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HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Radio Silence

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Usually radio hosts have to offend sacred moral sensibilities to be thrown off the air. Opie and Anthony were fired after they encouraged a couple to have sex in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Don Imus lost his job after using racist and sexist epithets against the Rutgers University women's basketball team.



Corbis

What would Martin Luther do?

But when the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod canceled its popular, nationally syndicated radio program "Issues, Etc.," listeners were baffled. Billed as "talk radio for the thinking Christian," the show was known for its lively discussions analyzing cultural influences on the American church. It seemed like precisely the thing that the Missouri Synod, a 2.4-million-member denomination whose system of belief is firmly grounded in Scripture and an intellectually rigorous theology, would enthusiastically support.

Broadcast from the nation's oldest continuously run religious radio station, KFUP-AM in St. Louis, and syndicated throughout the country, "Issues, Etc." had an even larger audience world-wide, thanks to its podcast's devoted following. With 14 hours of fresh programming each week, the show was on the

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leading edge of what's happening in culture, politics and broader church life. The Rev. Todd Wilken interviewed the brightest lights from across the theological spectrum on news of the day. Guests included Oxford University's Dr. Alister McGrath, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Albert Mohler and more postmodern types, like Tony Jones, national coordinator for a church network called Emergent Village.

On its last show, on March 17, listeners learned about the life and faith of St. Patrick; scientific and philosophical arguments in defense of the human embryo; the excommunication of two Roman Catholic women who claimed ordination; and the controversy surrounding the sermons of Barack Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright.

Despite the show's popularity, low cost and loyal donor base, Mr. Wilken and Jeff Schwarz, the producer of "Issues, Etc.," were dismissed without explanation on Tuesday of Holy Week. Within hours, the program's Web site -- which provided access to past episodes and issues of its magazine -- had disappeared. Indeed, all evidence that the show ever existed was removed.

So what happened? Initially, the bureaucrats in St. Louis kept a strict silence, claiming that the show had been canceled for "business and programmatic" reasons. Yesterday the synod cited low local ratings in the St. Louis area and the low number of listeners to the live audio stream on the Web site. But the last time the synod tracked the size of the audience was three years ago, and it did not take into account the show's syndicated or podcast following. The synod also claimed that the show lost \$250,000 a year, an assertion that is at odds with those of others familiar with the operating budget of the station.

The Rev. Michael Kumm, who served on three management committees for the station, said that the explanation doesn't add up. " 'Issues, Etc.' is the most listened to, most popular and generates more income than any other program at the station and perhaps even the others combined. This decision is purely political," he said.

He may well be right. The program was in all likelihood a pawn in a larger battle for the soul of the Missouri Synod. The church is divided between, on the one hand, traditional Lutherans known for their emphasis on sacraments, liturgical worship and the church's historic confessions and, on the other, those who have embraced pop-culture Christianity and a market-driven approach to church growth. The divide is well known to all confessional Christian denominations struggling to retain their traditional identity.

The Rev. Gerald Kieschnick, the synod's current president, has pushed church marketing over the Lutherans' historic confession of faith by repeatedly telling the laity, "This is not your grandfather's church."

Since Mr. Kieschnick narrowly won election in 2001, the church has embarked on a program, called Ablaze!, that has the admirable goal of "reaching 100 million unreached and uncommitted people with the Gospel by 2017," the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Historically the church kept statistics on baptisms. Now, however, it keeps a tally of what it calls "critical events." On March 17 a man reported discussing Jesus with his waitress -- and the Ablaze! count went up by one.

One congregation near St. Louis took a \$25,000 Ablaze! grant and used it to put up billboards with kitschy statements purporting to come from the devil (e.g., "JeffersonHills Church Sucks," signed "Satan"). A Michigan mission congregation replaced the historical message of Lent with a speaker series on sex. Following marketing principles, neither congregation uses the word "Lutheran" in its name or advertising campaign.

While "Issues, Etc." never criticized Mr. Kieschnick or his colleagues, its attacks against shallow church marketing included mention of some approaches embraced by the current leadership. It opposed, for instance, the emergent church -- an attempt to accommodate postmodern culture by blending philosophies and practices from throughout the church's history -- and the Purpose Driven Church movement, which reorients the church's message toward self-help and self-improvement.

This isn't the first time the Missouri Synod has been divided between confessional Lutherans and those enamored with the latest religious fads. In the 1970s, alert confessional laity thwarted a top-down imposition of chic liberal theology in the church's seminaries.

A similar grass-roots movement may now have begun among the radio show's fans. Within days of the cancellation of "Issues, Etc.," public outcry forced the synod to repost the archived broadcasts on KFUP's Web site. A petition calling for the show's return has been signed by thousands of people from 49 states, 27 denominations and 25 countries. Many of the signers explained how "Issues, Etc." introduced them to Lutheranism. Young listeners have started a Facebook group to share information about the fate of the show.

Jim Kruta of Collinsville, Ill., was the 4,056th petition signer. An adult convert, he says that he listened to "Issues, Etc." for engaging discussions grounded in confessional Lutheranism. Mr. Kruta explained that Missouri Synod members should have drawn the line sooner about how much deviation they would tolerate in the church. "Seriously, this has been like waking up in the hospital after surgery only to find that the wrong limb has been amputated and no one will admit who the surgeon was," he said.

As synod bureaucrats support congregations that hide their Lutheran identity while terminating the strong witness of "Issues, Etc.," members of the denomination are asking if they can have their grandfather's church back.

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