

How To Implement Sermon Podcasts



I can still remember the news of my grandfather's passing – it was after Thanksgiving in 1990 and he arose from breakfast, settled into his familiar Lazy-Boy chair, and turned on the Sunday morning church service on the radio. My grandmother came in to find him slumped over, presumably from a heart attack. The radio as a vital spiritual connection for them was essential since they didn't have a way to get to church as they had in the past. The costs can be prohibitive or nearly impossible for a church in a large market to broadcast a sermon,

but there is a very valuable alternative well within the reach of any church with some creative and devoted members willing to assist. Allow me to introduce you to the term "podcasting" and "streaming media" and give you a very quick and easy recipe to reach out further with God's message in your community or perhaps beyond!

Podcasts and streaming media are ways of taking audio content and sending it to an audience on demand. Without getting into the history or other background information, podcasts are simply a way of having a program "subscribe" to new content that you have, via a web site, for people to download. On their end, they can set up this subscription to your content "feed" and when you put up a new file (your broadcast) it will download to their computer automatically. Depending on what they have, they can then listen to it with their computer or perhaps even download it into a portable media device, such as an Apple iPod. This is where the term "pod" cast originates from - but any device capable of playing the format or converted file will work. Streaming media is slightly different in that instead of someone subscribing to the information and automatically pulling it down, they

instead can click on a link or perhaps use a program to access the audio file directly from your web site. For this article I'm going to show you a solution that allows you to have a good blend of both options.

This article assumes that you already have a web site -- in this particular case I'm using some software based on the basic LAMP (Linux/ Apache/MySQL/PHP) stack that is very common in web hosting scenarios. In this case, the only crucial piece is the PHP program but I'm sure other alternative programs based on other server side languages are available. The software that I found is called Podcast Generator and is available at <http://podcastgen.sourceforge.net/>. Our church has been using this software for over a month now with

no issues, and we are looking forward to trying a new update of the software coming out shortly. Here's their description of the software:

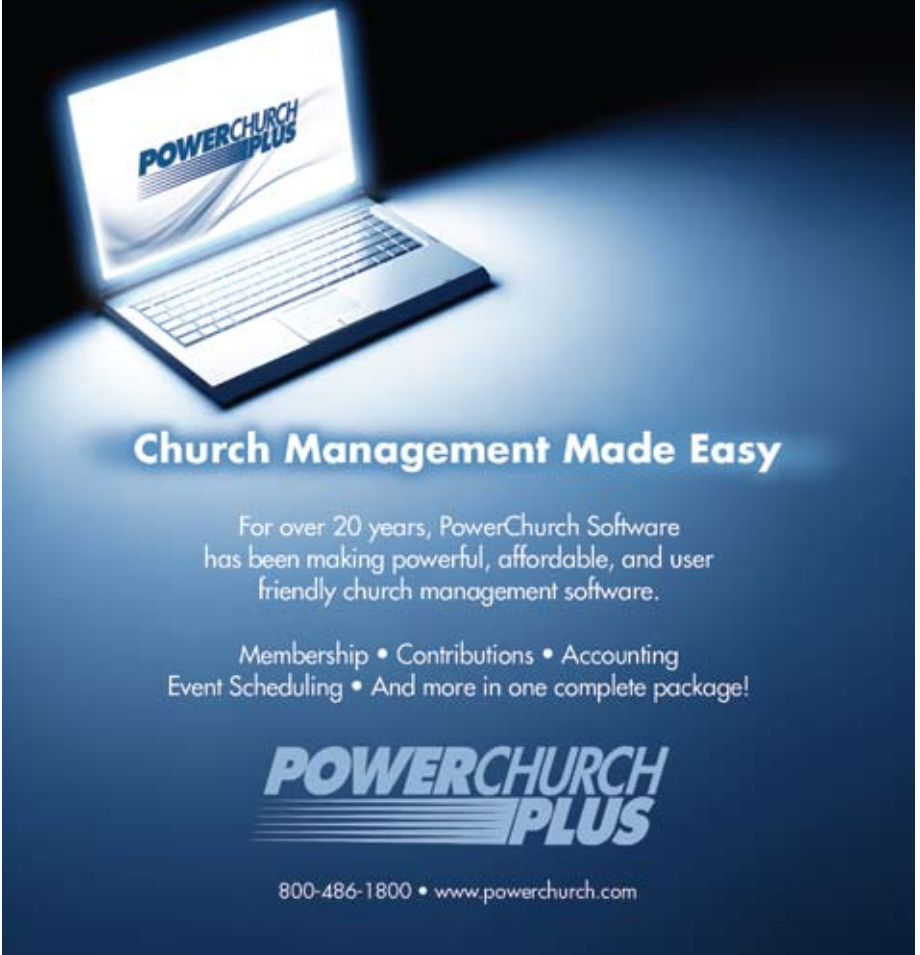
"Podcast Generator is a free web based podcast publishing script written in PHP: upload media files (audio-video) via a web form along with episode information and automatically create podcast w3c-compliant feed including iTunes specific tags. It also features a comprehensive web administration."

The first step to any of this is, of course, getting the audio of your sermon or material you wish to publish online. We use an older model iMac G5 with OSX Tiger (10.4) and a free program called Audacity. Audacity is available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> and it will run

on Windows, Macintosh, or Linux systems. I've tested this software with a cheap \$40, G3 based iMac CRT (600Mhz) with 512Mb of memory and it works great. You can find a used computer very cheap, or perhaps get a donated system, and install a very minimal operating system such as Ubuntu or some other Linux system. We have a feed that comes directly off our mixer board and plugs into the iMac line-in feed. Some playing with the line levels and settings in the software will be necessary, but once it's set up, it will work great. The only caveat here is you'll need to export your captured file in a MP3 format -- you can read the instructions on the Audacity web site on how to get the MP3 converter installed to allow it to export in that format. (Licensing issues don't allow the MP3 converter to be included with the install.) We set up the system and start it recording at the beginning of the service, through our worship band songs and everything. At the end of the service we save the file using the date and worship time as the file name. (In our case, we save two services - our 9:00 AM and 10:45 AM . . . in case we have a glitch we always have the other one.)

Once you have your file, you can opt to edit the file for brevity sake. We cut out the unimportant parts such as "refer to your bulletins, remember the supper next week" and we also separate the message from the songs for time sake later. When we save the audio we save it as a mono - 48 bit file for space's sake. We use the same MP3 file to then burn an audio CD for those wishing to purchase copies -- and yes, there is still a niche need for those. After this we upload the MP3 file to our web server via the Podcast Generator software. You can find instructions on the web site on how to install the software to your web site. Our typical sermon runs about 1 hour and is about 25Mb in size. It will take a little while to upload the file to the web server. (Most web hosting services will have instructions on using an .htaccess file or special php.ini setting to override the normal PHP file timeout settings. Check with your hosting provider for more assistance.)

Because of the size of the files and the nature of the podcasts (automatically being downloaded)



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you will see a spike in your bandwidth usage. Check your space available (to determine how many podcasts you can keep archived) and how much your bandwidth is being consumed by this service. It's a catch 22 because the more popular the service, the more bandwidth and storage space that will be consumed; but potentially the more people that will be benefiting from it and thus the more resources that can flow back to cover the costs of those items.

The final step to remember is to TELL people about your resources available and track the usage of it through web statistics. Include notifications that this new service is available on your church's web site and suggest possible uses for this. For example:

- Shut-ins unable to attend
- Those in a hospital or sick at home
- People on vacation or out of town
- Sharing a great message with friends or family
- Reach members serving in armed forces

On our particular web site we use Mambo as our Content Management Software -- <http://www.mamboserver.com/> and we use an iframe to display the Podcast Generator page inside our site. You can see it here: http://mambo.myheartland.org/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=79 We send out a weekly email to members with links to various news items on our web site as well as links to the podcast of the week's sermon. In addition we also have a mailing list of those interested in when the latest sermon is available. With some creativity, participation, and skills provided by your local members your church can help to follow God's command in Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV):

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

About the author:

Bradley Miller is a computer programmer living in the Kansas City area and has two children. He has been involved with computers since 1979 and has a degree in Computer Information Systems from DeVry Institute of Technology. He attends Heartland Church in Blue Springs, MO.

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