



Media with a Mission

A behind-the-scenes look at two Andrews television productions, *Circle of Faith* and *Scriptural Pursuit*, that are making a difference worldwide.

By Beverly Stout

Fans of the Hope Channel, the Adventist Church's official television network, probably have seen an episode or two of *Scriptural Pursuit* or *Circle of Faith*. These two faith-building, thirty-minute programs have been ministering to Christians and non-Christians alike around the world.

The programs have been on the air for the past couple of years, thanks to the hard work and dedication of a group of Andrews University students and faculty. But little known by those outside of Andrews' Department of Communication, is the amazing story of faith that lies behind each episode.

It's a story that has given Andrews students the opportunity to go on to careers in broadcasting with major television network, thanks to the vision of Melchizedek Ponniah, assistant professor of communication.

Ponniah joined the Communication Department faculty in the fall of 2003, he made a very specific request to be allowed to do some "real world" work in communication, desiring to give students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience. Ponniah wanted to start a television program. He thought the long-running, weekly radio show, *Scriptural Pursuit*, which followed the theme of the

Sabbath School Quarterly, was a great place to start. Founded by Robert McIver, who is currently a theology professor at Avondale College in Australia, *Scriptural Pursuit* hit the radio airwaves in the 1980s.

Ponniah approached the show's host, Glenn Russell, assistant professor of religion, and convinced him that the program could be adapted to suit a television audience.

But there was a problem. Andrews did not, and still does not have, a degree program in broadcast journalism; therefore, there was no equipment or funding available to make a television show. All the department had was a couple of outdated amateur cameras, not suitable for filming a television show.

But Ponniah wasn't going to let that stop him. He knew that there were a number of organizations in the area that did have television equipment, one of which was right on campus. He contacted International Learning System (ILS), a private, nonprofit media production

company housed at, but not owned by, Andrews University. Among many other things, ILS is responsible for filming the service each week at Pioneer Memorial Church (PMC). Ponniah negotiated with ILS and the church, and got permission to use the PMC cameras and the church's youth chapel as studio space.

And so production of *Scriptural Pursuit*, the television show, began in the spring of 2004. The program first aired on the low-powered, local station, WYGN, Good News Television.

However, conditions were not exactly ideal. The youth chapel was a far cry from a professional studio, resulting in poor recording quality and the inconvenience of a temporary set.

"We used to build the set every Thursday in the youth chapel," Ponniah recounts. "It was a laborious, time-consuming job. I remember carrying the heavy, wooden background from downstairs [in the communication department]. Oh, I used to dread carrying those things!"

But moving wasn't an option without

a new studio or new cameras, since they couldn't move the ones they were currently using out of PMC. So Ponniah did what he would do many times: he called his student crew together and said, "Let's pray; God will provide a way."

And, as He would prove to do many times, God did. Things began falling into place. WYGN, the station which was airing *Scriptural Pursuit*, purchased new cameras and allowed Dr. Ponniah and his students to use them. ILS agreed to let the students build a simple set in their studio, and fundraising efforts brought in a little bit of money from local community members. However, the bulk of the initial funding would come directly from Ponniah's own pockets. Something he would do many times throughout production.

But even though they now had studio space and cameras, the students didn't have the required editing equipment to do postproduction work. So once more, they prayed, and again God answered with a special grant from a local organization.

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Now that the crew had their own studio and proper equipment, they could focus on reaching their real target audience—non-Christians and non-Adventists. But WYGN didn't have broadcasting power outside the local Michiana region. So Ponniah made contact with the Hope Channel, which was very willing to



broadcast *Scriptural Pursuit*. Ever since, the program has been reaching Christian and non-Christian audiences around the world.

Next, Ponniah began phase two of his plan. He wanted to provide his

students with an opportunity for hands-on experience in news-gathering and reporting. So he came up with the idea for *Circle of Faith (COF)*, a thirty-minute news program, in the style of *20/20* or *60 Minutes*, that highlights Adventism in action, profiling Adventists who provide a better quality of life for others in their community.

However, there was no funding to purchase the portable cameras they would need to do the on-location filming the program required. Ponniah and his students prayed, and again God answered. Ponniah wrote a proposal to the same local organization that had helped with the purchase of editing equipment, and once again, their request was approved. Work on *Circle of Faith* began in 2005, and a pilot of six episodes has since been broadcast on the Hope Channel. *COF* also reaches beyond the Department of Communication and involves students from the College of Technology.

"Circle of Faith continues to provide journalism experience for students, doing camera work, sharpening audio skills, directing, producing, editing, using

graphics, etc..." Ponniah notes. "Many of the students who have trained under me are using their skills in many parts of the world." Three of Ponniah's students have gone on to work for ABC, PBS, and FOX television networks.

Working with these productions has provided unparalleled opportunities for their future careers. "Through [*COF* and *Scriptural Pursuit*], I have had the opportunity to talk with former president of the United States Jimmy Carter, CNN anchor Paula Zahn, and Academy Award-nominated documentarians," notes Rich Beckermeyer, senior journalism major. "By connecting with these people, I've been able to cement what I want to do as a career."

"It's an opportunity for our students to get hands-on experience, and at the same time we've considered it as the media ministry program, our outreach program of the department," states Department of Communication Chair Delyse Steyn. "One of our department's ethical statements is we want to make sure the media broadcasts good news. And so much of what the media feeds on, makes its money on, is bad news. We want our students to realize there's so much good news they can build on."

"We believe cocurricular programs are important, because they teach [students] an ethical service," Steyn continues. "The students go [to the studio] and everything they do there is voluntary. They know they can make a contribution. They have products, and they're excited about the fact that they are actually broadcasting their stuff."



Left: Patrice Jones, graduate communication student, operates a camera on the set of *Scriptural Pursuit*.

Opposite top: Glenn Russell, host of *Scriptural Pursuit*, chats with his guests during a recent filming.

Opposite bottom: Rich Beckermeyer, senior journalism major

But hands-on experience in producing a television program isn't the only thing students are gaining from this experience. Because of the many little miracles experienced on a regular basis, students' lives are being impacted in a much greater way.

"There are so many outcomes that we didn't even expect," says Ponniah. "Students have told me that their own faith has been strengthened." He shares a story about a time when they lost an expensive tripod. "I said, 'let's pray about it,' and so we prayed, as we do every Thursday before filming *Scriptural Pursuit*, for the Lord to help us find [the tripod]. The very next day the dean of the School of Education found the tripod right outside the steps as he came into the office early in the morning. So, all of a sudden, students who were not really interested in spiritual things were like, 'Wow, God is really answering prayer.' I know of at least one [student] that got rebaptized, and another that started coming back to church. This is part of the holistic nature of Adventist

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education. It's not just classroom training, but it transcends the theoretical instruction that the teacher enforces in the classroom context to pervade into the spiritual areas, and this is where it gets so exciting to see lives changing and transforming."

Dr. Ponniah calls communication graduate student Patrice Jones his "right hand." Patrice's life has been particularly impacted as a result of these ventures in television production. She is so passionate about the work they are doing, that she volunteered an entire year to production. "Media workers are very well-paid," Ponniah comments. "If she were to go work elsewhere, I know with her skills and expertise that she developed working with me and in practicum here, she would be earning a lot of money, but instead, she gave that time."

This year, Patrice works as a graduate assistant, training all of the students how to edit, run cameras, and many of the other skills needed to put the shows together, as well as working in production and postproduction herself. She is a driven individual, eager to learn. If she doesn't know how to do something, she'll find a way to teach herself. Patrice also works with ILS. Her official title is COO of the Media Education Center, which is a new venture combining the efforts and resources of WYGN, ILS, and the departments in Andrews' Bachelor of Fine Arts program. This job provides her opportunities to work on many other projects.

Why is Patrice so dedicated? "I have absolutely no idea," Patrice says, smiling. "It has to do with God. I tell people, if it was up to me, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be here, cause that's just who I am...It's so not me, but anyway, I'm here."

Last March, God expanded Patrice's horizons even further, taking her and student Adam Kotanko to film in war-torn Liberia for a project the Division of Architecture is working on, as well as for a documentary they are doing on their own and for the Media Education Center.

Junior journalism major Joyce Taylor found herself putting down the pen and picking up a paint brush to help with the department's production ventures. Joyce has played a large role in set construction, drawing inspiration from her love of

woodwork and time spent helping her mom be creative around the house. One day, she discovered the crew struggling with the set and decided to lend a hand.

"It's good to be well-rounded," Joyce says in explanation. "You never know where you'll end up and where someone will need help. It's good to know little things here and there...I just like woodwork and stuff like that."

And there are many other students like Patrice, Joyce, and Rich, who have found their education enriched and their lives blessed through their experiences working on the production of these two programs. Currently the Department of Communication offers degree emphases in journalism, public relations, communication, and media studies, but, in the future, Ponniah hopes to be able to offer more courses in broadcasting, and maybe even, if funding allowed, a major in broadcast journalism.

Funding remains a constant problem, and the programs are surviving on random donations and little miracles. There's strong evidence that God has His hand in the work of these dedicated students and faculty members.

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Dr. Ponniah continues, "One day Dr. Ponniah was saying he didn't have postage to send *Scriptural Pursuit* to the Hope Channel, and the next time, he came to me and said, 'I've just gotten the postage; it's going.' It's one story after the next. The students often stand here and pray, 'God, now we can't do the next thing because we have no money,' and they've seen miracles and evidence of God, and it's important that we have no money in a way. Then we can see the miracles of God and know that He is behind this."

Beverly Stout is media relations coordinator for Andrews University. She is passionate about all things German, international travel and a well-written memoir.