THE WIDE OPEN WORLD OF PODCASTING

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

By: Thomas A. Lyberg

Podcasting came onto the scene only two years ago, but its development and acceptance by the hungry public, particularly the under-35 crowd, have been staggering phenomena. The author tells why church leaders need to get on board or miss many potential opportunities for understanding and ministry.

"Transmitters? We don't need no stinkin' transmitters!" If you have heard this tagline by Craig Patchett, you have been wandering the wired and wild world of podcasting. In less than two years, podcasts such as Adam Curry's *Daily Source Code*, *The Dawn and Drew Show*, *Evil Genius Chronicles*, and the *Godcasters* were all launched and now are part of a new portable listening mainstream entirely separate from traditional broadcast. Gadgets such as iPods, iRivers, and other MP3 players are now as important as cell phones for staying connected to the digital world.

If you have no idea about what these things are, it is time you learned about a new technology that is changing how we understand entertainment, information, and community.

Only Two Years Old

What is podcasting? Technically, it is essentially the delivery of custom audio content in the form of MP3 files to your computer via a custom subscription program. Two years ago, former MTV video DJ Curry and programmer Dave Winer developed a program called iPodder that uses RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to deliver sound files instead of just text files. These MP3 files are downloaded to your computer where you can listen to them or transfer them to a portable MP3 player (such as the Apple iPod — hence the name "podcasting") to listen to at any time. The end result is that since August 2004, when the first iPodder script was released, the number of podcasts has grown from just a handful to more than 5,000 as of April, 2005, to 50,000-plus today with more than 2 million listeners worldwide.

Podcasting is much more than technology. Those who have jumped into this brave new world have discovered a community that exists nowhere in physical space but entirely online. Podcasts differ from broadcast radio or download on demand. Growing out of the blogging community, podcasting reflects an independent spirit to explore and produce commentary and community outside the traditional

boundaries of culture and technology. Each podcast is in essence an exercise in freedom of speech but also the creation of a micro-community that simply is not possible in popular culture.

A visit to Podcast Alley, Podcast Pickle, or one of the other podcast directories online shows the wide variety of content that can be found in the podcasting community. Music programs include *Coverville*, which plays cover songs, and the *Podsafe Music Network*, which promotes bands and downloadable music that can be played without BMI and ASCAP licensing. There are specialized shows like *Diggnation* on tech and society and *Inside the Magic* — all Disney park news and music. Religious podcasts are predominately Christian, like Craig Patchett's *Godcast Network*, the *Rev Tim Podcast*, and *The Catholic Insider*, but you can also find podcasts on the tarot and astrology. Some podcasts are more like blogs, stream-of-conscousness and personal reflections on daily life, like the *Evil Genius Chronicles, The Dawn and Drew Show*, and the granddaddy of all podcasts, Adam Curry's *Daily Source Code*.

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The technical quality of podcasts varies widely, ranging from professional productions to home studios to just a computer and a cheap microphone. The content quality is just as varied, with podcasts ranging from coarse juvenile humor that is not appropriate for work or children to very narrow technical conversations for a small group of enthusiasts to just plain boring talk that only the podcaster enjoys. However, the overriding creed of the podcast community is that no matter what you put out on the Net, you must keep it real. Although Curry and others have been working to develop the commercial possibilities of podcasting, and the major media groups have jumped into the field, many others still follow the early vision to keep podcasting as a personal art form and forum for the emerging generations under the age of 35.

Podcast Subscription Programs
While producing your own podcast requires significant technical knowledge and some equipment investment, subscribing to podcasts is very easy. All you need to do is download and install a podcast aggregator such as Juice (juicereceiver.sourceforge.net) or iTunes (www.apple.com/itunes), either of which work with Microsoft Windows computers or the Apple Macintosh. Once you have installed your aggregator, access either the

aggregator's internal podcast directory or a dedicated directory site like Podcast Alley (www.podcastalley.com) or Podcast Pickle (www.podcastpickle.com), choose the podcast feeds you wish to subscribe to, and start listening.

The future of podcasting is in a state of flux as it tries to define itself in a culture that is in transition as well. Many early podcasts have disappeared or merged into emerging podcast networks. The desire for individualized content for the masses and the understanding of technology as a personal extension of oneself and one's own creativity is running up against antiquated copyright law and corporate profit models. But corporate retailers have already figured this out, and we have seen the rise of creativity as a commodity and lifestyle, with the success of *HGTV, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and the marketing strategy of stores such as Target and Old Navy. Podcasting seems to be one more reflection of this larger cultural change that is occurring throughout North America.

Podcasting and the Church

What does podcasting have to do with the church? Perhaps a great deal. As we

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continue to move into a postmodern, "post-Christian" world, the very cultural trends that are reflected in podcasting are surfacing in the church, reflected in new terms and perspectives such as the emerging church, ancient-future, transformational ministry, and postevangelical. Newly planted congregations and some existing congregations are engaging this new culture by becoming immersed and conversant in its language and technology to witness to Jesus in the twenty-first century.

Favorite Podcasts

Podcasts are a matter of personal taste, but here I list some of my personal, safer favorites. Keep in mind that there are no restrictions on podcasting content whatsoever, so many will not be appropriate for work or for children. Like the Internet itself, use your own discretion and be prepared for occasional unexpected surprises.

- *Daily Source Code with Adam Curry* (dailysourcecode.com)
- *Coverville* (www.coverville.com)
- *Evil Genius Chronicles* (www.evilgeniuschronicles.org)
- *Digital Flotsam* (www.digitalflotsam.org)

- *Diggnation Podcast*
  (www.revision3.com/diggnation)
- *Inside The Magic*
  (www.distantcreations.com)

Christian Podcasts

Christian podcasting comes in a variety of forms. Here is a mix of some of the more popular church and independent podcasts, but realize that by sheer numbers, many podcasts come and go very quickly. Many ELCA programs, including *ELCA Audio News* and *Grace Matters*, are delivered now via podcast.

- *The Godcast Network*
  (www.godcast.org)
- *Catholic Insider*
  (www.catholicinsider.com)
- *A Different Perspective*
  (www.alanhartung.com)
- *Wired Jesus Podcast*
  (www.wiredjesus.com)
- *Relevant Magazine*
  (www.relevantmagazine.com)

Podcasting is rapidly becoming part of that outreach. Congregational blogs have given birth to congregation-specific podcasts. More traditional approaches have been podcasts of Bible studies, sermons, and inspirational messages aimed largely at a Christian audience, much like the cassette-delivery ministries of the 1970s and '80s. A number of podcasts have been born out of personal blogs. *A Different Perspective* by Alan Hartung and *Pagittcast* by Doug Pagitt have the conversational informality of a journal.

For Christian leaders, podcasts are both a tool to be used and a lens into the postmodern world. Several podcasts are aimed specifically at leaders, to create a forum for conversation and learning from others engaged in creative ministry in the emerging church. *The Relevant Podcast* is one example of an online/print magazine aimed at postmodern church leaders that has now moved into developing leadership content via its podcast. Others, including the *Wired Jesus Podcast*, the *Rev Tim Podcast,* and *The Edge of Faith*, attempt to engage postmoderns in spiritual conversation outside the organized church.

As a lens into the postmodern heart and world, it does not get more direct than on the podcasts. Dave Slusher's forty-minute *Evil Genius Chronicles* podcast on how he went from being an evangelical Christian to an atheist is an indictment of modern understandings of discipleship and a challenge for church leaders to learn to speak the gospel to a postmodern generation. The "Why I Don't Believe in God" podcast, in which he openly describes his father's suicide and the response offered to him by other Christians, remains one of the most discussed podcasts in the community and a must-listen-to for any postmodern Christian leader. One group of podcasters put together a podcast card for a fellow podcaster battling cancer, another aspect of how this digital community is taking shape in the real world. Just as the advice in the 1990s to youth pastors was to spend time daily watching MTV and reading *Rolling Stone* to understand youth culture, listening to podcasts brings us into contact with the intensely personal yet communal heart of postmoderns and their spiritual yearning.

Potential Uses

While most of these podcasts are not specific to congregations, there is tremendous potential for individual congregations to develop their own set of podcasts specific to their needs and ministries as the technology continues to be refined and made simpler to use. Delivery of sermons, Bible studies, and audio newsletters is just an adaptation from an old technology to new. Potential new and more creative uses could be daily devotionals by pastors and staff for small groups, ministry leaders, or the entire congregation. Book reviews, local praise band concerts, and guided spiritual disciplines can all be delivered for people to listen to while jogging, or in their cars, or to e-mail to friends and family.Add to that the growing penetration of MP3 players and podcasting into the generations 35 and under, their increasing disconnection with organized religion, and their search for community online, Christian podcasting could become a major evangelism tool in coming years.

Is podcasting a fad, or does it have the potential to become a communication technology that will someday be as dominant as radio and television are today? Only time will tell. In the meantime, podcasting is on the rise, capturing headlines in print and on television. In a world where communication is dominated by megacorporations like the television networks and broadcast giants like Clear Channel, people and the church will have the chance to ride the wave and join in a communications community by individuals and for individuals — the world of podcasting.

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