

With local radio gone Christian radio moves in

MEMPHIS, Tenn. - After out-of-town interests bought local commercial radio stations in rural America, evangelical Christian interests obtained broadcast licenses on that part of the FM dial reserved for noncommercial use, according to Dee Davis, president of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Ky.

As a result, there are now 2,000 evangelical radio stations in the United States, up 85 percent from 1996, when federal laws were changed to permit greater media concentration, Mr. Davis said. "The only format that's larger is country" music, he added.

Mr. Davis made his comments as a panelist during a workshop on media justice as part of the third National Conference for Media Reform, held Jan. 12-14 in Memphis.

"The story of mass media in rural America has been one of abandonment," Davis said. He cited an instance of a weather emergency in North Dakota. Calls were placed to radio stations in Minot, N.D., but nobody answered the phones. Nobody was inside the radio station buildings; the on-air material was being beamed to the stations for broadcast by satellite.

"As commercial radio moved out of rural America, evangelical churches moved in ... and petitioned to get those licenses," he added.

The growth in evangelical Christian radio may be overlooked in many sections of American society because much of America presumes what the political leanings of rural America are, Mr. Davis said.

"Twenty percent of the U.S. population is rural, along with 20 percent urban," according to Davis. "Because both groups vote predictably, Congress gives money to the 60 percent (who are) suburban to sway their votes," he said.

"The last two Democratic presidents were elected with a majority of the rural vote," Mr. Davis added, referring to Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. Mr. Davis

added that Democratic nominee Al Gore was beaten “decisively” in the 2000 presidential election in rural America, and John Kerry did “even worse” in 2004.

“The power of the station is the power to frame the news,” he said.

In that respect, he told Catholic News Service, noncommercial Christian radio is no better than its commercial counterparts, as news is beamed in from out-of-town Christian radio services. He charged that their choice of stories was designed to “energize their base” and steer votes toward political candidates who hold views more in keeping with those of the radio services.

He singled out radio feeds from Focus on the Family, which broadcasts daily on such topics as entertainment, faith, parenting, marriage, relationships, “life challenges” and social issues.

“It’s not just a political message,” Mr. Davis said. “But some of what they do is political. It’s political, and it’s strong.”

He added, “It’s very effective as a political strategy. ... Look at the growth of these radio services. Look at the voting patterns.”

Mr. Davis does not blame the rural audience for listening to Christian radio. He told CNS, “People care about these things. They care about the community.

They care about someone who will discuss issues that matter. And they want to know that someone’s on their side. Evangelical radio has moved in where traditional radio has departed.”

Mr. Davis said his organization “paid a lot of attention to this last election.” While the Republican advantage in rural America was 12 percentage points over the Democrats in the 2002 midterm elections, the advantage shrunk to 3 percentage points in the 2006 midterm elections, according to a report by National Public Radio. Democrats took control of both houses of Congress following the November vote.