

Jim Bakker Resumes His TV Ministry

Taping began on The New Jim Bakker Show 16 years to the day of the last PTL Club show

Just weeks after his release from prison in 1994, Jim Bakker looked at CNN talk-show host Larry King and told his audience of millions that he would never start another Christian TV ministry.

Yet on Jan. 2, exactly 16 years to the day of his last PTL Club program, he began taping The New Jim Bakker Show. Today the talk-show program is broadcast daily on more than 30 TV stations, 200 cable outlets and internationally through TCT Satellite Network of Worldwide Satellites.

"I meant what I said to Larry that day," Bakker told Charisma. "When you put your hand in a fire and get burned, the body reacts to that, and it remembers that. What I had been through had been so painful, I could not imagine doing it again."

In 1987 Bakker was convicted of overselling time-share-like units at his Christian-themed resort Heritage USA, and was sentenced to 45 years in prison. His term was later reduced to 18 years, and he served five years before his release.

The stunning fall of PTL revealed the lavish lifestyle Bakker and his ex-wife, Tammy Faye, had enjoyed, as well as a sexual encounter Bakker had with a woman from New Jersey. Upon his release, a repentant and humbled Bakker was eventually received in enough pulpits to speak most weekends.

But Bakker said he could not escape his passion for television. "For years I set about to do a number of other things, but I could not get away from what I feel God called me to do, anointed me to do, and that's Christian television," he said.

In the nine years since his release, Bakker has worked at the Los Angeles Dream Center, where he met his second wife, Lori. The two later moved to Charlotte, N.C., just a few miles from the old Heritage USA, and hosted workshops and continued Lori's ministry to women who have had abortions.

Eventually, the Bakkers moved to Florida and started Camp Hope for inner-city children, but that door closed when the camp was sold. Then longtime friends Dee and Jerry Crawford approached them about moving to Branson, Mo.

Charisma interviewed Bakker minutes after he and Lori finished taping a show from the former Cowboy Café-turned-Studio City Café in Branson. The buffet restaurant serves all-you-can eat Southern cuisine for \$ as the patrons watch the show for free. Guests have included Rex Humbard, Tony Orlando and Gary Smalley.

Branson—located about 250 miles southwest of St. Louis—attracts a variety of gospel singers and musicians, and draws millions of visitors each year to its family-friendly shows.

"People tell me that Branson exploded with growth the year after Heritage USA closed down," Bakker said. "This became the place to come for wholesome family entertainment. Lori and I have found our home here. It's perfect."

The program opened with a drum roll that seemed like déjà vu for a former PTL staffer in the audience, and ended with the signature, "God loves you, He really does."

"This is weird," said Gene Bailey, a former producer for PTL. "For me it's like going through a time warp. Everything that was good about the old PTL Club is back—without the hype and the glitz.

"He is gifted," Bailey said of his old boss. "You cannot sit in this studio and not see that. His natural ability to connect with the viewer one-on-one is a rare quality. Not everyone in Christian television has that talent."

The New Jim Bakker Show has been made possible largely due to the Crawfords, whose marriage was healed at Heritage USA years ago. The couple owns the studio-café, a small hotel across the street and the home where the Bakkers live.

But there are still financial struggles. "I had hoped I could do this without raising money on the air, but airtime is so expensive," Bakker said, adding that the judge gave him no financial restrictions. "Many stations gave us a few months for free or at a reduced rate to get us started, but now we have to generate the money needed to keep us on the air.

"I have to die to the flesh," Bakker said. "That's what old Jim Bakker has to do on the air every day. I have had the best of everything, 3,000 employees, the finest talent and equipment. Here I have an audio man who is learning, camera people who have never done this before, the copier is broken, and we don't even have phones yet.

“With all that, the most awesome thing happens here every day. The presence of the Lord comes into this place, and people have been healed, depression lifted, and many come to know the Lord.”

Though some Christians may view his return to television with skepticism, Bakker believes he should be given another chance. “I was at a truck stop not far from here a while back. This rough-looking old boy came up to me, and you could tell by looking at him that this guy had been through a lot.

“He looked at me and he said, ‘If there wasn’t any hope for you—a preacher boy—to find forgiveness, a new start, there sure wouldn’t be any hope for me. I am no preacher boy.’

“People need hope that the past can be the past, that God can use them no matter what they have been through. Lori and I are both broken vessels, but God is using us. He can use anybody—no matter what.”

In addition to taping the show, the Bakkers are guardians of five children who “came from incredible poverty and the nightmare of living in a drug-infested, violent inner city,” said Lori Bakker, who was unable to have children after a fifth abortion caused an infection that forced her to have a hysterectomy at age 22.

“We are like every stressed-out family in America,” she added. “We are both working, and taking turns with the PTA meetings and the basketball games and practices.

When we have to travel for ministry, we try to take one of the kids with us for some special one-on-one time with us.”

The Bakkers are arranging to adopt the two youngest, while providing a loving, stable home to the older three.

Bakker says he won't regret trying his hand at television again even if the show doesn't succeed. "If we don't make it, that's fine," he said. "It would be easy to get a little house in the Ozarks and speak once in a while. But that is not my calling. I have to be true to what God has called me to do, and trust Him with the rest."

Mary Hutchinson
in Branson, Mo.