

# Praise the Lord and Pass the Video Cam

by Peter Cheney

In the beginning, God created heaven and the Earth. Later came rock music, video cameras and wireless microphones.

And this week in Burlington, the church that wants to move into the 90's can find everything it needs under one roof at Inspiration '93, billed as the world's first high-tech religious trade show.

Here, the with-it minister can pick up a digital switcher unit, attend a pyrotechnics seminar, learn how to put on a laser show, or book a Christian rock band that plays a set dedicated to the theme of celibacy.

"Churches have to be more entertainment oriented," says show organizer Shelagh Rogers. "They're finding out that you can't get kids to Sunday School with just coloring books any more."

Rogers has brought together hundreds of diverse exhibitors and presenters, each offering goods or services aimed at sparking interest in religion with an infusion of showbiz.

"I can't imagine anyone seeing this as a change for the worse," she says. "Anything that gets people inside a church is good. How can it not be?"

The show runs until tonight at Burlington's Crossroads Center, home of the studios where the 100 Huntley St. religious broadcasts are taped- a fitting venue, given the high tech religious theme.

"King David would be attending this show if he had lived in this generation," says TV preacher David Mainse. "He would have loved it!"

"There's never been anything like this before! There are people who drove 14 hours to get here. Our message is: come, look it over, and see what's possible."

One thing that's entirely possible, a tour of the show reveals, is for a church to spend a lot of money. On hand is a staggering collection of high tech gear with prices that can run from a few dollars up into the millions.

Churches have always spent money to attract the faithful, Mainse says: "St. Peter's could afford to hire Michelangelo, while others couldn't. That's just the way it is."

'TECHNOLOGY HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITH US'

Mainse says those who bridle at the idea of using high-tech entertainment technology in churches should reconsider: "Technology has always been with us... When St. Paul the apostle traveled, he used the latest technology of his day. Maybe it was a sailboat, but that was the latest at the time.

"When Jesus spoke up there on the Sea of Galilee, he had a natural amphitheater. I guess that's high-tech, too. Natural high-tech... if there are people who don't want any high-tech at all, they should go live with the Amish."

The show has attracted a variety of churches and religious organizations.

Mike Foulger is with an international Christian organization called Youth with a Mission. Foulger wants to put together a training studio for mission members so they can advance the mission's cause through television.

"We could end up spending a million bucks, easy," he says. "This stuff isn't cheap."

The mission doesn't have that million on hand at the moment, he says. In fact, they've got nothing to put down at all. But that isn't a problem, says Foulger.

"We're a faith mission. We trust in God to help us. We

don't have any money up front, but we believe it will come. Not right away, maybe, but it will come. It always happens."

Foulger has an ardent faith in high tech as a means of attracting the young people who can renew a church. "High tech increases your possibilities of communication. You've got to be real. You've got to be relevant. The church has kind of been in the dark ages, really."

At Inspiration '93, faith and commerce intersect. Everywhere there are salespeople with name tags and booths filled with gear. Ascetics should look elsewhere: this is a free-enterprising, filofaxing, cellular-phone-toting Christianity, a Christianity that would not toss the money-lenders from the temple but hit them up for venture capital.

Show organizer Rogers, who publishes a \$60 directory that's distributed to the entertainment industry, says she got the idea for Inspiration '93 after she noticed that an increasing number of churches were buying her directory. Religion and high-tech showbiz seemed a natural pairing, she believed.

"Our job is to make them aware of the technology that's available, how surprisingly affordable it is, and help them move forward into the 90's," she says. "This is the first show of its kind. It's unique."

John Cornelius, a volunteer with Chatham's Evangelic Community Pentecostal Church, came to the show to look at a video projector. He also had a look at a \$44,000 Betacam video camera.

His church, with a congregation of 450, has turned to producing dramas and musicals to spark things up. 'WE DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY... BUT BELIEVE IT WILL COME'

"It draws in the community. It gets them interested. Some people like a traditional sermon, other people want to see a play. To each his own."

The church has already commissioned the filming of two videos by freelance production companies, and wants to do more.

"Technology is going to play a bigger and bigger part in our church," he says. "It adds color and excitement."

Daryl Stratichuk, a representative for the Shure microphone Company, which sells models from \$70 to \$1,000, says the religious market is much larger than most people realize and is growing.

He scoffs at the notion that modern technology interferes with religious tradition.

"It raises the quality of presentation. Why should the rest of the world go high tech, and not churches?"

Churches can be tough customers, by the way. "They want as much as they can get for as little as possible," says Stratichuk, "and they trust to the Lord that it'll last forever... I'm a Christian myself- I can relate to that."

One growing area of the religious market is video production. Inspiration '93 exhibitor Paul Stiles of Harvest Teleproductions says his company recently shot a 21-minute, \$40,000 promotional video for a national ministry.

"They'll use it to raise a lot of money," he says. "\$40,000 is a drop in the bucket for something like that.

"The production values have risen. You've got a smarter, more sophisticated audience today. This little Handicam stuff doesn't cut it anymore." ◆