

# PART 5

## Chapter 42

# Radio and Television

Gordon's heart attacks and bypass surgery brought about one lasting change in his lifestyle. For more than two decades he had considered himself an evangelist by conducting as many as thirty-five three-day crusades in a year. Thursday evenings after work he flew off to some remote country church, taking a dozen and more meetings by Sunday lunchtime, then he flew back to Sydney for his afternoon-to-midnight Sunday program at Wesley Mission.

Now, with a great deal of regret, the itinerant evangelist laid aside his personal appearance appeals to rely on voice-only messages.

This was not an entirely new venture. Dating from his time in Ararat, when he regularly drove to the nearest TV station at midnight to comment on world news from a Christian viewpoint, Gordon had never missed an opportunity to use the airwaves.

Gradually he gained confidence and experience and, when opportunity presented in Cheltenham, he branched out into city TV, making regular appearances at GTV9. By the time he moved to Sydney a decade later, he felt that he was a veteran of radio and TV and considered them as essentials for spreading Christian messages.

'Radio and TV carry the gospel faster and further than any human being can travel', he told his critics. 'God has made this medium possible, and we should use it.'

The former superintendent of WCM, Rev Dr Sir Alan Walker, had a reputation for his hard-hitting controversial stands on some of the social issues of his day. He established the popular Lyceum Platform radio programs that debated relevant social issues.

However, by the time Gordon took over, nearly every radio and TV station had current affairs programs, and the Christian viewpoint was only one of many.

'We'll have to change the format', Gordon said, and the committee members agreed. 'How about just reversing the pattern? Instead of criticising the government after it has moved on certain issues, why don't we present a Christian viewpoint beforehand?'

'Another item that's come to my notice', he waved a report in his hand. 'A 1979 *Quadrant* survey of two thousand citizens didn't even list Wesley Central Mission among the first twenty-five charities. We'll have to do something to increase public awareness of our work.'

(Gordon's push for publicity paid off when a similar survey a decade later showed that Wesley Central Mission had crept up to tenth place, and by 1995 another *Quadrant* report revealed that Wesley Mission ranked as third best known charity.)

With that in mind, 1980 plans emphasised radio programs and spots over 2CH and 'Sunday Celebrations' which took the form of a half hour of sacred music and exposition tied into the College for Christians. Then 2CH changed its policy, and the worship service from the Lyceum Theatre was broadcast live on 2KY and a two-hour program, Country Gospel, became Gordon's weekly talk program. This continued until 1983 when 2GB invited him to commence a talk-back program.

When an opportunity presented itself, Wesley Mission secured some 87.7% shares in Radio 2GB, worth \$3,087,000. Gordon and the WM committee were greatly excited over this deal. They considered that it had enormous potential for spreading Christian ethics and the gospel message of God's wonderful love for 'every nation, kindred, tongue and people' (Revelation 14:6).

Unfortunately, an influential segment of the Uniting Church did not share this view. They contended that it was unethical for a religious body to virtually own a secular radio station. They totally ignored the benefits, concentrating instead on a prolonged attack against the Wesley Mission leaders. Publicly, privately and in the press they criticised the 2GB personnel, the programs and the presenters. For more than half a decade they kept up their concerted censure.

'I think they are still rankling over my appointment as WCM superintendent', Gordon confided to a friend. 'Not once have they even grudgingly admitted that Wesley Mission showed foresight in acquiring the radio station.'

However, there is no denying that 2GB occasioned Gordon more worry and attracted more criticism than any other of his bright ideas. Time and again the station faced financial crises, but each time it survived. Before Wesley Mission's ownership several investors lost millions of dollars. But now the losses were stemmed. No-one, including the Mission, lost any money under the new management. Ratings fluctuated, personnel came and went. Gordon's grey hairs multiplied.

His detractors refused to realise that he was not in sole charge of the station and did not have the final say as to what programs went to air and what did not. Wesley Mission had a policy of not censoring trained journalists, a policy others in the church bureaucracy could not accept.

Although the all-important ratings climbed steadily, they were slow, and for several years the overall condition of 2GB remained far from satisfactory.

The new management also succeeded in reducing expenditure by five million dollars per annum, but still it could not keep pace with costs, which remained around a million dollars above income.

Despairingly Gordon noted in his diary, 'We need to reduce staff and come up with some bright ideas to survive'.

The impossible situation came to a head in mid 1995 when the vociferous minority in the UCA synod made threatening predictions that Wesley Mission would be forced to relinquish its share-holdings in 2GB.

'Attack is the best defence', Gordon reminded Wesley Mission committee.

As usual the committee took the problem to the Lord and, after much prayer and

serious deliberation, they felt impressed to get in first and discuss a merger with John Singleton, the owner of 2CH.

Gordon pointed out to John that by operating the two stations as one they could slash costs. The combination would need only one manager, one sales-manager and one set of offices in a single building

In this swift unadvertised move the WM effectively silenced the opposition's accusations of ownership by selling off all their 2GB shares to Radio Super Highway, which owns 2CH and Harbour Radio Ltd. It would form a new company, amalgamating radio stations 2GB and 2CH.

At the same time, the WM purchased fifteen per cent shares in the new company and entered into a legally binding contract which granted them all their previous 2GB broadcasting opportunities of 168 hours weekly, plus the fact that now they would be heard over two stations instead of one, doubling their air time and number of potential listeners.

This move also boosted WM's financial reserves, guaranteed them an income and removed all grounds for criticism. Wesley Mission could no longer be held responsible for any content of the stations' programs except the Christian segments that they themselves prepared and broadcast.

Even this did not solve every problem. By the end of the year, before the actual plans came to fruition, there were daily meetings to consider the 2GB/2CH merger. Gordon observed that 'the lawyers and accountants are fighting over every imaginable detail. This is very expensive.'

By April 1996 there were still public insinuations about unkept promises and unpaid moneys; the newspapers had a field day. One reported this and another reported that. Some portrayed Gordon as the villain, others as the hero. The public did not know what to believe. Eventually all the rumours died down and now, five years on, the Wesley Mission radio programs continue to flourish.

As the documents were signed, God's seal came in an unexpected way. One of WM's elderly listeners, who had no connection with any church, visited Gordon to discuss his own vision of helping others. Supported by his accountants and legal advisers, he met with the Moyes and handed over \$11.7 million, the largest donation ever given to WM. Gordon's insistence that radio would pay off better than they could ever believe was justified.

Naturally, Gordon played a leading role in all media negotiations and program preparations, but he had a loyal offsideer in Martin Johnson.

Their partnership began in 1982 when Martin Johnson joined the WM team. Martin's expertise lay in directing video and television programs. He could do anything from write scripts to manage production, and he was looking for some way that he could use his talents for the Lord. At the same time, Gordon was searching for someone to help him implement his ideas for using TV as a Christian tool. It became an ideal partnership — in everything except height; Martin stands 196 centimetres in his socks.

With his work centred in Sydney, 'where it's all happening', Gordon determined to really get into media work. In collaboration with Martin and their own TV crew the WM produced a weekly television program titled *Turn Round Australia*. This featured gospel music, interviews with people who variously contributed to society, free counselling, and a talk on Christian ethics delivered in Gordon's inimitable style.

It took a while for the responses to the *Turn Round Australia* program to gather momentum. At 6.00 am only a few viewers took advantage of the offer of instant telephone counselling, but the number increased weekly and eventually put a strain on the available volunteer counsellors.

During the early 1990s the Wesley Mission decided to re-run the *Turn Round Australia* programs at 2.00 am on Friday mornings. To their surprise they got more feedback from that showing than from the one at 6:30 am on Sunday. A little analysis revealed the reason. The people watching TV at that hour of the night were not only shift workers or nurses; they were people in homes, hospitals, jails or other institutions — people who were unable to sleep because of illness, worry or sorrow. They were people with needs that could be met with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Always alert for new trends, Gordon noted that the new medium of video had made religious movie films almost obsolete. Videos could be produced and distributed for a fraction of the cost of a movie film, and people could view them in their own homes.

During his years of ministry he had developed several series of sermons on the Life, Teachings and Miracles of Jesus, the Life of St Paul, and similar themes. Now he decided to make them into a series of TV segments and videos that would be shot on location.

'Imagine it', he enthused to Beverley, 'preaching about Jesus in his own land: the Sermon on the Mount delivered on a mountain slope beside the Lake of Galilee; the parable of the vineyard; the net full of fish; all of it photographed right there in Israel. It will bring the New Testament to life.'

Beverley agreed. A trip to the Holy Land had long been on their agenda, but time and finances had held them back. Now, with a reason for the visit, it would be a wonderful experience.

'Won't you need expert help, Gordon?' she asked. 'Our David's good at photography but —'

Her husband laughed. 'This idea is beyond our capabilities, Bev, but we've found the right man in Martin Johnson.'

In April 1984 the TV team flew to Israel and made twelve thirty minute TV programs on *Discovering Jesus*. They ran off twenty-five hours of film which could be edited back in Australia. Gordon's thirty-year collection of sermons provided material for the TV scripts and for the full-length videos they planned to produce.

As soon as they finished the TV scripts, Gordon and Martin chose casts for the videos. A team of researchers, costume experts, camera crew and sound people

finetuned each sermon or TV script into videos: *Discovering Jesus*; *Discovering Paul*; *Discovering the Young Church* and *Discovering Israel*.

It took the major part of two years and cost \$1.2 million to make the ‘Discovering’ series. The money did not come from Wesley Mission but from private investors, including a group of Rotarian businessmen who believed in Gordon’s vision. The videos have been sold worldwide and repaid their cost many times over.

Working together, Gordon and Martin have developed a near-perfect partnership. Neither man can tolerate second-best. Drawing from his many years of ministry and public speaking, Gordon provides an endless stream of talks for his weekly radio and TV programs, and, drawing on his expertise, Martin arranges the best camera angles, backgrounds, light, and sound effects for their TV features.

The two meet frequently to trade ideas and suggestions, choose guest artists and collaborate on all the minutiae that goes into the preparation of features for radio or TV. If at the last minute a chosen guest artist or interviewee cancels an engagement and Gordon cannot be contacted, Martin feels confident enough to take the responsibility for selecting a substitute.

‘We have worked together for so long’, he says, ‘that I know pretty well what Gordon likes and doesn’t like and I choose accordingly’.

For many years they conducted Sunday Night Live with Gordon as speaker and interviewer and with faithful Martin at the second mike caring for all the details of timing and program progression, making announcements in his pleasing deep voice, and ready to step into the breach if anything went wrong.

Eventually the program committee decided that this was not the most productive way of using Martin’s superior skills. Now he manages the WM’s growing Media Communications Department, which produces more TV, radio and magazines than any religious organisation in Australia, not only for Wesley Mission but for a score of other Christian organisations including the Christian Television Association.

Long before the end of the century they invaded the Internet and, in an amazingly short time, hundreds and then thousands of people began tapping into their homesite on the web. They also moved into channel TV, appearing on Optus Vision Channel 31.

Today in every major city of Australia upwards of three-quarters of a million people are watching TV at any given hour of the day or night. What an opportunity for Christians to spread the story of God’s love. Wesley Mission is making the most of it.