

CBS executive says religious shows important

By Jim Garrett

A CBS television executive said the assassination of Anwar Sadat can be viewed in association with the increase in worldwide misunderstanding between peoples and their religious and cultural backgrounds.

Pamela Ilott, CBS religious and cultural news vice president, said "we (Americans) suffered too in the streets of Cairo. It was as if we (Americans) were there. And because the public was better educated everyone knew immediately what the repercussions of this would be. Ilott spoke to about 200 people attending a fund-raising dinner for the Lincoln Fellowship of Churches Tuesday at the UNL East Union.

"The threat to peace, the instability of the world —

this is why religious programming should be on television," she said.

Ilott, who was born and reared in Great Britain, received degrees in comparative religion and church history from Durham University in London and literature from Oxford-Cambridge. She organized entertainment services for the British Army during World War II.

"Religion is not a decorative thing to be added to news to create publicity, but is the fabric of life, the good news."—Pamela Ilott, CBS executive.

She joined CBS in 1959, and won the George Foster Peabody Award in 1973 for her accomplishments on the television series "Lamp Unto My Feet" and "Look Up and Live."

She said the so-called "reality boys of the news departments" would rather keep religion locked away in some perfumed ivory tower and out of the day-to-day involvements of world, national or local happenings. But Ilott said, "what the religious message is, is an integrated part of our lives and we believe it."

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Ilott emphasized that the religious message must be careful to have quality content.

Gray areas

Ilott said current religious program themes provide morality plays dealing with the gray areas of life rather than the clear-cut black and white beliefs.

Initially religious programming consisted of airing

famous preachers and the nation's largest denominational churches, she said. These were live broadcasts aimed at children and youth.

When it was learned that the Jewish segment was left out, the network switched to short programs dealing with the more common moral life situations, she said.

Ilott said programmers realize the relationships with churches had to be broadened, yet order maintained among all the churches in America requesting their pieces be aired.

"So we left the mainline cathedrals, which didn't seem to represent the richness of the American religious heritage," she said, "and broadcast live from a small Dutch Reformed Church, with a terrible choir, which proved to be far from a good network program."

The emphasis at the network began to shift toward supplementing what was being done at the local church level, she said, "and not giving people an excuse or option of attending church while sitting at home in the comfort of their slippers with a cigarette burning out of their mouths."

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Ilott said religious programming cannot take the place of active involvement in communities and fellowships, but can provide a glimpse into what other people are thinking.

"Show the common ground between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam," she said. "Destroy those bad myths that have existed throughout history."

Helps neighborhoods

Religious programming should help "neighborhoods get to know themselves, to let the ethnic communities know the others, to make them proud of being Hispanic or Indian. Let them all know they have something proud to give of their heritage."

Ilott said there is a new breed of broadcasters developing programs like "Quincy" and "Lou Grant" who are finally beginning to deal with issues such as homosexuality, divorce and abortion, which used to be confined to religious shows.

"You can't do neutral programs," she said. "You have to deal with it, but you don't have to submit to it."

Ilott said there is a dangerous deterioration of stand-

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ards in America which should not be confused with the interest group rhetoric of "these are the new times," or "it's just a characteristic of the liberation movement."

"It is not liberation, making something traditionally accepted appear so trivial," she said. "It is something you have to resist."

Religious advocates

"It is particularly dangerous when this deterioration brings about a counter-action from the religious element, like the Moral Majority," Ilott said.

"The dangers of exclusion and censorship and what they (Moral Majority) advocate are almost as dangerous as those that advocate deterioration and the way it came about," she said.

Ilott said both sides are extremist and offer very narrow approaches to solutions and problems. Religious programming may show both of these, but doesn't submit to their control, she said.

Ilott said it is important to send the crews to places like Nicaragua and Guatemala to film what churches are doing there. "These are the shows worth doing, but are almost financially impossible except for the major networks," she said.

Ilott stressed that religious programming must have strong public backing in order to exist in a competitive world. "Public service programming is struggling to hold its own," she said.

She said the networks don't receive much favorable response to most of the programming. "It is a monument that CBS is still making that gesture or commitment to which we all believe in," she said.

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