

TBN's China Strategy Draws Criticism

Leaders of China's underground church say Paul Crouch's work in China could hurt them

The Trinity Broadcasting Network's (TBN) efforts to build a relationship with Communist officials in China—in hopes of winning permission to spread the gospel on state-sponsored Chinese cable television—is drawing complaints from house-church leaders and some missions experts.

But TBN says it is using the same strategy used by several U.S. presidents, as well as by Methodist, Southern Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries working inside China.

“A vast array of churches from the free world are actively working in China,” said Colby May, a Washington, attorney who acts as communications counselor for TBN. “It doesn't mean they accept or even like what the government does. But you have to be there. Every journey begins with the first step.”

TBN finds itself in a similar situation as the Rev. Billy Graham was in when he visited the former Soviet Union in the 1980s. Graham at that time declared that Communist Russia was opening to the gospel, May said.

“We understand that we're not immune to the same type of criticism,” said May, who also serves as the director of the Washington, D.C., office of the American Center for Law and Justice. May's comments to Charisma were made strictly under his role as legal counsel to TBN.

Leaders of China's Christian underground—who suffer persecution because they refuse to register their churches with the government—say TBN founder Paul Crouch should speak openly on TBN's Praise the Lord program about the daily torture and murder of Christians. They say Crouch spends too much time making friendly statements about the Chinese government. They also complain that Crouch lobbied the U.S. Congress to approve of China's admittance into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

House-church leaders warn that such supportive statements could actually endanger China's persecuted believers by taking the pressure off the Chinese government to end persecution. But May says there is more than one way to influence a repressive regime like China's.

"You can do it through either engagement or confrontation. Both of them I believe are perfectly respectable ways to proceed," May said.

Crouch met with Communist Party leaders last year to work out a broadcasting agreement—an exchange program in which TBN would agree to broadcast a program about Chinese culture. In return, TBN could broadcast a program sharing Christian values on the government-sponsored cable network that would reach 80 million Chinese households.

To date, no religious broadcasting is allowed on the state-sponsored network, and the government has not enacted the exchange with TBN. The state does pipe TBN into hotels for foreign visitors, but that is the extent of TBN's officially permitted broadcasts.

May said Crouch is not naive about the ongoing persecution and that TBN stands with persecuted Chinese Christians. "When given the opportunity, we certainly make known to the Chinese officials we meet with that anything that persecutes a Third World church is greatly disfavored in the U.S., and that we at Trinity believe it is a grave mistake for Chinese authorities," May noted.

The major obstacle to Christian television in China is the government's restrictive religious policy, which bans evangelism outside a registered church building. The long-standing policy allows religious activity in China only when it takes place at a state-designated time, in a state-designated place and led by a state-designated person.

China still comprises the world's largest TV market—300 million households—and the world's most unevangelized mission billion. But so far, the chances of TBN and other broadcasters airing evangelistic programs over Chinese television are slim.

Even so, a market is growing for airing "family values"-style programs that provide wholesome viewing, even if the religious content has been cut out. This is feasible, especially if broadcasters pay China's government big money to broadcast family content. In November 2001, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, visited Beijing to sign agreements to provide such programming.

A Christian working inside China's Ministry of Information said the government was courting Crouch as part of a "propaganda crusade." Crouch and other evangelicals who meet with Chinese Communists become "recruits" who do three things, the insider said: "They present a positive image of China abroad; they fight China's battles abroad; and they silence

criticism of China in their own sphere of influence.”

Underground church leader Li Tien En said Crouch should focus his attention on the persecution of Christians in China rather than courting the Communists. “Silence about suffering is not the way to help the suffering,” Li said.

Terry Law, a former missionary to China, said it wouldn’t surprise him if TBN had been duped by the Chinese government’s claims of allowing more religious freedom in return for support for world-trade status. “I am convinced that [it] is a ploy of the Chinese government. They are excellent at propaganda,” he said. Law told Charisma that a TBN affiliate in Tulsa, Okla., told him he could not speak about Chinese persecution during the broadcast.

“I want the American public to be aware that there is terrible persecution going on in China,” Law told Charisma. “If Christian television is putting across any other message, it is a message that does not fit the reality of the situation.”

A church leader in Shanghai said Crouch should re-evaluate his strategy. “The government is stringing him along, buying his silence with vague promises while he unwittingly dupes his public into thinking Christian TV is just around the corner,” he said.

Another Chinese insider warned that Crouch is “dangerously ignorant of China” because he does not know the background of the people he is talking with. “So he’s not even in the position to know whether he’s being a stooge for the government or a servant of the Chinese Christians,” the insider said.

May said Crouch is not ignorant of China, and he noted that TBN was a vocal supporter of the 1998 Religious Freedom Act, which today provides annual reports on which nations in the world are the most oppressive against religious freedom. China, May notes, is always at the top of that list.

May said Crouch lobbied for WTO status for China because China's entrance into the modern world might help change it. Said May: "A modern country permits religious freedom and free religious exercise, as well as a free press."

-Alex Buchan in China, with Billy Bruce