Televangelist's Soviet Pulpit Will Be a First

■ Religion: Thousand Oaks-based George Vandeman will take his message where U.S. preachers have failed to make inroads.

By JAMES E. FOWLER TIMES STAFF WRITER

Despite a 35-year run as a television preacher, George Vandeman is barely a household name even in Thousand Oaks, where he produces his Seventh-day Adventist show, "It Is Written."

But Vandeman is about to score an international coup over better-known American televangelists such as Robert Schuller of Garden Grove's Crystal Cathedral and Pat

Robertson of Virginia Beach.

If all goes as planned, Vandeman, 74, soon will become the first American televangelist to have a regularly scheduled weekly television program in the Soviet Union.

"We have a contract with the Soviet government," Vandeman said. "We're on prime time, and we're very grateful for that."

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has agreed to supply a professional television production studio in Moscow for the Soviets in exchange for a weekly time slot for "It Is Written," said Natasha Priahina



ANNE CUSACK / Los Angeles Times

George Vandeman

of the Foreign Relations Department of Soviet National Television.

"It's unique. We've never had anything like that," Priahina said by telephone from Moscow. "It's unprecedented that a foreign television company rents time weekly for a religious broadcast.

"We've had a kind of religious program on television, but they were spontaneous—they were called Sunday Sermons. We had Sunday Sermons for a couple of months."

Priahina said that Vandeman's show is scheduled to air Friday evenings at 6:30 and will have a potential audience of 40 million beginning as early as June or July.

However, given the current political situation in the Soviet Union, Adventist officials concede that it's possible

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there will be some unexpected

glitches.

preachers to crack Soviet television have shown how difficult it can be for even the most persuasive televangelists to survive changing Soviet policies.

Schuller was the first foreign churchman to appear on Soviet television when he delivered a Christmas Eve message in 1989. And amid much ballyhoo, he later contracted to produce monthly 30minute inspirational messages for the Soviet people.

However, those messages were unceremoniously pulled from the airwaves by Soviet authorities with no given reason after the first one aired Dec. 9 last year.

Vandeman and the Adventists say they are not going blindly into the deal with the Soviets.

"There's some risk involved because of the insecurity of the government," said Glenn Aufderhar, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Media Center in Newbury Park. "But we feel that the group we're working with is operating in good faith."

Priahina noted that Schuller dealt with Soviet National Television, formerly called Gostelradio Television, while Vandeman and the Adventists are negotiating with a different government bureaucracy, the Soviet Ministry of Communications.

Soviet National Television has traditionally controlled the production of television programming, and the Ministry of Communications has controlled the broadcasting or transmission of signals through towers or satellites, said Michael Taratuta, San Francisco bureau chief for Soviet National Television.

The equipment provided by the Adventists would give the Ministry of Communications the ability to produce as well as broadcast television programs.

· Aufderhar said the Soviets are bartering for equipment that is difficult for them to acquire due to a shortage of hard currency. He



Televangelist and Seventh-day Adventist George Vandeman prepares to tape his show, "It Is Written."

said the amount of money involved is "similar to what we would pay for air time here in the United States, only we're presenting it all up front."

Negotiations over the final terms of the contract are still going on, Aufderhar added. The Adventists had hoped to air the first broadcast this month but ran into delays that have moved the starting date back at least a month or two.

"That society is considerably different from our society in terms of methods of doing business," Aufderhar said.

Vandeman said it is an important factor to the Soviets that Adventism is already an established denomination in their country. He said the same "It Is Written" programs produced in Thousand Oaks will be dubbed with Russian at an Adventist facility in Tula in the Soviet Union, where there is a large Adventist community.

Although his is not a household name in America, he is not an unknown quantity. Vandeman has been the host of "It Is Written" since its inception in 1956.

When he taped that first program at the old Hal Roach Studios in Los Angeles, Vandeman said, he had no idea that he would still be doing it 35 years later.

The program, which was the first religious program to be broadcast in color, today airs in about 40 markets throughout the United States and usually ranks in the top. 15 of all religious broadcasts, according to both the Nielsen and

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Arbitron ratings surveys.

It'is also carried on several cable systems across the nation and can be seen in 22 countries in Europe.

Unlike Schuller's top-rated "Hour of Power," which is a televised worship service, "It Is Written" has a semi-documentary style. The program uses news footage, scenes from dramatic productions and other video edited with. shots of Vandeman in the studio or on location.

'Vandeman has been practicing and advocating—a no-nonsense, no-frills style since the 1950s, when he was a worldwide director for pastoral and evangelistic training for the Seventh-day Adventist

Church.

Vandeman comes from a church family. His father, Herbert, was a minister and an early pioneer of religious radio broadcasts for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Allentown, Pa.

George Vandeman and his wife, Nellie, live in Thousand Oaks and have four grown children. Except for an occasional singing solo by his daughter Connie, the children are not involved with the production of "It Is Written."

Although he is known and respected within his church, which has about 687,000 members in the United States, and within his industry, Vandeman has remained

fairly anonymous to the U.S. pub-

But now that he is close to a television breakthrough in the Soviet Union, he is thinking of even bigger audiences.

Vandeman has plans to preach in China on television. The program, which will be in Chinese, will be produced in Thousand Oaks.

"It's a delicate matter with the government," Vandeman said. "We're preparing to do a program about physical and emotional health that we feel will be acceptable to the Chinese people."

"Three-hundred million people watch television every night in 'China," Vandeman said.