

# A Parish Church for Electronic Age's World Village

(By Religious News Service)

What is religion doing with radio and television? What are radio and television doing to religion? The two interlocked questions cover a field that ranges widely from the weekly broadcast of hundreds of sermons to large-scale, international coverage of such spectacular events as Pope Paul's visit to Fatima.

The interaction of the media with religion takes place on many levels. Religion is not only a subject of broadcasts and a producer of programs but also a consumer and often a severe critic. Radio and TV carry the Gospel message, not merely "from the house-tops" but in vibrations that bounce off the ionosphere far above the house-tops. They carry and inspire controversy, but they have more often proved an apt vehicle for ecumenical dialogue.

Criticism against the religious content of various radio-TV broadcasts range across the whole spectrum from sensationalism to dullness.

More important—but less noticed—are the long-range effects of the electronic media on the churches. These are only beginning to emerge and only partially perceptible so far, but two effects are particularly noteworthy.

The electronic media seem

to have accelerated the trend of ecumenical exposure and discussion which is one of the most notable religious developments of our time.

They seem also to be reinforcing a new fluidity of structures in some churches.

Both effects parallel, in the religious field, some of the trends which the brilliant but often baffling analyst of media, Marshall McLuhan, has observed in the more general field of cultural relations.

Contrasting the cultural effects of electronic communication with the print culture that preceded it, Dr. McLuhan has projected that electronics will eventually make the world one large village—a cultural unit transcending political boundaries and held together by instantaneous communications, common interests and shared perceptions.

He also has projected a breakdown of the stratified, one-time-at-a-time way of functioning which is characteristic of print culture. This approach is exemplified in things as diverse as the layout of a book, the assembly-line mode of production, a elaboration of hierarchical chains of command and specialized committees within organizations—even, perhaps, the ordered rows of pews facing a pulpit in a traditional church. It contrasts with the electronic

processing modes by having "a place for everything and everything in its place" while electronics can put a voice, a moving image and the new ideas which things convey in many places simultaneously.

Some of the everywhere-ness of an electronic age and the variety of disparate interests and activities which can be blended into one unit by the intrusion of electronics were indicated recently in a statement by the Rev. John Rydgren, a Minneapolis Lutheran minister sometimes called "the swinging shepherd" because of the rock 'n' roll program he broadcasts in 14 cities.

The program includes interviews with teenagers which originate from what Mr. Rydgren calls the "Silhouette Shack." Here is the description of it:

"The shack is not a specific place. We move around like a floating crap game. The kids get together to listen to big beat music and to dance. I play the drums, and then we talk about such things as music, school, sex, Christ and faith."

This image, bewildering to most people of an older generation who think of a church as a highly-specialized place where people sit in orderly rows for about one hour a week, may be a precursor of the church of the electronic age—every-

where at once, in activity, in topics of discussion and even to some extent, in its physical location.

An aspect of electronic impact more readily grasped by the pre-Beatles generation can be expressed in terms of competition—the plight of the ordinary priest who for years has been haunted by the thought that his parish is unconsciously comparing him with Bishop Sheen or the minister who has had to contend with the pupil image (everywhere at once) of Norman Vincent Peale or Billy Graham.

This problem has been recognized to some extent by the Roman Catholic Church, which allows radio and TV to broadcast religious services (restricting the technicians to a role that does not distort or interfere with the rite) but does not allow Catholics to fulfill their Mass attendance obligations via radio or TV. It is reflected also in the strict prohibition against use of film or recorded music or sermons during Catholic religious services.

Another form of recognition came recently at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, in a report by Paul M. Stevens, executive director of the denomination's Radio-Television Commission. In the "transistor" age, Mr. Stevens warned, "the name,

voice and personality of the local pastor will tend to carry less and less weight in community leadership since there will be no community as we know it now."

"The future minister of the Gospel will undoubtedly be forced to rely on electronic amplification of his voice and face," said Mr. Stevens.

"When radio or television changes, we have to change. We are irrevocably interlocked with the total media-communication concept. When new methods are found to sell cars or aspirin, we must adapt them to telling men of Christ."

On another occasion, earlier this year, Mr. Stevens pointed out the ecumenical dimension of religious broadcasting. The occasion was the showing of "The Vine," a televised life of Christ filmed in the Holy Land and widely praised by critics.

Mr. Stevens, who directed it, noted that the film (along with two others produced by the Baptists) was written by a Catholic, Philip Scharper, and that there had been some criticism of using a Catholic writer for Baptist scripts.

Among the crew which made the picture, Mr. Stevens said, nobody asked about anyone else's denomination.

"We don't serve a Baptist God," he said. "We serve a living God. I do not consider myself simply a Baptist minister but a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

to consensus and avoiding controversy—a policy which is, to be sure, not always successful. Such a policy arises naturally from the diversity of the audiences reached by the networks and by most large independent stations.

This diversity was cited in a recent statement by Walter A. Schultz, executive secretary of the Division of Public Relations of the Lutheran Council in Canada. In using mass media, said Mr. Schultz, "we hope to reach the committed Christian, the lukewarm Christian and also the unchurched."

"The Bible-thumping, hell-fire and brimstone preacher might gain a considerable following among the 'committed' but very rarely seems to reach the unchurched," he remarked.

A generally positive approach and one which stresses things that unite has its dangers, of course. The danger of bland-

ness was underlined recently by W. H. Ferry, a vice-president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, at a meeting of the World Association for Christian Broadcasting.

Mr. Ferry called the mass media "the sedate vehicle of the middle class" and suggested that "the muscle of the church" might be used to put more vigor into programming.

His view was challenged by Miss Pamela Iltot, director of religious programming for CBS, who said that television was largely responsible for the present ferment over the Vietnam war and public interest in civil rights.

At the same meeting, Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike, also of the Center's staff, noted that interest in religion is increasing while interest in the church as an institution declines.

"People are not interested in our sectarianism, and we are being forced to be ecumenical,"

The electronic media, which have certainly reflected these trends, also have accelerated them.

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**Pope Meets Churchmen**  
Vatican City — (RNS) — Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, and Pope Paul VI are shown with members of the joint working party made up of WCC and Catholic theologians who called for "more dynamic collaboration" between the World Council and the Catholic Church. Photo was taken in Vatican City following a dialogue session.

**Farm Safety Week Set For July 23-29**

Farmers and their employees were urged by the American Red Cross today to "plant seeds of caution and reap crops of safety."

The advice came on the eve of National Farm Safety Week, proclaimed by President Johnson to begin Sunday (July 23).

"Next to mining and quarrying, and the building trades, farming is the most hazardous of occupations in numbers of accidents and deaths and injuries resulting from them," declared Al Justus, local director of Red Cross Safety Services. "In one year, 8,200 farm residents were killed and 740,000 others suffered disabling injuries in accidents."

"Every farm worker should know first aid," Justus said. "They work far from medical facilities, and first aid knowledge could save their lives in case of an accident. According to the National Safety Council, nine out of every ten persons injured fatally in tractor accidents died before medical help could reach them. Some of these deaths could have been prevented by immediate first aid care."

**Churches' Role to Fill Vacuum**

Bridgeport — (RNS) — All churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant, must "provide a sense of urban community," Jesuit educator told the New York Conference of The Methodist Church here.

Father William C. McInnes, president of Fairfield (Conn.) University, said a study at his school showed that clergy of all faiths within the Bridgeport area recognized they had lost the position of community leadership.

"The end of economic and social monarchy in our town has left a vacuum," he said. "With the end of a stable economic society and the dwindling of the urban community from which it can seek direction."

Father McInnes contended that abandonment of the cities by the traditional, industrial and intellectual authorities has opened the way to the disparate leadership of various minority groups.

At the same time, he added, the federal government has used its financial resources in the "power vacuum, sapping local community participation and initiative. One of the consequences has been a rising militancy among the several groups within the community

Incidents of ecumenical cooperation in television particularly, are too numerous to catalogue. In fact, even a list of ecumenically oriented programs which have been awarded prizes in the last few months would fill several column inches of small type.

One explanation of the ease with which television has adapted to ecumenism may be the fact that it is a team effort, involving closely timed and organized coordination among men of highly varied skills, interests and backgrounds. The writing of a book or a magazine article has been traditionally a solitary occupation and its processing has then gone through a one-step-at-a-time series from writer to editor to printer, binder and distributor. In a television studio, by contrast, everything is happening at once — and what is more, via a million receivers, it is happening everywhere at once.

Religious programming, still in its early stages, has a strong ecumenical emphasis, unlike the first century of religious publishing in colonial America. The latter was devoted almost exclusively to bitter controversy — among men whose theological views seem, from the perspective of today, nearly identical.

Besides programs which are prepared by ecumenical staffs or which have an explicitly ecumenical objective, the electronic media promote ecumenism simply by exposing the varieties of religion, familiarizing viewers and listeners with the beliefs and customs of their near or distant neighbors.

Relevant to the ecumenical impact of these media also is their usual policy of speaking

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