

Volume 12, Number 1, September 2015

## Extension

# Religion-specific television: does it have any value?

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'Television is the most powerful communication ever devised by man.' (Television evangelist Billy Graham)

When Graham said this we were in a pre-internet era and we might want to suggest that the internet 'is the most powerful communication ever devised'.

Religion-specific TV is in a crisis — simply because so few people watch it. In 2010, ITV cut religious output to just 1 hour per year, while there is no religion-specific broadcasting at all on Channel Five or Freeview. The BBC, meanwhile, is obliged to show 110 hours per year as part of its licence to broadcast.

In February 2010, the General Synod, which is the national assembly of the Church of England, expressed 'deep concern' at the reduction in religion-specific broadcasting. The TV channels responded by saying that audiences were falling because people were no longer interested in such programmes. The Rt Rev. Nigel McCulloch, then Bishop of Manchester, commented that: '... the level of financial pressure is radically affecting the channels' willingness to commission and broadcast religious programmes' (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 2010).

This was 5 years ago and it is difficult to argue that things are now any better. However, we should not be surprised by this. Many churches, even in towns, have regular congregations of less than 30. Cathedrals are reporting that generally more people attend weekday services than those held on a Sunday. Sunday has become a recreational family day and often one where people who work Monday to Saturday manage to do their weekly shopping. The only churches in the United Kingdom with growing congregations are gospel and apostolic ones.

If people do not want to go to church it would seem unlikely that they would watch religious programmes on television.

As to the few religious programmes that are watched, such as *Songs of Praise*, it would be interesting to see the demographics by age. Probably, it is the older generation who watch these: some because they particularly enjoy them and others because they are too infirm to go to a church.

In the UK most religious stations transmit via satellite. Some are streamed live on the internet or broadcast on Freeview. In 2009 Ofcom reported that religious broadcasting on the public service channels was watched on average for 2.3 hours per year per viewer. This figure has decreased significantly over the past 10 years.

There are dedicated religious channels including: Daystar, GOD TV, God's Learning Channel, Inspiration, Revelation TV and TBN. However, most of these are American-made and adopt an evangelical approach.

Most of the US channels raise funds from direct on-air appeal. This was illegal in the UK until the Broadcasting Act of 1990. Some US-based channels now also accept advertising.

While it is true that there are larger audiences for *The Big Questions* on Sunday mornings, it is difficult to describe this as religious broadcasting as many of the audience and panellists are avowed atheists. It raises challenging moral and ethical questions that seem to interest present-day viewers more than preaching and worship.

ITV cannot continue to produce religious programming in the way it used to. It relies on advertising for finance and advertisers are unlikely to pay for adverts that almost no-one will see. They know that the main take-up on advertising is during soaps and sports events.

It appears that there is a greater following for religious broadcasting on the radio. As well as the BBC there are four main stations:

- God TV
- Premier Radio
- Revelation TV
- United Christian Broadcasters

Some of these broadcast on both television and radio.

Several UK-based radio stations are based in a particular area:

- Branch FM
- Cross Rhythms

Some other religious stations only operate at certain times of year such as Christmas and Easter using a restricted service licence (RSL).

Another issue is that in television, marginalised scheduling means that many people are not even awake when programmes are shown. An example of this was a showing of a new full-length film of the Gospel of John over 3 days at Easter 2015, but it was shown at 8.30 am.

It would seem that any attempt to restore religious broadcasting will be a major challenge for the Church.