RELIGIOUS GROUPS FORM TV NETWORK

Mainstream Faiths to Produce Issue-Oriented Shows and Bar Seeking of Funds

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

An interfaith coalition of mainstream religious groups have taken a lesson from television evangelists: use television but handle it with care.

The groups, representing Protestant, Jewish and Roman Catholic faiths, are to announce today the formation of a new cable network that will not raise money on the air and will not be centered on any one preacher. It will be called the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network and will take what its organizers call a "positive approach" to religious broadcasting.

"The mainline churches have not utilized the power and importance of television," said the Rev. Daniel Paul Matthews, the rector of Trinity Epsicopal Church and chairman of the National Interfaith Cable Coalition, which has been formed by groups from various faiths to developing the new network.

The idea for Vision has been germinating for several years, Dr. Matthews said, but was given new impetus by the recent scandals that have enveloped the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker's PTL network. As a result of the scandals, he said, cable operators have become "disillusioned" with the television evangelists.

A major backer of the new network, Tele-Communications Inc., an Englewood, Colo.-based company that says it operates more cable systems than any other concern, dropped PTL programming from many of its systems last year. But the company is helping the new network with an undisclosed investment.

Robert N. Thomson, the company's vice president for government affairs, said he saw Vision as "an opportunity to improve the quality and variety of our religious programming."

Vision officials say it needs $5.2 million to get off the ground, and will seek commercial sponsorships. Dr. Matthews said several major concerns, including the McDonald's Corporation, have agreed to sponsor programs.

'Sitcoms and Soap Operas'

Religious services will be broadcast from time to time, but with the following ground rules: There shall be no proselytizing and no fund-raising.

Vision will try to discuss contemporary issues, such as drugs, unemployment and homelessness, from a moral and ethical perspective. While the issues will sometimes be explored by experts, more often they will be treated in an entertaining fashion. "There is a place for sitcoms and soap operas, too," Dr. Matthews said.

Using existing church studios in New York and Nashville, Tenn., Vision will debvelop news and entertainment programs and others will be donated by denominations who already develop shows.

The network hopes to begin broadcasting this summer on a part-time basis of six or eight hours a day.

Denuded of money, personality and religious salesmanship, some might wonder about the appeal of the new newtwork. But Nelson Price, the secretary-treasurer of the cable coalition, is not concerned.

"Consider homelessness, racial tension, child abuse," Mr. Price said. "There's plenty of drama there."

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