



The Story of Iowa Catholic Radio by Todd Erzen

People may love the movie “Field of Dreams,” but that doesn’t mean hearing voices from the corn is high on their priority list. So when Joe Teeling had his own “build it and they will come” moment, he’s not afraid to tell you how off balance it rendered him.

It was 1998, and seemingly out of nowhere his Sunday Mass attendance was regularly being invaded by thoughts of starting a Catholic radio station. Teeling was an insurance guy with no background in radio, yet month after month the silent petition did its work on him nonetheless.

“It was just all over me and it got to be bothersome,” said Teeling, a member of St. Augustin Parish in Des Moines. “I went to tell Msgr. (Frank) Bognanno I thought I was going nuts.”

Teeling figured Bognanno, who is now at Christ the King Parish in Des Moines, would somehow exorcise him of this strangeness. Instead, it was the priest who pushed him further into the unknown.

“He told me, ‘I have just the person you should meet’,” Teeling said.

That was John Putbrese, who earlier that same year approached Bognanno about introducing Catholic programming to the evangelical radio station he co-owned and operated.

It was an incredibly risky move to consider. The station was highly rated and financially successful, and there was little doubt its loyal listener and advertising base would protest. But the reason Putbrese had a connection with Bognanno in the first place might tell you all you need to know about why the easy route wasn’t taken in the end.

As Putbrese reflects on the meandering road that finally gave birth to Iowa Catholic Radio, the recipe for success seems clear.

“Being faithful is the No. 1 thing,” he said.

Back in 1976, Putbrese’s father, Chuck, was working in Washington, D.C. and had a good thing going in the private sector after spending more than 20 years in the Air Force. That means he wasn’t about to consider taking his brother up on an offer straight out of left field: Move back to Iowa and turn the country radio station he recently purchased into an evangelical station.

That's where Bognanno turns up again. He was making a pit stop in Washington, D.C. while on the way to Rome and spoke at a prayer retreat Chuck Putbrese was attending.

Their introduction included what Chuck thought would only be small talk about the radio proposition, but Bognanno wasn't thinking small. He told Chuck to go for it. Next thing you know, Chuck's house was up for sale.

"You look at all this now and you see that God did it," Chuck said.

Msgr. Bognanno agrees, saying that he was happy to play a role in God's providential care for Des Moines and Central Iowa.

Iowa Catholic Radio finally became a reality in late 2005, eight years after Teeling and Chuck Putbrese's son were independently moved toward the same goal with Bognanno's help.

"I continue to be amazed when people say to me that all they listen to is Catholic radio," Bognanno said. "They say it's the only thing that makes any sense. That's because it's not geared toward materialism and self-glorification. It's focused on the real meaning of life."

It took John Putbrese becoming the evangelical station's majority owner in 2001, then selling the station and reclassifying it as a non-profit in order to finally get a full schedule of Catholic programming on the air.

Such a move protected both Putbrese, who now owns his own business outside of radio, as well as Iowa Catholic Radio from the initial drop in listeners it expected after the transition. But it was not a path his wife was sure about taking at first.

Time for some minor miracles.

Seeking clarity and inspiration, John took his wife to a Catholic radio conference and happened to cross paths with Mother Angelica, the founder of EWTN.

John's wife said that if Mother Angelica talked to them, she would take it as a sign to move forward with Iowa Catholic Radio. The moment seemed to pass as Mother Angelica left the room they were in, but then they both watched as she turned around and walked directly over to where they were standing.

The Holy Spirit clearly had plans. Now it was Teeling's turn to raise the \$1.25 million to buy the station and make the final transition happen.

For a while, though, the Holy Spirit seemed to go away.

"It was a very tough sale," said Teeling, who now serves as Iowa Catholic Radio's

president. “We had to raise the money quietly so it didn’t impact the station’s advertisers.”

As the fundraising sputtered its way forward, Teeling was asked by a friend on three separate occasions if he had devoted any holy hours to his cause. A fine idea, he thought, but not one which he followed up on the first two times.

Then, fresh from the third prodding and after going two months without a new donor, Teeling penciled in an hour for prayer and reflection on a Saturday.

“I said ‘God, you know why I’m here. I’m really discouraged. I need a pep talk,’” Teeling said.

He started reading a book he brought with him from home, and one hour of traveling through church history turned into two. All that while, Teeling ignored multiple phone calls on his cell phone.

It was John Putbrese. A previous donor, Don Lamberti, decided at the very time Teeling was in chapel to call him and offer a large contribution to help breathe life into Iowa Catholic Radio.

Salvation was at hand. The rest of the money came easily after that, Teeling said, and the station has now grown from its original 22 donors to more than 1,500 today. Expanded programming and community outreach are expected to take the station to the next level in the coming years.

Teeling is currently joined by Rick Ball, Brett Bosworth, Julie Carmody, Jerry Deegan, Justin Doyle, Dave Freeseaman, Laurie Galles, Tim Jameson, Fr. Zach Kautzky, Joe Lane, Terry McGonegle, Tom Moreland and Mike Vasquez on the board of directors for Iowa Catholic Radio.

Both John Putbrese and Teeling say there have been times in their life when they weren’t particularly strong Catholics, so the blessings that have come with being part of the Iowa Catholic Radio story are humbling indeed.

All they can do is carry the torch of Christ as best they can, Teeling said. The outcomes are for God.

“The mission of the station is to save souls,” Teeling said. “It’s not for ratings. It’s not for money. The world is in chaos and people are confused and dying every day, and we need to get to them. We view ourselves as a voice in the wilderness. The search for truth is tremendous and it’s often all about timing in a person’s life. We want to be there when people are ready for us.”