

Why seminaries and Bible colleges should offer media courses

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Within one year after my wife and I finished language school in Costa Rica, I received inquiries from four former classmates serving throughout Latin America asking for help.

Each of them had developed an opportunity to be involved in a radio ministry and was writing to say that they had no experience in the field and didn't know what to do with the open door.

Two of those students were involved with putting a full-time Christian radio station on the air while the other two were looking at an opportunity to provide a regular radio program. In addition, one of them went on to publish an occasional Christian newspaper to assist in his church-planting ministry.

With the explosion of opportunities for Christian radio around the world, missionaries who have had no experience or training in the field are struggling with how to use this God-given medium to proclaim the Gospel and nurture the faithful.

“In the last ten or more years God has raised up a new era of broadcasting with low-powered Christian radio that is making possible the placing of small radio stations in many countries around the world,” explains Allan McGuirl, the president of Galcom International, a Canadian-based mission organization that provides low-powered transmitters, inexpensive studios and solar-powered radios to Christian groups around the world. (www.galcom.org).

“What has happened is that the quality of programming has gone from excellent to, in some cases, where it is most difficult to even listen to what is being said,” McGuirl says.

Church planters, theological educators, medical personnel and social workers who answer the Lord's call to a particular form of ministry seldom are aware that the opportunity for an evangelistic, Bible-teaching, educational or motivational broadcast ministry may be awaiting them in their country of service. Thus, few even think of obtaining training or reading material that would prepare them for quality Christian broadcasting.

(The same applies to those who prepare for Christian service within North America but seldom train for the eventuality that they, too, may have an opportunity for a broadcast ministry down the road.)

Unfortunately, even for those who may have an interest in radio ministry, opportunities for training are limited. While many Bible colleges, Christian colleges and universities and seminaries have missions courses, those that provide training for media ministries on the field are very limited. Even Christian colleges with communications departments concentrate mainly on preparing Christians for careers in commercial broadcasting or print journalism.

While most Bible colleges and seminaries will not find enough demand to develop a major in the area of broadcasting and communication, more need to consider providing courses that will train pastors, missionaries, evangelists and other Christian workers in the proper use of the media in future ministries.

Pastors and missionaries who have a radio broadcasting opportunity need to learn to ask the all-important question “*What* does the Lord want me to say to *whom*?” Only after the What/Who question has been answered fully can a Christian servant begin to develop programming that will meet the listener effectively.

Then there is the issue of how to present the message, how to make it listenable, how to promote a broadcast or a station, how to maintain sustainable financial support of the broadcast ministry and how to feed the insatiable appetite of a radio program or station.

In addition, the Christian broadcaster must learn proper production and voicing techniques, the correct use of equipment and timing and how to obtain other programming resources to fill a 24-hour schedule.

Moreover, Christian pastors and missionaries who embark on a broadcast ministry must be prepared to provide culturally and personally relevant material that reflects the Word of God accurately.

Historically, many radio ministries were begun by pastors or missionaries with biblical and theological training but little radio experience. Thus, their broadcasts were strong on the content side, but weak in the area of quality production and presentation for a listening audience.

Today, the reverse is often true. Full-time Christian broadcasters on the mission field may come from a radio background but have little training in biblical or theological studies. Thus, while their programs are well produced and sound good, they are often weak in content.

Many fledgling broadcasters need to learn proper broadcasting philosophies and techniques as well as the truth of the Gospel and ways to communicate it effectively.

Christian educational institutions and mission agencies would be well advised to consider providing opportunities for quality media training as a tool for missionary service. Schools can offer regular courses such as Introduction to Mass Media, Radio and TV broadcasting, Christian journalism and writing, and media analysis. Both schools and mission agencies should also consider offering regular short-term (one or two week) classes/workshops for missionaries in training or those on furlough who need to acquire such skills rapidly.

Radio and other forms of Christian media are a growing phenomenon both in North America and around the world. Christians need to guarantee that such efforts will be executed with only the highest quality possible in order to be most effective.

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