

Churches Take to YouTube, Instagram to Spread Holiday Gospel

The Christmas holiday brings peak attendance for most churches, and an increasing number of U.S. religious groups are using the boom time to wow parishioners with virtual choirs on YouTube and Instagram advent calendars.

More than 500 churches will stream Christmas sermons online this year, up from just a handful in 2007, said DJ Chuang, host of the Social Media Church, a podcast with church leaders about social media. Hundreds more started Instagram and Pinterest accounts this year to post photos of baptisms and quotes from the gospel, he said.

"Instagram is like the modern-day stained glass window," Chuang said. "They use it to tell the stories of the church."

The online churches appeal to those who have moved away from their own parish, people who may be reticent to walk into an actual church and people who wish to attend a service outside normal times.

The New Jersey-based Liquid Church has had an online pastor since 2009, and took to YouTube last Christmas to share a virtual choir using videos from roughly 500 church members who attend services remotely.

A technician overlaid the voices from each of the videos to create a cohesive song and video of individuals in front of their computers at home singing "Silent Night" in three-part harmony, said pastor Kenny Jahng.

This year, the church will hold virtual communion, the religious sacrament where worshippers drink grape juice and

eat bread. When members log on to the service, the pastor will tell them to get a glass of grape juice and any household bread.

Evangelical pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, which is based in California, is exploring how to get a PlayStation channel to stream its church services similar to the way Netflix streams movies.

The California megachurch, which was a pioneer in digital worship, already streams 168 services on its website every week, and will have services every hour on the hour the week of Christmas.

"Imagine church services on a Wii," said Jay Kranda, the lead pastor for Saddleback's online services.

The practice is not popular with all churches, however.

In November, the United Methodist Church declared a moratorium on all online sacraments, and said in a statement that communion must be administered with a "physically gathered community."