

**Testimony of
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United Church of Christ
Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Media Ownership Hearing, El Segundo, California
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Introduction

First, my thanks to the Commissioners for inviting me to speak for my church, and to describe the quest of our congregation to bring our voices to the airwaves of Southern California. My name is Dr. S. Huw Anwyl, and I am the pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Church in Laguna Niguel California.

As many of you may know, the United Church of Christ's participation in media policy goes back half a century. In the 1960s, UCC fought for and established a citizen's right to appear before the FCC. At that time, UCC successfully fought a television station's blatantly racist practices in Jackson, Mississippi. While we have come a long way since then, members of UCC, like my congregation, must still struggle for our voices to be heard.

I am here both as an applicant for a low power radio license and part of the United Church of Christ.

Low Power Radio

As you know, low power radio is unique in recent years at the FCC. It is the only program created to substantially add new broadcasters to the airwaves. Practically speaking, it is the only opportunity for a small non-profit to reach the public via the mass media. Low power radio stations broadcast at a 100 watts and serve a radius of five to seven miles. They are available only to non-profit organizations. Thousands of churches, community groups, and neighborhood organizations filed applications for low power radio stations when low power radio became available.

My town, Laguna Niguel is a small town of about 60,000 people, fifty miles southeast of El Segundo High School, where we are testifying today. The first service for our church, Shepherd of the Hills, was held at Crown Valley School on October 1, 1967. We are a small congregation but our members contribute hundreds of hours in community services and many volunteer organizations utilize our facilities seven days a week. We have been a home base for many start-up churches--Catholic, Protestant and Jewish--and community organizations as well as a pre-school. In our church, we believe that God is still speaking--in other words, that God's revelation of justice and extravagant welcome is still unfolding in our midst. Our church, has a saying, "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." We hope to use the airwaves to encourage community education and dialogue on issues that face the community, to foster art and music and to help bridge the dividing line between all races and religions so that the radio station is viewed as a bridge for all peoples. We are impacted by our own involvement

in the global community but we experience it most directly in our village, and access to local, LP radio is vital in breaking down the barriers.

There are very few radio stations that serve our small community—commercial radio from Los Angeles dominates our airwaves. If we wanted to share our church services, volunteer opportunities, or to provide space for our fellow townspeople to speak out, it wasn't possible—the closest station owners were an hour away and uninterested in our town.

It is these values of justice and welcome we hoped to spread in Laguna Niguel when we applied for our own low power community radio station in 2000. Years after we filed our application, the FCC allocated our small slice of the FM dial to us—104.7 FM. But as we began fundraising to build our station, and spoke to excited churchgoers, community leaders, and elders about the possibility of broadcasting when we went on air, our application faced another legal hurdle. Another station filed a 'Petition to Deny' against our station. After many years, we were able to move our frequency from 104.7 to 93.5 which we hope will resolve any concerns raised in the petition.

Media consolidation also poses a real threat to low power radio. Our LPFM station is in a precarious position, like many others around the country. As you know, low power FM stations are 'secondary' to full power FM radio stations. This means that we can be pushed off the air any time a full power station moves their operations to a location that overlaps with our signal.

Today the FCC's media ownership limits cap the size of many radio station owners. But, if the FCC were to increase the caps, they could relocate their transmitters, acquire additional stations, and reach more listeners. These times of relocation and consolidation are very dangerous for low power radio. I am hopeful that my application will soon be granted, but we know that if more consolidation is allowed we will live in danger of being wiped off the air. And hundreds of other low power FM stations are directly in the line of fire.

We are in constant jeopardy. Of the 750 stations on the air across the United States, about 50 are already at risk of losing their licenses for this reason. And about 300 more are still broadcasting, but suffer from interference from larger broadcasters.

UCC Advertising Campaign

As you have heard all day from panelists and community members, from labor unions, immigrant communities, and business associations, media consolidation hurts our collective opportunity to speak. Not only my small church faces this battle, the United Church of Christ denomination's core mission has been severely challenged by media consolidation.

As you all know, we are in the middle of a critical and historic debate in this country about the role of religion in civic life. United Church of Christ has long preached the beauty of God's "extravagant welcome" to all who wish to live the Christian way. The entire denomination has invested considerable sums on our "Still Speaking" campaign, designed to invite new members to our churches. In Laguna Niguel, we are restricted to the use of hard copy and banners.

However, several times in the last two years, the United Church of Christ has been unable to purchase advertising time on television stations. This year at Easter, at least nine networks—

broadcast and cable—that UCC approached refused to allow church’s paid advertisements on the air.

This uniform refusal to air our advertisements nationally because they were “too controversial” is a classic example of the negative impact of media consolidation. These decisions were made by a handful of executives in New York despite the fact that in test markets across the country there hadn’t been a single viewer complaint. It shows that the present media market does not meet the FCC’s own criteria of producing a robust marketplace of ideas. In a healthy, diverse, and competitive market, there will be many television station owners. Each will chart his or her own course. While one or two owners might refuse to air a commercial because of its message, others will make a different decision. In the present environment, the influence of networks is so strong and diversity of ownership is so scarce, that important viewpoints are excluded from the airwaves.

How can the Commission feel comfortable with the current media environment when it denies a mainline Protestant denomination in every state with more than 5,500 churches and 1.2 million members the right to publicize that it welcomes all people at ? If this viewpoint cannot be heard, what about more controversial or less mainstream views? If UCC cannot purchase air time to spread a Christian message of welcome to all people, how can we say the airwaves are serving the public interest?

Conclusion

In sum, then today, I have described two problems. The first requires a very specific and technical solution. To assist low power radio stations, I ask that you to protect low power radio stations from interference by ensuring that low power radio stations are protected from encroachment that will occur if you increase radio ownership limits. If you do not protect low power FM stations by giving them equal rights as the other, full power radio stations, you will be giving big media corporations dozens or hundreds of new stations, while churches like mine lose our only chance for one.

Second, we face a much broader problem. The airwaves are not open to the people and they are not allowing the appropriate and rich debate that democracy demands the American people deserve. Fewer owners will only exacerbate this problem. Thus, we urgently request that any consideration of further media consolidation give express consideration to how viewpoints like UCC’s will be included as part of our national conversation over our nation’s precious resource—the public airwaves.

I thank the Commission for their time today, and I deeply thank all of you, who traveled from near and far, to tell this FCC how much their decisions today, and in the future, matter to our communities. When the station of the Shepherd of the Hills Church of Laguna Niguel signs on for the first time, I hope it will be to a chorus of other religious, community, youth, elder, and so many more voices, on community radio. It is up to you, Commissioners, to make sure that that chorus is ready to sing.