

something to BELIEVE in

Stephen A. Rhodes

Prior to my appointment to River Road UMC in Richmond, Virginia, I became intrigued with radio spots aired by another congregation, McLean Bible Church. As I surfed the dial, I heard their one-minute spots on stations geared to very different audiences—jazz, top 40, oldies, and county & western, to name a few. During the 60 seconds of air-time, the pastor offered a spiritual thought or story, and he always ended by saying, “Not a sermon, just a thought. I’m Lon Solomon, pastor of McLean Bible Church.”¹

As I listened to Solomon’s spots for three years, it was clear to me that these radio moments were, in fact, sermons, albeit very short ones. They were sermons geared to those outside the faith community for whom religious language and narrative were unfamiliar. What impressed me even more was how Solomon did not refrain from using explicitly Christian messages with substantive theological content as he spoke through the medium of radio to seekers.

Soon after I moved to River Road

UMC, I encouraged the leadership to think creatively about how we might embrace the ministry of evangelism and reach out to metropolitan Richmond. The evangelism work area formed a committee to explore how we might develop an outreach similar to this one.

We talked with a laywoman at the McLean church. We also explored the possibility of utilizing one of the several prepackaged radio ministry programs that are available, but we opted to create our own program. The key factor in this decision was based on the importance we placed on the continuity of experience—the voice, style and content of the message should reflect the mission and theology of our worshipping community.

Once the decision was made to create our own program, the first hurdle we faced was what to call our spots. We wanted to appeal to those who are spiritually seeking and yet not be too corny. After numerous copyright searches, the name we settled on was, “Something to Believe In” —which was exactly what we hoped we were offering those who listened—something to believe in.

The next hurdle was developing our media strategy. Through the donated expertise of a local corporate advertising

department, we came to understand the twin pillars of advertising—reach and frequency. Reach refers to the total number of listeners who will be reached by this strategy in a given period. Frequency refers to the number of times a single listener is apt to hear the spot in that same time frame.

Using everyday situations, illustrations, or stories people would find familiar, we helped listeners to make the connection to God’s presence in their lives.

Our reach initially was 159,000 persons, with a frequency of 3 times per week. With the growth of listenership in the stations chosen, our reach is now at almost 180,000. Another key decision in marketing strategy was which age group to target. Though the ideal age group to match our congregational demographic is 25-54 years of age, because of cost

considerations we chose a younger age group, 18-34.

In August 2000, “Something to Believe In” debuted on Richmond radio. Our one-minute spots (airing between 60-70 times each week on two stations, one hard rock and the other top 40) were written to appeal to those with little or no religious affiliation. Crafted as a kind of devotional, they were intended to encourage an openness to thinking spiritually. Using everyday situations, illustrations, or stories people would find familiar, we helped listeners to make the connection to God’s presence in their lives.²



Stephen A. Rhodes is pastor of River Road United Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia

Since “Something to Believe In” first aired, we have seen a significant rise in our rate of first-time visitors. We now attribute one-third to one-half of all visitors to our radio presence. The numbers of professions of faith have risen significantly, as have adult baptisms. The wedding calendar is becoming increasingly full with the young couples searching not just for a church to be married in, but for a community of faith to which they may belong.

As our third year approaches, we are planning to expand the age demographic to whom we are appealing, including persons in their 40s and 50s. We are planning to expand the number and types of stations on which we are broadcasting. We are also developing an introductory class as a companion to the radio ministry—called, “Something to Believe In: The Experience.”

Radio ministry can be incredibly expensive. It is not always easy to ensure

funding. For this reason, from the outset, we understood that the mission of this ministry was not to be quantified by the new members received, or by the rate of visitors to worship. First and foremost, it is a ministry of proclamation—sharing the life-giving word of God with the people of our metro area whom God already loves. That will continue to be the focus and priority as we continue to offer something to believe in.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the congregation in Rome: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14-15, NIV) □

¹McLean Bible Church is a non-denominational congregation in Northern Virginia with over 10,000 members and the largest young adult ministry in that area.

² Sample texts of our messages are on our website, www.riverroadumc.org.



Sample Radio Spot

Sand Castles

Do you remember playing on the beach when you were a child?

Hi! This is Steve Rhodes, pastor of River Road United Methodist Church.

We could sit for ours building intricate castles made of sand, adding moats, walls and dams to try to keep the inevitable waves of the ocean from washing away our beautiful creation. Despite our best efforts, the ocean always won. Most of the time we weren't terribly disappointed, but laughed as the waves rolled in, moving to higher ground to build another sand castle that the waves could not yet reach.

Much of our lives can be compared to building sand castles. The things we spend the most time on—work, relationships, security—are often built on sand, and the waves of life crash against their foundations.

The Bible encourages us to build on the right kind of foundation. Jesus said, “The words I say to you... are... words to build a life on... like the wise carpenter who built upon the solid rock” and not the sandy beach.

(Mt. 7:24-25)

I'm Steve Rhodes and this is Something to Believe In, on the web at River Road UMC- dot -O-R-G.

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