

God And High-tech, A New Communion

by Lois Sweet

When Rick Manafo plans a Sunday worship service, the medium is almost as important as the message. Manafo uses smoke machines, audio with effects, even lighting that electronically follows people around on stage. "Our goal is to take the message (of God) and maximize it," says Manafo, program director at Willowdale's Northview Community Church. "Sure it's expensive, but it's even more expensive not to get your message through." That's a lesson many Canadian churches have learned - often the hard way. For many, membership has fallen. The presumption - "build it (a church) and they will come" - no longer works. "Churches have discovered that in order to draw people, they have to sell a product," says Tony Devai, a lighting consultant and director of sales for ColorTran, a Company that manufactures lighting systems for theatres and television. "The question is: How do they get people into the church so they'll stay there and give their dollar to the church as opposed to another one? They're all competing now, so they have to spice up their product." Devai speaks from experience. Increasingly, church leaders seek his advice on how to enhance their appeal. In fact, he's a seminar leader at the Inspiration North & South show currently running through tomorrow at the Regal Constellation Hotel. Designed for the religious community, this show celebrates the fact that high-tech and religion are not mutually exclusive. "Our mandate is to bring excellence back into the church," says Shelagh

Rogers, show organizer and publisher of Religion-Communications For Worship, a glossy magazine published in Aurora. The conference ran for the first time last year and attracted 78 different Christian denominations and synagogues. This year, more than 58 companies are displaying their wares and 77 seminars are being offered on topics as diverse as "Bible study on the Macintosh" and "Digital electronics technology in religious applications." The potential market is huge. It's estimated that Canada has 30,000 churches, most of which are just beginning to consider a relationship with high-technology. And when they learn that 90 per cent of them have sound systems that actually hinder their ability to reach people, religious leaders have to admit that good technology and expertise are, today, a form of survival. "Churches often deal with state-of-the-art sound systems, but they get volunteers to put them in," says Rogers. "Or, they buy a \$60,000 organ and put in an inferior sound system. They often lose people because they can't hear properly or they don't get the quality they deserve for the money they spend." Dennis Hopper of Bramalea Baptist Church is planning to attend the conference, and he's taking five or six other church volunteers with him. Bramalea Baptist seats about 2,000 people and has what he calls "a technical sound ministry." But he underlines Rogers' point: "The sound ministry is run by volunteers who have a real heart for serving the Lord, but aren't trained at all." So Hopper and his contingent will take in semi-

nars and examine the latest high-tech displays. Money is no small consideration. State-of-the-art technology can cost a small fortune. Ironically, however, it's sometimes cheaper than its more pristine alternative. The Aurora United Church, for example, needs a new organ. While researching a purchase, organ committee member Ed Griffith discovered that replacing its 1930-ish pipe organ with a new one would cost around \$300,000. An electronic organ, however, could be bought for a mere \$50,000. This would not only be cheaper, but would need less maintenance and be a lot more flexible. The church however, is moving cautiously. "An electronic organ will scare people," says Griffith. "It's not what an organ is supposed to be. "On the other hand, I don't know how churches can afford to put in pipe organs or why their congregations would let them. The problem is that churches are very traditional." While the traditional strain may run deep, it hasn't stopped churches from adopting computers - often in a big way. Some use them to track membership - who's married to whom, who could volunteer for what, that sort of thing. Others use them to boost giving. By sending out a monthly computerized statement, members are "encouraged" to up their financial contributions or, at the least, not fall behind. Michael Bells, pastor of Mount Albert Missionary Church, has the Bible on a computer disk. He can search out biblical words and instantaneously get their meanings in English, Greek and Hebrew. ◆