

Churches find 'kingdom-oriented' ministry online

October 26, 2012

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP)—Jim Somerville serves as pastor of a Baptist congregation in Virginia that—thanks to the Internet—includes people living in Austria, India and Slovakia, not to mention some guy in Iowa.

, 'I tune in online and consider [First Baptist, Richmond](#), my church, and Jim Somerville is my pastor,'" he said, recalling a conversation between the Iowan and a Richmond church member.

Such accounts are relatively common at churches that use the Internet to share their services, Sunday school classes and other ministries. And the practice is nearly as old as the Web itself.

But faith leaders testify to a growing awareness the Internet may well be a virtual mission field in its own right. Baptist ministers, among others, now describe their Facebook and other web ministries in missional terms.

"I am less and less concerned about the institutional church and more concerned about the kingdom," said [Wade Burleson](#), pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla. Burleson participates in the nondenominational, Internet-based [EChurch](#).

"It is my theological view that this ministry is kingdom-oriented," Burleson said.

Some have ventured into web-based churching for functional rather than missional purposes. [Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas](#) began live streaming its 11 a.m. worship about six months ago to serve members who cannot make it to worship due to illness, vacations or business travel, Associate

Pastor Mark Wingfield said.

It's also proven highly popular among faraway relatives who can watch a youngster sing in the youth choir.

"For some churches, it's probably missional, but for us, it's just helpful," Wingfield said.

Church members had requested the service for years, Wingfield said, but it was not launched until technical and volunteer resources were available to provide it.

All sorts of issues—from sound to lighting and camera quality—have to be mastered to avoid frustrating those who tune in online.

"It sounds like a really simple thing to do, but it is not," Wingfield said.

Keeping it simple was the whole idea behind EChurch, an online worship experience launched in March by two bloggers intent on reaching the unchurched.

"Worse than unchurched, it's people who just won't step foot in a church," said Dee Parsons, co-founder of EChurch and [The Wartburg Watch](#), a blog that tracks Christian trends.

Parsons noted she and blog partner Wanda Martin discerned from posted comments the need for an online spiritual community for those who feel alienated from church. Some cited pedophilia and financial scandals, or feeling ostracized for questioning religious dogma, behind their unwillingness to enter churches.

EChurch is not a live worship streaming event, but rather contains prayers, Christian music of varying styles and an embedded video of Burleson preaching at Emmanuel in Enid.

The format allows participants to watch when they can and then to comment on the experience. The back-and-forth between readers tells Parsons EChurch is providing much-needed fellowship for its participants.

Parsons believes their participants represent a specific population that otherwise is not being reached by churches or missionaries.

"The seeker churches are getting the seekers," she said. "These people are not seeking—they know what they believe, but they just don't want to come to church."

Burleson jumped at the invitation to have his sermons embedded at EChurch because that demographic needs ministry. "It's amazing," he said. "I have people contact me who said EChurch is restoring a little trust in the church."

In addition to the live streaming of its 8:30 and 11 a.m. services, First Baptist in Richmond also offers "[Microchurch](#)."

Through the church website, people can view the order of worship, suggested Scripture readings and watch the sermon. They are encouraged to gather with others as they do so, Somerville said.

Participants are encouraged to speak about the services, pray with one another and then have lunch together.

"I run into people all the time who said, 'I'm one of your Microchurches,'" Somerville said, adding that a format also exists for television viewers.

"It's another way we do what we can to bring heaven to earth."