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Contemporary Christian radio in Britain: A new genre on the national dial

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Abstract

Only in the second decade of the twenty-first century has contemporary Christian radio appeared as a new genre in Britain, unlike the United States where it has long been a significant format. Responsibility for religious broadcasting in the United Kingdom was, for most of the twentieth century, fulfilled by the BBC. However, the gradual relaxation of broadcasting regulations since the 1980s and the introduction of Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) have provided openings for Christian radio stations, and since 2009 the United Kingdom has had two national stations broadcasting from mainland studios for the first time. This article explores recent developments in this genre, using primary research interviews with Christian radio broadcasters. It suggests that what started out as a way for Christians to evangelize and proselytize their message has become a radio service that broadcasts almost exclusively to converted believers. It also observes that the programming and scheduling of these stations closely resembles the speech-and-music-mix style of BBC Local Radio, implying an attempt to insert themselves directly into the mainstream of the radio spectrum.

Keywords

British radio
religious radio
Christian radio
radio genres
radio programming formats
radio history

Introduction

National Christian radio, as a genre, only appeared in Britain as recently as 2009. Indeed, towards the end of the twentieth-century religious broadcasting had perhaps found itself in an uneasy place in British society: for some it was felt to be either irrelevant, intrusive or even problematic (Quicke and Quicke 1992: 4–9). In spite of this, non-BBC broadcasters who were keen to share an evangelical message had, since the 1960s, attempted to take advantage of each change in UK legislation, and every technological advance that had opened up a new delivery platform for radio, to create a distinctively British style of programming albeit loosely based on contemporary US Christian radio formats. This article reflects on the emergence of the Christian radio genre in the United Kingdom, considers its programme formats and audiences, and is intended to complement a review in this journal of the similar long-standing genre in the United States (Lochte 2008). It will argue that the current format of these national Christian stations mirrors established BBC Local Radio styles and offers listeners an easily recognizable programme format across the day of music and conversation. This article also concludes that these Christian stations, instead of proselytizing, are preaching to the converted.

For the purpose of this article, a distinction is made between the religious broadcasting typified by material made for BBC radio as part of the general programming (both for

national and local BBC stations) – which includes the short daily Church services, royal weddings, Christmas carol concerts and *Thought for the Day* – and the evangelical style of Christian radio programming being pioneered by British stations such as UCB-UK and Premier Christian Radio. It is the latter that are considered here. Their formats, and sometimes their content, more closely reflect those developed in the United States amongst Pentecostal/Evangelical radio broadcasters since the 1920s. Christian radio in the United States developed in the relatively free-market environment of commercial broadcasting (Kay 2009: 245), and Lochte (2008) has observed how the genre has continued to develop and change in the United States to the present day. He argued that contemporary US Christian radio was typified by two formats, either ‘spoken-word’ (preaching and teaching) or ‘music-based’ (2008: 118). Since the 1940s it has been ‘almost exclusively in the hands of conservative evangelical, fundamentalist and charismatic Christians’ (Lochte 2008: 124). In other words, mainstream Protestant or Catholic organizations have had little or no involvement in radio broadcasting in the United States. The situation in Britain has been subtly different.

A brief history

Since the advent of the BBC in 1922, first as a company and later as a public corporation under the leadership of John Reith, religious broadcasting had become to be regarded as a ‘cultural and moral expectation’ (Kay 2009: 246), and from the outset, ‘Christianity was presented as part of the BBC world-view’ (Quicke and Quicke 1992: 62). The BBC had for over 80 years had a near-effective monopoly of domestic religious programmes in Britain, and as Hunt observes, ‘This ensured that, from early on, the BBC in particular took pride in being ecumenical, tolerant and uncontroversial’ (2010: 26). This early history has been charted elsewhere (Wolfe 1984; Briggs 1961: 240–42, 272–75) and the radio content broadly consisted of the transmission of Christian church services (mostly from Anglican churches), together with discussions and talks by religious figures (Phillips 2003: 202). The BBC provided individual programmes amongst its general output rather than a dedicated radio channel. Direct appeals to listeners to accept Christianity were – through custom and practice, rather than regulation – not part of this output, even though ‘apologetics’ was regularly used in many religious talks on the BBC’s airwaves (Wolfe 1984: 309–11; Phillips 2003: 141–54).

During this period there were stations based outside of the British mainland, broadcasting Christian programming on short wave across continents or medium wave from central Europe to the United Kingdom. Examples include: Trans World Radio (TWR), which began broadcasting to Europe from transmitters near Tangier, Morocco, in 1954, and from 1960 onwards used the enormous power of the Radio Monte Carlo AM transmitter to rebroadcast American preachers (Kay 2009: 248); Radio Caroline during the 1960s, which played out programmes by US evangelists; and the sustained use of short wave radio by international (mostly the United States) evangelists aiming to reach worldwide audiences (Stoneman 2007: 115–16).

From the late 1980s a change of emphasis in broadcasting began, in part reflecting the gradual secularization of British society over the past two centuries, which had appeared to gather pace in recent decades (Bruce 2002; Dobbelaere 2002). The BBC still produced a substantial number of hours of religious broadcasting, but under a broader definition of what constituted such output. This led to satisfying the needs of a wide range of religious groups but ‘effectively squeez[ed] out specifically “Christian” content of programmes’ (Hunt 2010: 28–29). The effect was to create a more inclusive representation of the nation’s beliefs:

‘Religious output by the BBC has thus come to be more *about* religion and less specifically religious’ (Hunt 2010: 29, original emphasis). This programme content gap has been filled by the emerging independent Christian radio stations since the mid 1990s.

Commercial radio in the United Kingdom began in 1973, and legislation required these broadcasters to include some public service and religious programming in their output. The stations were not, however, allowed to be owned and run by religious organizations. Typically the commercial stations of the period would include a Sunday morning music and chat show themed on religious topics, without being overtly evangelical (or even specifically Christian). This requirement for stations to include religious programming in their output was later relaxed under the 1990 Broadcasting Act (McDonnell 2009: 154), which saw a general opening-up of the regulatory framework of British commercial radio as the government of the day sought to ‘stimulate competition, increase efficiency and widen consumer choice’ (Crisell 2002: 226). Meanwhile, late-night broadcasts from outside the British mainland continued: by TWR from transmitters in Monte Carlo, and pre-recorded half-hour slots paid-for by American preachers on the, by now illegal, offshore station Radio Caroline.

In the 1980s, as late night foreign-based broadcasts continued to reach limited audiences, United Christian Broadcasters (UCB) joined these established organizations attempting to reach the United Kingdom. In 1987 it began leasing the transmitters of Manx Radio, on the Isle of Man, after close-down. UCB was an international off-shoot of a New Zealand Christian broadcasting organization (Cummings 1996a), and this development was to be the beginning of a long-standing commitment to broadcasting in Britain. UCB, together with other Christian organizations, actively lobbied politicians and mounted publicity campaigns in the debates which led up to the 1990 Broadcasting Act. In particular, UCB was campaigning against how anti-Christian some in government and at the Radio Authority appeared to be (Quicke and Quicke 1992: 58). Reportedly the authorities feared that, with the start of satellite TV in the United Kingdom, American-style televangelism would emerge in the United Kingdom both on TV and on the radio.

In the event, the 1990 Broadcasting Act opened up the limited development of Christian radio stations. UCB launched a satellite radio service in 1993 (Cox 1999; Cummings 1996b), and Premier Christian Radio was awarded three AM frequencies in the greater London area from 1995 (Hunt 2010: 31). This was the first opportunity Christian broadcasters had to be based in UK mainland studios and operate full-time schedules (Cummings 1996a), even if their audiences were still relatively small and lacking in research data.

Also, from the early 1990s, the legislation allowed for restricted service licences (RSLs). These were either for AM or FM broadcasts to a limited area, or for a short period of time, to mark a sporting event (e.g. Formula 1 or Wimbledon), a religious festival (Easter or Ramadan) or a music event (such as the Glastonbury festival) (Fleming 2010: 39–40). One example was a series of Radio Cracker stations, which raised money to support Christian debt-relief charities working in developing and emerging countries.

The government agency Ofcom, the regulatory body since 2004, began awarding a growing number of community radio licences to a wide range of volunteer groups, allowing them to operate low-powered FM transmitters. Since 2007 a small number of these full time ultra-local stations opened: Cross Rhythms is a loose partnership of three local Christian FM stations in Plymouth, Stoke-on-Trent and Teeside, which share a limited amount of programming, whilst Branch FM is a Christian community radio station in the Dewsbury

area. However, Christian radio stations still could not hold national AM or FM licences (Stoller 2010: 272; Hunt 2010: 30), and during this period Christian radio remained ‘fragmented and localized’ (Hunt 2010: 31).

Potential Christian broadcasting groups continued to lobby the government and campaign for a change in the regulations (Hunt 2010: 32), which eventually led to authorization being given for the use by them of the digital radio (Digital Audio Broadcasting [DAB]) spectrum. Ofcom had decided to change its ‘Guidance for religious bodies’, to allow the use of DAB at national as well as local level by Christian broadcasters (2011). UCB-UK began broadcasting nationally on DAB in December 2009 (Wooding 2009), and Premier started in September of the same year (Plunkett 2009). However, analogue AM and FM national frequencies continued to remain forbidden.

This development has had its critics. The DAB broadcasting system in Britain was regarded by some media analysts as an unpopular and uneconomic radio platform since its launch during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Goddard 2010: 100). Goddard goes on to note at the time that, ‘... DAB radio is filling up with religious, ethnic and publicly funded broadcasters who don’t need conventional profits to drive their business models’ (2010: 100). Here he refers to the fact that Christian radio stations were run by not-for-profit companies and registered as charities which relied on donations to the parent religious body. The use of DAB for national broadcasting also worried Hunt, who warned that religious broadcasting in Britain could become a marginalized genre, ‘... light years away from the past distant world that attempted to speak of what was understood to be in the “public interest” and that such an interest was directed from and to the “nation’s church”’ (2010: 36). However, in this respect, the notion of the BBC as such an institution with a defined spiritual relationship had already long since disappeared.

This study is based on fieldwork interviews with station managers, producers and presenters and will consider Christian radio operators broadcasting in the United Kingdom at the time of writing: Premier Radio and UCB-UK, both on national DAB; the Cross Rhythms group as well as Branch FM, which are independent community stations; and Refresh FM a local RSL station in Manchester. It also includes TWR-UK which, as well as continuing its AM night-time programmes, has broadcast to the United Kingdom via satellite since 1995 and describes itself in its British licensing documentation as ‘a European Christian radio service’ (Ofcom 2015). Indeed, TWR-UK is the only major radio service in the United Kingdom that, for financial reasons, has not so far taken up the opportunity to broadcast on national DAB. Russell Farnworth, the CEO of TWR-UK based in Altrincham near Manchester says his station’s service of Christian news, current affairs and Bible-teaching became 24 hours only when it joined the Sky satellite service in 2001 (2015).

All of these stations also broadcast on the Internet, however this platform is the subject of future research and will not be considered here.

Programming formats

With the establishing in Britain in the 1990s of short-term Christian RSLs on AM and FM, as well as the opening of low-powered FM community radio stations, independent Christian broadcasters had opportunities to develop full day-long schedules of Christian programming. To an extent, some of the programming of these Christian stations in the United Kingdom reflected contemporary US styles, and they were the formats that have been picked up by the

new national DAB stations. They featured a mixture of spoken word (longer teaching/preaching programmes tend to be scheduled after dark through to 6a.m., before the start of the breakfast show), mid-morning current affairs phone-ins, and personality presenter-led music shows of at least two hours in duration (Lochte 2008: 117–18). In the opinion of the authors this closely follows the established and enduring format of the BBC's English Local Radio stations from the 1990s onwards. It is plausible to suggest that the Christian radio genre in Britain has adopted this format because it is a simple, convenient and established way to fill broadcasting hours, and by doing so has rapidly and seamlessly inserted itself into the developed radio sector with a format that audiences easily understand. The only difference being that the music played is predominantly (but not necessarily exclusively) contemporary Christian music.

From the 1970s to the 2010s the content of domestic US Christian radio stations changed from aggressive 'fire-and-brimstone' preaching, towards programmes that engaged with listeners and offer encouragement rather than confrontation (Lochte 2008: 117). This friendly style has been picked up and used in Britain in the 2010s. However Andrew Graystone, the director of the Church and Media Network, a lobby and training group, says that,

The Christian radio sector in the UK is massively underdeveloped compared to the comparable sectors in particularly America or in Australia. [...] When it became legal in Britain the churches looked down on it and didn't really want to engage with it. (2013)

This difference is a result both of the relative geographic smallness of Britain, and of the cultural and religious heritage still attached to the BBC. It also explains why Christian radio in Britain is run by independent groups, not directly aligned to any one religious denomination.

It is, however, worthy of note that UK-based Christian radio stations have begun to move away from content produced by US churches and preachers. These are regarded as lacking cultural relevance for British listeners. For UCB-UK, 'There was a time when we did buy in a lot of teaching programmes from the States which were very good and very interesting, if sometimes a little culturally disconnected' (Hammond 2013). This may not be just down to differences in presentation styles, but also because of the topics discussed and the target age groups. Cross Rhythms, which is a youth-focused Christian radio station explains that they,

... don't like to get too much from outside the area because we're a local community radio station, [...]we probably feel that the American accents are just a little bit too big a step, culturally, for most listeners. (Bellamy 2013)

And that popular American teaching programmes like *Focus on the Family* would not be appropriate because, 'that's more for an older-aged Christian in terms of value to them' (Bellamy 2013). Russell Farnworth of TWR-UK, the satellite radio station, says 'some of the American programming suffers a little bit because of the references they use' (2015), which highlights a perceived cultural divide in some of the radio material broadcast over Britain. Other stations such as Refresh FM do not use any American preaching, partly because they broadcast for 28 days on a RSL, but also because 'if our vision is Christian radio for Manchester we actually want to use Mancunians' (Dobbins 2013). UCB-UK occasionally uses material that was written in America and, '... anglicises it, with their permission obviously, then broadcasts it in a British voice' (Hammond 2013). These attempts by Christian broadcasters in the United Kingdom to use original, local, content highlights their

commitment to engaging listeners in culturally relevant ways, but it also reveals the dilemma of attempting to broadcast both to believers and non-believers at the same time.

Intended audiences – the dilemma

To broadcast *at* or to broadcast *to*? The practicalities of Christian radio in Britain mean that, despite attempts to be accessible to non-Christians, the key audience would, at the time of writing, appear to be almost exclusively believers. If this is the case it suggests that these stations are not proselytizing and seeking to spread the Christian gospel to non-believers, but instead are preaching to the converted. Furthermore, each station appears to be approaching this issue in a different way.

This tension of having two audiences, both with differing needs, is reflected by Marijke Hoek, a Christian author, who talks about the practical changes that need to be made when addressing these two audiences: ‘If you speak for a Christian audience, you may want to speak with one language, and if you speak to a non-Christian audience you would amend the way you refer to the origins of your faith, or your work, which is Christian’ (2013). This is also the case for the music that is played, for example Cross Rhythms who,

... don’t play worship music during the day [...] because that’s music that relates to my experience as a Christian, where I’ve already chosen to have a relationship with Jesus and God. Worship music talks about that relationship. Now, if I’m not a Christian I’ve not given myself to that relationship yet so I don’t understand music and songs that lyrically are talking about that dimension. (Bellamy 2013)

This creates a tension for Christian broadcasters when they seek to serve the differing groups and unite them as listeners. However, Jonathan Bellamy of Cross Rhythms that is based in Stoke-on-Trent stresses that they’re ‘not a church-on-the-air’ and that they are ‘not targeting a Christian listener’ (2013), despite continuing to identify themselves as a Christian radio station. Bellamy adds,

... my next door neighbour’s not a Christian but probably 80-90% of my life is very similar to his: health issues, education for kids, crime in the area, what’s on at the cinema or the theatre, how Stoke City did at the weekend and so on. (2013)

He argues that Cross Rhythms is ‘engaged in the life of the city’ and therefore needs to articulate its involvement in local culture and society (Bellamy 2013). In a similar manner, Branch FM takes the position that, ‘If the community is involved, that includes non-Christian organisations, as long as they are doing good, then obviously we will support that wholeheartedly’ (Hodgson 2013). It is an approach which allows a station such as Cross Rhythms to reach out the wider community by,

... talking to the council, all the different departments, whether that’s events or roads or pest control or whatever it may be; the Job Centre; the Citizens’ Advice Bureau; we will have the theatre around with any latest productions; we will talk to local businesses, events that are taking place and so on. (Bellamy 2013)

These practical examples of reflecting general-interest viewpoints on air are attempts to attract a wider audience to tune in to these radio stations, regardless of the individual listener’s beliefs. However, such attempts to cater to a non-Christian audience tend to be in

terms of delivery, general topics and presentation style, whilst the underlying core content still retains a Christian theme. Lochte highlights this trend also occurring in the United States, where stations are creating content that is appealing to general audiences through the encouragement of healthy conservative lifestyles (2008: 117–18), but that also seeks to minister directly to converted Christians. Dave Rose, the programme controller of Premier Christian Radio, one of the larger stations in the United Kingdom, says that he advises presenters to be aware of their choice of vocabulary, avoiding ‘... horrendous bits of Christian jargon that are just going to make a non-Christian listener freak out’ (2013).

TWR-UK is a fully autonomous partner of the American missionary organization, and through its satellite radio service it seeks to address British audiences. Russell Farnworth from TWR-UK says he knows his audience is ‘... largely white, middle class, probably educated [...] and if they’re not listening to us they’re listening to Classic FM or BBC Radio 4; most of them read *The Times* and are probably either Baptist or Anglican’ (2015). However, there appears to be no single approach to building audiences. Andrew Graystone describes what can happen to some stations:

Each Christian radio station started off with an intention to be accessible to people who aren’t believers and each of them, in turn, discovered that they couldn’t attract an audience of non-believers and that they couldn’t finance themselves without appealing directly to Christians. So their intention now isn’t to attract non-Christians, it’s to super serve the Christian market. (2013)

Graystone’s view illustrates the dilemma facing these stations. The financial aspect of running an independent radio station in Britain pervades every aspect of scheduling and programming, as Barnard observes,

The centrality of the audience to broadcasters and broadcasting content is a given: without an audience of some kind, the broadcasting of any message by any means is meaningless. A radio station may exist primarily as a profit source for its owners, or as a means of serving a public, but in each instance the audience is pivotal. (2000: 87)

Dave Rose of Premier Christian Radio considers that...

I think we would be naive if we didn’t admit that the majority of our audience are going to be Christians, and when you run a radio station called Premier Christian Radio, that’s sort of bound to be the case. (2013)

Through identifying a core Christian audience, Premier has been able to develop an appropriate mission statement: ‘To enable people to put their faith at the heart of daily life and to bring Christ to their communities’ (2014). It is thus clearly ministering mainly to a Christian audience.

At the time of writing Premier is the only Christian station that commissions audience research from Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR), the industry-wide independent research organization in Britain. The figures (for Premier’s London AM broadcasts only) suggest that the station’s audience is relatively small, but its listeners mostly stay tuned for longer than listeners do to many other stations (RAJAR 2015). They have been described as tending to be female, middle-aged Christians who ‘support religious and Third World charities and enjoy listening to classical music’ (McCawley 2004). Premier also carries out

listener focus groups at its London offices, where Dave Rose says, ‘We give them tea and cake, and I chair a discussion about what they think about Premier’ (2013). Premier then uses that information to make changes to its broadcast content, for example music, discussions and guests: ‘We know from the research who mostly listens, who our biggest audience is, and that tends to be women, mums, and evangelical church go-ers. So what we tend to do is aim most of our programming towards that kind of middle ground’ (Rose 2013). Examples of this include a programme called *Woman to Woman* (2013) on weekday mid-mornings covering issues aimed at Christian women, and a Sunday morning show of hymns and popular worship songs hosted by a BBC TV *Songs of Praise* (2013) presenter, Pam Rhodes.

At UCB-UK, the other national DAB Christian radio station, the approach to audience appears to be somewhat different. Paul Hammond, presenter and head of news says, ‘We don’t target a specific demographic with what we do’, and that they,

... broadcast the very best that we can and we don’t really worry about the mindset of the person who’s listening, what we worry about is the ethos that drives us as a Christian based station with a Christian world-view. (2013)

However, critical listening of UCB-UK’s radio output suggests a striking similarity with BBC English Local Radio output and styles, which would imply a target audience of middle- and lower-middle-class listeners in their 50s (Linfoot 2007: 129). This non-specific approach to audiences is reflected in another Christian radio station, Refresh FM, which broadcasts in Manchester as an RSL, where rather than targeting a key audience, its priority is ‘getting Christian presenters and getting good music out there, and really the good news of Jesus’ (Dobbins 2013). However, this does not mean that defining a target audience is not important to Christian broadcasters; it is simply not regarded as being of the greatest priority. Maureen Dobbins at Refresh FM says that ‘after serving Jesus Christ, one of the things that we are very much concerned about is actually making sure that we know who our target audience is’ (2013). These comments so far suggest that there is no general agreement amongst Christian broadcasters as to which takes priority: maximizing audiences of believers or of non-believers (or indeed, both).

There is the danger that Christian radio stations cater almost exclusively to the needs of their core audience’s Christian belief system, and reflect most of their schedules towards topics related to Christianity. In doing so they effectively become a ‘church-on-air’, and create a ‘Christian ghetto’ (Bellamy 2013), and are ‘a bubble in which Christians are servicing the Christian community with Christian content of a particular kind’ (Graystone 2013). This effectively excludes wider communities and,

The risk is that if people live in that bubble they just live in a smaller and smaller world and in this case Christians become less able to communicate with people in the mainstream on the outside world. (Graystone 2013)

This suggests that more detailed audience research into who is actually listening to these stations would shed further light on this problem. It also has implications for the financing and business models of these radio stations in Britain. The funding for the two national DAB Christian radio stations, Premier and UCB-UK, comes largely from donations from listeners, and whilst observing that they have a duty to provide content that is deserving of those contributions from listeners, they defend that this does not lead to editorial bias:

We [Premier] sell commercial airtime and sponsorships too, but we are largely donor-funded now. It does mean we have a responsibility to them, I believe, to spend that money wisely and carefully and try to fulfil their expectations. (Rose 2013)

This is another defining feature of Christian radio, separating it from the rest of the commercial radio industry. However, there is criticism that this particular funding model is not compatible with the commercial radio market:

... if you believe in commercial radio, if you believe in the market in any sense at all then neither of those is really legitimate because getting income from donations from people who've got another motivation is always going to skew the editorial content of your programmes. (Graystone 2013)

The stations themselves see their work as a Christian ministry; they see their mission not to preach but to 'convey the Christian perspective and world-view in a relevant way' (Hammond 2013), and they draw the line when using radio as an evangelistic tool because the majority of listeners are already Christian. Dave Rose defines Premier's role by saying,

I don't see it as an 'evangelistic' mission – the majority of people who listen are already Christians, but it's certainly a ministry. The feedback we get from the audience is very clear – they see it as a ministry too. (2013)

This way of thinking about their role as religious broadcasters is different from the missionary aims of the early Christian evangelists who pioneered US Christian radio. One reason why the interpretation of their function has changed is described by Andrew Graystone who thinks that despite radio being an engaging and informative platform of communication there are limits to its influence: 'I'm not sure the media is a great tool for evangelism, [...] you actually have to meet people in real life at some point' (2013). Therefore, instead of preaching the Christian gospel directly to listeners with an aim to convert non-believers to Christianity, their mission is to 'reach Christians across all denominations', whether they be committed or lapsed (Premier 2014).

Conclusion

In a changing – yet at times unyielding – regulatory framework, facing an increasingly competitive media landscape, and amidst a rapidly developing diversity of technological platforms for delivery of radio, Christian broadcasting has managed to establish itself in Britain as a national genre in a relatively short period of time, in part by using established music-and-speech formats and programming styles used by local radio in England since the 1990s. By inserting itself in this manner into the radio spectrum, Christian radio has in effect created its own 'listening public' (to borrow Kate Lacey's phrase), which responds to the messages of ethical behaviour, citizenship and family values shared by the programmes and presenters.

Christian radio is a new, yet rapidly maturing, sector of the country's radio industry. However these stations rely for their operation on donations from listeners and supporters, who themselves are likely to be Christian believers. As a result these stations are broadcasting back to like-minded people, confirming their moral values and world outlook. Whether they are engaging with a wider audience is the task of further research into listener attitudes and responses. It would also appear to be a challenge for the broadcasters themselves. While the

current representatives of Christian radio stations come from a variety of motivations and have different ideas on how best to accomplish their basic evangelical mission, one lasting impression is their overall sincerity, dedication, professionalism and steadfast faith.

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