

# 11 Religious Broadcasting

**ALTHOUGH DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING** rarely focuses on religious programming, religious broadcasters have a significant and valuable presence on the airwaves. Approximately 42 percent of noncommercial radio stations have a religious format, though that may understate the number since some religious broadcasters operate mixed format stations, which count in a different category).<sup>1</sup> Eighty percent of the 2,400 Christian radio stations and 100 full-power Christian TV stations are nonprofits.<sup>2</sup> As noted above, more than half of the channels set aside for educational programming by DirecTV go to religious stations and almost a third of DISH Network’s educational set-aside capacity is used by religious stations.

According to FCC regulations, religious broadcasting entities are permitted to hold noncommercial educational (NCE) licenses if their station is “used primarily to serve the educational needs of the community” and “for the advancement of educational programs.”<sup>3</sup> As with secular public radio programming, the FCC has traditionally let stations determine what constitutes educational programming.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, the FCC attempted to narrow the definitions, stating that “religious exhortation, proselytizing, or statements of personally-held religious views and beliefs” would

generally not qualify as general educational programming.<sup>5</sup> Given that such a definition could be read to eliminate much religious programming, a firestorm of criticism arose, and the Commission returned to its earlier position, saying that it would not narrow eligibility for NCE licenses.<sup>6</sup>

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Forty percent of Christian TV and radio programs are categorized as “news and information,” according to the National Religious Broadcasters association.<sup>7</sup> The Christian Broadcasting Network employs international and domestic journalists to create its professional-standard newscasts. The Total Living Network, viewed in more than 30 states, produces

programs on current events and personal life issues, and won an Emmy for its original documentary, *Acts of Mercy*, “about the humanitarian work of mercy ships, which are floating hospitals, staffed by volunteer doctors who perform extreme plastic surgery for hideously deformed individuals in West Africa.”<sup>8</sup>

Although most religious broadcasters do not focus on news in the traditional sense, many do offer public affairs programming tied to issues of concern for their audience. Generally speaking, it has been the popular national ministries that have had the resources for original programming, and their focus has been more on issues of national concern than local.

CPB rules prohibit the provision of federal Community Service Grants to noncommercial stations that “further the principles of...religious philosophies.”<sup>9</sup> Religious broadcasters have not sought to have that changed, but have suggested that government restrictions on fundraising and sponsorships might leave noncommercial broadcasters to “languish.”<sup>10</sup> (See Chapter 31, Nonprofit Media.) The FCC prohibits all noncommercial broadcasters from devoting time to fundraising for third parties<sup>11</sup> in an attempt to keep public TV from becoming too commercialized, but some claim this has limited religious broadcasters’ ability to fundraise for religious charities. (See Chapter 31, Nonprofit Media for full discussions.)

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