

A STUDY OF SPECIFIC MARKETING STRATEGIES IN
RELIGIOUS RADIO BROADCASTING

--a concise historical review of radio ministry with special emphasis on "The Lutheran Hour," "Insight For Living," and "Message From The Master."

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Starting in the predawn hours of each Sunday morning, the largest religious gathering in America takes place, drawing almost 130 million people to their radio and television sets. What happens is both exciting and miraculous. It involves a new approach to a problem as old as the Bible: how to introduce struggling, helpless, individuals to a loving God, who wants them to meet Him and be born again." (Armstrong, p.7)

Electronic media--specifically radio--sounds like a perfect solution to an old problem from the above quotation. But is radio the perfect solution? Can radio ministry replace the local congregation? The obvious answer to the questions is an emphatic "No." What role, if any, does a radio ministry play in the work of the local church or synod? If the statistics regarding religious broadcasts are at all accurate, it would seem imperative for a church or synod to implement a religious broadcasting program. If a church body is serious about the Great Commission it would seem imperative to implement an airwave evangelism program. It is extremely easy to get all excited about radio ministry without taking a careful objective look at the historical development of radio ministry in America. Based upon the historical development of radio ministry and the practical considerations of broadcasting this paper will focus on the specific marketing strategies of radio broadcasting with special emphasis given to "The Lutheran Hour," "Insight For Living," and "Message From The Master."

In many ways religious radio broadcasting can be described as "the beauty and the beast." The beauty of the electronic church is that it is able to reach untold thousands of people with the Gospel message. The "Gospel in the airwaves" can reach into the homes and cars of many people who resist conventional means of Gospel outreach. This ministry can consistently serve those who are unable to attend church services due to infirmities or work schedules. Another aspect of religious broadcasting is the positive image it can foster for the local church as well as the synod at large. But there is a beast to religious broadcasting! First and foremost religious broadcasting costs m-o-n-e-y. Airwave outreach can be severely limited in terms of quality primetime airtime. A distinctive confessional message can be susceptible to manipulation by the station managers. Religious broadcasting demands constant creativity as well as constant confessional integrity. Religious broadcasting is usually understaffed and overworked. Finally, religious broadcasting can be susceptible to ecumenicalism. We, the confessional Lutheran Christians of today, are left embracing a beauty that is part beast. We have a "medium" that allows us to carry out our Lord's Great Commission, but it is a medium that is restricted and costly.

The first religious broadcast in America produced such a beauty and the beast scenario. On Sunday morning, January 2, 1921, the first radio station in America, KDKA of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania attempted a "live" broadcast from Pittsburgh Calvary Episcopal

Church. Two Westinghouse engineers, one Jewish and the other Catholic, were dressed in choir robes to handle the technical aspects of the production, which involved three microphones. The Reverend Jan Van Etten felt that this entire religious radio broadcast production symbolized "the universality of radio religion:" (Barnouw, p.71) An ecumenical hue colored the words of Van Etten which would later be intensified with the founding of the National Religious Broadcasters Association. Indeed the beauty of spreading the Gospel via the airwaves was a blessing, but the doctrinal integrity was already jeopardized. The ecumenical spirit that affected most of the eastern United States also began to affect the use of this new medium.

The sheer novelty of radio attracted untold thousands of listeners in the first half of the roaring 20's, but by 1927 so much radio programming was being aired without government regulations that radio reception was becoming a near impossibility. In 1927 the government established the FRC (Federal Radio Commission, later to be known as the FCC). Approximately 60 religious channels were scrabbling for airtime across the country before the founding of the FRC. After the FRC set up technical standards, licensing, and assigned frequencies at assigned times of the day or night, the number of religious channels was reduced to twelve. This reduction was a direct result of the cost of broadcasting determined by the government. Although there were ill effects as a result of the reduction in the number of religious broadcasts, there was the positive aspect of clearer audio transmission. The spectrum of radio was considered by the government to be a public domain. The government was only a regulator in the early development of radio.

Many churches consolidated their efforts in the field of religious radio broadcasting and began to broadcast religious programming on a national level. Some notable efforts include: The Bible Study Hour, Haven of Rest, Back to God Hour, and Back to the Bible. Each of these religious programs were distinguished by the personality of the "radio preacher." This preacher either represented a particular denomination or was supported by several denominations. Gradually, the radio preacher became self-supporting through the generous gifts and contributions from the listening audience. Most of the early syndicated religious programs could be heard on the prime channels at the prime times. Production costs were substantial, but the radio preacher was supported by a congregation or denomination as well as listener-generated revenue. Stations regarded religious programming as sustaining time or public service announcements, although there was always a broadcasting fee. It was not unusual for a station to issue a regular weekday half-hour time slot in the early evening as a public service announcement for religious broadcasting. A key development occurred in the early history of religious broadcasting. Charles Fuller began his broadcasting career in March of 1933 on KGER in Long Beach, CA. The religious program offered music as well as an emotion-packed

sermon/talk. He set up a non-profit organization known as the Gospel Broadcasting Association and within four years(1937) the full hour broadcast, known as the Old Fashioned Revival Hour, became a national program. Eighty-eight stations carried the primetime radio broadcast at a cost of \$4,500 dollars a week. Fuller had to bring the financial needs of the broadcast ministry to the attention of his listening audience in order to maintain national "Gospel outreach." The ministry drew devoted support as well as direct criticism from three different groups. The first group to complain about Fuller's radio ministry was the national advertisers, who could not compete with Fuller for the prime time slot. In 1943, the GBA spent 1.5 million dollars and was the Mutual(CBS) radio network's biggest customer. (Armstrong, p.44) The second group to criticize Fuller was the Federal Council of Churches which only used "free public service time" on the networks to broadcast its distinctly liberal ecumenism. The major networks like NBC and ABC enjoyed this arrangement because it allowed them to sell to stable advertisers rather than the "begging preachers" who could not always be counted on to pay their bills on time. The networks also liked this arrangement because they could effectively regulate the type of religious broadcasts aired and avoid some of the itinerant socialistic preachers whose message was deemed too controversial. The Federal Council of Churches was opposed to "paid prime time religious broadcasts" because they could not compete with Fuller. The third group to criticize Fuller was the increasingly vocal band of atheists and secular humanists who opposed religious broadcasting of any kind--especially prime time popular religious broadcasting.

Because of this opposition from three distinctly different groups Mutual Broadcasting began to change its policies regarding religious broadcasting. In 1943, Fuller was told by Mutual that in September of 1944 all religious broadcasting would be limited to a half hour time slot on Sunday mornings. After World War II, ABC radio picked up Fuller's broadcast and aired it for an hour on Sunday mornings. This arrangement only lasted five years and Fuller again sought out the independent stations to air his broadcasts. The influx of revenue from advertisers at the end of the war brought about the end of free public service prime time. Advertisers began to control station programming and the advertisers were not as interested in specific denominational religious broadcasting that only reached a small audience as they were in programs that appealed to a wide audience. The FCC granted licenses to commercial oriented stations instead of public service oriented stations. Many congressmen had substantial financial interest in the local radio stations. The success of the local station in terms of drawing the advertisers dollar was of vital interest to elected officials and oftentimes their decisions to grant station licenses were based on their own financial gains. (Ellens p.30ff) The formation of the NEA (National Evangelical Association) and the NRB (National Religious Broadcasters) did provide an influential lobbying force in Congress despite their ecumenical natures.

THE LUTHERAN HOUR

No denomination has been about the business of radio preaching longer than the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. (Ellens p.44) Dr. Walter A. Maier, the voice of The Lutheran Hour, first faced a radio microphone in 1922, when a station in Louisville, KY aired his convention address to the Walther League. This initial introduction to radio intrigued Dr. Maier and eventually led him into the development of a radio preaching ministry. In 1924, with the aid of the Walther League, Dr. Maier and a young engineer set up the first religious radio station in the attic of Concordia Seminary. The FCC assigned the call letters, KFVO, which Maier translated into, "Keep Forward Upward Onward." (Armstrong, p.37) After four years of biweekly broadcasting on the local level, Maier began to talk about a national radio program. Maier first approached NBC about an arrangement, but the network would only allow a short sustaining time segment (any broadcast time not scheduled for commercial broadcasting). NBC was already donating time to three major faiths and was not interested in a single denominational broadcast. CBS was then approached and although the network was setting up a policy for only interdenominational broadcasts, it allowed for one more paid religious broadcast. The Lutheran Hour, which first aired from Cleveland, OH on October 30, 1930 proved to be an instant success and quite a boost for CBS.

The format of the original broadcast was quite simple. Maier preached and the Cleveland Bach Chorus sang opening and closing music. The entire broadcast was done "live." After three highly successful and popular years of broadcasting, CBS terminated the program and it was then picked up by NBC and the Mutual Radio Network, a collection of independent stations throughout the country. Now the broadcast originated from the revamped studio on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Maier did not want the Lutheran Hour to keep parishioners away from church so he insisted on a Sunday afternoon broadcast and a weekday evening broadcast. This demand made it difficult to keep network stations like CBS, who were in the process of limiting religious broadcasts to Sunday mornings, but the popularity of the program made it a lucrative option for other independent stations and networks.

What were the qualities of The Lutheran Hour that made it so successful in terms of popularity and in terms of confessional integrity? First and foremost, it was Maier's faithfulness to the Word of God that gave the program its source of power. Many preachers of all denominations reported that they would hurry home Sunday afternoons so that they could tune in Maier and his distinctively biblical exposition. Maier spoke at a rapid pace in classic expository preaching style. Oftentimes he approached 130 to 170 words per minute. Bruce Beemer, the voice of the Lone Ranger, was called in to coach Maier on standard radio voice technique and etiquette, but much to the Lone Ranger's dismay, Maier would automatically adopt his powerfully captivating pulpit style that people everywhere admired. The program never made a radio plea for financing. Maier and his predecessor, Oswald

Hoffmann, maintained that the program promoted the message of Jesus Christ as clearly presented in the Scriptures and not the welfare of the church. The Lutheran Hour draws its financial support from the Lutheran Laymen's League, local congregations, businesses run by LCMS members and a vast supply of unsolicited listener generated revenue. As the popularity of the The Lutheran Hour grew and Walter A. Maier became a household name, this great Christian leader maintained his conviction that, "Jesus must increase and I must decrease." (Sueflow p.149) For many years Maier continued to teach Old Testament classes as well as prepare for his biweekly sermon broadcasts. A fond story regarding the vigorous schedule of Walter A. Maier recalls that the preeminent Hebrew scholar would work long hours in his office or classroom and once in a while when fatigue would strike, Maier would slouch back in his chair with his head arched back and with pencils in both hands at his side. As soon as he fell into a relaxing sleep the pencils would fall from his hands and the clattering noise would wake him from his cat nap and once again he would go back to work. (Fredrich)

Today The Lutheran Hour is heard in 125 countries and in forty different languages. It maintains a high level of confessional integrity although the listening audience has decreased somewhat. The program is on sound financial footing with an annual budget of 3 million dollars none of which is a budgetary item of the synod. (Ellens p. 46) The format has changed very little over the years, Hoffmann, who succeeded Maier, was once a student of Maier's and has done an admirable job of maintaining the high level of confessional integrity as well as classic Lutheran expository preaching, although he is not as popular as WAM was in his hey day. The Lutheran Hour came into existence at a most opportune time; broadcasting costs were reasonable in the beginning, the program had a popular preacher for many years, and the program was faithfully supported by the LCMS organizations as well as individual members of the LCMS. God has richly blessed the work of The Lutheran Hour for many years and we would hope that the program would maintain its confessional integrity despite the confessional erosion on the administrative as well as isolated parish level of the LCMS.

Insight For Living

This particular radio ministry is quite different from ^{the one} described above. The title of the program itself highlights the differences. Whereas The Lutheran Hour is a distinctly Lutheran broadcast, Insight For Living is a decidedly indistinct as far as denominational affiliation goes. The founder and voice of IFL is Charles Swindoll, senior pastor at ~~the~~ ~~the~~ First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, CA. Chuck was raised in Texas and "firmly established his commitment to Jesus Christ" during a stint in the U.S. Marine Corps. He became involved in the Navigators outreach program while in the service and later entered Dallas Theological Seminary in the fall of 1959. In 1971 he took a call to the church

in Fullerton and became immediately popular. In 1987 First

Evangelical Free Church boasts a Sunday attendance of 5,000 plus spread over two morning services and one evening service. In July of 1979, Chuck founded the Insight For Living radio ministry as a separate but integral part of his parish duties. Today Chuck is the president of IFL and his wife Cynthia is the executive vice president.

The program itself is heard on over 700 radio stations across the United States, 14 in Canada, and 23 foreign stations. In most instances, the program is part of a religious broadcasting station like WCVY 107.7 FM in Milwaukee. The program is aired twice a day Monday through Friday. The program airs at 8:30 am and the same program again at 9:00 pm. The format is rather simple. Their familiar brass ensemble plays a few bars of music and the announcer introduces the topic under consideration and then invites the listening audience to listen to "our teacher Chuck Swindoll. Chuck then delivers a 25 minute expository message that centers around a theme. Some messages are verse by verse exposition, other messages are personal stories with one or two verses being expounded. Near the end of his broadcast, Chuck usually manages to put together several applications or "insights for living." The announcer then recaps Chuck's message, informs the audience about a publication that IFL is offering for free to the listening audience, makes a financial plea (this varies at least one per week, but oftentimes no more than just one per week) and finally the announcer re-introduces Chuck. The voice of IFL usually closes with a brief, but moving prayer--oftentimes this prayer includes a plea for a personal commitment to the Lord on the part of the listener.

For the most part Chuck's textual exposition is fresh and accurate. There are some glaring theological positions that will offend the confessional Lutheran listener, millennialism, decision theology, baptism by immersion only, and the Lord's Supper a memorial service only. Despite these errors (and they are a danger to the "untrained" Lutheran) his style of preaching/teaching is edifying and is popular. With a staff of 150 people to assist in the production of Bible study guides, correspondences, broadcast productions, textual study etc. IFL is a well-oiled radio ministry machine. IFL's motto is: Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application. IFL does carry out this motto out although the glaring errors need to be sifted out. In his study of the book of Daniel, there was so much reference to the millennial dogma that the study was of little value to a Lutheran listener. The broadcast is done from the pulpit in the Fullerton church before a live audience consisting of a handful of staff members or the congregation on Sunday. There is an emphasis placed on the use of your personal Bible throughout the sermon/talk. Insight For Living is a well managed radio ministry. Although Chuck Swindoll is quite popular (and I assume well cared for financially) there is a deep sense of genuine humility on

the part of this Christian teacher. I would be shocked if a Bakker scandal ever developed in connection with Chuck Swindoll, yet there is a decided emphasis placed on "please send money."

This approach to radio ministry is different from The Lutheran Hour, but I believe that it is still blessed by God although it does promote several false teachings as it carries out the Great Commission.

Message From The Master

This is the best radio ministry outreach program put together by the WELS. This program is production under the supervision and support of the Milwaukee Federation of WELS churches. Like The Lutheran Hour, MFTM also features choral music and classic Lutheran preaching. Unlike TLH, MFTM has a rather recent beginning, being first aired in 1976. This recent beginning has created an entirely different marketing approach than TLH.

Message from The Master and its companion program, Music For The Master are broadcasted on WEZW 10⁴ FM in Milwaukee. The program is aired at 7:15 am on Sunday mornings and lasts 45 minutes. MFTM does not pay a large broadcasting fee since the station graciously offers the 45 minutes of air time as public service time. The message and the music is taped in a studio now owned by the Federation and located at Wisconsin Lutheran College. The tape is then sent to the station and broadcasted. Six pastors take turns preaching on assigned texts. Sometimes the sermons are on a topic, other times the sermons follow a given pericope. The messages are tailored for a radio listening audience. The sermons are geared toward the Lutheran who might be listening more than the unbeliever who may have tuned in. But there seems to be careful consideration given to the choice of terminology that may be unfamiliar to the unbeliever. "Church" words are either avoided or else explained well.

The broadcast begins with the Music For The Master. This is a 15 minute program of Lutheran chorale music from our various colleges, prep schools and choral groups. The narrator is Profesor John Jeske and he introduces each piece and also reads the lessons for that Sunday of the church year. Pastor Ken Kraatz follows the music portion of the broadcast with an introduction to the topic or theme of the preacher for that Sunday. Often times Pastor Kraatz opens with a few leading questions that help the audience prepare for the particular message. The preacher then preaches for about 20 minutes. The six pastors who preach for the program are each gifted preachers whose styles differ yet whose basic message of sin and grace is consistently the same. This feature of MFTM is a rather distinctive trademark of the program and offers the listener a variety of preachers as well as the same confessional integrity. The only drawback to this arrangement is that it is difficult for the listener to become attached or drawn to the program through the personality of a given preacher.

This drawback mentioned above is a hurdle that MFTM faces. It must be understood that MFTM has a yearly budget of 40,000 dollars that is funded by the Federation as well as the listener generated revenue. A small budget like this can not support any one preacher or staff person so all of the production is handled on a volunteer basis. Each preacher has a full time call as well as radio preaching assignments. A great amount of dedication and self sacrifice is evident on the part of everyone connected with this production. It was noted above that Chuck Swindoll was a pastor of a large congregation as well as a full time radio preacher/teacher, but he has the benefit of a large staff(150 employed workers). It was also noted that Walter Maier was a seminary professor as well as a regular radio preacher, but he possessed what one might call a rare indefatigable spirit.

MFTM is also made available to individual congregations and other federations for a nominal production cost. At least six other areas of WELS churches have banded together and broadcast MFTM locally. These federations are able to dub the names of their own churches and times of service into the broadcast to give local color as well as serve as an evangelism tool in the community. Publicity for MFTM is usually in the form of a periodic bulletin inserts and occasional newspaper ad. In the area of publicity, it seems that MFTM could use considerable improvement. As the synod ventures further and further into the arena of the Mass Media Ministry, there will undoubtedly be improvements made in the promotion of Message From The Master. Some feel that the time slot in which MFTM airs promotes a "ghetto listener audience"--the tried and true WELS member--rather than an unbelieving or wavering audience. It also must be pointed out that MFTM does serve the many shut-ins of our synod who do not have access to their own church service broadcast on Sunday morning. In the respected opinion of the late Dr. John Meier this was the only legitimate use of religious radio broadcasting. It has been said that whenever he was asked to give a radio sermon he always addressed his listeners as "Dear Shut-ins." (Fredrich)

Personal Impressions and Conclusion

It has been said that "television[radio as well] may be as decisively the successor to writing as oral speech was the predecessor of writing." (Bachman p.21) As a maturing adult it is hard for me to concede that television or radio will ever take the place of reading in my life, yet I am a bit remorse to admit that radio and television do compete rather evenly with my reading time already. If this is true of a pastor-to-be, I am quite certain that it is dreadfully true of most Americans. As a Christian, committed to bringing the Gospel message to the hearts of people, I see a dual and somewhat conflicting role that I must play in the Great Commission: promote the reading and memorizing of the written Word and use the media available (radio and television) to

bring the written Word to people. It may not seem like a conflict, but do recognize that there is a difference between liturgical reading and radio listening. As ministers of the Gospel, our calling is to preach and teach God's Word to those who have gathered together to hear that Word. George Will has observed that "a radio or television audience is not a congregation in either a sacramental or liturgical sense. There is something suspicious about a congregation that assembles by donations alone." (McNeil Lehrer)

Yet the vast potential audience of unbelievers, shut-ins, wavering believers made possible through the airwaves should be reached with the Gospel message. I can think of numerous occasions in my life when there was a message from God's Word that I needed and received via the airwaves. Our urban society is becoming more complex everyday and radio ministry, while it will never replace the local church, does minister to many of those complexities. But how can a congregation or group of congregations financially maintain and creatively and confessionally carry out a radio ministry? I do believe that Message From The Master is the best religious radio program a federation in our synod has produced, but I also believe that we need to develop the program even further by staffing this ministry with full time workers as well as increase the budget substantially. We need to explore the possibility of an individual pastor, who has demonstrated an ability to attract a radio listening audience to the truths of God's Word as proclaimed in the WELS, to be the voice of the WELS on a national level. We need to creatively use the local radio stations in an effort to promote the cause of the Gospel. For too many years churches and church leaders have used the radio as a way to generate income rather than to simply preach God's message. There are sermons and there are texts that are not suited to the commercial nature of radio because God's Word not only comforts the afflicted, it also afflicts the comfortable. Yet the listening audience needs to hear the whole counsel of God not just the portions that have been neatly trimmed and packaged. As I wrap up this rather sketchy paper on the vast topic of radio ministry a few guidelines for broadcasting come to mind, the guidelines listed are personal opinions based upon information gleaned from many sources.

1. Thorough training in God's Word and some experience in God's fields is an absolute necessity before starting a radio ministry.
2. A single congregation with at least two pastors in a suburban or urban location would be an ideal place to begin a rm.
3. A popular teaching/preaching style should be mastered and the use of Bibles during the message should be developed.
4. A strong lay ministry program should aid in the production of the program at every level.
5. Support and encouragment from the local ministerium as well as the synod should be fostered while retaining the local identity.

6. A sound financial base should be established within the budget of the congregation and without the use of radio appeals for money.

7. It should be limited to a single metropolitan area but be offered in tape form to other areas.

8. It should be in keeping with the sound confessional practices of the WELS and promote the synod regularly.

9. The format can vary from straightforward expository preaching to informal interviews with special guests.

10. It should involve someone who possesses both a keen mind and a humble heart.

11. It should communicate the truths of God's Word and faithfully apply that truth to the everyday lives of the listener.

12. It should not avoid the passages in Scripture that afflict the comfortable or that require confessional statements i.e. the pope is the anti-Christ.

13. It should air on a station that will allow quality airtime and if at all possible it should air twice a day (same program).

14. It should be promoted on the congregational level as well as the community level.

15. It should not in any way detract from the pastoral care of the local congregation.

16. It will require someone with a rare indefatigable spirit.

17. It will always remain part beauty and part beast no matter how much attention to details is ~~given~~.

*This paper did not include Christian commercials or advertisement spots or short programs as part of the topic under discussion, but only attempted to look at lengthier religious radio programs and evaluate them.

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