

Family Christian Stores markets line of Christian karaoke music

BY JAMES PRICHARD
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Frank Breen isn't surprised that Family Christian Stores Inc. has released a line of Christian karaoke music, or that it's an instant hit with many of the company's customers.

Breen, who is president of the Nashville, Tenn.-based Gospel Music Association, figures that Christian music is a perfect fit for boombox karaoke — the portable, mass-marketed music players capable of displaying specially encoded lyrics used for singing along.

Family Christian released six different karaoke CDs in the music of several of today's most popular Christian performers.

John van der Veen, the company's music buyer, won't disclose specific figures but says sales have surpassed expectations by about 30 percent.

"It's a wonderful thing for the consumer," Breen says. "We know that people use these in settings other than just singing solos in church. Some people use them for personal enjoyment, for parties."

At least a decade before karaoke clubs caught on state-

side in the 1980s, performers in churches were belting out songs to instrumental recordings of religious music, called solo performance tracks or accompaniment music.

"I think the inherent value of this product line is that it's capitalizing on something that's already in existence, and that is a format of music that is, by its very nature, very conducive to singing along with," Breen says. "That is something that our consumers, for the most part, have already bought into, so it's not a big leap for them."

Contemporary Christian music has been the fastest-growing genre of recorded music over the past few years, he says. It has become a \$920 million annual business in the United States, where consumers last year purchased 60 million Christian music albums.

Even before Family Christian started selling its karaoke music line, its store in Augusta, Ga., was holding monthly karaoke nights that really weren't karaoke nights at all because singers sang along with accompaniment music.

"There's a lot of people who actually came up and sounded good," says Rory Rezzelle, 18, an employee of the store since April.

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Customers buying the karaoke CDs tell Rezzelle and his co-workers that they have been trying to find something like them for a long time.

"Actually, they've gone really fast," he says. "A lot of people come up and go, 'Wow, they have Christian Karaoke now?'"

Employees of Grand Rapids-based Family Christian got the idea last summer to create and market Christian Karaoke.

"We were just looking at different areas where we could tap into new ways of doing busi-

ness, and one of our vendors came to us and said, 'By the way, did you know that one of the biggest retailers out there this year is going to be selling about \$40 million worth of karaoke product this Christmas, in these two months, November and December, and we just kind of went, 'Wow,' van der Veen says.

Family Christian decided to sell karaoke CDs featuring contemporary Christian music, as opposed to hymns or other traditional religious music, but

there was little available from vendors.

"I said, 'You know what, there's a marketplace that's out there, and we have nothing, really, to participate in that. So let's kind of create our own,'" van der Veen says.

So Family Christian contracted with a consultant to form a new company, called Fuseic (pronounced FYOO-zik), and to manufacture the product.

Van der Veen says the first group of six Christian karaoke CDs — they include music by best-selling performers ZOEgirl, Stacie Orrico, Out of Eden, Plus One and Jump5, plus a compilation of various artists — targets girls between ages 8 and 16. Each contains three tracks and retails for \$12.98.

The karaoke CDs are being used by youth groups, at sleep-

overs and birthday parties, and by people who enjoy singing the most when there's no one around to hear them do it.

All the CDs are performing well and a second production run has been ordered, he says. Next spring, Family Christian expects to release half a dozen more karaoke CDs featuring other Christian artists.

Other companies have tried, without much success, to get Christian karaoke music into the hands of consumers, Breen says.

One of their biggest problems was a lack of a retail channel, he says.

He says that where Family Christian, with approximately 325 stores in 39 states, should have an edge.

On the Internet: Family Christian Stores, <http://www.familychristian.com>

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