the world's population. For the church to choose not to use these highways of today would be as absurd as Paul choosing to use dusty potholed and disused goat tracks long abandoned by everyone else, because he couldn't agree with those who built the Roman roads or how some used them. In the same way that Paul used the Roman roads, and the church in the middle and ensuing ages used Gutenberg's printing press, in today's world we need to grasp the opportunity of the electronic media.

## **How can the church get the message of the gospel though in the media environment?**

The media is a difficult environment in which to share the gospel message. But the problem of sharing the gospel in pagan situations is not new for the church. Paul experienced the same issues in the first century.

Paul, as the godly committed and intelligent sower that he was, gives us a great example of how to sow the gospel to a pagan secular society. Paul found himself in Athens, waiting for Timothy and Silas. As he walked through the city, he saw hundreds of idols. Paul's response was not the interest of the tourist but the heart of a missionary - 'he was greatly distressed' (Acts 17:16).

After talking with the locals he was invited to speak at the Areopagus, the intellectual marketplace of Athens. So how does Paul respond to this opportunity? When Paul gets to sow the seed of the gospel into the heart of the Athenian marketplace his approach is very instructive.

Paul does not start with criticism but with connection. He reflects that they 'are very religious' (17:22). He takes one of their objects of worship, 'an altar with the inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD' (17:23) and says that what was unknown 'I am going to proclaim to you'. After Paul begins with connection, he builds on the relationship by using their own philosophical foundations to draw them to the gospel. Paul quotes their own poets and thinkers (17:28).

After building these bridges with those at the Areopagus, Paul moves to speaking about God as revealed in Jesus, without mentioning Jesus' name. He finishes by warning of coming judgement and proclaiming that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Paul does not attack his listeners but sows the seed of the gospel in such a way that while some rejected Paul out of hand, others said 'we want to hear you again on this subject'(17:32) and a few eventually came to faith in Christ (v34).

Paul's method is instructive for us. We can use the media to connect with people so that they take further steps. Those who express interest can be given carefully prepared material. Finally seekers can be referred to individual churches and Christians who put a personal and individual face to the message.

## **'By all possible means I might save some'**

Paul's use of the Roman roads and his message in the Areopagus reflects his attitude to the Great Commission. He was committed to do all he could to reach the known world for Christ. This was both an outward and inward journey for Paul.

When he writes to the church he planted in Corinth later in his ministry, he reflects on some of his inward journey. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul has a discussion about his rights.

'Paul is dealing with those who wanted to assert their rights to the detriment of others' (Morris, Tyndale). Paul's response is that while as an apostle he could have used his position to assert his own rights he has chosen not to.

His motivation was that 'he would be all things to all men' (v22) so that as many as possible would hear and respond to the gospel. This was not about compromising personal ethics but 'where no principle was at stake he was prepared to go to extreme lengths to meet people' (Morris - Tyndale).

Paul includes in the discussion the phrase 'so that by all possible means I might save some' (v23). Paul's attitude was both internally reflected in his personal ethic and externally reflected in the lengths to which he would go, to share the message of Jesus.

Surely the church in every age must reflect Paul's attitude of 'all possible means' in sharing the gospel. A thoughtful reflection of the world we live in and the attitude of 'all possible means' leads to the conclusion that the church cannot ignore the media in sharing the gospel.

The electronic media is the primary medium of information sharing in today's world. It has the ability to take messages directly to people in their own homes giving the opportunity to hear the seed of the gospel.

The seeds of the electronic media message will fall in many hard places, often be discarded and be just another image in an endless stream. The message will by necessity be short and not give enough information for saving faith. But there will be thousands of times when the seeds, empowered by the work of the spirit, will fall on fertile soil and begin the process which will lead to new life in Christ.

As the church faces the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a heart committed to the great commission with the same passion as Paul and the apostles, it needs to use every opportunity to bring the message of Jesus to our community. In doing so we cannot afford to ignore, avoid or abuse the opportunity that the electronic media gives us.

## **So what is the church to do?**

There are several answers to this question and the church must decide at what level it will choose to respond to the call to the media. These are some of the options:

1. **Stay as we are.** The networks give some free air time and production time to Christian Television (CTA), Anglican Media, Catholic Television and others. Each ministry area that contributes to the programs is committed to doing an excellent job with their available resources. The result is a variety of programs which unfortunately tend to be broadcast in low rating time slots. The church can decide that it will continue to make the most of these opportunities. The result will be more of the same and a fragmenting of the Christian presence in the media. Outside the denominational media ministries or CTA, those in the media at

present are mostly self serving. They are in most situations, promoting their own ministries as well as showcasing a Christian message.

2. **A high profile program.** The churches could fund and resource a high profile and regular program on one of the networks. This could build an audience and give a positive face for the Christian community. Stories of personal change could be aired, church leaders could share the positive direction for the church, and Christian communicators given the opportunity to share the gospel message in a variety of ways. However getting this type of program on free-to-air networks will not be easy. Discussions were held with Channel Seven on just this possibility in the most recent past. The station management had difficulty in seeing the benefit to them in this approach.
3. **An ad campaign.** The church could fund and resource an ongoing ad campaign to get a positive and continual message in the electronic media. This could be either a short or long term campaign. The Christian Media Project has recently released a Prospectus in which a campaign is outlined with specific aims and parameters. The Prospectus has been reviewed by church leaders around the country, receiving a generally positive response.

The decision of the think-tank and sponsoring organisations is to pursue the last option.

## **Role of the Christian Media Project**

The role of the Christian Media Project is to be an agitator, catalyst and leading edge to build involvement in the media for the church. The Christian Media Project is by no means a permanent fixture on the church scene but a short term project designed to draw the wider church into an ongoing media presence.

### **Agitator**

Without some focused effort the church as a whole will probably take option one (above) by default. It will take positive agitation to see the changes take place within the church. The Christian Media Project does not want to be critical of the church but be an agitator for change.

### **Catalyst**

The Christian Media Project sees itself as the catalyst for change. There does not need to be a short term project but long term change in the church's attitude to using the media. This change needs an agitator to build some dissatisfaction at the current situation but also a catalyst to help bring in the change. A catalyst does not make the change but creates the environment where change occurs.

## **Leading Edge**

Alongside of agitating and being a catalyst there needs to be some action taken to draw the wider church into media ministry. Many organisations need to see something in action before they can grasp the concept. The Christian Media Project intends to be a leading edge for the church to get itself involved in media ministry. The Project is hoping to set up a media campaign so that the gospel message is shared and lives would be changed.

## **In conclusion**

The media and especially the electronic media is the most powerful force of influence in our community. The Christian church is really not using this medium effectively. The media is the highway of information into the homes of our community, it is the marketplace of ideas, it is the best place to sow the seeds of the gospel and start a sea change in our community. The Christian Media Project, while striving be the servant of and partner with the church, is committed to seeing the church take the media seriously and has set a course to bring about change.

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