

Christian use of digital devices redefines 'going to church'

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McKINNEY (RNS)—No matter where people live, they can go to church—virtually, at least—with [Christ Fellowship in McKinney](#), which is on board with almost every high-tech gadget under heaven.



Christ Fellowship in McKinney offers worshippers a Facebook page, online sermons, live chats and QR codes.

Find the church by going online—the 21st-century version of sighting a steeple on the horizon. Beyond its website, Christ Fellowship also has a Facebook page.

The curious can download the worship program by scanning their customized-with-a-cross QR code. Worship services are streamed online from the church's Internet campus—with live chat running so participants can share spiritual insights in real time.

Afterward, Senior Pastor Bruce Miller said: "Someone will ask you, 'How

did it go? Did God help you today? How can we help you?' Just like we do when people come to our building in McKinney. We are here to help people find and follow Christ, wherever they are starting out from."

And wherever they are in the digital world.

Christ Fellowship exemplifies most of the latest ways churches dramatically extend their reach beyond any one time or local address. Such congregations signal "a willingness to meet new challenges," said Scott Thumma, of the [Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#), author of a study by [Faith Communities Today](#) of how churches, synagogues and mosques use the Internet and other technology.



Sermons by Bruce Miller, senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Church in McKinney, Texas, are part of the streaming worship service offered by the church's Internet campus.

The organization's national survey of 11,077 of the nation's 335,000 congregations found seven in 10 U.S. congregations had websites, and four in 10 had Facebook pages by 2010.

The use of QR codes—which allow users to scan a bar code with their cell

phone and go directly to a related website—is too new to be measured yet, Thumma said. He recently began tracking churches that stream worship—about 1 percent of congregations, he estimates.

Future surveys may measure the explosion of digital applications. Christ Fellowship has one app for donating online and another for swapping goods and services to help others in the community—2,100 people at the North Texas church campus and God knows how many online.

Believers have been early adopters of every new form of communication since the first printed book—the Gutenberg Bible. Centuries later, examples abound beyond individual congregations:

- Pope Benedict XVI's annual World Communications address emphasized the importance of a Christian presence in the digital world. The Vatican has a Web TV channel and had a Twitter campaign during Lent.
- Confession: A Roman Catholic App—released for the iPhone a year ago by www.littleiapps.com, a U.S. company—has been downloaded more than 100,000 times. Sacraments can't be done virtually so "you are not YouTube-ing or emailing your confession," said Patrick Leinen, a cofounder of the company.



Confession: A Roman Catholic App has been downloaded more than 100,000 times since the aide to Roman Catholic confessions was released a year ago, according to co-founder Patrick Leinen.

The app is a "personalized examination of conscience," an aid that prompts Catholics through the required preconfession soul-searching. Then they can bring notes right in to meet the priest, Leinen said.

- [The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association](#), a pioneer in print, radio, television and satellite-broadcast outreach for decades, now employs search-engine algorithms to steer people toward salvation.

Its Internet evangelism project, launched last fall, scours search engines for people who enter phrases such as, "Does God love me?" or "Does God answer prayers?" The results page includes a paid listing that highlights a website introducing Christ, www.PeaceWithGod.jesus.net.

People who sign on to the sinner's prayer on that page turn up in a real-time scroll of the latest "decisions" at www.SearchforJesus.net, a page that

explains the Internet ministry.

- Believers can sing along with a new tablet hymnal from Church Publishing. In March, the Episcopal Church's publishing house released eHymnals for the iPad and other digital readers.

With the infinite reach of technology, "people are able to confront God in unique ways even if they are hundreds of miles apart," said John Mark Reynolds, director of the honors institute at [Biola University](#), a private evangelical school in La Mirada, Calif. Biola held a conference on blogging two years ago. It updated to a Web-focused conference last year, and this June, the conference zeroed in on digital technology.

No matter the technology, the overall focus remains the same, Reynolds said: "How can the Christian church utilize the tools media has given us without being subsumed by them? You don't want delivery to become everything."

Technology ultimately should be an enhancement, not a re-placement, for gathering in person for worship, discussion, debate and service to others, said Drew Goodmanson, CEO of [Monk Development](#), which helps churches use the Internet to fulfill their missions.

Goodmanson appreciates that "you can have a digital Bible in the palm of your hand or connect with others in prayer any time, anywhere." Even so, he cautioned: "Jesus would not have a Facebook page. He wouldn't be stopping in an Internet cafe to update his status."