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Churches sell steeple space as hiding spots for cellular antennas

Apr. 1, 2005 News media contact: Matt Carlisle * (615) 742-5470* Nashville {05190}

NOTE: Photographs are available at www.umc.org.

A UMC.org Feature
By Neill Caldwell*

For generations, church steeples have served as conduits to God, symbolically reaching heavenward, providing a visual reminder of the size and power of the church, and calling congregations to worship with the sound of bells.

These days, the steeple may also include an antenna to relay cell phone calls.

Churches, from the National Cathedral in Washington to the most rural parishes in the U.S. Midwest, are taking advantage of the telecommunications industry's need for a system of wireless antennas. Churches allowing such antenna in their steeples have discovered a new source of income that often runs into tens of thousands of dollars annually.

This proliferation of antennas is a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which prevented local jurisdictions from shutting out wireless carriers altogether. The United States has an estimated 125,000 cellular transmitters, and that number is expected to triple by the end of this decade to satisfy the exploding demand for cellular service and the arrival of advanced wireless technology. And as transmission equipment becomes smaller, placing it inside church steeples may become more common.

The United Methodist Church's New England Annual (regional) Conference has taken the lead in responding to this need. The conference established a formal relationship with SteepleCom, a company that brings churches and telecommunications companies together in leasing agreements. So far, the company has a client list of 800 churches.

"We see this as a benign way for many of our churches to enhance their revenue," said Mike Hickcox, director of communications for the New England Annual Conference. "It is simply riding the wave of technology in which our churches happen to have great location, height and a way to maintain the aesthetics of the area."

The Rev. Stephen Sebastian, an ordained congregational pastor who now works fulltime for SteepleCom, said church members always worry about where the money will come from for various ministries.

"This is such an opportunity," he said. "The church steeple is a valuable asset in today's wireless age. As the wireless companies expand their infrastructure, we're likely to see that

money funneled into our churches rather than the private sector because we know the churches will do good things with that money."

The contracts for the churches in the New England Conference have varied from \$500 to \$4,000 a month, depending on where the church is located, according to Sebastian.

Churches in the conference can use SteepleCom or negotiate their own deals. But officials at SteepleCom see power in numbers.

"Our company is a facilitator set up to deal with regional and national groups of churches," said SteepleCom's founder, Tom Moylan, a United Methodist in the New England Conference. "So many individual churches have been taken advantage of. They didn't know their own market value. And one church has no presence in the marketplace. When you have a group of 550 churches, they have a presence, and the carriers will take notice."

Hickcox said SteepleCom has a list of the locations of all churches within the conference, and it shares those coordinates with Verizon, Cingular, Sprint, T-Mobile and other companies as possible antenna sites.

Advocates see the placement of antennas in steeples as positive for all involved. A contract provides a church with income for renting out what is essentially an unused part of the building. The community gets better wireless service. And in some cases, the phone companies perform needed repairs to old steeples as part of the contract.

In Ipswich, Mass., lightning destroyed First United Methodist Church's steeple about 15 years ago, and the church lacked the \$100,000 needed to build a new one. When the town of Ipswich rejected a proposal for a tall antenna tower for Bell Atlantic (now part of Verizon), the company turned to the church and offered to build a steeple in exchange for the right to hide a transmitter inside.

The congregation rejoiced. In addition to not having to pay for a new steeple, First Church receives a monthly fee from the telecommunications companies that use it.

There's a flip side. At Temple United Methodist Church in San Francisco, the church found itself having to spend thousands of dollars to repair its steeple so that it could remain a location of antennas for Sprint and AT&T.

And safety can be an issue. At First United Methodist Church in Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., families living around the church opposed plans to locate a wireless relay antenna in the steeple. The pastor, the Rev. Karyn Wiseman, said opposition was mainly due to people not understanding what the equipment was all about, and the fear that it was somehow dangerous.

"It's not a huge cell tower," Wiseman said. "It's a 25-foot pole with a booster antenna attached. There are dead spots in between the cell towers, and these antennas boost the signal from one to another.

"There is a lot of misinformation that has gone out, but studies done say there is no discernable danger," she said. "If we'd found a single study that said these relay stations cause cancer, we'd have said no. But we found just the opposite. We did all the research we could possibly do."

As the highest point in town, the church seemed a natural location for AT&T's antenna. The

plan was approved by the city's planning board, then overturned on a technicality, and was headed back to the board for further action.

In the meantime, the church has endured a flood of negative letters to the editor in the local newspaper.

"We've been called Nazis and Satanic," Wiseman said. "Someone said we should put a sign out front that says, 'Show me the money.' It's gotten pretty personal. But the church has gotten stronger. Attendance and giving are up."

Local churches interested in more information on hosting a wireless communications site can contact United Methodist Communications at (888) 346-3862 or umc@umcom.org.

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