2 stations add more religion to their lineups
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Looking to capitalize on the shared moral values that many Utahns hold, two local Christian media outlets are pumping up their selection of locally produced programming and hoping to expand their reach.

KTMW-TV Channel 20, owned locally by Alpha and Omega Communications and affiliated with the Southern Baptist-owned FamilyNet TV network, has added a third locally produced religious program to its lineup, according to general manager Dennis Ermel. Earlier this month, the station initiated a weekly faith-based women's talk show, "Succeeding Gracefully," with local host Tiffany Berg, to its menu.

The hourlong program, aired Tuesdays at 11 a.m., focuses on various themes that include building self-esteem through Christian values. Berg said she wanted to help women explore their daily decisions because her own history is replete with struggles over self-esteem. After years of making "Hollywood choices (that) bring us Jerry Springer results," Berg said she was finally able to conquer some personal demons five years ago and has since done a lot of public speaking and writing about the issues women face.

"I made a lot of those choices in my life and it's been pretty painful. I'm coming back to some faith-based decisions," she said.

Only a few shows have been taped so far, she said, but already she has received positive feedback. Her next taping will include local experts dealing with how faith affects personal politics and healing from abortion, she said.

"I know some people start out thinking, 'I want to be on TV,' but that's a pretty scary thing for me. The message I have is something I feel is so important that I think I have to get over that fear. I'm on my second marriage and I want it to work. I think there are a lot of women who have made choices that have brought them a lot of pain, and I think they need that message of redemption and personal value."

The idea for the show grew out of a meeting between Berg and Ermel with the help of evangelical Pastor Greg Johnson. The station produces a program featuring Johnson, founder of Standing Together Ministries, called "Meet the Pastor." That show has been on the air for several months, Ermel said, and continues to grow in popularity.

Pastor Johnson's ministry became widely known among Utahns last year when he and other evangelical leaders held a news conference outside the LDS Conference Center downtown to decry the tactics of street preachers who were mocking Latter-day Saint teachings by desecrating religious clothing during the faith's semiannual general conference. He led the charge in calling for kindness and marshaled local Christians to stand on the sidewalk outside the Conference Center to politely greet LDS conference-goers.

The popularity of Pastor Johnson's program spawned a call-in program called "Ask the Pastor" that allows viewers to ask questions on religious topics. That show features a panel of local Christian leaders from a variety of local churches who offer

different perspectives on questions that are either called in to the show or e-mailed in and read on the air, Ermel said.

The station is also affiliated with Christian radio station KMRI 1550 AM, which has just begun airing a new locally produced program hosted by Pastor Clint Roberts, whose young adult-focused ministry at the University of Utah grew into a downtown outreach that opened just before the 2002 Winter Olympics — the now-defunct Main Street Coffee House.

His hourlong call-in show, "Theology Nexus," began airing earlier this month on Thursdays at 5 p.m. and focuses on specific theological issues. Pastor Roberts, who also leads a Christian outreach at the U. in partnership with the nationally based Intervarsity Fellowship, said the program is "kind of open-ended" but tackles meaty religious issues that go beyond the standard Christian radio fare. The show leads into a broadcast by internationally known Christian philosopher Ravi Zacharias, who will be in Utah for a speaking tour in mid-November that includes a stop at the Tabernacle on Temple Square.

"We thought it was appropriate to group that with our show," Pastor Roberts said, noting the combination will offer "two hours of a little deeper-water stuff than maybe what you would expect on a general Christian station."

Both Ermel and Pastor Roberts agree the local programming is an effort to garner a larger audience in a market not known for strong Christian broadcasting. "I think they're working to get programs that are more relevant and engaging," Pastor Roberts said. On his station, there are "not a lot of people who listen on purpose. We get those who are either scanning the dial and find it or those who know something about it."

Response to the local programming on both TV and radio "has been incredibly exciting," Ermel said, noting he initially decided to generate some local TV programming two years ago with a call-in show called "Facts for Life," featuring Dr. Dennis Harper, to address medical questions. The program generated calls from all over Utah as well as Nevada and Wyoming, he said. That made him wonder whether local faith-based programming would fly.

He says it has.

"We feel very gratified the way people are responding to these new programs." Though he doesn't have ratings numbers, Ermel said he gauges success by feedback from viewers and the fact that their call-in programs regularly fill the station's phone lines with first-time callers.

Ermel said he also wondered whether the programs would generate "a lot of weird phone calls and dumb questions, but the intelligence of these questions we're getting is overwhelming us. We screen them but very seldom have we not put someone on that's called in." Though Channel 20 is a small station with only three paid employees, it has generated significant interest, he said. Lots of volunteers help the station function, running the cameras and doing technical work they're still learning to master.

The full-power commercial station with the potential to reach 750,000 households garners most of its income from running "shop at home" programming, infomercials and some paid programming. As an affiliate, much of Channel 20 programming comes through Fort Worth, Texas-based FamilyNet, a full-time

television network airing more than 50 hours of original, values-based programs weekly.

The network's goal is to provide "reliable, safe viewing for today's family" as an outreach of the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board. The network claims a reach of 31 million households nationwide.

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