

Churches Hear Voice of 'Electronic Angel'

By Jay Merwin
Religious News Service

Some "electronic Church" evangelists believe that the satellites beaming their programs fulfill a biblical prophecy in the book of Revelation about "another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth."

In the past, some Roman Catholics have speculated that Thomas Aquinas was that "angel." Methodists thought it might be John Wesley and Presbyterians thought the reference was to John Calvin.



Special Report

Now, whether they agree with this new interpretation or not, denominations that have traditionally relied on network donated "sustaining time" to broadcast their message, are scrambling for a piece of that electronic angel.

A Catholic program produced by the Philadelphia archdiocese has been distributed on purchased broadcast time to other television stations in several major cities. It is financed in part by donations solicited from viewers.

On the national level, the Church plans to create a magazine format program for national syndication. The project has been financed by an annual national communications collection begun in the spring of 1979.

The United Methodist General Conference recently passed a plan to raise at least \$25 million to buy a local television station. The 192nd General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. has given initial approval to the development of a "mass media ministry" that would include the purchase of commercial network time and the use of cable television systems.

"The basis really of purchased time is frustration," observed Father John Geaney, CSP, president of UNDA/U.S.A., the Catholic communications agency. Within the past 15 years, the amount of available sustaining time has shriveled by about 90 percent, he said.

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The Communications Committee of the U.S. Catholic Conference has begun to study the technical specifications for a telecommunications network of its own. The system would be used both for evangelism and for intra-church data transmission, education and some forms of administrative communication. But the network would not pretend to a Catholic response to Pat Robertson's evangelical Christian Broadcasting Network, said Bishop Norbert F. Gaughan, chairman of the committee.

"What we must understand is that the Church is not removed from the marketplace, and provides social and educational services which can be served through a cable system," he told a meeting of the nation's bishops in Chicago last May. "So we're not talking about creating a new network, but about interconnecting the largest social service network already existing outside the government."

Construction on a smaller UHF television network has begun in Riverhead, N.Y., with the blessing of Bishop John R. McGann of the Rockville Centre diocese.

Channel 55, described in a promotional pamphlet as "an alternative to sex and violence, to materialism and vulgarity," would be the first exclusively Catholic station among 25 Christian stations and programs currently operating in the U.S. It would reach about three million people.

Further applications have been entered for broadcast permits on two available channels in the New York/New Jersey area and plans have been made to compete for a channel in San Francisco, according to Father Thomas J. Hartman, director of radio and television for Rockville Centre.

The Methodist solicitation to buy a local television network affiliate would begin next January, with the intention of landing a purchase of no more than two years later. Proponents of the idea reasoned that they were following the precedent of John Wesley who met people where they lived and worked in order to preach the Gospel.

However, the Rev. William F. Fore, a Methodist who heads the National Council of Churches Communications Commission, believes his church "is making a big mistake to buy a station and to pay for time." And given the demands of advertising sponsorship, "either they will be running a station that's indistinguishable from any other station or they won't be making enough money."

Millions of dollars required to purchase mass audience network time eventually will have to come from the church and from on-air solicitations, Robert Thompson, director of media programming for the communications committee of the United Presbyterian Church, acknowledged.

"If we're going to do the programming for a truly mass audience, we are going to have to buy time," he said. "That's something all the mainline denominations are going to have to wrestle with."

None of these churches, however, wants to become a full-fledged competitor of the multi-million-dollar electronic church. Consequently many of them have explored the burgeoning technological opportunities within cable television. For example, Presbyterian programs about the church's mission will not attract a mass audience. But that won't be an obstacle to cable viewing, Thompson said. They can be distributed exclusively to cable television markets with heavy concentrations of Presbyterians.

In Pittsburgh, the local cable franchise offers 60 channels in five service tiers ranging in subscription rates from \$4.14 to \$9.45 a month. One of these channels has been made available to the Christian Associates, an ecumenical agency comprising three Catholic dioceses and churches from 11 Protestant denominations.

But continued public access to cable television may depend on the level of commitment shown by the local community.

"Left to itself, the cable industry will develop along the same commercial and material lines as broadcast TV," said Christian Brother Richard Emenecker, superintendent of the Pittsburgh cable bureau. Christians should "help shape the latest communications technology and perhaps last frontier

Media critics within the churches favor the expansion into cable television. But they fear that forays into purchased commercial network time may have compromised their traditional claim that broadcast stations are obligated to provide sustaining time to the local community.

Churches "ought to be raising questions about the local stations' accountability, instead of raising money to buy time," said Fore.

The Rev. Everett C. Parker, director of the United Church of Christ Office of Communications, put it more bluntly: Churches that buy time are "playing into the hands of rapacious broadcasters who want to make as much money as possible."

However, major denominations may not be able to hold out for more openings in the sustaining time arena. "As the explosion into video technology transforms Western society from a written to a visual culture, the greatest influence will be accrued to successful packagers of ideas," an advertising agency executive told last year's convention of the Religious Public Relations Council.

He asked: "Are you good enough to compete for the attention and the money of the American consumer who is your parishioner?"

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Big Day Planned In Auriesville

The Holy Family Renewal Center plans a day of preaching, teaching and healing at the Shrine of the North American Martyrs at Auriesville Sunday, June 29.

The day has special meaning as the 50th anniversary of the canonization of the North American martyrs and also because just one week earlier Kateri Tekakwitha was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Rome.

Fathers John Bertolucci and Michael Scanlan will lead the celebration. Father Bertolucci is pastor of St. Joseph's in Little Falls, near Auriesville, and is a world-wide evangelist. Father Scanlan is president of the College of Steubenville, Ohio, and a charismatic leader.

Any groups interested in attending should contact the shrine at (518) 853-3033.



Check Presentation

Mark Lawn, president of the Blessed Trinity Home-School Association in Auburn, presented Sister Walter Anne O'Malley, school principal, with a check for \$1,000 at the Teacher Appreciation Dinner on June 6.

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