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The Gospel according to Twitter

Amy Green | May. 27, 2009

David Loveless, pastor of Discovery Church in Orlando, Fla., asks parishioners to send him text messages, or "tweets," via Twitter during his sermons to help spark an interactive conversation during worship services. (RNS/Amy Green)

Religion News Service

ORLANDO, Fla. -- Do you tweet during church? Isn?t it rude?

David Loveless doesn?t think so. Loveless is lead pastor of Discovery Church, a nondenominational congregation that draws some 4,000 on Sundays to three locations in Orlando. The congregation has always thrived on the cutting edge, becoming among the first to embrace contemporary music and remove its steeple from its building.

Now the congregation is tweeting -- using 21st-century technology to discuss the Gospel in 140-character cell-phone text updates sent via Twitter.

The technology emerged naturally here, as something parishioners brought with them to Sundays from the rest of their week. Loveless recognized it as a new way to communicate, and he began posing questions during his sermons and asking parishioners to ?tweet? back by texting their responses. Those responses were then woven into his sermons, creating an instantaneous dialogue between pulpit and pew.

?In John 1, when Jesus was referred to as ?the Word that became flesh,? God knew exactly what was the most relevant form of communication for the first century,? Loveless said. ?It made people feel like, ?My gosh, he talks my language.? That would be people?s responses these days, in going, ?My gosh, my pastor tweets.? ?

It is the newest technology arriving in contemporary church services. In fact, it?s so new, and growing so fast, that there?s no data to say just how many churches have embraced it.

No longer is the cell phone such a pariah -- only ringing cell phones are. Instead, church leaders are inviting worshipers to tweet and text their way through services as a way to share their prayers and reflections with

neighbors in the pews, or their family, friends and ?followers? on Twitter.

?It?s a hotbed issue right now, and people are on two sides of the fence about it,? said Matt Carlisle, a Nashville, Tenn.-based technology and new media consultant for faith-based groups and nonprofits.

?As Christians, we are to witness, we are to make disciples for Jesus Christ. And if we can embrace new technology to do that, I don?t see any reason why we shouldn?t embrace Twitter, why we shouldn?t embrace Facebook.?

Many church leaders embraced new media such as Twitter and Facebook long ago as a way to create an online gathering place and promote upcoming events. Now some are taking it further, encouraging tweeting and texting during services as a way to create dialogue and strengthen a sense of community.

Michael Campbell, the 30-year-old pastor of the 230-member Montrose Seventh-day Adventist Church in Montrose, Colo., poses questions during his sermons and asks worshipers to text their responses, which are displayed on a screen. Like Loveless, Campbell then discusses the responses.

In other congregations, Twitter has emerged quietly and organically, with parishioners tweeting their reflections during services in the same way they tweet their thoughts or activities throughout the week. The dialogue also allows real-time discussion and gives those who couldn?t make it a chance to monitor services from afar.

?I?m a younger pastor,? Campbell said. ?You?re just building that sense of community, and people are interested in that because now they are part of the sermon.?

But isn?t it distracting? Doesn?t it detract from the contemplative and meditative nature of spirituality? Carlisle points out that parishioners long have been taking notes during services, and that never has been distracting to others.

?I don?t think the etiquette has been established yet,? he said. ?Literally, within a year?s time, this thing has been happening at a handful of congregations.?

At Mars Hill Church in Seattle, leaders never decided to add Twitter to services. It just happened, said Ian Sanderson, a church spokesman.

The nondenominational congregation draws some 8,000 worshipers at nine locations, including a new one in Albuquerque, N.M. Seattle is a tech-savvy place, and the average member at Mars Hill is in his or her 20s. Tweeting and texting encourages dialogue across the congregation?s multiple locations, and it helps church staff keep up with what parishioners are thinking and feeling, Sanderson said.

?I would say probably 80 or 90 percent of the church staff is on Twitter,? he said. ?If the old rules aren?t helping anyone in their walk and their relationship with Jesus, if you can pull out your iPhone and Twitter something about the sermon and that helps your whole group of friends, we?re not going to frown on that at all.?

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