



Online Video

GodTube

James Erik Abels, 12.19.08, 6:00 AM ET

When Bobby Gruenewald joined LifeChurch.tv as a pastor in 2001, he turned to an obvious place to build membership: the Internet. A former technology executive, the daily tools of his trade are social media forums like Facebook and Twitter and a free iPhone application with a Bible translated into 22 languages.

"The church, the broader church, is finally seeing ways to engage with people," says Gruenewald, who oversees all of his church's Web operations. While his 13-year-old evangelical organization has attendance of some 23,000 people at 13 physical churches around the country, its online tools are a key element in attracting new members. And particularly important these days are the 1,800 Web video streams it serves up on average for its 11 weekly sermons.

Some of the same forces destroying major media are changing the face of even the world's oldest media formats like sermons. From News Corp.'s recently acquired Beliefnet to the user-generated video start-up GodTube, the Web is becoming an online hub for religious communication. As a result, churches are using Web video to attract the next generation of parishioners.

"I see a lot of people expecting it or asking for it," says Alex Hood, the Crossing Church's director of media and technology. Today, his Tampa, Fla.-based evangelical church streams services to some 500 to 600 people every weekend. Just 18 months ago, when Hood started, it was far smaller at only 150.

Those numbers may be set to jump this month as churches capitalize on the Christmas season. Multicast Media, which negotiates discounted rates from the content delivery network Akamai to stream these services for some 800 mostly evangelical churches around the U.S., predicts it will serve up well over 5,000 live streams this month.

Most months average 4,000—a number that already represents tremendous recent growth. Alan Riley, director of Web operations, says the eight-year-old company was averaging just 2,000 monthly streams 18 months ago.

"The growth has continued in spite of the economic slowdown," he says. No wonder. Religious groups are looking for younger parishioners, says Quentin Schultze, a communications professor focusing on religion at Calvin College in Michigan. The Internet has made competing for their attention harder than ever he says. The Internet is teaching people—particularly younger ones—that they can demand convenience in how they consume all types of messages, including religious ones.

"I think that goes to the cultural shift of the younger generations coming up, and getting used to an on-demand lifestyle," says Greg Stielstra, who just co-wrote a book called *Faith-Based Marketing: The Guide To Reaching 140 Million Christian Consumers*.

One big difference between media sites and religious ones: how long viewers stay tuned. Consider the Crossing Church where Hood reports viewers watch his streams for an average of 60 to 80 minutes. At LifeChurch.tv, the time is less at 25 to 35 minutes, but Gruenewald says they are thrown off by massive accidental Web traffic of people he doesn't average into his stream totals because they leave so quickly.

Though it depends on the type of content in a broadcast, Dan Rayburn, executive vice president of StreamingMedia.com, says people often watch live events online for 10 minutes or less.

It isn't all good news. Streaming Web video gets more expensive the more popular it becomes, so in the early days Rayburn says the cost of delivering thousands of gigabytes per show to hundreds of people over the Internet can be relatively inexpensive based on rates that range as high as \$0.50 per gigabyte. But the more people start tuning in, the bigger the cost becomes.

And online viewers tend to donate less as well. At LifeChurch.tv people give an average of \$8 to \$10 per week online--far lower than the \$25-\$35 they donate in person. Perhaps it's not surprising then that the church sees the format as a way to help drive people to physical locations, rather than a destination in itself.

"We're not viewing it as how can we make it be the big revenue stream for the church," says Gruenewald.