

Eric Reed



Churches Experiment with Preaching on Video

"After a few minutes, you forget you're watching a video," the cheerful, thirty-ish woman at the welcome desk says. In fact, everybody says that. In the Chicago suburbs. In Atlanta. In Minneapolis. In San Diego and Los Angeles. Everybody says you forget that the preacher is not right in the room with you.

"The test," says Larry Osborne, "is how do they respond when the preacher asks a question. Do they raise their hands when asked? Do they applaud a videotape?"

They do.

"Do they laugh in all the right places? That's what I wanted to know," Andy Stanley says. "And they do. Sometimes when we have guest speaker, I go into our other sanctuary to see how the video is received. They laugh. They cry. And when asked to stand or to make a commitment, they respond just as well as when the speaker is in person."

Both Stanley and Osborne are pioneering the use of video sermons. Both preach live in one worship service and via video in other venues. Both declare the experiment a success. And both plan to expand their churches by video. Another church has chosen to go entirely without a live preacher, relying instead on recorded sermons from the big boys.

Thiesen was worship pastor at a traditional church in Rockford. After an attempt at a seeker-sensitive contemporary service was shelved, the men decided to try it in a different setting. With the worship and leadership elements in place, only a dynamic preacher was missing.

Today's Special

It was Larry Osborne North Coast Church in Vista, California (near San Diego), who named the concept the "video café." It started in 1998 as an overflow that was "a reward and not a punishment," in Osborne's words. He contracted with Starbucks to provide coffee, and with tables and greenery, tried to create an atmosphere like a café. The café became a worship service of choice.

The room soon grew so crowded that the tables were removed to make room for more chairs, and when that arrangement was packed out, a second café was added. Now worshipers can choose from five worship styles at 13 services.

The service in the main sanctuary is what you'd expect in Southern California, casual with an up-tempo rock beat, just right for "an old hippie," as Osborne calls himself. In the outlying rooms, the worship flavor is varied: edgy alternative, acoustical, lush praise and worship, traditional. Each venue is more

intimate than the main worship center, 100 to 300 people.

"Leaders like it bigger, but the people like it smaller," Osborne summarizes. When the music (live) ends, the sermon video is played. "We don't try to hide that it's on tape..."

Most churches using video are limiting it to the sermon, and few are regularly doing that live....

Why Not Add Preachers?

Driving these examples is the demand to hear a popular preacher who can't take on yet another service. Ed Young, Sr., pastor of Second Baptist Church of Houston uses video and relatives. After preaching to two sites linked by video, Young drives to the remote site for a second service while son Ben takes over back home. But without the luxury of staff genetically predisposed to good preaching, most popular pastors are not likely to share their pulpits and risk their ministries.

When proposing the video solution,

[John] Piper's staff [at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis] addressed the question head-on. FAQ 24 and 25 at the website: "Won't this hinder the multiplication of preachers?" and more bluntly, "Are we promoting a 'fan club mentality'?"

"There is a tension between saying, 'We don't want to put John Piper on a pedestal' and recognizing that God has given him remarkable gifts and taking advantage of that," executive pastor Sam Crabtree says. Planning multi-site congregations featuring one preacher also means preparing for the loss of that preacher. "The day will come when John retires, and we don't want the whole enterprise to be torpedoed by that."

Megachurches often suffer great attendance losses when trying to replace a retiring pastor. Bethlehem noted in its proposal to the church Tim Keller's solution at Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan. At his retirement, Keller plans for each of the four sites where he preaches to call their own pastors and become separate churches.

Everybody's Watching Rockford

Sixty miles from Willow Creek, in Rockford, Illinois, Bill Hybels is drawing big crowds every weekend, about 2,000 people. What's unusual about that? Well, it isn't Willow Creek or a Willow Creek regional center. This as an autonomous, local congregation, Heartland Community Church, that happens to use Hybels on video to deliver their sermons.

It's an experiment that many are watching—a church without its own preacher. If it fails, local preachers everywhere can breathe a sigh of relief. If it succeeds, local preachers may start cataloging their other marketable skills.

The atrium at Heartland smells like French Vanilla café. With this \$2 million addition to a former restaurant, the building resembles the Cadillac dealership next door. That's the idea. When the

What does it look like?

Video Preaching appears in four forms at present:

1. **Conjoined congregations:** One Church, meeting simultaneously in two (or more) locations, shares the preacher live by video.
2. **Video Cafes:** Multiple congregations of one church, meeting at different times on the main campus, often with different worship styles, watch the same preacher on recorded video.
3. **Satellite congregations:** Multiple congregations, still controlled by the mother church but operating on remote campuses, watch recorded sermons of the preacher at the main campus.
4. **The preacher-less church:** An independent congregation that uses recorded sermons from another ministry, while providing its own worship, leadership, programming, and governance.

church relocates to 74 acres it purchased near the interstate, this building will be sold to a car dealer and the atrium will become a showroom. But today, it's a coffee shop and gathering place for a good cross-section of Rockford.

The people standing at chest-high pub tables are mostly between 25 and 45. Above the buzz you can hear answers to questions you're thinking: "almost five years now," "a woman I work with told me," "not like my old church at all," "you get used to the video," "I don't even think about it anymore," "very cool."

The buzz quiets when "the count-down" comes on screens over the coffee bar. The crowd moves into the worship area while announcements are shown on the large screens beside the platform—lots of faces, quick cuts, and a drive beat MTV-style, while a clock counts the seconds to worship. At 00:00, the live band kicks in, and worship begins, a smooth mix of contemporary songs from the standard charts, prayer, on this Sunday the monthly serving of communion, and the offering. The man in the middle, playing keyboard and guiding the service, is Doug Thiesen. He is warm and the atmosphere is like most upbeat, contemporary services.

Until the sermon.

After a short explanation, Bill Hybels appears on the side screens and delivers a sermon on "telling the truth." It is part three of a series Willow Wheaton saw five months earlier.

"We have access to the Willow Creek sermon Library, and we can choose what we feel our congregation needs," explains Thiesen.

"When we first started, some people said, 'When are we going to get a pastor?' They meant 'a preacher.' We have a pastor," Mark Bankord says, pointing to Thiesen. Bankord, a full-time assets man-

ager, also serves as directional leader for the congregation that he and Thiesen started in 1998 with 113 people.

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Bankord recalls a conversation between himself and his wife. "'How can we have consistently great teaching—like this?' she said to me. We had some tapes of Bill sitting on the TV in our bedroom." Bankord, a friend of Hybels, called and asked for permission to use some sermon tapes. After discussions about the church's mission and theology, Hybels consented.

Will other autonomous congregations be allowed to use recorded Willow Creek sermons for their teaching?

"We're open to it," Jim Tomberlin says, "if it can be done in a way that monitors the integrity of our content. We need another year to determine whether it's feasible."

If not Willow Creek's, other preachers may be available for syndication. Andy Stanley has been approached by a store owner in a city outside Atlanta who is showing Stanley's sermons to friends during lunch breaks. He's thinking about the possibilities.

"People listen to John MacArthur and Chuck Swindoll and my dad," Stanley says. "So they know what good teaching is. I would love to take this into small towns where they'll never keep a strong communicator, to partner with those guys and say, 'We will give you what you can't do if you will create the environment that you know will draw the unchurched people in your community.'"

The technology is in place to deliver "consistently great teaching" every week via video. Now the issue is, will our theology allow it?

The Incarnation and Other Minutia

Church expert Lyle Schaller has hailed the multi-site church as a means of expanding ministry while stewarding resources, doing more with less staff.

But the video element adds a new kink. If syndicated preaching becomes the norm, who will serve in Craig Barnes's words, as "the crucible where the needs of this congregation and the Word of God meet."

Barnes was for ten years pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and is now professor of pastoral ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He doesn't want to rule out the work of the Holy Spirit through whatever means he chooses, but Barnes asks, "Who can stand and say 'The Word of the Lord' to a particular congregation, unless that pastor lives with them, loves them, and is called specifically to shepherd them?"

And there are the pastors of local churches who face a new challenge from the megachurches. "The answer for small church pastors is reaching a niche," Larry Osborne says. It's the same advice given to Mom and Pop shops when Wal-Mart moves to town. Specialize. Know your customers.

"A church's niche can be its relationships or its denominational flavor. And they can create a great, smaller church atmosphere."

Of course, that's what Osborne is trying to do with his video cafés. "We don't talk about how big we are. We have a sense of family." A family whose hearth and altar, as at home, is the video screen. □

Eric Reed is managing editor of Leadership magazine. This article is excerpted from "Let's Go to the Tape" (Leadership, Spring 2003, pp. 76-80.) Used with permission.

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