



Christian television in Australia – does it have a future?

In 1980, Sam Chisholm, the general manager of Channel Nine in Sydney, rang Wesley Mission and asked if they would consider switching their new Sunday morning television program from TEN to the Nine Network.

The program was 'Turn 'Round Australia' (TRA) hosted by Gordon Moyes, the Mission's superintendent.

TRA and its successor, 'Rise and Shine' have aired on the Nine Network ever since.

But the days of station management inviting Christian producers to move programs to their network are long gone. The broadcasting agreements between denominations and stations, put in place when television first came to Australia, are also becoming a dim memory.

In 1954 the superintendent of the Central Methodist Mission, the Rev. Dr Sir Alan Walker, represented the Christian Churches at a Royal Commission into television. During the commission Alan Walker established the importance of the commercial networks supporting religious programming with facilities and broadcast opportunities. Out of this came Section 103 of the Broadcasting Act which stipulated that television stations had to broadcast a certain number of hours of religious programs per week. (This varied but was typically an hour.)

For almost fifty years, Section 103 (and its successors) meant that the Christian Church had access to station production facilities and airtime on commercial television stations free of charge. The quality and type of programs varied greatly. Epilogues by members of the clergy in the early days of television were always live and have provided fodder for comedians ever since.

Some denominations established their own television divisions. Others joined together to form state-based Christian Television Associations (CTAs) to raise funds and provide programs for capital city and some regional stations.

When television stations started networking in the late 80s, with programs emanating from Sydney, state based CTAs found it harder to access airtime locally and hence attract funding from denominational coffers.

In response, the Christian Television Associations of NSW and Queensland formed Christian Television Australia in the mid 90s and for the next 10 years provided weekly programs for the now national, Seven, Nine and Ten networks. All the other state-based Christian Television Associations have closed their doors.

The regulations governing religious broadcasting were relaxed in the late 90s with stations able to follow the 'spirit' of the previous legislation, rather than the 'letter'. This gradually led to less and less airtime being made available to churches to the point where Wesley's 'Rise and Shine' is now the only Australian produced weekly program on a free-to-air commercial network.

Why aren't there more Christian programs on the increasing number of digital channels?

Part of the problem is funding. In the heyday of Christian Television Australia, it received funding from major denominations in Queensland and NSW. The relaxation of the rules governing religious broadcasting coincided with a downturn in denominational funding.

Christian Television Australia has now moved from being a production agency to being a broker for independent producers who supply programming for seasonal slots negotiated with the networks by CTA.

Just over 12 months ago, the board of CTA met with two senior television executives – both of whom are responsible for major networks. Both meetings were part of ‘scanning the environment’ to try and answer the question, ‘what is the future of television and therefore, CTA’? The answers weren’t clear-cut, with both executives acknowledging that the television landscape has changed dramatically.

When Sam Chisholm made the phone call to Wesley Mission, it was understood that he probably did so because his proprietor, Kerry Packer told him to. No longer are our commercial television networks owned by ‘benevolent dictators’. They are increasingly owned by bankers who are out to extract every last dollar from advertisers while spending as little as possible on programming. Christian programming it seems, no longer fits this model, despite 68 percent of our population identifying with a Christian denomination. (2001 census data)

CTA’s view is that innovative and well produced programs will always capture the eyes of commercial programmers. Creating ‘compelling content that people want to share’ is the mantra of new media. Whilst funding will always be a key ingredient, we believe that good ideas well executed, will always attract support.

So where is the future?

The two television executives did identify the convergence of media, including ipTV as one clear indicator of where the future lay. YouTube viewers watch two billion videos a day. Television and the Internet now cross over with most broadcasters offering their programs on-line so viewers can ‘catch-up’.

Denominational funding for Christian television is a thing of the past. Anglican Media disbanded their television unit last year. The exception is the Australian Christian Churches denomination to which Hillsong belongs. Their ‘Hillsong TV’ program is seen around the world and on free-to-air in Australia, although this is through a commercial arrangement with a network.

Television, whether delivered by traditional technology, the Internet or something yet to be built (like the NBN) is here to stay. It is a powerful and effective communications tool for the Gospel. The US has a proliferation of Christian networks with hundreds of churches running television ministries that would rival an Australian network.

The Australian Christian Channel, available on the three main Pay TV networks actively supports Australian content.

CTA is seeking to forge a direction for Australia which may encompass ipTV together with content created for free-to-air. We want to do this on a collaborative basis, leveraging the CTA brand with the networks to continue to supply quality Christian programming. At the same time we're looking to build an Australian, ip based streaming network with quality Christian content in association with other interested parties.

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www.christiantelevision.org.au