

# Churches Get Edgy over Electronic Religion

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

Can anything on television be more harmful than the current exploitation of sex and violence?

Yes indeed — religion. Or, at least the way religion is packaged and presented by many religious broadcasters.

Surprisingly, the criticism does not come from vindictive soap opera producers or atheistic jingoists but from a rising chorus of communication experts from within the church establishment itself.

Father Edmond S. Nadolny, director of the office of radio and television for the Archdiocese of Hartford, claims that "while the overemphasis on sex and violence obviously has tremendous negative effects, many of our religious programs have a greater negative effect because their falsehood is a lot more subtle."

Without mentioning specific names, Father Nadolny accuses some "self-appointed electronic religious leaders" of quoting scripture out of context, attributing personal problems — including illness — to a lack of faith, and of building up their own kingdoms more than the kingdom of God.

Evangelist Billy Graham, who has probably entered more American homes via electronic media than any other preacher, also recently warned against the misuse of the airwaves by "false prophets."

Graham insisted that radio and television were "ideal tools" for bringing millions of people to Christ. And he defended most religious broadcasters as "sincere people of integrity."

But the world-renowned evangelist also warned, "We are facing the dangers of false prophets — the charlatans and Elmer Ganttrys — who in a relatively short time could destroy the great privilege we have of using the airwaves to proclaim the gospel."

All religious leaders agree with Graham's assessment of the value of the media as tools of evangelization.

Archbishop Francis T. Hurley of Anchorage told the assembly of his fellow bishops in Chicago this Spring that the Catholic Church planned extensive use of electronic media in an upcoming evangelistic effort to reach 80 million unchurched Americans.

Also, two large Christian national networks have ambitious expansion plans.

The Christian Broadcasting Network, which has a round-the-clock TV format offered to four of its own stations and 130 affiliates, is including four television studios and a second satellite transmitter in its new \$50 million building project in Virginia Beach, Va.

CBN's rival network, evangelist Jim Bakker's PTL (People That Love), also has a new multipurpose \$10 million project on the drawing boards.

From the time of St. Paul, who used letters to extend his apostolate beyond face-to-face encounters, Christian leaders have progressively used the printing press, radio and television to reach a wider audience. But until recently, most of the broadcasting has been confined to the ghetto of undesirable time slots.

Robert E. Burns, executive editor of the national magazine U.S. Catholic, points out that "in the last five years or so, a new breed of religious cat has found the formula: Develop a classy broadcast package that will grab a sizeable audience, ask their devoted viewers and listeners to send them contributions and, following an upwardly mobile schedule, buy desirable (prime) time.

"What is the value of this kind of broadcasting?" Burns asks.

The veteran editor worries that the electronic church is becoming a substitute for, rather than a supplement to, a worshipping community of believers. Burns claims that the often overloaded inspirational emphasis proclaimed from electronic pulpits is like "Worcestershire sauce without the roast beef."

Church historian and religion commentator Martin E. Marty shares the uneasiness that the electronic church is becoming a major competitor to the local church. "We should worry about members of the completely private, individual, invisible, do-it-yourself

To 17

## For Your Dining Pleasure

### THE MAPLEWOOD INN: STYLE WITH EASE

By PETER FRAVER

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