

More churches turning to high-tech outreach

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#)

April 23, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) No matter where you live, you can go to church, so to speak, with Christ Fellowship in McKinney, Texas, which is on board with almost every high-tech gambit under heaven.

Find the church by going online -- the 21st-century version of sighting a steeple on the horizon. Beyond their website, Christ Fellowship has a Facebook page to give it a friendly presence in social media.

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

Afterward, says Senior Pastor Bruce Miller, "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 of church 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. He's the author of a study by Faith Communities Today (FACT) of how churches, synagogues and mosques use the Internet and other technology.

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

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 their worship -- about 1 percent of congregations, Thumma estimates.

Future surveys may also measure the explosion of digital applications.

Christ Fellowship has an app for donating online and another one for swapping goods and services to help others in the community -- 2,100 people at the Texas church campus and God knows how many online.

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

-- 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 e-mailing your confession," says Patrick Leinen, a co-founder of the company.

The app is a "personalized examination of conscience," an aid that prompts you through the required pre-confession soul-searching. Then you can bring your 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.

Their 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.

-- You 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 summer the conference will zero 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 should ultimately be an enhancement, not a replacement, 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," yet he cautioned: "Jesus would not have a Facebook page. He wouldn't be stopping in an Internet cafe to update his status."