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TECHNOLOGY: Churches help members stay connected

By Clint Cooper Staff Writer

A company co-founded by a Chattanooga native is offering churches the technology to allow its homebound members to stay connected.

With a church interface kit and a home receiver provided by Lightcast Networks, homebound members can press two buttons and hear in real time a worship service, seasonal celebration, wedding or funeral at their house of worship.

"It's great," the Rev. John Whaley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Double Springs, Ala., said in a phone interview. "For shut-ins and the homebound, it makes them feel a part (of church life)."

Baylor School graduate Edward "Ned" Baker, now a resident of Cropwell, Ala., is president and co-founder of the company.

The Presence Today service was recently endorsed and is being sold by LifeWay Christian Stores (www.lifewaystores.com), a division of the Southern Baptist Convention, and White Wing Resource Center, a division of the Church of God of Prophecy.

Jennie Taylor, a production associate with the direct marketing department at LifeWay, said the service is catching on. "It's a great ministry opportunity," she said. "With the homebound, it's not that they don't want to be involved, but they might not have the means to get there. This way, they can sit there in inclement weather and still be a big part of the church. They still have a lot to offer the church, and it makes them feel cared for."

Mr. Baker, who has worked in telecommunications since he graduated from the University of Georgia in 1988, said the roots of Presence Today were created several years ago when he developed infrastructure for a dial-in service for college football games that was never used.

His service in running the sound system for his Pell City, Ala., church then gave him the idea for the homebound ministry. "A live presence is better than a 3-day-old cassette," Mr. Baker said.

The service involves a church purchasing a kit of three pieces of equipment that costs less than \$200. The equipment ties Lightcast with the church's sound system and its telephone line.

Churches also purchase home receivers similar to speed-dial telephones for \$19.95 each for their members. The members need only push one button to turn the receiver on (or off) and one button to listen.

"It's real simple," said Mr. Whaley, who has four homebound members using the service. "That's one thing we liked about it."

The weekly cost to the church is \$4.95 per member using the one-hour service, which Mr. Baker said can be borne by members of an average 12-person Sunday school class at about six cents a day. Time plans of shorter and longer duration also are available, he said. Mr. Baker said Presence Today is ideal for smaller churches which don't televise their services or broadcast them over the radio. He said the sound quality of the reception is comparable to AM and FM radio reception. "It's a high-quality service," Mr. Baker said. He said the service also has the capability to allow people in remote locations to call in and report to the church.

A disaster relief team First Baptist of Double Springs sent to Mobile, Ala., after Hurricane Katrina did just that during a mid-week service and allowed members to ask questions, Mr. Whaley said.

Mr. Whaley, whose church has been using Lightcast Networks technology for about two months, said he also planned to have future guest speakers call the church ahead of their visits. "We love it," he said.

Mr. Baker said Lightcast Networks recently created a new service, Voice Gateway, with Axletree Media, a Birmingham, Ala., Web development company. He said Voice Gateway will allow pastors to remotely use a telephone or cell phone to leave a message that will post as streaming audio on a Lightcast-partnered Web site. Church members need only click on the Web page link to listen.

Such a service would be useful for posting hospital updates, prayer requests, daily devotionals or children's parables, Mr. Baker said. "There are all sorts of applications. You can use it for anything."

For information, visit www.lightcastnetworks.org.
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