



Successful Christian Television

Making Your Television Ministry a Reality

*An Ministries Today magazine interview with
Producer and Director Phil Cooke*

Ministries Today Magazine: You like to use the word "effective". Why?

PC: Sadly, in just about any city in America these days, you can turn on the television and see poorly produced Christian television programs. In the early days, just getting a Christian message on television was a remarkable feat, and therefore *any* type of program would have been great. But today, there are a number of reasons why it's critically important that the Christian programs we produce are as effective as possible:

The competition is so much greater - In most cities there are about 30+ channels to choose from, and flipping through those channels has even spawned a new term: *Channel Surfing*. Some research indicates that if you can't grab your audience in less than 10 seconds you've lost them completely, so our programs need to be effective so they can "grab" that audience long enough to present our message.

The visual sophistication of the typical viewer is higher - The visual style of television has dramatically changed in the last thirty years, and it goes without saying that new programmers like MTV have transformed the way people look at television. Our attention spans are shorter, we're looking for a more exciting visual presentation, and the overall technical quality of television is far better. Therefore, it's tough keeping an audience interested if the technical quality and the production style is not comparable to the other programs they used to watching.

Television is very expensive. In most cases, the financial cost of a media ministry will be the most expensive outreach a church or ministry will ever have. Therefore, if it's not accomplishing it's goals, then something needs to be changed - *fast*.

Ministries Today: So where do we start?

PC: You start becoming more effective by stepping back and taking an objective look at your program. If it helps, bring in people that aren't associated with the church or ministry to look at it and give you their ideas and opinions. In advertising, we call that a *focus group*. Generally, it's people who have no vested interest in your program who will be perfectly frank. I would include non-Christians as well as Christians. (*Especially if you're trying to reach an unsaved audience*). Then, start asking questions:

Is this program the same as every other Christian program out there?

What makes it different?

Why would someone watch this program?

What does it do for the viewer?

What about the technical quality?

How well does it move?

Does the program have slow or boring spots?

Then, flip the channels and look at the competition.

Which program is more interesting, and why?

When you start asking questions like these, you start the creative process going, and that's when effectiveness really begins.

Ministries Today: Speaking of ideas, how did you decide to write your book?

PC: Aside from producing and directing media projects, I have always had a heart for helping local churches and ministries improve the quality of their programs. The fact is, every program produced within the Christian community reflects on us all, and therefore each of us needs to be doing everything we can to improve Christian programming.

The spark happened the first time I was ever asked to speak at a major conference on Christian television. I was a last minute replacement, and when I arrived, I realized I was part of

a panel. Every other panel member was a pastor or evangelist with a TV ministry, and I was the only "behind the scenes" guy on the stage. Each panelist gave rousing sermons on *the general potential of Christian broadcasting, wonderful testimonies, and inspirational comments* - but the audience sat there bored to death. I was the last to speak, and when it was my turn, I began talking about the real, practical, day-to-day aspects of producing programs: *should I shoot my Sunday service?, should I rent or purchase equipment?, what type of equipment should I use?, where will I find a crew?, what about music?, how about fundraising?, where can I find a director?* The audience's faces suddenly lit up and the atmosphere of the room changed entirely. After the workshop, I stayed almost three hours answering questions.

At that moment I realized that *most Christians are already convinced that television and motion pictures are important avenues of evangelism - they just need practical information on how and where to start*. Looking around, I couldn't find a single book that answered those questions, so I decided to write one. It's really written for anyone who's ever watched current Christian television and thought "*I can do better than that, but I don't know where to start*". The book represents nearly twenty years of producing Christian programs, and the information would easily cost hundreds of thousands of dollars if you hired a consultant. But now it's all in one reference book.

Ministries Today: What do you think are the greatest strengths and weaknesses in local Christian broadcasting today?

PC: The *strengths* of local church or ministry programming without question is their *ability to draw people into their local church for further training and spiritual growth*. National programs can communicate the gospel very well, but once the program is over it's difficult to offer effective, personal follow-up. Church-produced programs can encourage the viewer in a particular town or city at a much deeper level by giving them the opportunity to attend a 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. Needless to say, this all depends on that local church or ministry having an effective follow-up and response effort in place.

A *weakness* that I'm particularly sensitive to is the *lack of skill in program direction*. In my workshops and seminars held at events like the National Religious Broadcasters Convention,

I spend a great deal of time teaching directors of Christian programs that directing is more than just randomly cutting between different 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. Local directors should study directing techniques - it will make a dramatic difference in the quality of your programs.

Phil Cooke's book *Successful Christian Television* can be ordered through local bookstores or on the Internet. For more information, check out www.cookepictures.com.

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/>**