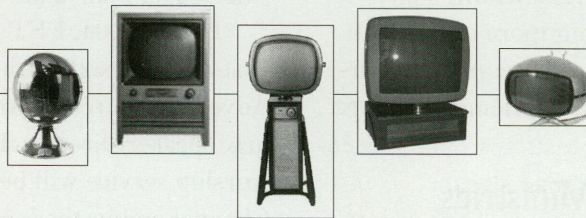


Discussed: formidable force, *Adventist Girl*, drama, news, West Point College of Evangelism, Hope Channel, conflicts, collaboration, donkeys and prophets



Adventist Television Today

By *Becky Wang Cheng*

Back in 1950, when William Fagal preached his first sermon in front of a television camera in New York City, he had no idea that he was pioneering the most widely used evangelistic method of the twenty-first century. Few could have predicted two decades ago that 3ABN, located in an obscure southern Illinois cornfield, would become the most powerful media force within Adventism, with millions of viewers.

Producing quality TV is a very expensive venture. The state of Adventist media today raises many issues and clear answers are few. Do we already have more media ministries than we need? Do studios and satellite channels foster creativity or competition? Let's begin our overview of Adventist television at the denomination's first official media center.

Adventist Media Center

Formed in the 1970s by the Church to provide consolidated services that would save money, the Adventist Media Center (AMC) was originally located in Thousand Oaks, California. In 1995, the original AMC campus was sold and the center moved to Simi Valley.

Because the new property's buildings

required extensive remodeling to convert them into studio space and to make them earthquakeproof, AMC incurred a financial loss over the move. After the move to Simi Valley, Marshall Chase was chosen to direct the AMC, which is operated by the North American Division.

Currently, the Adventist Media Center houses "Faith For Today," "Voice of Prophecy," "It Is Written," and "Breath of Life." Each ministry has its own staff, and they do not share personnel, although some employees have migrated from one ministry to the other for various reasons. In addition to the ministries, the center is also home to Adventist Media Productions (AMP), headed by Warren Judd.

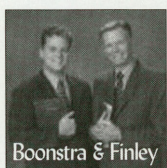
Adventist Media Production is the tech-



nical production resource for all Seventh-day Adventist Church ministries. As computer technology has evolved, making it easier to do video editing, the need for AMP services has changed. As a result, many of the ministries are also shooting more on location rather than in the studio. Furthermore, AMP is currently reevaluating its services and pricing structure.

Programs and Ministries

It Is Written



Boonstra & Finley

Succeeding George Vandeman in the late 1980s, Mark Finley, the former speaker of "It is Written" (IIW) is seen by many insiders to be the most formidable force in Adventist media. Shawn

Boonstra officially became the new speaker/director after Finley became global director of evangelism for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in January 2005.

A personable, energetic, baby-faced man who looks much younger than his thirty-five years, Boonstra resembles and sounds a bit like Sean Hannity of Fox News. Reared in the Christian Reformed faith, he attended an IIW Revelation Seminar while in college and he and his wife Jean became Adventists eleven years ago. Political science degree in hand, he was soon assistant pastor of the church in which he was baptized and then pastor of three small churches in northern British Columbia.

Boonstra eventually took some theological training at the Andrews Theological "Cemetery" (his term, spoken with a chuckle) to get up to speed with Adventist doctrine. Boonstra caught the attention of Henry Feyerabend, IIW Canada speaker, who asked him to become associate speaker. In 2001, he became the speaker, and in 2004 Finley tapped him to join him in the United States.

The mother of their two preschool daughters, Jean Boonstra has authored the *Adventist Girl* book series, which documents the history of the Millerite movement through the eyes of a young girl.

Faith For Today



Mike Tucker

Faith For Today (FFT) has produced the greatest variety of programming within the Church. Beginning with "Westbrook Hospital" in the 1960s, which

starred William Fagel as a hospital chaplain, it has utilized drama, talk show, and magazine formats. Its shows include "Christian Lifestyle Magazine," "Lifestyle Magazine," "McDougal MD," and "The Evidence."

In late 2004, FFT announced that Mike Tucker, pastor of the sixteen-hundred-member Seventh-day Adventist church in Arlington, Texas, would be its new speaker-director. His grace-based contemporary worship service will be broadcast on the Church's Hope Channel and in the local Dallas/Fort Worth area.

According to people who have met Mike Tucker, he seems to grasp the quality and spectrum of programming needed to reach a sophisticated, but unchurched audience. Tucker has an M.A. in counseling and is a bright, personable individual who "doesn't have an ego," says someone who has worked with him. His congregation has grown well in a relatively short period.

Despite the quality and appeal of the FFT shows, the ministry is struggling for lack of financial support. It has never attracted a broad base of supporters who want to see the pure evangelistic gospel preached.

The Voice of Prophecy



The Melashenkos

The oldest of Seventh-day Adventist media ministries, the Voice of Prophecy conducted several "Seventy-Five-Year Diamond Jubilee" celebrations throughout 2004. H. M. S. Richards senior started the "Voice of Prophecy" as a radio program, and its current

director, Lonnie Melashenko, is adding a television program called "Exploring the Word."


The new show debuted on the Hope Channel in 2004. After shooting the first twenty-six episodes, Melashenko is excited about "Exploring the Word," which is designed as a pastor's class for seekers/new believers. He believes this is a better, natural format for him, since he is more gifted as a teacher than as an evangelist.

Steven Mosley, a freelance author who has written for all Adventist Media Center ministries, creates scripts, directs, and produces "Exploring the Word." He describes one segment in the program as "Reality TV meets Bible Study group." It features lively interaction between four young adult Christians who struggle to relate their questions and life challenges to biblical principles.

The show is clearly geared to reach a younger audience. Mosley deliberately chose people who are attractive, witty, and dynamic. Although he admits that he had to

make adjustments so that 3ABN would carry the series, he was willing to do so. "In TV, there is no such thing as bad coverage; the more the better," says Mosley.

Breath of Life

 Charles Brooks, the powerhouse of Seventh-day Adventist preaching, was the first speaker of "Breath of Life." When Brooks retired, Walter Pearson became the speaker/director. "Breath of Life" is bicoastal. All of its data entry and mail are handled at the AMC, but it has its offices at the General Conference. "Breath of Life" does most of its recording on the road, since preaching in churches is its format, but it uses AMC personnel for its on-the-road taping.

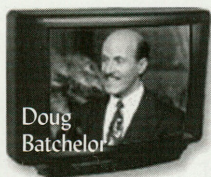
"Breath of Life" has been carefully watching its budget the last few years and is financially sound. It is beginning to buy additional airtime and expand its viewership. Judging from the responses that have come in, the program appeals to a wide variety of ethnic groups.

La Voz de la Esperanza

"La Voz de la Esperanza" began as a subsidiary of VOP and still has a working relationship with it, but it is currently a separate ministry. Frank Gonzalez is the third speaker/director, after founder Braulio Perez-Marcio and Milton Peverini, who now appears on some of the IIW Spanish programs. Jeff Wood, who just finished producing the first TV series for "La Voz," describes Gonzalez as an incredible person, honest and nonpolitical.

Because the Spanish Adventist church in the United States is growing faster than any other segment of the Church, "La Voz" is in the process of purchasing airtime and hopes to be on the air in the next few months for the first time after being on the radio for more than fifty years. "La Voz" records its radio show in the Adventist Media Production studios but its TV show, like "Breath of Life," is taped on the road in many parts of the world.

Amazing Facts



Doug Batchelor became speaker/director of "Amazing Facts" after the death of founder Joe Crews in 1994. His productions are a staple of 3ABN programming. Now

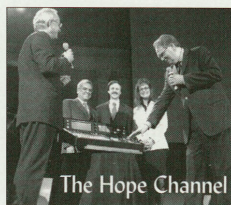
based in Rocklin, California, "Amazing Facts" is a \$10-million-a-year evangelistic group that oversees a Bible

college, a TV ministry and sales of books and videos.

Batchelor is also pastor of the Sacramento Central Seventh-day Adventist Church. Recently, he created a controversy within the Northern California Conference by suggesting that the Central Church building be sold and the congregation moved out of the city into the suburbs. At the end of 2004, the Northern California Conference voted eleven to seven to approve his plan to sell the current church building and use the proceeds to relocate the congregation. The new site will include buildings for his College of Evangelism. The conference stipulated that one million dollars be paid to the conference from the sale of the current site.

The Satellites and Channels

Adventist Television Network and Hope Channel



The Hope Channel was launched in 2003 under the aegis of the General Conference as part of the Adventist Television Network (ATN). Adventist Communication Network (ACN), which

developed the satellite links for Net 95, is the progenitor of the Adventist Television Network.

Brad Thorp, director of ATN and the Hope Channel, is trying to create programming that looks professional and cultured, and, most importantly, will attract non-Adventists. A former minister with no background in broadcasting or commercial TV, Thorp spent a considerable amount of time in his ministry as an evangelist, working fifteen years with secular cultures, nine of them in Europe. This experience has helped him recognize the importance and implications of satellite programming after the worldwide Net evangelistic series in 1995.

Before joining ATN as associate director in 2003, Gary Gibbs worked for Amazing Facts for thirteen years and started its College of Evangelism. He is excited about the challenge of making Christian programming appealing, and says non-Adventist Christians also share this concern.

According to Mark Dreistadt, chair of the National Religious Broadcasters Television Committee, "Christian television is very 'thin' because of its tendency toward nar-



rowly focused programming. Christian television often fails to engage the hearts and minds of mainstream viewers.”

Gibbs believes that we can responsibly portray the Seventh-day Adventist message in multiple ways and that there are “lots of creative producers out there with great ideas who need the money to finance their production.” At forty-three years of age, Gibbs is one of the older guys on his staff. He notes that four of the seven people working with him are under the age of thirty.

In April 2004, ATN sponsored a gathering of 175 people interested in Adventist broadcasting to discuss how to develop culturally relevant material and best utilize the new Hope Channel. ATN’s intended audience is spiritually sensitive seekers of any age.

The Hope Channel currently has five active channels: English and Spanish for North America, Spanish and Portuguese for South America, and an English international channel. Soon it will add a European channel using the Hotbird satellite, which has a potential to reach 110 million subscribers in Europe and the Middle East. The General Conference pays for basic expenses, such as salaries, office space, and satellite time, but finances are tight with new program development.

An unfortunate byproduct of this financial situation is the drastic reduction in the budget for the newscast. News is expensive, and the ATN committee would have liked it to continue, but it needed to spread funding devoted to a weekly program to develop other programs for 24/7 broadcasting. According to an informed source familiar with News Line, as this program is called, it received a tremendous response when shown in Asia, Africa, and Australia.

Liliana Henao, a gifted, young, Spanish-speaking woman, took a large pay cut to go to ATN to become its evening anchor for the half-hour news program. When the news was shortened to a fifteen-minute spot, she left and was immediately hired by Telemundo.

At ATN, Gibbs points out that almost the entire budget was going into the news programming, a segment that lasted only thirty minutes each week. “We just couldn’t justify the expenditure,” he states.

Hope Channel has 24/7 programming, although currently much of it is repetitious. Gibbs credits God’s leading for accomplishing so much so quickly. “What we’ve done in a year would take others much longer.” An Adventist Classics series, hosted by Connie Vandeman Jeffery, will feature the preaching of deceased greats, like George Vandeman, Charles Brooks, Joe Crews, and William Fagal.

Hope Channel offers its thirty-six-inch dish and

open digital receiver in the United States for about two hundred dollars. People who already own 3ABN’s dish can simply add the frequencies for the Adventist Television Network channels.

Three Angels Broadcasting Network



When Danny Shelton recounts the story of 3ABN’s miraculous beginning, he sounds as if it happened yesterday. “In 1984, when I was a carpenter and part-time gospel singer, I had a dream to build a TV station. Even though I didn’t have the money, I vowed never to borrow or beg for money, and I haven’t to this day,” he emphatically asserts.

In 1985, he stood up and told a group of Adventist media personnel: “The Lord has impressed me to build a TV station with a twenty-four-hour channel that will reach the world.” He says that the host made him look like a laughing stock by asking him several questions: Are you an engineer? Are you wealthy? What will it cost—five million? Do you have a prospectus?

To the last questions, he replied with his hint-of-a southern twang, “I guess I don’t, because if I had one I would know what it was.”

Danny recalls that the host, who was the only one who wasn’t supportive, went on to remind him that the Adventist financial pie is only so big. “Every time someone like you comes along, each slice gets smaller, because the funds are diverted.”

To which Shelton replied, “If you look in the refrigerator, I believe God has a lot more pies.”

3ABN may indeed have the last laugh because in the twenty years since Shelton’s dream, the network has amassed money, buildings, and state-of-the-art production equipment. “Our critics don’t think people will watch religious programming, but when I get a letter from a heroin addict who’s shooting up at 2 a.m. and then he hears John Carter say ‘you can turn to Jesus,’ and it changes his life, then I know better.”

Clearly, Shelton is still confident that the 3ABN ministry is succeeding beyond his wildest dreams, in spite of recent criticisms and his divorce from Linda Shelton. Walter Thompson, the original benefactor of “Lifestyle Magazine,” who only recently retired from a full-time medical practice, currently chairs the board at 3ABN.

“Contrary to what people might have expected after Linda’s abrupt leaving, God has blessed, and donations have actually increased since her departure. Linda has left a big hole, but this crisis gave us a chance to reeval-

uate and focus our vision," says Thompson.

Thompson remains strongly committed to health ministry and feels that "health is taking the program around the world." 3ABN has several health programs in conjunction with Lifestyle Centers of America in Oklahoma and Don McIntosh, a health educator, and it hopes to work with Loma Linda University School of Public Health to produce more in the future.

3ABN has intentionally expanded its international audience and now has a potential of a quarter billion viewers in India. It has also secured time on cable

Collaborators or Competitors?

Brad Thorp and Gary Gibbs of Hope Channel stress that they work with all the supporting ministries in a complementary fashion. Shelton contends that there is sometimes more friction than collaboration. "We shot a Doug Batchelor 2004 revival a few months ago and let Hope Channel show it. Then they turned around and told us that we would have to tape and delay Net 2004."

Gary Gibbs says that Hope Channel now has a protocol that gives 3ABN and others the opportunity

"The devil may say 'stop,' but the Lord Jesus says 'go.'"

—Danny Shelton

stations in Thailand and the Philippines. According to Thompson, a wealthy benefactor recently donated money for 3ABN to purchase a studio in France for broadcasting to the Muslim world.

Conflicts with 3ABN over Standards

3ABN has very conservative standards that reflect its donor base. As a result, it doesn't air some programming produced by the Adventist Media Center. Dress was an issue with the "Let's Talk" program, which features Jan Paulson, president of the General Conference, in a question-and-answer session with college students.

When told there was too much cleavage, Reger Smith Jr., associate director of communication for the General Conference, says he was baffled. "We had to review the tape carefully until we spotted one coed with a V-neck sweater, which is kind of the norm these days in that age group.

"Even the Net evangelistic series, which 3ABN has always carried, was censored in 2004. They deleted the music and only aired Walter Pearson's preaching because of 'drums and swaying,'" Smith continues.

Shelton says that some called him racist for doing that, but other viewers supported him, saying that it wasn't a cultural decision, but about upholding standards. "I like happy music, up-tempo music," he says, "but we don't want to make music a divisive issue."

Because of Faith for Today's nontraditional approach, repeated conflicts with 3ABN have arisen over the past fifteen years. In fact, 3ABN does not presently carry any of Faith for Today's four shows. Shelton insists that he's still willing to work with FFT, "If they produce something for our audience."

to have a live feed for the Net meetings and other broadcasts if they identify Hope Channel as the source. Brad Thorp is supportive of 3ABN and invited Danny to Hope Channel's advisory council.

Shelton's memories of having the 3ABN truck banned at the last General Conference session are still vivid. By his account, Neal Wilson and Jan Paulson intervened two days before the session started and 3ABN was allowed to proceed.

There appears to be an entirely different attitude this time around. According to Shelton, "3ABN has influential backers who fight for us...[T]he Devil may say 'stop,' but the Lord Jesus says 'go.'"

Walter Thompson sees Brad Thorp as a devout man who feels a genuine responsibility to meet the Church's media needs, but he feels that Hope Channel duplicates what 3ABN is already doing. "3ABN is already everywhere!" exclaims Thompson.

In contrast, Thompson believes that some competition could be good to stimulate improvement in both organizations. "3ABN is not the voice of the Church and should not be," he says.

When I asked Gibbs how much program duplication there is between Hope Channel and 3ABN, he replied that he hasn't done a side-by-side comparison, but believes that "ideally we would have unique, separate programs to appeal to different audiences."

Gibbs still believes there is more than enough room. "We could have several Adventist channels—we need saturation." What about the money required? "God owns the

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ADVENTIST TELEVISION TODAY

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cattle on a thousand hills. Our health work didn't have the money to buy Loma Linda, and look where we are now."

In addition to the international satellite channel and networks, there are regionally based channels and networks. Arkansas-based Safe TV is on the hospital channels of Adventist Health. Blue Mountain Television is a non-profit private station based at Walla Walla, Washington. Loma Linda Broadcasting Network was started initially just to broadcast the University SDA church service; it continues to develop and add more of its own programming.

The Future of SDA TV

Roger Smith Jr. thinks that the Adventist Church tends to take something that works well and formalizes it. "Eventually we get into a rut and don't realize that God is working in dynamic ways that are different from what worked thirty years ago. We take a model like the Net series, and we keep pushing it over and over until it stops being effective, not realizing that God wants to do something new for the current generation."

Smith cites as an example the Adventist Global Communication Network. With all the downlinks for the Net series, it was the largest business satellite broadcaster in the world. Now home satellite dishes have made it obsolete in less than a decade.

Writer Steven Mosley does not believe that our religious programs have enough appeal for commercial TV, for the secular person. "We can't have better drama than ABC or better news than CNN. If we try to compete, we'll just end up making a more mediocre version. But faith-based TV shows can do something that no one else can—create intense, spiritual stories that portray God in a very vivid way in people's lives. Look at how some shows can make deer hunting look compelling. Surely we can show people what a difference having God in your life makes."

When asked about the current state of Adventist TV, writer Jeff Wood focuses on the intended audience. "There are two distinct sides to the issue: do we reach non-SDAs, or is our goal to nurture only SDA members?"

He is currently enthused about several projects he's working on. Along with his brother, writer Jim Wood, he is completing a script for the *Seventh Day*, a series of five documentaries that traces the history of the Sabbath. Hal Holbrook is the narrator and Pat Arrabito of LLT Productions is the producer. Shot on location in several countries, this series will eventual-

ly be translated into eleven languages. In addition, Jeff Wood and Don Davenport are currently writing another script for the Hallmark Channel.

Conclusions

1. We Need News

The Church needs to lead out in communications 24/7 rather than just once a year in a Net series. News is an extremely crucial bond to keep this rapidly growing denomination together. More than 90 percent of our membership is outside North America and cannot afford subscriptions to the *Adventist Review* and does not have computer access to *Adventist Newslines*.

The slashing of the news budget should be reconsidered. Yes, news is old after a few days and cannot be recycled over and over like preaching, but it informs the members and draws us into what's happening around the world. Seeing is believing, and perhaps donations for missions would increase if the needs are clearly seen.

2. We Need a Variety of Approaches

There is room for traditional preaching, culturally diverse worship styles (high and low, organ and drums), talk shows, kids' shows, health classes, Bible study formats, drama, reality shows, and something innovative yet to be discovered.

Although older Adventists have depended on 3ABN to bring them worship services and encouragement with old-time gospel music, their grandchildren are leaving the Church while spending hours in front of computer, movie, and TV screens. The gutsy cutting-edge young writers and thinkers are out there. Let's find them and pay them.

If we speak with one voice, it can become monotonous. Liberal, conservative, boomers, and busters, we need each other to find our center, our common ground; otherwise it's too easy to be pulled off track. Dissension helps keep us accountable. The Lord speaks in silence and storm, through donkeys and prophets, children, women, and men.

Cooperation of the best and brightest could create a mighty fourth angel that would unify a global denomination to spread the gospel more effectively and rapidly.

Becky Wang Cheng is associate editor of the *British Medical Journal*, USA, and in solo medical practice in St. Helena, California. She was a cohort of "Lifestyle Magazine" in the 1990s, and coanchored ADRA's "World," a 1999 video report to the world church.