

'When Calls the Heart' Fans Find a Home in Hope Valley

I'm a Heartie. I've watched every episode of the No. 1 hit show on the Hallmark Channel for seven seasons.

There are "Trekkies" and then there are "Hearties." Trekkies are fans of all things *Star Trek*. Hearties are loyal fans of the Hallmark family drama, *When Calls the Heart*. Not only is the show Hallmark's highest-rated original series ever, it's also one of the highest-rated scripted series on cable. The faith-based serial is set to begin filming its eighth season later this year. *When Calls the Heart* has over 3 million viewers per episode.

Executive Producer Brian Bird (Michael Landon Jr. is his partner) said during my *Greenelines* podcast with him yesterday, "There are over 2.1 million people in the audience that define themselves as Hearties. They identify with the lifestyle of Hope Valley and our recurring message of faith. Our show represents faith on television. There's a church in the community, in the center of the community, that people go to, and they pray together. They go to school right in the same building as they worship. Faith is integral to the show and integral to our Hearties."

The storyline is not saccharine. The people of that era, (circa 1909-10) lived difficult lives. Though the cast is beautiful and well-dressed with perfect teeth, their hardships ring true through the script and minimalistic lifestyle. Their faith in God spurs hope in each trial. The location of Hope Valley is somehow attractive, and the set invites viewers to envision a simpler time and purpose of life. Hearties often tell Bird how much they'd like to buy a home in the fictional town.

“They’ve found a home in Hope Valley, but we didn’t invent that,” Bird told me. “I wish I could say I was smart enough to have invented the Hearties. They responded to our show in a grassroots way we could have never envisioned; we were just working so hard to make a show that we thought people would like. And when they did, they began to respond to us. They open up the culture for us for the show, because they tell their friends, they tell their neighbors, they tell their family members. They put the theme song on their phones as a ringtone.”

Over the last few years, I’ve often spoken with Brian about the shortage of faith-based programming and what must happen to attract more programming suitable for Spirit-led homes. He has continually challenged viewers to support the shows we have. We vote for family viewing by watching the shows, buying their books and engaging with the content.

“During the Renaissance of all the greatest art in history, guess who was the benefactor of that art?” Bird asked. “Who were the patrons of that art? The church, the church! The church supported beautiful art and architecture and sculpting and music and the church sponsored it. People of faith sponsored it.

“I’m not saying we have to support everything. But when things are worthy, we need to go out with gusto and be great patrons,” Bird said. “We need to watch content and support content that reflects our worldview and reflects who we are as people. Because if we don’t, why would anybody make it again? If we don’t support it why would anyone take the risk? It’s very expensive to make TV shows and movies.”

Many of us claim to want more faith-based content. We want our children to watch television shows that reflect our values. We crave inspirational content. We only need to support what little we have now and more will come.

We need more heart in our day. {eoa}