

The Cable Church: Using Public Access to Reach Your Community

Ministries Today, July/August 1991

Earl Creps, Ph.D.

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
in Pentecostal Leadership

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
Springfield, Missouri

ecreps@agseminary.edu

www.agts.edu

Abstract: Sometimes the right answer is right in front of your face--in your television screen. Media ministry is usually thought of as an extremely expensive undertaking reserved only for megachurches. The truth is that most communities routinely make public access cable TV available to non-profit organizations. This can be a powerful outreach tool for churches large and small. You just have to use it.

Sometimes the best ideas are the most obvious. For many months I had thought and prayed about how my church might do a better job of reaching our community with the gospel. With 75,000 people within 15 miles of our church of about 100, there were certainly enough customers. But how to get to them?

It never occurred to me that the video camera at the rear of our auditorium might hold an answer. Several years ago, a family in our church suggested we use their video camera to tape our services so that those who regularly missed them--our childcare workers, for example--could view them later. This operation gradually developed into an informal videotape lending library that was helpful not only to those who missed our services, but also to unbelievers who might otherwise never set foot in a church building.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus walked miles with Jesus and never knew it was He. Each week I preached to my people--and to a live video camera--and never realized that I was staring right into one of God's answers to the desire of my heart.

Like many towns in northern New England and other rural areas, ours is so far from a television transmitter that good TV reception is possible only by a cable hookup. But that fact, it turns out, is actually a blessing. The Lord showed us that a combination of

our videotapes and the local cable company's public access channel could bring our message into thousands of homes in the region at a low cost.

Cable operators frequently include a public access channel for community organizations in their basic package of network and satellite programming. A call to the programming director of our cable company revealed that our VHS cassettes were compatible with the broadcast equipment used for their public-access channel.

I explained that we wanted to air our Sunday morning services and asked about time slots and rates. After some negotiation, we arrived at a 90-minute slot at 7 p.m. on Thursdays, with a repeat at 1 a.m. on Saturdays--for \$30 per week! At those rates, we had before us an open door!

In less than two weeks, our worship services, special music and my Sunday morning messages were being broadcast twice a week in 10,500 homes. All of this was possible with no changes in our services, minimal alterations to our facility and at a very reasonable cost.

- *Unlimited potential*

The potential of local public-access programming is by no means limited to rural communities. In 1988, some 9,000 cable TV systems in the United States offered an average of 32 channels for a monthly fee typically less than \$15. Today, cable TV is available to more than 80 percent of American households, with about 53 percent already subscribing and 10,000 new homes being wired *every day*. And experts seem to be unanimous in predicting continued growth for the cable market.

Subscribers now devote as much time to cable programs as to traditional networks. This newfound diversity of programming led *USA Today*, in its issue of August 9, 1989, to conclude: "When cable was invented in the 1940s, it was just a way to get television to remote areas. Today its varied programming is an important part of millions of lives."

One legitimate question may be: With so many channels out there, is anyone likely to see our program on public access? According to the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, viewership surveys from around the nation indicate that 25 percent to 45 percent of cable viewers watch public access at least once a week. Our own experience has shown that the large number of available channels actually *enhances* the potential for viewership of our program.

The reason is that small device sitting on the coffee table or lost in the couch: *the remote control*. Today's viewers are more likely to change channels between and during programs than ever before. Remote control gives them an easy way of sampling what is on the other stations without leaving their seat. Many who view our program found us this way--they were simply flipping through the channels when they saw a group of

people singing or a man preaching. Curious, they started watching. These "coincidences" seem to happen almost weekly!

Perhaps a locally produced program would be an effective way to bring the message of the gospel and the ministry of your congregation to the attention of your community. The beauty of this outreach is that it is ideally suited to the smaller congregation seeking to raise its public profile. The smaller the church, the easier and cheaper it is to make the technical arrangements necessary to air a program. As a church grows, so will its need for more complex equipment and production values.

- *Simple guidelines*

Let me suggest the following simple guidelines:

1. *Don't be deterred by problems in prominent TV ministries.* Scandals have plagued major TV ministries for two reasons: first, because of the power of the media to raise large amounts of money; and second, because media can produce personalities too large to be accountable to anyone. Working through a local cable channel avoids both of these pitfalls.

The cost, if any, of broadcasting on public access can be so low that no fund raising is necessary. Our church does none. In fact, some cities *require their* cable franchises to carry public-access programming free of charge, as well as to provide training, technical assistance and even equipment and studio space.

The accountability issue may be one of the best reasons for doing media ministry on the local level. As an arm of the local church, your TV program's format and budget would be as accountable to the pastor, board and membership as any other church activity. This sort of day-to-day oversight, as well as the fact that the audience is limited to the subscribers of the cable system, keeps ambitious personalities from "running away with the show." Clearly, the temptations inherent in national-level programming are greatly diluted in the local market.

2. *Let your format flow from your vision, not the other way around.* Perhaps I should have added a third reason why nationally known TV ministries have been plagued by scandal: In several cases, the TV format began to dictate their vision, superseding the original vision given by the Lord. Thus the programs became locked into a cycle: "We need money so we can have a program, so we can raise money, so we can have a program, so we can raise money..." Get the idea? The tail began to wag the dog.

So why even take the risk? After all, aren't there many Christian TV shows on the air already? Yes, but *yours* may still be needed. A Gallup Poll revealed that in 1987, 25 percent of the American public watched religious programming each week. Following the Bakker and Swaggart scandals, however, viewership declined by about 30 percent! Thus, a huge pool of people have been turned off, burned out or never reached by

national programming - people who can be won over by television that is closer to home.

Although nationally syndicated programs are a valuable asset to the body of Christ on a large scale, they cannot (by definition) flow from the heart of God for a specific area. These ministries cannot know which time slots, formats or follow-up methods are best suited to the conditions among the people of *your town*. With all their ability *to reach*, it still takes a local congregation to *touch*.

Our church's vision is to be a house of prayer, a community for disciple-making and a place of healing. We realize, however, that many people who need God's healing love are reluctant to come to a church: Already feeling guilty, they often fear they will only be further condemned by the preacher and congregation. Others have had a bad experience, or even no experience, with a church and they are uncertain about what they are getting themselves into if they visit a service.

Our desire is to reach out to the lost and hurting *where* they are and *as* they are. Without a doubt, they are in front of their TV sets. For this reason, we schedule our program during prime time on a weeknight and again late-night on the weekend.

These time slots capitalize on maximum viewing hours, as well as take advantage of the shift-work nature of our community. Our late-night show comes on during the hours when workers at the local shipyard (8,000 employees) are coming home and unwinding from second shift on Friday night. Surprisingly, we have gotten more response from our 1 a.m. viewers than from our prime-time audience!

Our particular time slots also make clear that our TV ministry is an outreach from our church, not a substitute for our church. The needs of shut-ins are handled more efficiently by videocassette than by an entire cable program. Our goal is to take our ministry into every living room in the county, not to give Christians a reason to stay home.

Because we are located in a down-to-earth, industrial area of coastal Maine, we believe it's best not to produce a slick, high-tech "show," but simply to tape and air Sunday morning worship services as they are. We want our community to see us *as we are*: laughing, crying, singing, raising our hands, speaking in tongues, hugging-and most of all, lifting up the King of kings. This "raw" approach allows our viewers to feel they are having an authentic experience with our congregation, rather than just watching a show about us.

Formats, of course, are almost infinite in their variety. Broadcasting a worship service is perhaps the easiest type to produce. But other churches are experimenting with the production of concerts, talk shows, interviews, phone-in programs, and the list is growing. The important thing is that the format issue from the vision God has given *you* for reaching *your area*.

3. *Be prepared to make some changes --but not many.* At the first mention of television, your church may get a trifle nervous owing to some of the troubles mentioned earlier. In my case, after obtaining the support of our church board, I addressed these concerns from the pulpit.

First, I stressed that a cable telecast would require only a very small expenditure of funds. (Basic video equipment can be purchased for less than \$1,000. If buying equipment is a barrier, perhaps someone in the church who owns a video camera would loan it to you for taping in exchange for the church paying to have the camera serviced regularly.) Building modifications involved only the hanging of a blue curtain behind the platform to provide a more telegenic background and the adjustment of a few overhead spotlights for better lighting.

I also assured the congregation that there would be very few changes in the way we did things - and that we certainly weren't going to do anything so radical that we would fall into the errors exposed by the media scandals. After all, people who are on television fall, not because of TV, but because they are people.

One person asked me if I would be getting a makeup man for the show. I assured him no one was going to get this preacher into cosmetics! A more significant question was whether our people would be willing to worship openly and come to the altar if they knew they would be on TV. We found that after a few weeks, the church got used to the idea of the video camera, and today no one even thinks about its presence. It's simply another piece of furniture in our sanctuary.

4. *Talk it over with your local cable operator.* You will find that many public-access cable channels are underused and that programming directors are anxious to attract new shows to fill their time slots and to generate revenues--if they are not required to provide them free.

The programming director and other franchise personnel will be able to give you invaluable technical assistance with format, equipment, lighting, sound and camera locations. They may even be willing to review your program periodically and give you pointers on how to improve.

Your cable operator has the equipment to produce music, credits, graphics, etc., for your broadcast. During the closing credits of our show, for example, we list our church service times and invite viewers to call with questions or needs.

Once you are on the air, you can cross-advertise by running print ads for your show in the local TV directory. You can also add "call forwarding" to your church's phone line so that those who phone in during your show can have their calls routed to the homes of trained follow-up workers.

Past experience in broadcasting taught me that it takes months--perhaps years--of repetition to build an audience for a local mass-media program of any kind. Thank God

that He is bigger than our experience and smarter than our textbooks! Our church received feedback about our broadcast almost immediately, and we've continued to receive more and more responses. People are watching, and barriers are being broken down.

In the two years that we've been on the air, our cable program has produced some wonderful fruit. Seldom does a week go by without someone, usually an unbeliever, telling me that he or she saw our church on television. Others in the congregation are experiencing the same thing. The Lord *is* speaking to needy men and women through this medium.

The program has generated a number of visitors to the church and, about a year ago, brought the first family into our fellowship. This first "TV household" has already brought a second family. Our cable franchise has recently expanded its coverage by more than 20 percent, bringing our program into more than 12,000 homes twice weekly, so we are looking for more growth in the years ahead.

Perhaps best of all is the knowledge that we are fulfilling our commission to sow the seed of the Word into the soil of the human heart. If we do *our* job, God will do His job of giving the increase.