

Scandal, sex and sanctimony Paul Crouch and TBN

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By Andrew Gumbel

The time was the autumn of 1996, the scene a cabin in the San Bernardino mountains near Los Angeles. The cabin was owned by the Trinity Broadcasting Network, the world's largest televangelist organisation with outlets on satellite, cable and terrestrial channels around the world. That much we know.

According to Lonnie Ford, an admittedly troubled, sometime drug addict who worked for the station, it was also the site of an inappropriate, and potentially scandalous, sexual encounter between himself and TBN's president and founder, Paul Crouch.

For eight years, Ford has been threatening to go public with the story and has written a lengthy manuscript detailing his allegations. The two sides have been in and out of court, money has changed hands and each has accused the other of acting in bad faith.

Crouch has denied everything, as well he might, since homosexuality is a big no-no in the Christian fundamentalist world which he inhabits, and which has provided him with a lifestyle of striking lavishness over 31 years.

The star evangelist on TBN, Benny Hinn, once announced that "God will destroy the homosexual community of America ... with fire".

For eight years, TBN managed to keep the story under wraps, persuading courts to keep the relevant documents sealed and threatening Ford with legal action if he tried to break the terms of a 1998 settlement and seek a publisher for his manuscript.

That changed this month, though, when the Los Angeles Times got wind of the affair and went public with at least the gist of it. Through interviews with some of those involved, including a friend of Ford's who helped him to write the manuscript, the Times pieced together a tawdry legal history in which Ford has demanded large sums in exchange for his silence, and TBN reacted first by paying up and then by branding him a liar and extortionist.

America may be about to witness its first juicy televangelist scandal in 15 years.

In a hastily issued statement last weekend, TBN described the allegations as "deplorable", "salacious" and "false", but avoided going into any details of what may or may not have transpired during that weekend in the mountains.

Ford's friend and co-author Sandi Mahlow, meanwhile, told the Times how Ford had broken down in tears after returning from the cabin near Lake Arrowhead and told her that he and Crouch had engaged in sexual acts.

"Lonnie has a lot of bad traits. One thing he isn't, and that's a liar," Mahlow said.

The Times also quoted a letter written by TBN lawyer Dennis Brewer, in which he recalled Crouch's youngest son, Matt, telling his then law partner, David Middlebrook: "I am devastated. I am confronted with having to face the fact that my father is a homosexual."

Middlebrook and the younger Crouch deny there was such a conversation.

In its statement, TBN painted Ford as a disturbed man with a history of relapses into drug addiction, something the Times piece discussed as well.

"It is a reprehensible fact of modern life that public persons like Dr Crouch are targets of such dishonest, false and scandalous claims," the statement lamented. "The lifelong ministry of Dr Crouch has been to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world."

But TBN also acknowledged it had agreed to a financial settlement with Ford - the Times put the figure at US\$425,000 (\$641,000) - rather than go to court to fight his twin allegations of sexual harassment and wrongful termination.

"This course of action was deemed less expensive and would avoid the bad publicity, time and effort that it would take to fight the false claims," the statement said. "Dr Crouch reluctantly agreed to this advice with the understanding that the accuser would go away and leave both he and TBN alone forever."

It is understandable that TBN has fought so hard to keep even the allegations out of the public eye. The affair's oddly compelling pairing of sex and sanctimony - whether substantiated or not - are a direct reminder of the scandals of the late 1980s that brought down preacher Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, the husband-and-wife team behind the Praise the Lord network.

Swaggart was forced to admit he was addicted to pornography and prostitutes. [Jim Bakker](#) not only admitted having an affair with an employee, a former Playboy playmate, Jessica Hahn, but was also caught trying to pay her off with US\$265,000 (\$400,000) from church funds - one of a string of financial improprieties that landed him in prison.

TBN shares many of the traits of those earlier televangelist outfits. Crouch and his wife, Jan - who started out as business partners of the Bakkers - like to portray themselves as humble folks doing the Lord's work and giving of themselves as they hope their viewers will give, by sending in financial contributions.

Their costumes and studio sets are as gaudy and kitsch as anything the notoriously campy Tammy Faye Bakker came up with. The motif of the station is distinctly regal, with a crest based on the British lion and unicorn (plus a religious dove). Questions have been asked about the money the Crouches have generated and how it has been spent. The Bakkers had tens of thousands of dollars of gold plating in their bathrooms, and air-conditioning in their dog kennel.

The Crouches bought a US\$5 million (\$7.5 million) oceanfront home in the California yachting resort of Newport Beach. They gave various explanations, suggesting the property belonged to the church and they would not be living in it, then saying the purchase was proof of the lavish rewards bestowed on them by the Almighty for their good works.

Similar lavishness appears to be in order at the couple's private offices, which occupy half of the top floor of TBN's headquarters just off a freeway in Costa Mesa, 20 minutes' drive from Newport Beach in Orange County.

The 2438 sq m personal office space is off limits to the public and press, but construction workers who helped to build it have told reporters it includes a bar and sauna, a gym, handcrafted black walnut woodwork and ornate velvet furniture.

The money issue has been exacerbated by the Crouch's singular fundraising techniques. They have some stiff competition when it comes to spinning lines to true believers and inducing them to open their wallets. Back in the 1980s, Oral Roberts once told his viewers that God would strike him down if his supporters did not send him US\$8 million (\$12 million) within a year. The money arrived, and Roberts' life, miraculously, was spared.

Crouch's favoured rhetoric appears to be equating his network with the Lord God himself. "If you have been healed or saved or blessed through TBN and have not contributed to [the] station, you are robbing God and will lose your reward in heaven," he said on air in 1997.

The Crouches also have a singular line in defensiveness when it comes to criticism of the station - criticism that has spanned many lawsuits and included accusations from rival Christian organisations that TBN is spreading blasphemy.

"God, we proclaim death to anything or anyone that will lift a hand against this network and this ministry that belongs to you, God," Crouch said in 1997.

A few years earlier, he reacted even more vehemently to critics he characterised as "heresy hunters." "To hell with you!" he ranted during a praise-a-thon in 1991. "Quit blocking God's bridges or God's going to shoot you - if I don't."

The Crouches are positively tame compared with Benny Hinn, the network's star performer, who has preached that Adam was a superman who flew to the moon and

expressed his belief that one day the dead will be raised by watching TBN from inside their coffins.

Describing his frustrations with his enemies, Hinn once expressed regret that the Bible didn't sanction murder. "Sometimes I wish God would give me a Holy Ghost machine gun. I'd blow your head off!"

Hinn was embroiled in a legal controversy a few years ago when Mario Licciardello, a private investigator he hired to look into his ministry's finances, turned against him and threatened to publicise the dirt he had dug up. The investigator died shortly afterwards, and Hinn moved his ministry from Florida to Texas.

Licciardello has now shown up in the gay sex allegations. The Los Angeles Times found a deposition in which Licciardello quoted Hinn talking about "a sexual relationship that Paul Crouch had with his chauffeur". Hinn also said: "Paul's defence was that he was drunk." Hinn has denied saying these things, but at least one other witness has corroborated them.

In the mid-1990s, the Crouches tussled with the Federal Communications Commission over the legality of some of their station licences and only narrowly escaped being yanked off the air. In 1999, they were slapped with a lawsuit after a terminally ill woman from Virginia accused them of ripping off a novel of hers for their commercially successful end-of-the-world movie *The Omega Code*. The Crouches denied impropriety, but they ended up paying the woman an undisclosed amount of money.

One thing they have on their side is some powerful friends. Paul Crouch, 70, was brought up in the same Missouri town as John Ashcroft, President George Bush's fundamentalist Attorney-General, and still regards him as a close friend.

When Ashcroft was facing the Senate confirmation process in January 2001, TBN drummed up support for him in hour upon hour of programming. Who knows if Crouch will ask the country's top law officer to return the favour?

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