

In the Beginning Was the Word; Now the Word Is on an App

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ABSTRACT

Here at the church's headquarters, Mr. Gruenewald wears the same tennis shoes, slouchy jeans and T-shirts that suited him as a Christian rapper and small-time entrepreneur who bluffed his way into building Web sites, then ran a Web hosting company out of his dorm room and later sold a pro-wrestling fan Web site for \$7 million. "What's going to happen to the thinline Bible that people carry to church?" Adam Graber of Tyndale House, another publisher that provides translations for the app, expressed some reservations about YouVersion's strong position in the market for Bible apps.

FULL TEXT

EDMOND, Okla. -- More than 500 years after Gutenberg, the Bible is having its i-moment.

For millions of readers around the world, a wildly successful free Bible app, YouVersion, is changing how, where and when they read the Bible.

Built by LifeChurch.tv, one of the nation's largest and most technologically advanced evangelical churches, YouVersion is part of what the church calls its "digital missions." They include a platform for online church services and prepackaged worship videos that the church distributes free. A digital tithing system and an interactive children's Bible are in the works.

It's all part of the church's aspiration to be a kind of I.T. department for churches everywhere. YouVersion, with over 600 Bible translations in more than 400 languages, is by far the church's biggest success. The app is nondenominational, including versions embraced by Catholics, Russian Orthodox and Messianic Jews. This month, the app reached 100 million downloads, placing it in the company of technology start-ups like Instagram and Dropbox.

"They have defined what it means to access God's word on a mobile device," said Geoff Dennis, an executive vice president of Crossway, one of many Bible publishers -- from small presses to global Bible societies to News Corporation's Thomas Nelson imprint -- that have licensed their translations, free, to the church.

When Jen Sears, 37, a human resources manager in Oklahoma City, wants to pray these days, she leaves her Bible behind and grabs her phone instead.

"I have my print Bible sitting on my dresser at home, but it hasn't moved" in the four years since she downloaded YouVersion, Mrs. Sears said.

The app, marketed simply as "The Bible," has brought new donors to LifeChurch.tv. About \$3 million was given by a

handful of large donors to support development of the app last year; the church raised nearly \$60 million over all, according to its financial statements. The church says it will have spent almost \$20 million over all on YouVersion by the end of this year.

The church was founded in 1996 by a team consisting mostly of former business executives. It is affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church, a wider association of 850 congregations, which gives its members wide latitude in their operations. It has 50,000 weekly attendees in 16 locations.

The Gutenberg behind YouVersion is the church's 36-year-old "innovation pastor," Bobby Gruenewald, whose training was in business, not religion.

Mr. Gruenewald grew up in Decatur, Ill., in an evangelical church, where as a teenager he started a Christian rap ministry. Later, he moved to Oklahoma to join his sixth-grade crush, now his wife, who left Illinois to study at Southern Nazarene University.

Here at the church's headquarters, Mr. Gruenewald wears the same tennis shoes, slouchy jeans and T-shirts that suited him as a Christian rapper and small-time entrepreneur who bluffed his way into building Web sites, then ran a Web hosting company out of his dorm room and later sold a pro-wrestling fan Web site for \$7 million.

He joined LifeChurch.tv in 2001 after playing keyboard in its house band. Since then, the church has allowed him to experiment without an eye to profit.

Mr. Gruenewald's early efforts for LifeChurch.tv included a virtual church for the online Second Life community and a Google ad campaign to lure pornography consumers to the church instead. But then he had a critical insight: if the church wanted to attract younger people, it needed both to be technically advanced and to offer its resources free.

"We have a generation of people that can't fathom paying 99 cents for a song that they love," Mr. Gruenewald said, "and we were asking them to pay \$20 for a book that they don't understand."

He made YouVersion available in 2008, as the first Bible in Apple's App Store. That early release contained only a few translations, like the King James Version, mostly in the public domain. When he began trying to persuade traditional Bible publishers to enter licensing arrangements with him, he encountered suspicion.

"People would say: 'If people read it on YouVersion and they're not paying anything for it, what's going to happen to my pew Bibles?' " said Mr. Dennis of Crossway. "What's going to happen to the thinline Bible that people carry to church?"

Adam Graber of Tyndale House, another publisher that provides translations for the app, expressed some reservations about YouVersion's strong position in the market for Bible apps.

"One major player emerges, whether it's Apple or Google or YouVersion," he said. "It has its drawbacks in the sense that it gives people fewer options and it definitely consolidates power and kind of clumps that power into a few people's hands."

But Mr. Graber also said he saw benefits in being part of the app; he said he hoped readers who use his company's translation would later buy additional print or digital editions.

He compared the relationship between YouVersion and traditional publishers to the "freemium" strategy common in mobile games where the core content is free, but extra features cost money. In this case, those extras are things like devotional Bibles, study Bibles or gold-embossed heirloom Bibles.

As YouVersion became increasingly popular, other publishers also came to view the app as a positive force – less

a threat than a marketing opportunity. Although there are no ads on the app and no plans to create any, Mr. Gruenewald said, YouVersion collects vast amounts of data on Bible readership patterns. That trove of data provides valuable information about the habits and preferences of Christians that YouVersion selectively shares with its traditional publishing partners, such as which verses are the most popular within their own translations.

Today, the app contains everything from the New International Version to "The Message," an ultramodern interpretation that reads like a juicy novel. It also includes the so-called Orthodox Jewish Bible, which was actually developed for a religious sect known as Messianic Jews, who believe that Jesus is the Messiah that the Jews await.

And it has become a platform for evangelical leaders like Rick Warren to reach millions of people with custom reading plans; the pastor Billy Graham is the most recent addition. On Sunday mornings, as pastors around the country preach from iPads while congregations click on Corinthians, YouVersion's servers track more than 600,000 requests every minute.

And lately the church has fielded a variety of requests, including from a Christian music Web site, a major Hollywood movie studio and television producers like Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, who featured YouVersion alongside their biblical History Channel mini-series this year.

Scott Thumma, a professor at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, who studies large American churches, said YouVersion filled a longstanding vacuum for technological products aimed at a religious market. He called LifeChurch.tv "the most innovative congregation in the country in developing and using technology."

The app has gained appreciation in the tech world as well.

"This is a remarkable tech start-up by any measure," said Chi-Hua Chien, a partner at the Silicon Valley venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins and a Christian who has offered informal advice to Mr. Gruenewald. He compared YouVersion with well-known ventures like Pinterest or Path.

"It is certainly going to be the most important distribution channel for anyone who is creating Christian faith content," he said. "Where else can you go and reach 100 million people?"

Photograph

Listeners Use a Bible App During a Sermon at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. (A1); the App Is Nondenominational, and On Sunday Mornings, Youversion's Servers Track More Than 600,000 Requests a Minute. Point Your Browser to Nytimes.Com/Businessday for a Slide Show and an Interactive Feature, Showing the App's Range of Translations. (Photographs by Nathan Weber for the New York Times); a Number of Companies Licensed Their Translations, Free, Contributing to More Than 600 Bible Translations On the Youversion App.; Bobby Gruenewald, the App's Founder, Said to Attract Younger People, It Needed to Be Both Technically Advanced and Free. (Photographs by Nick Oxford for the New York Times) (A3)

DETAILS

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