

# THE FUTURE IS NOW



by William R. Benner Jr.

Cellular services offer clergy new opportunity in communicating with congregants

**D**ating from the first use of public address systems in worship services, congregations have grown increasingly reliant on innovative technology to improve communications with members and extend the reach of their message to new audiences. Worship leaders have also grown increasingly adept at using technology to involve and inspire congregations of ever-larger proportions.

Use of technology in religious services and sectarian social events has evolved tremendously from simple sound systems to include sophisticated audio-visual systems, projection video, broadcasting and Web streaming. More than ever, clergy

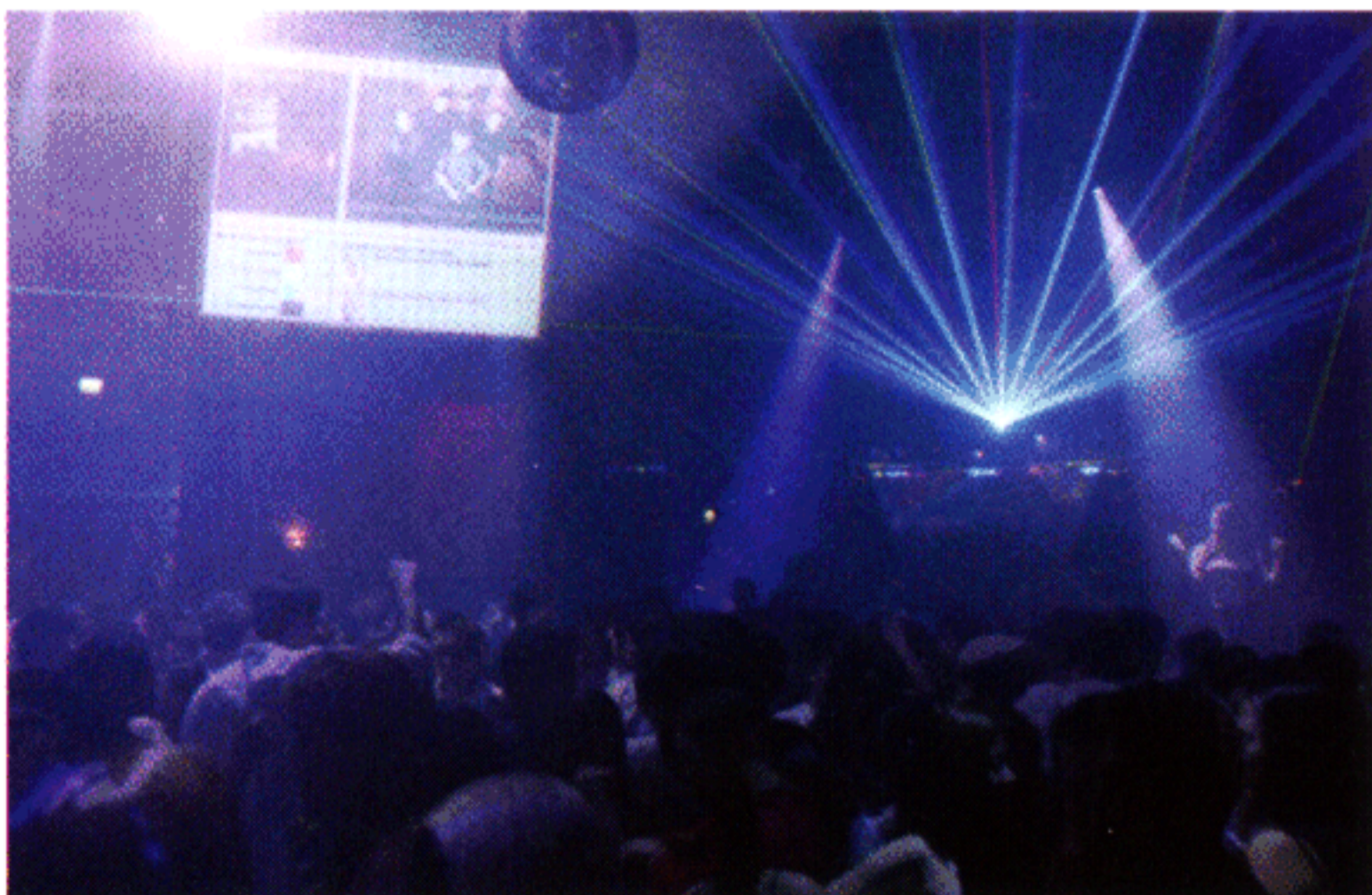
has the opportunity to expand its reach and increase congregation membership by embracing new technological trends and developments and applying them to worship services and other church related events.

The most important new trend in communications, even more pervasive than the Internet, is cellular technology. There are more than 198 million cellphone subscriptions in the United States or to put it another way, five out of every six people over the age of nine. While certainly no one would encourage the use of cellphones during worship services, there are ways clergy could be using cellular technology to enhance communications with congregants.

## New Uses

Pangolin, the world's No. 1 publisher for PC software used to produce laser shows, offers an exciting new Windows application called Interactive Messaging Unlimited. IMU allows people to send text or picture messages from cell phones (and wireless devices such as Blackberrys, etc.) to any type of video displays, including projection video, broadcast and cable TV, Webstreams, and laser systems. It also enables someone to send "text" messages from a computer to one or groups of cellphones. By utilizing cellular technology in this new way, IMU can add a new dimension to religious communications at meetings, conferences and social events.

Common uses for IMU include Q&A sessions during meetings, alerts of changes to schedule or room assignments at conferences, posting of public messages during concerts and



other performance events, and social “chatting” over video display systems at parties. It can also enable hearing or speech impaired people to participate in religious services and social events.

On a PC, IMU is designed to appear and operate like popular e-mail applications, though it offers special features related to its video display capabilities. It also permits message content to be automatically or manually screened by a moderator prior to being shown publicly. A system operator can easily determine when and whether messages are shown, their order of appearance and their duration on screen.

### Stay Connected—Individually Or Collectively

IMU has a unique feature that allows a system operator to send messages, including biblical and inspirational citations or congregational alerts, to a group or an individual. This unique feature provides religious leaders with a level of connectivity and support that was previously unavailable outside of traditional church services. Ultimately, this software has the potential to strengthen the

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religious bond of tight-knit communities and encourage a stream of continuous communication between its members.

IMU also has the potential to connect with younger people who rely heavily on cell “texting” as a means of communication. By incorporating this cutting-edge software in suitable religious settings, leaders have the potential to actively engage their younger audience and help influence them positively outside of traditional church settings and methods. Inspirational messages sent to their mobile phones can provide timely advice and reassurance to people in need of spiritual support.

In addition, with the popularity of text messaging growing rapidly in the United States, tech-savvy event planners can enhance meetings and social events by incorporating IMU for entertainment purposes.

IMU increases audience interaction by allowing attendees, while mingling, to “chat” visually via TV monitors, projection video or other video displays.

Throughout the event, participants send messages for display using a special phone number. The messages are filtered by a moderator, who controls which messages are displayed, their order and their duration. The IMU system has applications for real-time voting, surveys and polls, which planners can also incorporate into events and parties.

The IMU software also handles the receiving and processing of incoming messages, while the actual display of those messages is carried out by an SMS text display program called Video Messaging Unlimited (or VMU).

The VMU software arranges the approved messages and outputs them to a video feed. Therefore, congregations

who own private cable channels can use IMU as a way to create live “chats” where viewers can converse—in text—with other viewers.

The software provides tools for quickly creating professional looking video backgrounds and display screens on which various elements such as scrolling text, streaming video, live feeds, and static or animated graphics can all run simultaneously on-screen without overlapping or interfering with on-going chats.

For example, moderators can have a set topic such as a verse from the Bible displayed in one section of the screen, another section can display a streaming video, while the bottom section can be reserved for displaying incoming responses from viewers partaking in the live chat.

Another key element to the IMU system is its ability to interface with other display systems, and not just with conventional video methods. For larger events, IMU can be used in conjunction with laser display systems or even Pangolin’s Lasershow Messenger system, which interfaces typical lasers and beams with SMS text messaging and voting.

These laser beams can project text, images, and voting results on just about any surface creating a fun and visually exciting environment for all to enjoy. This advanced system is a perfect tool to use for religious social events such as dances and fundraisers where emphasis is on atmosphere and entertainment. Using the technology of colored laser beams, more commonly used at arenas, makes events one of a kind.

### **Inclusion For All**

It has been suggested that the IMU system can be incorporated into church services as a means to connect with hearing impaired parishioners. By using IMU’s video display capabilities, sermons could be shown in a “closed-caption-like” manner, which would allow for a greater involvement during traditional services.

At points of sermons where audience participation is desired, hearing impaired members could text questions to the pastor or bible study teacher. The IMU system offers more options in communication when it comes to enjoyment and participation of conventional church activities for all of its members.

Once purchased, the IMU system provides unlimited uses for congregations of any size. The Pangolin IMU package includes a portable, rugged wireless modem, which is necessary for receiving and sending text messages, and a USB cable for connecting the modem to a computer.

It is also available in two versions: Basic, designed for use at meetings, events, etc., and Pro, with special features for professional high-volume applications (such as broadcast and cable TV chat channels). ❖

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