

MEDIA CONFERENCE DRAWS CHRISTIANS CHURCHES LEARN SOME NEW WAYS TO SPREAD MESSAGE

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

With south Florida comprising one of the largest media markets in the country, one local church has joined forces with like-minded groups to bring together those involved in media with interested Christians.

"We are in the nation's eleventh largest radio market and fifteenth largest television market," said Carl Mims, Director of Communications at Fort Lauderdale's Calvary Chapel. "Over \$3.9 billion dollars a year is spent here producing films according to film permits issued in the year 2000."

Mims is concerned that the media is often "misused" by the Christian community. "We want to shake our finger and say that all of Hollywood is bad because of their trashy movies," he said. "Too many people shy away from using the mass media."

"We would like to educate the church on how to consume the media and how to use the media to get the message out," Mims explained.

To address those and other issues and bring church people together with media representatives, Calvary Chapel has held a "Christians and Media" conference for the past two years.

At this year's event, held on September 6 and 7 at the church's sprawling Fort Lauderdale campus, between 500 and 600 people attended to hear Hollywood movie producers, radio and television professionals and newspaper reporters and editors discuss their work and how churches can make optimum use of their services.

"I was very encouraged by the conference, especially the networking opportunities," said Jerry Newcombe, Senior Producer of Dr. D. James Kennedy's "Coral Ridge Hour," at Coral Ridge Ministries in Fort Lauderdale. "It was a great shot in the arm to see professional media people put their faith to work."

A highlight for Newcombe and others who attended the conference was a presentation by Ken Wales, a veteran of

Hollywood who produced many of the Peter Sellers films and was the driving force behind the writing and production of the acclaimed "Christy" television series.

Wales told how he struggled for almost 19 years to obtain permission to take the popular Katharine Marshall book to film, but was rebuffed numerous times by management changes in film studios, reluctance of television executives to accept a program with such an obvious Christian theme and other obstacles.

Finally, as filming of the television series began, Wales realized that the shooting began exactly 19 years to the day after he had first read the book.

He also learned that Kellie Martin, the only actress that he seriously considered for the role of Christy, would be celebrating her birthday the day the filming began. "It suddenly occurred to me that the person intended for this role on television was born on the day that I first began reading the book," Wales said.

Wales feels that the Christy series opened the door for other faith-oriented programming such as "Touched by an Angel" to be produced for television. "It was remarkable, because Christy was the only program in modern times to include the line, 'in Jesus' name we pray' on network television," he said.

Bill Bird, the co-executive producer and senior writer for Touched By An Angel told a workshop that there is a market for faith-oriented programming on network television. However, he said that he is surprised by the reluctance of some network producers to accept such programming even after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Bird distributed his proposal for a series called "Heartland," a program he describes as a modern "Walton Family" style show. The proposed plot centers around a farm family in the Midwest and the issues that they face in their community, personal lives and way of life.

"I presented it to one network executive, and he asked me if I could turn it into a cop show," he said. Bird said that he is not sure if his proposal will ever be accepted by any of the big networks.

Sandra Soto of Pembroke Pines, who previously hosted a program of Latin music on a North Carolina NPR station, said that she found the conference inspiring. "It was good to see that these creative people care about what they do," she said. "They are not in it to glorify themselves but to glorify God."

Soto, who describes herself as a "radio host in waiting," said that she attended the conference to see what Christian media is like and what kind of ministries there are. "I also wanted to see if God was leading me there."

Workshop leaders encouraged both Christian and secular professionals to be creative as they work. "Radio today is without imagination," Martin Mayen of Telemundo told a group of Spanish broadcasters and participants. "Radio is complex and simple, dynamic and progressive," he said. "The secret of radio is that it lacks the stress of TV or movie production."

Mayen encouraged his listeners to recognize God's calling even if they work in secular media.

Encouragement was at the heart of this year's event according to the planners. "We want to see people encouraged," Mims said. "It's a tough industry with a lot of rejection even if you are at the top. And when you are at the top, the tabloids are after you."

Soto said that she wished the conference would be longer in the future, perhaps even three days in length. Mims said that the church definitely plans on holding a similar event next year, possibly during the winter months.

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