

TV ministry: Not just for big-name preachers anymore: Raising cash to stay on the air

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Television ministry once was the province of such prominent preachers as Robert Schuller, Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell. But the business—and it is a business—has come of age.

At this year's National Association of Broadcasters convention in Las Vegas, the "technologies for worship" pavilion drew hundreds of religious broadcasters, and they are only part of the picture. Industry leaders say there are some 10,000 TV ministries around the country, both big and small.

"If you turn on basic cable, and a public access channel, in communities all over—not only the United States—you're going to find churches with a camcorder, a single camera shot, with an on-the-camera microphone, and a pastor who is sincere, who believes the word of God, and has a desire to teach that word and share it with other people," said Rod Payne, media director at First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas, who attended the NAB convention.

While many ministries start small, lots of others invest large sums in television—for everything from high-definition cameras to digital transmitters, not to mention the airtime. Costs vary depending on the levels of distribution.

"If you're going to go . . . to a network or something like that, you're going to be really sticker-shocked with the price that's out there," said Brent Kenyon of the Total Living Network.

Some churches, like Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, keep costs down by operating their own low-power stations and selling time to other TV ministries.

“It’s a compact little operation but very effective,” said John Rogers, director of Frazer’s TV ministry, which reaches 100,000 homes 24 hours a day. “It’s outreach we feel we can offer that enables folks to become familiar with what church is all about, serving Jesus Christ, and to bring them in to be part of the family here.”

Like many churches, Frazer relies heavily on volunteers for its TV production crew. It started its operation 24 years ago with donations from local businesses and money from the church budget. Now it offers training to churches just starting out.

Some churches hire consultants to help them develop new programs. “Most Christian television that you see is very low quality, it’s not very good, and a lot of people have issues with it,” said Phil Cooke, a consultant who wrote the book *Successful Christian Television*.

Many TV ministries get a significant portion of their income from product sales, such as CDs, as opposed to direct appeals for donations. They say they have to raise cash to stay on the air, just as public television does.

The days when stations donated time for programs are long gone. One of the pioneers, Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen and his *Life Is Worth Living*, eventually attracted a sponsor and drew 10 million viewers.

But in the 1960s, under pressure from evangelicals who felt they didn’t have equal access, the government ruled that stations could sell time to religious broadcasters. Evangelicals started buying, and now they are the dominant religious presence on television. The biggest “faith network,” Trinity Broadcasting, has more than 12,000 outlets worldwide and claims an audience of more than 100 million.

Pastor Joel Osteen’s program is said to draw more than 7 million viewers a week. *The Hour of Power*, from the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, estimates its worldwide audience at 20 million a week and its annual cost for airtime at more than \$13 million.

“It’s an expensive proposition to be on television on Sunday morning, and obviously requires a lot of fund-raising, a lot of \$20 gifts and \$30 gifts from people all over the country, to support that and make that happen,” said James Penner, producer of *The Hour of Power*.

Some TV ministries are organized as churches, some as not-for-profit organizations. Either way, they pay no taxes.

Rusty Leonard, who founded the watchdog group Ministry Watch to track the finances of televangelists, rates ministries on financial efficiency and transparency. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, for example, gets an A for transparency and four out of five stars for financial efficiency.

Some names in religious television—including the Trinity Broadcasting Network and Benny Hinn—get poor grades. “They won’t tell you how they’re spending the money they’re asking you to give,” Leonard said. —*Deborah Potter*, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly