

Just Two Little Words

May 12, 2008

--Dave Christensen, KD7UM – Mercury Amateur Radio Association President

At the request of several radio clubs on both ends of this great country I am writing this article directed to the great group of amateurs that have continued to serve and prepare for so many years. Many of us have a personal testimony that in the absence of consistent direction and organization well-meaning people may drift from a path once very clearly marked.

With the recent passing of the previous MARA President, Dick Potts-N7JID the Utah-based MARA Corporation was reorganized with Dave Christensen-KD7UM as the President and Jack Christensen-KD7NX as the Vice President. We seek to help unite the great works of nets and chapters as well as provide some clarity of future direction. All constructive comments are welcome.

Perhaps a bit of the history of the Mercury Amateur Radio Association (MARA) might be useful. The earliest MARA newsletter I have in my file is dated October 1982. The leadership roster lists Allen Packer-WA7BKD (now Elder Allen Packer of the Seventy) as the President, George Oates-K7BFI as Vice President, Ira Parkes-K7ERR as the Secretary, and Mark Hammond-K7HPH as the Treasurer. MARA had 5 HF nets listed with Roy Wennerholm-N3CMK as the Northeast Net Manager and Mel Martin-N7BCY as the Northwest Net Manager. By-the-way, first class postage for this newsletter was 20 cents for a 6 pages.

In April 1985 the MARA membership dues were eliminated at the request of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in order to make membership in MARA less restrictive. The LDS Church underwrote the cost of publication, some social activities, some expenses related to holding world conventions, meeting space, and basic equipment purchases for storehouses. The LDS Church's Ensign Magazine in February 1985 ran an article entitled "CQ-CQ-CQ from LDS Radio Group". The following is a short excerpt from the article:

"During a hurricane a few years ago, for example, MARA operators on the mainland kept contact with the islands longer than any other amateur radio net. Following an earthquake in late 1983, MARA members again served as emergency communicators for priesthood leaders. Then the state's Emergency Management Office asked if it could join the MARA net because its own communication system was not providing the coverage needed."

"MARA not only provides an opportunity for amateurs with a common bond to train for emergencies, it also serves as a 'clearing house' for information about setting up local emergency communication systems".

In the MARA Newsletter dated January 1986, Allen Packer – MARA President wrote:

“During the Teton (Idaho) Dam disaster, the Welfare Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint really saw the value, need, and benefits of communications during an emergency. They saw the service performed by amateur radio operators, many of whom were amateurs from Utah and Salt Lake City areas. As a result, not long after the Teton Dam break, several amateurs in the Salt Lake area were approached with the concept of providing backup communications during emergencies. The limitations of not being able to handle business or commercial traffic, along with the rules and regulations governing the amateur radio service were explained. The Welfare Department was willing to accept the service which amateurs could provide within the constraints of the amateur operating privileges.”

OK, so what does all this information have to do with the title (Just Two Little Words) of this article? Two interesting words are contained in the FCC regulations embodied as Part 97 Section 113(a)-3 which reads “No amateur station shall transmit communications in which the station licensee or control operator has a **PECUNIARY INTEREST ...**”. This section when combined with the first principle contained in the definition of the amateur radio service “Recognition and enhancement of the value of the amateur service to the public as a voluntary noncommercial communications service, particularly with respect to providing emergency communications” created an interesting juxtaposition for MARA. On May 7, 1990 MARA retained the legal services of Baker and McKenzie of San Francisco, California to act as an intermediary for MARA to the FCC. The attorneys described the relationship of MARA and the LDS Church without naming either party. As previously mentioned earlier in this article the LDS Church provided a small amount of money and some meeting room space in exchange for developing networks and trained operators.

The reply from the FCC came on May 21, 1990 and contained the following quotes. The "Facilitator" named is the LDS Church and the "Network" is MARA.

"You pose three questions. First, you ask whether amateur operators would be in violation of Section 97.113(b) if they accepted funds, building space, computer storage, and radio equipment from the "Facilitator". You are advised that the amateur stations in "Network" could not transmit messages for the "Facilitator" as a quid pro quo for the accepted funds, space, storage, and equipment."

"Second, there is no objection to requiring "Network" members to report their operations to local officials of "Facilitator" when such officials are volunteers, receive no remuneration, and are not considered to be employees of "Facilitator".

"Third, the proposal to have certain paid employees of "Facilitator" obtain Novice Class operator licenses, become members of "Network", and use amateur station transmitters owned by "Facilitator" for the transmission of messages would, in our judgment, violate Section 97.113(b) because salaried employees would be receiving material compensation, that is, a part of their salaries, for the messages transmitted by the amateur stations."

Signed John B. Johnston, Chief, Personal Radio Branch.

This response from the FCC left the MARA Board of Directors very few options to prevent legal action against the LDS Church. The decision was made to place some distance between the two organizations but let each determine, independently, how to relate to each other. This sudden “divorce” left many MARA members wondering what had happened. This was most unfortunate, and in hind sight, could have been mitigated much better. The Church has established an Emergency Response network to assist it in direct response activities, and in many areas MARA has continued to grow with local and regional networks.

Speaking from a personal perspective, my family at Thanksgiving time often exclaims “Who gets the drumstick and who wants the wishbone”? In a recent meeting with the LDS Church’s ECS we determined several areas of interest that are clearly within the ability and capability of MARA. I won’t spend a lot of time detailing them in this article but please give them some thought.

1. Health and Welfare traffic for anyone coming to the Church for help. This is one of the purposes mentioned in nearly every net preamble. Yet despite the reminder in every net, little traffic actually flows. My experience has proven that for every message intended for Church response, a hundred messages need handling for those of our Church and those not of our faith. Recent Church emergency responses to Myanmar, the Southeast USA, China, and Malaysia clearly portray the LDS Church’s desire to respond to the world in times of emergency.
2. Recruit, train, and assemble a pool of amateur radio operators that can be assigned in areas (local and remote) for communications service. This item includes real traffic handling, exploration of digital radio and Internet communication, and station and operator readiness. Requests, in times of disaster, may come to MARA to supply trained radio operators both for Church and non-Church service.
3. Provide communications services for non-LDS Church organizations. Become a trusted partner for any relief organization by preparing and establishing a well organized system of networks.
4. Provide an opportunity for socialization among net and chapter members.

Enough said, we seek your questions, suggestions, and help in this work. If you are aware of any MARA groups or associated organizations, please contact me. We want to create links from the *MARA.net* website to all groups, help consolidate technical and training materials, and bind this great group of amateurs together in this hobby that we love.

Thanks for your time and service. Feel free to forward this article to any who might be interested.

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