

The *Golden Hour* Radio Broadcast at St. Matthews, Kitchener (written April 2020)

In this third week of the COVID-19 pandemic, where church buildings are closed and pastors are posting services and reflections online, I wanted to reflect on 90 years of radio worship service broadcasting at St. Matthews, Kitchener.

The *Golden Hour* broadcast began in 1929, when Art Sandrock, a St. Matthews member, convinced the owner of the CKCR radio station in Brantford to move it to Kitchener, which at the time did not have a station. Since Sandrock was the owner of a local funeral home, he was well acquainted with elderly people's needs and realized that the new technology of radio could be used to reach the sick and shut-in members at home. He also saw the radio broadcast as a good way for the church to bear witness to Christ.

The first service was broadcast on February 23, 1930, coincidentally 26 years to the day after the founding of St. Matthews. The sermon, by pastor Dr. J. Schmieder, was on the parable of the "Sower and the Seed", describing how the Gospel, through the radio, could now be spread to different mission fields than previously thought possible. The first anniversary booklet mentions that "you would not notice the slightest change in the order of service or in the manner of conducting it", other than the presence of two microphones, one at the lectern and the other at the pulpit. The radio room, a hidden room beside the balcony, was where the equipment was kept.

The broadcast was at first in German, and was called *Kirche Daheim* ("Church at home"). Due to the large German population in Kitchener-Waterloo, there was a great need for a service in their mother tongue. The broadcast was the only German worship service regularly on the air each Sunday in the Americas.

Very soon, letters of support and thanks came in. A 1930 letter from Pastor J.H. Reble, Canada Synod President, mentioned how he knew of recent German immigrants from Hamilton (60 km away) employed as domestic servants, who would listen to the broadcast as they were not free to leave for church on Sundays. A letter from December 1932 states: "I always sing and pray along with you with folded hands when you sing and pray". Already then, non-Lutherans like Mennonites were also listening.

In 1939, German services ceased at the outbreak of WWII, and in 1940 the broadcast was renamed the Golden Hour. The title proposed is taken from the line "Look now! For glad and

golden hours come swiftly on the wing” in the third verse of the Christmas hymn “It came upon the midnight clear”. The verse is addressed to “you beneath life’s crushing load” i.e. the sick and elderly, in that the service brought over the wings of radio waves was a glad and golden hour that gave them comfort. The other allusion is to the fact that when the church bell would start ringing to mark the beginning of the service, birds roosting in the bell tower would fly out “on the wing”: a symbol of the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole town and region.

From the beginning, there was strong support for the ministry both from within the congregation and from without. Early supporters even included members of St. Matthew’s, Hanover and Trinity, New Hamburg. From the start, funding was provided by sponsorships, whereby official sponsors received name recognition during broadcast. Sponsorships were mostly memorials, but occasionally also commemorating wedding anniversaries, and more rarely, to celebrate a birth, or a recovery from sickness.

To the best of our knowledge, the Golden Hour is the third-longest continuous radio broadcast in the world. The only broadcasts which are older are the Grand Ole Opry (November 28, 1925) and the Mormon “Music and the Spoken Word” (July 15, 1929). For reference, “the Lutheran Hour” began broadcasting nationally and continuously on October 2, 1930, although they did have some radio programming as early as 1924.

Currently, the Golden Hour is broadcast by FaithFM Kitchener, a local Christian radio station, which, like most radio stations these days, also streams online. We are the only liberal mainline programme on their broadcast schedule, and our 11 a.m. Sunday slot follows the conservative “Focus on the Family”.

Our 9.30 a.m. service must begin promptly, because that is when FaithFM begins the recording. The audio feed is mixed in our radio room by our radio operator and then sent over a dedicated telephone line to the FaithFM studio, who record from 9.30 until 10.30 a.m. After that, there is a half hour buffer if any editing needs to be done, like removal of “dead air”. If necessary, a copy of the recording can be manually driven over to the radio station, which is about 5 minutes away, and in case of real technical difficulty, a backup recorded service can be played by the station. While initially the radio broadcast extended one or two hundred kilometres away, due to the current competition for airwaves, sometimes the broadcast does not even reach the entire Kitchener-Waterloo area. However, the stream can be accessed on local cable, and on the internet. 20 years ago the Golden Hour had a listenership of more than 10,000, when it was on a talk radio station. In 2019 the average listenership was about 550.

The Radio broadcast is less expensive to produce than TV and is less intrusive, that is, you do not notice that a recording is going on during the service at all. One of the other advantages vs. TV is that TV requires more in-house technicians, which could lead to it being cancelled due to pandemic regulations. We just need one radio operator, and can conceivably do with none, if the pastor just sets the levels and does not change them.

As pastor, I'm maybe a little more nervous prior to the start of the service, but I prepare better so that the liturgy runs smoothly. Once the recording light turns on, I'm "in the zone" and I lead worship, and don't think about the "invisible congregation" hardly at all. Of course that has changed since COVID-19 now that we don't have anyone in the pews, and I concentrate a lot more on how it sounds for the radio congregation.

Recent changes include trying to make the most of the air time and to improve listenability, esp. regarding announcements. We now have the most important announcements that have broad applicability to the radio audience at the beginning of the service, and other less vital announcements at the end (which potentially could be cut from the broadcast if the service goes over an hour.)

The feedback we receive is mainly from regular members who listen while on holidays, and esp. recently we have received more notes of thanks during the pandemic. Occasionally, maybe once a year we receive feedback from non-members, mainly if the sermon is out-of-the-ordinary.

The Golden Hour is still relevant because it helps us connect with members who can't attend worship, as well as with people we don't even know. Furthermore, esp. in this time of pandemic, it is the main thing that binds our church together. Finally, it is unique, both for its longevity and also in the region.

Because all the major worship services are broadcast, it's often in the back of your mind when preparing worship, and you know certain things will not work as well, for example using a slideshow or a video during the sermon. You also do not want to have a lot of silence for reflection, as that is "dead air", where radio listeners might wonder if there is a technical issue with the broadcast.

When the pandemic began, initially, we toyed with the idea of a Facebook Live or a Zoom service, but we realized other churches were doing that and the radio broadcast is still our niche. We are set up to do a good quality audio broadcast and so we carry on. It is the main way our community stays in touch.

Moving forward, I think the 1930 words of Art Sandrock still apply today, in that St. Matthews will do this “work of ‘bearing witness’ to Christ as long as God gives them grace to do so, and as long as this work appears to serve a genuine need and keeps on receiving the support which is necessary”.

The future of the Golden Hour probably might be more web-based, and perhaps include video, but for now, the majority of our shut-ins do not have internet, so accessing it through radio and cable TV still works best. Furthermore, online and video production brings in a whole other level of complexity.

By Rev. Sebastian Meadows-Helmer