

● REALLY BIG SHOW

'American Dreams'

Oh, TV of little faith



NBC's 'American Dreams' accepts the idea that people actually go to church on Sunday and grapple with real moral issues.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IT'S Easter Week and here comes all the TV specials about the beauty of faith and the forgotten benefits of religion.

Outside the holiday weeks, only a tiny handful of "good-for-you" primetime shows — like "7th Heaven" — ever mention the word prayer, let alone make it a plot point.

But NBC's "American Dreams" — the most entertaining new drama of the year — has surprisingly succeeded in threading religion (along with race relations and morality) through the show in a way that not only reflects the reality of the Pryor family in the early '60s but (my goodness) America in general.

For actress Gail O'Grady — an Emmy-nominated performer for three years on "NYPD Blue" — it's a refreshing change. "Certainly it's the first role where religion is an integral part of their life," says O'Grady, who was raised by a Catholic father and Methodist mom.

Her character, Helen Pryor, takes the kids to Sunday mass while the dad — in true-to-the-times fashion — putters around in the garage. We've also seen

Helen going to confession, watched little Will get ready for First Communion and have seen football star JJ ask advice from a priest.

Religion is not something the weird neighbors (think Ned Flanders) do but a sure, steady presence in their lives — and not always a comforting one. (That priest who JJ consulted botched it, telling the kid to suck it up and do what he was told, completely missing the boy's genuine confusion.)

The show's creator Jonathan Prince says they are often on the phone with priests or nuns the same way he assumes "ER" is on the phone with doctors.

"You'll notice a lot of our priests smoke," laughs the 44-year-old Prince.

"I was checking with a priest who said, 'Of course they smoked, they swore, they liked to gamble.'"

That desire to be true to the period shone through when Helen befriended a college student who had just undergone an abortion.

On a less imaginative show, Helen would have probably been awakened to women's rights or something. But in the early '60s, it was a major triumph for Helen just to be able to attend classes at

the local college. So, abortion wasn't something she was ready to embrace or embattle.

Creator Prince, who's worked on "a lot of failures" before finally scoring his first critical hit, pitched "American Dreams" to NBC as a continuation of its successful miniseries "The Sixties" and "The Seventies." He plans to take the Pryor family "from Kennedy to Nixon, from Camelot to Watergate" — which would mean a nine-year run.

"The Sixties" was told largely from the point of view of everything happening to one family," says Prince.

"And in a weird way, it was told from a liberal bias as if the change that occurred during the '60s was all good. And I don't believe that. I believe women's lib is good. Civil rights acts are good. Questioning institutions that have lost their meaning is good.

"The things that were gained in the '60s — thank God, we'd be a very different society if we didn't. But the things that were lost? I think we forget to mourn those."

AMERICAN DREAMS
Sunday, 8 p.m., NBC