

Is the Pioneering Age of Religious Media Over?

The Crystal Cathedral has officially closed escrow and the iconic glass sanctuary designed by architect Philip Johnson is now a Catholic church. But the sale represents much more than how one media ministry lost it's way.

Looking at many of the classic and pioneering **media ministries** of the last 50 years, very few are recognizable anymore, and as a result, I believe that era is definitely over. **Oral Roberts** built the most successful media ministry of his time, and the massive financial response built a university. But it became apparent that a second generation of leadership couldn't sustain it.

Today, his son Richard has left the university and the ministry media outreach is a fraction of the size it was at one time. Now, thanks to new leadership like Mart Green and Dr. Mark Rutland, Oral Roberts University is experiencing a rebirth and explosion in growth, but only because it's in fresh, new hands.

Scandals crippled the media ministries of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, both of which were extraordinarily large and influential in their day. Strangely, James Dobson left the Focus on the Family radio ministry he built into a national powerhouse for a different radio ministry with his son. D. James Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministries didn't make plans for a successor at all, and now, after struggling for years, has recently rebranded under a much different name.

While some suffered from scandals related to sex, and others from money, I think the two greatest challenges were:

1. **They were obsessed with a family member following in their footsteps.** Everyone wants a son or daughter to follow in their

calling, but if they're not qualified, you're only setting them up for failure. Sure, give them a shot. Let them compete. But everyone's different, and if they don't have the talents, vision or leadership skills that made the first generation successful, then it's time to start looking elsewhere. Don't let your well-intentioned love for family damage the work God has called you to accomplish, and destroy the lives of your children.

2. The second mistake is not realizing how the culture had changed. In many cases, these original media ministries were remarkably creative and innovative. Drive-in churches, prime-time TV programs, massive stadium events and **crusades**, global satellite linkups, and more. But once the organization became successful, the very innovation that launched them was banned, in favor of less risky strategies. Some stuck slavishly to the original vision, style and techniques, even though it was obvious the audience had moved on.

Fortunately today, there's a new generation of pastors and media leaders in the church who have learned from the victories and mistakes of a previous generation. They integrate their family with well-qualified team members from the outside. They're not platform centric, and understand that compelling stories are more important than individual platforms. As a result, you'll find them at typical religious media events, but also at secular film festivals, Hollywood, and anywhere short films and Web content is finding an audience.

The first generation broke through. **Billy Graham** and Oral Roberts broke the color line in their live crusades. Roberts made the first deal with a major TV network—NBC—for prime-time specials. Swaggart funneled millions of dollars toward overseas missions. Pat Robertson started buying TV stations. Bakker began in youth programming but didn't end there. Paul Crouch built TBN—the largest privately owned network in the world—period.

Today, those achievements are rarely remembered, largely because of the cloud of dubious behavior many exhibited, and also because the culture they ignored has now moved on to something else. The question for today's media leaders is: What will they say about you 30 or 40 years from today? Will you have held fast to your calling, or fallen by the wayside? Will you grow too successful to keep taking risks? Will you become less bold because you have more to protect? Will you be producing projects to make a difference or producing projects to raise money?

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Any other areas about these passing ministries that I left out?