

Podcasting:

HELPING THE CHURCH MOVE AT THE SPEED OF TECHNOLOGY

BY KIRK NOONAN

Podcasting leaves no excuses for missing church — or at least your minister's sermon — and Mark Batterson could not be happier.

"We're influencing more people via podcasting than through our services," says Batterson, pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C.

On Sundays Batterson preaches to more than 800 people at the Assemblies of God church, which has a satellite location in Arlington, Va. But each month, he says, more than 10,000 people from places as diverse as Holland and Singapore tune in to his weekly podcasted sermon.

"As a pastor I have to believe in the message I am preaching and I want as many people to hear it as possible," says Batterson, 36.



Pastor Mark Batterson

"If it's worth preaching, it's worth podcasting."

Podcasting has proved to be an inexpensive and easy way to spread the gospel. According to Batterson it also gives users the flexibility to listen to sermons during their commute to work, at the gym or even while waiting to see a doctor.

Yet despite all of its benefits some people worry that podcasting could water down the gospel, erode Christian fellowship and even make missing church on a regular basis OK.

"Podcasting is not a substitute for church, it's a supplement," says Batterson. "There never will be a substitute for the human touch or the corporate worship we experience together in church. Our goal is to evangelize people and get them to check out our church in a nonthreatening way, and podcasting allows us to do that."

Mark A. Kellner, a technology journalist and author of *God on the Internet*, points out that podcasting sermons allows those who may not be able to attend church on a given Sunday an opportunity to hear the sermon.

"Once a sermon is downloaded a listener can listen to it, study it and listen to it again at his or her own pace," Kellner says. "This

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could help a Christian grasp difficult concepts, reinforce their own core beliefs and learn important teachings.”

Late last year Apple introduced video iPods that can play television programs and videoed church services. Batterson sees an opportunity to use video podcasting to reach others with the gospel, too.

But some watchdog groups are concerned that such technology will be used to broadcast pornography. Adding to the problem, they say, is that there are few, if any, filters available to keep pornography off iPods and other devices such as cell phones and personal digital assistants that can play video files.

"Until filters are developed and put into place, users may unknowingly get much more than they have bargained for with the additional video features," reads one warning.

Experts say individuals and companies will always use technology to make money and further prurient interests. But, Kellner and others say, that shouldn't stop Christian leaders from using the same technology to spread their message.

"There can always be a downside to uses of technology," Kellner says. "But technology is morally neutral, and I'd rather have gospel-oriented podcasts and video podcasts than pornographic or satanic recordings. Christians need to be active in the marketplace of ideas, presenting Jesus as the answer."

Batterson agrees.

"I love redeeming things and using them for God's purposes," he says. "God wants to redeem everyone and everything in His creation, and technology is certainly a part of that."

Podcasting, in Batterson's view, is like getting on the airwaves for free. He says most churches are equipped and can afford to do it.

Because many churches record the Sunday morning sermons, Batterson says they should take



it one step further and convert those recordings to an MP3 (audio compression format). The MP3, he explains, is then uploaded to the church's Web site or podcast directory, such as iTunes, where it's made available to the public. Listeners can then subscribe to a church's podcasts and have them downloaded to their computer or MP3 player automatically.

Since last July, the number of religious podcasts available on Podcast Alley, which offers a variety of podcasts featuring everything from sports to business, has increased from 177 to 1,200 by February. Batterson and others expect podcasting to continue its rise from media trend to media mainstay.

Bible-publishing giant Zondervan is also utilizing the iPod to digitally disciple believers by offering an audio version of the Bible. The Today's New International Version of the Bible will feature both audio and text formats and will include study notes, a subject guide and 10 topical two-week reading plans.

Makers hope by offering the Bible on iPod more people between the ages of 18-34 will begin reading, or

at least listening to, the Bible.

"Research shows that the younger generation feels the Bible is relevant to their lives but they aren't engaging with it for a variety of reasons," says Mark Hunt, vice president and publisher of new media for Zondervan. "This new format will make it more convenient and desirable for people to find time to either listen to or read God's Word."

No matter how iPods are used, Batterson and other leaders see them as a way to spread God's Word. He says several people have come to National Community Church after hearing his podcasts. And many regulars at the church are studying his sermons — at their convenience — during the week.

"Podcasting is just good stewardship of technology," he says. "Podcasts have redefined the way we think about influence. The church needs to lead the way in this because a lot of people, including pornographers, are trying to get their messages out. But we need to compete so we get our message out too." **tpe**

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.