

RELIGION

Churches Preach a High-Tech Gospel

By CALMETTA Y. COLEMAN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Rev. Kevin Meyers of the Crossroads Community Church in Lawrenceville, Ga., believes he has found a way to spread the Word in a technological society. He illustrates his sermon with videos on a big screen behind the altar.

For his 12-week overview of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, Mr. Meyers showed a timeline of biblical events and historical maps—along with a clip of the opening of the Ark of the Covenant from "Raiders of the Lost Ark."

"It has made the whole Bible come alive," says Marc Schantz, a 38-year-old member of the interdenominational congregation. "When he put it up on the screen, it really began to sink in for me."

Crossroads is one of a growing group of churches that are using technology to enhance their services. The trend started in "megachurches"—big, evangelical churches whose services integrate elements of popular culture. But now some main-line Protestant and even a few Catholic churches are putting on high-tech shows that, like the stained-glass windows of the Middle Ages, are meant to dazzle and help teach churchgoers.

Electronic keyboards and audio-mixing boards are replacing organs and pianos; wireless microphones and high-powered speakers are supplanting old public-address systems; and video screens up to 15 feet tall are displacing hymnals.

The churches are trying to compete with big-screen television, CD sound and other technology that young people use every

day. People in their 20s and 30s, turned off by traditionally solemn church practices, "don't want to go to the church their parents went to," contends Max Strother, a Florida consultant who helps churches with strategic planning. "Young people have been trained by Hollywood to expect this," says the Rev. Charles Cooper of Hi-Praz Bible Fellowship in Maywood, Ill. They aren't "going to sit there and listen to a monologue about dry data."

To highlight key points of his sermons, Mr. Cooper designs graphics on a laptop computer, converts the images to video and then projects them onto a screen.

When it's time to announce church events, Speak the Word Church in Golden Valley, Minn., dims the lights and puts video commercials on two big screens above the congregation. A typical commercial might introduce a visiting minister by showing a clip of him speaking or advertise a camp meeting with a video of singing. "The pastor used to stand up there and read announcements, but this is more effective," says the Rev. Paul Staack.

Similarly, about 25,000 churches have their congregations singing from transparencies and videos projected overhead, estimates Christian Copyright Licensing International, which handles song copyrights.

That and other innovations were popularized by Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill., which attracts about 200 pastors a year to seminars on working technology into services. Meanwhile, the General Conference of Seventh Day Adventists transmits programs

about Christian training by satellite to local congregations. A spokesman says 1,878 Adventist churches have receivers and projection equipment.

Sometimes, of course, the marriage between flashy technology and church services can be rocky, as some churchgoers complain about too-loud music and costly upgrades. Trinity Charismatic Episcopal Church in Ocean City, Md., showed songs overhead for only a month this year before it returned to the traditional bulletins and hymnals. People complained they couldn't read the words on the screen, says the Rev. Larry Hill. Another problem: Copyright issues prohibit churches from reproducing the music along with the lyrics, making it harder to sing along.

Others worry that conspicuous equipment pushes religious symbols into the background. During a recent visit to Judson Baptist Church in Oak Park, Ill., 30-year-old Hermann Mazard spent about 10 minutes scanning the sanctuary for a cross. Halfway through the service, a motorized screen used for song verses behind the pulpit was lifted, revealing a stained-glass cross. "To cover the cross with some high-tech equipment seems almost sacrilegious," Mr. Mazard says.

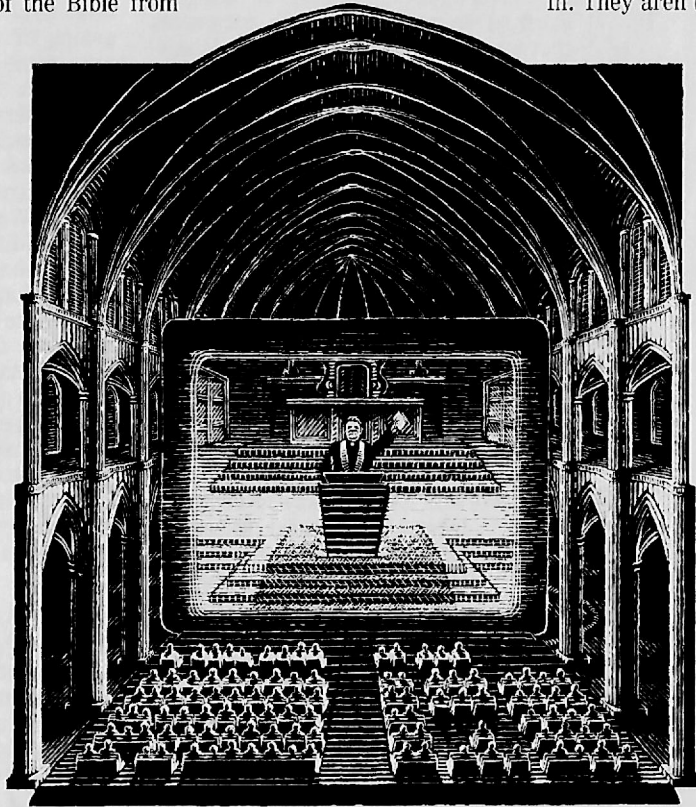
Some church buildings just can't accommodate the new technology. "You may have a lot of pretty stained-glass windows that let in a lot of light. That's going to hurt your screen," notes Darren MacDonald, a dealer of video projectors.

Meanwhile, the churches' services are evolving along with the new technology. At Grace Missionary Church of Zion, Ill., wireless microphones, part of a new \$12,000 system, have made it easier for the Rev. William R. Swanger to walk out into the congregation while preaching. "I used to work with a wire trailing behind me, and it was awkward," he says. Microphones also help "praise teams," or minichoirs of six to eight people, lead congregational singing.

The high-tech tools can help make services more interactive. During the sermon at Crossroads, the Georgia church, the video screen will display a sentence with a missing word. One recent example: "You've met the servant Jesus Christ, now meet the s----- Jesus Christ." The sermon reveals the missing word: "sovereign." Attendance has jumped to 800 a week from 600 since Crossroads began using video.

A number of companies are catering to churches. Washburn Guitars Inc. of Vernon Hills, Ill., which makes amplifiers, mixing consoles and speakers, last year established a division to serve churches and recently began making sound systems with oak, walnut and other veneers to blend into churches. Washburn replaced its old system, acoustically designed for nightclubs, with a new Worship System, which has a clearer, less booming sound more suitable for Sunday morning worship. The company also hired a minister, the Rev. Doug Prewitt, to preach the virtues of its products. Washburn's average audio system sells for about \$25,000.

Washburn says the church market added 10% to its sales last year. Another maker of sound systems, JBL Professional of Northridge, Calif., says about \$12 million to \$15 million of its annual sales comes from churches. "Ten years ago, the average [sound] system sold to a church might be a \$10,000 to \$20,000 job, but today it's about \$100,000 to \$150,000," says President Mark Terry. Mr. MacDonald, who works for Irving, Texas-based Shepherd Ministries, says he sells video projectors to about 60 to 70 churches a month, with an average sale of about \$4,000. Sharp Electronics video projectors cost up to 50,000 including the screen.



Patrick Arrasmith