

Simple technology allows homebound to attend church

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Margaret Coffey is a faithful member of Unity Baptist Church and "attends" services every week even though she is homebound and lives nearly 100 miles away.

Thanks to remote listening technology offered through LifeWay Christian Resources, Coffey can feel connected to Unity Baptist and a Christian family in spite of her inability to physically go to the Allardt, Tenn., church every week.

"She feels like she knows some people in the church," said Linda Smith, Coffey's daughter and a Unity Baptist member. "She feels like they know her and know of her and know me as her daughter. Mom really felt like she was connected."

Many individuals resort to television or radio broadcasts of worship services when they must attend church from their living rooms. While these methods offer sermons and worship, they lack the personal connection a local church family provides.

Mike Northcutt, pastor of Eastmont Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., recognized the need to provide worship opportunities for homebound individuals, but his church couldn't afford to broadcast its services via radio or television airwaves.

Remote listening services served as an inexpensive but effective alternative for Eastmont and a growing number of churches learning to minister to an aging population.

The U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 reported that people over age 65 make up more than 12 percent of the American population. That percentage will only increase as the first baby boomers begin to reach age 65 in about 2011.

Earlier this year, the direct marketing department of LifeWay Christian Resources' retail division began offering remote listening technology through Lightcast Networks.

Lightcast allows homebound individuals using a Lightcast Home Receiver to connect to their church's broadcasts through existing phone lines. The receivers feature simple technology and near-radio-quality sound.

At Unity Baptist Church, when Raymond Phillips became pastor in early September, one of his first objectives was to meet with each of the seven people currently using Unity's remote listening service.

"It's important that people who are disconnected from the church physically can stay connected spiritually," Phillips said.

One way he maintains that connection is by specifically addressing remote listeners during Sunday worship. Phillips said he sometimes uses his introduction time to recognize in-home listeners and let them know the church family is thinking of them.

Edward Baker, president and co-founder of Lightcast Networks, said the technology can “give them that connection with the congregation, the feeling they’re right there with their friends and family.”

Northcutt said remote listening devices actually serve a three-fold ministry purpose at his church:

Homebound individuals feel a spiritual connection through real-time worship, a physical connection through church members visiting the homes to install and maintain the listening equipment, and an emotional connection through a sense of “Wow, they care for me,” Northcutt said.

Allowing homebound individuals to experience Sunday worship is a key aspect of remote listening technology, but Baker said the equipment has potential in other areas, noting that churches have used the technology to connect homebound people to activities such as weeknight revivals, Christmas cantatas and Easter plays.

Additionally, the Alabama Baptist State Convention used a remote listening system to make its November 2004 proceedings available to people unable to attend.

“There’s no substitute for real time and feeling like they can be there,” Northcutt said.

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For more information about remote listening services, visit LifeWayStores.com/Lightcast or call 1-800-464-2799.