
The Media Center: Getting Ready for Prime Time?

by Bonnie Dwyer

When William Fagal and George Vandeman started broadcasting the Adventist message via television in the 1950s, the new medium seemed to offer dynamic possibilities for spreading the gospel. In the 1980s, the picture is not as rosy. Ever since the Bakkers, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts grabbed national headlines with their sordid affairs and bizarre behavior, televangelism registers negatively with a majority of the American public. A recent national study by Frank Magid Associates found that 63.2 percent of those surveyed had unfavorable feelings about religious television programs. And as Andrew M. Greeley wrote in *TV Guide*, "there has been almost no effort (on the part of the media) to present the other side of the story; there have been very few news segments about the honest, dedicated, hardworking preachers who have been tainted with guilt by association."

Dedicated Adventist preacher Dan Matthews, director/host of "Christian Lifestyle Magazine," claims the Bakker and Swaggart scandals did not hurt the income of his television program, which is mainly supported by Adventist church members, but the negative effect on potential viewers presents a real problem.

Discussion of potential viewers, target audiences, public awareness, and media challenges at the General Conference was heightened by the

Magid survey mentioned above. It was done for the church by the research firm used by the American Broadcasting Corporation and the Mormon church, in conjunction with the Media Center Commission, which was charged with the task of investigating the church's media ministry.

In its February 1988 report, the commission said Magid had found

only a relatively small portion of people in this country have even basic knowledge of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Of the seven different religious denominations listed in the survey, Seventh-day Adventism is the only one about which the majority say they know nothing. . . .

The current [Adventist] media efforts do reach some people, statistically estimated in the millions, but the impact is far too limited to make a significant dent in the population of North America. "It Is Written," "Voice of Prophecy," and "Christian Lifestyle Magazine" have measurable levels of awareness in the population, but even these programs are unknown to 90 percent.

Separate research of Adventist members and leaders found that even people within the church do not view or listen to the programs very often and do not evaluate them very favorably.

If media ministry is to play a major role in the church's outreach, a new overall approach is required. The research pointed to several areas of considerable promise, both for focusing the current programs more effectively and developing new media initiatives.

That might be considered the bad news presented to the General Conference's Media Center Commission. But given the general public's perception of religious television programming, perhaps it wasn't bad news to be unknown after all. Maybe now is the time for the church to move from relative obscurity in the media to a place of

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prominence. Perhaps Adventists can be at the forefront in helping to change the public's perception of religious television.

Magid Study Provides New Role for General Conference

Certainly, the Magid study is an important first step in establishing new directions for Adventist media ministry. It is a significant piece of work because it marks the first time that the General Conference has done such in-depth audience research. And with the data the church has developed a rational basis for decision-making, as well as specifying target audiences that it wants to reach. How the denomination will implement the goals that have evolved through this process is still open to question, however.

There were four steps in the work done by Magid: an evaluation of the current programming produced at the Adventist Media Center, a written questionnaire that was circulated among church members and leaders, a national telephone survey, and a media plan that identifies goals for the Adventist Media Center. The numbers generated in the 1987 survey will serve as the baseline for future studies.

Magid's director of marketing, Joe George, took three months at the outset to do a subjective analysis of the media center and its programs. At that point his assessment showed some duplication among the programs, and that present programs were attracting mostly an older audience. But there was more to know before any recommendations could be discussed. In the three months of analysis, George had become well enough acquainted with the Adventist system to be able to draft a questionnaire for church members and leaders about the media ministry.

A tremendous effort was made to reach lay people as well as paid officials for the in-church study, George says. The interest level of church members was high, according to the survey results. "We considered the 50 percent response rate excellent, particularly since it was a compli-

cated questionnaire which required an hour or more to fill out," George said.

One major finding was that the church wants media to do outreach to young adults. More than 90 percent of the members gave that as a priority. Outreach to persons over 50 received only 51.3 percent response.

Random digit dialing was used in the national telephone survey, with careful attention paid to statistically balancing the response regionally as well as in terms of age, race, and gender. Data from the national survey broke down the audience for the current programs along age and gender lines, showed the perceptions people had of religious programming in general, what they knew about various denominations, and where they sought information to improve their lifestyle.

Response to the programs presently produced at the media center bore out the initial impressions of the Magid organization. For the most part, the

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shows score highest among people over 50. "Christian Lifestyle Magazine" had the best rating of any of the Adventist programs with people under the age of 35.

General Conference President Neal Wilson personally reviewed the long written questionnaire. His interest in the media center led him to accept the chairmanship of the center's board early in 1988. He told George that the media are key to the future of the denomination.

For the employees at the media center in Thousand Oaks, the Magid study and the commission created a high level of anxiety. When the commission was created in 1986, the various components were asked to prepare papers on their operations. With a flurry, the papers were written, considered, and seemingly put aside while the Magid people did their work. Tension built as the work of the commission dragged on, simply because of the unknowns that it represented. But in the end, the components became closer. "I have talked more

to H. M. S. Richards, Jr. and George Vandeman in the past two years than in the previous six," says Dan Matthews. Now the programs are looking at ways in which to cooperate. Richards and Vandeman have both appeared on "Christian Lifestyle Magazine." And all the programs are making announcements for one another to help in audience building.

In February 1988, the commission reported to the center's board of trustees. It recommended that the church create programs for young adults and do a campaign of spot advertisements to increase general awareness of the church. It also made some suggestions for streamlining the work at the center through reorganization.

To the people at the center, the reorganization seemed like the most important result of the commission's work. It is the story that has been featured in the Adventist press. Consolidation of the Bible schools, treasuries, and mailroom have been mentioned. Particular emphasis has been given to the fact that contributions given to a particular ministry will go to that ministry and not into a gigantic melting pot. Program production will also remain separate. These distinctions are very important for fund-raising. People give to a specific ministry or to a particular person, not to the bricks and mortar known as the media center or the General Conference, says Robert Jacobs, media center president.

Funding and Programming

The Magid people were concerned that funding is coming mostly from church members. If the audience is to be used for fund-raising, the audience base will have to be broadened, George said. This issue will continue to be important as the plan sketched out by the media center commission is implemented. If people give to specific programs, which come first—the program or the money? How can funding be found for new programs or those that appeal to audiences without money?

"Adventists like to give money to harvest machines," says Matthews, [and to] "programs that result in baptisms. But to be able to harvest,

someone has to bust the sod and prepare the soil for the sowing of the seed."

Where will funding for the new directions called for in the media plan come from—the General Conference? In 1988 only three percent of the General Conference's \$151.5 million budget went to direct communication programs. That three percent, or \$5.25 million, covers the General Conference's contributions to the media center and its programs, Adventist World Radio, special projects, and the departmental budget for communications.

A look at the three largest production companies at the Adventist Media Center helps to put that \$5.25 million into perspective. In 1987, the gross income (which includes the General Conference appropriation, listener donations, gifts, trusts, et cetera) for the "Voice of Prophecy" was \$6,736,000. "It Is Written's" total income came to \$5,613,000, and "Faith For Today's" figured

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out to \$2,338,000. The media center as a whole posted almost a \$2 million gain, not quite equaling the \$2,345,000 base contribution of the General Conference to the media center.

Donations are down in 1988. As of July 31, the receipts were \$200,000 less than for 1987 during the same time period, but Dale Bidwell, the media center vice-president for finance, says he expects the final balance sheet for 1988 will show a gain, rather than a loss.

Looking to the future, the media center is requesting \$5,677,000 for 1989 from the General Conference. That includes \$1 million for development of spot advertisements and station time. The various center components have also made some special requests. "Faith for Today" has a potential for a matching grant of \$200,000 to produce a program showcasing Adventist values. "It Is Written" is seeking \$200,000 for major cable time. A five percent increase is being asked

for in the base General Conference appropriation.

According to the Magid survey of church membership, when asked what support should be received from the General Conference, 52.2 percent said limited support should go to certain programs; 26.1 percent said that the General Conference should give total support to certain programs; 10.1 percent felt that the General Conference should not support any programs.

Media Center President Robert Jacobs feels that the General Conference will assist with start-up capital for new programming. As an example of their willingness to help, he cites the contribution

that was made when “Faith For Today” created the “Christian Lifestyle Magazine” format. “The General Conference did give an appropriation for that,” he notes.

“Christian Lifestyle Magazine” Scores High in Its First Year

“Christian Lifestyle Magazine” is the success story of the Adventist Media Center, according to the Magid study. It is

The Case for Photojournalism

by Dennis Crews

A small staff of dedicated photo reporters would greatly enhance the work of the various departments in the General Conference. They could provide a current picture archive for the secretariat, pursue vivid photos and hard news for *Liberty*, continue (and even expand) the “Mission Spotlight” program with follow-up stories, document the Adventist Development and Relief Agency’s (ADRA) accomplishments, provide material for *Ingathering*, and document the work of the church for the secular media—the list could go on. The *Adventist Review* should have one photographer assigned to it full-time.

Photography is only a tool; its real value is derived from the use that is made of it. Pictures can be shallow and irrelevant, or they can be eloquent, powerful witnesses. Having a reliable source for quality editorial photography is critical to the communication process. But this tool has become a tool of universal choice for the mass media, and with good reason: Good pictures are much harder to ignore than good words.

We remember what we see for longer than what we read. Who can forget Eddie Adams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of the street execution of a Viet Cong soldier during the height of the Vietnam war? Or the heroic World War II image of U.S. infantrymen planting the American flag on Iwo Jima? Or the awesome sight of the whole earth, resplendent as a huge jewel, photographed from space? By such images our imaginations are fired, our indignation is kindled, our compassion is awakened. The opinions we hold and the convictions we cherish are profoundly influenced by the visual images our minds retain.

The Seventh-day Adventist church has thus far failed to realize the powerful potential waiting for its use in the

communication arts. The church finds itself struggling to communicate with the generation that stands at the threshold of leadership. The church will be unable to nurture or even attract the interest of this generation whose language it does not speak—unless it changes its approach and learns to use that new language.

People can scarcely be expected to feel deeply for something they have never really seen. Our church is a vital, fascinating family, but many of its young members only perceive it as a group of nondescript people who wear suits, attend lots of meetings, and sit around theologizing. Tragically, the many shining faces of the real church have never been shown them. There are many parts of our world church that members would be edified by seeing. What is it *really* like to be a Seventh-day Adventist behind the Iron Curtain? What is the condition of the church today in Central America, the Middle East, South Africa, and other regions torn by internecine strife? Exactly what are our relief efforts accomplishing in Ethiopia and other famine-stricken areas?

Although some of these subjects are sensitive, the confidence of church members would be bolstered immeasurably by their leaders’ willingness to permit a candid portrayal of these situations as they really are. Positive photojournalistic reports would enhance members’ esteem of their church, and the painful ones would, if wisely photographed and written, give members a meaningful subject for their concerns and prayers. I am convinced that whatever the cost, the ultimate benefits to the church from such ecclesiastical *glasnost* would be great.

Dennis Crews is editorial director of “Amazing Facts.” His photography and writing has appeared in several Adventist publications and in such other journals as *Country*, *Governing*, and *Regardie’s*.

the Adventist program that most appeals to the under-35 age group. It had only been on the air for about a year when the Magid survey was done, and its recognition rating was very close to that of the programs that have been on the air for many years. The program has gone through several phases since its creation, and with new music and graphics for 1988, settled into a happy balance of stories that are socially relevant and entertaining. The look and sound is pure “thirtysomething,” the popular “baby boomer” ensemble show on ABC. New technology is being tried also. The crew of the *Canvasback*, on its tour of the West Coast following a mercy mission in the Marshall Islands, was interviewed via satellite.

Producer Don Davenport says that limited production money can affect the possibility of doing some stories, but not to the point of having to compromise quality. If a story does not work, it can be dropped.

The staff research team has come up with some very unusual pieces for 1988, including stories on the Christian Surfing Association, the Christian Motorcycle Association, the gospel radio station in the Louisiana State Prison, and a soap opera

actress who not only played the part of an abused wife on the set, but at home also.

As 1988 draws to a close, the major accomplishment at the media center from the new media plan is the reorganization. New vice-presidents are on board for field services and production. But that is all background for the major suggestions in the plan—producing promotional spots to increase awareness of the church and more youth-oriented programming. It has not been determined, however, who will carry out these missions.

“It will probably take five years to see whether anything has been learned from the research that was done by Magid and the commission,” says Robert Nixon, until recently General Conference director of communication, and a moving force in the decision to begin utilizing major marketing research firms. Targeting a message to a specific audience is not the way things have been done at the media center in the past. Perhaps as the General Conference continues with audience research, the numbers will begin to sway financial and production decisions. Certainly, with the Magid study the data is there to make the tough decisions that are part of the media business.