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SPIRIT FM SAYS FAREWELL

By Didi Williamson

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Where there was once rejoicing, now there is only static.

Instead of uplifting Christian music, listeners heard white noise after tuning into Spirit FM on 89.7 WMCU Sept. 30. The station went off the air quickly after Trinity International University sold the frequency to American Public Media Group for a reported \$20 million.

WMCU was the first Christian radio station in South Florida and one of the top 10 Christian stations in the country.

Throughout Spirit FM's 37 years on the air, the station spread the Gospel, led prodigals home, reached prisoners and touched believers as far south as Cuba and as far north as West Palm Beach.

Now there are only two English-speaking Christian stations in Miami; one, The Call on 91.9 WMKL, targets teens and broadcasts hard rock to a portion of Miami, and the second on the AM dial, 1360 WKAT, broadcasts some Christian programs.

"Frankly, I don't feel like we've had this much of a blow to the Miami Christian community since Andrew," says Stan Goldenberg, a meteorologist who provided WMCU with up-to-date hurricane information.

Goldenberg, who is also one of the creators of SaveWMCU.com, says the Miami community was shocked at the sale.

"The listeners — they're hurt," says Merryan Padron, WMCU's general manager. "We're part of their family. In the thousands of e-mails, the primary comment was their concern for the team here. That has been so moving to me."

According to Padron, Spirit FM former staff members like James Shepherd and Donna Jean Matthews, are doing well, and they are entrusting God with their futures. And God is already moving — Ruthie J., who's full name is Ruth Justamante, is currently getting her Master's Degree in California, and Kenny Robinson is working at another Christian station in Maine.

Pending approval by the FCC, 89.7 will become the home of classical music in Miami, which some Christians see as a blessing.

Many South Florida residents have been hoping for another local classical station since WTMI was sold to Cox Communications and started playing dance music.

But others fear that liberal news will accompany the music of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven.

However, other discrepancies surrounding the sale of WMCU have left listeners asking questions.

Why was WMCU sold?

According to Gary Cantwell, TIU's vice-president of communications, the station was sold to benefit the school's educational programs. TIU, based in Deerfield, Ill., acquired the station when the school's South Florida regional campus took over WMCU's creators, Miami Christian College (MCC).

"The mission of the Trinity International Foundation is to support the educational opportunities for Trinity International University..." Cantwell says. "And radio was not the core part of what the university exists to do."

The \$20 million from the sale will be placed in an endowment for TIU that will not be touched for a number of years, and the school will use the interest to train pastors, educators and missionaries, he adds.

Yet, the radio station was 100 percent solvent and was beginning to make money. In fact, Spirit FM was known for having one of the best share-a-thons in South Florida, bringing in over \$1 million a year.

"This station was listener-supported. It is a small consolation to us that this money is going to be used to train pastors and evangelists," Goldenberg says. "That's not what the money was collected for, and by selling the station they've abandoned a rich, diverse and very open harvest field in southeast Florida."

Where is the money going?

Many people are also upset that the proceeds of the sale are going to benefit students in Illinois.

Miami Estate Planning Lawyer Paul Stokes, a previous board member for TIU and MCC, says the initial agreement between the two schools said that any profits received from MCC would stay in the area.

"I don't think there was bad faith or some other agenda or someone was going to secretly make any money," he says. "But I think it was a big mistake, and the sale hurt us down here in South Florida."

Larry Poland, former president of MCC and one of the founders of WMCU, says that the station was created by local donors in 1970, some of whom sacrificed their retirement savings to bring Christian radio to Miami.

"I think (the sale) was a betrayal of the founder's intentions and the faithful people who've given money over the years to build the station," he says. "They didn't have the right to take away that sacrificial giving ... regardless of the good intentions or the upstanding nature of their programs in Illinois."

However, Cantwell maintains that the donations received by the station only went to cover operating costs and never paid for the station itself.

"The difficult thing for people to grasp is that what we sold was primarily the right to broadcast on this FM frequency of 89.7," he says. "A very small portion of the sale was the physical plant of the station. The staff is not going to the new owner. The building is not going to the new owner. Some of the equipment is."

Why wasn't the station sold to Christians?

Although local Christian radio stations WAY-FM, WAFG and Reach FM confirm that they expressed interest in buying the station, Cantwell says that no one else made a tangible offer.

"We've had inquiries about purchasing the station for years, and we entertained the discussions as they've come up ... but none of them resulted in an offer until now," he says.

However, Poland calls TIU's choice to sell to a secular organization "egregious."

"If they really wanted it in Christian hands, they could have given it to Christians," he adds. "Obviously money was the question."

He says WMCU's ministry and reach made the station irreplaceable and beyond worth.

"You couldn't put a dollar sign on it..." Stokes adds. "In my view, \$40 million wouldn't be enough to pay for what that radio station meant."

Why didn't we hear about the sale sooner?

In addition, no one knew about the sale until days before the station went off the air, Stokes says.

"I never heard anything about Trinity wanting to sell WMCU. If Christians had known that, then we would have done something about that," he says.

WTGS, a Christian station in Washington, D.C., was almost bought by the American Public Media Group as well, but radio staff members stayed on the air and

encouraged the community to fight against the sale, says Goldenberg. WTGS is still on the air today.

However, in Spirit FM's case, the station went off the air soon after the radio personalities mentioned the sale.

"When the contract was signed the station manager decided not to have the announcers stay on the air mainly because it would have been a difficult, emotional experience for them," Cantwell says. "So they recorded their goodbye announcements rather than giving them live."

Can Christians broadcast on another station?

There are no other frequencies available in the Miami area because they are all currently in use.

"Basically, they shut down a ministry that cannot be replaced, and there are no more signals," Poland says. "This was the last signal, and we got it in 1970. Buying an existing channel would cost at least \$20 million, if not \$100 million."

However, WAY-FM and Reach FM are working to set up translators to reach a small portion of Miami listeners.

In response to the community's reaction to the sale, TIU staff members are praying that God would move in Miami-Dade County without WMCU, Cantwell says.

"We've been praying that God would pour out his Spirit on South Florida to fill any void left by WMCU," he says.

But some South Florida residents hope to save the station – somehow.

Can Spirit FM be saved?

Prayer is the only hope for keeping the station in Christian hands, Goldenberg says.

"The problem is that even if Trinity suddenly had a change of heart, they probably couldn't back out of the deal," he adds. "Possibly, if something happens with the FCC then Trinity could do something."

Listeners can learn how to write the FCC, TIU and the American Public Media Group at www.SaveWMCU.com, a website Goldenberg started with other concerned individuals. But letters must be sent as soon as possible to make an impact.

Poland says the FCC can change everything if they deny the license transfer to the APMG.

"The FCC grants the use of its signal for the community interest and the public trust," he says. "And the community interest and the public trust have both been violated by this sale."

But for now, the station sits in silence.

*For information on contacting the FCC, please visit **www.SaveWMCU.com**.*

Tell us what you think. E-mail us at Editor@GoodNewsFL.org.