

Partnership Aims to Reach Secular Audience With Christian Media

First on the list of upcoming projects is *Gifted*, a talent show patterned after Fox's popular program *American Idol* *Inspirational Speaker*

A music-industry veteran and the son of Christian TV pioneers are teaming up to produce Christian-themed entertainment that will reach secular audiences.

The partnership will fuse Johnny Wright's experience in the music industry as president and CEO of Wright Entertainment Group (WEG) with Matt Crouch's background in the Christian entertainment industry as the founder of Gener8Xion Entertainment. Together they plan to create entertainment that will enjoy large crossover appeal.

"It is our goal to wrap God's message—His love—in acceptance, and in a way that blends seamlessly into 'pop' culture while still upholding the values we, as Christians, value most," says the mission statement of the partnership, tentatively called Wright Generation.

As a first step, Wright, a Christian who heads the management group for Britney Spears and 'N Sync, and Crouch, son of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) founders Paul and Jan Crouch, are creating a TV show titled *Gifted*, a Christian talent show similar to *American Idol*.

Scheduled to air Thanksgiving evening on TBN, Gifted will feature 12 solo artists, aged 18-24, who will compete by singing gospel and contemporary Christian songs in front of a live studio audience and an experienced panel of judges.

A cross-country audition tour was to begin in September. Finalists were to be chosen from such cities as Denver, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mobile, Ala., and Nashville, Tenn.

The TV audience will select the winner, who will receive a record deal and future management in both the secular and Christian markets under Johnny Wright. This fall the show will be a two-hour special, but Wright Generation is planning a full 10-episode second season.

The similarities between Gifted and American Idol are obvious, and Freemantle Media, the producer of Fox's hit show, has noticed. Freemantle recently sent Wright Generation a letter stating that it is infringing on American Idol's copyright trademark and requesting that it stop production of Gifted.

"We're not going to be bullied," Wright told Charisma. "Our show is completely different than theirs."

In addition to being a two-hour special, Wright said, Gifted will have a number of features different from American Idol. He also noted that in his time working on Fame, an NBC talent show of similar mold, there was never any talk about accusations of copyright infringement from American Idol.

"Is this just a veiled attempt to shut us down so they can move forward with the same kind of idea?" Wright said. "The

Christian community, as well as the secular community, deserves to have a show delivered to them like this, and it deserves to come to them from people that are in the Christian community.”

The statement is interesting coming from Wright, who until this point has not worked in Christian entertainment but now says that it is what he is going to move into in the future.

“I can’t begin to tell you how many times I’ve had people come up to me and say: ‘I have a great daughter that can sing, but I really don’t want them to be in that pop world because I don’t want them singing about those subjects. I would really like them to be singing about church and faith,’” Wright said. “How many times are people going to say that to me before it clicks?”

When Wright’s assistant, Philip McIntyre, met Crouch, he saw an opportunity for the two to work together. He said the chemistry between Wright and Crouch was apparent from the start.

Now a producer for Gifted, McIntyre said the whole project came together in less than six months—which is rare in the entertainment industry. “It absolutely happened fast, like it was definitely meant to be,” McIntyre said. “In our industry, it normally takes a lot longer.”

Crouch said that in their first conversation, Wright told him he wanted to “reshape pop culture that [he] was in part responsible for creating.” At that point Crouch says he knew God had orchestrated Wright’s career through the mainstream communications world and his career through Christian media so

they could each bring a unique perspective to this venture.

“What burns inside of me ... is to really put a new face on what the world thinks Christians are and what they think a life of faith in Christ is and does, and what it accomplishes,” Crouch said.

Wright Entertainment is currently making plans past Gifted for future TV and music projects, which they hope will help reinvent the cultures that each of them have come out of.

Crouch said they want to help people understand that “we, as people of faith, can blend seamlessly into the world because that was really what Christ said for us to do.”

Chris Glazier