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## The Electronic Church

By Ed Briggs  
Religion Today

When John Wesley set out in the 19th Century to preach his belief in the universal love of God, he found himself blocked by his recalcitrant Church of England.

Undaunted, Wesley took to the streets — to the folk culture — and thus began what has become a major Protestant force in the world: Methodism.

A major consultation among Protestants and Catholics held here looked into what appears to be an abandonment by organized religion of bringing the message to the people. It is the "Electronic Church," the plethora of radio and television programs featuring sock-it-to-'em, stand-up-for-Jesus evangelism.

The consultation examined the new phenomenon, which somehow touches the lives of 130 million Americans weekly, from both scholarly and critical directions.

Perhaps the most critical of the electronic church is Dr. Colin Williams, a former dean of Yale Divinity School, and now a senior fellow with the Aspen Institute.

Dr. Williams stood at a microphone in front of one of the television evangelists, Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network in Virginia Beach, Va., and said, "I basically do not like the style of the show (Robertson's 700 Club) or its music."

Robertson had defended the electronic church against the charges that rather than carrying the message of Christ's promise of salvation to the world, the medium it used — television and its overall cloak of entertainment — is itself the message.

## Is Its Message 'Cheap Religion'?

Like Wesley, Robertson said, he tried to work within the system of organized religion. But when he asked for money to start his first television station in Portsmouth, Va., he was turned down by both his local ministerial association and the Southern Baptist congregation he served as pastor. Robertson is the son of the late Sen. Willis Robertson of Virginia.

Robertson said he persevered and, despite the snub from organized religion, built his network to four television stations with a total audience of 1.7 million viewers, 126 other broadcasting outlets through purchased time slots, and 3,500 television systems.

"We learned and . . . I paid my dues," Robertson said.

He indicated to the churchmen that he believes in a simple Gospel message that would sit well with television audiences that for the most part want to be entertained. He has distilled the works of the late Karl Barth, one of the century's greatest theologians, down to: "Jesus loves me. This I know, because the Bible tells me so."

That didn't sit well with Dr. Williams, who told

Robertson, "Barth wrote more than that. He wrote volumes. And I still read them."

The scholar acknowledged that Wesley sought the folk culture to spread his religion, just as the electronic church has done. Dr. Williams added, "Wesley went out to the people and talked about the universal love of God. Wesley insisted it must not be a cheap religion" that was to be preached.

He said that "cheap grace" that is preached through the electronic church comes with declaring that one is saved without having to carry out the dictates of Christ to care for others in the world.

"Cheap religion" seems to be the problem of the electronic church, he said.

That was the attitude conveyed throughout the rest of the consultation toward the 85 syndicated religious television shows broadcast each week across the nation.

What the consultation feared was that through the electronic church the television set is becoming the altar.

As part of the national debate over a possible electronic reformation, questions such as these will be raised:

Can the sacraments, such as baptism and Eucharist, be transmitted over the airwaves? Past cases of self-administered Communion in the homes were frowned upon by the consultation.

And, with the transfer of a real community of persons gathered together in a studio audience inside the television set, what happens to one's concept of doing good works for others?



## New Home

The Rajaphoumy family spent two years in a refugee camp in Thailand, but thanks to the efforts of St. Joseph's Parish in Penfield, they have settled in the Rochester area. Standing outside their apartment are, from left, Sang Vane Rajaphoumy, holding her infant daughter Vieng Krek; Vilavanh, seated on bicycle with her younger brother Boun Nhareth; Vasana, eldest son, and father, Boun Loyanh. The two oldest children wave balloons, an American acquisition. Story is on Page 3.

## Family Life Issues To Be Discussed Throughout Diocese

Issues that will be debated at the White House Conference on Families will be aired at a series of public meetings in the diocese before the national meetings begin in June. The first two gatherings are scheduled for tomorrow, March 6, and March 13, at 7:30 p.m. in the third floor conference room at the Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Rd.

Terrance Holly, announcing the dates, said, "Plans are in place to have the delegates (to the national conference) available to travel to all sections of the diocese between now and June to listen to the concerns of people as far as how government intervention or lack of intervention affects the family. It is hoped that those interested in Family will take the time to come and share with us."

Holly and his wife, Sheila, are coordinating this project for the diocesan Office of Family Life.

As alternate delegates, they attended the Governor's Conference on Families Feb. 23-25 in Albany. The delegation from the diocese included Mr. and Mrs. James Gillette of Brockport, Angel Rivera of Rochester and Judge Daniel Donahue of Elmira.

"Unfortunately, 'grass roots' people weren't numerically represented," the Hollys wrote in a report on the Albany sessions, at which position papers were prepared. "What we saw was a lot of people who truly want a strengthening in the family, although, unfortunately their concept of family and the so-called individual rights are in direct conflict with what we believe are Catholic values."

"Abortion as an issue did not come up directly but strong support was given to pending legislation where funded abortion is available. Contraception was couched in such expressions as 'free choice' to plan when and how big a family one would have. We were delighted to have

the terminology: Natural Family Planning as part of the position papers."

The following statements are taken from the Hollys' outline of the position papers:

"The present welfare and social insurance systems do not adequately meet the basic needs of families."

"Discrimination in the workplace undermines family life in a number of destructive ways."

"There is a critical shortage of decent, affordable housing in America, in rural, suburban and urban communities alike, injuring families at all income levels."

Position papers were prepared on a number of topics, including education, health care systems, ethnic and cultural diversity, families with special needs and families in stress and crisis. The papers will be discussed at the Pastoral Center meetings and others, yet to be scheduled, elsewhere in the diocese.