

# FROM ROCK TO RELIGION FOR REBORN WCFL

By **Vicki Vass. Special to the Tribune**  
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✎ "Gospel music isn't just for Sundays anymore" is the contention of the Nashville-based Gospel Music Association.

And on the FM dial of your radio, WCFL (104.7) is out to prove that motto true. Just a little over a year ago, the Morris station switched over from a classic rock format to one of contemporary Christian music after being purchased by the Illinois Bible Institute of Carlinville, Ill., between Springfield and St. Louis. The institute owns several radio stations downstate.

Station manager Jay Greener of Morris said that WCFL operates on a shoestring budget of \$360,000 annually, financed by listener donations, with no advertising. Within the first few months, listenership was estimated at 10,000, with the majority hailing from Aurora, Wheaton, Naperville and Joliet.

"This is a good area for us," Greener said. "There are lots of opportunities for expansion."

Greener had a background in Christian radio but had left another institute station in 1991 to pursue a master's degree in theology and communication at Yale University. He returned when he got the call about WCFL.

"It was a good time for me to come back," he said. "I felt the potential was here, and I had some ideas for programming."

Greener began by studying the existing religious stations. "Most Christian stations reach a narrow part of the market--those already involved in a church," he said. "We wanted to be more accessible. We decided what was missing was a contemporary music station."

The format, he said, would reach the station's target audience--those in their 20s or 30s. WCFL's seven-day-a-week format is contemporary Christian music, interrupted only by two half-hour talk programs, at 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"We decided music was the best way to reach people," Greener said. "Music is not so openly preachy, and it tells a story."

But just because a song is on a Christian label doesn't mean WCFL will play it. The station stays away from inspirational tracks, even though all are offered in a playlist, near Braidwood.

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Hannah brings his 11 years of experience in Christian radio across the country to the task of choosing music for the station; he personally listens to and selects each song played and also relies on comments from listeners.

"We only play about 10 percent of what we receive," Hannah said.

To be classified Christian, a song's lyrics must be based on the four gospels of the New Testament.

"The message stays constant. The artist just changes the way it's given," Hannah said. "My goal is to reach as many people as possible and to be their number one source of Christian music. Our most important goal is penetrating people's hearts."

He terms it a seed-planting process. "We play the song," he said, "and hopefully through the process they'll be impacted for God."

Early demographic studies show that 30 percent of WCFL's listeners are newcomers to Christian music, Hannah said.

Gospel Music Association projections confirm the potential for growth in Christian radio, according to association president Bruce Koblish. In January 1993, Koblish said, the Wall Street Journal reported "that revenues (for Christian music) have nearly tripled during the past decade to nearly \$500 million . . . in Christian bookstores alone."

Since that time, the music has become more visible through the addition of stations such as WCFL and through availability in mass retailers such as Target, he said. Since enlisting Target as a sponsor of the annual Dove music awards (the Grammys of Christian music), sales have increased considerably.

"This shows that if the music is there and available, people will buy it," Koblish said. "People are listening to it."

Besides developing a relationship with listeners, Greener said, the station has been reaching out to local churches, helping to sponsor blood drives, food drives, family outings to the Kane County Cougars and other events.

"Our biggest goal is to let people know we're here," Greeneyr said.

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