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FAITH

CFCN dumps the Bible hour

And E.C. Manning blasts the station where it all started



Senator Manning



William Aberhart

There has never been a more obvious need for people to develop a spiritual dimension.

"It was one of the most difficult decisions we've had to make and it took three years to do it," says Norman Haines, general manager of Calgary's CFCN radio station. Small wonder, since his decision to bump the National Back to the Bible Hour from 7:30 to 6:30 Sunday morning has resulted in the cancellation of a Prairie landmark. The Bible Hour was started on CFCN in 1925 by William Aberhart, who used it to become premier of Alberta, and carried on to the present day by his successor as premier, now senator, Ernest Manning. Though the Bible Hour has spread from CFCN to 49 other Canadian stations and is now produced in Edmonton, Senator Manning was distressed enough by the affair to write his supporters condemning CFCN and suggesting a write-in appeal. CFCN's Haines says the only appeal that counts is audience appeal, and Back to the Bible Hour has little.

Back to the Bible Hour began when High School Principal Aberhart was persuaded to broadcast his Sunday afternoon preaching on the new CFCN radio station. The sermons carried live from the Calgary Palace Theatre, were an instant hit, and the show's audience grew to 350,000 at its peak. When the Depression hit Calgary, associates persuaded Mr. Aberhart to use his bible broadcasts to preach the monetary reformism of Social Credit. He soon had the able assistance of a

young bible college student from Saskatchewan, Ernest Manning. Their most successful collaboration was series called "The Man from Mars," by which Alberta's Depression travails were examined as if by an extraterrestrial visitor.

By 1935, Mr. Aberhart and Mr. Manning were alternating the broadcasts each

CFCN's Haines

We seek to serve the widest audience.



week from Calgary and Edmonton, and were the leaders of Alberta's new Social Credit government.

When Aberhart died in 1943, Mr. Manning took over sole command of the Bible Hour and has continued as its host for the past 36 years. CFCN's offer of a new 6:30 a.m. time slot left Mr. Manning with no choice but to decline. The Bible Hour would be paying for it, and not getting its money's worth.

The CFCN decision to place the program an hour back was based, on the ratings. "The Bible Hour audience has sunk like a stone," says Mr. Haines. "We're in the business of serving the widest mass of people possible."

The CFCN ratings figures show a sharp decline in the Bible Hour's popularity through recent years. In the Spring of 1977, the show attracted 9,500 listeners; a year later: 7,500 and by the spring of this year, 3,700. Compared to a rating of 17,900 for a rival station during the same time slot, the Bible Hour was a "no show."

Furthermore, Bible Hour listeners are not CFCN's usual audience. After the hour is over, Mr. Haines figures they tune off. Meanwhile, the middle of the road audience will have already tuned to a rival, and may be lost for the day.

In a newsletter to Bible Hour listeners, Mr. Manning advises Calgarians to try to hear the show on Drumhellesr High River or Camrose radio stations. He also

ambastes CFCN for "an appalling lack of a sense of values and responsibility. At no previous time has there been a more obvious need for people to develop a spiritual dimension and perspective without which any society can survive. Surely Christian radio programs which contribute to that end are deserving of an equitable amount of effective radio time on stations which purport to serve

the public interest."

Mr. Manning also appeals to his listeners to voice their disapproval of the show's cancellation. CFCN program manager Vern Rombough says that more than 70 letters from irate Bible Hour listeners have been received. For Mr. Manning and the 54 year association with CFCN however, it is too little and too late. ■