Use technology to extend worship beyond the sanctuary (Part 1)

Every autumn, people wait with baited breath to see the hottest new gadget or coolest technology that is hitting the street. If you doubt this, watch the iPhone 5 pre-order frenzy, the hoopla about Google Glass or the hunt for the hot toy of the 2012 Christmas season. We are obsessed with technology.

It is the same for the church. People are asking if their church should be on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or other social media. Should pastors use iPads in the pulpit? What should you use to build your church website? Should you post your church videos on YouTube or GodTube? The questions keep coming.

A recent survey of pastors showed strong interest in video streaming and using it in the church. This raises a simple question: Why?

It is easy to compare your church to the mega-church down the street and jump into buying the latest worship presentation software, building a church app or even live-streaming worship services. None of these things is wrong, but if you focus your attention on the latest shiny object, you may forget what is important.

Ask a better question. How do we extend the reach of our worship services and sermons beyond the four walls of our church? This is what video streaming tries to do. It provides a way to connect with those who are not physically present in the sanctuary. It is one way to respond to Christ's call "to go and make disciples of all nations."

So, starting from this call, how do we use technology to share and experience Christ beyond the sanctuary?

Understand your audience. Take the time to understand whom you are trying to reach. What are their unmet needs? What are they seeking in life? What are their current habits? Are you trying to reach the

shut-ins from your church or the un-churched in your community? Both groups have different expectations, needs and potential motivations to connect with your church. Be clear on whom you want to reach, make specific choices and take the time to understand their needs.

Decide on an objective. Now that you know whom you are trying to reach, ask why it is important to do so. What do you hope to achieve? With shut-ins, for example, you may hope to overcome the loneliness and isolation some feel. Ask, "How can I bring the church experience they love to them?" Do they want to hear the sermon, or do they want to feel loved and missed? The clearer you are on what you hope to accomplish, the more effectively you will build the solution and achieve desired results.

Define the tactics. Your target and your objective should drive your choice of medium. If you want to reach the shut-ins of your community (target) to help them feel loved by your congregation (objective), what tactics are likely to achieve that? Video streaming the service could help the shut-ins feel connected to the congregation, if they have the capability to access it. Would a better alternative be to create a DVD with videos of a month's worth of services that they can play on their TV? Which tactics can your church staff and volunteers execute with excellence? Focus on doing a few things well, rather than doing many things poorly.

Get the right technology. Be creative and try things before making a big investment in recording equipment, software or hosting services. Start by recording sermons and burning them to a CD. Distribute the CDs and see how people respond. The last thing you want to do is to spend a significant amount of money and volunteer time to stream your services only to discover no one is watching.

Create experiences. Use the decisions you have made about the target (WHO), the objective (WHAT) and the tactics and technologies (HOW) to create a meaningful experience that will touch people's hearts.

Example #1: Break down walls of isolation for shut-ins.

WHO: People from the church or community with whom your church has a relationship, but who are unable to attend services.

WHAT: Reduce the loneliness they may feel by assuring them your congregation loves and misses them.

HOW: Audio or video record the sermons and a few people sending good wishes and burn them to a DVD. Ask Sunday school classes to make "miss you" cards and then deliver them as part of a home visit or monthly care package.

Example #2: Take the fear out of a first-time visit.

WHO: First-time visiting families

WHAT: Allow potential visitors to "experience" a typical Sunday morning without actually being there.

HOW: Buy or borrow a digital camcorder or HD flip cam. Find someone willing to be the "virtual guide" and record a walkthrough on a typical Sunday morning. Consider what a visitor may care about and take short videos of key elements (parking lot, nursery, coffee time), the full sermon and some "people on the street" interviews with the congregation asking why they attend. Edit the video using iMovie (Mac) or Windows Live Movie Maker (PC) into short clips (3-5 minutes), except the sermon. Create a YouTube channel for your church, upload the videos and post them in the "visitor tab" on your website. Include directions and contact information as well as a Web form to ask for additional information or to submit prayer requests.

Example #3: Keep volunteers "in the loop."

WHO: Church volunteers who are busy during worship

WHAT: Eliminate the feeling of missing out because they must serve during the worship service.

HOW: Create sermon series CDs for volunteers to take home or create a weekly sermon podcast to download from iTunes. Buy a digital recorder and connect it with an AV cable to your soundboard. Record the sermon, download the MP3 file to your Mac or PC and burn it to a CD using iTunes or Windows Media Player. You can also create an audio podcast your volunteers can download. If they are not sure how to do it, help them to set it up.

These are just three simple ways to extend the reach of your worship service beyond the sanctuary. For most churches, live video streaming the service is too labor intensive for the expected return. Try something on a smaller scale, measure its effectiveness and decide if it meets your objectives.

On the other hand, occasional video streaming or use of other advanced technologies may make sense. One example would be for a pastor serving three or more churches. Members may want to switch from holding multiple worship services each Sunday to streaming the worship service to all locations. Another could be enabling worshippers who travel for extended periods to stay connected. Be very clear on **WHOM** you want to reach and **WHAT** the objective is before starting on **HOW** to do it.

If you wish to take the plunge in video streaming and more advanced techniques to extend your worship service beyond the sanctuary, read Part 2 of this series, *How to stream worship beyond the sanctuary*.