



## *The Next Step*

*An NRB Magazine interview with Producer and Director Phil Cooke*

Phil Cooke, Producer and Director with Cooke Pictures, in Santa Monica, California is one of the most sought after program producers in Christian broadcasting. His eclectic client list includes both major Christian churches, ministries and television networks as well as secular studios, corporations, and entertainment companies.

**Christine Pryor: You have produced programming in more than 20 countries, and you've recently finished the largest worldwide Christian broadcast in history for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. What do you see happening in the world of Christian broadcasting on a global scale?**

**Phil Cooke:** Two words: *cultural sensitivity*. One of my greatest disappointments in Christian broadcasting on a global scale is the number of churches, ministries, and other program producers who distribute their programs internationally *just as they are*. Many don't even go to the trouble of translating them into other languages.

There's no question that satellite technology has made the world a smaller place - a "global village" as Marshall McLuhan called it in the 1960's. I'm constantly amazed that in places like Manila and Calcutta you can watch MTV, or you can view CNN in Lagos, Nigeria. That tells me that yes, our production techniques and levels of quality and creativity are becoming accepted in nearly all cultures and countries. But at the same time, there is still an important place for national identity, cultural sensitivity, and recognizing that the clothes, sermon illustrations, music, promos, and other aspects of a religious program can be completely lost when viewed in another cultural context.

**CP: Is the same thing important with secular companies?**

Just this past March, the *Los Angeles Times* did an interesting story that Sony Corporation, (*the second most prolific producer of television programs in the world*), is shifting its focus to more localized programming in various nations around the world. In India for example, Sony's programming reaches 8 of the 10 million Hindi cable households with programs that are now 80% Hindi programming and only 20% dubbed U.S. shows. That gives you an idea of just how critical it is to have the local audiences identify with your program.

**CP: What are some of the global examples you've been involved in?**

I had the opportunity over the last two years to be a Language Edition Producer for the Billy Graham Global satellite uplinks from Essen, Germany in 1994 and San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1995. In each case, numerous directors had worked for about a year shooting local music in countries around the world and producing interviews with local celebrities, church leaders, sports figures, and other people in their own languages. Then, each night of the crusade, a group of us producers would edit the first 30 minutes of the programs with all the music, interviews, and feature segments from each country and then go to the translated message from Billy Graham.

That way, each country viewed a program in their own language, featuring their own sports figures, celebrities, church leaders, and others speaking, singing, and ministering in their own languages and culture - and the results were unbelievable.

This year, the ministry chose to try one program that would reach all those nations and more. We called the program "*Starting Over*" - and according to the Graham organization, more people were presented with the Gospel during that program than any other time in history. *I have to tell you, it's a humbling responsibility to know that you're creating a program that will be seen by more than 2.5 billion people.*

So first of all, the ministry pre-arranged to have the finished program translated into about 60 languages. Then, during the production, we did everything we could to give it a global appeal. It was hosted by Cliff Richard from London, we did interviews with people from Hispanic, African, Indian, Oriental, and other backgrounds. We even used European vehicles in the shots. We selected a vast amount of global footage from CNN, Image Bank, and other libraries. We illustrated Mr. Graham's sermon with scenes from numerous cultures and ethnic groups, and we dealt with situations that were generally global in nature.

Now there's no question that a global approach like that was expensive. But there are also less expensive things every program producer can do to insure that their gospel message will be better received in each country where it's broadcast. Translating the program into different languages, using a culturally sensitive opening and closing, or using program hosts from that country, are all less expensive ways that will make our programs far more effective when broadcast globally.

**CP: In the last decade or so, how have you seen Christian broadcasting changing here in America?**

**PC:** When I first started in Christian broadcasting, the major programs were produced by Oral Roberts and Rex Humbard. Then, after a while, others, like Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Fallwell came on the scene. In those days, the world of Christian broadcasting was dominated by a handful of major national ministries, and every city in America saw the same Christian programs. But in the last 20 plus years, largely because of the ground those early pioneers plowed, we've literally seen an explosion of programs across the country and the world.

One of the most interesting changes I've seen is how programming has gone from a national level to a local level as local stations, churches and smaller ministries have actively jumped into their individual markets. I think it's vitally important that communities have a local Christian voice in broadcasting, and I'm greatly encouraged by the growth in the number of local stations, churches and ministries on television.

The frustration is that these local voices often have the smallest budgets to work with, so their creativity and quality is often limited. But as equipment costs continue to come down and as more and more young people graduate from Christian colleges and universities with degrees in communications, I think we'll see a difference.

**CP: Where do you see the greatest need in the Christian broadcasting community today?**

**PC:** I think we need to solve the financing problem. There's no question in my mind that just about every single frustration and struggle we face comes down to money. The fact is, of all the ministry outreaches a Christian organization does, television is by far the most expensive. Equipment costs money, qualified people cost money, production costs money, airtime costs

money. How we got to this place is another magazine article altogether, but the day when we are able to produce programs through alternative financing sources and without having to ask for money on the air, or bury our viewers with truckloads of direct mail, is the day we will be able to produce the creative things we've all dreamed about - movies, dramatic series, comedy programs, serious documentaries, news, special events, etc... Sure, today some innovative ministries, TV stations, and networks are exploring these things - *and I'm thrilled to see it* - but it's only on an irregular basis. No one in the Christian world is able to truly produce and broadcast these and other types of programs on a daily schedule - *at least not yet* - but some of us are definitely out there working on it.

**CP: The television and film projects you're involved in are roughly 50% Christian and 50% secular. Is that intentional, and what does your secular experience bring to your Christian projects?**

**PC:** A few years ago, I was asked to show some of my work to a major commercial producer here in Hollywood who was wanting to represent a handful of top directors in the advertising industry. After I showed him some programs, he remarked that he liked my reel, but couldn't work with me. When I asked him why, he said that at the top of the industry, the best Madison Avenue advertising agencies like directors to *specialize*. Therefore he was looking for directors that only shoot *cars*, or only shoot *children*, or *fashion*, or *sports*, and so on.

Although a relationship with this producer represented a great deal of money, I had to walk away, because I have no desire to specialize. In a typical year or two, I will produce programs for major churches, ministries and Christian networks, as well as documentary style programs, long-form video programs, music videos, corporate promotional programs, infomercials, commercials, motion pictures, and I'm developing a secular television series.

I believe very strongly that my experience in each of these areas makes me a better Christian program producer and allows me to bring a wealth of experience to each project. For instance, my experience shooting music videos and commercials keeps my shooting style very current, my experience shooting infomercials helps when ministries need advice in their fundraising programs, and my experience shooting celebrities and professional actors gives me great insight when I'm helping pastors, evangelists, teachers, and program hosts be more effective on camera.

I would strongly recommend every church, ministry, and Christian TV station encourage their television production staff be involved in a great variety of production situations, even if that means time off for outside freelance projects. There's no question in my mind it will give them fresh new insight and ideas when they come back.

But the point I want to make is that *everything I do comes from a Christian perspective*, and therefore, I don't like drawing a hard line between "Christian" and "secular" programs. For instance, last year I produced "*The Story of Silent Night*" featuring the Vienna Boys Choir and shot on location at the Royal Palace in Vienna, Austria. That Christmas special was broadcast nationally on the Learning Channel, then released on video through video catalogs like Columbia House and Reader's Digest, and it told the story of how the most popular Christmas carol in history was written. Therefore, we had the opportunity to present a Christian message to a largely non-Christian audience, and that's where my heart is.

**CP: What are the most common mistakes Christian producers make in the production of programs?**

**PC:** Understanding just how unique and different the medium of television really is.

*A light bulb is not a candle you plug into a wall.*

*A car is not a horse with wheels.*

*A television is not a radio with pictures.*

*A television program is not a church service.*

*See where I'm going?*

Television has its own strengths and weaknesses, and those strengths and weaknesses need to be properly exploited if we are to be as effective as we possibly can.

A church service is not the most effective use of the medium, but today, church services probably represent the vast majority of Christian programming. That's not to say that sermons and teaching situations shouldn't be on television, but they need to be done in a more innovative way that takes better advantage of the medium.

For instance, in a *live* church service you're sitting in a crowd of hopefully interested people. You experience first hand the worship and music, you can feel the electricity of the moment, and you can often sense the energy and the anointing as the pastor paces back and forth across the stage.

But when you watch that service on television, you're often by yourself, watching the service through a glass TV screen from the other side of the room - and more than likely, you're doing something else at the time. Very few of the things that make it exciting in a live situation come through as you watch it later on television.

Therefore, we need to take advantage of creative television techniques to translate that service into as powerful a television program as possible. The most successful producers today are the ones who are well versed in those techniques and know how to transform a live event into a compelling television experience.

**CP: At this year's NRB Convention, your workshop titled "Increasing Your Effectiveness on Camera" was one of the most well attended workshops. When you work with pastors, evangelists, teachers, program hosts, actors, and other on-camera personalities, what are some of the secrets to effectiveness?**

**PC: Quit if you can.** People are always surprised at this response, but I believe that unless God has given you such a strong calling to minister on television that you can't possibly escape it, then you should get out fast. Don't do it because you have a large church, you enjoy being on television, or because you have the financial resources. Do it because God is leading you in that direction and you can't escape the call.

**Don't get locked into one style of preaching on television.** Just because you're a pastor doesn't mean that you have to do everything *standing behind the pulpit*. One of my greatest joys is taking pastors who think they can only function well behind a pulpit, into other settings - *a living room, a back alley, a beach, a homeless shelter, a desert, a mission field, etc..* They're quite often thrilled and amazed to discover the possibilities of ministering in more creative and unconventional settings.

**Talk to one person.** Whether you're preaching, teaching, or hosting a program, don't think about those *millions of people in TV land* - think about one person. There's no way you can effectively focus on ministry while trying to imagine the multitude of needs, hurts, and struggles of the entire television audience. So calm down and focus on *one person*, just as if you were talking to a friend. You'll be amazed at the difference it will make.

Also, if it helps, put a baseball cap on top of the camera, or hang a photograph underneath the lens. Anything that helps you look into that camera and see a hurting person, the more effective you'll be.

**Know your audience.** Learn about audience demographics and talk to your time buyer or local broadcast outlet about who your audience is. Until you discover who's watching out there, how can you be most effective?

**CP: You spend a significant amount of your time working with local TV stations, churches and ministries helping them to improve the quality of their programs. Generally speaking, at the local level, what are their strengths and weaknesses?**

**PC:** Especially speaking for local churches, the *strengths* of their programming is their *ability to draw people into their local church home for training and spiritual growth*. A national program can communicate the gospel, but once the program is over it's difficult to offer effective, personal follow-up. Church-produced programs can encourage the viewer in that particular town or city at a deeper level by giving them the opportunity to attend a particular local body. In a similar way, local TV stations and ministries can also provide real, local follow-up for new believers that national ministries and networks have trouble providing.

A *weakness* that I'm particularly sensitive to is the *lack of skill in program direction*. In my workshops and seminars at local stations and churches, I spend a great deal of time teaching directors of Christian programs that directing is more than just randomly cutting between 3 or 4 cameras. There are very specific techniques to successful program direction - from properly framing shots, visual transitions, program structure, use of graphics, etc... For example, I teach that *cuts and dissolves to a director* are like *periods and commas to a writer*. They are part of the visual grammar that makes the program work, and since research indicates that as much as 80% of the program's message is communicated through the visuals, those specific rules and techniques can be the difference between a program's success or failure. And by the way - don't ever let anyone tell you that good directing is just someone's opinion. Good directing is an art with definite techniques, rules, and standards. Of course, a gifted director can go beyond those rules, but good technique is the basis of all good television.

**CP: What about education? You have an undergraduate degree in Television and Film, a Master's in Journalism, and are working on a Ph.D. in Theology. Plus, I notice you always hand out reading lists and outlines at your workshops and seminars. How important is research and education in the field of Christian broadcasting?**

**PC:** I'm saddened at how little production people at Christian TV stations, churches and ministries know about the history and technique of television and motion pictures. You can't believe how often producers or directors will call me with some new method they think they've just invented and I pull a book from my library and show them that someone was already doing it back in 1955.

It's no different than a concert pianist not knowing anything about Bach or Beethoven, or a great pastor not knowing about men like Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Finney, Moody, or others.

At my workshops and seminars I'm constantly quoting famous producers and directors, or telling historic incidents from the early days of secular or Christian television. I strongly believe that *until we know where we've come from, we'll never know where we are, and we certainly won't know where we're going.*

Learn more about the history of television and motion pictures - it will open your mind to a world of new ideas and possibilities.

Research is another area that we don't explore nearly enough. The secular networks and Madison Avenue spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on research to find out who their audience is and how to more effectively reach them. We need to understand that good *research doesn't hinder creativity or anointing* - it simply gives us the tools we need to learn how to focus that creativity and anointing where it will do the most good.

**CP: What's Next for Phil Cooke?**

**PC:** There are three areas I'm most interested in. First of all, I'm looking for those churches, ministries, stations, networks, and other organizations that really want to explore the possibilities of producing the next step in Christian programming. We have to keep moving forward and my great challenge in life is moving out there into unexplored territory. Even with it's risks and dangers, it's an exciting place to be, and it's the only place a real breakthrough in Christian broadcasting will happen.

Second, one of my great passions has always been to produce and direct motion pictures. That's always been a difficulty for Christian organizations because of the high expense and lack of quality of many past projects. We are currently developing projects along that line, and I think it's one of the critical places where we can have a voice and make an impact in our contemporary culture.

Third, I want to stay on top of what's happening in the internet world. *Cooke Pictures* has set up a web site at **[www.cookepictures.com](http://www.cookepictures.com)** that was designed to be the ultimate resource for Christian program producers. In one place we want people to be able to download program budget worksheets, storyboard forms, information on equipment, creative ideas, and other essential information. We're just in the early stages of discovering those possibilities, but anything that will help bring us closer together for information or inspiration, I'm all for it.

Have you signed up for the Cooke Pictures e-mail newsletter? It's a monthly journal filled with media research, creative concepts, production resources, and great ideas. **Sign up today at <http://www.cookepictures.com/resources/newsletters/>**