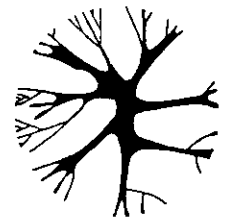


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Satellite Communications and the Church

Today all churches are becoming increasingly aware that they are working in a communications environment in almost continuous change. Prophets of a new communications age hold out promises of more and more channels of information in a technological wonderland of video, viewdata, teletext, cable TV, microcomputers, and satellites. Other voices urge that the established media of books, newspapers, magazines, radio, cinema films and television be not forgotten. Everywhere the Church is urged to use old and new media alike to communicate the Gospel.

For the church caught up in this media confusion it is often difficult to decide what course of action to take. This issue of TRENDS looks in detail at the response of one church to be part of the media challenge: the potential of satellite communications. It is hoped that the account of the US Catholic Church's experience will prove helpful to other churches considering the possible uses of advanced technology.

CTNA: The US Catholic Church and Satellite Communication

The Vision

In March 1979, at hearings held by the United States Catholic Conference on the communication problems and opportunities facing the church, Fr. Michael Dempsey made a bold proposal with far-reaching implications. He proposed that all the US Catholic dioceses should be electronically interconnected via satellite. Why? Because, in his words, such interconnection "would dramatically increase our effectiveness for both evangelization and catechesis and it would offer substantial cost reductions in operations like program distribution, mailing, data-gathering and distribution etc."¹

Dempsey went on to stress all the ways in which satellite communications could aid the Church in its task of evangelization. He pointed to the growing numbers of people subscribing to cable systems, and said that the Church should "place good programming on the satellite for the 1,000 cable stations already hooked to the satellite. Why? Because they, unlike the networks, are looking for good programming ... and because it can be done now. You could right now reach about 25 million people that way, one-fifth of total television household audience in the United States."²

This vision was supported in further hearings by other experts who also emphasized the importance of the Church acting quickly. The pace of technological development and growth in demand for satellite services was increasing so rapidly that available satellite channels were becoming ever fewer. If the Church was to have a chance to use satellite channels it had to stake its claim soon.

Other speakers indirectly reinforced the arguments in favour of using satellites by drawing attention to the large numbers of Catholics who were already tuning in to the television preachers of the "electronic church". A satellite network could deliver Catholic programming to the cable systems across the country and would enable the best of local religious programming to be seen nationwide. Also the demand created by a satellite network would stimulate Catholic producers to create a new range of quality programmes. Certainly no terrestrial mode of programme

distribution was likely to be as cost effective and efficient in the long-term as a satellite network for a country the size of the USA.

The Birth of CTNA

The US bishops found the arguments in favour of a satellite convincing enough for them to fund a \$200,000 feasibility study. The study, undertaken by Michael Dempsey, took one year, May 1980-May 1981. After receiving the study the bishops voted to establish a National Catholic Telecommunications Network: *national* — because it was to be a corporate act of the whole US church, as significant for its time as the 19th century commitment to building Catholic schools; *Catholic* — designed to serve the pastoral goals of the Church and to support the work of the local church; *telecommunications* — not simply a television network, but also a means of carrying data-processing, electronic mail, telephone and teleconferencing services; *network* — a means of interconnecting all the dioceses, a programme delivery service, and a potential carrier of new information and communication services.³ The ultimate aim was to form a national network embracing all 172 dioceses, and large numbers of the 240 Catholic colleges and universities, 640 Catholic hospitals and 1,000 religious orders in the United States.

The vision was embodied in the renamed Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA) which in November 1981 was incorporated as a wholly-owned subsidiary for-profit corporation of the United States Catholic Conference. Its objectives were intended to realise the vision behind its birth. They are (1) to support and facilitate the existing communications effort of the Church, (2) to reach homes via cable and broadcast stations with worthwhile religious and general programming; and (3) to supply new services that will reduce financial costs and increase efficiency, e.g. teleconferencing to reduce high travel costs.⁴

How does CTNA work?

Then CTNA went "on the air" for the first time on September

20, 1982. At that time only 30 archdioceses had affiliated to the network, of which 9 had fully operational earth stations (downlinks) capable of receiving satellite transmissions. Some 89 of the 172 dioceses had expressed interest in participating during the network's first three years. By April 1983 CTNA had 37 affiliated dioceses, of which 14 were "on the air", 10 were constructing downlinks, and 3 were busy raising money or finding suitable locations for their earth stations.

Those dioceses capable of receiving CTNA signals are able to get three hours of radio and television programmes every day, five days a week (Monday to Friday) between the hours of 12.30 am and 3.30 pm (Eastern time). It is hoped to provide eventually five hours of programmes every day, five days a week.

The system works in the following manner. CTNA leases time on a transponder on the Westar IV satellite. Signals are transmitted from the CTNA uplink at Valley Stream, New York, to the satellite transponder where they are converted to a new frequency and retransmitted to diocesan downlinks. Upon arrival at the downlinks, the signals have to be decoded (as they have been "scrambled" to prevent unauthorized access) and distributed to users throughout the diocese.

The burden of organizing distribution of the satellite programming falls upon diocesan communication offices. They have a number of options: 1) they can simply record the programmes on video or audio tapes and then play back these tapes to groups convened at the central downlink facility, or "bicycle" them (i.e. send them by road or post) to radio and television stations, cable operators and church institutions and groups etc. in the diocese; 2) they can, in addition, make use of an existing ITFS (Instructional Television Fixed Service) system, or construct a new one, to transmit programmes by microwave to television stations located across the diocese; 3) they can locate the central downlink close to a cable system head-end or to a radio or television broadcasting station and retransmit programmes directly, in addition to taping them. Large dioceses may find they require more than one downlink.

Financing the satellite network

Setting up and running a satellite telecommunications network costs a great deal of money and much discussion in the US Catholic Church has taken place concerning the financing of CTNA. Indeed CTNA was created as a for-profit corporation precisely to enable it to raise income by leasing, at the commercial rates, the system to non-church users, particularly for teleconferencing. It was felt that the amount and quality of the programming required would need more financial resources than could be supplied by the dioceses alone. One estimate is that CTNA's start-up costs will eventually total some 5 million US dollars. However, in comparison to the money currently spent by existing evangelical television programming networks this is a very small amount.

At present many dioceses are wary of affiliating because of the costs involved. A downlink will cost something between \$15,000 and \$30,000; the affiliation fee, \$5,000; an annual membership fee of between \$2,000 and \$5,000 depending on the population of the diocese; and an annual service fee depending on how many hours of programming are taken per week. The service fee ranges from between \$3,850 and \$5,500 for 7½ hours of programming; \$7,700 and \$10,500 for 15 hours; and \$11,000 and \$15,000 for 25 hours. However, if all the dioceses were to join CTNA, it is estimated that operating costs could be reduced to one-fifth of their present level.

Having incurred these initial costs the diocese then has the additional costs of redistributing the programming. Even simply "bicycling" programmes incurs substantial administrative, transport and mailing costs. One director of communications estimated an additional budget cost of \$34,000 just for video tape

and a part-time member of staff to record the signal. Setting up an ITFS studio and network would cost over \$200,000 and between \$50,000 and \$100,000 annually.

In 1982 CTNA received a grant of \$100,000 for programming, and the US bishops allocated \$1.5 million a year from the American Board of Catholic Missions for three years. After three years it is assumed that CTNA will break even and thereafter begin to realise a profit. It is estimated that in order to break even CTNA needs the affiliation of around 90 dioceses. That number could be reduced if CTNA is successful in persuading enough Catholic colleges, religious orders, hospitals and other institutions to affiliate before 1985. At present it is hoped to have between 50 and 60 non-diocesan affiliates by the end of 1983, and between 80 and 90 by the end of 1984.

To put these costs into perspective it is sufficient to note that evangelical broadcasters are pouring millions of dollars each year into television programming and distribution. For example, from its \$50 million headquarters in Virginia Beach, Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) makes 24-hour a day programming available to over 3,000 cable systems in the USA and Canada. CBN owns its own University, elaborate programme production facilities, 4 TV stations, 6 FM radio stations and 2 satellite earth stations. PTL Television Network which also programmes 24 hours a day has a six-year 5.7 million agreement with RCA for the use of a full-time transponder, which it began operating in April 1978.

The basic problem facing the Catholic Church is that few dioceses have made available anything like sufficient funds to enable local communication offices to do their job properly. A recent survey⁵ of 121 diocesan communication offices revealed that out of the 99 who replied 65 had annual budgets of less than \$51,000, 20 had budgets of between \$51,000 and \$100,000, and only 14 had budgets of over \$101,000. Few diocesan communication directors believed that much more money would be available for participation in CTNA.

Programming on CTNA

It is the idea of CTNA as a national programme delivery service which is most attractive to the majority of Catholic bishops and diocesan directors of communication. Though CTNA itself stresses its role as a telecommunications network, it is still largely perceived and used as a programme service. This perception means that CTNA's effectiveness is judged largely in terms of the availability and suitability of the programmes it offers.

CTNA has been trying to ensure that its programme offerings will be attractive to the dioceses and to the parishes, groups, institutions and cable and broadcast stations in dioceses who will use them. Programmes, usually lasting 30 minutes, presently scheduled include: pastoral programmes including 13 on marriage and 25 counselling sessions on problems such as unemployment and alcoholism; 12-24 programmes entitled "Send forth Your Spirit" on the Charismatic Renewal Movement; 10 programmes on "Christ in the Modern World" and "Christ in the Scriptures"; 13 programmes produced by the Centro de Communication for Spanish-speaking Catholics; and a series of short (12 to 14) minute programmes made by the Maryknoll Missionary Society.

Several special programmes and series are planned — including a programme on the Bishop's recent pastoral letter on nuclear deterrence, and a 13-part series on bishops who were outstanding leaders in various fields. In March 1983 the CTNA responded to diocesan requests by introducing a new radio programme series via a sub-carrier of its satellite transponder.

At present reaction to CTNA programming at a local level has been mixed. Most dioceses are looking for more programmes to supply to cable television stations. About one-third of current programmes are for radio, and another quarter are for Spanish-

speaking audiences. Because dioceses cannot simply pick and choose the exact mix of programmes they require, those with less need for radio and Hispanic programming have expressed dissatisfaction. On the other side, there are diocesan communication directors who criticise an over-emphasis on television and who champion radio programming because of its flexibility and low cost.

There have been some complaints about the overall quality and rather didactic nature of the programming. These complaints point up the pressing need for CTNA to acquire programmes of the highest standard — but this in turn means that programme producers will have to become ever more creative and imaginative. That will require much more investment of money and talent in religious programming.

The recent collaboration between Oblate Media and Franciscan Communications, Frost Media, Catholic Television Network — Chicago, Telicare and Iconographics to produce a 7 part television series entitled "The Search for Justice" is a hopeful sign of how CTNA might give a stimulus to Catholic programming. "The Search for Justice" will use stories, documentary material, and Biblical references to reflect upon contemporary economic issues. It should be available over CTNA by the end of the 1984 in time for the release of the US bishop's pastoral letter on social justice. According to the administrator of the Catholic Communication Campaign, Raymond Spellman, the project will "make the most efficient use of a wealth of talented resources in terms of production companies, religious communities, national Catholic organizations, priests and laypersons."⁶

Teleconferencing and Telelecturing

True to its mandate as a telecommunications network, CTNA has promoted the teleconferencing and telelecturing services from the beginning. Both services offer the possibility of two-way audio, and one-way video transmission, and any affiliated diocese (or other organization) with its own downlink (or access to some other organization's downlink) can participate. In a CTNA teleconference participants are able to see and hear the conference chairman and main speakers, while the chairman and speakers are able to receive comments and questions and respond to them. The participants can be situated in as many locations as there are downlinks.

Teleconferencing is seen as a service which will become increasingly important. It reduces the need for time-consuming and increasingly expensive long distance travel. It also serves the needs of those people who for one reason or another cannot travel. The costs of teleconferencing are low compared to the costs incurred in holding conventional conferences. Thus, for example, the total basic costs of a two-hour teleconference involving 10 CTNA downlinks are estimated to be in the region of \$4,000. Such a conference could bring together up to fifty people at each of the conference sites. Up to June 1983 CTNA had held 6 teleconferences.

Problems facing the network

CTNA's initial months of operation have revealed a number of problems which must be tackled if the network is to develop into a viable long-term project. In the first place, CTNA has to widen its base of support among diocesan communication directors and others at a local level. CTNA was a project proposed and carried through at the national level of Church decision-making. From the beginning it has been a project of the bishops, and there is a danger that support for its development at a local level will depend too much on the interest, enthusiasm and commitment of the diocesan bishop alone.

Secondly, little has been done to ascertain the real needs of dioceses in relation to the satellite's programming and telecommunications offerings. Moreover, the Catholic population as a whole, who are the prime audience of CTNA's programming,

and who provide its financial support through their contributions to church collections, have had little or no input into the design and implementation of the system. What does the audience really want and need?

Thirdly, there is criticism that the scrambling of the satellite signal to preserve confidentiality (in teleconferencing, for example) and copyright, and to give the bishop a chance to screen programme content before redistribution, has placed unnecessary restrictions on the accessibility of CTNA programming. Because the signal is scrambled cable television operators are unable to take the programmes off the satellite directly. This means that dioceses are faced with costs of decoding and redistribution which they might have avoided. If only for economic reasons, dioceses may have to reconsider their policies in relation to signal scrambling; it should be technically possible, for example, to devise ways of ensuring the confidentiality of messages without scrambling every programme.

Fourthly, CTNA has to face many problems in realizing all the potential economic advantages from the use of a satellite telecommunications network. At the beginning CTNA hoped to be able to reduce church telephone bills on a nationwide scale by routing telephone calls through the satellite. Unfortunately, however, it proved impossible to convince local dioceses of the benefit to them of changing from their present arrangements. Similarly, there is the question whether CTNA can successfully sell its teleconferencing services at commercial rates to non-church customers.

Fifthly, there is the problem of a rival Catholic satellite programme delivery service: Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network, (EWTN) in Birmingham, Alabama. EWTN draws upon many of the Catholic sources of finance that CTNA may hope to tap, and in its programming and now, its teleconferencing services, it is a direct competitor to CTNA. EWTN transmits four hours of programming daily and now claims to reach over a million homes via cable. CTNA and EWTN have established a liaison committee, and both networks will have to work out some kind of *modus vivendi* for the future.

The Potential of CTNA

On the plus side, CTNA has proved its value in its provision of programming and teleconferencing services. At the same time there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the potential of CTNA among diocesan level communicators. This interest was to be strengthened and built upon, but some of the initial scepticism surrounding the network seems to have dissipated.

CTNA's biggest advantage is its very existence. A network such as CTNA requires to be fed with new programming and this need has given something of a stimulus to programme production. It has also opened up to local production centres the possibilities for them to reach audiences all over the country with catechetical, evangelical, pastoral, or general interest programmes.

The presence of the CTNA has also stimulated thought about ways of developing its telecommunications potential. If, for example, the CTNA could develop electronic mail and data transmission services, it could vastly improve the efficiency, reliability, and speed of inter-diocesan communication and information transfer.

As a complex technological system CTNA has begun to make new demands upon existing church patterns of organization and distribution of authority. The need for high levels of technical expertise at all levels has meant that the laity have taken on more positions of authority in communication offices. Since bishops recognize their lack of technical knowledge and expertise and yet want the system to succeed, their staffs have been given more autonomy on budget decisions and the setting of local objectives. Even in the area of programme screening, bishops have been forced to delegate to communication staff members, many of whom have

little or no theological training. The need to get the programmes on the air quickly takes precedence over the desire to monitor their content. Because CTNA is run by the laity, it provides one influential model of lay ministry within the Church.

In their article on CTNA, Soukup and Boone also point to a serious limitation in the way the system is currently established. They argue that the network model — a central distribution system with local affiliates — “constrains local access, reinforces hierarchical and one-way communication, and further defines the Church as a distribution network rather than as a community. In this way, CTNA works against the pastoral ideology it espouses.”⁸

A major challenge for the US Catholic Church in the next few years will be to devise ways to overcome the limitations of the network model. This challenge will oblige the Church to devise new forms of organization at all levels of decision-making, and to give the local church more say in the overall development of the network.

Delivering the programming to the dioceses is easy, making effective and imaginative pastoral use of that programming is the challenge facing local communication directors, catechists, pastoral workers, priests, bishops and laity. As CTNA develops, its pastoral effectiveness will depend much on how responsive the network is to the needs and demands of dioceses and on the responsiveness of the local church to the needs and demands of the audience.

The Lessons of CTNA

Other churches contemplating the use of satellite technology may find the CTNA experience helpful. In particular the way in which CTNA came into existence may offer some general lessons about how churches decide to use advanced technology.

General observations from the CTNA case are:

- 1) Planning the use of advanced communications technology should draw upon the widest possible base of support in the Church. If planning is restricted to top level decision-makers, there will be serious problems in enlisting local support for the project.
- 2) Advanced technology should not be used simply to do old operations in new ways. The technology should be used in a system that opens up new possibilities for church pastoral action. The

CTNA hopes to be a telecommunication network but it is often perceived, and was initially supported by many, as simply a programme delivery network.

3) Pastoral, evangelistic, and communication objectives should guide the development and introduction of new technology. In the case of satellites for example, there is a danger that the needs of the technology will become paramount. Satellite technology is expensive and more effort may be given to finding ways to make it yield income than to serve church pastoral goals.

4) There is no point in investing in advanced technology in a half-hearted indecisive manner. Once the commitment is made, the Church must be prepared to devote money, people, time and effort to ensure the technology is used properly. It is better not to invest at all than to invest and then fail to exploit the investment.

5) The introduction of advanced technology should provide the local church with the tools it needs to carry out its mission. The technology's purpose is to liberate the local church for more effective witness, not to enslave it to the maintenance of costly and unproductive systems.

6) The Church must start from the needs of those it serves and devise systems to meet those needs. Even using satellites to improve internal church communications, is intended as a way of providing people with a better service from the Church.

7) Finally, no system of technology can substitute for creative and imaginative programme content. Technological innovation must go hand in hand with a desire to find new ways of communicating the message.

1 United States Catholic Conference. *Communication Campaign Hearings, Washington, DC., March 7-8, 1979.* p. 8-9.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3 Michael J. Dempsey. *An Overview of the National Catholic Telecommunications Network.* June 1st 1981. Mimeo. p. 2.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

5 William Thorn. *Catholic Communication: Electronic Media Access in the 1980s.* New York: USCC, Department of Communication, 1983.

6 *Proclaim*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (May) 1983, p. 2.

7 Paul Soukup and Mary Boone. “Negotiation Through Power, Ideology, and Technology in the Local Development of the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America.” Mimeo.

European Bishops face the challenge of new media

Between April 18-22, 24 Catholic bishops, 50 media specialists from 21 countries, and representatives of international Catholic communication organisations, OCIC, UCIP and UNDA, met together at Bad Schönbrunn in Switzerland. The occasion was the European meeting of Episcopal Commissions for Mass Media, organized by the Council of Europe Episcopal Conferences (CCEE) in association with the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications.

A major theme of the meeting was the challenge to the Church to understand and come to terms with the possibilities of the new media (videotex, cable TV, satellites) for evangelization and pastoral communication. In addition, there was a widespread recognition that at both European and national levels the internal communications of the Church had to be improved.

Keynote addresses were given by five speakers: Gerd Bacher, Director-General of the Austrian Broadcasting organization, ORF; Sean MacBride, President of the UNESCO International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems; Bishop Antonio Montero, President of the Spanish Episcopal Commission for Social Communication; Bishop Michel Sandreau, President of the French Episcopal Commission; and Mgr. Wilhelm Schätzler, Director of the German Catholic Media Centre.

Five key points were made by these speakers: (1) now is a psychologically crucial moment for the European church to become involved in the shaping of national and European communication policies. The final institutional arrangements for cable, videotex

and satellites have not yet been made, and the Church should be prepared to speak up on behalf of the interests of the public as a whole; (2) the Church should be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities offered by new media to explore different ways of communicating its message; (3) the local church should be given the financial and institutional support necessary to become involved with new media at a local level, e.g. cable systems; (4) the European church should explore the possibilities of creating religious programmes which would be distributed (e.g. by video or satellite) to all parts of Europe; and (5) in the face of multiplying channels of information and the development of new forms of media, there is an urgent need to train more church communicators and to provide church support for Christians working in the media.

Out of all the discussions two central points seemed to emerge. The first was that the church in each country needed to develop a pastoral strategy for its media work. An effective pastoral strategy, however, could only come from a more effective collaboration between church leaders, media professionals and communication policy makers.

The second point was that more cooperation on a European level was needed, especially in exchanging media productions and in working together to study the challenges of the new technologies. It was suggested that a study centre on the new media might be set up in an advisory and research capacity to all European churches.