

No more rocking as holy roller hangs up his mike

Martin Freeman meets the DJ behind the pulpit of the air waves

He is Hong Kong's most unlikely radio star. He is too old (61) to be trendy, wears all the wrong clothes and does not even play pop music.

Then there is his tendency to talk religion, a subject which, as a Catholic priest, is close to his heart.

The only thing he has in common with other successful disc jockeys is a snappy name: Ciaran (pronounced Keer-an) Kane.

But popular he is, make no mistake. His weekly RTHK Radio 4 show *Kyrie* enjoys the highest ratings of any English programme on the channel.

Quite why the hour or so of gentle choral music interspersed with Kane's comments delivered in his bubbling Dublin accent is so successful remains a mystery, even to the man himself.

There are plenty of other presenters around the world who get away with talking religion. Their secret is controversy and all too often the gospel they preach is one of fear and hatred: repent or ye will not be saved.

But Kane is not even contro-

versial. Although his order, the Jesuits, have a long and rebellious history within the Catholic church, Kane is not a natural rebel.

Place a hurdle in his path, get on to a hot issue such as artificial contraception, and he has a tendency to move the conversation gently away and on.

For one holding beliefs so strong he has devoted his entire life to them, he is refreshingly free from zealotry.

Ask him why the ancient and beautiful Gregorian chant has become a massive hit among a teenage audience whose more usual diet is rock'n'roll,

rap and hip hop with "enjoy, enjoy" references to sex, violence and drugs, and you could forgive him a few references to the calming, spiritual nature of the monks' prayers.

But no. "I haven't a clue why it's so popular," Kane says.

"I think the young people en-

joy it, because it is so different, an antidote.

"It is the same with *Kyrie*. It is simply beautiful music.

"Hip hop, rap and those sorts of music have run their course. Music like the Gregorian chant is filling the gap until the next thing comes along, I guess."

Kane has run his course, too, as far as broadcasting is concerned.

After a radio "career" spanning more than 30 years he has recorded his last religious programme in the territory. While you can hear his taped voice and his choice of music each Sunday evening until the end of October he

headed off this week for a year of theological study in the United States and Wales.

He has retired from his full-time job of warden at Adam Schall hall of residence at the Chinese University, which the Jesuit order helped fund.

When he returns next sum-

Music like Gregorian chant is filling the gap until the next thing comes along



Hit show: Ciaran Kane has a huge audience.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN SHAVER

mer it will be to diocesan work in the New Territories, not to the microphone.

He began as a stand-in when the regular presenter of the weekly Catholic slot on RTHK's *Morning Prayers* was taken ill in 1960. He went on to record more than 2,200.

Kane also helped launch the *Sunday Magazine* and was co-presenter on the religious news and conversation programme for nearly 15 years.

This summer he was back in the chair, again as a stand-in.

Born into a comfortably off Catholic family in Dublin - his father was a tax collector - Kane says he joined the Jesuits straight from school as it seemed "the natural thing to do".

He arrived in Hong Kong as a student priest in 1958, having graduated from University College Dublin with a BA in languages, but with six years of his 14-year preordination training to complete.

He learned Cantonese and taught at Wah Yan College be-

fore completing his theological studies and training in broadcasting in Britain during the mid 1960s.

"Hong Kong was a different place when I came back in 1967, at the tail-end of the riots, with bombs being planted almost every day," Kane says.

"The building boom was happening and it was all change. There were only three tall buildings in Central, the old Bank of China, Standard Chartered Bank and the Hong Kong Bank headquarters.

"That all changed so quickly."

While the Hong Kong skyline changed almost daily throughout three decades - and Christians around the world adjusted their views on everything from contraception to the ordination of women - Kane and his church stayed constant.

He has had his "ups and downs, some minor crises [of faith]" but nothing major.

Of his three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience he rates following his superiors' orders the most taxing.

"You have the everyday disagreements with your boss. You might think 'that's a bloody stupid idea' but when it comes to the nitty-gritty you go along with it."

(Although a salaried university member of staff, he kept his "poverty" vow through taking only his day-to-day living expenses and putting the remainder in the hands of the Jesuits.)

He has the peculiar Jesuit, intellectual knack of being able to argue and justify totally opposite points of view with a calm detachment; of marrying the reasonable and the irrational.

He counts himself "a bit of a feminist" but adds: "I can't personally see the justification for the ordination of women."

"This is not a rational thing - women are equal to men, there is no doubt about that - but the

fact that it has never been done in the church for 2,000 years is a very big weight of presumption against it."

On the detention and ordeal of US missionary Dennis Balcombe in Henan province in February, and on the clamp-down against churches in Guilin, Guangxi province last week, Kane again takes the middle road.

"Perhaps the way forward is to try and keep a balance, between confronting the authorities, and going your independent way."

It is the careful, reasoned type of argument that fits easily with the new face of the Society of Jesus - the more formal title of the Jesuits - that appears to be regaining its influence throughout the Catholic church, building a bridge between the intellectual traditionalists and the modern liberals.

Their most senior member in Italy, the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini is a tipped as a good bet to become the next leader of the Catholic church, the first Jesuit Pope.

He takes Kane's careful, reasoned arguments to extremes - of compromise.

On the subject of female ordination, Martini says there can be "no women priests until the next millenium".

That sounds emphatic - until you realise that this is a mere six years away.