Synchronized worship: The rise of the multicampus church

by Jason Byassee in the January 26, 2010 issue

Every week tens of thousands of people attend virtual worship services that use an online ministry called LifeChurch.tv. A hundred churches worldwide are part of the LifeChurch network, and 23,000 additional churches have downloaded LifeChurch resources—for free—from open.lifechurch.tv. LifeChurch also has a multisite church network of its own, with 13 separate campuses connected by satellite.

Perhaps you find this kind of ministry disturbing. The faith represented by LifeChurch is largely disembodied, you might suspect—nothing more than virtual Christianity.

But the reality is more complex. And it's undeniable that multisite models of church are mushrooming. Willow Creek Church and North Point Community Church are two of the more famous, and there are a thousand others. What if LifeChurch is simply ahead of the curve? What if network-based, satellite-fed congregations, supported by technologically savvy staff, professional-quality music and an effective Internet presence, represent the Christianity of the future?

Craig Groeschel, founder and senior pastor of LifeChurch, certainly thinks that his 13-year-old ministry represents the wave of the future. Such innovations may be "despised and rejected by many," he writes, but "I'm guessing they will be generally accepted in less than five years."

Groeschel's face and voice are beamed via satellite all over the world. When he makes a joke in Edmond, Oklahoma, site of LifeChurch's original campus, he gets laughs in Albany, New York. When he asks people to raise their hands in response to a query, hands go up in Hendersonville, Tennessee. When he hammers home the points of his message with *USA Today* simplicity and precision, worshipers in Australia nod in recognition.

It all seems very 21st century. But Groeschel's model of ministry is rooted in the example of John Wesley. Groeschel told me that he is intrigued by Wesley's circuit-

riding ministry, “which perhaps planted the seed that would grow into the multisite idea.”

Groeschel grew up in United Methodist churches. After attending Phillips Theological Seminary, a Disciples of Christ school in Tulsa, he served at Oklahoma City’s First United Methodist Church. He was a pastor there in 1995 when Timothy McVeigh bombed the city’s federal building, and the church’s sanctuary became a makeshift hospital and morgue.

But Groeschel left the UMC in frustration when he and others wanted to launch a new site in another part of Oklahoma City and the denomination refused to sanction it. LifeChurch began in a garage as a church plant of the Evan gelical Covenant Church and remains affiliated with that denomination.

LifeChurch’s hallmark is its sophisticated technological and Internet presence. At LifeChurch.tv, participants can hear sermons at any time, attend church online and click on a “virtual lobby” where they can interact with other participants. During the sermon, instant messages appear on screen from other listeners who are responding to the messages in real time and getting responses from online LifeChurch pastors.

LifeChurch also sponsors the virtual world of Second Life, which includes a site called Experience Island where people can connect on spiritual matters. In addition, LifeChurch has a site called mysecret.tv, which offers an online confessional, and an iPhone application called YouVersion that allows users to download individualized biblical content. You can also engage in micro-missions and discuss your experience with others online.

LifeChurch is not only an online presence. Thirteen Life Church campuses share Groeschel’s preaching live via satellite. A giant digital clock in the back of each of these churches—visible to the pastors but not the congregation—makes sure that everything in the service happens according to script, down to the second. A switch is flipped exactly 19 minutes and 30 seconds into the service: that’s when Groeschel’s sermon in Edmond goes global via satellite.

Groeschel never lets a worship experience go by without offering an invitation to follow Jesus. “Even though I grew up attending church,” he told me, “I was never challenged to repent of my sins and trust Christ as my Savior.” His preaching corrects that oversight.

But unlike many technology-infatuated churches, Life Church does not only emphasize conversion. LifeChurch's mission statement is "to lead people to become more fully devoted followers of Christ." The network offers more messages that are more challenging than those of most other Web- or television-based preaching.

One recent sermon, for example, dealt with money—not how to get more of it, but how to keep less. Groeschel told his listeners that those who make more than $40,000 a year are, compared to the rest of the world's people, already rich, and they need to ask themselves: What does the Bible ask of rich people? How can we stop consuming in order to give more away to those in need?

LifeChurch is not dogmatic about its approach and bends over backward to help other churches. Former dot-com executive Bobby Gruenewald, LifeChurch's "pastor and innovation leader" (yes, that's his title), insists that LifeChurch wants to help its mainline colleagues, "even if it's just with a little technology. We want to see the church thrive."

In his most recent book, *How Churches and Leaders Can Get It and Keep It* (Zondervan), Groeschel speaks of taking up offerings to send to other churches. He confesses to feeling envious of other churches' success and encourages readers to pray for the churches that they drive by on the way to their own.

While perhaps right of center, LifeChurch seems to have no need to stress a claim of doctrinal or political purity. Tome Dawson, pastor at the South Tulsa LifeChurch campus, told me flatly, "Our competition is not other churches. Our competition is Disney"—and a myriad of other forms of entertainment.

For Gruenewald, Internet technology is simply "amoral." What matters is how it is used. While he knows that the Web poses dangers, he argues that the greater danger comes from the church being disengaged from technology. "The absence of the church just allows [sin] to go on unhindered."

The Internet, he believes, allows for a new level of unity in the body of Christ. The fact that the LifeChurch network church in Ada, Oklahoma (population 1,000), gets the same online content as do the bigger churches is a good thing. "It's beautiful," Gruenewald said.

One of the problems that an online ministry faces is how to administer the sacraments. It's not easy to dunk somebody in cyberspace. When a woman in Maine

converted online, LifeChurch leaders flew there to conduct her baptism. At other times, they will encourage a new believer to seek out a local church to receive sacraments. They have also mailed communion elements to an online worshiper and arranged for someone from LifeChurch to commune via Webcam.

While sacraments are a challenge for an online ministry, disembodied preaching seems to work fine. Groeschel observed that at one time one of LifeChurch's campuses struggled while others thrived. "Guess which one got smaller? The one where I taught 'live and in person.' All the campuses that experienced weekly video teaching grew. If you don't like video teaching, put *that* in your pipe and smoke it."

I visited three LifeChurch campuses in Tulsa, the largest of which claims to have some 3,000 partners (Lifespeak for members). The campus in the far south of the city started in 2008 with 700 members drawn from the midtown church. Then about 500 others from midtown peeled off to start a campus in Owasso, in northeastern Tulsa. LifeChurch expands rapidly out of a determination not to get too big in any one setting.

A preference for a relatively intimate atmosphere is one of the major reasons for having multisite campuses. The resources of a church of 10,000 or more are astounding, but the size of the crowd can be overwhelming. Nobody goes to a stadium for intimacy. And the cost of building a Saddleback-sized auditorium is daunting. Satellite-based preaching allows the largest LifeChurch I visited to have half a dozen worship experiences per weekend. Each service can accommodate 500 people. And each attendee gets a "fresh" preacher on screen, not one who is on his sixth or seventh sermon of the weekend. So each campus has the intimacy of a medium-sized congregation, with the resources of a megachurch—including top-quality video images and sound.

I heard part of a sermon series on Elijah, which included the visual image of a raven beamed onto three enormous overhead projectors. Sound effects of the raven cawing and flapping set the stage for talk about the misery of the drought referred to in the book of Kings.

Announcements were either part of a video—produced with the snappiness of a TV commercial—or handled deftly by the campus pastor. "You have to be a better communicator here," one leader told me, "because you get only 90 seconds."

Each campus can be relatively light in numbers of staff because of the massive online presence and direction that come from the LifeChurch office in Edmond.

When I asked folks at the LifeChurch campuses in Tulsa what brought them there, no body mentioned the online preaching. One member, who had grown up in a small church, admitted that the idea of a screen preacher was a negative for him at first. “It didn’t seem very relational,” he said. But others talked about encountering a warm atmosphere. A young African-American woman said, “We’re all like family here. We live in this area [suburban south Tulsa]. It’s very welcoming.”

“It’s so young and inviting here,” a middle-aged white woman said, as she set out donut holes and fruit. Many families come because of LifeChurch’s video program for youth, LifeKIDs. One young white man presented a reason for attendance at LifeChurch that illuminates Oklahoma’s evangelical context: “All of the other young churches in town are charismatic.”

Since the network’s preaching is done almost entirely by satellite and video, the pastors at the various campuses do not focus on preaching. Dawson speaks with some frustration about not getting to preach regularly. “We talk a lot about sacrifice here: giving up something you love for something you love more.” But he feels that not having to spend 25 or 30 hours a week preparing a sermon frees him up for relationships.

I happened to visit on a Sunday when the campus preachers were scheduled to speak. The three preachers’ talking points were all identical, clearly handed down from a central office. But their stories, jokes and illustrations varied. At times they even clashed.

In South Tulsa, Dawson told a story of answered prayer—how a teenage girl survived a suicide attempt and was in church the next weekend. But at the Owasso campus, Eddie Stephens spoke of his wife’s cancer and his 20-year-old daughter’s pregnancy—and his experience of unanswered prayer. A leader in Edmond watches all the worship services and may offer immediate feedback. This can be jarring: campus pastors may get a text message as soon as they sit down after speaking. Ken Behr, campus pastor in Hendersonville, values the feedback, since it is likely to be constructive. “Wouldn’t you rather hear from the guy who knows what he’s talking about?”

Michael Bartley, a Wesley Foundation minister in Tulsa who operates in the shadow of LifeChurch, sees a darker side to the network. “I know of four funerals of young people from LifeChurch.tv that were done by [ministers outside LifeChurch] simply because they could not be fit within LifeChurch’s schedules,” he says. He reports doing about 50 weddings a year for young people who “attend LifeChurch but feel little connection to it.”

Jonathan Bartlett, a seminary student with a background in the Vineyard movement, says he sees little place in LifeChurch for strong lay leaders. “Their whole pitch for leaders of LifeGroups is ‘It’s easy.’ LifeChurch is made up of people who liked youth group in high school, but then grew up and found nothing like it—until this.”

But if Groeschel is right, all churches are headed in the direction of LifeChurch. Will congregations be cast in the role of providing pastoral care and sacraments to those who want the professional show provided by a church like LifeChurch? Will congregations become satellites of centralized ministries? Will most preaching be done via satellite television? If so, what will become of one particularly mainline gift: the credentialed, educated, warm-blooded pastor who meets the congregation in person?

The medium and the message are not inseparable. Some kinds of theology can be put into practice digitally and some cannot. But LifeChurch stands as a strong reminder that technology is shaping ministry—and that if we are going to use a new technology, we had better use it well.