

'Parking pews' can make it easier to pray

By JOHN DART

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When the first drive-in worship services began, they were thought to be a gimmicky addition to the drive-in craze of the 1950s. But in the 1970s — when main-line Protestant denominations continue in a membership tailspin — the drive-in churches are beginning to look like a shiny new model for church life.

They are gaining members. The pacesetter has been the 6,350-member Garden Grove (Calif.) Community Church, which the Rev. Robert Schuller began in 1955 by preaching at a drive-in theater.

By 1963 he had built a combined walk-in, drive-in church in which the same service is visible from the pews and the autos. The service (one of five conducted each Sunday) is visible a week or two later in 40 cities on television as "The Hour of Power."

At least 18 other churches have begun drive-in services on a year-round basis — not only in the sunny regions of California and Florida but also in places like Denver and Michigan.

One of the most ambitious in California will be the Lake Hills Community Church, which began this year as a spinoff from the Garden Grove church. A 54-acre site is being purchased for a walk-in, drive-in church sanctuary, a retreat center and chapel to be built around an existing 15-acre lake.

Now meeting in a school auditorium, Lake Hills already has some 560 members and the benefit of an unprecedented \$300,000 new-church loan from the Reformed Church in America.

OLDEST DENOMINATION

Practically all the drive-in churches are affiliated with the RCA, a relatively small denomination of Dutch heritage, which claims the longest continuous church existence in North America (since 1628).

Like many other denominations, the Reformed Church has suffered membership losses since the mid-60s. In the four-year period to the end of 1972, the active communicant membership declined from 228,620 persons to 221,195.

But Reformed Churches in the Southern California-Arizona region, which now

includes nine drive-in churches, have climbed collectively up to 13,623 members — a net gain of 2,080 persons in the same period. (Other main-line Protestant churches, meanwhile, have lost members in Southern California and Arizona, just as they have at the national level.)

"We have to attribute our growth here to the drive-in churches," said the Rev. Harmon Wierenga, field director for RCA churches in the western states.

Why more churches of other denominations have not picked up the concept is "baffling" to Wierenga and other denomination officials. "Other denominational executives ask a lot of questions, but they don't seem to feel that's their bag," he said.

The drive-in churches use the parking "pews" primarily as a way to introduce hesitant, but potential, churchgoers to their style of worship and church activities.

The pastor of a walk-in, drive-in church in Long Beach, Calif. — El Dorado Park Community Church — said his congregation has almost doubled to 1,200 since facilities were completed in 1970. "We find the general procedure is that they drive by, see the church, and say, 'I want to attend there sometime; it's beautiful,'" the Rev. William Miedema said.

THE BIG STEP

"On some day like Easter or Mother's Day, they sit in the drive-in section," he continued. "After a couple of times, they

decide to sit inside for the worship service. The fourth step, if they like what they see, is to become active in the life of the church by joining."

The biggest problem, said Miedema, "is to get people from the cars into the church. They are not really a part of the fellowship when they're out there."

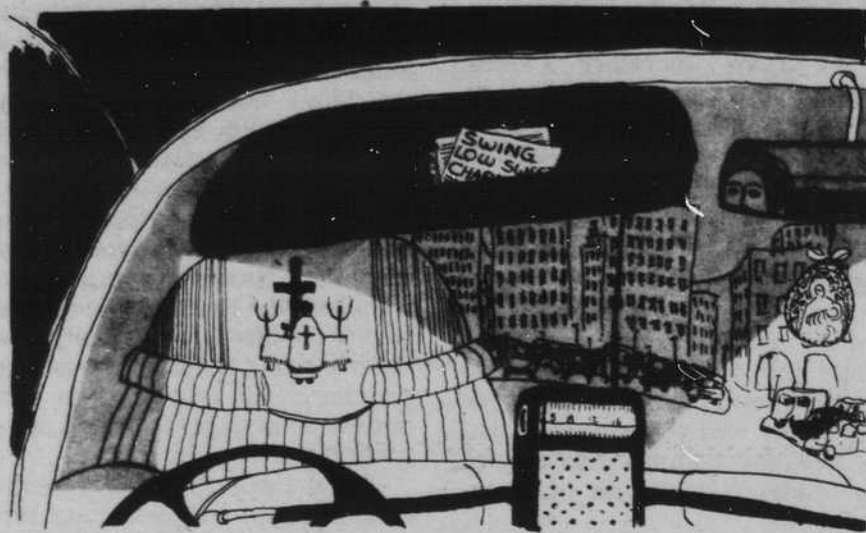
The Rev. Harold Leestma disagrees. "I never felt anyone outside had to come inside. To make a distinction would make them second-class citizens," said Leestma, Lake Hills pastor and for more than 10 years an associate pastor at the Garden Grove church.

For some, the drive-ins simply make churchgoing possible. These include persons who are crippled, mentally retarded, ill or merely uneasy about religious services. People dressed casually for a Sunday trip can go directly from church to their planned activity without going home to change. Campers are not an unusual sight in the drive-in section.

One minister tells of a city worker who is sometimes on call on Sunday. Contacted via radio while attending a service in his car, he can either radio instructions or respond to the call himself.

3 TO 1 INSIDE

The Garden Grove church — designed by architect Richard Neutra — allows the ministers on an elevated altar to be visible both to those inside and outside. Huge sliding glass doors to the side of the altar open at the start of the service, allowing



the ministers to alternate facing first one audience, then the other. Attendance averages about 75 per cent inside, 25 per cent outside.

Other drive-in churches either schedule separate worship services on their property or conduct them at a drive-in movie theater. At the theaters, the existing sound system of speakers is used.

Churches with their own drive-in sections — some paved, some grassy — generally have speakers between parking spaces or broadcast the service in a limited range, picked up on car radios at the left end of the dial. Motorists without car radios are lent transistor radios for the service.

Portable heaters are kept on hand by a Denver congregation that conducts 11 a.m. Sunday services year-round at a drive-in theater five blocks from its church (where it holds an early service and Sunday school). "We've gone through three winters," said the Rev. Paul Lupkes, "and we've only had to cancel three services because of weather."

The Denver church's membership has increased only modestly from 150 to 200 persons since beginning its drive-in ministry two and a half years ago, but apparently it has been successful enough to inspire inquiries from Baptist, Free Covenant and Assembly of God congregations in Colorado.

But pastors and executives of the Reformed Church in America emphasize that the drive-in feature is not enough to guarantee a thriving church. The particularly successful drive-in churches appear to have three things in common:

— A communitywide approach, non-denominational on the surface at least.

— An emphasis on "personal Christianity" and how-to-be-happy sermons.

— A promotional flair on the part of the pastors.

Not long after newcomers get exposed to the RCA drive-in churches, they learn that it is the same denomination to which the famous Dr. Norman Vincent Peale belongs. Within a generally evangelical Protestant presentation of the gospel, the drive-in preachers have adopted their own versions of Dr. Peale's "power of positive thinking." In Schuller's lexicon that becomes "possibility thinking."

