

Media Charismatics: Moving Mountains and the Masses

{jcomments on}Charismatics have always been pioneers in media, particularly on TV and radio. But are they keeping up in today's mobile era of constant change?

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Throughout 2012, we're celebrating what we call "The 12 Communities of Charisma" and highlighting the various groups that have made up this magazine's varied readership for the past 36-plus years. As a central hub for the larger Spirit-filled community, we believe one of our roles is to help connect these "tribes" by reporting on what God is doing among them.*

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Having already highlighted the classical Pentecostal, Messianic/Zionist and revivalist movements in recent issues, this month we examine how the Holy Spirit is working today through charismatics in both traditional media (e.g., TV, radio, print) and the ever-changing realm of new digital media.

Long before television and radio programming had segregated "Christian" categories, a message of Holy Spirit power dominated America's airwaves. Tent-revival preachers such as Aimee Semple McPherson ruled the radio landscape in the 1920s and 1930s, addressing families huddled around a receiver during an era when talk of a spiritual Comforter was as much relief as finding another day of work on the docks.

By the early 1950s, rising evangelists Billy Graham and Rex Humbard were expanding into the new medium of television. Yet among those pioneering the way on the small screen, Pentecostal evangelist Oral Roberts was the first to introduce America to the element of healing on his broadcasts.

In 1954, Roberts began airing recordings from his tent crusades—and the miraculous healings that occurred during them—on a weekly show called *Your Faith Is Power*. He wanted a way for people to call in with prayer requests during the show, however, so the following year he launched *The Abundant Life*, which featured operators standing by during airings. By 1957, the show was on more than 150 TV outlets, thanks to an unprecedented partnership with NBC—with an average of 25 to 40 million people watching each week. It would become one of the longest-running and most-watched Christian TV shows ever.

With Roberts' pioneering, the age of televangelism had officially begun, and the Holy Spirit's miracle-working power was upfront and center. Roberts' influence on what would become Christian TV cannot be overstated, nor can his lasting imprint on the general public during the decades to follow.

"[Roberts] planted the seeds publicly of what became the charismatic renewal after 1960 because the American public first saw Pentecostalism in their living rooms through his televised tent crusades," says Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan.

Roberts' TV ministry paved the way for other Christian evangelists, yet it also remained on the cutting edge of technology, purchasing the first trio of RCA video cameras ever made (the first was named "Evelyn II" in honor of Robert's wife) and revolutionizing the way multi-camera shows were produced. (What Roberts' crew set up then is now standard on most TV shows.)

By the mid-1980s, Roberts was one of many Spirit-filled

leaders known not only within charismatic circles, but also in millions of American households—thanks to the mass influence of television. As Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, Paul Crouch and Jimmy Swaggart highlighted the Holy Spirit's power with their fast-expanding TV ministries, more people than ever were getting their first glimpse of the charismatic expression of Christianity.

Unfortunately, they also got more than a glimpse—due to secular media's wall-to-wall coverage—of the scandals that have too often cast a shadow over the entire charismatic movement. For all the pioneering “media charismatics” have done, they've also left such damage in the wake of their efforts that the term *Christian TV* often has been synonymous with scandal.

Still, since its formation, the Spirit-filled community has historically understood and employed the power of media better than any other part of the global church. It has excelled at reaching the masses with a message of faith that moves mountains. And through each generation of the last century, it has adapted to technological changes and used media to expand God's kingdom on earth and preach His Word with signs and wonders that follow.

But what about today? Are media charismatics keeping up amid the constant change of this mobile-everything era? Or have the once-pioneering ministries rested on their laurels, only to find themselves now left behind?

Papa Don't Preach (As Much)

It's a bit of both, according to those who have kept a pulse on Christian media over the decades.

“Being there *first* doesn't necessarily mean being there *best*,” says Phil Cooke, a Christian TV veteran who's produced programming for countless ministries. Cooke started his career working on Roberts' show and is proud of the accomplishments

made by earlier generations of media charismatics. “But in most cases, while these leaders were passionate about the message, they weren’t so passionate about *how* it was delivered. As a result, much of Christian broadcasting over the years has been low quality, corny and very cheesy.”

Because the first generation of Christian media leaders consisted almost entirely of pastors or evangelists, “they saw everything through the lens of preaching,” Cooke adds. “That’s why, for decades, preaching programs dominated religious media—both radio and TV. I love great preaching, but when it comes to the media, it’s not always the best method of sharing our message.”

Today’s media charismatics still lean heavily on delivering sermons as the main event, as is the case with most Christian TV and radio. Yet many of these Spirit-filled leaders have successfully transitioned into a new generation of relevant delivery vehicles. Among “legacy” media ministry leaders such as Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen, almost all faced a single crossroads point of transition. In Meyer’s case, her ministry had flat-lined, yet by working with consultants such as Cooke, it made an intentional—and remarkably fast—shift in its corporate culture, which was naturally reflected on broadcasts.

Osteen had only preached once prior to the death of his father, Lakewood Church founder John Osteen. But instead of shunning the opportunity to lead, he embraced it and transformed the TV ministry—and church—into something bigger than anyone could have imagined. (It helped that he’d spent years producing Lakewood’s TV programs.)

Ironically, both Meyer’s and Osteen’s broadcasts still center on a 20-minute sermon or teaching. Yet those running their media ministries have built around their core message while expanding the way those broadcasts are delivered. It’s a strategy perfectly in-step with a new generation of media

leaders who recognize that it's not enough to be present on the latest platform; your content must stand out and actually *engage* amid the media clutter of sneezing panda YouTube clips and Facebook FarmVille requests.

"The people who are getting it right are the people who understand how to communicate their message—using the right medium—to move people to action," says Brad Abare, founder of the Center for Church Communication and director of communications for the Foursquare Church. "If it entertains, teaches, motivates or inspires, people will pay attention. It's been working this way for centuries."

Marcus Lamb, founder and CEO of Daystar Television Network, agrees that not only is content still king in today's fragmented media world, the underlying message is ultimately still the same—only now with seemingly infinite ways to deliver it.

"Maintaining cultural relevance—both within the church and, in turn, to the world—is tantamount in reaching the masses with the gospel of Christ in our postmodern world," Lamb says. "While we could do much more, I see great strides within the charismatic and Pentecostal communities. Christ's mandate upon the church remains the same: to challenge ourselves daily within our sphere of influence to develop new and innovative means to bring health and wholeness to a hurting world, from the inner-city ghettos to the sprawling upper-class areas and beyond."

Anything But Dead

Daystar has aimed to follow that mandate daily since it first went on air in 1985 in Montgomery, Ala. As one of the leading Christian TV networks, its challenges today are indicative of all traditional media, which have been forced to adapt to the emergence of new media platforms such as tablet devices and smartphones. (As proof, Daystar—along with other Christian networks such as TBN, God TV and INSP—now delivers live-

streaming and on-demand content to everything from iOS devices to Roku boxes.) With such rapid changes on the media front, early adapters have been quick to declare television as the fading and soon-to-be-dead grandparent medium.

Not so fast, argues Cooke. He believes media fragmentation has actually made TV the “last great American campfire” by which more segments of the mass audience gather than any other medium. (See “Why TV Ministry Still Matters,” p. 19.) Ask 100 people from the coveted 18- to 49-year-old demographic what their favorite app, website or blog is, for example, and you’ll get 100 different answers. Yet almost all of them still watch TV programming, whether on a 3-D TV, laptop or iPhone. Clearly, the pie is still there; it’s just sliced in more ways today than ever.

It’s no secret that has been unwelcome news for the major secular TV networks, which have struggled in recent years as they’ve watched their viewership diminish to a fraction of what it was in past generations. Christian TV, however, has not faced the same demise, mainly because it has always served a niche audience with niche programming. That’s not to say Christian TV doesn’t face an uphill battle; if anything, its obstacle may be even greater than changing audience shares, technology trends or advertising budgets.

“The great challenge within Christian media outlets such as Daystar,” Lamb says, “is to give each viewer watching—from the small tribal villages in Third World countries, to our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world—the ‘spiritual reasons’ to be drawn to Christ in this era.”

Stated another way, media charismatics’ biggest hurdle today isn’t necessarily the delivery mechanism of the message or even the core message itself; it’s redefining and repackaging the compelling reason people should pay attention to the message in the first place. With so many media options pulling us in different directions and promising to deliver as much

content as we want, our seemingly never-ending thirst for more content is actually causing us to forget why we're thirsty in the first place. (Not surprisingly, that happens when the average person spends a staggering 10 hours a day interacting with some form of media.) The result: The gospel message, no matter how it's delivered, becomes just another message waiting in queue on our DVR, right between the latest 30 *Rock* episode and *House Hunters* reruns.

Lose the Bling ... and the Labels

Many of Christian media's leaders not only understand the gravity of this situation, they're committed to starting a spiritual awakening through whatever new media avenues will regain people's attention. This starts with avoiding the past mistakes that caused some of the greatest charismatic media ministries to lose their voices almost overnight.

"I've often joked that charismatics produce much more interesting programs than mainstream evangelicals, but charismatics also have a higher rate of ending up in court or in jail," Cooke says. "Sadly, the same creativity, boldness and openness to risk that helps create interesting media also pushes some people into ego, outlandish behavior and sometimes outright crime. What frustrates me the most is the excess we've seen in Christian media—especially among the Charismatic community. A new generation of pastors and ministry leaders looks at that and thinks, 'If that's Christian broadcasting, then I don't want to have anything to do with it.'"

Undoubtedly, millions of believers have given up on traditional Christian media because of the high-profile sex scandals and allegations of financial mismanagement. These embarrassments gave Christian media—particularly in the realm of television—a stigma and tarnished the name of Christ for the entire church.

The setbacks still haven't stopped today's emerging media leaders from delivering stories of supernatural living,

radical faith and a Jesus who still heals today. If anything, the charismatic message burns stronger than ever in this newer generation. But for many of these rising leaders, there is a major difference: The terms have changed—literally.

“The dividing line between *charismatic* and *non-charismatic*, when it comes to media, is becoming less and less of an issue,” believes Abare, who is among the leaders of this new generation. “Many use media wrong; many use media right. The issue with charismatic and non-charismatic only matters to the people who think it does. There will always be stereotypes and people who live up (or down) to the expectation of ‘charismania.’

“Likewise, there will always be the fringe audiences who align or distance themselves with charismatic media. The real issue, then, is how to get the charismatic message mainstream. I don’t think this will happen by continuing to draw the line between what is and what isn’t.”

Indeed, just as churches are focusing less on what it means to be charismatic—with countless shedding the label—these leaders refuse to make the “Spirit-filled” identifier a point of separation at the risk of remaining relevant and heard. Their primary goal is to change lives and fulfill the mission God has given them; explaining why they believe in speaking in tongues or the baptism of the Holy Spirit, albeit crucial, remains secondary.

Is this a generational reaction to the overload of scandal and moral failures among media charismatics? Maybe, though it certainly isn’t a new trend and is a sentiment that extends far beyond media circles. It’s also a sense shared across age groups, cultures and even charismatic—if the term can be used—circles.

Essentially, people are looking for a new meaning of *charismatic*—one less concerned about the “us vs. them”

divisions and more concerned about authenticity and character. The charismatic community is shifting in this hour, and media—everything from magazines to apps to vlogs to movies—is the platform on which this transition and struggle is being played out.

Having observed the good, bad and ugly among media charismatics for decades, Cooke remains excited about what lies ahead.

“I’m seeing a new generation of pastors and ministry leaders who are Spirit-filled but not *strange*,” he says. “A generation ago, many of the charismatic and Pentecostal figures you’d see on Christian TV may have been sincere, but they were just plain weird. Fortunately, today people consider the few of those guys who are left as fringe, and they’re moving toward new charismatic leaders who are more dedicated to biblical truth, don’t live a lavish lifestyle and are simply normal folks like you and me.

“As a media producer and consultant, I’m looking for the pastor or ministry leader who will define for a 21st-century culture what it means to live a Spirit-filled life without being wacky. And trust me, the media world is waiting for that leader.”

Marcus Yoars is the editor of *Charisma*. At one point in his career, he was actually paid to be a media junkie and analyze the correlation between media and cultural trends. Though exciting, the job also required taking in more lousy TV shows, movies, recordings, etc., than any human should ever have to endure. For more of Marcus’ writing, visit .

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