God’s Call Comes by Cellphone

Bible verses on a BlackBerry, sermons on an MP3 -- an explosion in digitalized spirituality is making true believers of online e-vangelists.

By Stephanie Simon, Times Staff Writer
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A recent national poll found just 17% of adults view the local church as essential for developing faith.

Small wonder.

Sitting in a pew on Sunday morning seems almost embarrassingly old-fashioned in an era when you can watch a video recreation of the Last Supper on your Palm or get God’s word text-messaged to your cellphone.

Bored with your pastor’s ramblings? Select a peppier sermon from among hundreds of “godcasts” online. Just pick a topic: Christian dating? Old Testament prophets? Then download it to your MP3 player.

Finding the old leather-bound Bible a bit cumbersome? A quick download from Olive Tree Bible Software and you’ll be able to search Scripture on your Blackberry.

"At first blush, it may seem a little peculiar to connect with God on your cellphone," said Christopher Chisholm, a TV-executive-turned-digital-evangelist. He recently helped launch FaithMobile, a service that will send a daily Bible verse to your cellphone for $5.99 a month.

In this harried age, he asks, how else are you going to “get in touch with the Word?”

The explosion in digitized spirituality might seem likely to make the traditional sanctuary obsolete. But pastors are not giving in. They’re fighting back with some high-tech tricks of their own, turning to the Internet to save souls, renew faith, inspire hope — and, not incidentally, to fill their pews.

An evangelical church in Granger, Ind., put up billboards a few months back showing a rumpled bed, entwined feet and the address http://www.myjamesexlife.com. That site linked to an artsy mini-movie with shots of a seedy motel and a man sunk in morning-after regret.

"Is your sex life a bore? A chore? ... Why does it seem like everyone else is having all the fun?" the text asked. As the movie ended, viewers for the first time saw the logo of Granger Community Church, which was sponsoring five weeks of sermons on sex, lust and porn. The tagline: “We’re not afraid to talk about it.”

Pastor Mark Beeson credits the campaign with boosting attendance 70% the week he gave a sermon entitled “The Greatest Sex You’ll Ever Have.” Six weeks after the series ended, weekly church attendance still topped 6,000, up from 5,000 before the ad campaign.

"We dare not change the Gospel. But the method of delivery? We better change it for each new generation," said Beeson, who preaches in front of a floor-to-ceiling video screen. His latest sermon series, which starts next week, is called "Finding God in Your iPod," he promises to analyze spiritual yearnings in songs from Coldplay, Kenny Chesney and other artists.
Like Beeson, many of the pastors leading the push for high-tech evangelizing run large, non-denominational churches. Several big-name ministries also support the effort; they include Focus on the Family, Campus Crusade for Christ, Promise Keepers, the Billy Graham Center, and associations of Southern Baptists and Pentecostals.

Those groups formed the Internet Evangelism Coalition, which offers advice on using the Web to spread the Gospel. The coalition's top tip: Don't sound preachy. Avoid "churchy jargon" — words like ministry, salvation, redemption, even faith. Draw nonbelievers to Jesus (or attract "unchurched" Christians to your specific congregation) by presenting the church as an upbeat, uplifting community of friends.

Mark Batterson, the pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C., posts zany video blogs on his website; one shows him tap dancing in the reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Other pastors post MTV-worthy clips of church bands. Many offer free downloads of their most popular sermons, including PowerPoint presentations.

"People often think the church is boring, judgmental, not relevant," said Richard Reising, president of the Dallas firm Artistry Marketing, which specializes in church advertising. "New media's a great way to reposition ourselves."

Nearly 60% of Protestant churches have websites now, up from 35% in 2000. More than half use e-mail blasts to communicate with their congregation — and 12% let the faithful tithe online, according to the Barna Group, which conducts research for Christian ministries.

In the sanctuary itself, more than 60% of Protestant churches spice up their services with video clips shown on oversize screens.

Even the tradition of praying for your neighbors has gone high-tech. No more waiting for your pastor to announce who's suffering from kidney stones and who just had a baby.

Log on to http://www.worldprayerteam.org and you can intercede for the parents in Singapore who want their son to practice violin; for Christine in South Africa, who needs to sell her house; for Bill in Nevada, who'd like the Lord to send him a sympathetic auditor from the Internal Revenue Service.

Andrew Careaga, a youth pastor in Salem, Mo., welcomes some of these advances. Yet he worries that when spirituality migrates to cellphones, it becomes just another item to check off the to-do list — "a five-second spiritual fix, you've seen the verse of the day and you're done."

"Technology always seems to be a Faustian bargain. It encroaches on our ability to unconnect with the world and connect with God," said Careaga, the author of "e-Ministry: Connecting with the Net Generation."

Theologian Philip Kenneson voices another concern: When churches measure success by how many times a sermon is downloaded, Christianity becomes just another consumer product.

"There's a danger that it encourages people to see the church as a service agency, there to meet their particular needs" rather than to help them serve God, Kenneson said.

"It's easy to reassure yourself that you are, in fact, a Christian because you're ... consuming Christian products," he said. "Then I don't have to love my neighbor or pray for my enemy or ... take on any of the messy, difficult demands of the Gospel," said Kenneson, an associate professor at Milligan College in Tennessee and co-author of "Selling Out The Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing."

E-vangelists respond that the church, and its mission, survived the advent of radio ministry in the 1920s and the televangelism boom of the 1970s, and will no doubt make it through the iPod era as well.

They see the gadgets of the 21st century not as distractions, but as a vital means of broadening Christianity's reach.

"You can sit in an ivory tower and whine all you want about 'This isn't the way it was done in 1500,' " said pollster George Barna, who runs the Barna Group. "We're here to help people. If there's a tool out there that can help us reach them, why wouldn't we use it?"

Barna's firm is a partner in FaithMobile and also sells Christian images and videos for churches to use in multimedia sermons.

Barna's survey on religious trends turned up the statistic that only 17% of adults see the
local church as a key factor in spiritual growth.

But he has also found that such cynicism doesn't mean empty pews. In fact, the number of adults who attend weekly worship services has been on the rise in recent years.

There's something special about face-to-face fellowship that no website can replace — at least, "not until they come up with a device that will squirt water out of your computer and baptize your kid," said John P. Jewell, an assistant professor of ministry and technology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa.

"A basic principle of Christianity is incarnation," Jewell said. "The word became flesh. It didn't become digitized."

Out on the plains of Oklahoma, Pastor Craig Groeschel aims to update that ancient principle.

He's the senior pastor of a church that's so high on high-tech, it built the concept into its name: LifeChurch.tv. Groeschel founded the church 10 years ago in a two-car garage.

The congregation outgrew a middle-school cafeteria and a bicycle factory in quick succession.

These days, Groeschel preaches to 6,000 people a week in a traditional Oklahoma City church.

Those sermons are then broadcast by satellite to 12,000 far-flung members of his congregation, who gather in a middle school in Texas, an office building in Arizona and several other venues in Oklahoma.

It's common these days for mega-churches to have suburban satellite campuses, but just a few spread their congregations across several states. Last month, LifeChurch.tv cast its net wider still by launching an interactive online campus. More than 160 people from as far as Vermont, California, Pakistan and Indonesia logged in to watch the inaugural Internet service Easter Sunday.

Among them was Terry Vallandingham, who gathered his wife and their three kids, still in their pajamas, to worship in front of a flat-screen computer monitor in their home in Shawnee, Okla.

When Groeschel asked questions, the Vallandinghames responded by clicking an icon. When the band struck up, they all sang aloud, right there in their study, sprawled out on the leather couch. After the last "Amen," they surfed into the online "lobby chat" to wish the pastor a good holiday.

The only thing they missed were the free Krispy Kreme doughnuts at the church door.

"It was amazing," Vallandingham said. "My wife even said, 'Church doesn't get better than this.' "

Nineteen virtual congregants were so moved by the service, they clicked an icon to indicate they were accepting Christ, or being "born again."

At FaithMobile's office in Sherman Oaks, Chisholm hopes to inspire the same spirit of transformation — via text message.

His cellphone service sends out sermon clips that subscribers can use as ring tones (his favorite is a stern voice demanding, "You need to decide: Is Jesus Christ my friend?").

He also offers Christian-themed computer wallpaper (a crucifix glinting in the sun, a hand resting on a Bible) and video reminders to stay on the straight and narrow ("Put God's work first and do what he wants").

"Christians aren't known for being on the cutting edge, but we think this is a slam dunk," Chisholm said. "We want to remind people: 'God's calling. You need to connect.'"